
MAKING *CALLALOO* Past, Present, and Future

I began *Callaloo* as a Black South forum in 1976, when I was teaching in the Department of English at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. However, I actually conceived the idea of such a literary and cultural journal during the spring of 1974, when I was visiting my father's farm in Auburn, Alabama. As I look back now, I recall again, as I have done so many times, what I saw as the urgent need to accommodate, nurture, and help develop black literary voices in the South. I was fully aware that the need for such a forum resulted mainly from two separate but related realities: 1) the White South's policies of racial exclusion, one of the tenets upon which white supremacy is based; and 2) the Black North's will, for some nefarious reason, to place itself in a position of superiority over black people in the South. In other words, African American writers in the South were being systematically excluded from Southern (and more often than not from Northern white) literary journals, magazines, and publishing houses; and Black South writers were only occasionally published by black periodicals in the North, even during the 1960s and early 1970s, when short-lived black literary journals in the North seemed to "jes' gro'." Then, too, there was no forum for black visual artists in the South, a problem that I, even with the very first issue of *Callaloo*, tried to address. One might say *Callaloo* began as a journal of necessity.

I first realized how I could help address the need for a Black South literary forum while I was on an NEA Fellowship leave from my teaching duties at Southern. There I was one morning in the peace and quiet of my father's farm in Auburn, Alabama—some three hundred miles away from the rush of classes and office hours and the crush of students—in a setting where the intellect and imagination are allowed to range, without interruption, over vast pastures. It was late March in 1974, and there I was, I recall, sitting at my father's kitchen table, ruminating after breakfast. Two or three days earlier, I had returned from Washington DC, where I had met and taped a long interview with Sterling Brown, poet and critic, who was still teaching at Howard University. To the kitchen table I had moved books, writing paper, and a portable typewriter to begin my article on Brown and his use of the Southern folk tradition in his poetry. Sitting there alone, I thought, for not a short while, about what I had discovered in the interview about Sterling Brown's long career as a pioneering figure in African-American literary and cultural studies. His studies, as well as his own poetry, had led him to the vernacular culture of the South, a region so in need in his youth and in 1974—yes, in need of justice, fair play, basic material comforts for the many poor, and high standards of formal education for all, and yet so very rich in song and language and eloquent speech acts and other instruments of expressive culture. As I thought about all that Sterling Brown had done to preserve, promote, and celebrate African American life and culture and the written word originating from them, I began to wonder what I could do. The answer was immediately apparent: a independent venue in which new and developing black writers in the South could make their voices heard,

a periodical that would not only publish their work but would also encourage, nourish, and support them as artists. With Sterling Brown's eloquent and erudite voice lingering in my ear that spring morning, I began to realize the Black South needed a forum that neither subscribed to a narrow political ideology nor attempted to dictate to authors what to write. In the wake of the demise of the Black Arts Movement, what we needed in the South, I concluded, was a free and open journal whose goals would take us far beyond the prescriptive aesthetic of the Northern and urban Black Arts Movement and, at the same time, would promote the common good of black writing communities throughout the South. That moment at my father's kitchen table concluded with my writing letters to a few of my friends, telling them about my vision and inviting them to join me in ways each thought appropriate to help bring the project into being. That project was *Callaloo*, whose first issue would not appear until December, 1976, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Needless to say, to found *Callaloo*, and to publish, distribute, and promote its very first issue were no easy feat. After I returned from my father's farm to my teaching duties at Southern University in Baton Rouge during that autumn term of 1974, I set in motion, with the support of colleagues and students, a series of activities that led to the publication of *Callaloo*—the most important of which was the organization of a non-University creative writing workshop. Using some of my own money, funds raised in the community by workshop members and a few of my colleagues, and the proceeds of a fundraising campaign that I launched through the mail, the journal was finally born 1976.

As we have moved over the years—from Southern University to the University of Kentucky in 1977, to the University of Virginia in 1986, and finally to Texas A&M University in 2001—*Callaloo* has become more than a literary journal. It has grown into a *de facto* literary and cultural center, organizing and coordinating a variety of activities that serve to exhibit, preserve, critique, and promote black literary culture in the United States and abroad. It was at the University of Kentucky, where I literary published the journal out of my small academic office, that we issued the second number and, a few years later, began publishing two series of books: one for poetry and the other for fiction. Rita Dove's collection of short stories and Nathaniel Mackey's first novel graced our fiction list, and not a few volumes by established and first-book authors made up our poetry list—Melvin Dixon, Brenda Marie Osbey, Gerald Barrax, and Jay Wright, for example. It was in 1986, when I was appointed to the English faculty at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, that Johns Hopkins University Press began publishing *Callaloo*. During my fifteen-year tenure at the University of Virginia, my staff and I created and coordinated an international reading/lecture series, and began offering creative writing workshops, which we initially held at such historically black institutions as Fisk University, Spelman College, Morgan State University, North Carolina Central University, Morehouse College, and Xavier University of New Orleans. At the University of Virginia, we also organized conferences, symposia, and other activities, which we either mounted on the Grounds of the University or at such institutions as the Library of Congress in DC, Casa de las Américas in Havana, the Federal University in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and the Public Theater in New York. In an effort to promote visual art, we have increasingly sought out new art and artists from various nations throughout the African Diaspora. From the inception of *Callaloo*, it has been our hope that the visual art—in portfolios and on covers of the journal—resonates with the creative and critical texts published in each issue. Like the publication of visual art in the

journal, the coordination of a variety of allied activities at home and abroad has not only helped to extend the readership of *Callaloo*; it has also brought together a number of artists and intellectuals who might not have ever met in exchange. It is for those reasons, then, that we have continued to organize and coordinate a number of these activities since our move from Virginia to College Station, Texas, in 2001.

At Texas A&M University in College Station, we have continued to sponsor, for example, the annual *Callaloo* creative writing workshops in fiction and poetry as open and competitive projects that attract applications from across the USA, the English-speaking Caribbean, Canada, and England. The goals of these workshops are commensurate with some those of the journal: to identify potential and developing writers, to offer them two years of instruction under the tutelage of established writers who teach in some of the major university creative writing programs across the USA, to support and nourish these young writers, and, when they write publishable poetry or fiction, to assist them in getting it published in refereed periodicals. The annual Callaloo Creative Writing Workshops is currently the first and only national project of its kind which, through competitive and vigorous means, seeks to make a direct impact on the aesthetic development of American literature in general and African American literature in particular. From its inception to date, this very important project, which is not inexpensive to sponsor each year, has been exclusively supported by funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.

At Texas A&M University, we have also begun a new project: an organized investigation of the presence of peoples of African descent in different areas of the Spanish-speaking Americas. Our interests, of course, are the history, life, literature, and culture of African descendants in different nations. Cuba and Mexico are our points of departure, and they are not random beginnings. We wanted to follow the early routes that the Spanish used to transport and distribute their human cargo, captive West Africans, throughout certain parts of the Americas. We knew how the cities of Havana and Veracruz functioned together in the Spaniards' trade in human bodies: we have studied how enslaved Africans were captured in and transported from West Africa to the Caribbean, received in Havana (and other points in Cuba), shipped to Veracruz, Mexico, and later distributed throughout Mexico and various other countries in the Spanish dominated Americas. From our field research on the contemporary presence of people of African descent in the State of Veracruz, Mexico, we have published three issues focusing on the literature and visual art, and on the history, life, and culture of the pueblo Coyolillo and of three coastal fishing villages south of the city of Veracruz. Through this kind of research work we hope to affect the concept of the Diaspora and its developing discourse.

There is a long distance between Havana and Veracruz and my father's kitchen's table. And yet the forum I conceived there is currently the only site where writers and intellectuals from various locations in the African Diaspora may meet and converse, however indirectly. In other words, it is my hope that, through *Callaloo*, writers, critics, and educators in Brazil, for example, can find out what black writers in the United States are doing, that critics in Suriname will discover the works of their counterparts in France, that general readers and visual artists in Haiti will explore works produced in Cuba and England, and that we, here in the United States, can keep abreast of the work of writers of African descent in, for example, the Dominican Republic, Martinique, Canada, Holland, and Guyana. The forum I founded and first published in 1976 is today the only American

literary journal to organize and coordinate literary and cultural activities throughout the African Diaspora.

In addition to being the world's premier journal publishing African Diaspora literature, *Callaloo*, for the past thirty years, has also served as its recorder and arbiter. And by focusing on superior craft conveying original and unbigoted perspectives, the journal has, moreover, extended and expanded the aesthetic and ideational possibilities of African-American literature-in-the-making. Perhaps, and most importantly, the journal, from its beginning in 1976, continues to be the sole North American cultural enterprise that not only identifies and encourages new African-American writers, but also publishes them right along with established writers. *Callaloo*, a forum whose aim is to promote the best work by and about artists of African descent, is indeed still a journal of necessity.

Now that we have moved our editorial offices to Texas A&M University in College Station, the future of *Callaloo* (still published by Johns Hopkins University Press) looks brighter than ever. Never before have we had a university sponsor whose administration and faculty, both in words and deeds, have demonstrated such understanding, appreciation, and respect for *Callaloo* and its vision. The Texas A&M family has not only welcomed us but offered us generous support and room to grow. And as we continue to grow during the next thirty years, we want to develop and expand our projects related to audience development, the teaching of creative writing, and the publication of visual art.

Our local, national, and international literary readings and conferences, at home and abroad, provide public venues for writers and critics, and assist us in our continuing efforts to help develop audiences for the kind of literature we publish. In other words, because audience development will determine not only the future of the journal but also the viability of African Diaspora literature in general, we must, as we move forward in the future, continue to develop and extend the reach of projects which broaden readership inside and beyond the borders of the United States. In particular, we must develop further and hone carefully our creative writing workshops for new writers by continuing to offer two- or three-week sessions during the summer on the campus of Texas A&M University. Through an agreement with a university press, we also want to expand our publishing to include a series of book-length creative (i.e. poetry and fiction) texts as well as critical studies that focus, respectively, on works by and about writers in the African Diaspora. We must also further broaden the range of the creative texts by publishing a greater number of writers who live outside the United States. Reflecting the uniqueness of our new location, we want to introduce writers and visual artists from the Mexican border region, the Southwest, and the West.

If we can introduce new projects that further the cause of contemporary literature, while supporting and helping to develop writers and writing communities throughout the African Diaspora, then, of the next thirty years of *Callaloo*, we will feel confident in saying "the port was worth the sail."

—Charles Henry Rowell