

Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast

Oscar Murillo and Charles Henry Rowell

Lucas Zwirner: From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*, a podcast about artists and the way they think.

Oscar Murillo: It is fundamentally the desire to hold the mirror or shed light into certain broad notions of inequality in the context of the human being regardless of any racial difference.

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, and every episode features a conversation. We're taking artists, writers, philosophers, designers, and musicians and putting them in conversation with each other to explore what it means to make things today.

This episode's pairing: the artist Oscar Murillo and the academic and editor Charles Henry Rowell.

Born in Colombia, Oscar Murillo has consistently challenged the more established narratives around what it means to be an artist of color. You can see that in his multifaceted practice, but it's also true of the way he has traveled around the world, trying to encounter and explore as many different cultures as possible. He was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, and, I think in large part, it's because how he has challenged and opened up the conversation about identity and representation in the arts.

Born in the Deep South, questions of identity and representation have often been on the mind of Charles Henry Rowell. He's the founder and editor of *Callaloo*, an award-winning literary magazine that presents the culture of the African diaspora, from writers to visual artists and beyond. It's actually the longest continuously running African American literary journal in the world.

A few months ago, I heard from Oscar that Charles had been in touch with him, and I jumped at the opportunity to get them in conversation. What follows is part personal history, part history lesson.

Charles and Oscar, thank you so much for coming and doing this conversation today. I thought that just, by way of sort of an introduction, we could hear a little bit, Charles, about *Callaloo* and how you came to sort of start working on it.

Charles Henry Rowell: *Callaloo* focuses on the African diaspora, and it originally started focusing on the American South, because we had no site at all for publication, even during the black arts movement.

So I said those northern people don't even want us in their journals, but we will start one here. Also, as well as, the whites in the South did not want us in their journals. So I thought, "Okay, I will ask the students at

Southern University, where I was teaching, to help me with the finding money for the journal." So they went around with little tin cans. So when we first started, it was very, very small and folded, no perfect binding, and focusing only on the South. So that's how we got started.

LZ: But it sort of branched out from there into diaspora.

CHR: Into diaspora. Right, exactly. I wanted the world to see how we already had an aesthetic, and they were talking about a black aesthetic. The black aesthetic for me was the music of the spirituals, the Gospel, the blues. The black aesthetic was those sermons in the church and the rhetoric of the servants in church. The black aesthetic for me was those... just even to see those old women, those women in the church fan the way they had, with an elegance, or how they walked. All of that was part of the black aesthetic. I grew up in the black aesthetic every day of the week. That's one of the reasons that I started the journal.

LZ: Oscar, leading from that, did you find that when you first started working in London that there was real receptivity? You had been already in London for a number of years, but when you were really studying at the Royal College, how did you feel about sort of the reception of what you were thinking about?

OM: In a way, this is a little bit speculative, but I think in the context of how I grew up in Colombia—my generation and I think my father's generation and probably my grandfather's generation, there was no roots really—I struggled to position myself in any kind of in a way defensive conversation about the African diaspora.

CHR: Do you think that is... a possibility of that is the social class you come from? Or were you so young in Colombia before you left that you did not notice that the aesthetic and diaspora aesthetic that I'm talking about is performed in dance, in music, in ways of speaking, in ways of being in the world?

OM: No, absolutely. I think that being a landowner equals capital of sorts—cultural capital, financial capital—primarily, and I think more importantly, in the context of previous generations. And that leads to the destiny of future generations. And like, for example, my family, we don't own any land, or at the very least, we don't own any important land that warrant us a kind of an important status in society.

CHR: Were there other people of African ancestry who owned land?

OM: Well, not in the region where I grew up. I mean, I think we still very much exist on the very oppressive system of plantations, very much controlled by one or very few families that, of course, are not of African origin. They are European originally.

CHR: And all of these people worked... continued to work the land of the Europeans?

OM: Of course.

CHR: In the American South, we had a lot of black people working the land of the European settlers. However, some few of us did acquire land.

And that's.. I think there's a remarkable difference in jobs, and I think that's where I have a kind of struggle. And I'm trying to find the reference point and their position within, particularly in the current social moment of conversations about blackness, for example, because my experience, it's tremendously, tremendously different. And I think it's a mixture of knowing, of course. And it comes from my mother, who was a factory worker, but my father, too, was a factory worker. But in that mix, it wasn't simply just a racial situation. Racial, of course, yes. But also it had to do with the working classes. What you had in an indigenous population, the oppression is such that I don't think we have been able to get over an understanding of an oppressive existence.

LZ: Meaning it hasn't even been crystallized the way it has in America, for example. that The black experience now is characterized by a clear struggle.

OM: I think from a kind of, let's say poetic, point of view, the way I like to describe this experience is that the Colombian, the individual that's oppressed, is only alive really because of the beauty of the natural surroundings of the country.

CHR: From that environment, those people who are not in the ruling class, what kind of art exists?

OM: In terms of the visual arts? Zero.

CHR: There are no... how do you call them, self-taught artists? We have self-taught artists.

OM: No, but again this is so advanced that even this idea of calling yourself a self-taught...

CHR: They would never say they are, but they can't necessarily read and write.

OM: You know, I have this image of being drowned, of people, of the oppressed being drowned. And I'm

really talking about the working class really, whether you're from an Afro diaspora or whether you're from an indigenous or even white. The oppression is such that when they submerge you deep into the water and they leave you there. There is a kind of understanding that if they bring you back to the surface just in time before you become unconscious and die, so that you live in this, in this kind of, delirious limbo, where you're simply subjected to a life of pain. And this is where potentially art comes into the picture—or culture, which is mostly music.

LZ: What do you think characterizes the experiences of artists? It's sort of like an overview of what you think the experience of a diaspora artist is like.

CHR: I would call it infinite variety because dance in the US, among African people, if we go back to early dance forms, they would not have the semblance of samba, they would not have the semblance of anything Jamaican, but we would know that there's something African in it. There was always a wheel toward resistance of whatever the Europeans exerted on us. The resistance may not appear publicly, but the resistance is within the home, within the soul, within the church, and, in fact, plotting and planning to do something to liberate yourself all the time.

OM: I want to discuss this idea of performativity within blackness, and I very often even in conversations I say, "Look at my face. Isn't that enough?"

LZ: Are you talking about the kind of performing a role within the existing narrative? How are you understanding that particular word?

OM: Persistence on creating a kind of frame for yourself as an artist of color, which is something that...

LZ: You have not wanted to do.

OM: ...I have a complete desire to eradicate. Period.

CHR: Is that possible in this kind of international culture? I don't think that's possible.

OM: I would like to...

CHR: And what is wrong with operating within that frame? Because out of that frame...

OM: I think that it isn't, it's not about being right or wrong. I think it's simply about if there is, for example, particularly in the American context, if there is a desire to achieve equality of some sort. And what is equality and what are you measuring it against?

Then I am simply just a human being. I'm saying, "Of course, there are problems; of course, there is racism. But my approach is to say, "I want to be antagonistic, and I want to be confrontational with my own body, because that's much more important."

CHR: But once you do that, you're placing your body, that racialized body by the society itself, at the center. And that's what I'm saying, there's nothing wrong with saying—if somebody calls you a black artist, that you are at the center, which means they affirm the viewers are your... how do you call them, the people who like your art? Yes, your audience. They will accept who you are in that art.

LZ: The idea is I think, if you think about it, if you are a white male artist, people will immediately engage with you as an artist first, because there are no... you're part of, again, you're part of the majority, the hegemony, however you want to frame it. But the real benefit to that is that it's your expressive action that gets considered and judged as it is, for what it is.

CHR: But I think the African American now wants to say, "This white art here" the same way they've been saying "his black art here," because the white art is also racialized and also in a certain class. The black art is also the same thing, but it's just that there's a failure to do what I'm advocating now: to think, "This is white art."

OM: In my personal experience, it was also in the image of the context in which I was growing up in. And I always advocate for the working class first and not the diaspora. For me, the working class is so much more pivotal, then, to have a conversation purely and simply, even though I clearly come from an Afro background. I mean, my mother's black, and my father is mixed. And I have a broad family of people that are primarily Afro, from both sides of my family.

CHR: Which is true of most African Americans, by the way, but we don't make the distinction the way you're making it. You may not be representing it, but the eyes of the power will represent you as making art in that... from that stand of that particular group. It don't matter if you talking about sunlight. "He spoke about sunlight as a black man. Do you hear the comment about his black sunlight?" You know, that's how that operates here.

LZ: But that's fascinating, because it's sort of like how do you resist? How do you speak in a way about... speak whatever it is you want to speak about

without being immediately classified, or without being encouraged to classify yourself in the way that the dominant power structure wants to classify to understand you?

CHR: I would like to say this. This may be my romanticizing my existence. I think *Callaloo* speaks for itself as art. Now if you want to add race to it, add race to it. But these people are producing the kind of art that challenges any question about what the art is. It is imported jazz. And jazz... I keep coming back to the idea of jazz,—jazz, in its root so terribly, terribly African American. It started with with African American. It is replete. And look at what happened to it. It now dominates the whole unit, the whole globe. And these people have been saying, "I'm going to write black music." No, they just performed out of their... They just created out of their performing existence, and they didn't have to say, "I apologize about being race or class." They created and they informed. They have shaped the world's music. These are black people, who are poor black people. Let me just say this and that's all I ask as an editor of *Callaloo*: just create the same way the jazz musicians. And you will have always the microphone in your hand, because they would go to try to imitate you.

OM: This is why I have the microphone in my hand. You know, but I think to add to that I think what's important also to acknowledge is that hip-hop, for example, is another example. This is why I like to say, "Well, look at my face." And that's somehow... I think it is enough.

LZ: As opposed to having to qualify yourself some way, right?

OM: Exactly. And I think that...

CHR: You should never surrender yourself to being qualified, except, "Look at my work."

LZ: I think part of what he's saying is finding a language that moves people, using that as an entry point, and then having it stand for whatever it stands for, whether it's an experience like a jazz musician or...

CHR: And it has to be a new language, as the jazz musicians created a new language.

LZ: Back to *Callaloo* for a second. It's one of the things I noticed when I started really digging in and reading issues is that you managed to create a publication that is very much about a specific experience, but the content is defined really strictly on its quality.

CHR: I don't think I did anything except to collect what I thought to be the best. And the best has to do with the quality of the performance on the page, and it doesn't have to apologize. It has... doesn't have to defend. I'm looking for the best of the art from the diaspora. If it doesn't fit in terms of what I'm calling the best... And I guess you could ask the question, What do you mean by the best? Does it do what it is intending in itself to do?

OM: I think you've got me thinking. And I wanted to ask you a question in relation to travel and the importance of travel to have self-esteem and to have a kind of reference point for the individual in relationship to the world and what that does in relation to how societies have indoctrinated themselves. You need to have any kind of structure and framework. Even this idea of diaspora is a vessel to to meander and to navigate a difference.

LZ: It's really interesting what you said earlier, when I asked you what characterizes the art of diaspora, you said infinitely varied. And of course, something one could say about your practice is that it is extremely varied. I mean even the show that's currently open at The Shed is very varied.

CHR: Yes.

LZ: And I feel that, more and more, one of the things you've resisted is being pigeonholed into one specific thing. How has travel—we know that you move around a lot—is it explicitly part of your practice, that travel? Or do you feel more it's just something that you have to do for yourself personally?

OM: My work, it's... I think, first and foremost it's about a download of physical energy. And I think this is where perhaps they come to a broader understanding as to why I want to eradicate any kind of framework around categorizations. And I think it has to do with also with the lack of historical belonging. Even in the context of being an Afro in Colombia, where you really—apart from, of course, knowing a very vague history of my family—but I'm not subject... I don't have these kind of heavy roots holding me down.

CHR: What he has said about himself is what I could say about all of the people that I've been collecting in *Callaloo*. They are just performing themselves without worrying about what people would think about them. And in performing themselves, if they have a little... if they learned a little by traveling in Brazil about samba, if they have one samba beat in a poem, that is still the world.

LZ: I want to change directions just a little bit. I want to sort of talk a little bit about personal background. And so I'm curious, Charles, if you could tell us a little bit about how your aesthetics were formed? Because, of course, visual art has increasingly become part of *Callaloo's* story.

CHR: Remember, my father was a farmer, but he took great pride in organizing the land. And if I had been able to fly over in those days to see how those rows of cotton or corn, I would've said, "Oh my God, that's art." I think, thinking back on it now, I knew that he was an artist too. And he always was responsible for the vegetable garden, which is a small plot of land that I could see. And he took great pride in laying out the rows of cabbages, the rows of collards, the rows of squash, a certain kind of way, the tomatoes, a certain kind of way.

But then my mother was just the ultimate artist with her flower gardens. My father was creating these lines for necessity. My mother was creating these lines with her flowers... the variegation. Is that a word? The variegated patterns of the blossoms. She didn't put straight rows of zinnias, straight rows of petunias. These seeds were mixed in a certain kind of way as one would find any kind of abstract art. Because people would pass by our home and stop their cars to look at the organization. And then over from that was this orchard, fruit orchard. They would stop and look at and ask my mother, "Would we be able to have an apple? Would we have a pear?" These are whites. And my mother was gracious. She said, "Of course, you may get more than one."

Somehow, in high school, I heard about Mr. Johnson. And I can't even remember his first name, but he taught me. My parents allowed me to go into the city to take lessons free from Mr. Johnson on drawing and watercolor. And I said, "Oh, I have it good." My friends are all going to have to go study. They have to run off to play baseball, football. They get hurt. I could just do what I wanted to do: the beautiful things.

And then when I went off to college, I did not go to study art. I was going to study horticulture and landscaping, which is what my mother was doing all the time, you know? So, but then I discovered that botany was a challenge for me, and that numbers were a challenge to me.

I made Cs in math. I made Bs in botany. And the botany thing was a thing that signaled to me: I'd better leave this alone because I can't... If I could make only Bs in botany, what would I do when I got to plant pathology and agronomy? I would fail at those. So I took the easy way. I was making As in English, so

I turned to English and literature. So that's how I got that direction. But in doing the English... But I was looking at beauty when I was reading the poetry and I was reading novels.

LZ: Will you describe to me being in graduate school...

CHR: Oh yes.

LZ: ...studying *Beowulf*, and seeing—being in the '60s being the '60s and seeing things happening in Alabama, where you were from.

CHR: Yes. Oh yes. Absolutely. This is a moment when I was at Ohio State, in graduate school. That must've been the '60s, obviously. And I was taking this course, I started out specializing in Old English. This is before Chaucer. This is Anglo-Saxon, where you had *Beowulf*.

And so I was studying the original language, the Anglo-Saxon, because I'd had a course a quarter in just Anglo-Saxon grammar and prose. And then next semester, I had this course in Old English minor poems, you know, "Dream of the Rude" and other small poems like that.

But then the *pièce de résistance* was the course in *Beowulf*. And there were three of us in the *Beowulf* class—one guy from Yale who was very snooty. And that's why I want to go there and learn how to be snooty. We met daily, and so I'd have to go home. But that one morning, before I left my apartment, I knew I had to see what was going on on television, so I flicked it on. I had about an hour to do that and get to class too. I lived across the street from the university. That morning, I got this image of these people being beaten by these policemen as they were crossing the Pettus Bridge over in Alabama, in Selma, walking over here to Montgomery. I knew about the Civil Rights March, but I'd never seen this beating and killing of people. And I was in such shock and here I am, off headed to a class in *Beowulf*, translating Old English.

And I asked the question that the Bishop of Rome asked the people he had sent off to England to Christianize the Celtic people. He asked, "What has in Gael to do with Christ?" He was asking, "Why are they saving these manuscripts with this *Beowulf* stuff in it? That has nothing to do with Christianity." So I asked myself the same question with a different way: "What has my studying *Beowulf* to do with going home, where I knew I had to return, to the South?" That's what those old women in the church told me. "Honey, you're going to have to come back here and help us out. You've got to come back and work for

the community." And I knew that I would have to do that by teaching in an all black school, an all black university.

So I turned away from Old English after that semester, but I stayed that course. I still took a few courses in that, but I had nothing to turn to because there was no African American classes. I never took classes in African American literature. That was a new sort of thing. But I took courses in American literature, and if they were twentieth century, I would tell my professor, "I'm going to write on a black writer. I'm going to write on either Ralph Ellison, or I'm going to write on Baraka's *Dutchman*, or I'm going to write on Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry." So that's what I did. That's how I got involved in African American literature.

LZ: Oscar, you know when you mentioned your mother, what was that in reference to in your own childhood that you learned from that relationship?

OM: Yeah, I think again the land has to do... the land comes from the mental. Whereby Charles, your family were or are a landowning family, and therefore even in the context of the '50s, the '40s, or the '60s, you as a family... You're living on the land, and therefore you have a kind of freedom to exist—even if it's limited, even if there are... very clearly there were racial issues and, in fact, you just explained that. We were not and we are not a landowning family, whereby, therefore when I say, "Well, how do I know that I have kind of alliance to my mother in kind of an aesthetic?" It's really much more in a totally unrealized way. Because my mother couldn't have a car, couldn't even have the time cause she worked twelve hours a day in the factory, six days a week.

So there was not even a way to explore what those intricate moments, or finding that relationship, could have been. I just know that the... I think probably the only example of that was when my mother went to her tailor friend to get dresses done. And she had a kind of style, so I know that she was interested in aesthetics, but there was no beyond that. And also she, my mother, was a great dancer too. But effectively she was a maid, and she worked as a factory worker. So there was no way to really explore the self. She didn't have a way to explore the self, even if it was through a garden or sewing or... There was no time for that.

LZ: She had one day off. She had Sunday off and so six days a week...

OM: She had Sunday off, but then, you know, you have a family.

LZ: And I'm curious what you think about that, because when you describe your mother, you're basically describing a woman who never had a real chance for self-expression because of extreme economic pressure. And you're talking about a family that had to totally ingratiate yourself to a dominant white class in order to retain a certain amount of economic freedom.

CHR: My parents.

LZ: Your parents.

CHR: And I was warring against the subjugation.

OM: Yeah, that was your subversive part, those moments.

CHR: Yes. But let me just say this to you. My parents were not peculiar. There were other black people throughout the South who owned land and who were self-sufficient in certain ways and who had to fight and protect themselves from the Klan. But so happened on the road where we lived, my father had established certain relationships with the whites on that road. And the other family was a Bradford family, their last name was Bradford. They also established a relationship with the other white people, so no Klansman ever came down the road where we were because I think my father would have said, would have called the white farmers and said, "You know, you're going to have to keep them away." The same with my grandfather—his father—my grandfather created a posse when the Klan came and drove them away.

Now, I don't know how Edmund Rowell, who is my great grandfather—yes, my father's grandfather—I don't know how he acquired land, but it was quite shortly after emancipation. I need to go to the county records to figure that out. His name was Edmund Rowell. His wife was Rachel Rowell. And so all these names... so that's what happened. And how they got the name Rowell, I assume that was a slave master with the last name Rowell—somewhere, not their necessarily slave master. It could have been just, "I like the name Rowell."

LZ: Maybe one of the last things I was hoping you would talk about, Charles, is, are some of these subversive? I mean you talked about being in a big family of eight siblings, but what were some of the kind of indications early on that maybe you weren't going to fit into the context that existed.

CHR: Well, I think it came from my public speaking in church, because the people who said to my mother, "Ms. Jessie—her first name was Jessie—"You know, Ms. Jessie, that boy's going to be a preacher." And another

woman would say, "No, he's going to be a 'fessor," meaning professor. And then—so I didn't know what they were talking about—then my first-grade teacher would come and talk to my mother about what she should do with my father to push me forward. I didn't know what they were talking about. I never knew until much later. That's what they were doing to propel me on, and nobody gave me a lecture about it. They just said, "We'll listen to what he says, perhaps, and we'll support it." So I was supported fully to go off to college.

My father took me into the city, to his danger, to his peril. He took me with him in the city, and my mother told him to go by a particular store to buy something. And I noticed this little clerk, always a young white clerk, toss the money at my father. I said, "Why are you throwing that money at him?" My father grabbed my arm. She looked at him. I said, "I don't understand why you're doing it. You're just as cheap and tacky." My father dragged me out of the store, and so he said, "Don't you ever do that again. You're going to get me killed, if not you." So I listened.

My father would sell vegetables in the black community. You know, we had produce, set gardens, all kinds of vegetables. He'd take it into the city and throughout the black community. And he'd stop and chat with the people, and he would say, "This is my baby son," meaning youngest child, "My son, this is Master Charles Henry," of which I thought all these years he's given me this title. He doesn't mean slave master, now. Master Charles Henry. I discovered what that meant yet later years by studying Middle English, Old English, Middle English, and then finally the Renaissance and the royal families of the upper classes. They would call the special one, or the youngest one, master—a young man as master. And in church, I was called "Master Charles Henry," but the other boys were not called "Master Charles Henry." So that was a pushing. I never developed an ego about it. The ego is coming now, in my old age. I was always Master Charles Henry.

OM: I think, just to add, I think there was this innate spiritual feeling of injustice that you felt, that it wasn't even... I think it preceded even your education.

CHR: I knew something was wrong.

OM: And maybe I ought to explain myself better: When the courage to repel the injustice, the courage to remove the oppressive shackles, was much more stronger because there was a very clear source of supremacy and power and oppression.

CHR: Interesting.

OM: And this is what I mean about it's kind of part of didactic relationship.

LZ: In the American context, you mean?

OM: In the American context, the supremacists kind of always announced themselves, and this is who we are, we're here, we're oppressing you. And there is this kind of relationship that existed or exists. And that's kind of what I mean, whiteness. And I think that this is where, even though I have solidarity and I sympathize, I also acknowledge that I come from a totally different context. And even with my slight provocative discourse sometimes, it's really not to dismiss or to be ignorant, but really for there to be an acknowledgement that there are...

LZ: Different conversations.

OM: There are different conversations that need to be acknowledged.

LZ: You know, how does—this is kind of a strange question, maybe— but how does success play into your vision of yourself, into this vision of solidarity? Your own success in a capitalist system, of course, gives you leverage and power, and are there ways to take advantage of that? Does that make you uncomfortable? Is it something that you have to contend with?

OM: No, I think, I think, absolutely. I think what that does is, I mean it something that I'm beginning to handle, I think it's that leverage. It's something that, I think as I continue to manage my practice, I would insert that leverage to attain certain kind of discourses and to discuss certain things that I strongly believe. It is fundamentally, I'll say, with the desire to hold the mirror or shed light into certain, or I get into, very broad notions of inequality in the context of the human being—just regardless of any racial difference.

LZ: I want to thank you guys both for doing this this afternoon. Thank you, Charles. And thank you, Oscar. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you both.

CHR: Thank you. Thank you very much. And it's a pleasure meeting both of you and coming out of the wilderness, which is the South, to say hello to you in the city of New York.

OM: I'm still in the wilderness. Thank you for the history lesson, Charles, a real honor to be here with you.

LZ: Thank you.

Dialogues is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists on this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues. And if you like what you heard, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. It really does help other people discover the show. I'm Lucas Zwirner. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you join us again next time.