

Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast

Dora Malech and Kosiso Ugwueze, *The Hopkins Review*

March 31, 2022

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. Our guests today are Dora Malech and Kosiso Ugwueze. Dora Malech is an associate professor in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and the new editor-in-chief of *The Hopkins Review*. She has written four books of poetry: *Flourish*, from Carnegie Mellon University Press, *Stet*, Princeton University Press, *Say So*, Cleaveland State University Poetry Center, and *Shore Ordered Ocean*. With Laura T. Smith, she is the co-editor of the *American Sonnet: An Anthology of Essays and Poems*, forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press. Kosiso Ugwueze is a Pushcart Prize-nominated writer and editor. She was born in Enugu, Nigeria but was raised in southern California. Her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Joyland*, *Gulf Coast*, *Subtropics*, and the *New England Review*. Kosiso is an MFA candidate in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University where she is the managing editor of *The Hopkins Review*.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dora and Kosiso. We're just really excited to take some time with you to learn about what's happening at *The Hopkins Review*. To start with, can you introduce yourselves: tell us each your name, and what your role is at *The Hopkins Review*, and how you came to be a part of the journal?

Dora Malech

My name is Dora Malech and I'm the editor-in-chief of *The Hopkins Review*. I just stepped up to the position in January. I'm also an associate professor in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, which is our creative writing department, and I am filling the big shoes of my predecessor David Yezzi who served as editor for seven years, and before him John T. Irwin, who passed away in 2019, but was really the force behind launching *The Hopkins Review* in its current incarnation in 2008. Thank you so much for having us on the podcast.

Kosiso Ugwueze

My name is Kosiso Ugwueze. I'm managing editor of *The Hopkins Review* and also a second-year MFA candidate in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. I became involved in the journal my first semester. I started as an assistant editor, and when the opportunity to become managing editor opened up, I raised my hand and said I would love to do it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

For our listeners who might not be familiar with the journal, can you give us a little bit of background on its history and the content?

Dora Malech

Absolutely. So, in terms of the history of *The Hopkins Review*, it actually is one of the older journals published by a degree-granting creative writing program. I believe it was originally the first literary journal published by a degree-granting creative writing program because it was established in 1947, the year that the Writing Seminars was founded by Elliot Coleman. For reference, that's the second oldest program of its kind in the country, the first is Iowa, and I believe Iowa's journal didn't start till the 1970s. So, that's kind of a geeky claim to fame, and unfortunately, it was a short-lived claim to fame because due to lack of funding and lack of permanent faculty, that incarnation of the journal actually folded in 1953. So, *Hopkins Review* was dormant/non-existent for several decades, and then John Irwin really felt like a top tier MFA program needs a literary quarterly, both to be sharing its vision and curating emerging and established writers, and also as an experience, a professional experience, a pedagogical experience, for its own MFA students.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And what would you say sets *The Hopkins Review* apart from other literary journals?

Kosiso Ugwueze

I think one of the biggest things that sets *The Hopkins Review* apart from other journals is that we have an art folio in every issue. So, we feature prominent or emerging artists throughout the journal. We also prioritize criticism and public-facing art. In the past, we've had things like dance reviews, book criticism, personal essays, and memoir. We also have a long-standing relationship with form in poetry, but we're trying to keep that conversation ongoing and open, and so I think *The Hopkins Review* is really special in that we have a lot of different components. We feature art folios; we have great formalist poetry but poetry that also expands the forms. We're also open to different forms of poetry and fiction, so I think that is, like, the main thing that makes us a special journal.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And for those who either subscribe or are familiar with the journal, when those folks either received or saw online the latest issue that just came out in the last couple weeks, at least speaking for myself, they were in for quite a bit of a visual surprise because the journal has had what I would categorize as a pretty massive redesign this year, with this volume year. So, I wanted to talk to you about that because it really was just sort of jaw-dropping and stunning, the sort of before and after. So, I wanted to ask you kind of how that decision came about and how that process happened. Where the impetus to make such a dramatic cover change came about, just kind of talk us through. In addition to your coupling with the cover re-design you have a very shiny, very lovely new website, so I was just hoping to get some more background detail on all these exciting new changes.

Dora Malech

Thank you so much and thank you for the positive feedback on the re-design. We were hoping that would be the general reaction, but perhaps the general reaction after a moment of shock and surprise because it is very different.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I gasped, audibly gasped.

Dora Malech

Wonderful, mission accomplished. So, I think Kosiso did a beautiful job of talking about the content itself of *The Hopkins Review* and the really eclectic content being what sets it apart from perhaps other literary journals, that poetry and fiction is really bumping up against visual art and criticism, and we are going to make a push to start publishing more public-facing scholarship. All kinds of things, and so the idea is if you come for one genre, you end up having to encounter and enjoy and wrestle with others as well, and in taking over the journal, and I knew that I was going to be stepping up last year, so I had some lead time to do some planning. I really was thinking about how to keep that mission of this very eclectic lively journal going while both expanding the readership base, expanding the contributor base, thinking a lot about the diversity and all kinds of diversity in terms of where people are geographically, in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, aesthetic. So, just thinking about how can we make *The Hopkins Review* more inclusive and really celebrate this aesthetic diversity alongside all kinds of other diversity, and I thought: we need a design that reflects that.

It also is the 15th volume, which means the 15th anniversary, of this new incarnation of *The Hopkins Review*, so I thought, let's coordinate that redesign with a kind of celebration of those first fourteen years, and then this looking forward at what our future is, and I ended up doing a lot of listening sessions with different, what you might call, stakeholder groups: advisory editors, contributing editors, faculty advisory editors, former staff, current staff, which are of course current student and alumni, and just getting a sense of what they wanted to see in the journal, what they wanted the journal to represent, how they might want the journal to represent the Writing Seminars itself and our community here, and I did that in collaboration with the designer Sevy Perez who I had worked with before on other literary projects, and I admire his work. He's very immersed in the literary publishing world, and so he was a great partner and visionary in doing both the cover design and then also saying, well, let's have this be a more holistic design and make sure we have a website that is as inclusive and user-friendly and dynamic as the vision we want for the print journal itself.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The other thing I wanted to ask about the cover in particular was, you know, after I sort of saw the new cover and was again taken aback by how gorgeous it was, I then realized reading, you know, both on your social media and in other writing about the issue, was that your plan was to feature one artist on every cover of this volume year. So, I wanted to find out kind of how that

decision came about; how you selected the artist for this year, maybe a little bit more about him, and just sort of how that played out. Cause to my knowledge, at least within the Hopkins Press catalogue, there isn't another journal that does that kind of thing, to feature someone in various ways over the course of the volume year, which I think is a really inspired choice, so I wanted to hear more about that.

Dora Malech

Thank you so much, and I'm here in my office in Gilman Hall on the Homewood campus and class is letting out, so I apologize if there's ambient noise from happy students.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I think that's a good thing. We all are happy to hear happy students.

Dora Malech

We all have missed it, but the timing isn't perfect. So, you asked about this featured cover artist. We've had these folios, as Kosiso mentioned, for the duration of *The Hopkins Review* since 2008. We've had this focus on visual art, but in thinking about print culture and where print culture is now and trying to really do some reflection on why someone would want to subscribe to a print journal: why they would keep it in their home instead of pulping it, why they would leave it out on their coffee table. I thought, let's start thinking in terms of volumes being something cohesive, something meaningful, something that represents a year of art and culture and thinking and community, as opposed to a kind of container for more piecemeal issues that come and go. So, that was my vision.

I didn't want to lose this wonderful tradition of these interior folios, and I think it's really important to focus on a different artist each month, but to have that cover artist, and our hope is to often have them be artists who have some affiliation, past or present, with Baltimore, we thought would be a way to celebrate where we're based geographically, to celebrate our hometown, to shine a light on really amazing artists, and to also create this really beautiful print artifact, where it would live on your shelf or live on your table, and you could get to really anticipate each new issue coming in a year, and then look forward to what the next year would bring, and we're really excited to start with our first cover artist, Stephen Towns, who is a figurative painter and a fiber artist. So, we'll have some of his paintings, and then we'll have two of his fiber quilt artworks.

Mary Alice Yeskey

How cool.

Dora Malech

We're really excited about the next to covers, and so we're just excited about that, and then in this issue Karen Wilkin has a folio featuring the paintings of Jill Nathanson, who is an abstract

painter, kind of a color field painter, and so to have that figurative vision and then open up and have the abstract vision, hopefully is another little surprise in terms of juxtapositions in the artistic landscape.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, is Stephen Towns from Baltimore?

Dora Malech

He is not originally from Baltimore, but he is based in Baltimore now, yes.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I think, again, it's such a thoughtful design decision that ties into the mission of the journal really well, and like you said, gives people a tangible, real artifact that they're gonna want to keep, and it creates anticipation for what's next. Like, I didn't realize that he was also a fiber artist, I just assumed it would be a series of paintings and knowing that it's going to be completely different in two issues makes me excited for 15.3, so I'm excited to see that.

Dora Malech

We'll also be ending the year, because we thought, you know, the artist who's on the cover should have a folio of their own as well, so the final folio of the year, 15.4, will be a folio of Stephen Town's work, so that will be 8 additional images, and we're really excited. Karen Wilkin, who's been our long-time art critic and curator, encouraged me to also reach out in this process and invite other guest critics and guest curators, and so the Rabkin art journalism award-winning art critic Seph Rodney will be introducing Stephen Town's which we're really excited about.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, how nice. What a nice little kind of full circle endcap for it too, that's really exciting. What advice would you give to someone considering submitting to *The Hopkins Review*?

Kosiso Ugwueze

As managing editor, I'm sort of in charge of the submittable queue, and we have a very robust system. I just want to give a shoutout to our wonderful assistant editors and our wonderful readers who do a lot of the heavy lifting of going through and reading our submissions. A process that we try to come to consensus about a lot of the work that we choose, but we always have thoughtful discussions about the pieces that jump out at people, and we encourage our editors to sort of, you know, pursue work that sings to them. So, while we have a sort of structured and meticulous system of like looking through submissions and making sure that everything gets read twice or more, we also encourage our assistant editors and our readers to champion work that they feel jumps out at them or that has a unique voice, a unique

perspective, a unique way of looking at the world, and so we say to our submitters that if you're on the fence about something, you think it's too experimental, you think it's not going to be a good fit, we encourage you to submit it because we do have people on our staff who have different tastes. We have a very diverse, very interesting, eclectic group of readers and assistant editors. So, if you're on the fence about something, you think it's too weird, you think it's too experimental, we encourage you to submit it because someone on the team might be, you know, really into speculative fiction and love to take on your work. So, don't be shy is the advice I'd give for anyone who's interested in submitting, is to really, first and foremost we're looking for work that sings, essentially, and so we're really encouraging of all types of forms and topics.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And I love that sort of atmospheric picture you just painted about the editorial process, about how you have almost psychological safety, that the editor can say, look, this is important to me and here's why. I think that that speaks to, you know, again, to talk about what we were talking about in the beginning, sort of how different this journal is from other journals and how the net is a lot wider and a lot more open and accessible. I think that's really something special, and I love you using the word sings. That's great. That's a really succinct way of describing it because it isn't one specific genre or focus, it's really whatever sung to the person who read it. I think that's fantastic.

Issue 15.1 is out now, in print and online, via Project MUSE. Can you give us a little sneak peak as to anything that may be in store for 15.2?

Kosiso Ugwueze

Yeah, absolutely. So, 15.2, we have, as we always do, we have some wonderful poetry, we have fiction, we have book criticism, we have memoir, essays, we have an art folio, and I think what's really interesting about 15.2 is that we're featuring, like, new people. People the journal has never featured before. I think in the past, we sort of have, like, recurring writers, but I think in 15.2 most of the people are people who have not been featured before, and a lot of them are people whose work came through Submittable, and so we do value the submissions that we get and we do value, sort of featuring people who have not been featured in a magazine before.

Mary Alice Yeskey

New voices.

Kosiso Ugwueze

New voices, yeah.

Dora Malech

Absolutely. Kosiso, I'm glad you mention that because I think there's always a balance, in terms of editorial team, between solicitation and open submissions. I don't think it's a bad thing, or an immoral thing to say that we do reach out to writers we're excited about and say please submit things, what do you have for us, and I do that as editor-in-chief, but I've also really encouraged assistant editors, managing editors, readers with the journal, students and recent graduates, to reach out to writers that they're excited about. So, to have that kind of multi-faceted vision in terms of passion pieces and really getting to reach out to peers and heroes and invite them, but I also do think it's important, as Kosiso just said, to make it very clear that open submission means open submission and that we are accepting and reading and excited about work that's coming to us through our open reading period in October.

I thought I'd also briefly mention that this month, the month of April, is introducing our first contest. So, that's not, we're talking about the issue 15.2 coming up, but in terms of other sort of exciting things on the horizon, Sophia and Antonia Frydman, who are the daughters of Anne Frydman and Stephen Dixon, who were really beloved professors, longtime professors at Hopkins who passed away, they have established two new prizes in their parent's honor: the Anne Frydman translation prize, which is open to all emerging translators, which we're defining as translators who have published no more than one full length book in translation, and the Stephen Dixon fiction contest, which is open to all graduates and current students of Johns Hopkins University. So, those are open all through the month of April. They are free for subscribers, as are submission periods are always free for subscribers, and so that's pretty exciting. So, thinking about the kind of legacy, Stephen Dixon was a long time Writing Seminars faculty member.

Another longtime Writing Seminars faculty member was John Barth, who turned 90 years old recently and his, what will likely be among his last books of writing, his later collected writings, called *Just Desserts*, will be published later this year. I believe by Donkey Archive Press. So, we really wanted to celebrate John Barth during his own lifetime, and celebrate his legacy as a writer and a teacher, so 15.2 brings a John Barth tribute folio, including a piece from John Barth which is very exciting, from his forthcoming book, a short piece called "Navigation Stars" which is about his literary touchstones, and essays by writers which include Gina Apostol, Jennifer Finney Boylan, John Domini, Robert L. Freedman, and Michael Martone writing about their experience learning with and from John Barth, so I'm very excited about that.

We have some great reviews. Kosiso mentioned the art folio which will be another tribute, this one posthumous, to Wayne Thiebaud. Karen Wilkin was friends with or colleagues with Wayne Thiebaud, and he passed away I believe on Christmas of last year, and she has curated a folio and for those familiar with Wayne Thiebaud, you often think of the rows of pie or the rows of cake, and there are some of those pieces, but there are also some more surprising pieces. Some figurative pieces, some landscapes, with a tribute, a remembrance by Karen Wilkin. As Kosiso also said, some poetry from people who have appeared in *The Hopkins Review* before, A. E. Stallings for example, and then people who are new to the journal, but certainly names that are

exciting to those familiar with contemporary poetry, like Safia Elhillo, D. A. Powell, C. T. Salazar, torrin a. greathouse. So, we're really excited about those, and we have not one but two translation folios in 15.2, one from Yiddish and one from Korean, so I think there's a little something to excite and surprise everyone.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Sounds like it, and when are we expecting that issue to become available to our readers?

Dora Malech

That should be in June.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Okay, fantastic. Well, thank you so much Dora and Kosiso, this has been such a great conversation and again, congratulations on the journal's sort of rebirth. I mean, I wish I could have videoed my face when I saw the picture of the cover, it really was stunning, and the website is just lovely, and I'm so looking forward to reading the next couple of issues and seeing what's next for you guys.

Dora Malech

Thank you so much, and I loved when Kosiso was talking about people submitting and said, "don't be shy." I feel like that could be the motto of the new *Hopkins Review*. I feel like we're trying to not be shy and put ourselves out there, and we're really seeing ourselves not just as a sort of one-directional publication, but hopefully as something that starts a conversation and builds a community and gets people excited about each other's work and about discovering new work.