

The Fiction of Robert Antoni

Writing in the Estuary



Richard F. Patterson

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University of the West Indies Press
Jamaica • Barbados • Trinidad and Tobago

University of the West Indies Press

7A Gibraltar Hall Road Mona

Kingston 7 Jamaica

www.uwipress.com

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CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Patteson, Richard F. (Richard Francis), 1947–

The fiction of Robert Antoni: writing in the estuary / Richard F. Patteson

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN: 978-976-640-275-4

1. Antoni, Robert – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PR9272.9.A58 Z78 2010

813.19

Cover illustration: Rafael Martinez, *Bodeguera* (oil on canvas, 2000). Photographed by Troy DeRego

Set in Centaur MT 13/16 x 24

Cover and book design by Robert Harris.

Printed in the United States of America.

... water is the beginning of all things

– Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Robert Antoni for many things, not least for providing me with indispensable information about himself, his family and his ongoing work that would have been otherwise inaccessible. Sincere thanks also to Lynne Rienner, for allowing me to use material from my previous book (*Caribbean Passages: A Critical Perspective on New Fiction from the West Indies*) as the basis for my discussion of *Divina Trace* and the early stories.

Students in my Caribbean literature seminar over the years (Amy Myrick, Brad Campbell, Maria Montgomery, to name a few) have influenced my thinking in innumerable ways. I should cite in particular Dean Karpowicz and Eric Smith, who went on to become Antoni scholars in their own right. The input and support of many colleagues, particularly Brad Vice (*il miglior fabbro*), have also been invaluable.

I began work on this book in late 2000, shortly after purchasing Raphael Martínez's *Bodeguita* from Bettye Marshall at her gallery in Santo Domingo. From the moment I saw it I associated the face with all the enduring, culture-laden women in Antoni's fiction. The painting's reincarnation as a book cover is due to the photographic expertise of Troy DeRego and the talent of the design department at the University of the West Indies Press.

I would certainly not want to forget to mention, with much gratitude, Dr Matthew Little, for facilitating a sabbatical near the beginning of this project, and Dr Rich Raymond, for providing me with extra time off and a research assistant toward the end of it. And speaking of that assistant, this should close with a special note of recognition to Nick White, who went through the entire manuscript twice, helping me get it into the correct format for the Press. His fingerprints are on every page.

... the Caribbean calls for a Cervantes who has read Joyce

–Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*¹

Occasionally a brief passage, perhaps one composed even before a writer has formed a distinct conception of himself, can reveal much about his subsequent development as an artist. The opening lines of Robert Antoni's early story "Two-head Fred and Tree-foot Frieda" are a case in point:

I loved Zoe because she helped raise me, because she let me pinch her breasts when my mother wasn't around, and because she told me she ate Barbados rat for whooping cough. I loved Jook Jook because he helped raise me, because he let me sip from his rum bottle when my father wasn't around, and because he told me he ate Whatlin's Island iguana for grimps.²

The symmetry of this sequence of observations forecasts the tendency towards binary structures in Antoni's later, much more complex verbal compositions. But we have here as well, in the counterpointed pairs of the verb phrases *raised me/let me/old me*, a nuanced suggestion of future themes: roots, freedom and the telling of tales. In *Divina Trace* these elements have assumed the shape of a singular creative vision: Antoni's exploration of his Caribbean origins, his forging beyond experiential, cultural and aesthetic frontiers, and the discovery of narrative's transformational power. The colonial and post-colonial worlds of Trinidad, where Antoni's parents were born, and the Bahamas, where he grew up, are quietly evoked in the beginning of "Two-head Fred" by the tacit reference to laws laid down by the mother and father. *Thou shalt not pinch breasts. Thou shalt not drink rum.* Gently opposing this system of rules and received authority is the liberating influence of Zoe and Jook Jook. The narrator, Addy, loves them because they allow him to grow, removing in the small way some of the restrictions of his childhood, but also because they open up his imagination to a wider world – and thereby extend the boundaries of his identity – through their storytelling.

Four centuries ago Cervantes tapped into a current of fascination with reality and dream that has run through the novel ever since, like the Guadiana River in *Don Quixote*, flowing sometimes above the surface and sometimes just below. The fiction of Robert Antoni – even such an apprentice piece as "Two-head Fred" – exhibits in a myriad of ways the capacity of imagination to alter fact and characterize the highly problematic frontier between the known and the narrated. Addy is a boy given to believing in the reality of the imagined worlds conjured up by Zoe and Jook Jook, while his brother Christopher, like his Sancho Panza, constantly pulls him in the direction of phenomenal reality, conventional morality and parental rules. Addy talks about Jook Jook's made-up characters Two-head Fred and Tree-foot Frieda as if they were actual people, while Christopher insists that they do not exist. The brothers are spending part of their vacation at the family's summer place on Deep Water Cay in the Bahamas. Zoe has cared for them since they were babies, and Jook Jook, who does "odd jobs" for their father, takes them "fishing, conching, and misbehaving". Jook Jook's name derives from his reputation as "the greatest conch and woman jooker in all the world",³ and this summer he has set his sights on Zoe.

As the season progresses, a romance develops between Jook Jook and Zoe. At the same time Addy

cope with the boredom of island life by imagining ways to make his daily routines more interesting. “I had lots of time on my hands,” he recalls; “ideas were already taking shape in my head.”⁴ Chi among those ideas is a scheme to follow Jook Jook and Zoe around until he sees them “in action”. Near the end of his stay on Deep Water Cay he manages to hide himself in a box that Jook Jook uses for a closet. When the lovers come in, Addy knocks over a bottle of rum stowed on the floor but manages to salvage enough of it for several large swallows to calm himself down. What follows is a comic collision of imagination and reality:

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 Friece 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.⁶

“Two-head Fred” might well have been titled “A Portrait of the Artist as an Eleven-Year-Old”. Its climactic scene enacts the implications of its opening sentences, with Addy’s adulthood brought closer by his attraction to rum and sex and his already creative consciousness enriched and expanded (though somewhat confusingly) by “ideas” originating in Zoe’s and Jook Jook’s stories.

Enrichment and expansion – recuperating origins and breaking through boundaries – can both be seen as fundamental constituents in Édouard Glissant’s construction of the Caribbean as “the estuary of the Americas”. Throughout the region, Glissant points out, “each island embodies openness. The dialectic between inside and outside is reflected in the relationship of land and sea... A Caribbean imagination liberates us from being smothered.”⁷ An estuary is the part of a river that is also, in a sense, part of the sea: an area where it flows into the sea and is in turn influenced by oceanic tides, or to put it another way, an arm of the sea that extends inland to meet and become the mouth of a river. An estuary is by definition a borderland between two different states of being. But where is the border between river and sea? It can never be seen as an exact, unchanging point or line on a map; it is indeterminate, shifting, subject to interpretation and change – an always open frontier.

The Caribbean imagination is profoundly estuarial; its most recognizable characteristic is its preoccupation with its multiple origins combined with an imperative to reach out and mutate, like an estuary merging into the sea, each in a constant state of exchange and translation. The Caribbean writer may well be the harbinger of a new kind of world where, as Roland Littlewood suggests, “syncretism and heteroglossia contest ... hybrid and parodic, creolised and polyphonic, self-creating and endlessly recursive”.⁸ Obviously today’s “transnational literature”⁹ is hardly limited to the West Indies,¹⁰ or even to the “New World”. Neither the cultural mixing (often associated with or subsumed by such terms as creolization, *métissage* and *mestizaje*)¹¹ nor the flowing outwards is unique to the Caribbean, but these elements – along with the region’s lengthy oral tradition and widespread acceptance of language as a means of fashioning a culture recuperated, through narrative, from the ruptures of history – are uniquely vital to its historical matrix, its sensibility and its poetics.

Robert Antoni is an estuarial writer if ever there were one, and he is quintessentially Caribbean in terms of both his background and the trajectory of his adult life. Raised in Freeport, Bahamas, where his father practised medicine, he spent many summers and other holidays in Trinidad, where both branches of his family have lived for generations. Today he effectively holds three passports: Trinidadian, American (by virtue of his birth in a Detroit hospital while his father was completing his

medical training) and Bahamian.¹² He attended Duke University, Johns Hopkins and finally the University of Iowa. With a Trinidadian background, a Bahamian upbringing, an American education and several years of residency in Spain, Antoni is, like many other writers with roots in the Caribbean, a member of the West Indian expatriate community. The three citizenships are a source of satisfaction to him: he revels in the ambiguous hybridity of his legal status. It is certainly no accident that *Carnival*, his most nearly autobiographical fiction, all kinds of borders are blurred: racial, sexual and political. But even though Antoni has arguably slipped the bonds of narrow nationalism to a greater extent than most writers from the region, that same liberational impulse is deeply embedded in the Caribbean psyche. Antonio Benítez-Rojo has observed that “Antilleans ... tend to roam the entire world in search of the centers of their Caribbeanness, constituting one of our century’s most notable migratory flows. The Antilleans’ insularity does not impel them toward isolation, but on the contrary toward travel, toward exploration, toward the search for fluvial and marine routes.”¹³ Fluvial and marine, the river and the sea – the diaspora itself is a manifestation of the estuarial imagination, which is, to take Glissant just a bit out of context, “both rooted and open ... both settled and migratory”. From the expatriation of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys before the Second World War to the emigration of V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Sam Selvon and Derek Walcott after the war to the present day’s ongoing movement of Caribbean writers to various other countries,¹⁵ the river continues to surge into the sea, enriching and altering it. If Antoni’s work can be properly understood only in terms of the Caribbean’s disparate and sometimes fragmented cultural origins, it can also be fully appreciated only as part of the diversity of the Caribbean diaspora. In his first novel, *Divina Trace*, his second, *Blessed Is the Fruit*, and his more recent and somewhat more accessible books, *My Grandmother’s Erotic Folktales* and *Carnival*, Robert Antoni has both grappled with the complex composite nature of Caribbean identity and origins and charted the movement of a dynamic, evolving and outwardly flowing culture.

The narrative process is the ground of being in Antoni’s world. J. Michael Dash characterizes Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse* as “an unflaggingly ambitious attempt to read the Caribbean and the New World experience, not as a response to fixed, univocal meanings imposed by the past, but as an infinitely varied, dauntingly inexhaustible text”.¹⁶ This could just as easily be a description of *Divina Trace*, undoubtedly Antoni’s most complex work, with its seven voices channelled through the memory of nonagenarian *über*-narrator Johnny Domingo and their enunciation of the myths and histories of European, African, East Indian and Amerindian components of a composite Caribbean identity. *Blessed Is the Fruit* has only two primary narrators (the predominantly white woman Lil, last member of a ruined plantation family, and her black employee Vel), but their discourses intricately reflect, answer and complement each other on virtually every page. Clearly less formally difficult is *My Grandmother’s Erotic Folktales*. This book is a near-novel composed of five tales in which expanses of continuous diegesis (the plots of the individual tales) are interrupted by “downward” shifts into embedded stories and “upward” ones to the framing narrative of Granny Myna’s own life and personality.¹⁷ And finally there is *Carnival*, Antoni’s first fictional foray into contemporary life and his only extended work of fiction with a single narrator unambiguously telling his own story.

Much of Robert Antoni’s fiction, like that of Gabriel García Márquez, has its genesis in stories told

to him by older people during his early years. Antoni recalls several figures who planted in his fallo imagination tales of the old days in the southern Caribbean. They included, for instance, Velm Clarine Bootman, a maid who raised him from infancy and who was the prototype of Vel in *Blessed the Fruit*; a great-uncle who provided him with invaluable information about colonial Trinidad and ultimately became one source for Papee Vince in *Divina Trace* (the other being his maternal grandfather); and most of all, as in the case of García Márquez,¹⁸ a grandmother: “Things that I know now, that I can talk about to students as fictional techniques and narrative strategy, Granny Myna do naturally. She knew all the tricks, all the stunts. How to make absurd things believable by focusing on detail – you know, everything.”¹⁹ This grandmother was incalculably influential, providing Antoni not only with a treasure trove of material for his fiction but also with a commanding persona, one that would eventually grow into Barto’s long-suffering wife in *Divina Trace* and the protagonist/narrator of *My Grandmother’s Erotic Folktales*.²⁰ With respect to Antoni’s literary vocation, there are few facets of his biography more consequential than his growing up among such expert practitioners of West Indian yarn-spinning. The telling of a tale marks the most ancient trace of migration, the pouring forth of an idea, encountering the Other; it is an estuarial transaction that has an expansive effect on the imagination of both teller and listener. In the hands of an artist like Robert Antoni, narrative constitutes a meta-current comprising both the process of *métissage* and the impulse towards diaspora – the flowing into the Caribbean of numerous cultural streams and the endless dispersal of that new and continuously developing culture beyond its sources.

The body of Antoni’s work may seem small when measured solely by the number of books, but each of them is so substantial that the fictional territory he has staked out is already quite extensive. If there is any common denominator in terms of technique among these four very different (and each formally unique) works, it is a plainly displayed need for all of his various narrators to get their stories told. And they are always told to an implied listener, as if the narratives were extended prose versions of dramatic monologues. Most obviously in *Divina Trace* (1991), but throughout his other work as well, the object of cognition – what might be called reality – is continuously displaced, replaced, by its story.

Antoni’s reality tends to hover in a mysterious limbo between pre-cognitive conjecture and post-cognitive memory. Johnny Domingo, the primary narrator of *Divina Trace*, rakes through his recollections and dreams on the night of his ninetieth birthday, listening once again to the accounts related to him many years before by Granny Myna and other older members of his strange family. In *Blessed Is the Fruit* (1997), two women lie in bed telling their life stories to the unborn baby Bolon. In the middle of the novel their narratives are recapitulated in the form of dreams that intertwine with one another in the developing consciousness of Vel’s fetus. *My Grandmother’s Erotic Folktales* (2000) brings back a version of Granny Myna, now telling her grandson Johnny tales of her comic escapades on the island of Corpus Christi²¹ during the Second World War, as well as two traditional (though largely invented) Caribbean folk tales. None of Antoni’s narrators, with the possible exception of William in *Carnival* (2005), is more patently aware of the storyteller’s estuarial role than the Granny Myna of this book. She knows that her stories, which embody her identity and her culture, go out to encounter the imagination of not only her grandson within the text but also all her listeners in the world outside it.²² And *Carnival*’s narrator/protagonist, William Fletcher, is an aspiring novelist who, as a member of the West Indian diaspora, recognizes that in telling his own story he is also addressing a wider audience among which he, like so many others from the Caribbean, has chosen to live. Though neither he nor Granny Myna would put it this way, their narratives correspond

Benítez-Rojo's explanation of text as "born when it is read by the Other", at which point "text and reader connect with each other like a machine of reciprocal seductions".²³

One of the most beguiling seductions embedded in the mechanism of Antoni's storytelling is the incorporation of the reader – and the reader's reality outside the text – into a thoroughly Caribbean fictive space. This is accomplished in ways both large and small. In *My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales* Granny Myna not only throws the net of her narrative over such neocolonial icons as General Eisenhower and the Kentucky colonel of fried chicken fame, she also yanks Ernest Hemingway (along with his style of reportage)²⁴ back to "the old, old-time time"²⁵ and weaves him into the fabric of West Indian folklore.²⁶ On a grander scale, Antoni appropriates the framework of an entire novel by Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, to tell a wholly Caribbean story in *Carnival*. In *Divina Trace* Pope Pius XI is reduced to a somewhat ridiculous figure in the accounts given to John Domingo by family members who go to Rome to persuade the Pope to canonize Magdalena, the frogchild's mother, a revered figure back on the island of Corpus Christi.²⁷ The satirical treatment of the Holy Father and of the Church in general is consonant with the subordination of European power structures to Caribbean storytelling throughout *Divina Trace*. That clever form of "seduction" can be seen even in the book's most startling effect: the mirror page in the middle of it. The mirror makes the reader a participant in the novel's construction,²⁸ but readers attempting to "master" the text find themselves literally assimilated into it. *Divina Trace* makes West Indians out of all its readers.

That counter-colonizing impulse in Antoni's work is only part of a broader engagement (discernible as early as "Two-head Fred") between a mythic consciousness and a view of everyday life accessible mainly by reason. Benítez-Rojo defines Caribbean literature in general "along Lacanian lines, as paradoxical literature oscillating between the languages and episteme of Europe (the Name-of-the-Father) and nature and the folk tradition (the Image of the Mother)".²⁹ Neither of these "sources of legitimation",³⁰ in Benítez-Rojo's view, is completely attainable. Within Antoni's own vision of the Caribbean "imaginary", myth in its broadest application is an alternative to the linear, rationalist epistemology of the West, most fully embodied in literary realism and in the "rigid, hierarchic discourse" of history, which, as J. Michael Dash points out, "attempts to systematise the world through ethnocultural hierarchy and chronological progression".³¹

The subversion of rationalist, Western "reality" by myth manifests itself most simply in "Two-head Fred and Tree-foot Frieda" and most complexly in *Divina Trace*, where the ceaseless intertwining of myth (European, African, East Indian and Amerindian), history, memory and dream fashions a virtuous model of human consciousness that breaks through the frontiers of empirical modes of thought. The very form of *Blessed Is the Fruit*, encoding the voluntary merger of the sensibilities of two damaged women, one black and one white, gives birth to its own myth of a creolizing Caribbean future – a myth that, for better or worse, will necessarily shape the lives of the characters whose stories and dreams engender it. The dialectic can be seen operating in the foreground of *Erotic Folktales*, where Granny Myna exists both in the world of phenomenal reality and in that of myth. As a "real" person she tells her tales to her grandson, transmitting to him the received legends of the Caribbean past; by including three accounts of her own life, she becomes, if not a mythic being, at least a larger than life self-created fictional character. Moreover, the tales she tells often function as reimaginations of the linear "history" imposed on the Caribbean by hegemonic colonial powers.

At first glance *Carnival* might seem to lie altogether in that rational hegemonic realm (Benítez-Rojo's "episteme of Europe"), but appearances in Antoni can be deceptive. The collision between myth and everyday life is almost brutally explicit in this novel. When several sophisticated expatriate

return to the Caribbean for Carnival, they join a band (Peter Minshall's) whose mas that year is titled "River". "Mr Minshall's theatrical myth-making," as William Fletcher puts it, "retold the cosmogony of the Earth People."³² Despised and shunned by the other islanders, these simple folk, who live in a remote redoubt called Hell Valley, practise their own non-Western religion, which eschews the unnatural practices and rationalist culture of the modern Western world. After the period of fête ends, the main characters go up into the mountains; among the Earth People they find themselves in the very world that the carnival band had turned into an artistic construct.

Divina Trace, Antoni's own most prodigious artistic construct to date, began modestly as part of his work for a PhD degree at the University of Iowa. When Reynolds Price, who had earlier been one of his teachers at Duke, read "Granny Myna Tells of the Child", he encouraged Antoni to write a novel, and that piece ultimately became the first chapter. But of course the true genesis of Antoni's fictional world, including that of *Divina Trace*, lies much deeper – in generations of family experience in the Caribbean and particularly, as I have already noted, in stories about that experience told to Antoni when he was young. Many of the most memorable elements of *Divina Trace* come from that body of lore. There were tales of his maternal Grandfather Tucker, an entrepreneur and adventurer: his exploits in South America among head-hunters and giant snakes were the stuff of legend in the Antoni family. Granny Myna told young Bobby stories about her late husband, Bartolome (called Barto in life as well as in the novel), who died when Antoni's father was quite young; he heard about his grandfather's philandering as well.³³ The list of characters and situations that can be traced back to this web of family narratives is long. But Trinidad as a whole – transfigured into Corpus Christi – should not be underestimated as a major source for Antoni. This island, with its exotic history and legends, could almost be regarded as a voice in itself, telling the future novelist its stories of the Dorado, plantation days and especially the Black Madonna of Siparia. Over the years devotion to the little statue, known in Trinidad as La Divina Pastora,³⁴ spread to Hindus and other non-Catholic groups. The syncretic nature of the cult – its importance to Trinidad's disparate ethnicities – made it an ideal focal point for Antoni's exploration of the relationship between consciousness and community in *Divina Trace*.

Reflecting on that very link, Eva Hoffman observes that "a culture does not exist independently of us but within us. It is inscribed in the psyche, and it gives form and focus to our mental and emotional lives. We could hardly acquire a human identity outside it.... In a way, we are nothing more – or less – than an encoded memory of our heritage."³⁵ Caribbean writers seem particularly attuned to this phenomenon. There are many novels from the West Indies in which the community, more than any single character, is the protagonist. One thinks immediately of Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* or Mais's *Brother Man*, which Edward Brathwaite describes as "pointing not to the development of the Faustian novel, where individual characteristics triumph and are stressed; but towards the alternative tradition of inter-related perceptions".³⁶ Frequently too the novelists are narrators or characters whose point of view is clearly that of the community, such as in Olivia Senior's "Real Old Time T'ing".

But few Caribbean writers have ventured as far into the forbidding territory of collective identity that Antoni attempts to survey in *Divina Trace*. In one section of the novel, Johnny Domingo is sitting in a church pew behind his great-aunt, Mother Superior Maurina, on the night before his departure for school in America. She hands him "a folded piece of paper" that a few minutes later becomes, as he listens to her story, "the black surface of my collective unconscious", which is "already crowded with words".³⁷ In a later recollection of the scene, the text is partially spelled out in almost the precise

words that Johnny uses to begin the novel: “The boulderstone was big and obzockee. I was having hard time toting him.”³⁸ And as if to underscore the extent to which *Divina Trace* is a transcription of Johnny’s collective unconscious, similar words (this time the exact opening of the novel) come to Johnny again in a dream on the morning of his ninetieth birthday.

As the novel originating on that piece of paper unfolds, the seven voices of Johnny Domingo and his family members – recollected, dreamed, perhaps partly imagined – gradually increase in intensity (and in difficulty for the reader), culminating in a declamatory poem. This part of the novel – a Caribbean vernacular version of the *Ramayana* shaped to fit the history of the Domingo family, the story of the frogchild Manuelito and the account of his mother’s virtual canonization – is arranged around a brief passage of nearly impenetrable prose corresponding to the most basic pre-linguistic part of Johnny’s selfhood. All of the voices, including this one and the second half of Magdalena’s poem, recur in reverse order on the other side of the mirror page lying at the novel’s dead centre: the place in Johnny’s, and the reader’s, being where words fail.

The idea, Antoni has explained, is to move “into the unconscious” in order “to get back to something like the ‘source’ of Johnny’s Caribbeanness (identity)”.³⁹ There is a tension here between the individuality that Johnny claims and the cultural and family history that seems at times to possess him. The question of balance between collective consciousness and the degree of individuation needed to articulate it recurs in *Carnival*, with its novelist narrator who somehow needs both to separate from his home island and to return to it. In *Divina Trace* Johnny repeatedly tries to step away from the swamp of his inner being and see it as an individual, from the outside. These brief moments always give way to sinking back again into memories, stories, nightmares that blend into one another in an endless process of revision. The result is a rather difficult (though richly rewarding) reading experience. Antoni himself has admitted, “I put everything I had into it. It has faults because it’s reaching too far.”⁴⁰ In fact, as I will argue in the following chapter, it reaches almost farther than fiction – or even articulate thought – can go.

In *Blessed Is the Fruit* Antoni brings to life a paradigm for a composite and changing Caribbean selfhood by weaving together the memories of his two protagonists. Once again he draws on familiar matrices for both voice and setting. The Corpus Christi of *Blessed* is less a mythic place of the distant past than a historical one, set rather precisely in 1958 (although Vel’s and Lil’s accounts of their lives go back more than two decades earlier). As in the case of *Divina Trace*, the arrangement of the narrative’s constituent parts is starkly visible. Every aspect of the book’s structure, as I will demonstrate in [chapter 3](#), is calculated to enact the theme of *métissage* or creolization: the coming together of the two women’s “encoded memories” to form the beginning of a confluent identity which manifests itself in the unborn child’s double dream at the centre of the novel.⁴¹ The clear plastic window page in the exact middle serves as both a barrier and, like other windows in the text, an entranceway from one life to the other. Both this scheme and the book’s other obvious superstructure – its division into the three chaplets, fifteen decades and 150 beads of the circular rosary – create a textual space in which partitions can be transformed into convergences and in which human selfhood can break out of the boundaries dictated by history. In *Blessed Is the Fruit* this essentially generative (one is tempted to say *gestational*) process takes place within the immense tropical vacancy left by the disintegration of a plantation system that once filled much of the social space of the West Indies. The dynamics of the narrative, the comingling of two streams of cultural discourse, function, like Benítez Rojo’s somewhat romantic characterization of creolization in general, as “a mutual exchange ... rather than the acculturation of subjugated peoples to the coloniser’s culture”.⁴² It is of the utmost

importance in *Blessed Is the Fruit* that neither woman's identity is simply subordinated to (colonized by) the other's. The novel moves toward an idealized moment of complete, almost transcendental reciprocity.

An early version of the initial story in Antoni's third book, "My Grandmother's Tale of the Buried Treasure and How She Defeated the King of Chacachacari and the Entire American Army with Her Venus-Flytraps", appeared in *Conjunctions* in 1992, a year after the publication of *Divina Trace* in Britain. However, the tale "had been hanging around a long time"⁴³ and so is certainly one of the earliest manifestations of Corpus Christi in the landscape of the Caribbean word. Eventually Antoni returned to this story, adding four more until Granny Myna, the first and last voice we hear in *Divina Trace*, had a book all her own. The resulting collage of tales, embedded tales and digressions is a testament to the power of storytelling to open up the frontiers of imagination, but the tales she tells (like some of Zoe and Jook Jook's behaviour in "Two-head Fred") could easily be construed by unimaginative guardians of propriety – such as parents – to be a bad influence. Granny's coarse language (and indeed, that of several other Antoni narrators) recalls the often scatological speech of the Earth People, who used obscenities as "demotic and carnivalesque subversions of social power". Granny's linguistic rebelliousness is essential to her more serious purpose as the narrator of a new Caribbean reality: to rewrite history, break rules and unravel patriarchal patterns of thought left over from colonialism.⁴⁵

My Grandmother's Erotic Folktales, though tied together with many subtle threads (not the least of which is the commanding voice of the narrator herself), must be seen as a dramatic departure from the massive symphonic novels that preceded them. Yet the difference lies in a shift of emphasis as much as in a reduction in scale. Antoni is quick to insist that America plays "a large role in *Divina Trace*",⁴⁶ but there is so much else going on in that mammoth book that the reader might be forgiven for not paying too much attention to it. This is decidedly not true of *Erotic Folktales*. From Granny's amusing reworking of the island's colonial history in "The Tale of How Iguana Got Her Wrinkles" to the chronicles of her own epic confrontations with outsiders such as the King of Chacachacari and the Kentucky Colonel, the book is filled with comic encounters between the Caribbean (as evoked through Granny's persona) and the outside world. Not the least important of them, particularly in the retrospective light of Antoni's subsequent novel, is an appearance by Ernest Hemingway in "The Tale of How Crab-o Lost His Head". According to Granny Myna, this "Ernesto", a butterfly collector and "famous American author" with a penis like a "little pencil-eraser", eventually goes home and writes down the "real-life newspaper details"⁴⁷ of the story – a pedestrian account lacking the power and poetry of Granny's voice.

One might think from the rough treatment accorded to Hemingway in *Erotic Folktales* that Antoni does not think highly of him. Nothing could be further from the truth, as *Carnival* clearly proves. "Ernesto" is slipped into *Erotic Folktales* as a caricature of a journalistic realist whose reportage is in variance with the lush tonalities and frequent mythologizing of Caribbean storytelling. But the actual Hemingway is evoked with great respect (and a good deal of playfulness) in *Carnival*, as a writer who bequeathed the language of everyday speech to his successors and who gave to Robert Antoni in particular a model for exploring human value and identity in the wake of global cultural trauma. On his website Antoni says that *Carnival* is "in some ways a recasting, in other ways a parody" of *The Sun Also Rises*, and this seems to strike just about the right note. Antoni's debt to Faulkner in *Divina Trace* is well documented. He has gone so far as to claim that "[t]he whole structure of *Divina Trace* comes from *Absalom, Absalom*.... The idea of situating various narrators at different distances from the

story, with different perspectives on it ... all that comes from Faulkner.”⁴⁸ In *Carnival* the use of *The Sun Also Rises* as a frame of reference is much more readily apparent. If the result is that Antoni becomes known as both the Faulkner and the Hemingway of the Caribbean, these two great writers must already be writhing in their graves.⁴⁹

Carnival moves from New York City to an unnamed Caribbean island that is closer to present-day Trinidad than the Corpus Christi of Antoni’s other books.⁵⁰ Most of the story takes place there (with a brief coda returning William and his cousin Rachel to New York at the end), and this long section is divided between the characters’ experiences during Carnival itself and their excursion into the mountains to meet the Earth People, whose belief system was the subject of the mas they played. While *Carnival* is undeniably the most accessible of Antoni’s novels, the subtleties of a narrative related in a “realistic” Hemingway fashion – incorporating within its realism both the fictionalization of a myth through mas and the myth itself as lived by the Earth People – should not be underestimated.

To complicate matters further, the novel’s overarching plot (with its phantom framework borrowed from *The Sun Also Rises*) is an exhaustive meditation on the diasporal experience: expatriation, the longing for a return to some “hypothetical center or origin”⁵¹ and the lingering, painful effects of wounds inflicted by history. The three main characters, despite their relative education and affluence, all suffer from afflictions of the soul that no amount of revelry during the brief period of Carnival can heal. Their final journey, to an island subculture that is attempting to dial itself back to a pre-colonial, pre-modern condition, is motivated at least in part by their need to recuperate something lost – to be somehow restored. For this critical movement in the novel, Antoni has drawn extensively on his own life as an expatriate writer who has struggled to stay connected with his West Indian roots. Although he “only really started to visit Trinidad” when he was “sixteen or seventeen”,⁵² he has been back there frequently, often for extended periods. And, like William, he once made a practice of returning for Carnival and twice trekked up into the mountains to visit Hell Valley after the celebrations had played themselves out. *Carnival* is more firmly planted in a recognizably contemporary world than any of Antoni’s other books, but it was his fascination with the strange mythology of the Earth People that finally, after considerable difficulty, brought this novel into being.⁵³

Antoni has commented that “[t]here’s no heritage of Caribbean literature”,⁵⁴ and he is certainly right if *heritage* implies a tradition extending over a number of generations. The region’s indigenous peoples, unlike their Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec and Aztec neighbours on the mainland of Middle America, had no system of writing. Of course, beginning with Christopher Columbus, many outsiders (including European colonists) have written about the West Indies; some of the more recent of these, such as Peter Matthiessen and Madison Smartt Bell, have done outstanding work, but their perspectives are still extrinsic to the region. The literary heritage is in fact a brief one, going back in any meaningful way only to the early twentieth century.

Claude McKay’s *Banana Bottom* (1933) can plausibly lay claim to being the first significant West Indian novel, and certainly the first by a person of colour. McKay’s contemporaries in the period before the Second World War include Jean Rhys (who wrote most of her novels years before *Wide Sargasso Sea*) and the writers of the “Trinidad Awakening”, a movement that included such figures as

C.L.R. James, Eric Roach, Alfred Mendes and Albert Gomes.⁵⁵ James and Mendes founded a short-lived magazine called *Trinidad*; two years later, in 1931, Gomes had better luck with *The Beacon* which can be given much credit for helping to establish the idea of a Trinidadian literature. Such modest beginnings laid the groundwork; after the war a new, astonishing generation of novelists, poets and playwrights emerged, many of them, like V.S. Naipaul, beginning their careers with a British education. In addition to Naipaul and his fellow Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, there were Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace and Wilson Harris, among others. These major figures paved the way for a veritable eruption of gifted artists such as Robert Antoni whose work has appeared in the post-independence era.⁵⁶

The word *eruption* is not inappropriate, and the diversity of these writers' origins is remarkable. They come from Guyana on the South American mainland, from Trinidad and Barbados in the southern Caribbean, from relatively large countries such as Jamaica and tiny ones such as St Kitts, Grenada and Dominica and, of course, from lands that were never under the British flag: Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Martinique. Even Gabriel García Márquez, who hails from near the coast of northern Colombia,⁵⁷ takes pains to claim the Caribbean as his own. This multiplicity of origins has been matched by the diversity of the writers' destinations. As for the previous generation, the present-day wave has splashed abundantly onto foreign shores, part of the far larger diaspora of ordinary West Indians – millions of them – driven to emigrate for economic or political reasons.

And Caribbean writers, like their compatriots living “in foreign”, manage to stay connected. Many of these *écrivains sans frontières* (writers without borders) know one another and read each other's books; the linkages they maintain are carefully documented in Antoni's *Carnival*.⁵⁸ Papee Vince's *Divina Trace* tells Johnny Domingo, “[Y]ou can only tell your own story. You can only hear your own story too”,⁵⁹ but if the self is indivisible from the culture that produces it, that story is never entirely one's own. A kind of cultural *cousinage* (or “affiliation” in Edward Said's sense of the word)⁶⁰ can be detected in the work of most of today's Caribbean writers – including those who are scattered around the globe.

One member of the West Indian diaspora whose work most clearly displays affiliations with Antoni's is Lawrence Scott. Born in Trinidad in 1944, Scott has lived in London for many years. His family, like Antoni's, were long-established members of the island's so-called plan-tocracy, a heritage he explores and reimagines brilliantly in his ambitious, technically innovative first novel *Witchbroom*. The book's hermaphroditic narrator Lavren⁶¹ – a self-proclaimed “Tiresias”⁶² “levitates between races, a creole in a creole world”⁶³ as he seeks his own identity by relaying his version of Caribbean history through the story of the Monagas de los Macajuelos family. But Lavren is a disguise. The subsections of *Witchbroom* are called “carnival tales”, and true to the spirit of the mas, the narrator adopts the mask because his “actual” persona and style are not sufficient to work his magic. The tale, he says, “I had once started ... neat, clipped and distanced”, but “it seemed impossible for the story to hold ... in sentences so always balanced like the prose of another land, the one we were taught in schools in order to write good compositions in our royal-blue exercise books with the picture of the king on the front”.⁶⁴ Much later he comments, “I have the sentences of my colonial education. Secretly I envy him his creole loudness”; and “The clear balanced sentence, the sequential paragraph would not always do, the linear logic would not hold. Lavren would have to talk to hold.”⁶⁵ The parallels between *Witch-broom* and *Divina Trace* are fascinating, especially considering that the novels were published only one year apart and, Antoni has told me, their authors were

unaware of each other's existence at the time.⁶⁶ Both are formally eccentric, capacious attempts to imagine a kind of Caribbean "history" that is neither *sequential* nor *linear* – and certainly not inspired by "colonial education".

Tonally the two books could not be more different. *Witchbroom's* narrator is arch, witty, scholarly, allusive – and at the same time elegiac – while Johnny Domingo's voice and the elder voices he remembers are filled with fear and wonder. But the Trinidad past folds itself into the texture of both ways that are often eerily similar. *Witchbroom*, like *Divina Trace*, features a founding family named Monagas,⁶⁷ a walking statue, several references to La Divina Pastora, and a near-miraculous birth. Lavren is discovered by the attending physician to have both male and female genitals. While this scene is by no means rendered with the comic bravado of the frogchild's birth in *Divina Trace* (a bit of *comédie rosse* without many parallels in the history of literature), Lavren's physical condition is thematically significant as Manuelito's, inasmuch as Scott needed a narrator "who levitates between centuries, races, and genders"⁶⁸ to tell the story of such a fragmented new world. Scott employs similar techniques in his other books,⁶⁹ where, as in *Antoni*, the complex relationship between Caribbean identity and culture always poses difficult and disturbing questions. Scott's characters tend to be haunted by a sense of alienation that clearly has its origins in the various ruptures brought about by the Caribbean's tortured history. This is an undercurrent in Antoni's work as well, reaching its fullest development only recently, in *Carnival*. But perhaps the strongest bond linking the visions of these writers is revealed near the end of *Witchbroom*, when Lavren admits that "no words here would have been possible without the poetry, prose, history, painting, sculpture, the mobility of mas, the invention of pan, calypso and the spoken voice which had come out of the yard of this archipelago and which had invaded my ears, sitting on the sill of the Demerara window."⁷⁰ *The spoken voice*, the story told to a listener, is the most fundamental estuarial act – a living link between past and present between the Caribbean and the lands beyond.

A primary force that guides the movement of Robert Antoni's artistic growth even more than Scott's is a desire to break through boundaries. In various interviews and conversations he has spoken of opening up language, freeing himself from racial, national and other "restrictions" and admiring books "that test limits".⁷¹ "The landscape of your word is the world's landscape", Glissant has remarked, addressing Caribbean writers. "But its frontiers are open."⁷² This highly implicative metaphor illuminates Antoni's work in several ways.

Most obviously, he participates in the estuarial movement of the Caribbean voice outwards, beyond any delimited island, into the "sea" of the wider world. There is too the urgent and protean articulation of that voice by Antoni's narrators. All of them are obsessive, constantly expanding the territory of their own identities, even in such an early work as "Two-head Fred and Tree-foot Frieda", which does not quite end with Addy's drunken confusion of fact and fiction during his attempt to spy on Jook Jook and Zoe. The next morning the two of them take Addy home on Jook Jook's boat; he is convinced that Zoe will never speak to him again after his mortifying interruption of their tryst the night before. But when his thoughts "find a center", he brushes a leaf along Zoe's bare shoulder and effectively wills her forgiveness – enlarges the borders of his reality – by telling himself a little story: "She allowed me this, and I put the leaf on my tongue and imagined that it could melt slowly in my mouth, could cool my hot insides."⁷³ From Addy to William Fletcher, Antoni's storytellers seem to understand on some level that narrative is not just decorative but transfigurative, containing within it the power to readjust the world's lines of demarcation.

The narrative that runs throughout Antoni's fiction and contains all others, the postulation of a

evolving, pluralistic Caribbean identity, necessitates the violation of certain categories of thought imposed by colonialism. If this extension or erasure of “frontiers” is a political act, it also becomes an aesthetic choice for the Caribbean writer. Commenting on the memoirs of Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, who wrote about the Caribbean in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Benítez-Rojo finds that the French priest conceived “the hypothesis of a common Caribbean culture ... unbounded by the linguistic and political frontiers imposed by the various colonial powers”.⁷⁴ As many students of postcolonial literatures have doubtless observed,⁷⁵ spatial delineations on maps have often been only the outward manifestation of much deeper ones. But those lines are deliberately breached in Antoni’s books. The various narrators of *Divina Trace*, for instance – representing European, African, East Indian and Amerindian heritages – combine to produce a collective, boisterous deconstruction of that quintessential novel of filiation, the family chronicle. And in *Blessed Is the Fruit*, a post-plantation narrative space is created by the insistent growing together of two “plots” that the *ancien régime* would have kept apart. Both novels (not to mention *My Grandmother’s Erotic Folktales*) unravel the filiative threads of received history and weave them into new, distinctly non-linear forms of discourse. Brian McHale’s definition of the “postmodernist historical novel” fairly accurately describes Antoni’s project. That genre, he explains, “is revisionist in two senses. First, it revises the content of the historical record ... often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself.”⁷⁶

Closely related to Antoni’s ideation of a collective Caribbean consciousness liberated from extrinsically imposed boundaries and divisions is his expansion of the formal and technical frontiers of fiction. Like Lawrence Scott, Antoni has often found “the clear balanced sentence, the sequential paragraph” and “the linear logic” insufficient for his purposes. In exploring alternatives he has not hesitated to acknowledge bonds of kinship with writers from “foreign” who have spurred his imagination. Although his work is unquestionably rooted in the oral tradition of the West Indies, he has allowed books that “test limits” – such as *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (not to mention the works of Freud, Lacan, Julia Kristeva and others) – to influence him enormously. It is, I believe, this complex combination of relation to Caribbean culture and an acknowledgement of filiative links⁷⁷ with canonical European and American writers that places him in a company that includes Derek Walcott, and few others. Like Walcott he navigates both the headwaters and tributaries of Caribbean folk tale and the limitless oceans of modernist and postmodernist text. Benítez-Rojo has commented that “to reread the Caribbean we have to visit the sources from which the widely varied elements that contributed to the formation of its culture flowed”,⁷⁸ but he has also written eloquently on the Caribbean impulse “toward travel, toward exploration”. That exploration leads a writer like Antoni along “fluvial and marine routes”⁷⁹ to search for origins, yes, but also to enlarge the landscape of his identity as a human being and an artist, to open up the frontiers of the word so that others may follow.

DIVINA TRACE

The Inexhaustible Myth

It was a story to top all others. Even the Biblical one.

– *Divina Trace*¹

There is no story that is not true.

– Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*²

Like several other capacious, innovative works that have emerged from the region (Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, V.S. Naipaul's *A Way in the World* and Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, for instance), *Divina Trace* is part of what Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls a movement "toward the creation of a ethnologically promiscuous text that might allow a reading of the varied and dense polyphony of Caribbean society's characteristic codes".³ A generic cross-dresser with a long mock-epic poem enfolded in its prose, *Divina Trace* conjoins disparate cultural and religious traditions within a multivocal narrative that contests itself at every turn, continually undoing and retelling the story. At its centre that protean story confronts matters that we scarcely have the vocabulary to describe: the nature of human consciousness, the dialectic of consciousness and culture, and the possible link between consciousness and something indefinable beyond it.

"Break a vase," Derek Walcott said in his Nobel address, "and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love that took its symmetry for granted when it was whole."⁴ If the Caribbean writer's task (as Glissant repeatedly implies) is to plumb the collective memory and reassemble the broken fragments of culture, Antoni certainly rises to the challenge; *Divina Trace* stands at or near the forefront of those recent literary efforts to reclaim a past distorted by the corrosive legacy of colonialism. Precisely because that past has been shattered into so many discrete pieces, its reconceptualization must be, at the very least, collective and composite – an evolving, multifaceted history for a complicated, multifaceted culture. This is the kind of history that Antoni obsessively evokes in *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 Benítez-Rojo's "repeating island, "unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth".⁵ The novel is also characterized by the counter-colonizing movement described by Edward Said: the incorporation of non-linear thought structures associated with southern Asia and west Africa into the narrative design of a very Western form of discourse – the fictional family chronicle – transforming it into something truly rich and strange.⁶

Although the repeated interpretation and reinterpretation of family and island past generate the narrative structure of *Divina Trace*, the novel also explores other issues related to the ambiguous interplay between past and present. Like Zee Edgell in *Beka Lamb*, Antoni addresses the question of how personal and cultural identities together evolve and grow 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 is the difficult struggle of the central character, Johnny Domingo, at the age of ninety, to understand who he is by examining particles of island history and legend available to him through memory, imagination and dream. 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 such as 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, and particularly the importance of story-telling in the retrieval and transmission of culture. But in *Divina Trace* these themes are raised to an altogether higher power. The method of storytelling becomes a meditation on the intrinsic attributes of narrative, with all of its attendant retelling, variation and elaboration. This aspect of the novel in turn raises questions about the shifting, variable quality of the truth accessible to human beings. As in Karl Popper's "non-authoritarian theory of knowledge",⁷ the "truth" of *Divina Trace* is gathered into a seemingly endless cycle of hypotheses, rejections and new hypotheses. But Antoni goes even further, towards the very frontiers of fiction's possibilities, using the Caribbean's estuarial/diasporal hypostasis to explore the nature of human consciousness itself and its relationship to language and storytelling. The deepest mysteries of *Divina Trace* hauntingly echo that ancient insight encoded in the Indo-European root *gno-*, the common ancestor of both *knowledge* and *narration*. And throughout the novel, the ancestor-plagued Johnny keeps returning to questions raised by those mysteries: What is history? Does an objective history even exist? What is the connection between history, storytelling and myth? What, in "fact", is the difference between imagination and reality?

A STORIED WORLD

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

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, transmutation, return, fluxes of sidereal matter.⁸

The subjectivity of the seven voices that speak to Johnny Domingo as he pieces together his family story makes the “spiral chaos” of *Divina Trace* a fluctuating space of shifting events, relationships and dates. Like the Milky Way, Antoni’s text is also a pattern, paradoxically in a state of constant change, self-destruction and recreation. Much of this effect can be traced to the book’s origins in the oral tradition – in the stories told to Antoni by his own grandmother and other family members. A sense of the spoken word is a dominant feature in all his work, and nowhere more so than here, with such a crowd of voices speaking, all inscribing themselves “on the black surface” of Johnny’s “collective unconscious”.⁹ Indeed, the epistemological signification that Glissant attributes generally to Caribbean folktales seems almost an analysis of the mechanics and implications of *Divina Trace* itself: “The oral techniques of accumulation, repetition, and circularity combine to undo the vision of reality and truth as singular, introducing the multiple, the uncertain, and the relative instead.”¹⁰

Just as useful to an understanding of the novel’s mechanics is Benítez-Rojo’s notion of the Antilles as a meeting place of “the discourse of myth with the discourse of history”.¹¹ Early and late in *Divina Trace* the two are intertwined, coming together even in the name of the island – Corpus Christi denoting as it does a union of the temporal and the eternal. History may produce myth, but myth in turn remakes history, as Papee Vince explains:

Because son, the fact is that 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 her 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.¹²

Not just here but throughout Antoni’s vast structure of recollection (to borrow a phrase from Proust) Benítez-Rojo’s two discourses engage in an ongoing dialectic as the family history that Johnny struggles so mightily to make rational is penetrated and transformed by the frightening irrationality of myth. And, for Johnny Domingo, the deeper wellsprings of that myth are powerful and lifelike enough to fire his narrative with a childhood terror that ninety years of ordinary historical experience in both the United States and the Caribbean, do little to extinguish.

The arrangement of the 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*, so that in this section the Magdalena of Johnny’s imagination relays her version of past events on the island of Corpus Christi. Between the two halves of Magdalena’s poem, and at the dead centre of the novel, lies an even more oracular utterance, the narrative of Hanuman the Hindu monkey god. Hanuman, in his “calypso-simian tongue” – an asyntactical, highly associational flow of words and syllables – spins out his own account of the “subplot of the monkey tribes” found in the *Ramayana*. This brief segment, 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”.¹³ 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. These voices, having brooded over the birth of the frogchild in the book's first half, now offer up their varying interpretations of the mother's later elevation to island sainthood. And though Johnny's voice is the medium that holds and transmits all these others, his is like Marie-Sophie's in Chamoiseau's *Texaco* – "only part of a chorus, a multi-layered, multi-perspective identity that is revealed as an even more dominant force" than that of any individual.¹⁴

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 i Where, in truth, are dere monkeys patient to trudge, / Dis mudthick-mudswamp monkeylanguage?"¹⁵ Hanuman's section suggests a level or source of consciousness beneath or prior to rational thought, and therefore a prelinguistic, perhaps even 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.*"¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 apt one – 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".¹⁸ Finally, the *Ramayana*, like *Divina Trace*, records the birth of myth out of storytelling and its inscription on the consciousness of a people. As Aamer 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."¹⁹

The *Ramayana*'s remarkable regenerative capability, its endless retelling of itself, may well be its most consequential link to *Divina Trace*, where a story is conceived not as the opposite of reality ("fiction" is thought to be the opposite of "fact") but rather as one possible revelation of the real. Two brief sequences somewhat removed from the novel's central events demonstrate the difficulty of ascertaining a truth apart from truth-as-told. Just five pages in, Granny Myna tells Johnny that the scar on his father's forehead derived from her looking at a picture of Saint John with a similar scar during her "moments of passion",²⁰ including the moment of Dr Domingo's conception. But much later Johnny recalls his father's own explanation of the scar: that he got it jumping out of a tamarind tree. Still another version has Uncle Amadao accidentally hitting him on the head while skipping stones across the duck pond. Within the storied world of *Divina Trace*, all three versions are equally true, just as Magdalena remains, in Papee Vince's words, "a saint, a whore, or both".²¹ Moreover, neither Papee Vince's "factual" or "historical" account nor Dr Domingo's "scientific" one is prioritized by the novel's overall deployment of narratives. On the contrary, they are placed on the same level as the emotional, superstitious and hysterical testimonies of Granny Myna, Evelina and Mother Maurina.

Although the plot of *Divina Trace* constantly evolves and mutates as the different voices speak to Johnny Domingo in his recollections and dreams, it does possess a determinate core, and that core is Johnny's search for the plot.²² That the search must be conducted through storytelling is intimated

the subconscious “monkeylanguage” at the centre of the book. Hanuman concludes his monkey speech (effectively beginning the novel’s second half) with “*Krick-krack, monkey break he back, all fa pie of pommerac*”.²³ This is a traditional Caribbean call-and-response signal to begin a story, and its placement here, within the nucleus of Johnny’s consciousness, clearly signals that in the beginning of the word, or even an unnameable pre-word.²⁴ All of the storytellers whose words are 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”.²⁵ 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.²⁶

And what is that story? In Papee Vince’s words, 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 actually have been anencephalic.²⁷ Magdalena herself died immediately afterwards, under circumstances that are hotly disputed, and the child, christened Manuelito Domingo, lived for just three days.

Of course these “facts” do not go 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 Warrahoons²⁸ (Amerindians), yet she sported a Hindu *tilak* in the middle of her forehead. Johnny’s 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-quarter Amerindian). The frogchild (or “crapo-child”,²⁹ as he is frequently called) Manuelito was apparently the equal 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. 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”.³⁰ 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 the statue in a nearby chapel “belonged to a time much older than Mother Maurina”.³¹ 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

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