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GENERATIVE CHALLENGES Notes on Artist/Critic Interaction

by Koritha Mitchell

"Each mode of articulation by the writer and critic is necessary for particular fields or venues, even if in the last instance, it is limited by audience. Yet, what each does with language, however transparent or opaque, is the same: they seek to destroy the texts they are working with so they can never be read the same way again."

—Shona Jackson, *literary and cultural critic*

"Scholars seldom engage the literary fiction that is being written right now, so I write with posterity in mind. That's an important part of my audience. Still, I aim to produce work that is sophisticated enough to merit critical evaluation."

—Mat Johnson, *award-winning fiction writer*

"It is the duty of your opponent to create the greatest possible difficulties for you, just as it is yours to try to create obstacles for him. Only by doing this do you give each other the opportunity to find out to what heights each can rise. So I arrived at the startling conclusion that true competition is identical with true cooperation."

—W. Timothy Gallwey, *tennis coach*

The invitation to participate in the *Callaloo* retreat *Literature, Culture, and Critique* was a challenge to "... discuss what seems to be the ever-widening gap between the work of the critic and the cultural productions of the creative writer." As *Callaloo* editor Charles Rowell put it, we would aim for "healthy and productive conversations between those who produce culture forms and those who critique it, so as to bridge or close the gap between the writer and the critic." Rowell further explained, "This has long been one of the goals I have tried to achieve, however indirectly, in my efforts to publish the creative alongside the critical in *Callaloo*. Now is the time to be more direct in my efforts."¹

Yet, as soon as we gathered, a sort of debate ensued about whether or not "the gap between the writer and the critic" even existed. Shona Jackson opened the retreat with a presentation to lay the groundwork for discussion. She admitted that her remarks would "over-simplify in order to produce strong reactions and get us talking." Her presentation outlined some of the differences and similarities between what writers do and what critics do. In the process, she mentioned James Baldwin and Aimé Césaire. Many in attendance noted that Baldwin and Césaire very much blurred the line between artist and critic.

Thus, they suggested, beginning the retreat with references to these figures only helped emphasize that perhaps we had gathered to discuss a false distinction. Some participants essentially asked whether it was possible for there to be an “ever-widening gap between the work of the critic and the cultural productions of the creative writer” when many in the room were themselves both artists and scholars.

If the rationale for the retreat identified a line between critical writing and imaginative writing, were those who produce both being asked to choose a side? Having encountered situations when they were expected to do precisely that, they were justifiably cautious. Often, the assumption is that critics are not very creative and that creative writers are not necessarily critical, but these scholar-artists stand as evidence to the contrary. Thus, they intervened immediately to make sure that our discussions would not be based on stereotypical understandings of “writers” and “critics.” They insisted that we analyze the assumptions that might inspire the call to “close the gap” between these presumably distinct groups. After doing so, I believe that our efforts to answer Rowell’s call were, and remain, worthwhile.

I cannot speak as one who works as both a creative writer and critic, but I assume that even those who do somehow divide the labor in their minds or in their habits. Just as they can speak only as people who occupy both roles, I can speak only as one whose work falls in a single category: cultural criticism. I therefore readily admit that I see a distinction between the work of the creative writer and that of the critic, and these figures sometimes seem to be less in conversation than is fruitful. Indeed, generally speaking, while the creative writer and the literary critic should be each other’s ideal audience, they do not always appreciate each other’s efforts. Many scholars ignore the work being produced by their creative colleagues, and many imaginative writers dismiss critics as jargon-addicted elitists who produce alienating prose. Therefore, despite the existence of those who are both artists and critics, there is plenty of opportunity for more dynamic interaction.

Though I see a line of demarcation between the work of the critic and that of the artist, I would insist that there is nothing inherently limiting about it. Depending upon how we view it and work with or around it, the line can be quite generative. Indeed, I see it as the source of certain challenges that can make both creative writers and critics stronger—that is, sharper in critical vision, more precise in articulation. Acknowledging the line could simply generate challenges that require each of us to use all of our skill, courage, and concentration and thereby discover and extend our true potential.²

I insist upon these generative possibilities even as I admit that the distinction between “creative writer” and “literary critic” is as artificially constructed as any other category or boundary. I also recognize that the division of labor serves the interests of institutions that, just by operating as they do, perpetuate oppression. Still, the retreat left me determined to think about—and have us continue to think together about—the question that keeps surfacing for me: *To the extent that there is a difference between the labor of creative writers and critics, might we use the space produced by that difference as an asset?*

I.

When fiction writer Mat Johnson admits wanting to do work that merits the particular sort of engagement that a scholar offers, is he not acknowledging a difference between

his task and that of the critic? This recognition does not have to come with an assumption that one is more important or valuable than the other. In fact, the creative writer and critic prove indispensable to each other precisely because of their differences. The critic relies on the work of the artist because she usually offers a reading of some sort and therefore needs material to engage. It would be overly simplistic, though, to suggest that the critic is of secondary importance. After all, critical engagement with artistic work can often determine whether or not it stays in circulation via anthologies and textbooks, for example. Also, while it may seem that the artist simply creates and does not need the critic, a general awareness of how the work of predecessors and contemporaries has been received necessarily influences creative choices—whether the artist decides to defy the critical climate or somehow accommodate it. Artists and critics need each other.

In addition to needing each other, we share a fundamental goal. As Shona Jackson asserted, both creative writers and critics use language in hopes of transforming the material that they engage so that it “can never be read in the same way again.” If both aim to do transformative cultural work through language, then the distinctions arise in terms of form, venue, and audience. Because most publications privilege either imaginative writing or scholarship, the outlets most important to scholars often differ from those most vital for creative writers. This is a structural reality³ and because our institutions insist upon pecking orders of all sorts, we must sometimes aggressively assert the importance of the venues and audiences that welcome our respective work. As a result, many have yielded to the sense that culture producers and critics operate in different arenas and do not need to feel invested in each other. Our impulse at the retreat was to reject that mentality and work to prevent its perpetuation.

In that spirit, I aim here to propose strategies for viewing ourselves in ways that both acknowledge and challenge the structural patterns that are meant to pit us against each other, to put us on opposite sides of an institutionally drawn line. One way to honor our interdependence while recognizing institutional constraints is to vow to be like good tennis opponents.⁴ Perhaps better than anyone else, creative writers and critics can offer each other “the opportunity to find out to what heights each can rise” and allow “true competition” to prove itself “identical with true cooperation.” In encouraging us to make difference an advantage, I am speaking primarily of the creative writer who does not want to write critically and the critic not inclined to work in creative genres. Of course, our institutions will continue to ask us to value one type of endeavor over the other, but we can choose to resist the hierarchy even while seeing a difference between these forms of labor.

Doing so is akin to the sorts of self-affirming moves that intellectuals of color often make in order to avoid being swallowed whole by the racism that characterizes U.S. academic institutions. Most of us recognize that our universities were not designed with us, or our culture, in mind. Just as we were never meant to outlive slavery,⁵ we certainly were not meant to be employed in institutions of higher learning as creative writers and scholars. Recognizing that reality, many of us develop ways of keeping a certain amount of psychological and emotional distance from the workings of our institutions. We often read our surroundings critically, and in doing so, we recognize that judgments about our contributions to our departments, universities, and to the larger profession arise from standards created in racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist conditions. Every mechanism that keeps our institutions functioning was created with the core belief that whites belong

and blacks do not. We know the dangers of letting negative evaluations of our work from colleagues, administrators, or students determine our conceptions of ourselves. We know that the standards they use presume heterosexual white males as the epitome of authority, intelligence, and merit. Just as importantly, we understand that even when we earn institutional accolades, it is dangerous to base our self-worth on them.

I mention the tendency to separate ourselves from the values that dominate the spaces that we inhabit because I refuse to ignore key issues that fueled the intense “closed door” sessions at the retreat. Again and again, we grappled with the contradictions that arise from our positions within powerful institutions. Those who declared that the boundary between artistic and critical endeavors is false reminded us that the division is cultivated for institutional purposes. The distinction strengthens hierarchies that keep employees concerned about protecting their “territory” and the (limited) resources that come with it.

But it is precisely this sort of insidious structural motive that can make the space created by this division of labor generative. No one at our gathering denied that colleges and universities draw a line between critical discourse and creative writing, so transgressing the boundary that one’s institution constructs can become a form of resistance. More accurately, and much more importantly, for the person who sees herself as both creator and critic, it is a way of preserving her self-conception. Recognizing the line that others draw can become a way of making their opinions less important than her own truth. In its obliteration, then, the line nonetheless proves generative.

If the line itself generates challenges for those who seek to destroy it, the challenges are no less plentiful for those creative writers and critics more comfortable with the boundary; to use the tennis metaphor, their challenges come from “opponents” working on “the other side.” That is, if we grant that there is a difference in these forms of labor, then in the space created by that difference, there is room for cultivating tremendous admiration and respect that enables us to help each other improve. Each can master her own craft in ways that challenge the other to take her work to the next level.

For those comfortable with the distinction between the work of the creative writer and critic, a respect can develop that ideally makes us receptive to the insights of those who offer up challenges from the other side of the “net.” If artists read criticism seriously and respect its contributions even if they would not follow its protocols or use its language, benefits await. For a creative writer, there may be a sense of *Hmm, I never would have seen that in that poem*. Or, when one’s own work is engaged, *That wasn’t what I had in mind, but I see how the text conveys it*. For the critic, there may be the sense that one’s own writing inevitably suffers when one does not prioritize reading creative work. As Suzette Spencer put it, too much academic writing is “bloodless—it takes no risks, expresses no emotion, has no life.”⁶ Scholarly prose does not have to be dry and lifeless, and reading creative writers may help critics avoid falling into that trap. For me, then, what Rowell called “bridging the gap” is more about appreciation for each other’s craft than about suggesting that there is little distinction between the work of the critic and that of the artist.

In fact, our discussions made me realize that I have no desire to stand on both sides of the line. With that realization, I became conscious of my high regard for artists. I do not see myself as fitting into that category and, at least for me, that is part of why their work demands to be treated with such care. Accuse me of fetishizing if you will, but I handle as precious gifts the creations of novelists, poets, and dramatists partly because I do not

think that I could produce that sort of art. Now, this does not mean that my work is simply about praising theirs. In fact, I believe that part of the value of having distance between creator and critic is that it helps prevent the very human tendency to let rapport and over-identification influence critical vision. I believe that some effort toward objective critique must be made, despite the inevitability of bias. So, my commitment to treating art with care is about respecting it enough to submit it to rigorous examination.

Thus, what most resonated with me in Shona Jackson's tone-setting presentation was her description of the shared goal; as a critic, I hope that my work will make it impossible for a text to be read the same way again. If I can change the way that texts are viewed and interpreted, then I have helped to illuminate something about their significance. As Salamishah Tillet insisted, we do not engage art that we do not think is important. In fact, "if the work is not very challenging or sophisticated, it makes the scholar's task of saying something about it that much more difficult" (Tillet). When the creative writer has perfected her craft to produce a beautiful, meaningful work, she offers an impressive serve. That accomplishment challenges me to rise to the occasion of putting forth insights worthy of the artist's effort and achievement.

II

In making me realize that I do not yearn to straddle the line between artist and critic, *Literature, Culture, and Critique* made me grapple in more direct ways with the question of audience. In the process, I became conscious of the value that I place on other scholars, the people I hope the bulk of my writing will reach. During the retreat, several discussions centered on how it happened that Black Studies, which was founded through overt grassroots activism, could now seem so removed from communities beyond university walls. Have we lost our way? Have we forsaken our commitment to "the people"? Have we abandoned the very communities whose protests created a space for us in the academy? Many believed that this was a distinct possibility and that the best evidence of our waywardness is the fact that much of the field's writing only reaches other academics. We all agreed that the exigencies of tenure and paychecks played a key role. In other words, we recognize that we are operating within larger frameworks. We admitted that our stepping onto the "court" had required some sponsorship from institutions that we cannot fully disregard. In fact, many of us would not have been able to meet in New Orleans without research travel funds. As we reflected on our roles as scholars and artists, there lingered a sense that we needed to remain diligent, lest everyday pressures lead us away from the cultural values that inspired Black Studies. It is certainly not a new dilemma.⁷

While I saw the logic of this concern (and in fact felt connected to the sense of community from which it sprang), I could not shake what I believe to be a class-based feeling that arose within me. As we were justifiably identifying academia as a problematic location from which to work, I found myself thinking about how important it has been for me simply to have a seat at this circumscribed table. The innumerable sacrifices made by ancestors—deprived of literacy, dogged by segregation, and intimidated by mobs—came to mind, but so did the mother and aunt and other family members who are proud to be

able to say that I went to college. The sacrifices that they made and the rain checks that they took, hoping to see another cash them in, are exactly the reason I am here. So, even if my work reaches a “limited” audience, it is an audience that I have a responsibility to address. I see myself as very much a part of the world outside of the university walls, so I do not take lightly my opportunities to speak to those within them. I do not so easily say that my addressing scholars is an apolitical, disconnected enterprise.

For me, writing for an academic audience is one way that I avoid taking for granted the sacrifices made so that I could enter arenas that others could not. Many struggled so that I could walk this path. Whether overtly resisting the discourses and practices that labeled them inferior, or seemingly “accepting” them in order to avoid trouble, my ancestors and my mom were acting politically. They were making decisions with an eye toward how they might bring about a different material reality for someone else, if not for themselves. Of course, I realize that this is not the only way to acknowledge my debt to the ancestors. Thus, I am not suggesting that my ambitions can never exceed the goals that they may have had for me. So, if I imagine that sacrifices were made to give me a seat at the academic table, that does not mean that I cannot aspire to operate outside of its confines. Just as importantly, I do not emphasize the validity of addressing an academic audience in an attempt to ignore the fact that, within the academy, blacks have struggled to make it possible for the next generation of scholars to be respected for their broader contributions. Because of forerunners, I can establish the credibility of my work without having constantly to refer to European theorists or write in unnecessarily complicated language. Likewise, scholarly predecessors fought to ensure that I can target non-academic audiences without being automatically deemed to be lacking rigor. However, I would venture to say that those efforts were meant to create more options, not fewer. Therefore, we need not insist that all black scholars should write in styles that appeal to “the public” and strive to address broad audiences. In other words, the efforts to convince academia to recognize our public intellectual endeavors do not have to be interpreted as a declaration that any work that fails to appeal to “the people” is inherently less political, less socially conscious.

For me, even writing that may be read only by other scholars is a fulfillment of my commitment to my community partly because I do this work with a keen awareness that I can do it *only* because of my forebears. I am not here because academia has become so welcoming or less white supremacist in orientation; I am here because my ancestors paid a high price in myriad ways. The opportunities they paid for should never be one-dimensional . . . because the tolls never were.

Indeed, I want to trouble the assumption that broad appeal is the most natural way to gauge a scholar’s connection to black communities. First, as I have suggested, my scholarly work springs from my community allegiances because they are the ones who struggled to put me here. Blacks are needed in *every* arena; I will not discount the one in which I have been given the opportunity to operate. Second, the tendency to doubt the efficacy of black academic discourse often coincides with the assumption that addressing other scholars is somehow politically irrelevant. Yet fundamentally, politics is about who has power and how that power is used to distribute resources. Academia is not in any way divorced from politics—a politics that matters for the communities to which I belong. Thus, targeting an academic audience is not tantamount to abandoning community.

Just as my work is fueled by an awareness of my predecessors' decisions to change material realities, I operate with similarly political goals in mind as I look toward the future. It may be a slow process, but scholarship can change how people feel comfortable discussing—and even thinking about—issues. Historians changed the way that slavery could be taught and talked about when they began focusing on those who were enslaved, rather than relying exclusively on the records left by owners. An emblematic example is John Blassingame's 1972 classic *The Slave Community*. This book and studies influenced by it have shifted the conversation so that students more readily recognize that slaves had cultures and communities apart from the whites who oppressed them and that they were not simply passive victims. Such conversations would not have been possible before, and while they may not take place in every college and high school classroom, we should not underestimate the importance of this contribution, no matter how few non-academics read *The Slave Community*. After all, real change does not happen quickly, so the need to establish "truth" at a high scholarly level *before* it will trickle "down" will not soon disappear. That means that addressing academic audiences will not suddenly become politically irrelevant.

Throughout the weekend, the question of audience continued to haunt our discussions, and though everyone in attendance was affiliated with a college or university, the consensus seemed to be that we should all strive to reach audiences outside of academia. In this way, there was a commitment to education in its broadest sense. I certainly see the value of contributing to learning processes that are not dependent upon institutions of higher learning, so I worked to reconcile the very valid critiques of the academic orientation of Black Studies with my impulse to defend it.

Nevertheless, my inclination to resist prioritizing broad audiences over specialized ones only intensified during the final poetry reading of the retreat, which was held at Sweet Lorraine's Restaurant and Bar. While the second of four poets was sharing his work, an audience member approached me because I was emcee. He was visibly frustrated and he wanted to know if I was the person who decided who could present their poetry. He felt that he should be on the program because "poetry should be read with feeling! I'm not hearing any passion!" I tried to calm him and suggested that he continue to listen and give the artists a chance. Then, I explained that the program had been months in the making and that it reflected the wishes of a renowned editor whose journal was sponsoring the event. He shook his head and pursed his lips but agreed to sit it out.

I could not help thinking that this unsettling encounter was an issue of audience. I am guessing that this man's idea of a poetry reading probably looked and felt a lot like spoken word sessions featured in the film *Love Jones* and showcased by HBO's hit series *Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry*. The fact that Michael Collins was not talking about sensuality or acting out his words did not sit well. And even Fred D'Aguiar's humorous opening was not close enough to the more animated performance that this audience member expected. This was the last event of the weekend, and I was pleased to witness this already excellent program end on a powerful note with readings by Ed Roberson and Evie Shockley. Among other things, it emphasized Joyce Ann Joyce's earlier observation that the retreat had given us unique opportunities for productive exchange across generational lines. Still, what most struck me was the way that my enjoyment and this audience member's disappointment collided. To some, my saying this may only confirm that we

black scholars have lost our way. After all, spoken word invigorated the Black Arts and Black Power movements. If our poetry readings do not carry that ethos, then perhaps they are proof of our having abandoned the struggles that created the positions that we now occupy. (I hear those voices challenging me now as I write, just as they did at the retreat. I hope I have made clear why I do not believe that there is only one way to demonstrate connection to these movements.)

As the incident hovered over my experience of that night, I was reminded of comments made on the first day. Mat Johnson, who writes literary fiction, said that novels like his are not flying off of bookstore shelves; meanwhile arguably superficial works by authors such as Zane sell in numbers not to be ignored. At this, Christian Campbell quickly interjected: “You think nobody buys black literary fiction? They don’t buy black poetry!” For me, these declarations confirmed that, as an audience member, I matter as much as the man who seemed to be a spoken word veteran and perhaps a regular in the community space provided by Sweet Lorraine’s. He approached me in my capacity as emcee because he felt a sense of ownership in that space, and in many ways, he is a representation of the “community beyond the university walls” that many suggest is being neglected by the academic orientation of Black Studies. Nevertheless, our opposite experiences as individuals attending this reading struck me as an indication that we must ask: is there really something inherently irresponsible about my scholarly work being read mostly by other academics or about Mat Johnson’s fiction not reaching the Zane crowd?⁸

Without attempting to analyze market pressures, categorize tastes, or address the ways in which capitalism shapes preferences, I want to remind us of what we already know, that addressing different audiences often requires altering the form and content of our work. For some of us, this would mean playing on a different “court” and facing different opponents who offer different sorts of challenges. Doing so is certainly an option, but not doing so is an equally valid choice. I would not discourage the impulse to strive for larger and larger audiences, or for more and more popularity. After all, both the creative writers and critics who participated in this retreat have something meaningful to say to readers outside of the academy. However, we have to ask whether offering texts that appeal to specialized audiences really is the same as producing work that is inherently “disconnected.”

If my position seems like a turn inward that disregards any sense of wider responsibility, please note that it did not save me from agreeing that there are ways in which I am failing to fulfill commitments. Arguing for the value of academic audiences does not lessen the conviction I feel about charges leveled in closed door discussions by Carl Phillips and others. They said that literary critics need to engage contemporary texts rather than wait for time—and often the artist’s death—to magically make their work worthy of critical attention. Though their texts would richly reward scholarly analysis, literary critics seldom engage them, apparently preferring to examine literature written decades ago. My research centers on the last turn of the century, so I could certainly fall into the category of those who read contemporary work but do not incorporate it into scholarly endeavors. If I want to claim that academic audiences are important and that Mat Johnson and Christian Campbell should not have to worry about appealing to Zane fans, then I cannot turn my back on the task of critically engaging their work. It is not enough to read it for my own edification or for inspiration to avoid writing “bloodless” prose. In other words, critics need to be a better audience for our creative colleagues.

Still, the fact that they delivered this indictment at a *Callaloo* retreat brings me again to the very real way in which challenge inspires us all to rise to new heights. Though some of them are both artists and critics, when they leveled this charge, they were speaking as creative writers with a critique of scholars that carried the momentum of having traveled from “the other side.” Here again is an opportunity for us to let “true competition” prove itself to be “identical with true cooperation.” Thus, these artists have issued a challenge that inspires me to work toward rising to meet it.

In this instance, as in so many others, *Callaloo* had created opportunities for creative writers and critics to engage each other and perfect their cooperation through productive confrontation. Charles Rowell says that he initiated this retreat in order to become “more direct” in his efforts to put creative writers and critics in conversation, but in many ways, Rowell and the journal have always done precisely that. As Brent Edwards argues in the thirtieth anniversary issue, Rowell’s articulation of his goals “may also be misleading because it elides the fact that *Callaloo* had fulfilled that ‘long-desired goal’ from its inception, striving for disciplinary and generic boundary-crossing by publishing visual art next to fiction, interviews next to cultural and literary criticism, memoir next to contemporary poetry” (44–45).⁹

In every volume and in every event hosted, *Callaloo* has very concretely put us in conversations not to be had elsewhere. Again, Edwards describes the achievement: “For the work of a journal is not conflation, not some hallucination of unanimity. On the contrary, a periodical’s impact on the development of a culture is predicated on the ways it allows new dialogue, shifts and mixes readerships, channels influence beyond the usual barriers . . .” (46). *Callaloo*’s unique capacity for accommodating and embracing a wide range of interests and perspectives came into focus at the retreat when someone asked Charles Rowell how he would characterize the journal’s audience. He admitted that it was hard to gauge and certainly impossible to capture in any simplistic demographic sense.¹⁰ At one point, he added, “You know, I don’t know who reads *Callaloo*. If you can read English and you have any interest in the African Diaspora, there’s something for you in *Callaloo*—be it a poem, a play, a critical essay.” In so many ways, this pithy, somewhat light-hearted remark illustrates Rowell’s commitment to creating what he believes to be important, whether he can tell who values it at every point in the journey or not. That level of devotion and strong sense of purpose cannot be easy to maintain, so the journal’s longevity is a testament to his love for the complexity of the literature and culture of the African Diaspora. And indeed the disagreements that we had during this retreat further illustrate Rowell’s commitment to fostering dialogue, even when it is not easy . . . and even when there are questions about the need for it.

In coming together in New Orleans, we discovered that we have as many differences as commonalities. We created in person what Marlon Ross describes as his reading experience: “Each time I taste from the pages of *Callaloo*, I get this same sense of disorientation that I experienced on first hearing the word. It tastes so familiar but looks so unfamiliar, both homey and estranging, both rooted and floating” (88).¹¹ In concert with this sentiment, Rinaldo Walcott insisted throughout the weekend that we embrace our differences as much as our similarities. As he put it, African Diaspora Studies should be moving toward the point where “differentiation is at the core” of our analysis.

If for one left the retreat knowing that each of the colleagues in attendance had given me a tremendous gift by encouraging me to push myself toward greater clarity. As I interact with them in the coming years—whether in person, by phone, or by simply reading their work—I know that my thinking will evolve and sharpen as a result. These critics and creators have positioned themselves in perfect cooperation with me by offering productive opposition. Put another way, our conversations stayed with me precisely because *Callaloo* once again did what it does best. It put the complexity and diversity of the African Diaspora center stage so that its thinkers could challenge each other to discover and extend our potential. Such rigorous intellectual engagement is possible precisely because we offer each other *no easy conflation, no hallucination of unanimity*. Another impressive serve!

NOTES

The author thanks Charles Rowell and Ryan Friedman for taking time to comment on earlier versions of this essay. I hope that they can see from my revisions how highly I value their feedback. Friedman's thoughtful criticism of this piece is just one of many ways that he has proven to be a model colleague. I hope that I have returned some of the generosity and insight that he has offered to me.

1. Charles Rowell, Retreat Invitation. November 2007.
2. I am paraphrasing Gallwey, taking inspiration and language from this passage: "It is only against [great challenges] that he is required to use all his skill, all his courage and concentration to overcome; only then can he realize the true limits of his capacities [and] discover and extend his true potential" (120). See W. Timothy Gallwey. 1974. *The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance*. New York: Random House, 2008. Also, the epigraph is from page 121.
3. Again, I will reiterate that *most* publications privilege either the creative or the critical; the fact that *Callaloo* values them equally makes it quite unique and underscores its commitment to addressing the problems created by the divisions that are left unchallenged by the publishing programs of most journals.
4. Admittedly, I do not play tennis and never have. And, I am not trying to make a class-inflected comment by using this metaphor. I am interested in the mental preparation suggested by this classic book, written by a tennis coach, and used by coaches and players of every sport. There are many life situations in which it would be worthwhile to take seriously Gallwey's attitude toward how best to view the person that others believe is simply your opponent.
5. This is certainly not an overstatement, given the dehumanizing character of slavery in the Americas. I find Bernice Johnson Reagon's wording useful: ". . . we were brought here to do certain kinds of work, to carry out a certain kind of function. That function and responsibility did not have with it a concern with our continuance or existence as a people . . . Sometimes I think by the time they made the cotton-picking machines, we were just not supposed to be here anymore" (82, italics mine). See "My Black Mothers and Sisters, or On Beginning a Cultural Autobiography." *Feminist Studies* 8.1 (Spring 1982): 81–96.
6. Suzette Spencer's ideas on this point are more nuanced than this brief quotation may suggest. She explains: "what I mean when I talk about bloodless writing and writing devoid of passion and life, is a type of mechanized systematic process of written and verbal representation that refuses risk and the emotive for fear that such writing is the stuff of imagination, imprecision, and irresponsible abandon. Such a disposition refuses to recognize that intellectual discovery is inherent in the risky venture of writing itself. This, in the end, is a power game as dangerous as any presumed excess that might inhere in writing with honesty and daring to convey some feeling as opposed to hiding behind some ostensible objectivity that is never possible in the first place. This has affected both the kinds of scholarly books we are publishing and what has become permissible as discussion topics in the academy and in fields of black literary study. I see young scholars (ages 28–40) as extremely affected by this, as not harnessing voice and talent . . . and as being bored and jaded. Some people are simply stuck and it's not because they are not 'smart' or whatever, but because the pathways are not flexible enough and this actually has affected the vibrancy of African American literary studies."

So when Spencer speaks of bloodless discourse, she is referring to "protocols of fear and control that mar both writing and intellectual processes, and result in stagnation and boredom or a manda-

tory uniformity that is equally as stifling.” Make no mistake, though, Spencer does not assume that imaginative writers are free from these dangerous possibilities, “although it is often believed that creative writers transcend the banal politics of the academy.” In fact, “it is a mistake to think that they do not traffic in the power games that result in similar, though not identical, predicaments. Perhaps in the end, then, what I am talking about is power—not just abilities that are not being leveraged in the right way or individuals who are not taking the right paths, etc. I am talking, I think, at bottom, about how fields become shaped, get jaded, and why they end up producing the kinds of things they produce. My talk of bloodless writing is not an indictment of individuals, but a question about a way of being and constructing knowledge in our fields.”

7. It is not a new dilemma, so I do not claim that my responses to it (in this essay or elsewhere) are without precedent. Yet the need to address these issues will not soon disappear, and *Callaloo* is again helping to bring us together for dynamic dialogue. The follow-up to the March 2008 retreat is a much more public gathering in March 2009 titled *The Intellectual’s Dilemma: Production and Praxis in the Twenty-First Century*. Discussions this time will center on selected texts, including Houston Baker’s *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (Columbia UP, 2008); bell hooks and Cornel West’s *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (South End, 1991); and Harold Cruse’s classic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (Morrow, 1967). Houston Baker and Michael Eric Dyson are among the speakers; I don’t think that anyone expects the conversation to be any less high stakes than it was when the first printing of Cruse’s book helped encourage black scholars to articulate their various views on these complex issues.
8. Of course, there is much more of a continuum of black literary art than is suggested by my blunt juxtaposition of the work of Mat Johnson and Zane, but there is not enough room in this reflection to address those complexities. And I take full responsibility for the comparison. I am not altogether sure that Johnson actually named an author when he spoke of the type of black fiction that is flying off of bookstore shelves.
9. See Brent Hayes Edwards. “Southern Cross: Reflections on the Orientation of *Callaloo*.” *Callaloo* 30.1 (2007): 43–7.
10. It makes sense that pinpointing the demographic profile of the *Callaloo* reader would be challenging. After all, the journal welcomes material of many sorts, including both literature and criticism, visual art and interviews. Also, the journal demonstrates—in its pages and through the conferences it sponsors—a keen awareness of not only the U.S. and Canada but also black Britain, the African presence in Mexico, Spain, and Brazil as well as several regions of Africa and Asia.
11. See Marlon Ross. “*Callaloo*, Everyone?” *Callaloo* 30.1 (2007): 87–94.