"Tink is you dawson dis yana?" Imitation and Creation in Robert Antoni's "Divina Trace"

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I. Introduction: The Ape and the Pope

"READING ROBERT ANTONI'S *Divina Trace*," according to Rhonda Cobham, can be "an exasperating and tedious experience."[1] But though the novel disorients the West Indian and non-West Indian reader with such novel techniques as "its self-indulgent mirror page and irritatingly unfamiliar stylized representation of Trinidadian speech" ("Of Boloms" 49), it is not altogether unfamiliar in form and style. It recalls Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, whose styles Aijaz Ahmad describes as "delightful to readers brought up on modernism and postmodernism" (*In Theory* 112). Antoni's style delights readers familiar with García Márquez and Rushdie. *Divina Trace* explicitly employs the form that has gained currency in the North American academy and market place under the name of magical realism *while* playing with received notions of what the "Caribbean" or "Third World" novel should be.[2] By calling into question the genealogical structure that has dominated European as well as Caribbean discussions of identity and influence, Antoni moves towards a surprisingly radical idea of creativity and originality, intertextuality and tradition.

Edouard Glissant's *Le discours antillais* and *Poétique de la relation* provide insightful studies of genealogy in the Caribbean, adopting a culturally and historically engaged application of the decentring insights of poststructuralism — especially of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome — that contextualizes *Divina Trace*. Glissant associates the tree-root with fixed identity and racial purity, and traces the origins of European nationhood,

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imperialism, and intolerance to this root: "The West . . . is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, all require that the root take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari no doubt meant to challenge" (*Poetics of Relation* 14). He elaborates in *Caribbean Discourse*: "Reversion is the obsession with a single origin: one must not alter the absolute state of being. To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact" (16). The rhizome becomes a way of imagining identity as both rooted and in process, and of drawing attention not only to the vertical connections of genealogy, but to horizontal relations as well. As Jonathan Culler notes, most European models of influence and tradition are based on paternity and legitimacy:

> Feminist critics have shown considerable interest in Harold Bloom's model of poetic creation because it makes explicit the sexual connotations of authorship and authority. This oedipal scenario, in which one becomes a poet by struggling with a poetic father for possession of the muse, indicates the problematic situation of a woman who would be a poet. (*On Deconstruction* 60)

Culler poses a question similar to Antoni's: "What relation can [the female poet] have to the tradition?" (Culler 60). He accuses the genealogical model of influence of being explicitly patriarchal. The family model is also implicitly racialist, relying on purity and exclusion. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel most closely related to *Divina Trace*, García Márquez troubles this model through the Buendía's incest, showing in the extreme the result of keeping tradition within the family. In *Divina Trace*, Antoni eschews this exclusiveness, deconstructing any attempt to trace a rooted family tree.

Divina Trace is a novel in three parts, narrated by ninety-year-old Johnny Domingo, as he recalls the stories told to him by various members of his family. The stories revolve around the peculiar life of Magdalena Divina and her child, who may or may not have been born with the head and upper body of a frog. The novel's first part, comprised of five chapters, gives voice to five different narrators who each tell their version of the birth of the frogchild. After recording the testimonies of these various

family members, the middle section of the novel gives Magdalena a chance to speak for herself. She appears to Johnny and recounts a modified version of the Ramayana which parallels her own story. Magdalena's story is in turn interrupted by Hanuman, the monkey-god who digresses from Magdalena's Ramayana tale in his "impenetrable monkey-language" (172). This language has a syntax suggestive of Trinidadian Creole and a vocabulary made up of the names of some of Antoni's influences (Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Julia Kristeva, Derek Walcott, and Jorge Borges, among others) and a wide variety of monkey-names. Antoni, who has studied biology and worked in the monkey laboratory at Duke University as an undergraduate, uses his extensive scientific vocabulary to create his "monkey-language," recalling James Joyce's use in *Finnegan's Wake* of names of birds as words: Antoni's phrasing "uakari den Rishy-muka, pigtaile macacaque tween you legs" (*Divina Trace* 199), echoes Joyce's "nobirdy aviar soar anywing to eagle it!" (*Finnegan's Wake* 505).

The novel is bisected exactly at the half-way point by a sheet of reflective paper, placed in the middle of Hanuman's tale. The second half of the narrative turns out to be the mirror reflection of the first; the same voices speak, in reverse order, this time about Magdalena herself rather than the frogchild. The novel's symmetry is precise. For example, one hundred pages into the novel, a page from a scientific journal appears describing the anencephalic fetus, and one hundred pages from the end, the same page reappears. While Johnny's search for the frog-child's origins propels the novel's first half, the second half explores how Magdalena came to be mythologized. Antoni brings together many of the formative myths of the Caribbean, from the Ramayana to the Black Virgin, to contemporary myths of magical realism.

In 1988, Antoni published an essay examining the relationship between Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Antoni focuses on the question of creativity in Allende's novel and of her relation to tradition. Reviewers feel compelled to defend *The House of the Spirits* as more than "a mere reworking of *One Hundred*

Years of Solitude [from] the feminist perspective" ("Review" 102). Antoni would appear to share this view, entitling his piece "Parody or Piracy," as though Allende might be plagiarizing García Márquez, copying rather than creating.[3] The image of the Caribbean or Latin American writer as a "mimic man" (or woman) endures. Antoni admits that "the first few sentences of the *House of the Spirits* seem to belong to García Márquez" ("Parody or Piracy" 16). García Márquez's influence on Allende is well-documented. Antoni describes the style of the opening paragraph of *The House of the Spirits* as "quite obviously . . . the language of magic realism, the language of García Márquez," emphasizing that "we note similarities in tone and technique" (17). But he goes on to say that "the last few [sentences] — which, ironically enough, are much the same — belong to Isabel Allende" (16). According to Antoni, Allende, in her first novel, finds her own voice *through* García Márquez's, so that by the second time that she writes "*Barrabás came to us by sea*," the sentence with which the novel both begins and ends, she truly writes in her own voice. In Antoni's reading of *The House of the Spirits*, "Allende uses [García Márquez]'s language to discover her own" (16). Antoni goes on to discuss, using Bakhtinian terms, Allende's text as polyphonic: Allende begins with "the language of magic realism," alongside the patriarchal discourse of Esteban Trueba, but eventually, these voices give way to the voice of Alba, a more historically grounded narrator.

Anyone familiar with Caribbean literature understands the efficacy of the image of author as mimic that Antoni's raises. V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* is the most famous literary example of a discourse that reduces the Caribbean periphery to an imperfect imitation of the European centre. Walcott summarizes this position as the belief that "no gesture . . . is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement is a quotation, and because it is mimicry, uncreative" ("The Caribbean" 6). These accusations of imitation intersect with European scientific discourse in which Africans and Amerindians were thought to be a link between man and ape. Tzvetan Todorov describes Sepúlveda's analogy that the Americans he encounters are "as inferior to the Spaniards as children are to adults and women to

men . . . almost — I am inclined to say — as between monkeys and men" (*The Conquest of America* 153). From this perspective, mimicry, "aping," implies not only a lesser degree of creativity, but of humanity. Antoni, then, as Caribbean author, is condemned to perpetually ape European tradition, unable to create anything new or important.[4]

The twelfth chapter of *Divina Trace* is narrated by Papee Vince as a "history lesson." His can easily be taken as the text's authoritative voice. Vince describes his narrative at one point as "biological-historical truth" (368), a transcendence no other teller in the novel claims. In fact, his speech closely resembles the history of the Caribbean that Todorov presents. He relates the very information about Sepúlveda mentioned above, telling of "an on-going biological debate" between Las Casas and "the renowned journalist Sepúlveda, the latter offering scientific proof of the equation that Indians are to Pañyols as monkeys are to men" (357). Todorov's and Papee Vince's narratives coincide not only in factual information, but even in presentation. Just as Vince protests that he is "a simple storyteller" (341), Todorov prefaces his text by warning that he has "chosen to narrate a history . . . closer to myth than to argument" (*The Conquest of America* 4). Todorov is using the moment of European encounter with the Caribbean to draw conclusions about discourse and Othering relevant to contemporary Europe; Papee Vince's narration makes a bid to connect the Domingo family saga to a greater Caribbean history.

Papee Vince offers one of the most cohesive and compelling stories of Magdalena's canonization hearings. As he sees it, Magdalena Domingo's miracle is that she can be deified by all of the diverse residents of the island of Corpus Christi, known "to the Pañyols as La Divina Pastora, to the Amerindians as Akambomah, to the Africans as Mamma Latay, to the East Indians as Kali Mai" (*Divina Trace* 377). She can be "white white and beautiful and fair as morning she sweet self" (71), Indian with "that red mark of a coolie already stamp right here in the middle of she forehead" (399), or cocoa black like the statue in the church. Her ability to "flock we up" (377) all together as one is the true miracle of Magdalena.[5]

At her canonization hearing, the representatives of the Catholic Church consider the more quotidian miracles of Magdalena Divina such as her immaculate conception (which they sketically see as perhaps just the consequence of inadequate contraception [254]) and subsequent resurrection. The Pope is not convinced by any of this Caribbean superstition, and decrees to the residents of Corpus Christi that "this woman [Magdalena], and all else you have come to know and believe and dutifully to pass from generation to generation since your first beginnings, is but a fiction of your collective imagination" (312). The story of Saint Magdalena, the story which *Divina Trace* seeks to recollect, cannot be denied by the Pope. The Vatican's refusal to canonize Magdalena is taken "as a rejection of Corpus Christi sheself, as a denial of we very existence" (387). However, the islanders manage to turn this denial by the traditional centre into an affirmation of identity. They are able to claim Magdalena as their own, the patron saint of Corpus Christi, the black virgin, marginalized by the Catholic Church in Rome but celebrated by islanders of all backgrounds. As Antoni notes:

> Racial tensions which had marred we entire history seemed suddenly to disappear. The many religions did more than accept they former rivals: they now sought to incorporate each other. Whatever class differences remaining after we long years of colonialism were finally torn down, dissolved without a trace. (384)

The islanders reaffirm their distinctiveness from the colonial powers by the highly charged act of renaming the church and other landmarks, proclaiming that "we naming ourselves fa the world" (387). They wipe out the European name of St. Mary's with a mere "change of two letters, two Gs," thus renaming themselves St. Maggy's after Magdalena Divina. The story, in the end, is not just about the Hindu goddess Kali Mai, or the African Mamma Latay, or the Spanish Divina Pastora, or the Amerindian Akambo-Mah, for Magdalena Divina embodies them all, embodies "each of these names [that] came from cross the sea" (380). *Divina Trace* creates and names a deity whose roots cannot be clearly traced to just a single source; she is the syncretic result of historical entanglement, of the confluence of cultures in a new "whirled" space.

As the townspeople rename the island, they "ceremoniously smashed open the glass case in the museum, and . . . wrote over the first official map of Corpus Christi, drawn out in Barto's own hand" (387). While this moment allows the townspeople to overthrow symbolically their colonial father by rewriting his texts, the narrator needs a much more vivid oedipal exoneration from his two grandfathers. Bludgeoning Barto to death with a glass bottle (340), Johnny tries to complete the overturning of Barto's paternalistic domination that had begun through the renaming of St. Maggy's.

The authority and dominance of Johnny's other grandfather is much subtler, and Antoni's strategy to undermine his authority is thus less visceral. As Cobham argues, Papee Vince's authority derives from his status as the story's oldest, most European male. Barto may be more easily identifiable as (neo)colonial strong-man, but Papee Vince resembles a benevolent disseminator of knowledge and information in the mold of Shakespeare's Prospero. Towards the end of Papee Vince's speech, Johnny reaches to pluck a piece of lint from his grandfather's "half-moon of white flesh exposed between the bottom of his undershirt and the elastic waistband of his drawers" (366). Papee Vince's white flesh, rather than imbuing him with authority, occasions a moment of absurd comedy and catalyzes Johnny's realization that his grandfather is just a memory; that "in fact Papee Vince was eighty-six years of age, and tomorrow [Johnny himself] would be ninety" (367). Suddenly, the narrator is released from the spell of his grandfather's voice. He remembers that Papee Vince's story is just one of many. In the end, neither Papee Vince's age nor his whiteness proves to be adequate sources of authority.

By killing one grandfather, rendering the other absurd and immaterial, and renouncing the Pope, Johnny no longer has a figure of paternal authority to whom to appeal. As Werner Sollors asks, "in the absence of a pope, what are we to do about the problem of the canon in rewriting American literary history?" (*The Dialectics of Our America* 3). Rather than resisting or rewriting the British canon, which Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin identify as the primary project of

postcolonial fiction in *The Empire Writes Back*, Antoni explicitly lifts passages or techniques from the works of Walcott, Faulkner, García Márquez, and Borges, all New World sources. Significantly, Joyce, the most obvious European intertext in *Divina Trace*, is from a subject nation, Ireland, rather than from imperial England.[6] By modelling his work on these figures, Antoni's intertextual project aligns him neither with "mummy-England," nor with "Third World" authors as opposed to "the West."[7] His intertextuality suggests relation rather than tradition: he will not be tied to a tree, slave to a genealogical model of influence. Johnny finally knows why Granny Myna will have the last word.

II. Johnny's Quest: Reconceiving Tradition

Johnny's role in the novel mirrors Hanuman's as the monkey-mimic of the middle chapter: each is supposedly no more than a scribe, but each also struggles intensely to establish his own individual voice. John Hawley remarks that "this 'typical' Caribbean thrust [of writing the subject into existence] is not Johnny Domingo's project in *Divina Trace*." Instead, he is "surrendering himself to a communal identity" (102). Glissant asserts that "the question we need to ask in Martinique will not be: 'Who am I?' — a question that from the outset is meaningless — but rather: 'Who are we?'" (*Caribbean Discourse* 86). But why should we not ask both questions? Like Hawley and Condé, Johnny at first considers the quest for his own voice incompatible with absorption into the whole, initially seeing the world in terms of such binary oppositions: "It was as if the world were suddenly divided, as if I could choose between science and religion and disregard the other" (*Divina Trace* 96). At this point, Johnny resists submerging his voice to the communal voice: "*Why this bob-olups oldman is so determined to tell you this thing you don't want to hear? And if you don't want to hear it, why you don't get up and carry youself . . . Get youself from here!*" (41). Eventually, as his voice joins in with the others, however, he finds himself absorbed into the story; his voice becomes one among many: "It was only Evelina's voice in the dark. But it was Granny Myna's voice, and Papee Vince's voice: a collection of voices merging and separating, and occasionally falling into rhythm with my own quick breathing. . . . And now it was my voice too" (82-83).

The various narratives told by each character appear to conflict with one another, offering contradictory versions of the story. But whereas in *The House of the Spirits* it is "as though one voice were gradually consuming the other" ("Parody or Piracy" 24), the deviations between stories in *Divina Trace* establish the individuality of each character and of each narrative strand. The stories remain distinct throughout. This distinctness ensures that no speaker surrenders his or her identity entirely. Just as Kamau Brathwaite describes Creole as predicated not "upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather on their continual and mutual development" ("Creolization in Jamaica" 184), the narratives in *Divina Trace* rather than negating those that precede them instead fill in details previously unknown or only speculated upon. The different voices contradict one another but are not in discord. Indeed they are complementary, in the sense that the whole story must be understood as the aggregate of the conflicting tales. Each story adds to the others, producing precisely the syncretism about which Brathwaite theorizes. Françoise Lionnet, describing Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*, another novel told in pieces, writes: "The sum of these perspectives does not present a totalizing vision of Guadeloupean reality; on the contrary, it brings to light the contradictions, discontinuities, and limits imposed on narrative when it attempts to deal with the everydayness of the real" (*Postcolonial Representations* 80). Replace Guadeloupean reality with Trinidadian, or perhaps better still with Caribbean, and Lionnet could be describing the reality of *Divina Trace*. There is no pure story, no transcendent truth, no smooth and simple narrative to be related; instead there are only the various relations in all of their incongruity.

When Allende ends her novel with the same sentence as it began, Antoni reads this as an affirmation that the novelist has found her own voice. In *Divina Trace*, Antoni uses a strategy similar to the one he examines in *The House of the Spirits*. *Divina Trace* opens with this passage: "The bottle was big and obzockee. I was having a hard time toting it. It was the day before my thirteenth birthday, seventy-seven years ago: tomorrow I will be ninety years of age" (3). Four hundred twenty pages later, the same thought flashes again through Johnny's mind:

> I took a few deep breaths. No sooner had I closed my eyes when the words began to move past, spectres out of the darkness. *The bottle was big and obzockee. I was having a hard time toting it. It was the day before my thirteenth birthday, seventy-seven years ago: tomorrow I will be ninety years of age.*" (421)

However, Antoni is not simply copying Allende's technique. There are striking differences between Allende's and Antoni's strategies. Most obvious is that while *The House of the Spirits* begins and ends with the same phrase, *Divina Trace* does not. Despite the mirror in the middle of the book, a perfectly logical justification for beginning and ending with the same sentence, four pages follow after the reappearance of the *obzockee* bottle. Johnny's quest to insert his voice into the communal voices means that he cannot have the last word: "the last word somehow belongs to you Granny Myna" (396).

Johnny is not searching for his own voice as Allende is; he already has one. At the beginning of the novel, his voice is the first to appear. What he is trying to do, and what he finally succeeds in doing, is to insert his voice into the collective voice of the Caribbean community, a transparent metaphor for Antoni's project as a Caribbean author in relation to the established literary tradition. In the first half of the novel, every chapter begins and ends with Johnny's voice, describing his dreamlike memory of releasing the frogchild. But in the second half, his voice becomes a part of the story, and every chapter instead begins and ends in the voice of his witnesses, his voice framed by their voices. It is only in the middle section that Johnny realizes that "the world was not an extension of [himself], but that [he] was an extension of the world" (170). Only then can he agree to "surrender [himself] unconditionally to this primal power — to surrender [him]self up to this monkey of my imagination and let him speak, even in his own impenetrable monkey-language — to turn around and go back to the beginning once more" (172). Instead of the book ending with his voice, as it began, it ends with the voice of Granny Myna. His voice has become consumed by the community of voices.

Antoni's apprenticeship to García Márquez is dramatically displayed in *Divina Trace*; thus perhaps it is no accident that Granny

Myna shares her initials with García Márquez. But if it is so important that Allende have the last word in *The House of the Spirits*, can it be that García Márquez gets the last word in *Divina Trace*? He seems to have the first word, before Johnny utters a sound. One of Antoni's least subtle homages to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the family tree preceding the narrative. In García Márquez's novel (displayed in the Rabassa translation), the diagram of the family tree helps the reader to keep track of the dizzying relationships between a set of characters otherwise almost impossible to remember. Antoni provides a similar genealogy with tongue firmly in cheek. The reader soon finds out that the diagram is at best grossly incomplete, and at worst incorrect and misleading. By the end of *Divina Trace*, Johnny has found almost every character in the novel to be somehow related to him, yet only a handful of those mentioned dangle from this tree. In fact, most of the relationships depicted in the family tree turn out to be either inconsequential or ambiguous. Gertrude and Ann Devon are scarcely mentioned in the story, although they figure prominently in the diagram. Myna and Maurina are listed as sisters, but are completely estranged ones. Barto's paternity of Johnny's father is left up in the air. It is never clear that the Domingo patriarch fathers anyone; Dr. Salizar's rape of his granddaughter Myna may have impregnated her, and it is possible that this rite of passage which happens to "all the other little Warrahoon girlchildren" (404) may have led to Maurina's and possibly even Magdalena's pregnancies, making Salizar a possible father of almost every character. Yet Salizar is absent from the genealogical diagram altogether. The novel acts as the alternate history (Glissant's "relation identity"), which the "root"-based family tree, with its aspirations to racial purity, elides (*Poetics of Relation* 143-44).

Through the repetition of names, *Divina Trace* confuses times and generations. By the second chapter — which Johnny's father narrates — it is unclear whether the first interruption in Dr. Domingo's story is one of Johnny's typical interventions or if his father himself is digressing into a secondary story. "Boy, let me give you a little story while we here, showing you just what kind of story this story you telling has become" (284). Structurally,

it is Johnny's turn to interrupt his father, but the voice sounds very much like that of the elder Dr. Domingo. The speaker goes on to recount the story of a patient who comes in terribly constipated, and when the doctor does a rectal examination, he finds "a third eye inside there blinking at me, right up at the top of you asshole!" (286). A few pages later, the grown up Johnny, now a doctor himself, begins to tell the same story, but suddenly "this story is feeling very vague, and I can't be sure if I'd experienced it myself, if I'd dreamed it up, or if I'd read it long ago on the frontpage of the *Bomb*" (300). The mirror confounds us, making it impossible to identify which image is the original and which the reflection. We are left "looking in the mirror to find the asshole looking out" (299).

García Márquez acknowledges learning the technique of repeating names between generations from Faulkner. Just as in *The Sound and the Fury* repeated names and traits make one Compson indistinguishable from another, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the same is true of the Aurelianos. Antoni likewise adopts this technique.[8] The only names which repeat in the Domingo family, aside from the Dr. John Domingos, are the names of all three of Johnny's children, Evelina, Vincent, and Oliver Domingo. Vincent and Evelina are obviously named after two of the narrators. The third child, Oliver, though, is named after Uncle Olly, whose relationship to the family is unclear. He lived with Myna and Maurina on the South American continent before they came to Corpus Christi, but they call him "uncle" as everyone else does. While omitted in the family tree, Uncle Olly plays a significant role in the story; he operates on the frogchild and preserves him in his laboratory. His laboratory calls to mind the library/laboratory so central to *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Uncle Olly's only actions outside of the laboratory are to hold a lottery (*Divina Trace* 56), recalling García Márquez's Aureliano Segundo, who "managed to set up a primitive lottery business" in Macondo (*One Hundred Years* 343) . Thus even though Olly seems peripheral to the family tree, he is the character in *Divina Trace* who most clearly belongs to the world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

Dr. Domingo remarks on the irony that through a twist of fate, Olly's is the only body which ends up buried in the catacombs, and therefore accidentally sanctified (*Divina Trace* 290-91). Uncle Olly's canonization can thus be read as an homage to García Márquez. More important, while Johnny's uncle, Oliver Domingo, is omitted from the family tree, his name is not. Just as one Aureliano actually becomes another in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Uncle Olly is recorded in Johnny's family tree in the name of the young Oliver Domingo, Johnny's son. Similarly in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses this as a Borgesian metaphor for the literary migrant; when Saleem claims to be able to give birth to his parents, he shows that he is free to choose his ancestors without the restrictions of tradition. Antoni goes further than just choosing his literary lineage. By having Johnny give birth to his uncle, Antoni means something radical about intertextuality: rather than thinking of García Márquez as ancestor, he makes him into his literary descendent.

In *Divina Trace*, Antoni redefines the relationship between tradition and the Caribbean individual talent. For T. S. Eliot, "the existing order is complete before the new work arrives." Without doubt, Eliot could have scarcely imagined the Caribbean as the ground in which this order would take root, having lamented that "we have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the [tropical?] sand" ("Tradition" 5). He admits that "the past should be *altered* by the present;" but he opposes the dictum that "the present is *directed* by the past" (5; emphasis added). Antoni takes Eliot's first formulation to heart, suggesting that the existing order is not only altered by the new, but the new in fact defines what constitutes the existing order. The flow is definitively two-directional. This is obviously much more open than Eliot's tradition which "writes itself" or even Borges's idea that writers pick and choose their ancestors (who happen to be mainly European). Antoni explodes lineage and tradition in favour of a tangled web of relation.

III. Translation or Creation?

Aníbal González offers an interesting reading of the relationship of translation and relation in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

in his article "Translation and Genealogy: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*." Drawing on Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, González provides a deconstructive reading of García Márquez in which the novel's challenge to notions of pure identity and genealogy become postmodern challenges to pure language and literature. Although González admits that "Aureliano seeks out the origin of his name in the parish archives, not only to make sure he is not Amaranta Ursula's brother but also to ascertain the 'propriety' of his name, of his origins" (75), the threat posed by Aureliano's convoluted lineage is just a metaphor for writing itself; for "translation, like incest, leads back to self-reflexiveness, to a cyclonic turning upon one's self which erases all illusions of solidity, all fantasies of a 'pure language,' all mirages of 'propriety,' and underscores instead language's dependence on the very notion of 'otherness,' of difference" (76). According to González, in showing the impossibility of pure origins, García Márquez is really showing the impossibility of a pure referent. González's argument is clever, but perhaps a more interesting way of considering the novel might be to reverse González's hierarchy of world and text, and to read translation as a metaphor for identity; for as the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* demonstrates, an inability to allow for a world outside the text ultimately forces the text to collapse in on itself. By throwing into question the relationship of signifier to signified, García Márquez (and Antoni) offer a much more engaging critique of originality, identity, and tradition than González is willing to admit.

Questions of translation and originality are literally at the center of *Divina Trace*, in the form of the Hanuman, the narrator of the middle chapter and the monkey god who sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki and wrote down the entire twenty-four thousand stanzas of the Ramayana.[9] Hanuman's relationship to Valmiki parallels that of Johnny to the other speakers (and Antoni to his intertextual ancestors!), a scribe more than a creator. In *Divina Trace*'s version of the Ramayana, Valmiki dies, leaving to Hanuman the task of creation. Janata tells Hanuman, "is fa you now to carry on the load you uncle lay down to rest. Compose fa he in writing de whole yana as if from out he

mouth" (214). Since Hanuman does not know the whole story himself, and lacks the creative power of Valmiki, it is only through "meditation deep, Hanuman did hear Kaikeyi speaking. Lakshman, Manthara, Kusha and Sumitra, Sita she own voice she storytelling! And as Hanuman continue, he listening forward, same voices speaking in reverse" (215). Through listening and copying the voices of the others, Hanuman must learn the story, which he then narrates in the second-person in the middle section.

Hanuman, then, acts as a channel through whom the other voices speak, as Sugriva reminds Hanuman. "Sugriva he vervet-vex, purplehowler you gibbon: 'Hanuman, you nasalis but a piltdownhoax! Tink is you dawson dis yana, stead of Valmiki?' [Sugriva is vexed, and yells at Hanuman: 'Hanuman, you are nothing but a Piltdown Hoax. Do you think that you gave birth to the Ramayana, that it was you and not Valmiki?']"[10] (198). Sugriva, like the critics of Allende, dismisses Hanuman as merely a monkey-mimic. The monkey-trope develops an idea Walcott posits in an essay on mimicry in the Caribbean:

> The idea of the American as ape is heartening . . . for in the imitation of apes there is something more ancient than the first human effort. The absurdity of pursuing the anthropological idea of mimicry, then, if we are to believe science, would lead us to the image of the first ape applauding the gestures of what we must call the first man. Here the contention crumbles because there is no scientific distinction between the last ape and the first man, there is no memory or history of the moment when man stopped imitating the ape, his ancestor, and became human. ("The Caribbean" 7)

Because humans learn by imitating their ancestors, it follows that the first humans learned through mimicking the last apes; yet the two groups are indistinguishable from one another.

Hanuman's story is precisely Walcott's. Hanuman describes the moment at which Sugriva, eager to win back his bride Tara, rises to walk on his hind legs ("Anubis step. Anubis . . . now Sugriva bipeddaling" (*Divina Trace* 200-01)) and carry "dey very first bootoo [club]" (201) because "IS TOOLS MAKETH MAN" (200). Hanuman then realizes that "Humannature" is to "forget you a monkey" (202). Following this evolutionary break between monkey and man, Hanuman falls asleep and dreams that

he is "writereading," searching for the "primate missinglink" (202), which Antoni glosses as "the photograph of a male infant — his mysterious ancestor who is the link to his past" ("A Piece of Pommerac" 170). At this moment, Hanuman finds only the mirror page. The second-person addressee in this sentence allows the phrase to mean that Hanuman, the listener (Johnny), and the reader are the missing-link. "Seeing in de page you own monkeyface ee-eeing, quick out you dreamsleep walcott" (*Divina Trace* 205). Hanuman's story of evolution thus points directly to the Walcott essay related above; "walcott" implicitly means "wake-up," as Hanuman wakes up from his nap to find Tara's suicide note; but the name also invokes the author who inspires this section of Antoni's text.

A few pages later, after Tara's death, another encounter between Hanuman and Sugriva takes place. This time, Sugriva instructs Hanuman, in language reminiscent to that of their first encounter, to stop his writing project and to chisel a statue of Tara:

> Is now Sugriva vervet, is now he cromagnum, redhowler you hot: 'Boy, you ga chisel fa dis de whole of you strife and breath. Aye commission you pièta, a great stonestatue, michelangelo fa me potto mausoleum. Monument it probiscis, lemurlike, poststructural. Monument it of feminist francosimarbre. Monument it of Luce, Kristeva, Cixous — Beauvoir as me potto black mummy' [Now Sugriva is really mad, and yells at Hanuman: 'Boy, you are going to chisel for all you're worth. I commission you to chisel a great statue of Tara out of stone for my baby's grave, as beautiful as my baby's mother]. (209)

Hanuman, frustrated with the progress of his writing, decides that "alldesame, aye suppose you could rest from you scribbling, toque up rockchiselling, after all, one fart as good as another [all the same, I suppose that I could take a break from writing and take up sculpting, after all, one art is as good as another]" (210). The question for Hanuman is "homo mirror fa mimisis dis madonna-mourning chimp, wooly Tara nasalis loris ayes on she potto [how to imitate Tara in mourning for her child, when she never laid eyes on her baby?]" (210)? Nevertheless, when he finishes the statue, he realizes that "you done create de very fossil of you predescenters imagination!" (210), a perfect replica

of Tara. The statue in fact turns out to be more than a mere replica; as soon as Hanuman stamps his mark upon it, the statue scampers away with a life of its own. Even this mimetic translation creates something new, and something over which the creator does not have complete control.[11]

Johnny tries to exhibit control over the stories he retells, despite the persistence of the metaphor of scribe/translator as channel. Tension exists between the story as transcription or as Johnny's creation. While we may be led to believe that each character is speaking in his or her own authentic voice, "with each teller relaying the story with the richness and cadences of his or her native speech" (back cover), the stories are collected by Johnny and his presence as chronicler allows him to infuse part of his consciousness into what he is retelling. His personal consciousness is not the only medium refracting the stories; the collective consciousness of all of his witnesses also bends and shapes the stories in their retelling. "This story does not belong to this voice. To these voices. *This story belongs to that moon. To that black sky and that black sea. This story belongs to that same foul smell of the swamp when the wind blows*" (119, 310). The story belongs to the island, Johnny included, but, just as important, Johnny belongs to the story; it is as "though the story were forming itself now not out of the dregs of human time and memory, but out of the incense-filled air itself" (140). There is something greater than Johnny to which the story belongs, and which allows him to tell the story himself in the second half of the novel. Acknowledging that individual and collective are not so easily separated in the world of relation, Antoni questions the notion of a communal voice speaking through Johnny.

In Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, the character Manuel, according to the narrator, "translate[s] into good Creole" (131) the stories of the peasants around him. In so doing, he becomes what Michael Dash calls "the ultimate authority and the author of a prelapserian truth in the novel" (*The Other America* 79). He derives his authority from his ability to speak for the collective. Similarly, Johnny derives his authority from his claim to act only as a translator through whom his witnesses speak, as though only he can transcribe the "pure" story which

exists independent not only of him, but of any of the other speakers:

> Years later I began to hear Mother Maurina's voice again. First it was only isolated words: short phrases, fragments of 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 hearings I can sit here and listen to the whole story, complete, autonomous, told to me in a voice which does not belong to me, but to her. Before my ears. In my own eyes. (158)

The feeling we have that Johnny is channeling these voices is reinforced by the fact that each of the voices speaking to Johnny is long since dead. Evelina, for example, tells Johnny that after her death, "you daddy write me out a next birthpapers" (325) so that she can be buried in the family plot. This moment, as Johnny realizes, highlights the impossibility of the narration; Evelina cannot tell him about her own death; either Johnny is making up this part of the story, or someone else has told it to him. Just as Hanuman cannot control the statue he creates, the story never fully belongs to Johnny, seeming to exist free of his signifiers in some realm of pure signified.

According to González's reading of Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," the task is "to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work." This "pure language" is that "which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages" (*Illuminations* 80). It is this sacred language, which represents meaning precisely and without the encumbrance of the spoken or written word, that Johnny believes he has discovered: "Already I knew where Evelina was leading me in this story. Already I knew what she would say. . . . Now I could stop Evelina and take up her story myself: her own voice telling the story without her even having to say it" (*Divina Trace* 332). He thinks that he has fully digested the story, and that he no longer needs the storytellers.

He knows that next Evelina will tell him how "*doodoo, when me raise up my eyes to find she standing dere pon she pedestal before me, now in she arms she swadling dis crapochild*" (332). Johnny realizes that he finally has access to "pure language," and that he no longer needs the speakers. He now knows that he can finish the story without them.

Johnny is wrong. She instead tells him "BECAUSE DOODOO, when me raise up me eyes to find Magdalena . . . standing dere pon she pedistal she arms spread wide as always, she palms open as always to embrace all she children. But dere sitting pon de bench is dat man [Barto]" (333). The jarring discrepancy between Johnny's expectations and what he actually hears reinforces the story's elusiveness. Even the words of long dead Evelina exist free of Johnny's consciousness. Antoni's strategy follows the argument of Derrida's critique of pure language, as González represents it: meaning cannot exist free of language, just as the story does not exist outside of these voices.

> Translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is the translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact have never had, to do with some "transport" of pure signifieds from one language into another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched.
> (*Positions* 20)

Derrida sees the transfer of meaning from one language to another as imprecise because there is no pure language corresponding to experience exactly. "If there is indeed between the translated text and the translating text a relation of original to version, it could not be representative or reproductive. Translation is neither an image nor a copy" ("Des Tours de Babel" 180). It is instead a transformation, the creation of something new. Translation, then, is not necessarily opposed to originality: the imperfect copy is more mutation than facsimile.

The original and copy are still clearly demarcated, as shown in Roland Barthes's famous reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine* in his *S/Z*. Barthes uses the relationships of statue to painting, and of painting to person, as an example of the chain of signifiers

along which meaning is constantly deferred. This chain, however, remains linear, tree-like, arrow-like — a directionality which implies along each of its links a further remove from any, however impossible, origin. Balzac's statue comes to life in *Divina Trace*, in the statue which Hanuman chisels. This statue appears to be a copy of the living Tara, a translation, but exhibits a life of its own, eluding even its own creator. Antoni's narrative challenges the distinction of signifier/signified in the relationship between Magdalena Domingo and the statue of La Divina Pastora. While the two are related and nearly identical, it is never clear if the statue is a representation of Magdalena, or if she is the manifestation of the statue. Granny Myna claims that "it is that saintstatue Maurina *must* have been looking the moment she conceive the child, because how else could she come out so much the same in every detail like the statue come to life" (*Divina Trace* 399). Evelina, in contrast, explains that the statue is a petrified version of Magdalena: "Magdalena only turn she eyes to look in he [the frogchild's] face when she turn to boulderstone" (71). The relationship between Magdalena and the statue renders useless the concepts of signifier and signified. Each object occupies both positions simultaneously. Antoni also erases directionality in this relation, preferring a tangled circle to a sliding chain. Antoni thus takes an even more radical position than Derrida and Barthes towards concepts of originality and purity in language, as well as in subjectivity. Antoni's rejection of pure language and pure origins agrees with the novel's overall effort to throw into question the rooted model of pure identity characterized by the family tree.

The metaphor of Johnny as conduit or channel for his community disintegrates without resorting to French high theory. If we take Johnny to be a mirror, reflecting the story that he is told, the reflection cannot but distort. Johnny's voice, both as a boy and as an old man, enters throughout to interject his thoughts and reflections. Clear breaks in the text set Johnny's voice apart from the stories he transcribes. But leaks begin to occur, undermining the narrator's authority by making Johnny more and more difficult to dissociate from his chronicle. Johnny's memory of the frogchild recurs throughout the story: "Feeling my feet

again in my jesusboots beneath the mud, looking down again through the dark water . . . I watched his long angular legs fold, snap taut, and propel him smoothly through the water; snap, glide; snap, glide; and the frogchild disappeared into a clump of quiet mangrove banyans" (*Divina Trace* 25). This memory motivates Johnny's search for the rest of the story. Coninciden-tally, Johnny's memory sounds suspiciously like an event which Evelina relates: "In no time a-tall me dere standing up in de water sunk in de mud high as me knees, and me let go dis diab-crapochild to take off swimming just like he diab crapofa-ther, push-slide in de direction of dose mangrove banyan" (80). While Johnny's memory is expressed in his own idiosyncratic standard English, he is certainly describing the same event as Evelina. He has translated her description into his own lan-guage, acting as the monkey-translator. However, the relation-ship is not a straightforward matter of Johnny imitating Evelina; it is not clear which version is the original and which the copy, whether this memory belongs to Evelina or Johnny.

Perhaps Johnny is only inventing his memory from a story that he has heard told to him. "Maybe this frogbaby is only some monster you dream up. Some jujubee Granny Myna push inside you head" (13). This cross-pollination does not *only* flow from witness to interlocutor, however. It is conceivable that Johnny imposes his memory on Evelina's narrative, translating his mem-ory into Evelina's language and inserting it into her story rather than the other way around. His dual role as chronicler and par-ticipant exacerbates these ambiguities. To add to the confusion, events repeat themselves in identical terms from one character's narrative to another, as in the case of Granny Myna and Mother Maurina. Myna, breast-feeding the frogchild, feels "something happen when that child begin to suck at my breast. Something happen, and I don't know what it is. Like some poison pass from out he mouth to go inside my blood" (17). The next thing Myna knows, she is being restrained from boiling the frogchild in her callaloo. Myna's story repeats Mother Maurina's reaction, years earlier, to Magdalena's first attempt at breast-feeding. The situation is identical but expressed in Maurina's language: "No

sooner do I look in the face of this negrita cocoachild already sucking at my breast when some poison pass from out she mouth to penetrate my blood, and Sister Robin Clark and Sister Alicia have to hold on" (144) to stop Maurina from pitching her daughter out of a window. The distinctness of each of these narrators from Johnny and from one another, which Antoni apparently establishes, is blurred by these moments of déjà vu, recurring throughout the story.

The two-directional flow implied by the breast-feeding incidents becomes a metaphor for Johnny's storytelling. Normally, we imagine breast-feeding to involve only the flow of milk from mother to child; but in these cases, a reciprocal relationship is created: the apparent recipient passes something back to the giver (in these cases, poison). The implications of this metaphor for Antoni's story echo the distinction Lionnet makes between acculturation and assimilation:

> "Acculturation" *Webster's New Twentieth-Century Dictionary* (Second Edition) tells us, is "the transfer of culture from one ethnic group to another," whereas "assimilation" is "the act of bringing or coming to a resemblance; . . . the merging of diverse cultural elements." . . . Already, we can see some contradictions in the semantic fields of these terms: is "the transfer . . . from one ethnic group to another" only a one-way process that causes one culture to erase another? Or could we infer that transformation of both — or all — of the cultures in contact is extremely likely, if not inevitable, through this process. (*Postcolonial Representations* 8)

Reading Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace* can be an exasperating and tedious experience, confronting the reader with the familiar in such a way as to make it disturbingly foreign, and vice versa. Through the tropes of incest and translation, Antoni turns the straightforward Domingo family tree into a criss-crossed spider web. Translation is an opportunity for one language to change through contact with another language; the effect is a hybrid product affecting both of the participating languages. Neither can "influence" be limited to a one-directional flow; *Divina Trace*'s relation to its predecessors, especially *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is more complicated than a genealogical notion of paternity might imply.

NOTES

1 Two people read every word of this manuscript and spent countless hours talking with me about these ideas. The final product would not exist without the endless generosity of Rhonda Cobham and Britta Hiester. Sandy Petrey, Román de la Campa, and Elena Machado Sáez also read this and discussed it with me. The reader may notice that Rhonda has the first word in this essay . . .

2 My discussion of magical realism is limited to its usage in the North American academy. As an Anglophone novel, *Divina Trace* interacts with the international publishing phenomenon that is the Rabassa translation of *Cien años de soledad* which has been processed as the exemplary text of magical realism, if not contemporary Latin American literature. Antoni provides a clue that it is this text with which he engages: the Spanish original did not feature the family tree that precedes Rabassa's version and plays a prominent role in Antoni's parody.

3 Antoni's word choice implies something slightly different from mere plagiarism. The American Heritage dictionary defines piracy as "to make use of or reproduce (another's work) illicitly." But it also means "to seize." The nuance is significant: piracy connotes appropriation.

4 On this point Antoni's strategies overlap with the process of "signifyin(g)" which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes in *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates writes that the Signifying Monkey is "the ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike . . . he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language" (52).

5 "In death she has indeed transcended all frontiers: of race, skin, religion, language, history, nation, class," writes Salman Rushdie in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (480) of his main female character in a chapter called "Vina Divina." I am quite certain that Rushdie has read Antoni's novel; his transparent recycling of the myth of Magdalena Divina seems in the spirit of *Divina Trace*.

6 It must here be noted that while Antoni's fictional intertexts may be identified as "postcolonial," Antoni is *deeply* influenced by Continental theories such as French feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. This tension can be seen most vividly in the middle section, when the names of Borges and Walcott brush up against those of Kristeva, Freud, and Cixous. Antoni's affection for the Latin American boom carries with it an interest in the postmodern and poststructural European theories which frequently dominate the discourse surrounding contemporary Latin Americanism and Postcolonialism. Román de la Campa provides one particularly incisive critique of the prominence of European "high theory" in Latin American criticism.

7 Once again, Papee Vince: "Son, you never truly grow up until the death of you second parent. Whether that death is natural, psychological, or the result of bloody murder. Only then can you come to know yourself. And in fact, we only just finish matriciding we mummy-England the other day" (368). By making the relationship genealogical, Papee Vince obviously consigns the Caribbean to childhood, and grants Europe parental status.

8 In addition to the article on Allende and García Márquez, Antoni also writes on the connection between Faulkner and García Márquez, and how each author creates a mythic atmosphere in his novels. Richard Patteson discusses the connections between the three authors in his chapter on Antoni. Antoni tells the story that while he was writing *Divina Trace*, he had only two books with him: *Absalom! Absalom!*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He read Faulkner and García Márquez over and over again until he had finished writing his novel.

9 I was recently intrigued to learn that the howler monkey was the god of writing to the Mayans of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (*National Geographic* Oct. 1989).

[10] Translations of Antoni's shack shloka are my own. These translations are of course imprecise; the 'language' flirts with opacity, highlighting the impossibility of any literal translation. But through a contextual (relational), oral reading, some notion of meaning can generally be gained. My glosses are intended merely to assist the reader in reading this paper.

[11] The statue's originality seems to be due in part to its refraction through poststructural theory. Indeed, there seems to be a shadowy, poststructural subtext uncomfortably undergirding the novel, and, as exhibited in these endnotes, perhaps in this essay as well.

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