Offspring of a virgin’s womb
Up to monkey business in Robert Antoni’s Divina Trace

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ABSTRACT
Robert Antoni’s Divina Trace has not yet found the wide readership that might be expected of the winner of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, perhaps because it does not conform to its readers’ expectations of a Caribbean novel. And yet it is of particular relevance to the legacy of indentureship and the East Indian presence in Trinidad and to the relationships among the different ethnic groups on the island through its central concern with a black madonna on a fictional island unmistakably resembling the Divina Siparia worshipped by Catholics or the Hindu Siparia Mai. This essay examines the author’s postmodern techniques with particular reference to his treatment of sexuality, stereotypes, the grotesque and religious themes to discover what could be the significance of the idea of the Virgin and her representation in the black madonna. In doing so it engages with Deleuze’s ideas on repetition to investigate the relationship between storytelling and reality, and the nature of the creative imagination.

KEYWORDS
Black madonna, Caribbean, sexuality, religion, Ramayana, repetition, Gilles Deleuze, creative imagination, Wilson Harris

Journal of Indentureship 2.2 December 2022
DOI:10.13169/jofstudindentleg.2.2.0081
‘Beyond the lover and beyond the mother, coexistent with the one and contemporaneous with the other, lies the never-lived reality of the Virgin.’ Gilles Deleuze

‘The bottle was big and obzockee. I was having a hard time toting it.’ So begins Robert Antoni’s *Divina Trace*, and it’s not surprising the bottle is giving him a hard time. Johnny Domingo, scion of the Caribbean ‘masters’, whether Spanish, British or American, is only a 13-year-old boy, a go-between like L. P. Hartley’s (1953) Leo. The narrator at this point, he feels charged to shuttle between the incompatible narratives of his incestuous family along the ‘divine’ trace, or path, through the sacred body of his island of Corpus Christi, a sensual and haunting evocation of Trinidad. The bottle is the womb of his pregnancy, and the foetus it contains, the ‘crapochild’ – half male potency, half frog¹ – is to be born into the swamp of the unconscious which mothers destruction and creation, from where, as an amphibian, he will swim up to tame or be tamed by that most fearful of goddesses, the Virgin. That Virgin is also Akambo-Mah of the Amerindians, African Mamma Latay and Indian Kali Mai. She is also Magdalena, Mary Magdalene, purported whore and disciple, maddeningly present on the margins of European orthodoxy.

Before moving on to address some of the issues raised here in more detail, I would like to say a word about the background and nature of Antoni’s novel and its reception; *Divina Trace* has a particular relevance in the context of the legacy of indenture, because the Virgin described here, *Magdalena Divina*, bears an uncanny resemblance to the *Divina Pastora* of Siparia, in southern Trinidad, also known as *Sipari Mai*, one of approximately 400 black madonnas in the world. Once an Amerindian settlement, Siparia came under the control of Spanish Capuchin monks and is still connected to the family of the last royalist general of Venezuela.² When the first indentured East Indian labourers reached Siparia soon after the arrival of the *Fatel Razack*, they identified the black
madonna as the living representation of Mother Kali herself.\textsuperscript{3} The coming of the railway brought an influx of workers from the St Madeleine sugar factory at San Fernando and the canefields all up the west coast, who used the Christian Easter break to celebrate and process with the figure on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, while the Catholic adoration of the Virgin was concentrated on a separate feast day for the \textit{Divina Pastora}. The celebrations for the \textit{Divina Magdalena} in the novel take place on the Thursday and Friday before Easter.

The film \textit{Madonna Murti} (2011), made by Trinidadian-Nigerian Oyetayo Ojoade, documents how Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian pilgrims all participate in the veneration of the small painted statue in a way that is not syncretic, as there is no cross-cultural interaction between their acts of worship, but which fulfils a multivalent and tolerant symbolic function. For Hindus, the object of prayers is said in the film to be good husbands, children and the well-being of the family. For the Catholics, the dark-skinned \textit{Divina Pastora} (holy shepherdess) represents the indigenization of the gospel. The origins of the figure are shrouded in mystery. Some say it was brought from Venezuela by a monk escaping from an Amerindian attack, others that it was found near a waterfall in a forest, while others still claim it was part of a wrecked ship’s figurehead.

There is, then, an undeniable connection between this figure and that of \textit{Magdalena Divina} in Antoni’s novel, which weaves together stories told by members of the Domingo family about both a statue and a real girl called Magdalena who has given birth to an abnormal child. The fate of the child differs in the different versions of the story; one of them has it buried in a glass bottle which Johnny is carrying at the beginning. The voices of these narrators – Granny Myna, grandfather Papee Vince, black servant and possibly illegitimate family member Evelina, the narrator’s father and medical practitioner Dr Domingo, and aunt and head of the convent Mother Superior General Maurina – are played
back and interwoven with that of Johnny himself as a teenager and as an old man in the first section of the book. In the second, central section, Johnny introduces the voice of Magdalena, who tells the same story in the guise of the *Ramayana* in Trinidadian verse, framing an account in ‘monkey language’ by Hanuman, the monkey god. At the dead centre of the book there is a reflective foil page. The third section of the book reintroduces the voices of the first section in reverse order. It gradually becomes clear, in spite of this neat symmetry, that the stories are a ‘swampy matrix’ (Patteson 1998, p. 163) of contradictions, full of inconsistencies as to events and their chronology and subject to the unreliability of their narrators.

Laura Zander notes: ‘It is not the individual narrators that are the creators of this story; it appears to shape itself out of thin air’ (Zander 2019, p. 143). This is perhaps related to the surprising fact that, according to the author in conversation with Peter Josyph, they originate in stories told by the actual members of his family:

> **Granny Myna is my Grandmother Myna. Dr. Domingo is very much my father, idealized. Those voices came to me quicker. Evelina is a combination of several black maids who raised me. Velma, in the new book [Blessed Is the Fruit], is the maid who actually raised me from infancy, and I recorded her stories just as I recorded my grandmother’s stories. Papee Vince is a combination of a great uncle and my mother’s father. But that great-uncle, who was called Papee Vince, I only met for maybe three hours. I had heard about him. He was overseer on the estates in Trinidad for years (Josyph 2013).**

That must, of course, come with the proviso that we have no guarantee of the reliability of this information either, which may be yet another level of the masking that characterizes the work as a whole. The setting, though the fictional island is called Corpus Christi, is recognizably Trinidad, and even uses authentic Trinidadian place-names confusingly shuffled and redistributed.
to different geographical locations. Parts of the stories recur in different iterations, sometimes in isolated words and phrases, sometimes word for word, while Papee Vince provides a more or less factual history of the Caribbean and of the Siparia madonna, and Mother Maurina lifts most of her story of the miracles of the madonna from the phenomena surrounding St Bernadette Soubirous’s visions at Lourdes. In addition to his colportage of one of the oldest known oral epics from India, stylistically and technically Antoni is making unashamed use of intertextual influences and techniques associated with high modernists like Faulkner, Joyce and Beckett as well as South American ‘magical realism’, to which the admirably clear but fundamentally treacherous guide of the family tree at the beginning pays tribute. The whole novel, with its central vortex of concern with birth and origins, its playful narrative tricks, its humorous digressions, its gimmicky mirror page and its bawdiness, unequivocally lays claim to _Tristram Shandy_ in its ancestral tree.

As with that eccentric masterpiece, _Divina Trace_ has divided the opinions of its readers. And potential readers may have a job getting hold of the book in the first place. In spite of winning the 1992 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for best first novel, it is only available in the UK in hardback (with delivery in weeks rather than days) and in the US from the unfortunately named Overlook Press, so remains something of an insider tip. Comments on ‘Goodreads’ range from: ‘The writer was trying too hard to create some aberrant stream of consciousness, artsy fartsy, intellectual post-colonial fictional discourse and literary work: he succeeded; I had to read this in a post-colonial Carribean [sic] grad course where it was embraced by a high-browed prof. A wretched work!’ to ‘One of the best books I’ve read in a long, long time. That said, don’t read it if you don’t have the stomach for descriptions of graphic sex and violence, medical procedures and phenomena, black magic, narratives peppered with a monkey dialect you won’t understand, challenges to your Christian beliefs and feelings
about the British empire.’ Nevertheless, it has fared comparatively well with academic reviewers. Somewhat unfairly, Rhonda Cobham’s (1997) opening remarks about reading the novel as an ‘exasperating and tedious exercise’ have been widely quoted, but she goes on to treat the novel to a fruitful analysis, albeit hampered by a frame of reference dependent on Lacanian and post-colonial orthodoxy. Serious and insightful discussions can also be found in book chapters, by Richard F. Patteson (1998), Lorna Burns (2014) and Laura Zander (2019), several PhD theses, and articles by John C. Hawley (1993), Raphael Dalleo (2001) and Eric D. Smith, among others. The reader who wishes to gain a general overview of the novel can be confidently referred to these, while my considerations here will be more specific. But I hope they will contribute to deciding whether we should view the novel as self-indulgent post-colonial mimicry that has been rightly sidelined, or as an unjustly neglected contribution to the fascinating body of Caribbean literature.

In the first instance, I wish to examine the way sexuality is portrayed in the novel and how that relates to the ambivalent figure of the Virgin, and beyond that to mythology surrounding Sita and Kali which the central section brings into play. This will inevitably also cast light on more general issues of sexuality and gender assumptions in the Caribbean. These questions can, however, not be detached from issues about the relation between storytelling and reality which the novel also raises, and in this context the work of Gilles Deleuze on difference and repetition and that of Wilson Harris on the position of the artist may prove illuminating. Finally, the role and valorization of the creative imagination, to which the author constantly returns, will need to be assessed, not least in that image of the amphibian returning from the unconscious and assuming the form of the trickster simian.

Given the number of ‘descriptions of graphic sex’ mentioned above, it is remarkable that almost all of them involve violent, unconventional, non-consensual or unconsummated sexual
encounters. It is also remarkable how little attention the academic critics have paid to this aspect of the novel. Most of the descriptions of sex, bodily functions and genitalia belong to the realm of the humorously grotesque or the shockingly absurd; desire does not generally lead to erotic or loving fulfilment but to taboo-breaking excess. The text takes a Rabelaisian delight in scenes which, in other, more realistic contexts, would be condemned as abusive. This observation does not only apply to sexual encounters, but can also be extended to the casual denigration of others outside the family circle. The somewhat disingenuous view of the novel in terms of the metaphor of the callaloo expressed by some critics –

_The callaloo metaphor, representative at once of heterogeneity and diversity but also of assimilation and fusion, constructs the West Indian identity as complicated and convoluted by various influences and elements but one that is delicious by virtue of these various seasonings and merging of flavours (Rampaul, p. 10)._ 

– is belied by the racist stereotyping and dismissive contempt displayed in the stories told by many of the characters. For instance the indigenous Warrahoons (analogous to the Guarrahoon people) always appear in anonymous groups of three or six, often with pirogues, subject to jokes about their small stature (like the ‘absurd miniature Warrahoon-Windsor chair’ made from a dictionary diagram to fit its maker), their head-shrinking past and their dietary habits, like roast iguana. They perform most of the menial labouring tasks in the book, like digging graves, exhuming bodies or transporting bulky objects, and have access to secrets of ‘bush medicine’ like the ‘Belgian blackstone’ to counteract scorpion bites. Evelina, the black maid, conforms to so many stereotypes as the daughter of a shango priestess who knows all the ‘science’ of obeah that she might stand in for Christophine in _Wide Sargasso Sea_ (Rhys 1966). Insulting collective terms abound, often in the tradition of stereotypical foods, like: ‘half-wild,
half-naked calaloo-creoles and dalpouri-coolies and pepperpot Warrahoons’ (p. 244). Nuns, police and ‘chupidees’ (intellectually challenged believers) are treated in a similar way, without any contrasting narrative tone from Johnny, the central narrator.

An obsession with genitalia is not confined to the male narrators. There are frequent references to the ‘cojones’ (testicles), ‘toetee’ (penis) and ‘jooking’ (poking) as in ‘jook is jook he jooking she with she nundress all tear up’ (p. 69) or ‘like each one get jook by a big jooker up they backside’ (p. 12). Granny Myna says of Magdalena: ‘between she legs she chucha was hot like a whore’ (p. 399), which she finds unsurprising because Myna’s sister Maurina, Magdalena’s mother, ‘have the same pussy on fire’ (p. 399) and she believes Magdalena looks like the statue of the madonna because Maurina was looking at it during sex, as she also claims that Magdalena’s child was half frog because she ‘just love to see the frogs fucking’ (p. 7); she claims the child’s prominent genitalia come from ‘the cojones of every man on this island of Corpus Christi’ (p. 7). Classic Freudian phallic symbols are also present, like the cigar smoked by the patriarch Barto. Intercourse is often referred to euphemistically as ‘nastiness’, ‘business’ or ‘monkey business’ but most of the sex described is in the form of mass rapes or orgies. Magdalena is tied up and gang-raped by chief of police Gomez (possibly Maurina’s son) and ‘the entire police forces of Corpus Christi’ (p. 47). Maurina claims that Magdalena was so beautiful that she provoked a whole crowd of men to violently rape her near the swamp, and they only desisted when she grabbed one man’s testicles and ‘squeeze them so hard they burst in the air’ (p. 133). Johnny’s father reports in a letter that Maurina herself has been raped and murdered by a crowd of Carnival revellers, apparently including the Prime Minister and his cabinet because ‘you know how much dem like whitepeople, Doctor?’ (p. 239).

An equally inexhaustible recurrent source of bawdy is impotence. For instance, Papee Vince says of Gomez:
Understand son, it had long been common knowledge – a common joke animated by every prostitute in Corpus Christi fa years – that this Chief of Police shot blanks. Some said he couldn’t even shoot a-tall. That is to say, he is sterile, impotent: a tantieman, a mammapoule (p. 48).

So Gomez’s rape of Magdalena has to be achieved using penetrative fruit. This is contrasted with the three-day erection Barto brings when he visits Magdalena in the convent. Gomez, to prove his prowess, treats himself with an Amerindian aphrodisiac called bois-bandé (which, incidentally, Papee Vince suggests was the true El Dorado Sir Walter Raleigh brought back from the Orinoco, where, apparently, it was used by the Amerindians for 3-day ‘jooking-jamboree’ orgies presided over by the zemi (image) of Akambo-Ma); as a result he is hospitalized in agony with his penis packed in ice and the nuns constantly peeping under the sheet ‘to know how the Chief of Police’s flagpole is going’ (p. 56).

These stock tropes of bawdy comedy – the powerful man who is impotent, the mother superior with barrack-room language, the nuns fascinated with male equipment – are extended into the Catholic Church as a whole, whose representative, Monsignor O’Connor, is known for having his way with all the altar boys. Johnny ascribes his decision to have nothing more to do with the Church to his encounter with the Monsignor, which he omits to describe in detail. Mother Maurina also quotes ‘his ladyship the Monsignor Roderick O’Connor’ having seen the nun Bernadetta with a halo and thinking it was part of a solar electric fan, considering offering her a ‘Lazyfingers battery vibrator’ in exchange for it (p. 258). This kind of anachronism is consistent with the carnival tone of the writing and the Rabelaisian sense of the grotesque. Another comic set piece is the plan hatched by Evelina for distracting the attention of the onlookers watching the attempts to find and exhume Magdalena’s body in the graveyard. She uses another aphrodisiac which she has made from shellfish taken off dangerous rocks (an allusion to Caliban’s scamels?) mixed with
refreshing snowcones sold to everyone so that soon the churchyard is full of copulating couples in a ‘jumbie jamboree’, including the Papal representative Bishop Sévère riding the Monsignor like a cowboy, while the Indian salesman pedals home on his bicycle singing the refrain ‘Back-to-back, belly-to-belly / I don’t give a damn, / I done dead already!’ (p. 317).

That calypso, part of the tradition of playing mas and jumping up in defiance of ‘massa’ during the period of Carnival when the usual rules of convention were overturned, is believed, like the limbo dance, to refer back to the Middle Passage on the slave ships and the tightly-packed spaces below deck, so it should not be forgotten that apparently light-hearted and absurd performance, for all its subversive Bakhtinian foolery, may mask a darker reality. David Rudder, in the song ‘Behind the Bridge’ (1996), talks of the drummer playing a painful rhythm as he leads the dance, ‘and yet the drummer playing a bad hand’ in the shape of ‘Carnival Lord Death’, as Wilson Harris calls the figure presiding over the movement from naive utopianism and farce into inconceivable tragedy. The reality of everyday violence and intolerance is still present in Trinidad society, as attested in two very recent novels: Ingrid Persaud’s Love After Love (2020), and Lisa Allen-Agostini’s The Bread the Devil Knead (2021). The child Johnny releases kicks up ‘a grey cloud rising in a mushroom towards the surface, spreading out, and settling back slowly to the bottom where he had disappeared [...]’ (p. 169): the apocalyptic cold war image of the potential of the human imagination for harm.

In Rudder’s song, Granny Sybil says: ‘What this nation needs right now is a brand new Daddy, / A little déjà-vu, and everything going be iree.’ Rudder associates this desire for a patriarchal strong hand with the dependency on drugs: ‘Well Granny, I got mine here right in my hand ready to abuse me.’ The narrator’s abuser in Allen-Agostini’s novel, who makes her pregnant, is also her father and her mother’s brother, the children of a white employer and his black servant. In Divina Trace the patriarch is
Barto Domingo, who is alleged to have fathered not only Johnny’s father and uncles but also Evelina with a plantation worker’s wife, Magdalena herself with Mother Maurina, and the ‘crapochild’ with Magdalena. It seems that, for all its joking about paternity and sexual relations consonant with its bawdy literary lineage, there is a dark reality stirred up below the surface.

The only erotically engaging portrayals of sex in the novel are the ecstatic Joycean stream-of-consciousness monologues, in the second of which Mother Maurina recounts her moment of climax, presumably in the conception of Magdalena, accompanied by a nimbus of religious and sensory imagery, beginning with images of a stylus writing and transforming into ‘He long sword dripping of fire pressing up stiff between my legs’ (p. 232). The capitalized He is an indication of how the sexual and the religious become merged in her perception, and relates to her belief that the child is the son of Papa God. This passage immediately precedes the letter describing her horrific murder, so that the two become associated. The first uses many of the same terms to convey the vicarious experience of watching Magdalena being impregnated by Barto, ‘seeing myself again my own beautiful daughter struggling helpless here in the mud of my own hopeless longing to lie again beneath my own husband-father-son-of-my-son in Nomine Patris Filii et Spiritus Sancti’ (p. 154). Perhaps of the same order is Granny Myna’s vision of the beautiful toes ‘that were long and white and creamy like icecream’ and which she told Johnny were ‘part of the way Papa God does do He business’ (p. 28); Johnny wonders if the devil does his business the same way. The association of Eros, storytelling /writing and Thanatos is striking.

The trappings of conventional religion receive short shrift. Apart from the ‘mammapoule’ clergy and the far from unworldly nuns, the whole process of Catholic canonization is hilariously satirized. The description of a ‘waterhead’, only accepted into the order because the Mother Superior believes she is not long for the world, who sees a vision of Magdalena asking for a chapel to be built, is lifted directly from the events in Lourdes, even down to
the nun’s name Bernadetta Soubirous, and the contributions of a sensationalist press about absurd magical happenings. These events are recounted by a sceptical Mother Maurina in the first chapter of Part 3, and Doctor Domingo’s assertion in the following chapter that ‘when it comes to faith, the Church don’t believe nothing without hard scientific proof’ (p. 295) is ironically juxtaposed with the Pope’s final judgement from his ‘gestatorial’ chair, after all the other stages have been gone through, that the woman and the story are ‘a fiction of your collective imagination’ (p. 312). The reason for this decision is made clear. Magdalena’s casket has been shipped to Rome supposedly containing remains echoing in exact words the reports of the undecomposed state of St Bernadette in Lourdes, after a farcical game of musical coffins in the churchyard, exhumiing one after another found to be full of big black ‘chockstones’. However, the coffin examined in the Vatican also contains nothing but stones. According to Johnny, Magdalena may even still be alive. If there are serious religious elements in the novel, they must be found elsewhere.

As for the Virgin Magdalena herself, she seems to be entirely placid and passive, accepting all the abuse and exploitation other characters heap on her. She cannot by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as a feminist icon. Her mother, as a nun, rejects her, more for her ugly appearance as a baby than for any scandal it might cause. She is raped and subjected to humiliating sexual actions, married off to Gomez, forced into holy orders, pimped out to Barto and arrives at Doctor Domingo’s hospital apparently unaware of what is happening to her. She contrasts starkly with the assertive Mother Superior: ‘because let me tell you I am a woman that nobody could never stop me from nothing in life once I have made up my head no even me myself’ (p. 154) or Granny Myna, resentfully accepting of her fate, or Evelina, with her mysterious obeah powers, all three of whom scare the men. The author does not present this Virgin in terms of either religious orthodoxy or feminine exemplification.
While Parts 1 and 3 revolve around Magdalena and her child and the Domingo family, Part 2, the hub of the story, picks up on the veneration of the statue as Mother Kali and her avatar Sita by rehearsing the ancient epic of the *Ramayana*. And now, coincidentally, we find that the story of Rama, of the wives’ jealousy and how Sita came to be carried off to Lanka by Ravana, corresponds with Myna and Maurina’s jealousy, Barto and Gomez’s rivalry and questions about Magdalena’s chastity. It becomes clear that this section, in its way, doubles the repetitions already contained in the other five narrations. Within the rest, Hanuman’s story of the monkey tribes (believed to predate the rest of the *Ramayana*) repeats the same triangular plot. The story has been ‘Caribbeanized’ in the process, with the same emphasis on sex and bodily functions as in the surrounding chapters. For example, Sita’s birth occurs because Kali pulls away at the critical moment, spilling the ejaculate into the cane field where Janaka is ploughing with his buffalo Ganesha, incidentally the name of the elephant-headed god of writers. A critical difference from the original is that Sita’s father here is not Vishnu, the preserver, but Shiva, the destroyer, recalling the dark aspects of the creative imagination mentioned above. In her survey of the history of Indian indenture in the Caribbean, *Coolie Woman* (2013), based on her own family’s experiences, Gaiutra Bahadur speculates whether the story of Rama’s treatment of Sita might have provided a justification for the widespread violence of Indo-Caribbean men towards their wives.

While the teller of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki, is pondering the appropriate form, he sees two fabulous creatures:

*Dere he spy a manquenk and a diablesse,*

*Loving up dey loving up together.*

*Valmiki stop to watch de two beautiful creatures,*

*When just as dey reach de rapture of love dey lovemaking,*

*Quicksudden a Warrahoon burst out from de bush* (p. 175).
The Warrahoon kills the manquenk, leaving the diablesse in tears, and Valmiki’s curse on the Warrahoon gives him the metrical form of his Indo-Caribbean ‘shackshloka’. This episode replaces the killing of a bird in the original, and perhaps signals another way of understanding the intertextuality between the different sections of the novel. It also repeats the association of Eros, creativity and death.

Hanuman’s story, the central part of the book, is the part readers find most daunting, recalling as it does Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and Lucky’s ‘thinking’ in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Close reading with Wikipedia to help with the profusion of monkey species and the main figures of the evolution debate, and with a dictionary of Caribbean English Usage to hand, will actually reveal an extraordinary wealth of puns, allusions and associations surrounding a fairly lucid discourse. The reader needs to apply the kind of lateral thinking required to solve cryptic crossword puzzles like those set by the Guardian’s Araucaria (a sobriquet meaning monkey-puzzle tree). It is, of course, appropriate that the monastic order who brought the veneration of the black madonna to the New World, the Capuchins, should also be the name of a species of monkey. Hanuman himself, the monkey scribe, is also an important protagonist in the story, a Hindu god with magical powers. Equipped with great learning, wisdom and bravery, he is also a trickster, and thus reveals his consanguinity with African Eshu and Caribbean Anansi, the Lord of Carnival, or the spirit Mercurius who was so important at the time of the revival of Cathar Gnosticism and the cult of Mary Magdalene and the black madonna.

In the version of the *Ramayana* story in *Divina Trace*, Sita guides Hanuman’s finger to prove that she is a virgin when he finds her in Ravana’s palace. He reports this to Rama on his return:

*But Rama could not understand de royal monkey,*

*Nor de monkey make sense of de royal prince,*
Thinking: But how Rama could proudboast heself to plunge,  
Where you own monkeyfinger could not pierce? (p. 188).

When Sita returns, pregnant, Rama assumes Ravana is responsible, curses her and drives her out. The finger is significant. When Doctor Domingo, Johnny’s father, is about to deliver pregnant 13-year-old Magdalena’s child, which he thinks is anencephalic and thus stillborn or at least unviable, he is so fascinated that she has an imperforate vagina that, after a caesarean and believing Magdalena to be dead, he penetrates her with his finger, and so misses seeing what happens to the baby. Many years later, Johnny himself penetrates his own 13-year-old daughter in a similar way to allow her first menstrual flow.

Listening to Mother Maurina in the chapel, Johnny, aged 18, thinks he sees her headdress spreading out like an angel’s wing:

Now I did something never done before in the annals of literature and all the chronicles of man’s childish endeavours: I let go of the piece of paper, and I held out my right hand. Slowly, very carefully, I reached and touched my index finger to the pointed tip of my own imagination. I felt it. I touched the tip of that white wing. The farthest extremity of my deepest, most sacred self, and I sat back calmly and took up the piece of paper again, telling myself once more: It is only a dream. A dream (pp. 156–157).

Far from being unique, exactly this gesture is famously illustrated on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Michelangelo’s portrayal of Adam inspired to life by God through a kind of electrical charge, while God is surrounded by a diversity of figures such as might be found on Corpus Christi. Johnny goes on to say that the words he hears are recorded indelibly ‘on the black surface of my collective unconscious’ (p. 157), a significant use of the Jungian term. The author reintroduces the idea of the electrical charge in the finger in the incongruous scene of Johnny putting his index finger to his grandfather’s navel to remove a piece of lint, causing ‘a bright flash of static electricity’, a gesture that ‘felt somehow obscene’
(p. 366); the reader will by now recognize the use of absurd and grotesque physicality to mask a more serious idea.¹¹ The physical and material, in even its most grotesque forms, is being related to an idea of the spiritual that goes beyond the boundaries of any particular religion or myth.

What is being suggested by the parallelisms and multiplicities in the novel both questions and delegitimizes calcified religious doctrine and mythical dogma, while at the same time revivifying and revaluing the spiritual essence behind the different religious traditions to be found in the Caribbean. The farcical outcome of the Papal investigation into the sainthood of Magdalena betrays the Eurocentric attempts by the Catholic Church to stamp its authority on a world it is unable to appreciate and thus negate its very identity while at the same time the narrative makes it abundantly clear that the miracles it does accept are equally preposterous. The whole process can then surely be seen as an equivalent of more general cultural claims to hegemony, contrasted with the actual powers of the creative imagination.

It is only at the beginning of the second, central section that the reader is told what happens after the ‘birth’ of the ‘crapo-child’ from the bottle and the young boy realizes: ‘He is the child of Magdalena she herself. Magdalena Divina, Mother of Miracles, Black Virgin of Maraval!’ (p. 169). It is his other self, his twin, his third eye – the Hindu tilak in the centre of my consciousness with which I heard myself, my essential self, God within’ (p. 170).¹² He turns round to see a black woman in a white dress walking down the path from the church towards him. The story is taken up at the end of the second section as she touches her index finger to the mud and walks into the water:

*She lifted her face from the water: her large undulating eyes, her dark sienna skin, the crimson mark on her forehead, her comforting lips. Slowly, carefully, she reached out towards me: touched her mudtipped finger to the centre of my brow (p. 225).*
Then, wearing her bridal-burial veil, she takes up the child, as in her retelling of the Ramayana Sita takes up her child, Manuelito (little saviour Emanuel), frog child, anencephalic monster (creature of the unconscious), devil son of God, and returns towards the church. At the same time the amphibious child has become the monkey trickster Hanuman, the scribe of the tale. Magdalena is at once lover, mother and virgin, from whose womb of imaginative creativity the new can proceed. Ean Begg, in The Cult of the Virgin (2006), follows Jung in noting that symbols of totality are fourfold, and that in conventional Christianity the male trinity of father, son and spirit lacks both the feminine and the shadow side of God. He suggests that black madonnas began to appear at a time when the collective unconscious was throwing up symbols to redress that imbalance.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo, in The Repeating Island (1992), offers a model for reading Caribbean culture that owes something to the insights of so-called chaos theory in understanding the dynamics of turbulence; the flight of textual signifiers ‘is neither wholly disorganized nor absolutely unpredictable, rather it responds to the influx of “strange attractors” in whose codes the dynamics tend to follow determined movements and, therefore, to draw certain regularly repetitive and self-referential figures’ (Benítez-Rojo 1992, p. 269). Though Benítez-Rojo focuses on the plantation as one such strange attractor, his analysis is also open to other factors such as Gnosticism and alchemy. Clearly, Antoni has built his novel around the religious phenomena associated with Siparia in Trinidad, but the principles of self-reference and repetition extend throughout the fabric of the text. Not only are the stories reiterated and varied, sometimes even contradicted, by the different narrators, even, as we have seen, echoing and alluding to ancient religious and epic traditions, but the text itself uses repeated formulations, words, phrases and images in each of the chapters. Sometimes the repetitions are exact, as in the recurrence of the purpleheart desk with its too-small Windsor chair; at
other times there are significant variations, for instance in substituting stones for bodies, as in the coffins, or when Bernadetta the illiterate gives Maurina a piece of paper that reads: ‘The boulder-stone was big and obzockee. I was having a hard time toting him’ (p. 264) or subtler ones like Hanuman’s version of the Ave Maria: ‘Et benedictus fructus ventris nostri’ (p. 205), indicating the universality of the possibility of soteriological rebirth.\textsuperscript{15}

Some of the variations in the repetition function symbolically, like the footwear. ‘Jesusboots’, ‘washicongs’ and ‘hardbacks’,\textsuperscript{16} words which are hauntingly unusual, give indications about the age and identity of the wearer on different occasions, but these then slip and slide, leading to elisions and contradictions, to make the identities themselves meld and lose their precision. Other recurring tropes like the cutting of navel strings, the swallowing of objects, the striking of the clock in the square, the tin in which some object has been buried under a tree could all be mentioned in this context. There is also the reaction of the narrator to the stories he is told and whether or not he can stop listening, combined with the gesture of the older person’s hands on his shoulders. And always, outside the room with the desk, there is the island itself, Corpus Christi, under the eternal repetition of sunrise and sunset.

When we consider these techniques, the insights offered by Gilles Deleuze into phenomena of repetition may prove fruitful in our appreciation of the novel. Firstly, Deleuze points out that repetition does not simply mean doing the same thing again and again. Nor is it a process of ‘aping’ a model seen as pre-existent or superior. We are not dealing with epigones round master-narratives. Deleuze takes examples from Proust and Joyce – thus pertinent to our subject; in the case of Joyce, ‘of drawing together a maximum of disparate series (ultimately all the divergent series constitutive of the cosmos) by bringing into operation linguistic dark precursors [...]’ (Deleuze 2004, p. 148).\textsuperscript{17} In our case the dark precursors are the multivalent imagery set up in and between
the different iterations of the story. With Proust, Deleuze is looking at the repetition in relationships and what connects them, between Swann and Odette in the narrator’s childhood, and the adult hero with Albertine: ‘Each series explicates or develops itself, but in its difference from the other series which it implicates and which implicate it, which it envelops and which envelop it’ (Deleuze 2004, p. 151) and this enveloping is achieved through the simultaneity of a former present (Combray as it was lived) and of a present present, represented by the taste of the madeleine cake. Deleuze suggests that in such repetition Eros points to a goal which is Thanatos, immanent transcendence.

Deleuze uses theatrical analogies for this type of repetition as performance: ‘The mask is the true subject of repetition. Because repetition differs in kind from representation, the repeated cannot be represented: rather, it must always be signified, masked by what signifies it, itself masking what it signifies’ (Deleuze 2004, p. 20). Benítez-Rojo, stressing the importance to Caribbean culture of rhythm and performance, speaks of ‘insoluble differential equations, which repeat their unknowns through the ages of the meta-archipelago’ (Benítez-Rojo 1992, p. 26). This seems to be the equivalent of Wilson Harris’s concept of the ‘infinite rehearsal’.18 The idea of theatre and play relate to the intimate connection of imagination and reality. In the final section of the novel the nonagenarian narrator meets an East Indian in a parlour who makes a ‘pappyshow’ of pouring him a rum with the words ‘Dis is not altogether fool, boy!’ (p. 409). The reader will recognize, here and elsewhere, echoes of Shakespeare, in particular King Lear, Hamlet and The Tempest. No one would dream of asking whether Lear, or Hamlet, or Prospero and Caliban, were ‘real’, or whether the actors playing them were really them, any more than they would consider that they were about a particular time and place. We understand the nature of play: that things are and are not at the same time, at any time. That, too, is the nature of the Virgin, of Kali and Sita, or Hanuman or Anansi.19 A short
time later the narrator meets an old man on a cart dressed in aluminium foil as St Michael playing ‘mas’, apparently the same man he had met as a boy carrying the bottle. He asks the old man if it is him ‘or you daddy’s son’, which is, of course, the same thing. As if symbolic of the revolutions of repetition, one of the wheels breaks but he is able to replace it with another, and fit it with the fishknife the narrator happens to be carrying after unearthing the rosary he will give to the madonna, ‘as though the fishknife had been designed for just this purpose’ (p. 415). The old man in his costume resembles an Arthurian knight in armour, and now another set of old stories bubbles up as Granny Myna serves the frog child up to the population in an inexhaustible callaloo recalling the magic cauldron underlying the Grail legend (and Joseph of Arimathea was supposed to have brought Mary Magdalene and the Grail across the sea and into a different culture) while the narrator throws the fishknife out over the swamp like Excalibur.

Deleuze’s ideas lead us into his third synthesis of time or what he calls an ‘empty order of time’ (Deleuze 2004, p. 111). ‘The synthesis,’ he points out, ‘is necessarily static, since time is no longer subordinated to movement; time is the most radical form of change, but the form of change does not change’ (Deleuze 2004, p. 111). Time is distributed around a ‘caesura’, which is at the exact point where the fracture in the ‘I’ appears. In other words the point where the child is born, was always born and will always be born, of a living Virgin goddess. It is also the point of origin of the story in the emergence from the collective unconscious, the creative imagination. Thus Valmiki hears the story of himself from his younger self, who is yet to experience it, just as Rama will hear about the story of his coming exploits from Valmiki in Ayodhya before they have happened, and Hanuman, after the passing of Valmiki, will take up the story out of the tradition that has made the statue of Sita, and will create the virgin story as if it were his own, just as Antoni fashions his novel on the basis of diverse traditions of Europe, Africa, India and America. I would
contend that it is this sense of reflexivity which determines the presence of the mirror page, rather than the readers being presented with a distorted vision of themselves. In Wilson Harris’s *The Mask of the Beggar* (2003), the artist’s mother, who has given birth to him, is a work of art he himself has created:

_He, the ageless artist, needed to lament the apparently motherless fate of the inexpressible / expressible, inexpressible childhood, inexpressible / expressible maturity. Without such a lament, in works of art, between mother and son, the inexpressible would remain for ever hidden and unborn* (Harris 2003, p. 4).

**NOTES**

1. The French word *crapaud* is also Trinidadian for frog.
6. Zander, in particular, shows how restrictive certain orthodox approaches to Caribbean literature can be if less attention is paid to what the work is and does than to what critics think it ought to be doing. Ironically, that can lead in effect to a new ghettoization of non-metropolitan literatures that ignores the achievements of, for example, the Caribbean wizards of language such as Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite or Wilson Harris, whose mastery completely liberated the potential of the writers who succeeded them.
7. This unusual word for the chair the Pope is carried on also involves a cunning pun by the author on gestation and birth.
8. A diablesse (she-devil) in Caribbean folklore is a beautiful woman who appears in a lonely spot by moonlight, luring men to death and destruction in her true cloven-footed shape. A manquenk is half man, half peccary. The shak-shak is a Caribbean percussion instrument providing rhythm.
9. It may not be by chance that Lucky’s speech begins with ‘Given’ and Hanuman’s chapter with ‘GIBBON’.

*Journal of Indentureship 2.2  December 2022*
Though academia was initially sceptical about the scholarly status of Wikipedia because of its open editorial policy, it has in fact proved itself to be a remarkably reliable guide, particularly due to the transparent way in which expert input and debate on the entries can be followed and appraised.

The gesture with the index finger becomes an integral part of the conventional Catholic ritual of crossing himself with holy water used by the old man in the chapel at the end of the novel (424).

The absent or true God of the Gnostics and Cathars could be sought as a spark of the ‘God within’.

Cf. C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, Collected Works 11 (1969): The Trinity was represented by the three ‘spirits’ of air, fire and water. The fourth, earth or the body, was symbolized by the Virgin. ‘But since woman, as well as evil, is excluded from the Deity in the dogma of the Trinity, the element of evil would form part of the religious symbol if the latter should be a quaternity’ (§ 107).

It should be noted that Benítez-Rojo begins his book with a discussion of a Cuban Virgin similar to that in Siparia.

The fruit of *our* womb instead of *your* womb.

Jesusboots are sandals. Washicongs are sneakers, believed to derive from Chinese ‘flower shoes full of holes’, cheap footwear popular with Chinese indentured labourers. Hardbacks are leather shoes, a term invented by the author.

The dark precursor is the connection made from clouds to earth before the visible lightning retraces the same path in the opposite direction.

Cf. Leo Courbot’s (2019) essay on poems by Fred D’Aguiar with Wilson Harris’s ideas about infinite rehearsal.

In a recent Caribbean iteration, *Weaving Water* by Ryhaan Shah (2013), Neela is mermaid, Indian Ganga Mai, African Mama Wata, at the same time as being a bar-room singer and courtesan.

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