Kyla Kupferstein Torrs on the Future of *Callaloo*

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Rahne Alexander
Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I am the Senior Publicist for the Journals Division of Hopkins Press. Today,we get to meet Kyla Kupferstein Torres, the new Executive Director of Callaloo, the premier journal of literature, art, and culture of the African diaspora.

This year, she took the reins of Callaloo from the founding editor, Charles H. Rowell, who founded Callaloo in 1976, in which he cultivated into a vital voice for original work by and about writers and visual artists of African descent world-wide. I had a great time talking with Kyla on this episode where we talk about highlights from the history of the journal and some of the plans in store as Callaloo enters its new era.

To accompany this episode, we've created reading lists spanning the history of the journal. Check out the show notes for links.

Thank you, Kyla, for being on the Hopkins Press Podcast. Glad to have you here today.

Kayla Kupferstein Torres
Thank you for having me. I'm very excited.

Rahne Alexander
So I'm especially excited to talk with you today because I have to say, in the last year since taking on this role. I've featured a lot of poetry, fiction, even film criticism from Callaloo in our daily posts to Hopkins Press social media. And it's been a real treat to discover how much great material, Callaloo has published over the years.

One of my favorite moments from this year was when I went looking for something relevant to Leap Day, February 29th. And, of course, Callaloo came through. Right there was a poem by Rita Dove, none other than Rita Dove, about February 29th that Callaloo published in 2008. So, to my mind, as a publicist, Callaloo seems like quite the treasure trove. I imagine you might feel similarly.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
Oh, yeah. When I was approached by the Callaloo Foundation Board to take on this position, you know, the first message I got was from a friend of the board chair saying, oh, there's this project, these books, they're like African-American books, something called Callaloo. And I immediately called my friend back and said, Callaloo, what do you mean? Callaloo, the literary journal? You mean Callaloo, the

journal that's responsible for every prominent black author of, [Laughter] the last 50 years. Treasure trove, is almost putting it mildly. I mean, when you think of who are the literary leaders, especially in fiction and poetry from across the African diaspora, let alone this country, Callaloo features them all. You know, Rita Dove, Percival Everett, Yusuf Komunyakaa, Tracy K. Smith, Edwidge Danticat. I mean, we could just go on and on. Natasha Trethewey, all of these people who remain on our masthead and who have been their career arcs you can see from the earlier issues of Callaloo to now when they're the masters of their fields. Yeah, it really is an incredible treasure trove. I think that ensuring its long-term vibrancy was the thing that called me to this work. And I feel so lucky to be waiting in these waters now and inviting new people in and old people back. It's very, very exciting.

Rahne Alexander
Yeah. Well, I'm excited to talk a little bit about your future with the magazine and your thoughts on its history. But I want to take a step back first and say, I imagine that some listeners may not have the pleasure of enjoying Callaloo, the dish. Can you talk about what that dish is and how it relates to the name of this journal?

Kayla Kupferstein Torres
Yeah. but I have to give a caveat. You know, I am Jamaican. so for Jamaican folks when we say Callaloo, we mean a vegetable. We mean a greens, it’ss a kind of green that you chop up, you cook almost like a collard greens or you make with salt fish, people have for breakfast and also have for other meals. So, when I hear Callaloo, I think greens, as opposed to people in other parts of the Caribbean and Americans, seems that Callaloo is more like a gumbo, a mix up dish, know, everything, a little bit of everything in there. And I think that when Charles Rowell, Dr. Charles H. Rowell is the founder of Callaloo. And when he heard about this notion, I think he was speaking to a West Indian friend, and I'm sorry, I don't know the story exactly, who told him about this dish, he was like, well, that's what we're like, right? The African diaspora is this Callaloo, is this big mix of, you know, people who have an experience in the Caribbean, people who have a Southern experience, an urban experience, the Black voices in the Americas particularly, but also throughout Europe, make up a big melange, a big stew. And he loved that reflection of who we are and chose that as a name.

Rahne Alexander
Fantastic. Can you talk a little bit about your background and what brought you to the journal?

Kayla Kupferstein Torres
Just before I came into this role, I was a managing editor at a magazine called Strangers Guide, which was also a quarterly magazine. It's a magazine about place. So it's not a travel magazine. It's not travel writing, but more people who live or are from a region sharing their home with others. We did issues on Tehran, on Lagos, on Texas, California, the Caribbean, South Korea. So it was really about, it's a kind of great thing to read before you go, right? To give you a taste of the contemporary place. And that was, it was thrilling work. We won three national magazine awards in our first four years. It was kind of unheard of; women-owned, young publication, entering the fray during, know, “publishing is dead, long live publishing” era where,

you know, the challenges to print journalism as well as audio journalism, you know, are really profound.

So it was a great thrill to do that and I was lucky enough to work with some huge people, Wole Soyinka and Pam Houston and Charlayne Hunter-Gault. And we really were able to punch far above our weight class very quickly. So, that was the role that brought me here. Before that, I had a career for over 20 years in education. But what I was doing was working mostly in admissions related work, working with students of color, Black, Latino, undocumented, students from Title I backgrounds, helping open up educational opportunity for kids who don't have it naturally. And so in that work, I really was doing a lot of organization building and systems and pipeline building. So a lot of the work I did in that previous career really has come over with me to Callaloo, because in many ways we're rebuilding the organization as well as producing a journal. So, the soup to nuts rebuild that I have to do for the whole organization has been well served by that long career in education.

Rahne Alexander
So, you're in this real rebuilding phase. Do you have specific plans in the near term or the far term that you can talk about at this juncture?

Kayla Kupferstein Torres
Sure. You know, Callaloo was more, was and is more than just a journal. So the centerpiece of the organization is the journal quarterly, where we are on track to be back to quarterly after five years of producing issues very slowly. This year, by the end of 2024, all four issues of volume 42 will be in print with you guys. Yes, it's very exciting. It has been quite a lift.

Over these few months, we had wonderful partners. know, Crystal Wilkinson edited a two-volume issue, or I'm sorry, two-issue feature on Black Appalachia. We have an amazing issue on the Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival. It was the 50th anniversary and they revived the festival from 50 years ago that was founded by Margaret Walker. We have another just Callaloo general issue coming out, and at the end of the year, an issue on Black Britain, which is co-edited by Jason Allen-Paisant, who is quite a decorated poet in the UK right now. He's getting so much great press and his partner, Karen McCarthy Woolf, who's another well-known writer on the other side of the pond. So we have a great lineup. So first is the journal, making sure that we are producing quality issues year over year, quarter over quarter to get back on track. And we're well in gear for that.

Another thing is, you know, fundraising. We gotta keep flights on. We gotta have enough money to pay folks, even with our small team. The next thing is finding an institutional home. And we are in conversation with a number of universities at this point to find a place. Callaloo always was part of Dr. Rowell's work at any school. He was at University of Virginia. He was at Texas A&M, which was really the place that hosted Callaloo for the majority of its life. And since his retirement, we've been kind of homeless. So, finding a new home for the journal for the long term is a big part of my work. And then Callaloo is almost 50 years old. In 2026, will be our 50th anniversary. And there's a lot of stuff in the wake of all those years. So working with an archivist, we were very lucky to get a grant from the Mellon Foundation. And

Mellon Foundation is led by a Callaloo longtime contributor, Elizabeth Alexander, the fantastic poet.

So we have worked with an archiving team, folks who are really specialists in Black literary archives, to start finding out what's in all those boxes that were accumulated by Dr. Rowell over all the years. So both his personal papers and the papers associated with the journal, as well as all of the backlog of actual Callaloo's, getting those organized, figuring out where they should go. Should we be sending a set to every HBCU, to different schools?

So those are the sort of buckets into which things fall. And then finally, the associated events. Callaloo was well known for their scholarly conference. And it wasn't only scholarly, they bring creative writers and artists together with scholars for panels. And, so reviving the conference, which we hope will come back in 26, as well as the creative writing workshop, which was not only an amazing place for lot of writers whose names you know now to cut their teeth and get some of their early development and training with masters. But places where people went from being students to faculty, those were held all over the world here in universities in the US, as well as in Barbados and in the UK. So, finding institutions that want to support that work and bring that back as well so we can be creating a pipeline for our pages. So,it's a big job.

I'm feeling quite doable by one person, but you know, I'm so lucky our board that's led by Melvin White is incredibly supportive. Folks who've been on there, who've been friends of our associates of Charles for a long time. And I've brought on five new folks, people from my world, from the art world, from academic world, from the world of journalism, and podcasting, who really can help with organizational building and development. So yes, Callaloo just has so many fans and friends out there, Rahne, I have to tell you that I always get the same reaction from everyone when I say, know, I'm your executive editor, Callaloo, Callaloo, my God, I love Callaloo. And then they say, is it still publishing? And when they hear it is, and when they hear it is, they wanna jump in. You know, the people who were affiliated with the Journal of the past, people who were younger and reading it was sort of their, you know, this is where I aspire to be one day, this is where I'd like to be published in these pages. So I get almost nothing but really positive feedback from folks who want to be involved in the revival of the journal and want to see all of its component parts in full blossom for the future.

Rahne Alexander
That’s so wonderful. And you really come out of the gate with so much good stuff. These two issues that are just out on Black Appalachia, they feel especially timely.

Kayla Kupferstein Torres
Yes. Yes, but before we go there, I want to pause a second and say that I don't mean to just be falling over myself, but if it weren't for Johns Hopkins Press, your support of this journal on-goingly and dedication to keeping things like this in print has been overwhelming and really been a huge gift to us. You know, to think about, it's one thing to be rebuilding the organization and all of these parts that were held in place by different things. But if we didn't have a home with a publisher, in this day and age to try and knock on doors, to start that conversation from scratch, I really worry

about, I mean, I don't worry anymore because we've had your support. William Breichner has been unbelievable and been steadfast by our side through this bumpy period. Hopkins has made it very easy, right? Like, okay, we still have the same process, just give us material. So we've gone out and we've gotten the material. We've gone out and produced the issues and there's been no sort of blowback or repercussions for us, being kind of on hiatus for a while, but also just full support, responsiveness. We're incredibly grateful. We definitely would not have been able to affect this revival, so quickly without the unstinting and unwavering support of Johns Hopkins University Press. So thank you for that.

Rahne Alexander
That's wonderful to hear, very sweet to hear. I'll make sure everybody on our team knows. Yeah, I mean, I think it really highlights the fact that like journals are kind of across the border, kind of labors of love. You know, it takes lots of people to make these things happen and often in under and under unappreciated ways, right?

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
Absolutely.

Rahne Alexander
But anyway, it's exciting and it's exciting just to have this energy.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres(
Yes, thank you. But Appalachia.

Rahne Alexander
Yeah, let's talk a little bit about that.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
I mean, so first of all, want to represent to everybody and let you know I'm giving a little tutorial. It is Appalachia. I have heard from all the, yes, not Appala-*chia*, but Appalachia. So, like I forget what the mnemonic device is, but if I remember, I will share that. You know, I think, first of all, Crystal Wilkinson is just, she's brilliant. She's a delight to work with. She's an amazing writer. She's incredibly well connected.

And she manages to be deeply grounded in where she's from as a Black Appalachian and yet be so vibrantly part of like a national conversation and international conversation. The time we spent together working on these two issues so much, I think her perspective is powerful and unique. And she talks a little bit about that in the opening notes. But I think what's most important at this particular moment, and I can't take credit for choosing the topic. It was here when I arrived. Mostly, you know, I'm facilitating things that were decided before I came. My mark will be on the journal soon enough. But at this moment where our country is so divided, where I think there has been an artificial construct developed about the coastal elites and the heartland folks that really just creates this gulf. And one of our Vice Presidential candidates is purporting to be a voice for Appalachia. And I think when in the popular imagination, Crystal says this too in her introduction, that the idea of the Appalachian was this white, was a white person, right? Nobody really thinks Appalachia blackness and black folks have always been there. [Laughter]

These are parts of the world where there was slavery, where there were plantations. And the idea that we have constructed a narrative that doesn't include Black people in Appalachia is, it's absurd, but it's so powerful. I mean, I'll say myself, I was like, Black Appalachia, okay. I really had to be educated a bit. I knew there were Black people in those places. But the idea that the identification of “Afri-lachia” was a thing among people who were Black Appalachians. And there is a world and identification, a culture, an ethos that shares things with Southern culture, which shares things with rural culture, but that we haven't seen, one, as part of the definition of Appalachia, but two, is the definition of what it is to be Black, right? We haven't really included, there's like country people.

But we really haven't included the complexity, the nuance, all of the facets of what it is to be Black in different ways. And so, I think it's really important that we add this to the diaspora conversation, right? That we're not lumping all Americans on one way. They're either in Chicago or they're in Atlanta, know, but Caribbean ones are in Miami. But this really, I think, opens and just gives us another way of looking at our complexity as Black people in this country.

So, I'm really thrilled and we intended for it to be one issue, but there were so much material that Crystal loved in terms of poetry and fiction. And then in terms of the scholarly work that I said, let's go for it. Let's make it two. Let's give it it’s full, you know, instead of cutting and trying to be two, just saying we have these two perspectives. There's a creative and personal and then the scholarly. So, I'm really excited. And people have been responding *so well* to this. I know there are folks who doing Appalachian studies who want to make this a part of their curriculum.

And you know, that's really another, I think it's great that this is what we're putting forth first at the beginning of my tenure because one of my, another, I try not to set too many strategic goals. [Laughter]

And I think those five that I mentioned are plenty, but I think that one of the things that's important to me is that Callaloo is being used actively in classrooms, in universities, and high schools across the country. There's so much amazing material in here that I believe should be in front of students. You know, the best high schools have access to MUSE and JSTOR and those things, but I would love to find ways to create a series of Callaloo curricula and really make sure that we are, that all of this, this treasure trove, as you said, is making its way to people who need access to it, to understand the full picture of who we are.

Rahne Alexander
This is maybe getting at the heart of like why treasure trove seems like an understatement. Callaloo does have a really important role in affirming Black scholarship in the humanities kind of across the board.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
And I think there's two angles here, right? When I talk to folks about the journal and the importance of the journal, there are really a couple of functions, that it serves in that world as well. Yes, we're putting together a wonderful compilation of poetry

and art and fiction and scholarly work for people to enjoy. But, one, fashion comes and goes in the publishing world. And sometimes Black folks are fashionable and sometimes less so. Right, post-George Floyd, you couldn't find an organization for working people of color that wasn't having money raining down on it. Now, maybe not so much. So we need publications that are always looking for us, always looking for our work, always looking to, you know, it's not about a feature or a spotlight or a special event all the time. That every Black author knows that they can submit to Callaloo all the time because we're looking for them. And number two, again, the same way that implicit bias exists everywhere. It exists in other scholarly journals and in other scholarly venues. The who gets selected for MLA or for different kind of historical conferences, if you're not in on what's hot in history right now, what's hot in literature right now. For Callaloo, Black Studies of all kinds, whether that's literary studies or looking more historically or looking at literary criticism.

We are always looking for Black academics to have a space here. So, as folks need to publish or perish, they have to go through that tenure gauntlet, they need a place that is always looking for their work and where they can cut their teeth and know that it won't be the whims of whether Black people are in Vogue that year to get their work published.

Those things to me feel like the urgent mission of Callaloo that's always beneath the surface. Dr. Rowell originally founded this publication to showcase Black Southern voices. He thought that there was a very clear bias in the literary world, the Northern world, that Black Southern writers were seen as somewhat backward, that the Bama stereotype of Black Southerners, what needed to be combated with literature and that's why he created it. Now, very quickly his perspective widened as he talked to more people and was like, this is really about the diaspora. We want to go beyond just the South. But I think that urgency, like there is a way in which we can always be overlooked. There's a way in which we can be ignored. Our votes taken for granted, our existence or our challenges doubted. And this publication sort of stands for the excellence and the complexity of who we are as Black people for the long term.

Rahne Alexander
I am wondering, do you have some favorite pieces from the past that resonate with you, that stick with you?

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
Wow, there's so many and I'm discovering more all the time. You know, I'm digging in the crates all the time looking like, did we do this? Did we do, we did a whole issue on Maryse Condé. Okay, that was, that was in the eighties. All right, great. But I think one of the pieces that's really important to me or just sort of the genres of Callaloo, the interviews are amazing. Love, Charles, Dr. Rowell loves, he is a *raconteur* and he is, he loves to be in dynamic conversation. You know, when I got a chance to meet him, it was just instantly the repartee. He's the delight to talk to. And you can see that in so many of the interviews. You know, I don't think I could pick among his and just everyone and their mother has been interviewed in Callaloo. You know, so many, Rita Dove, there's multi-part interviews with her. My dear late friend, Greg Tate, who was someone I sort of grew up in Harlem looking up to as a writer, like to hear him in his own incredibly original voice in the pages of Callaloo. And then a piece that's

really important to me and more so now is Audre Lorde. When she went through Hurricane Hugo, when she was living in the Caribbean, she wrote this letter. It's like a multi-day letter, almost like a journal of getting through the hurricane and also then interviewed with Charles at that point. And Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who is one of our foremost public intellectuals right now, she and Courtney Desiree Morris are going to be co-editing a special issue for the anniversary of Katrina that is inspired by that letter and that interview. We'll be reprinting them in the issue and then having reflections and poetry and fiction from hurricane survivors. Those will be the people who are the contributors to that issue. So, that piece has a sort of, it's getting a new life, especially with all the attention that's been on Audre Lorde's legacy through Alexis's work and the work of others. But I'll also, say in our next issue coming up, our general issue or our theme is Transitions. There are two short stories by young women that I love. And one is by Destiny O. Birdsong, who is a novelist and also works with poets and writers. She's terrific and she has a really wonderful story about two young women sort of making it through their respective challenges. And then Tierney Oberhammer is another young writer. It's a great story about a young mixed-race Black mother as she moves into those first days of motherhood and how she grapples with the questions and contradictions of race and around identity as she becomes a parent. So, those two stories are very special to me. I was able to, in all my free time, I was able to step out and work with writers sometimes. So those two stories are, I'm really excited about.

Rahne Alexander
And is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you really think we need to before we close out the podcast?

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
You know, the one thing I will say is that preserving institutions in communities of color, particularly, I mean, look, the ones I have experience with are Black, I'm Black, so that's what I know. But, I think that, you know, there's a way in this whole world of creativity and philanthropy and, you know, the things that we treat as unnecessary but are really foundational to our understanding of who we are and who we can be and what we can do. You know, there's anything this job makes me energized about, it's really saying, how do we keep things alive when there isn't a commercial, when the market forces don't support it? What is it we need to do to keep things alive? And how do we communicate the urgency and relevance of those things? Folks who are career fundraisers and I am not one. I don't think anyone really enjoys fundraising. There's a small subset of people who love to go ask people for money. I'm not one of those people, but I certainly am one of those people who is passionate about communicating why we need philanthropic dollars. And I think it's a slippery creature, right? Thinking about long-term and the present at the same time, being able to think about those two priorities. I think that Cave Canem is doing it really well. Cave Canem is an organization that was founded by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady as a Black poetry organization to support and nurture and develop Black poets. They've done some amazing work along with Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University. They've taken on a study. It was the two of them, Obsidian Journal and I feel terrible, I forget the name of the last organization, the smaller organization down south, a young woman who started about developing black literary worlds. They got together, and got funding and have done this study, they're calling Magnitude and Bond, where they're really looking at

Black literary organizations and thinking about what have been the threats to their survival, what are the things that they need, what are the leadership challenges.

What are the philanthropic, fundraising challenges? How do we sustain Black literary institutions? I'm really grateful to them. I, only wish that, you know, I'd been in this chair a year ago and they started that work and I would have joined them, but I will, you know, going forward and make sure Callaloo is part of that conversation. I'm just really pleased to see that there's already a community coming together to think about how do we steward our organizations and how do we ensure sturdiness for the long-term.

Rahne Alexander
Yeah. That's exciting. I'm just thrilled to have you on board and I'm really excited to see what Callaloo does next and maybe we'll have you back on the podcast.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
Yeah.

Rahne Alexander
After you've achieved some more exciting milestones.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
Yes, my hope for our 50th anniversary is in 2026. So, I'm hoping that we will have some more of the boxes checked, and getting back on a quarterly schedule. We're not quarterly this year, but we will have a full volume published over the course of 2024. But being back on a quarterly schedule with a regular. [Laughter]

You know, my, some people, this piece of paper, this is the new one. This is my production calendar for the rest of the year. The first one was dog year. We didn't know if we were gonna do three issues or if we would come up with the four, could we do five? So, that's what keeps me on track, that production calendar. I love a good calendar. And so working with Joe and other folks in production has really been, has been gratifying that we know that we can get back. So, that's check one. And then with our institutional home and finishing up our archives and I really hope to have lots of good news by the time we hit our 50th anniversary in the Middle East.

Rahne Alexander
Me too. Well, thank you so much for your time today.

Kyla Kupferstein Torres
Thank you, Rahne, I really enjoyed this.

Rahne Alexander
Thank you for listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. Check the show notes for more information on Callaloo and a link to the reading list spanning the journal's history. The theme music is by Jean Toba, which you can find on the free music archive also linked in the podcast information page. Thanks for listening and we hope to see you again on the next Hopkins Press Podcast.