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## Interview with Gordon Rohlehr

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Tunapuna, Trinidad and Tobago

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**PM: Thank you for granting this interview. It is intended to be a short piece on the influences which have shaped your vision and your critical practice. That is a good point of departure for our conversation.**

GR: Any of our writers, at any given point, become the most penetrative critics of their work, of the society, of other writers' work. How are you going to begin to even discuss the voluminous amount of the work produced by writers and critics like Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming - their essays, commentaries, newspaper articles, speeches? How are you going to ask a person like that to summarize what he has been doing, what influences fed into his work and his vision? We do not begin to understand the dimension of the writers and we do not understand the variety of forces that have shaped them and to which they have responded - sometimes in an utterly contradictory manner ...but they are growing all the time. I think we have passed the point of short pieces, which can encapsulate any writer's or critic's vision in any meaningful way. I question the assumption that people have critical and aesthetic positions that they can clearly identify and that they can trace their progress in some logical way. This certainly does not apply to me at all. I am more of an improviser.

**PM: I am proceeding at my own risk then. What was the social cultural milieu at the point at which you entered the field? And what were the salient issues and discourses of that moment?**

GR: The issue with which I began came up during the formation of the Caribbean Artists' Movement in England late in 1966 and then in 1967. That issue was the existence of a Caribbean aesthetic. It was very much a post Federation issue. We had for a few decades debated Federation, at times with considerable acrimony and quarreling. Trinidad emerges as the Federal capital but in three years Federation and all that was envisaged and all it promised in terms of Caribbean unity as the stepping stone towards independence had disintegrated. Yet, paradoxically Trinidad and Jamaica both gained independence in August of 1962. That was a massive paradigm shift. We were still not certain what went on there.

Guyana you might recall was not in the federation at all, having its own problems with the way racial identities fed into politics. A range of catastrophes had taken place in Guyana from 1962-1965 - constant long strife, labour issues, riots, marches, burnings - virtual civil war. There was the whole tragedy of Georgetown burning in February 1962, even as the Federation was breaking up,

only a few months before Trinidad got its independence. I was then an undergraduate student of the University College of the West Indies (UCWI) in Jamaica which was then affiliated to London University. A whole lot of us from Guyana were there. I went in 1961. Walter Rodney went in 1960. I think in 1962 the college gained more autonomy retaining external examiners as a kind of watch dog, like the Privy Council. The educators who founded the UWI were concerned with maintaining the highest standards and with keeping us pretty close to the London model. They were not too experimental.

Guyana was not in that at all. Guyana emerged out of the 1961 election under Cheddi Jagan who questioned why we should be contributing to the UCWI and decided we should form our own university. This created a financial crisis for us as Guyanese students at Mona. Eventually there was a compromise. The students already enrolled would be supported but subsequent students would enter with different arrangements.

**PM: This seemed to have made significant impact for you to mention it decades later as a formative element of your critical sensibility.**

GR: You see it fed into a sense of crisis as to what was this thing called West Indian identity, if the people of one of the larger and intellectually more outstanding land masses were excluded from the regional tertiary institution. Guyana's education was so elitist that we used to win the majority of the UCWI open scholarships and the officials at University were also concerned because they wanted to safeguard the quality of postgraduate who would represent the calibre of the university at institutions abroad.

The socio political issues were closely related to the intellectual climate. Out of the social conflict in the early 1960's in Guyana emerges the New World Movement. Lloyd Best was in Guyana at that time. De Caires, Miles Fitzpatrick, later on Clive Thomas would have joined that band. While New World was dealing with economics and politics, it was also dealing with broader questions of identity. And because Martin Carter was part of that discourse, it was dealing with art and poetry. There was an avant-garde intellectual talk shop called Itabo among some very fascinating younger people. The point is there was a ferment of activity in Guyana which spilled over when New World was launched too in London at a conference in 1965. And there I met all these people. There was John La Rose from Trinidad, and I think Walter Rodney was there. The deliberations of this conference located the Guyanese experiences within what was happening in the rest of the Caribbean. We were discussing break up of the Federation, the problems of new nation building that confronted Williams, Manley and Bustamante. We debated what was going to happen to the other islands.

Guyana was then working out its muddles. You could not find a country that was more divided and less fulfilling of what you assumed were the criteria for

independence, yet Guyana got independence in 1966. This led to questions as to whether independence was just an attempt by the British to get rid of these millstones which were becoming politically and socially far too turbulent, while maintaining control of the major lifelines of their economies, whether it was oil and natural gas in Trinidad or bauxite in Guyana and Jamaica. These were still under strict colonial control. Give them independence make them feel good! Eat more ackee in Jamaica! Eat more labba and drink more creek water in Guyana! Find the last remaining remnants of the cascadura in Trinidad - cook that up and make sure that you will end in Trinidad your days! What does independence mean? Why did we get it when we felt we couldn't get it? You worked through the forties you worked through the fifties. You had a hard time getting the vote and ten or fifteen years after you get independence even after the Federation, which was the outcome of all of the efforts of the forties into the '60s had not fulfilled its promise.

And that promise was like an epiphany, a new dawn signaled by a massive festival of the arts which brought together regional artists, writers, painters, poets, dramatists who had been reading each other's work but who had never met each other. They were all there on the stage in Trinidad celebrating this thing called federation. In two years time suddenly there is no federation. It's crazy! It is like the People's Partnership. You have these moments where we pool a lot of energies, a lot of ideas, a lot of hopes, a lot of faith. We pool these things and say yes we can do better. We have all the intellect that we need. We have the people skills. We have managers. We can change structures. We can change ways of doing things. But these things are ingrained. They don't change so easily and we emerge after two or three years with a terrible sense of failure.

**PM: It is the level of hope. The discouragement in the flawed order makes us pitch our hopes so very high....**

GR: That I understand. In Guyana, some made very radical decisions. Many left carrying this smoldering thing inside of them and just never went back. Many stayed but what were they doing? What scope did they have for ongoing contribution to personal and national growth? In fact, when one looks back one finds that in the latter colonial period there were far more cultural activities. There was drama and a lot of intellectual discussion on a range of interesting topics... not just acrimonious stuff ...real conversations. There was a sense of a whole intelligentsia coming to life and everyone was deeply patriotic. There was something to be built. But after the first five years of the 1960s a lot of these people left. *Kyk-Over-Al* stopped publishing. Although we think these are small things, we realize they are not when they are no longer there. When there is no longer a *Tapia* and a *Trinidad and Tobago Review*. When the spirits that fueled

those publications are crushed, or they migrate, or they die, or they are replaced by someone else.

**PM: In terms of your own intellectual journey, you mentioned earlier being set on your way in response to a challenge delivered at a Caribbean Artists' Movement meeting in London?**

GR: Yes, the issue was the existence of a Caribbean aesthetic. I argued that we needed to study the individual Caribbean territories looking at a cross section of what our people have produced in say visual arts, music, literature, maybe even political discourse and when we have done sufficient of that kind of work we can collate these efforts and discern certain threads running through the entire fabric and then identify them as Caribbean modes of expression. This is how we define excellence. This is what we have discarded. These are the values that have been emerging. Then we will recognize that we have things that only we do, in the ways that we do them. It could be calypso music in Trinidad, ska and Rastafarianism in Jamaica, itabo in Guyana. A Caribbean aesthetic is too huge. Each place has a different style, ways of cooking, being, seeing, imagining. And we have our ways of determining quality. We can say this is a good pan song, political satire or road march. Before we attempt to define 'Caribbean' we should deal with the individual territories. So what produces a Ras Daniel Hartman? Why is what he is doing so different from a Guyanese painter? And what would link Ras Daniel Hartman and a Don Drummond? And what links them both to say Roger Mais? Is there something particularly Jamaican about what they all are doing? In Trinidad we were seeing the emergence of a kind of social literature with a satirical consciousness. We saw it in Selvon in his own gentle way. We were seeing it in for sure in Naipaul's *Miguel Street*. It was also there in the calypso. The only collection then available was Sparrow's 'One Hundred and Twenty Calypsos to Remember.'

And so they asked me why don't you define a Caribbean aesthetic? Now I was just a graduate student at Birmingham University, liming the fete as they say and writing a thesis on Joseph Conrad. The initial idea was to do the big thing looking at wit, humour and social satire in Selvon and Naipaul and how some of these same things were manifested in calypso. So I set out to do that but that was too huge an undertaking so I found it much easier to limit the study to Sparrow's 'One Hundred and Twenty Calypsos to Remember.' I set out to read those lyrics closely as discourse about society, transferring some of the research skills that I had acquired at the undergraduate level and through reading a craftsman like Conrad. There have been complaints that I only deal with the words. I deal with the music a lot in old talk and in live presentations, but when I am writing I tend to write about it as a quasi-poetic form, but I am looking at how words are crafted too. When a calypsonian uses a simile, or a metaphor or a piece of picong, I want

to get inside to see what is happening there. And I found that the world as viewed through Sparrow's calypso was infinitely as fascinating as anything Naipaul or Selvon had conjured up. And it was a world that had its own rules and values. It was like an alternative world to the ones that I had encountered in classical Literature. I was thinking of Jane Austen or Chaucer as satirist against Sparrow as satirist. And I was also thinking about what Louise Bennett was doing at the same time in *Jamaica Labrish*, which had just come out in about 1966. Bennett would tell us a k foot man produce a duck foot son and we know immediately that the village is saying that he is not the father because k foot man don't produce duck foot children. Why do we see the world through caricature? What creates our ways of seeing, saying, knowing, and laughing? What lies behind the laughter? Sometimes it's sadness, sometimes it's bitterness, sometimes it's hostility and violence? What of the harshness of many of the calypsos about women and how women were represented? That would later become an interest in gender but we did not call it that then.

**PM: How did these early notions about the significance of indigenous ways of knowing our complex societies feed into your lifelong pursuits?**

GR: These in latter years developed into a way of critiquing criticism. I am firmly convinced that we must always begin with the knowledge of ourselves and our situation. This is why my teaching has been a kind of conversation – a dialogue as opposed to a monologue in which students would have their own voices which I have been careful to affirm so that they would learn to take their voices seriously. We must not shun critical discourses which come from outside which could be very relevant and helpful in terms of understanding ourselves and our situation. And yet there is always going to be a homegrown approach, flavour, difference which we must keep hold of. And we should create our own terminology, our own language of ideas. I have seen some evidence of students trying to do this. Most of all we should recognize and understand the very complex and entangled nature of our societies. Take current discourse in Trinidad. I am hearing the term Afro Creole. Is Lawrence Duprey an Afro Creole? Is he a black man, a mullato, a 'red' man or is he simply a financial empire builder with a little bit of the guile and trickery which is very common in our survivalist society? Or look at Jack Warner. Is he a black man... a confirmed Roman Catholic, a confirmed Hindu? He's everything because he is a trickster and a trickster has to have several faces to trot out at any given time to greet a diverse range of situations. There is nothing surprising about that. What is surprising is how far he was able to go on the international stage using the kinds of trickery learnt on the local stage, which is second nature to most of us. I believe he should have been included among the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary national icons awardees, because he is iconic of shiftiness, amorality, charisma, wit, and the fallout, which arises when

that kind of personality gains a high level of power. People talk about him and values, a word that does not apply in the space where the trickster functions. The ancestors correctly and prophetically depicted Anansi as having an impediment of speech, a tied-tongue, a stutter, a marker not so much of incoherence as of moral ambivalence, the trademark of the trickster. Anansi tries to get food for his own family, eats out the food and then justifies why he has to eat more food than his wife and all his seven children. He is not necessarily a bad person; he sometimes starts with good intentions but he is completely self-centred. And ultimately he wants to come out on top in encounters with far more powerful foes. If we know our folk patterns, it will help us to understand why we find these scenarios endlessly replicated in the calypso, and in our economy and politics. We need to apply these kinds of analyses in order to understand our predicaments.

**PM: Where have you published and what are some of the choices you have made?**

GR: I have never really had any great desire to publish abroad. It has not been my primary motive to become established outside of the region, to sell my books on Amazon.com. I have self published much of my work and also taken the hassle of dealing with sales and distribution. I have also not been averse to having pretty long essays published in serial fashion in journals like *Tapia* and *Trinidad and Tobago Review*. Through these avenues, a lot of my work has been brought to the attention of the mass of the people who then could dialogue with it, dismiss it or hopefully become illuminated by some of its perceptions. I have also conducted television programmes and far more so radio programmes creating as it were a kind of dialogue with the community.

**PM: You are concerned then with bringing illumination to the man in the street?**

GR: I strive for illumination. I try to bring to light what I think I have seen and what may not have been seen in quite that way by many other people. I would not say by all other people because it is a humbling thing to realize that your vision is not really unique. I really write the way I feel, and I write with certain twists of mind and phrases and wry humour, which really means that you must not take everything that I say at face value.

**PM: In your critical sensibility and your practice you seem to have claimed the entire region as your home?**

GR: The rampant destruction in Georgetown in the 1960s left me with a peculiar sense of disorientation – a feeling that one has to create home wherever one is. At the same time I was moving from a cloistered Guyana into a wider Caribbean location. By virtue of having gone to the UCWI at that period I also

imbibed a sense of Caribbean belonging. But belonging as we approached nationhood meant having been born in or naturalized in a particular place. It meant passports and work permits. So when I came to Trinidad to work for UWI in April 1968, the immigration officials asked where is your work permit? I assumed that UWI would have dealt with it but the immigration officer saw me as an alien. So I spent a lot of time dealing with work permit issues. Two years later the Black Power uprisings began and work permits were being withheld, so I had to go down every month or two, early in the morning to the same immigration officer who pretended he had never seen me before, and wait for him to eat his greasy sandwich or doubles before he put his Trinidad and Tobago stamp on my passport. Now that breeds a lot of quiet anger and resentment because it goes against notions in your head about belonging to the entire Caribbean and bringing your little light to the people. In spite of such a rude awakening, I have never lost my sense of what Yao Ramesar calls 'Caribbeing.'<sup>1</sup> I have spoken to Bajans about cricket in Barbados, to Jamaicans about reggae music and Bob Marley, to Trinidadians about calypso. I can teach each group new ideas because I have studied these cultural forms in a way they have not. And that to me is a 'borderline position.' I do have a sense of being on the border of several places and situations. And this is both a disadvantage in that one does not fully belong anywhere and an advantage in that one brings a different perspective to issues and situations from those who consider themselves to be insiders. Maybe to borrow James Aboud's term I am in 'inxile.'

This is how I felt about the 1970 Black Power uprisings in Trinidad. I knew a lot of the participants, sympathized with some of them. I belonged neither to Tapia nor to NJAC although I worked with both groups. In the 1990 attempted coup, I was even more severely removed. I was then finishing *Calypso and Society* and the curfews and restriction of movement forced me to sit down and do the bibliography and index. That was Abu Bakr's gift to me.<sup>2</sup> All the while I was wondering why does this pattern of disintegration have to happen all the time? Why are these fellas burning down Port of Spain? Why are they mashing up the place? Don't they know that the place it has to be rebuilt and don't know the same people they are fighting are the ones who have the money to rebuild it and after it is rebuilt they won't employ those who most needed jobs-the poor, black and angry? It just blew my mind. And at that time I virtually swore to myself that I would not say anything again to the society. This was not about writing criticism. It was sharing thoughts, feelings and possible illumination. What ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Trinidadian director Yao Ramesar uses the term 'Caribbeing' to refer to his filmmaking aesthetic, which uses all natural light.

<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: In 1990, under Abu Bakr's leadership, the Muslim group *Jamaat al Muslimeen* attempted a coup d'état against the government of Trinidad and Tobago.

thoughts do I have to share with people who will not be illuminated? But I wrote far more after that than I did before. At the present moment, I am caught in another trough in which I don't have the will to tell people anything. I don't feel it makes any sense wasting time and wasting words.

**PM: Would you say that you have had a prophetic role and vision in relation to the region?**

GR: It's interesting that you would put it that way. The legend says that children born with cauls have second sight and I was one such child. The story goes that I would see things and tell my family dreams. This is another thing about Caribbean identities. People live in dream spaces. They live in worlds other than the visible and they are constantly looking for signs. I was a sickly child and I caught the things that were going around. I must have caught malaria - we had some very fierce mosquitoes. I definitely caught typhoid fever and it nearly killed me. At one point, so the family lore goes, I was sick with typhoid and I told them to get this weed and that weed and the next, boil them and serve the brew in a new calabash. And they did and I got better. All these details blew my mind...what kind of thing is that?!

But at the same time they were not comfortable with this child that was seeing this and living in a spirit space. They were concerned about madness, you see. So they determined that they had to stop this thing ...put the eyes out. I cannot quite fathom at exactly what age ...maybe not much more than five or six. And the way in which they put out these eyes out was to hold one over a pot of boiling steaming rice to steam out the vision. I think they were successful. I have not seen anything since and I stopped telling them my dreams. My mother who was very strong and vocal always said they - the older women in the family - should not have done that, but oddly enough, in this case, she seemed powerless to intervene. But this is why today I see nothing. I hear very little. And I am moving towards the point of speaking nothing: neither good nor evil.