

Creative and Cultural Identity in the Work of Anson Gonzalez (Trinidad and Tobago): A Study of *Proseleela*, *Chela Quest*, and *Crossroads of Dream* as Spiritual and Literary Autobiography

Cynthia James
University of Winnipeg

The effort of Anson Gonzalez at sustaining the Trinidad and Tobago literary journal, *The New Voices*, throughout its existence from 1973-1993 is a West Indian legend. As Gonzalez himself testifies in the preface of *In My Own Words, In My Own Journal* (2007), “[n]ot only did I scout the contributions, but I selected, edited, typeset, printed, collated, bound, and trimmed the units (sic). Then I packaged and/or delivered the issues. At the same time I held down a full-time job, did post graduate studies, tried to keep fit, and fulfilled my family and spiritual obligations” (n.p.). The journal, though based in Trinidad, is diasporic and pan-Caribbean, for among its pages one can find not only the early work of well-known Caribbean writers such as Dionne Brand (Canada and Trinidad), Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados, UK and USA), and Ian Mc Donald (Guyana, UK and Trinidad), but also a fair collection of Caribbean letters by contributors better known in literary scholarship and editing circles, such as Kenneth Ramchand, Reinhard Sander, Stewart Brown, Gordon Rohlehr, and Jeremy Poynting.

Gonzalez’s efforts as a literary facilitator tended to overshadow his own writing, but this is not to say that his craftsmanship has not been acknowledged. He was awarded a writing fellowship at the University of Miami Caribbean Institute in 1991; he was writer in residence on the Cayman Islands in 1996; he conducted creative writing workshops, one of them sponsored by UNESCO on the island of Dominica in 1992; and he taught poetry, creative writing, and West Indian literature at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, from 1986 to 2004. Yet as is the case with most Caribbean authors, he had to have a book published internationally before his own Caribbean community truly recognized him. It has only been since Peepal Tree, the UK based press, published his *Crossroads of Dream* (2003) that the coherence of his forty years of writing has been recognized, leading to his consideration as a serious Caribbean poet.

This paper attempts to redress those forty years of neglect by exploring three of Gonzalez’s latest works—*Proseleela* (2007), *Chela Quest* (2005), and *Crossroads of Dream* (2003). I have chosen these three

texts because in their very integrated and composite texture, they incorporate most of the literary forms that Gonzalez worked in—free verse, haiku, prose poem and prose. Furthermore, as I will show, these texts function as ‘collected works.’ But most of all, they have been chosen because in the insistent and reiterative nature of their self-portraiture, they can be considered to represent the man, his life and his work. As texts bearing such description, I have chosen to explore them through the lens of autobiographical criticism, referencing three scholars pertinent to the fields of Caribbean letters, education and narrative identity, fields in which Gonzalez has done most of his work. These scholars are Sandra Pouchet Paquet, whose *Caribbean Autobiography* (2002) discusses the writing of seminal Caribbean authors such as Kamau Brathwaite, V. S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, and George Lamming; Jerome Bruner, whose work as an educator and psychologist is well respected; and Jens Brockmeier, whose research on narrative and identity is well known.

In my examination of *Proseleela*, *Chela*, and *Crossroads* I will show how these three texts amply reveal the spiritual, literary and cultural teleology of Gonzalez’s writing, and if this paper focuses most on *Proseleela*, the most recent, it is because, given the high degree of overlap within these three collections, it is in *Proseleela* that a retrospective glance is most able to pull together the philosophical strands underlying Gonzalez’s work.

Of Reiterations and Recurrent Motifs—Intimations of Autobiographical Structuring

Chela, *Proseleela* and *Crossroads* contain quite a few repeated pieces of writing. “The chela was helping,” “Develop a culture,” “Golden thoughts,” and “In that period of night,” from *Crossroads*, for example, can be found in more than one of the three collections. All three as well contain poems repeated from Gonzalez’s earlier volumes of the 1970s through to the 1990s. “First Friday Bell,” “Healing,” “Shoulder,” and “Moksha” in *Chela* and *Proseleela*, for instance, can be found in *Merry-Go-Round and Other Poems*, a 1992 collection. Meanwhile “Moon,” “Moksha,” “Shoulder,” “Confrontation” and haiku such as “the golden poui,” “from your golden,” “oft it has been said,” and “blue light of spirit” can be found in the 1988 collection *Moksha: Poems of Light and Sound*.

From volume to volume, most of these poems have not been altered. However, some are differently titled when they appear in the three collections under discussion, which contributes to new readings, almost as if the writer had come to a newer understanding of their meaning. Also, while set out either as individual poems or under sectional headings such as Epistles, Postcards, Haiku, or Contemplations in earlier collections, these duplicated poems in later collections are laid out thematically in narrative progressions that suggest spiritual enlightenment. Thus the textual design of *Chela*, shadowing the disciple’s journey, moves from “Seeker” to “Guidance,” to “So Much Love,” to “Months Fly,” to

“Spiritual Healing,” to “Re-searching,” and finally to “Confrontation.” This progressive epiphany is interspersed with poems worded with refracting and splintering motifs of “diamond” and “golden” light. In this refraction and splintering, the poem “Golden Heart” appears twice, once in English and once in Spanish. On this inner journey, the gentle touch of deliberately placed haiku, earlier clustered together in *Moksha*, brings the voice of the universe as meditative wisdom, counsel and release to the chela or disciple, who is experiencing a private and lifelong wrestling match between the pull of erotic pleasures, temptations, and banalities on his earthly self and on his desire to commit to a higher, more disciplined spirituality.

Gonzalez’s insistent repetition and reorganization of motifs suggests an autobiographical point of reference. A parallel can be drawn, for instance, between his *Crossroads of Dream* and the later work of Kamau Brathwaite such as *DreamStories* where in a similar way, a panoramic collection of prior personal and societal memories is repeated and interwoven with autobiographical asides and footnotes into new creative and societal meaning. Thus *Proseleela*, is not the gathering of odds and ends of earlier work as it first seems. Artistically, it is a representative mosaic of many of the various prose traditions that the writer has worked in—prose poem, short story, memoir, journal, fable, and parable. Additionally, the pieces that are repeated from the earlier *Chela*, such as “Skyscape,” “Hopsbread,” and “It was a Spiritual,” create a different narrative, a narrative grounded in the social landscape of a calmer authorial persona who makes allusions to friends, poetic fraternity, family members, and social practices—a narrative in which from time to time he mentions people such as his wife Sylvia and other poet friends by their actual names.

Gonzalez’s affinity to a larger Caribbean autobiographical ethos is also evident in the echoes of Walcott’s *Another Life* that pervade *Proseleela*. The evocation of the firebrand of memory, the romantic pastoral and the recollection of the meaningfulness of tranquility are signals of that stylistic influence. Glimpses of reverence to teachers and the hallowed ruins of a great house, for instance, appear in Gonzalez’s “Teacher” (10), which celebrates a “teacher’s reward” (line 1) and “Lines written above Tintern Abbey” (12). In this poem Gonzalez references the Wordsworthian colonial heritage, such as is seen in Walcott’s writing, and its recurrent replication in Caribbean poetic consciousness in his (Gonzalez’s) own teaching career and his visit to Tintern Abbey in 1998 (Gonzalez 2008).

But unlike the persona of Walcott’s *Another Life* who turns the page at mid-career, Gonzalez’s persona is at the end of his career, one who in the words of “Gerontion and his mate” of *Crossroads* “take[s] more than twenty-four hours to do a day of nothing” (13). Gonzalez’s Gerontion, also so reminiscent of Eliot’s *Wasteland*, putters through his winter years with whatever the day brings:

The morning comes, and hopefully it is the glorious day of fulfillment. The poet-lover looks to the east for the rising face of his love in the sun. The drums are packed away, the spirits have fled, and the hushed cadence of dawn is pregnant with love and hope. (14)

So, by the end of *Proseleela*, one is not surprised to see the persona ruminating protectively on his wife's horticultural labour that devout Christians steal as they pass by, looking out the "window" on his neighbours "the Ashes [pun], across the way," as the thought of his own impending final consignment from dust to dust and ashes to ashes passes through his mind (*Proseleela* 70).

For all the mindfulness of the end of his life that looms, though, this proseleela-persona is contiguous with the man of the mid-years of the earlier collection, *Moksha*. In *Moksha*, that earlier authorial persona could be seen "talking to the man in the mirror," as he shaves, examining the wear and tear of the world on his identity in a shuttered room, trying hard to stave off the embattled, day-to-day traffic and the frustrations of work that he had to go forth to meet. Despite his acute sense of personal degeneration that *Moksha*-man had to grin and bear, but get out in the maelstrom of life anyway:

As he pulls the blade for the last time, he thinks, the children, they are the reason for our existence—and SUGMAD (manifestation of God). He glances at the mirror again and the man is smiling enigmatically. (*Moksha* 58)

In *Proseleela*, though, the persona has passed that stage. When he closes the window and turns inward, Gonzalez tells the reader that this proseleela-persona "refuse[s] to look at the mirror on the wall" (*Proseleela* 70). The children are now grown. Putting on a smile to face the world is no longer a requirement.

The Man in the Mirror: The Shifting Narratological Persona in *Proseleela*, *Chela* and *Crossroads*

But who is the man in the mirror? Sandra Pouchet Paquet's analysis of the seminal West Indian text, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), provides a useful approach to answering this question. It also helps to demystify the narratological framework of Gonzalez's three collections.

In a chapter entitled "Blurred Genres, Blended Voices" in her examination of the West Indian autobiographical genre, Pouchet Paquet, notes of George Lamming's *Castle*:

A complex rhetorical design sustains the contradictory impulses of this self-conscious and self-celebrating text. Lamming's strategy is to split the narrative into contrastive but complementary first-person, omniscient, and dramatic modes of narration that blur the boundaries between the author and authorial persona, and between the constitutive parts of the authorial persona . . . Author and persona merge tentatively to acknowledge a coincidence in person between the two and also to establish the limits of self-equivalence . . . His (Lamming's) fluid position at center and periphery of the text, as author and protagonist of an autobiographical fiction, is sustained and

validated by the parallel and overlap between the narrative modules that share a common axiological center. (*Caribbean Autobiography* 112-113)

From a narratological perspective, a similar overlap of shifting personae carries the testament and testimony in *Proseleela*, *Chela* and *Crossroads*. In the early prose poems of *Chela*, such as “Seeker,” “Guidance,” and “Hospital,” a biblical, parabolic, third-person prose style is used to follow the path of the spiritual ascetic as he journeys on his earthly trials as a “minority of one” (30) among a multitude of bigots and hypocrites. In these prose poems the disciple persona is a thinly veiled cover for a Jesus-figure or cleric, whose ruminative and meditative teachings include: “Develop a culture of respecting psychic space. Respect the other’s psychic space” (20). The epiphanies of this chela are often conveyed in spiritual exultation and through reference to elements such as love and the golden heart. The adoption of the chela-title is not accidental, as will be discussed later in this section in an analysis of the autobiographical references to the author, Gonzalez himself.

But to deal with focalization and the narratological context first, it can be observed that within *Chela*, as in the two other works, the narrative perspective is not always in third person. In “Spiritual Healing,” for example, a prose piece that is at once a blend of feature article, anecdote, speech, and testimony, a narrative-I addresses a brotherhood inclusively as “us.” Here the identity of the I-persona is not revealed as it is in “Window” (69) of *Proseleela*, for example, where Gonzalez refers to his wife, Sylvia, by name. However, one gets the sense that it is the same authorial I-persona of prose pieces such as “Flight” (*Proseleela*), in which Islandwoman and Islandman with his “newly fitted, good looking mouth” (38) take a trip abroad to see Islandgirl (one of their daughters) graduate—except that this authorial-I (Islandman) is at a different stage. For it must be made clear that although the narrator in all three texts may make incidental references to his home in Diego Martin, to his wife, and to his daughter/s, as Pouchet says of Lamming’s central character, the autobiographical-I in these texts “is clearly not the author at the time of writing [even though] their separate worlds coincide” (Pouchet Paquet 113).

So far I have highlighted the shifts between first or third person persona as family man, father, and teacher. But these are not the only first and third-person autobiographical personae that inhabit the three texts. The spiritual persona, the chela or disciple and spiritual leader, who emanates from Gonzalez’s private life as an ECKANKAR devotee is as large a contributor to the narrative shifts evident in Gonzalez’s work. The three texts are inextricable from the poet’s belief as a devotee of ECKANKAR, a spiritual community based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which he joined in 1980. The tenets of ECKists can be found on its main website (www.eckankar.org), but one of its better known descriptors is The Religion of the Light and Sound of God. The religion has also been variously described as aligned to Christianity, Hinduism and new age

cultism. Gonzalez has been an active member of the Trinidad and Tobago ECKANKAR group where he is chela or disciple and ECK cleric, having received his fifth religious initiation in 1995.

Crossroads, *Chela*, and *Proseleela* all engage a constant narratological wrestle between two conflicting consciousnesses: first, that of the spiritual ascetic and second, that of the earthy sexual being, tormented by temptations from eroticism and the seductive pleasures of the flesh. In the “Matrix” found in *Chela*, for example, the ascetic tries to reconcile them both when he awakes from his sensual dream:

Later in the morning he was preparing a sermon. He came across a reading that said that when we dream of marriage and mating it represents an inner initiation or a closer tie at a different level with the Holy Spirit.

Is it that she is his matrix with the Divine? (*Chela* 59)

The ascetic’s reflection and questioning suggest that his sensual lapses continue subconsciously to torment him. It is clear that the holy man is haunted by transgression and sexual impasse time and time again.

The parallel between Gonzalez’s religious beliefs and his work is important, not only because it throws light on the meditative nature of that work, but also because recognizing that spiritual life illuminates his tone, style and specific choice of lexicon. ECKANKAR contextualizes concepts such as ‘Kali Yuga, the last days,’ and ‘Satya Yuga, the Golden Age’ (*Proseleela* 16), poem titles such as “Swami is serious about his dharma” (*Crossroads* 71), and individual words such as ‘Mahanta (Master),’ ‘chela (disciple),’ and ‘SUGMAD (God)’ (*Chela*). And as I argue in the next section of this paper, this spiritual belief also leads the poet to a perception of the quintessence of Trinidadian art in the melding of its two major cultures, the East Indian (mainly Hindu) and African.

To conclude the examination of the shifting persona of Gonzalez’s work that is the subject of this section, it is clear that Gonzalez’s religious beliefs cannot be divorced from the development of his poetic sensibilities. His beliefs configure the spiritual and developmental struggles of his various autobiographical personae. These personae have been of the flesh and are still of the flesh, in spite of the spiritual asceticism that they embrace, and this eternal duality remains the unresolved axis around which *Crossroads*, *Chela* and *Proseleela* pivot. Further, this duality connects the phases of his forty years of writing intertwined in the three volumes.

The point is that all narratological personae, whether they be past or present, are in continuum with personae from earlier lives, such as the I-narrator of “Nightclub” (*Proseleela*) who experiences distinct pleasure in relating the raunchy episode of his first awakenings to the steaminess of sex and prostitution as a young man in Trinidad. However, the persona of the autobiographical narrative is never the same throughout the course of the authorial review. Factors such as temporal difference, retrospective evaluation, the distillation of memory and the different focus of the plot at

the new time of telling all create related, but different, selves and different perspectives along different stages of a single life (Pouchet Paquet 2002; Brockmeier 2001; Bruner 2001). Further, from a narratological standpoint, story time and discourse time are not the same: “[T]he time sequence of events (what Chatman calls ‘story time’)” and “the time of the presentation of those events (in [Chatman’s] terms ‘discourse time’)” are not the same each time the narrative is told, although all the narratives are interdependent” (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001, 275). While the first time is an actuality, all other times are reviews in recreation or recall.

Thus Gonzalez’s multi-voiced persona blends selves of the past with selves in the retrospective present—self as dancer, Trinidadian ‘limer,’ innocent hopsbread lover, storyteller, entertainer, proud parent, husband, and no less, self as editor of *The New Voices*. The self as ascetic, though insistent, has no absolute and righteous claim, and it is in *Proseleela* that the author-persona seems to experience this epiphany. In this text, the omniscient retrospective chela-figure seldom intrudes didactically, and even when it does, it is the voice of the flesh that brings perspective to incidents. “Hopsbread” (45) is a case in point. This story (also found in *Chela* 41) opens with a moral retrospective preamble about honesty, set off from the story in an italicized paragraph: “*Our former lives are replete with mistakes. When we acted it was mainly from the human consciousness . . .*” But in the story itself the lure of the flesh is painted all too vibrantly. Innocente, the young male protagonist, is led by his friend to a temptation that no spiritual teachings about honesty can resist:

They decided to purchase two of the very large, delicious, hops bread with some butter and cheese. The butter and cheese melted in the bread and the ambrosia of the sandwich made them dizzy with anticipation. They salivated as they clutched their booty, and left the shop drooling.

“Eat your bread, boy,” his friend urged. But he hesitated.

When they got around the bend, in a less populated part of the village, he decided finally to sample his hops, as the butter eased down his palm. (*Proseleela* 45)

For all his retrospective moralizing, what lingers for Innocente, now an ageing man, is the lasting image of himself and Boboy, his friend, salivating at “the ambrosia” of butter and cheese melting between two “very large, delicious, hops bread” (*Proseleela* 45). What stands out about this event over the years is the cultural memory of the Trinidadian delicacy, hops-and-cheese, in the psyche of the growing persona. I discuss in the following section how similar cultural features embedded in the identity of the persona are integrated into Gonzalez’s work.

Integrating a Creative and Cultural Identity in the Narrative of the *Ramleela*

Having addressed the autobiographical nature of the three works and given an insight into the narratological personae that inhabit them, I will now explore the creative and cultural identity in which they are grounded for in their backward glance across the years. *Proseleela*, *Chela*, and

Crossroads foreground not only the creative, cultural and spiritual centre of Gonzalez's life-work, but they also unfold the creative voices that inform his teleology and the cultural milieu that sustains it.

First of all, one might notice in each of the three texts an absence of the strident, political critique of the early Gonzalez of "Nationstate I" and "Nationstate II," and an absence of angst-ridden poems such as "Who Killed my Son," a poem that harbors a double-edged *cri de coeur*—a personal *cri de coeur* for his own son who died shortly after birth in 1970, the year of a Trinidadian coup d'état, and a socio-political one for the young men who died as a result of that same revolution. In these poems the persona rails at the insouciance of a society in which hedonism and indifference pervade, and confronts those perceived as responsible, demanding to know "who is going to pay" (*Merry-Go-Round* 46). In "Nationstate I" bearing the epigraph "The horror, the horror!" an allusion to Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, the persona uses taunting, alliterative and hyperbolic sarcasm to express his disgust at his countrymen's Carnival mentality:

500,000 jump around yah!
 500,000 guzzling gallons of gall
 thinking the taste to be pleasant
 500,000 stomachs bloated on bilious
 peas and rice souse and pudding
 sweat insensitively not hearing
 the silence that pervades the noise
 not hearing the explosions of the future
 above the paste wire and masking
 of the latest bacchanal (*Merry-Go-Round* 41, lines 10-19)

However, the absence of such agitated, political statement in the playful *Proseleela*, the meditative *Chela*, and the visionary *Crossroads* does not mean that they are apolitical. On the contrary, in these collections the autobiographical lens of temporal distance transmutes political comment into an accreted, sometimes bitter, resignation. Brockmeier discusses this kind of transformation of actual autobiographical experience as "a life narrative becom[ing] an iconic artifact" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 255). The phenomenon is explained in terms of someone looking back at the "life lived"—perhaps to take stock, trying to figure out what has been important, what was right or wrong, and what did it all mean" (255). Citing Phillipe Lejeune, the renowned autobiographical theorist, Brockmeier, notes three fundamental elements of autobiographical theory: "First, the autobiographical view is taken from a retrospective vantage point; second, it focuses on the individual life; and third, it is concerned with one's own existence" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 254). All of this he defines as the writer's "retrospective teleology: an order of lived time and narrated time in which the present emerges from the past like the famous flux of time" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 253).

In Gonzalez's later work, the pulsation of the heart surfaces as the emotive equivalent of Brockmeier's iconic artifact. Thus in *Chela*, peace is imaged in "the golden heart" (24-35), while in *Proseleela* "Heart" (43) sums up, in retrospective episodic events, the chronological journey through the loss of heart from birth to the present. Gonzalez uses the present perfect progressive in this poem to collapse both time and episodes along the way, showing how at each inhumane encounter with his society "[h]is heart has kept shrinking through the years . . . to the size of a dried-up dou-doux mango seed" (*Proseleela* 43). Thus the open condemnation seen in earlier work such as "Who Killed my Son" and "Nationstate I" still intrudes, but it is carried along in the heart as pulses of bitter memory, as the poet-persona moves toward his end: "It is only by the grace of God that [the persona] can sidle through life, or like water, find a path through this *violence and hatefulness* (emphases added) as he awaits his call for entry into the sanctuary of the Far Country" (*Proseleela* 44).

But the retrospective telos of the autobiographical genre is hardly confined merely to the personal domain. Both Brockmeier and Bruner observe the large extent to which the "retrospective teleology" of the autobiographer is captured within the context of "the culture's theories and stories" (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 275). Of the three collections, *Proseleela* bears most evidence of how Trinbagonian culture and Trinbagonian stories are embedded in Gonzalez's work. This idea has already been alluded to in the alignment of his religious beliefs with Hinduism, the main and most vibrant religion of the large East Indian population in Trinidad. The Hindu vocabulary and meditative tone of the three collections have also already been referred to. I will now detail a clearer exposition of how *Proseleela*, in particular, captures, plays on, and integrates the fused cultural ethos of Trinbagonian culture in a cameo-like retrospective glance.

First, in his use of the title "Proseleela," Gonzales evokes the Trinidadian Ramleela with all the indigenous heterogeneity that this Hindu ceremony connotes. The Ramleela in Trinidad is literary drama, narrative, poetry and play as village religious ritual and enactment of parts of the *Ramayana*. Derek Walcott evoked the Trinidadian Ramleela as the central motif of his Nobel Lecture, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory* (1992), drawing attention to the quintessential cultural and artistic renewal with which it has imbued his creativity:

Felicity is a village in Trinidad on the edge of the Caroni plain, the wide central plain that still grows sugar and to which indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation, so the small population of Felicity is East Indian, and on the afternoon that I visited it with friends from America, all the faces along its road were Indian, which, as I hope to show, was a moving, beautiful thing, because this Saturday afternoon *Ramleela*, the epic dramatization of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, was going to be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on a field strung with different-coloured flags, like a new gas station, and beautiful Indian boys in red and black were aiming arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light. Low blue mountains on the horizon, bright grass, clouds that would gather colour

before the light went. Felicity! What a gentle Anglo-Saxon name for an epical memory. (*The Antilles* para.1)

In his witty title *Proseleela*, then, Gonzales seeks to capitalize on multiple combined connotations—prose and poetic drama, art and artifice, the spiritual and the ephemeral, Trinidadian community and Trinidadian cultural history. The title also evokes the myriad manifestations of the prose poem form in which he works and is most versatile. Simultaneously, the title embraces the retrospective glance of its shifting persona, who appreciates the hand of the Supreme in his life work, but looks back with wry humor at the collector's item that he has wrought.

Thus, "Drums assail" presents, in "consciousness coming from different levels of being," an interwoven cosmopolitan society in which "[t]he hills and plains amalgamate into a carnival of possibility" (*Proseleela* 11). In this prose poem a somewhat clichéd set of Trinbagonian cultural symbols is presented; nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the well-known melding of histories, cultures, and ethnicities (mainly Indian, African and European) is engaged. In the poem the "pique" and "bele," post-colonial dance fusions of the African and the European, harmonize with the East Indian "dholak" and "tassa" drums. Spiritual Baptists are depicted as worshipping in their Orisha faith (a New World transatlantic incarnation of African religions transplanted during slavery). Meanwhile in an equivalent Hindu religious ceremony, "the dhantal [Hindu musical instrument] takes up the contrapuntal chorus" (lines 9-10). Indian drumming, the "tassa (11)," tops off the calypso dance, the "dingolay" (11). Both blend to make an Afro-Indian fusion, the well-known Trinidadian "chutney" (12); the emerging sound, "now dougla [mixed race], channels a meeting of the people" (11-12).

This type of societal and cultural fusion proceeds on many levels throughout the collection. For example, in "A large gathering of poets" (14), a poem situated within a creative atmosphere, the persona meets not only his "Indian literary friends . . . Parmasad, Gosine and especially Samaroo," but also "[t]he mandarin from Marabella," a reference to a well-known Trinidadian poet of Chinese descent.

To summarize, then, both culturally and creatively, in the pun on the Trinidadian Ramleela, Gonzalez is pointing to the multi-ethnic, massala, chutney-Caribbean Trinidad that underlies his teleology. This heteroglossia is echoed in each of the three works that are explored in this paper. For as Bruner, Brockmeier and Pouchet Pacquet all suggest, autobiographical personae can hardly eschew the enactment of the cultural voices and milieu upon which "the truth" of their self-representation and self-verification is built. In Brockmeier words, autobiographical texts:

- (a) "comprise more than one person and several temporal levels of meaning. Together they create a dense composition of time: a mingling of various layers of natural and historical time and the timeless..." (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 258).
- (b) "are no longer conceived of as monological utterances of one speaker or writer [and] are organized like speech acts, directed to specific addressees and fulfilling

social functions. They are like all conversations, jointly organized activities...”
(Brockmeier and Carbaugh 264)

Thus in tracing a life, the shifting persona of all three texts belongs to both past and present Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. The quintessential Trinidadian cultural pastime of ‘liming’ (47) is fully depicted on the broad swathe of Gonzalez’s retrospective canvas, as is the well-known voice of the arch-West Indian speech-maker of the oral tradition, the Midnight Robber seen in “Confrontation.” This prose poem appears in *Moksha* and then again at the end of *Chela* (67) to remind the ascetic in his Trini-Carnival life to pay his dues to the spirit and not to the flesh. “Nightclub” (57), too, presents a fusion of Latin American, expatriate-European, Hollywood-American, and Afro-Trinidadian pulsations of Trinidad. This prose poem is set in the milieu of prostitution and veiled in Middle-Eastern erotic imagery. Here the transient morality of high and low society is effectively conveyed against the background of the island’s oil industry, symbolized in the iconic Point-a-Pierre refinery. In like manner, in “Hospital,” a poem that appears first untitled in *Crossroads* (63), and later in *Chela* (22), the culture of the ubiquitous Trinidadian bacchanal is parodied:

Outside a large crowd of stick-fighting women was demonstrating. Their drum and chants further excited the patients. The women in the chela’s line became sexually playful. One, who used to be a teacher but is now a librarian, wanted to play with the chela’s rear. He hugged her to stop her. (*Proseleela* 22)

The unruliness, painful seriousness, as well as the enjoyment of Trinidadians in the midst of their struggles comes alive. The pharmacist and the patients at the hospital are all infected by, and involved in, the drumming and the chanting of the wage-protestors outside. This is a society that enacts pain and pleasure in the same way—in vociferous and multi-vocal masquerade

Conclusion: A Polyphonic Intimation of New Voices from 1973 to the Early 21st Century

In terms of Trinbagonian and Caribbean polyphony, then, Gonzalez’s work is the site of many confluences; first of all, the umbrella title for his literary journal *The New Voices* could hardly be accidental, coming so close after the Anglo-Caribbean wave of Independence from Britain in 1962. The Ramleela narrative in *Proseleela* has already been intimated, as well as Brathwaitian parallels in Gonzalez’s use of dream as motif for collapsing autobiographical time and investing it with lasting resonance. In *Proseleela*, *Chela*, and *Crossroads* there are echoes of Lamming’s philosophical and ruminative prose, and the Walcottian pastoral presides, too, in Gonzalez’s depiction of the Trinidadian landscape. However, a significant manifestation of polyphony that appears in all three of the collections, a manifestation of polyphony which is perhaps the crux on which the cultural and creative identity of Gonzalez’s work rests, remains

yet to be named. It is Gonzalez's "Wall of Gratitude" that first appears in *Crossroads*, filling in as preface. It appears trimmed later in *Chela* and *Proseleela* under the title "Skyscape." The repetition of this piece suggests the importance that Gonzalez places on his inheritance from artists of all walks who have made him—musicians, painters, dancers, calypsonians, pan pioneers. Ethno-musical polyphony is echoed in this tribute in its affinity to The Mighty Sparrow's calypso, "Memories," a poem that laments the passing of Trinbagonian creative icons in the arts, while "remembering" (invoking individually) his indebtedness to them. In fact, Gonzalez's *New Voices* publications are an archive of the literary voices that have formed a rock-bed for Trinidadian and Caribbean writing. Among these titles are: *Eight Trinidadian Sonneteers*, *41 Trinidadian Poets in The New Voices*, and *TNV Short Fiction: Stories by Trinidadian Writers 1973-1993*. These *New Voices* publications represent a veritable doctoral thesis without a committee, an effort for which acknowledgment is long overdue.

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