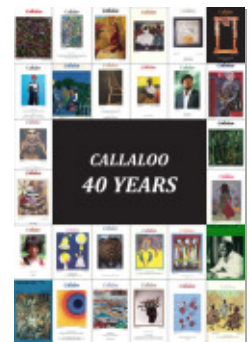




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40th Anniversary Celebration

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Joshua Bennett, Howard Dodson, Ben Okri



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PERFORMANCES, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, AND DINNER Closing of the 40th Anniversary Celebration

*by Dagmawi Woubshet, Charles Henry Rowell, Rizvana Bradley,
Nathaniel Mackey, Joshua Bennett, Howard Dodson, and Ben Okri*

The closing of the 40th Anniversary Celebration included the presentation of the Lifetime Achievement Awards, closing remarks by Howard Dodson and Ben Okri, and musical performances by Carole Strong Thompson, Robert Reid, Hermine Pinson, and Harris Simon.

WOUBSHET: I conducted an interview with Dr. Rowell at the Goethe-Institut in Addis Abba back in 2009, a year before the CALLALOO CONFERENCE in Addis in 2010. I asked him, foolishly, “Dr. Rowell, how do you keep up with the literary trends of the day so that the journal keeps current?” Without skipping a beat, he replied, “We don’t have to keep up since we set the trend.” [*Laughter*] Foolish question, wise answer. *Callaloo* has been setting the standard for the past forty years, and in the process has forever changed the American and English literary canon. It has done so by prizing rigor, experimentation, what Greg Pardlo calls “radical individuality,” and also our collective ideals of justice, of freedom, and of beauty. Dr. Rowell, we treasure you, we love you, and we thank you for being our standard-bearer. Please, I was going to say “raise your glass” but raise your hand to Charles Rowell. I’d like to invite to the podium the Editor of *Callaloo*, Dr. Charles Henry Rowell. [*Applause*]

ROWELL: We also honor the people who have been setting trends in various forms of art in literature, in literary criticism, in fiction writing, and in visual art. That’s what we’re going to do tonight. First, we will honor Frank Bowling for his lifetime achievement in visual art. Rizvana will not only speak about him, but she will accept his award. He is not able to be with us this evening.

BRADLEY: Thank you so much, Dr. Rowell. It is a great honor to speak about Frank Bowling’s work, as I’ve also had the honor of teaching his work in many of my courses in art history and visual studies. Frank Bowling’s paintings have been exhibited widely and internationally. His selected solo shows have included the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Serpentine Gallery in London, and a touring retrospective in the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It’s worth noting as well that in 2017 the Haus der Kunst in Munich will present *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, a comprehensive survey of large-scale paintings. Frank Bowling, Order of the British Empire, was born in 1936 in Guiana and moved to London in 1953, where his artistic career began shortly after his arrival at the Royal College of Art. He started his career as a figurative painter and then moved to abstraction and became involved in the British pop movement in the 1950s and

1960s. His first solo exhibition, *Image in Revolt*, was hosted the year Bowling graduated at the Grabowski Gallery in London, and he decided to move to New York in 1966, as Stuart Hall noted in a very well-known essay about Black British artists published in the 1980s. He was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1967. Bowling's paintings began to turn to abstraction, the field in which his contributions were to be most significant, and he was frequently visited by the art critic, Clement Greenberg. His series of quasi-abstract color fields, overlaid with stenciled images of maps of Australia, South America, and Africa, are his best known works, in which he experimented with the possibilities of paint. It has been noted that Bowling's legacy concerns his innovations with new process within his paintings. It should also be noted that he developed a special mechanical apparatus, which tilted the canvas so he could pour paint on it, and that allowed him to create what we now know as his famous and iconic poured paintings. I'm very happy today to be able to speak about his work very briefly and his contribution to contemporary art, and I'm honored to accept this award on his behalf.

ROWELL: The award reads: "The 2016 *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement Award to Richard Sheridan Franklin Bowling for your sterling contributions to visual art and visual culture."

BRADLEY: Thank you so much. [*Applause*]

ROWELL: We will also honor Wilson Harris. He is not able to come tonight, but Nathaniel Mackey will introduce him and receive the award.

MACKAY: It is a great honor and privilege and pleasure to receive this award for Wilson Harris, a writer whose work is, I think, one of the most senior bodies of work extant. I came upon it in the 1970s and began with a reading of *Palace of the Peacock*, his first novel, published in 1960. I had never read anything like it. I proceeded to read everything of his that I could find. It had that impact on me. Let me read you a paragraph from the introduction that I wrote for the *Callaloo* special issue on Harris: "In 1980 while working on an essay on Wilson Harris's ninth novel, *Ascent to Omai*, I inquired in the course of a letter to Harris concerning the significance of the cards upon which the judge in the novel draws and writes. Harris replied, 'The cards imply that as they fall, no hand is absolute, each hand writes and is written by another.' The cards change by hands and changing hands further figure the quote 'self-revolving parts in endless dialogue' of which we read in Harris's sixth novel, *The Eye of the Scarecrow*. Such intimations of ensemblist authorship abound in his work, attesting to the aleative, accretional conception, animating one of the most strikingly original bodies of writing to have emerged in the twentieth century." Mr. Harris—or, I should say, Sir Harris, for he was knighted a few years ago—was born in British Guiana in 1921, and he's been a resident of England since 1959. He has published more than twenty books of fiction, one book of poetry, and three books of criticism between the years 1960 and 2006. The great C. L. R. James was one of the first to note his genius, and he's gotten plenty of accolades since then. Many of us believe that he should have won a Nobel Prize for literature by now, but unfortunately, he doesn't play guitar. [*Laughter*] There have been many attempts to categorize his writing. Surrealism, marvelous realism,

and other terms have been floated out there. He, in an interview, referred to his writing as “quantum fiction” and he went on to say, “My writing is quantum writing. Do you know the quantum bullet? The quantum bullet, when it’s fired, leaves not one hole but two.” Great pleasure to receive this award.

ROWELL: This is an extraordinary award. It is a poem that Nathaniel Mackey wrote when we told him that we were going to honor Wilson Harris. For the Extraordinary Achievement of Wilson Harris, we honor him with this poem.* We will put the awards out on the table, so at the end of the dinner if you want to come look at them and inspect them you are welcome. Now we come to two people who are a part of the CALLALOO CONFERENCE group. First we want to honor Hortense Spillers. Introducing Hortense Spillers is Joshua Bennett.

BENNETT: I first encountered Dr. Hortense Spillers’s work during my freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania. I had just been admitted to Mellon Mays, the undergraduate fellowship there, and our graduate fellow that year, Brandon, had assigned an article by Spillers to my entire cohort. I had never encountered anything quite like “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” On first and second read, I found it both impenetrable and incomparably energizing. It was almost as if I was relearning how to read, how to write, and not only that, but understanding for the first time what a certain kind of reading and writing practice could produce in its most rigorous and unflinching form, both a mode and a mood, a style that reflected countless hours of formal studies and remained committed to expressing both the unthinkable terror and unfettered beauty of Black social life. Spillers wrote of the flesh over and against the body, blackness as “vestibular to culture.” It was this image of the vestibule that I was unable to shake for the next eleven years or so, reminiscent as it was of my time in Messiah Baptist Church as a boy, huddled with all the other latecomers, any number of whom were still recovering from Saturday night’s revelry. And even though what most would call the main event took place in the sanctuary, there was life in the vestibule, a gathering space for those who moved with their own sense of tempo and propriety, those barred, if we think of the vestibule in a wider and metaphorical sense from the protections and protocols of Western man. And this is what Dr. Hortense Spillers’s work makes available to us: a critical vocabulary for our full, fleshy lives, an entire corpus that dares to assert that black cultural production across genre merits attention and diligent study. Indeed, that rigor can be our dream. It should come as no surprise, perhaps, that Dr. Spillers was a radio DJ during her tenure as an undergraduate at the University of Memphis or that she wrote a doctoral dissertation that held the rhetoric of black preachers at central concern. All her work bears the trace of such deep, fugitive music of commitment to the black quotidian and ear-tuned to the everyday lives of everyday people across the African diaspora. Time and time again, Spillers invites us to look where we have been taught to look away in either disgust or awe. To train our gaze on the unimaginable that we may do just that, might craft incredibly divergent ways of organizing human and non-human life alike, that we might find if not joy, then certainly wonder in this blackness, this beauty that the world calls “nothingness.” Over and against such relentless reading, Spillers offers us plentitude and abundant life.

* See “Angel at the Gate” by Nathaniel Mackey pg. 141–144 in this issue.

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In the name of those forced to live at the underside of modernity, she asserts that our people deserve complexity. Indeed, if she were not here, we would be left to dream of her invention. Any such dream, of course, would fall short of the genuine article. For though she is part of a longstanding tradition, her life's work represents something of a cosmic event in the field of Black studies, a breaking into the world of a new way. In no uncertain terms, she helped make my work as well as that of so many of my friends, mentors, and the greatest teachers, possible. From her abiding love of this craft, this field, this way of moving through the world, and making something more livable and beautiful of it. We're trained, hundreds of us, ready to be in battle, ready to claim the insurgent ground she mapped out for us so many years ago. [Applause]

ROWELL: The inscription for this award is: "The 2016 *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement Award to Hortense Spillers for your provocative and invaluable contributions to literary and cultural studies." [Applause]

SPILLERS: Thank you. I think I'm supposed to say something, but I don't really want to say very much. I'm really grateful for this. This is the first award of its kind that I've ever received in my life. And I'm profoundly grateful. [Applause]

ROWELL: Receiving the other award for this evening, Joan Anim-Addo, creative writer, literary and cultural critic. She will be introduced also by Joshua. [Applause]

BENNETT: I was not aware that I was going to be introducing Joan, and I feel that that's actually all the more potent because when I was sitting up here, she came up to me with her camera phone out and she said, "I'm going to take a picture of you because you look like you belong here, like you've always belonged here." I'll never forget about two years ago when we met at the CALLALOO CONFERENCE at Emory. I remember sitting in the audience hearing Joan speak at length with power, clarity, and conviction about being a black academic here in the UK. I remember her generosity when we spoke after her talk, how clear and powerful and convicting it was. And I remember feeling that a strong bridge had been built, not just between us but between my conception of what it meant to be black, to be a thinker, and to be committed to this work in a global sense. I think in her literature, in her poetry, her scholarship, Joan is always inviting us into that much wider, more capacious conception. So for that, and also for the generosity she shows in her everyday life, I'm intensely thankful. I want to thank her for the work she does, for the work she is in the world, the work she enflashes and embodies. [Applause]

ROWELL: The 2016 *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement goes to Joan Anim-Addo for your individual contributions to literature and to literary and cultural criticism.

ANIM-ADDO: Thank you. Thank you. I'll just say that when I had an email inviting me to dinner and there was a list of people being honored this evening, I glanced at the list, and I saw my name and I thought, "Oh, dear. How embarrassing. They've made a mistake." [Laughter] So I didn't say anything. I just waited for someone to say, "We're terribly sorry."

We've made a mistake." [Laughter] But when I spoke to the *Callaloo* office, apparently it wasn't a mistake, so what can I say, we're not used to being invited to the table here in the UK. So I really feel very humbled and very honored to be given this award this evening. Thank you very much. [Applause]

WOUBSHET: We're going to have two closing remarks by two extraordinary individuals. First is Howard Dodson, Director Emeritus, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, followed by Ben Okri, novelist.

DODSON: Four distinguished individuals—Joan Anim-Addo, Frank Bowling, Wilson Harris and Hortense Spillers—have been recognized and honored tonight for their extraordinary achievements and contributions to the academy, to their respective disciplines, to humankind, and especially to people of African descent. I'm talking about individuals whose work has fostered knowledge and appreciation of the black experience. I'm talking about people who have helped affirm the dignity and self-worth of African-descended people and demonstrated the standards of excellence and creativity that make people around the world honor and respect black folk and the black experience. These 2016 *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement Award winners are certainly worthy of the honors that have been bestowed upon them, and I for one want to add my congratulations to them. I personally feel honored to be in their presence and to share this moment with each of them—and you.

My task this evening is to acknowledge and celebrate a person who is equally worthy of receiving the *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement Award. This is especially true given the fact that we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of *Callaloo*. I refer to none other than Dr. Charles Henry Rowell, founder and editor of *Callaloo* throughout its forty years of existence. As most of you likely know, tonight's program of recognition, like most of what happens through and with *Callaloo*, is Dr. Rowell's brainchild. *Callaloo* has recognized other Lifetime Achievement awardees and like tonight's they, too, have been his designees. In his typically humble and self-deprecating way, he likely never thought of making himself an honoree. That would, for Charles, be too self-serving. What I have chosen to do is take that decision out of his hands and put it in yours. So, I'm going to make a case for why it's time for him to receive this award. My hope is that the evidence will be so persuasive that you will endorse my recommendation and that he will grant us permission to make him an awardee next year so we can start the fifth decade of his and *Callaloo*'s life together in full recognition of the pivotal role he has played in the making of *Callaloo*. In the time that I have, I will only be able to mention a few of the prize-worthy facts about Charles's contributions to *Callaloo*, the academy, literature and the arts, and African Diasporic people.

As I stated earlier, Charles is the founder of *Callaloo*, "a journal of necessity," and has served as its editor continuously for forty years. But Charles is more, much more than just an editor. At *Callaloo*, he is the producer, curator, writer, mobilizer, and marketer as well as its editor. That's because *Callaloo* is more than a journal of literature and art. It is, as Charles reminds us, a literary and art center as well as a journal. And Charles is its impresario as well as its editor. Over the last forty years, he and *Callaloo* have led a transformation in African American and African Diaspora literature and art, presenting through the pages of *Callaloo* thousands of writers and artists from the African Diaspora who might not have found a publication vehicle for their creative talents.

For purposes of comparison, I went back and checked the tenure of the editors of other major African American and African Diaspora journals. What I found is that only one editor of a journal of any kind by and about people of African descent has served as editor for forty years. And that person is Dr. Charles Henry Rowell. Carter G. Woodson edited the *Journal of Negro History* for thirty-five years. Charles Thompson edited the *Journal of Negro Education* for some thirty-five years. And Alioune Diop, editor of *Presence Africaine*, a Paris-based journal on Africa and its diaspora, only lasted for thirty-three years. Dr. Rowell has forty continuous years of editing *Callaloo* and he is still at it!

Over the course of his tenure as editor, Dr. Rowell has published the work of an estimated 3,500-3,750 writers in over 150 issues comprising more than 30,000 pages of text and images. The quality of the writing, art, and aesthetics of *Callaloo* has earned for it a place of distinction in the field. It is widely recognized as “the premier journal of literature, art, and culture of the African Diaspora,” and was recently ranked 13th among the top fifty literary magazines worldwide by *Every Writers Resource*. These are just a few of the reasons why I believe Charles Rowell has more than earned a *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement Award. But they are more than enough, in my mind, to put him at the top of next year’s list of *Callaloo* Lifetime Achievement Awardees. And if you agree, I’d ask that you stand and give him a standing ovation and vote of affirmation. [*Applause and cheering*].

OKRI: Good evening, everybody. Thank you for your extraordinary compression of forty years of thought into five minutes of celebration. To those of us who have experienced the annual international CALLALOO CONFERENCE, it is always a unique and special experience. We are aware that *Callaloo* represents the best in our transcultural dialogue, bringing together the highest thoughts and critical practices and literary political activism, as well as intellectual meditation from all across the diaspora. It is to my mind the most important vehicle for circulating the perception of our culture, our history, and our civilization and suggesting the possibility of our unity. This unity has been a vexed issue these last forty years. There’s much to celebrate, but there are also the feelings of this time that what has been done to us historically may have done irreparable damage to this great family, whose roots go back more than a million years to the denizens of Olduvai Gorge in East Africa. The history of our genius and our genes goes back longer than the history of our cultures and of our other identities. What unites us is older than what divides us. It seems to me that sometimes we focus more on what has been done to us than what we are and our spiritual and cultural heritage transcends the centuries. Maybe we need a new perspective, guided by more open time to reexamine the ways in which our past can inform and transform our futures. This is why *Callaloo* is so important and why Dr. Charles Rowell is a visionary. It is a vision that constantly redefines who we are towards a constantly greater perspective. With the clouds gathering above trans-Atlantic skies, with new shifts in the political atmosphere, I feel we’re living in vaguely dangerous times, and more dangerous than anything we’ve ever known for a generation, and for that reason, we need *Callaloo*’s vision now more than ever. I feel we need now to find a new fire as a people to torch our way through the possible dark times that are coming. It’s not just that Black lives matter. Black thought matters, and it ought to be and it will be the defining force of our times, and it depends on all of us here under the guidance of Charles. Thank you all very much. [*Applause*]



Photograph courtesy of Jerriod Avant

Howard Dodson's final remarks at the 2016 CALLALOO CONFERENCE in Oxford.