

Performing History, Historizing Performance in Robert Antoni's *As Flies to Whatless Boys*

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This essay discusses how our world is becoming increasingly performative and replete with multiple forms of performance (Denzin; Schechner), not just in the acts we enact, words we speak or how we say them, and generally the manner bodies are applied to doing things, but how written texts burst with performatives and action as well. Essentially, there has arisen what has been aptly described as the “rapid part-words-part-pictures hypertext communication” of e-mails and cell phone interactions (Schechner 4–5), depicting the intermingled ways images, words, and embodied expressions circulate in live and online encounters. The pervasiveness of this condition has breached the limits of the written text, producing instead temporality other than stasis, nuanced over fixed narrativity, with two identifiable outcomes: “rupture and expansion” (Murray-Román, 3). As such, performance theory provides compelling insights into how we perceive “culture and civic engagement” in contemporary times (Shields, 14). For this reason, performance studies itself is pertinently a lens through which almost everything is examined (Auslander, *Performance Theory* 2–3), thereby making it relevant to how we evaluate phenomena including written texts in contemporary times.

Elsewhere, Auslander rightly notes how “art is no longer content to stay on the museum wall [... and] literary critics see their writings as performances” (“Postmodernism,” 99). Poets, on their part, are confronted with choices about whether they perform or script because they all “inhabit the differing contexts—and must wrestle with the differing requirements—of print and of performance,” as their works become increasingly “designed for presentation to an audience rather than for private perusal by the isolated reader” (Morris 241-242). In this essay, the focus is on historical narratives, particularly how they now favor polyphonic voices and multiple perspectives, which privilege characters that perform their stories rather than remaining mouthpieces of their creators. Through a performance analysis of Robert Antoni's *As Flies to Whatless Boys*, therefore, this article interrogates some of Antoni's characters and their actions, to discuss how characters that were hitherto printed onto pages are presently discontented with remaining in print. On the inverse, how we read has also changed, to the point that the present module for reading characters in print imbues them with liveness due to the profusion of the “rapid part-words-part-pictures hypertext communication,” according to Schechner, mentioned previously.

To bring performance to print, writers embrace performativity. Rightly defined as the reconstruction of “the performance dimension [of

written texts] in their minds” (Berns, 677), performativity is derived from “performative utterances,” developed around speech act theory that define how spoken words accomplish things (Austin, 5). It has now been applied to different facets of life, for instance in showing how gender is a product of repetitive performance (Butler, *Gender*, 24-25, 134-141), and how language, in particular, has historically caused harm while remaining open to all manner of redefinitions (Butler, *Excited Speech Politics* 144-145). Some scholars have conflated performativity and performance to show how they function in speech and action (Diamond, 69). In Antoni’s *As Flies to Whatless Boys*, as shown in this article, there is evidence of this kind of fusion; a form of performative storytelling that privileges speech and action over the written/printed text. This manner of writing decentralizes the narrative voice, ruptures authorial perspectives, and displaces readers’ sense of time by jumbling the past, present and future in multiple conflicting mixes. The author himself cements this writing predilection as a Caribbean tradition by stating its similarity with what he calls, the “utter exuberance with which Derek Walcott recalls transcribing to the page a West Indian world – complete with hurricanes, balizier, callaloo, and its own rich dialect – for the first time ...” (Antoni, 9). Attributed to the “chantwell” tradition of the Caribbean storyteller-persona, *As Flies to Whatless Boys* portrays a narrative that incorporates multiple narrators who are aggregately like this traditional narrator— “a critic, commentator, creator of delightful turns of phrase and astute user of double entendre, often with humorous effect” (Aiyejina, 8). It is these forms of individuals that inhabit Antoni’s novel as seen in how they run off in their own preoccupations and interests. The chantwell (or chantuelle) is a multi-talented artist who sings, tells histories and stories, is a spiritual leader, among other things in traditional Trinidad and Tobago culture (Nakhid-Chatoor; Pearse; Tuttle). Like their counterparts in mainland Africa, the griots and the *imbongi* of West and Southern Africa as well as other oral artists of old (Kaschula and Diop; Okpewho), these creators inhabited spaces where art and memory, alongside other functions of entertainment, ritual, celebrations, and the like intersect.

Antoni’s novel is conveyed in multiple vernaculars. The novel has been described as “an evolution in the understanding of hypertext,” due to how “novel, media and literature not only intersect, but ... interrogate and influence each other as a way of highlighting familiar themes in new, reimagined ways” (de Matas, 10). It is a reconstruction rather than a telling of the stories of a group of people, referred to as Pioneers, who set sail from England to settle in Trinidad. Antoni brings their journeys to life using Trinidadian vernacular, a language choice that enlivens the words on the pages of the novel. As part of the storytelling, in lieu of a linear narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, there are intertextual interjections that perform numerous functions within the stories. For instance, there is the use of “family correspondence(s), anecdotes and emails, references to bazodee, tool-tool-bay, assatataps, tabanca, cockspraddle, geegeeree, and maco-eyes” (Roberts). In this novel

therefore, Antoni builds a tale that epitomizes what Pollock refers to as a novel that in its doingness “displaces writing as meaning” (75). He, thus, creates a vortex of making and distorting meaning, particularly presenting the unsayable by allowing the characters to play out their stories through interpersonal exchanges with minimal interjections from the author. The text, in this manner, becomes largely performative, thus “ineffability becomes visible to the spectator/reader” (Robins, 1). With the privileging of doing overwriting, Antoni’s characters spring to life from the potent imageries and compelling diction buoyed by a metatextual interplay of words and pictures, the pulverization of nominal orthography, especially in dispensing with the rules of punctuations and syntax, and the use of creolized language in place of more formal ones.

Encountering the narrative

The narrative opens with *First Message*, which contains the first email sent to the researcher Mr. Robert W. Antoni in July 2010, from the director of T&T National Archives. To this email, the director attaches three letters written in 1881 to and from Mr. William Tucker, as he prepares to return to England on a brief visit, thirty-six years after their initial voyage of 1845 to Trinidad. After “First Message” is the Preamble, with a date: “7 September 1881”: This is where Willy’s son, with whom he makes the passage back to England, introduces his father’s story. This date, 1881, is one of the narrative’s two major present-day occurrences with the other being the correspondence between Mr. Robert W. Antoni and the director of the T&T National Archives. It is from the “present-day” of 1881 that the reader is led back to what transpired in 1845 when Willy was still a teenager. Subsequent parts of Antoni’s novel, from this point, run without break or clarification of what period it is. As such, there is a juxtaposition of various times and periods in a deliberate disheveling of chronological order, to give an impression of a story that is told by rote rather than in a plotted manner. One outstanding technique Antoni deploys here, aside from the preponderance of vernacular, is the elision of quotation marks in direct quotes as seen in regular works of fiction. This prevalence of informality in Antoni’s text makes it more liberating and positively banal, unlike what one encounters in the more formal narratives of English writing with its adherence to all punctuation, semantic and syntactical rules. This narrative predilection is not unique to Antoni alone, but to a newer generation of West Indian writers, who Gikandi (1-2) avers, “exhibit extreme anxiety and ambivalence” towards modernity because of its view of Caribbean literature and culture as appendages to European variants.

Subsequently, one acquiesces to the postulation that Antoni’s text should “be read strictly as Caribbean fiction” for its local setting, affinity to oral literature as well as its use of Creole and privileging of “a multilayered inquiry into language, silence, talk, and the shifting

definitions of literature itself in the digital age” (Lee, paras.1-2). The stories of the novel are built around two main individuals. The first is a man described as “a crackpot British engineer,” John Etzler, who “found a colony in Trinidad in the West Indies based on a contraption he called the Satellite,” decided to move people there and to use this device to do all the work while humans engage in more spiritual and leisure activities (Holland). The others are Willy Tucker and Marguerite. Both are teenagers who met on the ship from Europe to Trinidad. Tucker is interested in Marguerite, and Marguerite cannot speak. Tucker is in love with her, and they eventually find comfort in each other’s arms, but their belonging to different social classes brings its own complications both on the ship and when they eventually arrive in Trinidad. The fact that Marguerite cannot speak creates some of the ample opportunities for performative writing in the novel both in the way she communicates with others and how others convey information to her. *As Flies to Whatless Boys* is therefore a historical fiction, told in the postmodern montage of words, symbols, texts and email messages.

The language of the novel, particularly the diction choices of the characters, are outstanding. The linguistic experimentations of Antoni and their successes in eliciting the postmodern-cum-postcolonial consciousness of multiple identities and intertextuality in this novel are succinctly captured in the following observations:

the novel is pure coscomel, a kitsch combo of 19th- and 21st-century Standard (proper), vernacular and German “infected” English; emerging Trinidad English Creole and new millennium Trini text talk. Orality [...] mixes easily with the literary, and local readers may be delighted to come across many Creolisms, which are disappearing from currency: obzockee, bazodee, geegeeree, assassataps and others like the “whatless” of the title, which cause us to halt and question orthography and spelling: too-tool-bay, bosée-backed, tout baghi, toe tee. (Lee)

From the foregoing, it is evident that Antoni pertinently engages in expansive experimentations with languages spoken rather than written variants. The main narrative voice preferred in the novel is referred to as the “Trini vernacular cell phone text speak” (5 Roberts); Trinidadian street-speak, not only for direct speeches and Miss Ramsol’s emails but also, in a smaller dose, for the narrative voice of Willy. Apart from the dominance of this form of language, there are also instances of accents of other nationalities, especially the ones used by the German pseudo-inventor, Adolphus Etzler and the French aristocrat, Comte. Due to this blend of a variety of spoken languages, *As Flies to Whatless Boys* comes alive once one picks it up because its characters literally come alive to play out their roles in the imagination of readers. Antoni’s choice to keep away from the encumbrance of formal, picky prose writing format, in this work, is geared towards adopting a more “malleable, open, inclusive and aggressively subversive” ambience that the vernacular creates, mostly

because it is “always regenerating and reimagining itself” (Roberts). The privileging of performance narration liberates his narrator, Willy Tucker, from the strictures of formal language which he has little competence in to grant him the impetus to mould his thoughts and their expression in Trinidadian Creole where his vocabulary is richer.

Writing outside the rules of punctuation

Punctuations may exist in spoken speech through pauses and cadences of delivery that delineate the different sentences and inflections seen in the written form. However, the use of quotation marks appears to be an invention of the script because, with its absence in Antoni’s text, it is easier to see how inhibitive they can be to the free flow of thoughts. Antoni ingeniously does away with them and in their place implants italics for Marguerite who speaks through writing other than vocal cords. In this exchange between her and Willy, one notes how her speech flows easily on paper without punctuation hang-ups, the same way it would for someone else who can speak:

Marguerite daubed the lead against her tongue, scribbling—
*I’ve been waiting here patiently
feigning illness so as not to leave my cabin
whatever took you so long to find me?*

She took her book back, scribbling again—

*[...] eventually I took up the search myself
but you were nowhere to be found [...]*

I cleared my throat—

You’ve no idea what I’ve been through to get here.

Marguerite took her book, smiling—

*[...] & such a silly outfit
wherever did you get it from?*

I shrugged my shoulders, embarrassed.

Marguerite turned the page, writing more—

[...] you look like the boy who brings my breakfast!

I took her book and put it aside, reaching to take hold of her hand, looking into her face. Her bright, sleepy, hazel-coloured eyes [...]
(*As Flies*, pp. 73-74)

I quoted this in full to show how the text presents the passage; duplicating how exactly it uses a mix of indentations and italics, and positions on the page to pictorially present the exchange between Marguerite and Willy as an enlivened rather than narrated encounter. Marguerite’s “speeches” are italicized and centered on the page—denoting significations of emphasis and mainstreaming of her gender and what could have been her disability, evidently repurposed here as agential and assertive. Through italicization,

the removal of conventional quotation marks and the centralization of Marguerite's words on the page, Antoni gives her a stronger voice. Rather than settle in her "cordlessness," Marguerite's words perform themselves into prominence by their being literally separated from those of others who have the benefit of using vocal cords. Antoni creates a norm out of Marguerite's vocal challenges by making her written words conversational like those of others who can speak. For example, when the narrative voice says—"She took her book back, scribbling again ..." (*As Flies*, p. 74), it is presented as every other regular behavior before a speech like Willy's "I cleared my throat ..." (*As Flies*, p. 74). The reader is not told in these exchanges that Marguerite handed her speech book to Willy after writing. This is not an omission because in actual vocalized speech one does not tell the other person, "It is your turn to speak now," and whatever lull that is needed for Willy to collect the book, read and hand it back to Marguerite is something that Antoni represents with succeeding em-dashes to these action parts of the narrative.

Furthermore, when it comes to parity, Antoni seeks the equality of the individual actions that precede each of the two speech patterns between Marguerite and Willy as exemplified in the following:

I shrugged my shoulders embarrassed.
Marguerite turned the page, writing more [...] (*As Flies*, p. 74).

Specifically speaking, the expression "writing more [...]" equates Willy's shrugging of shoulders, and what follows are Marguerite's words with no quotation marks, centered, italicized, and with little attempt to distinguish the different mediums through which they speak. This indicates the narrative's blurring of the dividing line between spoken and written texts which act as evidence of Antoni's privileging of performative narrative where the story is enacted by the characters even when it is being narrated from the perspective of young Willy. The emphasis is, thus, not on the telling, but on the *doingness* of the narrative as expressed by Pollock above, declaring thoughts that are better expressed by the characters themselves rather than the narrator and/or author as implied by Robins in her upholding of the performance novel's professions of the ineffable.

To further validate the melding of written and spoken texts in the novel, readers are made aware that Willy had already heard from his father that Marguerite was born without a "spinecord." This leaves him wondering and musing about what it was like; how she would "probably [...] be *heaved* from place to place, like some kinda human jelly fish" (*As Flies*, p. 49); a feeble human being meant to be scooped from one location to another due to the absence of a supportive frame to hold her upright. Coupled with the fact that she has no parents and had to put up with the Whitechurches, her uncle and aunt, Willy's sympathy and sense of pity over what he first thinks of Marguerite's sorry state, is palpable as seen in his thought:

In any case, whatever this Marguerite was like, I assure you I wasn't much looking forward to meeting her a-tall. (*As Flies*, p. 49)

Of course, why would he want to meet someone who, to him at the time, does not measure up to his own social status? Hence, a sense of superiority and power washes over Willy on hearing about this individual whose station in life is lower than his. Little wonder he becomes embarrassed when he eventually gets to meet Marguerite, to the point that he must hurriedly hide the bottle of whisky he is holding (*As Flies*, p. 50). Is it that he just realized he had alcohol with him? No! His hiding the bottle is a product of his discovery that his thoughts of this person have been a far cry from what is truly the case. So, when he finds himself in front of a proper lady other than the helpless "invalid" he had envisioned, he is flustered, and as such makes quick efforts to adorn any semblance of a gentleman that he could muster in such a brief period. Willy not only becomes discomfited but also loses his voice as her beauty and class unearth his unsuitability for her company. Marguerite then helps him find his voice again by bringing out her little book, which he at first thought was a Bible, and scribbling their very first "spoken" exchange: "You're not eighteen (*As Flies*, p. 52).

It is ambivalent: it could be a question or a statement. Of course, Willy had lied to her aunt, Mrs. Whitechurch, about his age. That is something Marguerite picks up instantly on meeting him; and whether she asked or just said it matter-of-factly, this opening remark cements her triumph over Willy and all the preconceived misrepresentations of her that he was still grappling with. The strength of her character is not in doubt because, at another point of their interaction, she makes it known to Willy that while everyone else is either awed or less concerned about Mr. Etzler's shenanigans, she has a different opinion from theirs. She tells Willy in her usual manner of speech:

*he's always struck me as something of a buffoon ...
Mr. Etzler—though I fear he's nearly as dangerous as he is foolish
[...]
he's an unpardonable charlatan* (*As Flies*, pp. 64-65)

To confirm the superiority of her intellect, despite the reverence which others have for this man, Marguerite further queries the scientific basis of his inventions by saying that "*his mathematics are unsound*:" (*As Flies*, p. 65). Thus, her refusal to be swooned by Etzler's trickery is as resolute as her cordless voice. Her inability to speak vocally does not diminish her character; it rather confers upon her a strength that makes Willy cower. Still on their first meeting, moreover, while Willy remains awestruck and yet to regain his voice, Marguerite takes up the responsibility of making him recover his vocal cords. This is something Willy is unable to do for himself since he is still lost in the emotional and psychological ruckus engendered by the rupture of his initial, now-pulverized conception of

Marguerite. Her overwhelming confidence, beauty and class are intriguing even as she sets out to alleviate Willy's speechlessness:

She flipped a page of her book, scribbling something else. Reaching it forward—

I was born without vocal cords

[...]

since it's all I've ever known

it's never seemed much of an impediment (As Flies, pp. 52-53)

Note the way Antoni's tale fuses both the narrative voice and the direct speech of the characters. The sense of performative writing is more evocative in Marguerite because of what she lacks in vocal speech, Antoni makes her perform by doing. Consequently, rather than elicit sympathy for not being able to speak, the reader is awed by the grace of her actions, the superiority of her intellect and the power of her performance.

Willy's reaction to Marguerite equates to that of the reader because Antoni does not prepare anyone for the vehemence of Marguerite's personality. He allows her to emerge after adroitly allowing Willy and all of us (the readers) to wallow in several pitiable conjectures of what she would look like. Nothing prepares anyone for the person she turns out to be. She also does not announce herself but rather lets who she is speak in the best way, albeit the most powerful manner it can possibly express who she is. Willy, thus, finds himself re-evaluating his ability to speak:

I sat contemplating this last remark. Turning it over in my head. And son, it wasn't a minute before I turned my mind round arse-backwards too. In the opposite direction. Thinking: who needs to talk anyway? since you could write down everything you had to say quick-and-easy enough? clear & simple & fixed there solid on the page without a chance of miscommunication neither? Because what-the-arse-good has talk ever done anybody? so many people always flapping they traps? so much wasted breath? brainless babble? (*As Flies*, p. 53)

Willy's volte-face in his cogitative questioning of the relevance of the capacity to talk when challenged by the solidity and potency of Marguerite's "cordless" voice is instructive. It is a final surrender to the awe of this person and to her passion because they eventually start an amorous relationship with series of sexual escapades and explorations aboard the ship that were not narrated but were also allowed to act themselves out. Antoni's privileging of performance over narration is shown in Willy's musings above, with the omission of full stops, the use of the ampersand instead of "and," as well as not capitalizing the first letters at the beginning of sentences. Willy's thoughts are thus presented here in their unspoken form—without the niceties of scripted words. It is in the same manner that Marguerite's "speeches" are given—with sparse punctuations and less adherence to the rules of writing which exist neither in speech nor in people's thoughts. Marguerite's voice, in its strength of

character and purpose, is thus equated with that of the narrator, which also shows less regard for the stringent rules of English writing and punctuations.

It is instructive, therefore, that the absence of quotation marks and full stops (at the end of direct quotes), for instance, blurs any demarcation between reported speech and direct quotes, leading to a seamless performative narrative. At one level, these (out-of-habit) boundaries are well delineated even in their absence, but at another level, one is made aware of their needless intrusiveness when they are present in writing because no one reads them. They are there as guidance as to how one should read. For this purpose, their absence is liberating because it opens myriad ways in which the text can be read and this is the purpose of performative writing, as cited above, in its meaning-displacing mode (Pollock). What Antoni does in this narrative is to fuse spoken and written texts, creating the performative variant one sees in this novel. Antoni's conscious elision of regular narrative patterns and predilection towards performativity thus provokes, questions, pulverizes and decenters normative forms of, not only writing, but language itself. It problematizes the language of the colonizer, English, as well as all its conventions. In place of the gap created by the thrashing of the English language, Antoni supplants it with Creole. This is, however, not something that is peculiar to him, but to West Indian writers like Samuel Selvon, who, it has been observed, instead "of positing old African or Indian traditions as the basis of a new Caribbean national culture ... believes that the process of creolization has created a new people and culture" (Gikandi, 112).

Erasing boundaries and divisions

Throughout the novel, the story swings from Willy's days in London (prior to the trip, especially how he and Marguerite met, as well as other events that happened afterwards); their days on the ship, *Rosalind*, on the voyage to Trinidad; and the time spent between Port-of-Spain and the plantation in Chaguabarriga. The narrative does not explain variations in time because different sections of the stories run concurrently and seamlessly. Succeeding scenes are often past or future tales of the characters involved. For example, from talking about the Tuckers' arrival on the *Rosalind* and meeting with young Vincent who took them to their abode with the Johnstons (*As Flies*, pp. 145-148), the next scene jumps to the future where a much older Willy and his own son meet the same Vincent who, at this time, has become the seafarer, Captain Vincent (*As Flies*, pp. 150-152). Other instances too numerous to mention here are the portions where Marguerite's past escapades with Willy in London are narrated alongside the several, detailed (mis)deeds they perpetrated on that trip. There is, in all, a deliberate melding of separate times and events. The major unifying factor in Antoni's tale is the narrator's perspective, which went from Willy's son to Willy and back to the son again. His audience is

inadvertently allowed to follow Willy's thoughts as they wander through the different sections of his story's unraveling. This blending of the past, present and future tallies with what has been referred to as "the transformative power of fiction," defined as rehearsing "the past in the present" which in turn is "a habit for unmasking and decentring binaries of the past and the dichotomies of the present" (Shields, 12). It is this juxtaposition of opposites that catalyzes rupture and therefrom, expansion (Murray-Román, 3), as mentioned at the beginning. This expansion provides the fodder for literature to grow out of conventions, in this case, enabling West Indian fiction to transcend the stasis and become more expressive of the boisterous cultures from which they were birthed.

The second form of juxtaposition Antoni exerts in this narrative is the melding of various narrative voices. Willy is the principal narrator. His son takes over at some points (first at the beginning, somewhere in the middle as the two meet Captain Vincent, and then at the end). Miss Ramsol, the director of T&T National Archives is another narrator. She fulfils this part through the informative emails, newspaper clippings and letters from the past (which become their own narrative perspectives due to the information they bring) that she sends to Mr. Robert W. Antoni from the Archives. Then, there is also the very silent narrator, the author himself, absently present in all deliberations, weaving the different strands of the tale into a composite whole. Together they all form the polyphony of voices that tell the stories in *As Flies to Whatless Boys*. Antoni makes Willy tell much of the happenings from 1845. The reader is aware that this version of the story is that of his son in his father's voice, being relayed by Antoni himself. This is evident in the embellishment, proof and support provided by Miss Ramsol's letters and newspaper clippings some of which Willy is not shown to be aware of because they reveal sides of the story that are unknown to the first-person perspective, but are appropriately deployed to validate Willy's historical claims. For example, the letters of Stollmeyer and Etzler (*As Flies*, pp. 195-198, 256-259), tell of what became of the duo and their other endeavors after the failure of their Trinidadian experiment with the failure of his do-all machine.

The other voice, that of Miss Ramsol, also graphically reveals a more recent part of the tale which is the sexual encounters between her and the researcher of the story, whom she calls Mr. Robot. His meeting with this woman is out of the desire to, as a descendant of the Tuckers, trace his family history at the National Archives. This is made evident in the letters she writes him, especially in this manner: "...plus dat letter from u relative WILLIAM SANGER TUCKER dat i find 4 u in de STAR [...] u needs to make PLENTY more copies 4 u research before u could write out dis book" (*As Flies*, p. 327).¹ Miss Ramsol's stories are interesting for the Trinidadian vernacular used, as well as for being quite comedic and light-hearted. Her "messages" further tells how she, offended by his actions, decides to get her brothers to beat him up. In another, she apologizes, and they make up again, going back to their normal explosive sexual intercourse. In the letter dated "15/8/10," she writes:

dear mr robot:
now as i have lil chance 2 catch me breath & cool down some after
all dem boisterous carrings-ons of last night, of which i can only
admit 2 have play my own part in dem 2, my womanly desires
catching de best of me unawares much as i fight to hold dem down,
cause Krishna-only-know dis tuti aint get a good airing-out like dat
in many a long day, & now it finish & i could collec meself lil bit &
sit down cool& calm & quiet enough dis morning 2 write u out dis
email & put everyting down clear in b&w 4 u 2 hear... (*As Flies*, p.
75)

What relationship this Mr. Robot has with the author, Robert Antoni, is not established. However, in an interview, Antoni told how he became hooked to writing this tale through his mother's (a direct family descendant of the Tuckers) mention of Etzler. Afterwards, he carried out a bit of research, which resulted in his

discovery of a letter, fished out of William Sanger's pocket on his deathbed, and addressed to the editor of *The Morning Star*—the journal published in London that followed the progress of Etzler's society, where the letter was mailed and eventually appeared. That letter is the only description we have of the settlement where Etzler's great plan for humanity came to fruition and met with its tragic end in a matter of weeks. Once I'd found that letter, I was hooked. No turning back. (Battistella)

Antoni's blend of a composite tale that alternates between different narrative voices conflates historical facts and inventions, making one appear like the other. His statement in the excerpt above further beclouds knowledge of whether the entire narrative, parts of it, or none of it is fictional. All the voices – young Willy's, his son's and Antoni's are blended in an undifferentiated whole, interspersed with Miss Ramsol's more contemporary happenings. The manner of their conjoining aids the novel switch between fiction and what appears to be reality. Thus, every segment is employed purposely to perform its veracity as something that truly happened.

The third aspect of blended transitions is that of meta-narrativity: the deployment of pictures, written texts, maps, diagrams, blank pages, pitch black pages and symbols. They contribute to making Antoni's text a truly performative narration, exemplifying Schechner's "rapid part-words-part-pictures hypertext communication" (4), mentioned earlier. Antoni, in his engagement with this form of melding of communication mediums, stayed true to the nature of contemporary West Indian fiction writing by staying true to the non-literary forms of its constituent African and Indian cultures. The manner of the deployment of these materials in the text equally validates their own utilitarian purposes. This is because the narrative jumps from acting out one event to validating the same through

any of newspaper cuttings, archival documents, symbols, diagrams, and maps, mostly derived from the paraphernalia of Willy's father, Miss Ramsol's e-mail, or a find in the National Archives. One outstanding example is that while aboard the ship *Rosalind* on the voyage to Trinidad, Comte, the French gentry, intimated to his fellow travellers that indentured workers from India were on their way to Trinidad at the same time as they (*As Flies*, p. 66). Later, as the Pioneers sight land, Miss Ramsol's four-page e-mail is interposed. In the mail, she tells Mr. Robot about her family being part of the East Indians that arrived on the ship, Fatal Rozack (*As Flies* pp. 99-102). This is the way Miss Ramsol wriggles her way and ancestry into the narrative, establishing that her forebears arrived on the island on the same day that Mr. Robot's people came. She validates this claim by presenting two newspaper clippings from *The Port of Spain Gazette* published on different dates in 1845 detailing the two concurrent arrivals (*As Flies*, pp. 103-104). Though addressed to Mr. Robot, the attachments bring a new dimension, that of equating the arrival of the Pioneers from Europe to that of the East Indians to Trinidad. It becomes obvious that Antoni's novel does not leave out the necessary persuasive paraphernalia for verifying the story it is telling as shown by the preparedness of the narrator, Willy, in the following excerpt:

He'd brought out his leather briefcase, the same one he took every day to work. [...] And it wouldn't be until a good while after he'd launched into his story [...] that he'd open up his briefcase to take out a slightly battered pasteboard cigar box. [...] Inside was a collection of old papers, smudged and ragged-looking round the edges, that he would ruffle through occasionally and select one to illustrate something from his story: maps, letters, clippings from some ancient newspaper I'd never heard of [...]. But the main thing he wanted to show me [...] was the little notebook that had once belonged to his own father. It told of the twenty-three days they'd spent together on some estate up on the north coast. (*As Flies*, p. 29)

Among these materials are maps, especially that of Port of Spain inserted between pages 152 and 153 – unnumbered pages with red markings showing the route that Willy and his family took from the ship, in 1845, to their new abode on the island. The backside is yellowish, with light creases and deep colored crumples, then a penciled division of the page into four equal parts. These give the impression of ageing, and that of the page having been folded previously. The texture of the paper is also different from the rest of the book.

There is an obvious effort to create a realistic antique map to deepen the plausibility of the tale. In other words, this map is performative because it births and validates this historical narrative. Not numbering it also successfully creates the impression of a genuine document which exists outside this novel because such a map would not have page numbers, let alone ones that tally with the numbering of Antoni's book. There are diagrams also, mostly from Willy's father's journal. These

include sketches: Mr. Wood's floorplan of how he will get Etzler's Satellite to the camp, which Willy says his father, "Papee," conveniently copied from the sand where it was made into his notebook (*As Flies*, p. 200); and that of the bay where the Pioneers first landed on Chaguabarriga taken by Papee on their arrival (*As Flies*, p. 180). The similarities between this second sketch, with its "natural stone jetty," parts of the Pioneers' experiences on this trip and that of the Pilgrims to the US is equally overwhelming. There is also a more expansive diagram of Chaguabarriga (*As Flies*, p. 194) as well as Mr. Carr's design for a channel to drain floodwater from their gardens (*As Flies*, p. 205). These items appear in the text, not as descriptions, but pictorially, to validate their existence. Furthermore, the use of Miss Ramsol's letters to introduce archival documents, especially old newspaper clippings, is a clever way of enhancing believability of the documents. Antoni could have just infused them wherever he pleased using poetic license. He ensures that every piece is deployed in ways that validate their existence as proofs that the incidents they represent actually took place. This is another way that performative narration is promoted in this text. The story is just not told, but performed using images, maps, pictures, diagrams and a living, pulsating, enlivening language which privileges speech over writing. The melding of time, narrative voices and image-text-symbols further imbues the novel with the kind of fluidity that allows for free flow of thought. This entire style of writing is not about revisiting modernist writing, but a revalidation of authenticity of West Indian writing which is, by Antoni's own admission, that for "the second generation of West Indian writers, the models are no longer restricted to foreign imports; they are also, now, home-grown, giving rise to another kind of homage, another kind of intertextuality" (*As Flies*, p. 110).

Performative narration: the talking script

This novel attains an elevated level of uniqueness with its form of language. Antoni, in this work, is not only given to the "misuse" of punctuation marks and deployment of meta-narration, but also to a total disavowal of the strict structures of written English and overarching preference for creolized forms. He employs a variety of accents and language forms, variously disrupting a sense of linguistic orderliness that most conventional writings in English have been known for. In the first instance, the Trinidadian English of Willy's voice of narration prefers "they" to "their" and "she" to "her," for example:

And with that the niece reached she own whitegloved hand towards me— (*As Flies*, p. 50)

[...]

One-by-one the flickering votive candles surrounding our elaborate bed burnt down, sizzled, extinguished theyself in a puff of smoke. (*As Flies*, p. 88)

[...]

Mr. Stollmeyer settled into his previous ramble. He explained how our agents proceeded inland from they various coastal landings to examine still other properties. (*As Flies*, p. 139)

This form is sustained throughout the narrative to the extent that there is almost no “their,” except for Etzler’s German-accented “zair,” since it is mostly rendered by “they.” The syntax of this form of English accommodates a highly performative diction which privileges speech over the written form:

Reaching, grabbing, pulling myself higher. And higher still.
Till I’d got to within an arm’s reach of the sill—an arm’s reach!
All-in-a-sudden the vine pulled loose. In three punctuated
sections—voop, voop, voop—and I tumbled backwards to the hard
ground. Flat on my back with a loud humph. Inhaling a crust of
gritty dirt. (*As Flies*, p. 228)

The onomatopoeic “*voop, voop, voop*” and “humph” are used here to capture the way Willy narrated the story to his son. The flurry of accents, interjectory phrases and words from other European languages encountered in J. A. Etzler’s heavy German accent, for instance, also privileges the speech over writing:

West Indian plantation owners, he says, stuck in zee blind
prejudices huv zair age-old practices unt customs, are dumb as
donkeys. Belligerent unt boorish as billy goats! (*As Flies*, p. 67)
[...]
Zee problem wiss men since antiquity is zat zey do not reason. Zey
do not sink! Stuck in zair state huv mental sloth unt barbaric
ignorance, zee generality of men do not even open up zair eyes to
see what sits in front huv zair noses! (*As Flies*, p. 68)

These words are written in the same manner they are spoken with quite minimal punctuation marks. Comte’s code mixing between English and italicized French also resembles Etzler’s:

Écoutez ici, Monsieur Etzler, [...]
You crystallize sugar, he says, without the use of fuel—ou le feu,
oui?—for everybody here to witness, and I pay you the equivalent
of one thousand pounds in gold doubloons!
[...]
Fail, he says, Et avant le Christ avec sa Sainte Verge, Captain
Damphier will set you in a rowboat, adrift, *au milieu de la grande
mer!* (*As Flies*, p. 68)

Different from the Trinidadian English used mostly by Willy, *As Flies to Whatless Boys* achieves its major profundity in language in its deployment of Trinidadian Creole, from which the “whatless” in the title is derived. Though not expansively spoken throughout the work, it aptly characterizes the individuals who conversed in it, like the housekeeper at the Johnstons’, speaking to the boys who brought the Tuckers from the port, and the

Black slave, John, who dealt with them at the plantation estate,
Chaguabarriga:

Vin-cen, you hurry you banshee quick-quick to Mastah Johnston
office. Tell him de Tucker family done reach. Tell him dey waitin
pon he up to Samaan Repos.

[...]

N' de rest of you whatless scoundrels, carry dem bundles in de
back. Vincen mummy give you each a fie-cent. Fix you up wid a
piece of hot dinner! (Antoni, 2018, p. 154)

[...]

Egn-egn, John shook his head. Cause he plenty weighty—heavy too
bad. For build boat you does use de bois cano. O' de bois gri-gri.
(*As Flies*, p. 192)

Trinidadian Creole is very important to Antoni because, according to him,
it is “a living thing – malleable, open, inclusive, and aggressively
subversive – always regenerating and reimagining itself”; always at
variance with the “singular and static” English; and has become a
preferred language for “the second generation of West Indian novelists.”
He states further that, this language

... is constantly leaking outside the confines of a quotation mark,
constantly acting upon and infecting what might be recognized as
the former ‘controlling’ or (colonizing) language. The result of this
ongoing process, I contend, has been a kind of inversion, such that
Proper English has now become the substrate (the subservient);
more and more West Indian novels are being written entirely in the
vernacular, with the Proper English occasionally appearing in
quotes - if they’ve not been dropped altogether. (Roberts)

For being alive, “malleable” and “inclusive,” such languages are replete
with performatives – words that have breath and are, as such, more
amenable to the undulations of speech than the inertia of scripts. The
interspersion of these myriad languages is Antoni’s way of furthering his
preferred model of performative narration. It is a direct transcription of the
mannerisms of everyday speech, where people speak in, not only different
languages, but also a mix of pidginized and vernacular tongues.

Willy’s diction is equally exemplary in its exhibition of
performativities. Speaking mostly in the first-person mode, his choice of
words is at once interesting and instructive:

To my embarrassment I was still holding the bottle of whiskey. I
disappeared it quick inside the pocket of my jacket again. (*As Flies*,
p. 50)

He could have said, “I hid ...” in order to describe how the bottle went
from his hand to his jacket’s pocket. Instead, the word “disappeared,” a

regular intransitive verb, is animated, made performative by turning it into a ditransitive verb:

I (*subject*) disappeared it (the book - *object*) quick inside the pocket of my jacket again (*second object*).

Willy's narration also enlivens inanimate objects surrounding Marguerite, with verbs that personify:

Beside her feet *sat* a canvas rucksack, bearing the outlines of two-three books. [...] Now my eyes *began climbing up* the lacy frock-folds. [...] Now my eyes began *climbing up them*, like a little ladder, button by button, up to the nape of her neck. (*As Flies*, p. 50; emphases added)

The imagery of a canvas rucksack "sitting" beside Marguerite, as well as the eyes "climbing up her frock," and then the repetition, how those eyes are climbing as though a ladder, defies motionlessness. Even when one admits that eyes move and can also roam, they do not leave their sockets to climb. The way they are described here gives the impression that they have walked out of their enclosures and are literally "climbing" up the buttons of Marguerite's frock, one by one. Adjoined to that is the canvas rucksack which walked in with her and is now sitting beside her by itself, like a dedicated pet. Furthermore, there is also this example of how food is not just eaten, but "inhaled" like air:

But even before I could return to my seat I'd consumed the two sandwiches, inhaling them one-after-the-next in a couple of breaths. (*As Flies*, p. 55)

"He ate hastily, out of hunger" does not come near to stirring the kind of vivid pictures elicited by Willy's preferred diction here. This manner of description is deployed in his picturesque explanation of the scenery he and others encountered as they trudged home, bearing his sick Papee on a makeshift trestle:

Before we knew it we passed the first sleeping shack—or it passed us—and slowly more shacks appeared. They passed us by. Then the shacks turned to larger slumbering boardhouses. Then concrete, masonry-walled houses. Houses with proper front yards and proper yards behind. And the soft brown dirt road beneath our feet changed to hardened pitch before we realised. (*As Flies*, p. 286)

The narration imbues the environment with kinetic qualities by making the sleeping shack pass them, more shacks *appear*, then *pass* them also. Numerous other types of lodging equally do same, and then, as the city

approached them, one guesses, the road beneath them *changed* by itself to “hardened pitch” before they even realized they had arrived.

This pattern of narration is not just selected for their poetic qualities and the imageries they can elicit. It is also a very potent way of conveying the state of mind of these individuals who are now moving on reserve energy and as such have become quite oblivious of the environment. It aptly depicts the feeling of numbness which makes it appear that it is the landscape that is moving and not the individuals. It further captures that state of fatigue where the cognitive capacity to note one’s surroundings is gone, and the individual enters that state where the only sustaining ability is adrenalin. This novel shows that the best way to evoke this and other kinds of realities that defy the capacity of written words to capture is to deploy performatives, and allow the actions act themselves out on the page. It foists a certain level of performativity towards plausibility. Even the book itself is designed like a parchment, with an elaborate taint especially at the edges to suggest ageing, and then with a fore-edge that is deliberately trimmed unevenly. From its written (spoken) words to the form of the book itself, Robert Antoni’s *As Flies to Whatless Boys* is replete with multiple performativities that speak to myriad issues ranging from accentuating the superimposition of vernacular and creolized forms of language over formal ones, and the privileging of meta-narrativity; a direct transcript of everyday socio-cultural interactions in the world’s fast-globalizing spaces. In his own words, Antoni avers that,

the most basic definition of a novel is a “community of voices.” Each tells a story, each speaks a language; and I want to hear each of them individually, in my ears and on the page: each voice is its own text. If the description of the novel I have suggested is in any way accurate, then the West Indies – with its excessive hybridity of cultures and languages, or English-language implants – would seem perfectly poised for their production. And I believe this same multiplicity of voices and vernaculars may be found increasingly in West Indian poetry as well. (*As Flies*, p. 110)

This is an indication that Antoni speaks for a generation of West Indian writers which deviates from the formality of preceding writers like V. S. Naipaul. Performative writing for them is a means of extricating themselves from the strictures of such traditions and then establishing a more virile fiction genre that is pulsating and in tune with the liveliness of Caribbean cultures. Such writing does not sit still on the pages of books. They leap out from them, gyrating like calypsos, speaking through multiple voices representative of the different peoples of the Caribbean, and evocative of contemporaneity of street-speak and real-life situations. To sum up, what Antoni presents in this novel is not just the hypertextual fusion of various media—written text and the electronic-cum-social media, it is also the merger of the oral and the written, the past and the present, which is an emerging model for the preservation of live histories that is more amenable to embodied, performative re-enactments. It is an

alternative to the fixed, fossilized pattern of the past, which is replete with misrepresentations and uneven power hierarchies. Within this model, participants speak for themselves eloquently and with agential presence, even when they, like Marguerite, have no vocal cords.

Notes

1. This page is an approximation because there is no number on that page. It is in the section *Final Message*, the last part of the narrative.

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