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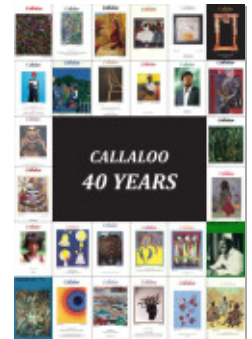
This Love Saves Lives: Community and *Callaloo* at Oxford University

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## THIS LOVE SAVES LIVES

### Community and *Callaloo* at Oxford University

by Stacy Parker Le Melle

On November 22, 2016, two weeks after Election Day, I returned to Oxford, England, for the first time in two decades since my year as a post-grad student. New York City felt like both safety and danger and I wanted a few days outside of everything Donald Trump, even if the escape was to one of the greatest sites of Western European truth-making, an operation that for centuries kept my kind at the bottom of every pyramid—even if we were the ones building them.

There is always a behind-fortress-walls feeling when I visit Oxford. A literal one, of course, for so many colleges are small castles, but also the felt sense of having scaled walls created specifically to keep us out. My traveling friend Holly, a 5'2" woman of Italian extraction, kept finding her space invaded by boisterous groups of young English men in sweaters and tweed. This is their natural habitat, I told her, as if that were an excuse for not seeing her on the sidewalk, or for swamping her space at a café. Though I was struck that the only things that still looked the same to me after twenty years were the yellow-stone colleges, and the looks of the landed gentry youth.

Yet inside our host castle, I found respite. Pembroke College hosted our assembly of Black writers, poets, and scholars gathered to celebrate *Callaloo*, the journal of African diaspora arts and letters. We suffered shellshock from the election results but we had each other, and created fellowship through panels, readings, dinners, and drinks. No matter the history of Oxford and its Black intellectuals, no matter the chilliness inside the conference auditorium that pushed some to use coats as blankets, the gathering itself warmed me, reminded me, as Prof. Robert Reid-Pharr said, that we've been in bad political straits before, that this is the time for writers to live with our fear and still speak out.

But the fear is no joke. Poet Vievee Francis articulated a primal fear during the Creative Writing Workshop panel. Francis, who has co-led the annual CALLALOO CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP with Pulitzer Prize winner Greg Pardlo for several years now, outlined the conventions that distinguished their poetry workshops. At one point she said the teachers would not "discourage individuals if they chose to write about roses on the trellis," that "the individual is not a threat to the collective."

Threat. Yes. God. Francis wasn't talking about the outside world, per se, but when aren't we Black people resisting these constant efforts to categorize our beings as dangerous? There is that question for Black people, always. And the intensity of our pushback since Trayvon Martin's murder—in the streets, in our arts, ending missives with those three simple words #BlackLivesMatter, three words that threaten those who feel they have something to lose when our full humanity is acknowledged.

This perception of Black threat to the American collective is always present. But what struck me about Francis's point was the safety within a writing workshop—and really, safety within a Black gathering. She stated with conviction and power that within their assembly, there is support to write about “the roses on the trellis”—that is, to go where your desire and art takes you, not what you think the collective requires, for fear of being abandoned by the collective.

Maybe we can't get revolution all at once right now. Maybe we get revolution in 90-minute intervals. In spaces of love created by people who say, you, yes you, can bring your whole loving self here, we won't grieve your rebellion against groupthink, we won't read your independence as our death.

This is my fear. I come to you, as myself, and you reject me. In some circumstances, that is OK, I can keep going, your rejection hurts but won't stop me. But what if the rejecters are family members? Peers? Employers? Law enforcement? Community at large? Despite our beliefs that we are individuals in charge of our destinies, we rely on the communal, and it is no small thing to be expelled from those other humans that have loved us, protected us, gave us the means of survival in landscapes at turns hostile and indifferent.

Which brings me back to Donald Trump. And what is to be our future under a Trump Administration. Already, I've seen three ultra-affluent Black celebrities say, “Let's give Trump a chance.” Mega-mogul Oprah Winfrey did it. So did comedian Dave Chapelle at the end of his *Saturday Night Live* monologue, the first #SNL after the election. Basketball legend Shaquille O'Neill did, too. These are two Black men and one woman who, of course, have never escaped Blackness, and of course carry the psychic wounds of anti-Black discrimination. But, they must admit to themselves they now belong to a protected class—the rich. And not just the rich. The cool Black rich. The kind of Black people that, if pulled over by police, would more likely be greeted with smiles and requests for selfies. They must admit, even if it's difficult—or easy, I don't know their hearts—that they are not of the folk anymore, that they will not face the same gamut of tripwires and harassments. They must not forget those who have not followed them past those fortress gates. They should do this for morality's sake. But if that's not enough motivation, they must heed this everlasting truth: no fortress is perfect. If the city burns, your barricades won't hold.

I write this on December 1, 2016. Already, I've seen circulated a “Dangerous Professors” list. I've seen a Rutgers Professor, after tweeting a “dangerous” tweet, picked up by NYPD and sent to Bellevue Hospital for a psychological evaluation. I've seen Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway go on national television and warn popular vote winner Hillary Clinton that Trump had been “gracious” in discontinuing his call to arrest her. I still can't believe the GOP nominee threatened his opponent with jail, making clear for all dissidents that jail could be in their future, too. I live in New York City. This vertical city is home to so many warrens of detention. Rikers. The Tombs. ICE. Places we know about. Places we don't. I live my life as bravely as I can, careful with my actions, for I am a mother, a wife, a daughter, and I must act with my family in mind. I always fear those handcuffs and guns who abuse their power. The man, or woman, in charge of the men with weaponry decides that we free people of America are threats to the collective, or, really, to the leader's power, and I will find myself branded a terrorist. And with that my rights rescinded, my life bound by the dictates of state-drafted definition of sub-humanity, one that justifies their methods to silence and hurt me, kill me if needed.

I am small potatoes. But I need the big potatoes to be brave, too. I need them to stand up for us and speak out loudly. This becomes harder as the nightmares of Gestapo return.

But how to resist despair? So many of us feel like Cassandras yet we see those around us drift into the Formation we fear—if not lockstep service, then huddled acquiescence. This essay is not to provide political strategy; as we make out the fast-shifting landscapes our strategies change and change. But let me offer this one suggestion for coping that I believe will help us persevere: community gathering. And not just any old gatherings. Ones with love, where, as Francis states, the individual is not a threat to the community.

The CALLALOO CONFERENCE at Oxford offered this kind of gathering. But so did a reading I curated in Harlem on November 15th, one week after the election. Called “What Just Happened: Writers Respond to the 2016 Presidential Election,” several local writers shared essays, poems, and sit-down stories about how they’d experienced the last year. Five Black writers, an Afghan writer, a Guyanese writer, four women and three men, two of them Muslim, one from a Muslim-Christian family, two who identified openly as LGBT—all of us at Shrine Bar, surrounded by the album covers that decorated the ceiling and the walls, all of us leaning forward in our seats to hear their words in that packed house.

All of the writers delivered that night. Ibrahim Abdul-Matin. Grace Aneiza Ali. Hajar Husseini. Max S. Gordon. Chris Prioleau. Morgan Jerkins. Hafizah Geter. I must make special note, however, of Ibrahim Abdul-Matin’s essay, for in speaking about our natural environment, and helping us see Mannahatta before the Europeans showed up, he pulled me out of the angst of this Manhattan moment, helped me touch the moist black earth that lived beneath the concrete and subway tunnels, connected us to currents that flow through and around us, regardless of us. I must also single out poet Hafizah Geter, who had a pointed reaction to those who thought this election result was white supremacy’s last gasp, that we need only wait for the old guard to die. She told us to look at where so much of the bullying and hate crimes were happening: in schools. Grammar schools and universities. The young learning from the old, as they always have. How she remarked that Trump had given the “green light” to all who didn’t want to “get with the program,” that those days of respect were over. Funny how the new program looks so much like the old program we’d fought like crazy to escape.

The writers spoke of pain and anger. Yet, after 90 minutes, I was shocked. Not by what they said. But how I felt. How others there told me they felt. We somehow felt better. No logical reason to feel better. Nothing outside had changed. But inside, somehow, my batteries recharged. That slinking, sinking to the floor inertia had been beat back. Like church. The best of church when you’re welcomed in love and not judgment. I didn’t know what I’d do next. But I knew I’d do something because we came together. Because we got into the same room and churched. Just like we did at Oxford. Just like Dr. Charles Henry Rowell’s *Callaloo* does with its conferences and creative writing workshops every year. I can’t begin to express my gratitude for being included in these communities. They will save our lives.

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## AUNT CLARA'S SOPA BOBA (DUMB SOUP)

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from Aunt Clara's Kitchen of Dominican Cooking

Time: 20 Mins

Difficulty: Easy

Serve: 4 people

Before starting to cook: No previous preparation is necessary.

Ingredients:

1 cup of gem squash cut into small cubes  
1 cup of potatoes cut into small cubes  
1 cube of vegetable stock (optional)  
1 cup of cassava (yuca) chopped into small cubes  
6 cups of water  
1 cup of noodles  
1 teaspoon of chopped parsley  
1/2 teaspoon of mashed garlic  
1/4 cup of chopped celery  
4 slices of bread  
1 tablespoon of vinegar  
Salt

Preparation:

1. In a pot add the vegetable stock, vinegar, salt, herbs, garlic, oil, water and squash. Bring to a boil and leave at medium heat for 15 minutes. Add the potatoes and the cassava, then in five minutes add the noodles. Stir regularly to avoid excessive sticking, adjust water when necessary. Adjust salt to taste. Remove from heat.

2. Toast the bread until light golden brown.  
Serve.

—*Nelly Rosario, Callaloo 30.1*