

**Robert Finley**

## **The Accidental Indies.**

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### **West Is Everywhere**

Every student of Canadian geography knows that the district of Lachine, just outside of Montreal, got its name from its owner's failed attempt to push across the continent to find Asia. In either mockery or compensation, the place he did find became "La Chine" (China). Such accidents of naming presumably reflect the kind of contingency Robert Finley intends in his title, *The Accidental Indies*. For there is nothing unplanned about either the original voyage of Columbus in the *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* or about Finley's meticulous re-visioning of the interior life of the man whose voyage changed history and created the west as both concept and plausible location.

At the point of departure in this short, lyrical narrative, however, there is no west, only a fabled East and a drowsy Europe. The quest for the spicy East begins, as do all good Judeo-Christian narratives, with a fall. In Finley's opening chapter, baby boy Colón tumbles from his cradle, which instantly becomes the cradle of European civilization. From this genesis moment Finley courts allegory, pointing self-reflexively to the symbolism of his own narrative. Not since Wilson Harris's *Guyana Quartet* (1960-1963) has history been made so mytho-poetic. Whereas Harris, a generation earlier, harnessed Latin-American magical realism to roll back the colonial

era to reveal the Amerindian strata beneath the shallow soil layer of what was then Commonwealth history, Finley tackles the Indies as a byproduct of European dreaming. The text flirts with allegory, setting up the reader with the Sea of Allegory and the Coast of Contradictions, even a character called El Dorado, but ultimately refusing allegory's epistemological certainties: the westering pilgrim who started as a baby with a bump on his head has embarked on a progress whose outcome is still unfolding.

If you think of *The Accidental Indies* as a novel, you will be disappointed. Divided into sections like a ship's log-book, stippled with quaint pictorial devices, the book unfolds sometimes like a long poem, sometimes like a seaman's journal. Dates, songs and small pointing fingers decorate the text. Despite the narrow text-columns and the wide, ecru margins, there is a sense of marginalia here. This is the Columbus story as doodled in the margins of history.

The highly interior narrative, densely meditative, seems the lineal descendant of old English poetry: *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*. Destiny is invoked, and human lives are insignificant. The voyage of the *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* sets off in dream, entertains recurring nightmares and ends in a visionary trance. Here the physical world—old and new—forms a text composed by an unknown

hand, only to be retraced fantastically by a chart-decorating Columbus. This is not the crafty, monarch-courting seafarer we know from our high-school history, but an artist in words, paints and space. Finley's Columbus traces lines across vellum and out onto the ocean. This obliteration of the expected boundaries melts dolphins and mermaids together, while eliding the distinction between a painted shore and a real Caribbean island.

It is the season of the falling stars, and tonight the sailors watch them coming down all around from the tree of darkness. In the twinning voyages of their sleep, they swear that there are voices, perhaps the pink throated shells singing on the tide, perhaps the scattered islands that they lie anchored by drumming in the night wind, or the shifting of their golden sands. (65)

Now, we've all heard the Columbus story before. It's the North American meta-narrative par excellence, though a tattered and currently unpopular one. There's no suspense in this story: we know how it ends: with colonialism, slavery and independence movements. So, how does Finley draw us in? Partly by his mesmerizing narrative voice that lures the reader onto the voyage, addressing the reader as 'you'; however, the *you* is characterized differently at different parts of the work. Sometimes we are on the flagship, sometimes standing on the deck next to Columbus, consulting the treacherous chart, but finally we are the solitary old man fishing from a stone boat. This boat, like its larger cousins in the fleet, is a fragile craft adrift on a sea of signs and wonders, and like Eliot's Fisher King, we troll for meaning in Finley's deep ocean of visual and verbal symbols.

In places, Finley's writing borrows from the magical-realist toolbox, making the new world react to the exploratory stirrings of the old:

And the world? The new names start to stir

in their shells. In (Virginia) a pigeon falls out of the sky, which puzzles everybody who sees it. In the (Yucatan) an unhusked cob of corn bursts into flames for no reason. On (Hispaniola) a woman gives birth to numberless snake children . . ." (8).

It is piquant to think of the New World as having premonitions of the European coming; nevertheless, one cannot help seeing the Eurocentric aspect of this trope, as though those two great continents, north and south, together with their Amerindian inhabitants, had nothing better to do than await their messiah from the east and to function as the Old Testament to the Europeans' New—as a text for prophecy and typology. Finley does, however, acknowledge the impact of Europe on this projected Indies, as he imagines the future willed into existence by the map's pointing hand: "The hand that points is magical: it has the powers of levitation, of transformation, of creation and self-creation, and alas, of assimilation and of extermination" (18). In this passage, the interjection *alas* carries the entire burden of regret and apology for the negative effects of Columbus's journey: genocide in parentheses, albeit with a wry grimace.

Finley has a poet's way with language, despite a tendency to occasional cryptic banalities. "Departures are always the same," "Even maps of the familiar are not easy to interpret;" or, most nugatory of all, Columbus's dream meditation, "I felt the O of emptiness gathering as though the land I travelled in was a land of absences and I was left with nothing" (21). Finley knows his various kinds of stuff, though. He mentions Behaim's globe and can do Conradian nautical directness in his prose: "By eight o'clock we take the tide up over the bar of Saltès and head out" (22) as well as Coleridgean nature in this ship's log-book entry entitled "They see dolphins ":



We see them first from far off. In a few minutes they cross the path of the three ships and turn from their way to play under the bows, and to lead them. By day as quick as shadows, by night they mine the living veins of light under the bow waves and ignite the dark water deep below the hulls (37-38).

Above all, the author excels in the language of celestial navigation, dead-reckoning and chart-making. Alongside Columbus we look up at the night sky and down at the unfolding scroll, with compass or pen in hand. The faithful description of the compass rose (55-56) leaves us nodding in agreement with the text's question: "Why are charts so wonderfully engaging?" (56). Like Conrad's Marlowe, Finley has known the fascination of a map's empty spaces. His prose is equally supple whether recreating the toss of a lead line or mixing up the pastel palette of what is about to become the Caribbean Sea:

The paddlers are decorated with cochineal, yellow, black, their skin, myrrh slightly darkened. Behind them, the island itself is extravagant, a green gem set in gold, banded by a line of white and then by turquoise (fine ground azurite), and set in a deep blue wash of ocean. (59)

The considerable research that went into *The Accidental Indies* is reflected in the "Notes" and "Acknowledgments" at the end. A useful list identifies sources for the intriguing gray-tone illustrations and describes Finley's long-standing engagement with Columbus's journals and other materials relating to European arrival in the Indies. The names of Drake, Mandeville,

Marco Polo and de las Casas evoke the era of exploration.

In placing this unusual book within Canadian literature, one would instinctively set it down in the postmodern camp. It meets the requirements of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographical metafiction, although "historiographical meta-prose poem" might be closer to the textual truth. Although ocean journeys are melodiously recounted here, the real journey is that "of an idea outward into language" (84). As a re-visioned explorer narrative, *The Accidental Indies* also belongs alongside George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980) and Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1995), since each of these challenges a version of exploration history—of Captain George Vancouver's landing on the Pacific coast and of Sir John Franklin's overland trek in the Northwest Territories, respectively.

However, *The Accidental Indies* could be just as welcome in a course on postcolonial writing alongside Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1992), Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973) and, of course, the visionary oeuvre of Guyana's Wilson Harris.

"He [Columbus] has always known that the East was not a place but a name for riches, and that the West was everywhere" (12). This thought captures the conceptual nature of the west in the explorer mind, but the phrase could take on a sinister relevance when read in—and applied to—the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For it is finally true, as Finley's "alphabet of ownership" predicts (91): globalization has shrunk the hemispheres until the west really is everywhere.

