

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Kira Thurman and Ashleigh Gordon

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by historian and musicologist Dr. Kira Thurman and violist and co-founder of Castle of Our Skins, Ashleigh Gordon, where I ask them: Are we hearing a crescendo of anti-racism in classical music? Welcome to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for this episode for several reasons, but one of them is because this is our first episode specifically about classical music and contemporary music generally. And it's only our, like, third episode ever with two guests at once. So I'm so excited for that. So without any further ado, welcome Dr. Kira Thurman. She is an assistant professor of history and Germanic languages and literatures at the University of Michigan. And we also have Ashleigh Gordon, who is the co-founder and artistic and executive director and violist of Castle of Our Skins, a Boston-based concert and educational series devoted to celebrating Black history through music. Now, that's just like a baby introduction for both of you, because you both have, like, such gorgeous, layered stories to tell. But my introduction to you both was through Twitter and through, should I say Dr. Kira Thurman. Or can I call you Kira? How do you want me to say?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:01:24] Please call me Kira.

**JVN** [00:01:27] OK. So this was my introduction to Kira. And so basically, and so this is kind of a double edged sword in introducing you to this episode. And just generally, because basically the viral Twitter thread is about, you know, "Is Beethoven, or was Beethoven Black?" And then your kind of thread is about, "Well, the more important question is here, 'Why don't we know another musician whose name is--'"

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:01:53] George Bridgetower.

**JVN** [00:01:53] Yes. George Bridgetower! And I don't spend too much time on whether or not Beethoven was Black, honey, because that's like literally what the point is. But just wanted to get your perspective of that tweet and how that came to be, just to kind of catch everyone up.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:02:09] Sure. So I will, I guess, begin by saying I did not mean to become accidentally Twitter famous. It's been kind of a roller coaster ride, but also pretty fun. So, yeah, I'm a German historian and a musicologist. I teach at the University of Michigan and my research is on the history of Black musicians in Europe. And I've been working on this topic for, oh gosh, now a decade or so. And the question of if Beethoven is

Black has come up over time. I've heard it from all kinds of different people. And I, you know, I, I sort of said, you know, my piece, to pull a name, I said what I said on Twitter. But at the same time, you know, I do think it's interesting to think about, you know, what examples do we have of Black musicians and Black classical musicians in particular? Why have you become fixated on Beethoven instead of, to my mind, celebrating the Black composers and Black musicians that we know of, who were active in classical music? So, so that's been a big question of mine that sort of shaped a lot of my research for the last decade.

**JVN** [00:03:20] Which is absolutely fascinating, and I think I just am obsessed with people who, like, found something that they want to learn about and like, that's just so cool. So love that. But then, Ashleigh Gordon, we have to say hello and welcome. And also welcome so much to you, Kira. But tell us a little bit about you and your, how you found yourself here, and on "Getting Curious" and being like this slaying violist that you are.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:03:48] Sure. Well, well I was lumped into this Twitter thread through Kira-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:03:54] Sorry.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:03:55] And Kira and I we actually, no, it's all great. We go back to college actually having sat in lunchrooms together and solfege and theory classes together. But similarly, very much to Kira, I have a curiosity myself, as well as my co-founder Anthony R. Green, who is a composer, Black composer living in the Netherlands, have a curiosity of trying to answer the same questions as what Kira posed, which is why? Why don't we know of more Black musicians? Am I really the first one in the 21st century? And of course, the answer is no. But through education and through marginalization, through erasure, through intentional erasure, our, our lives and histories have been, yeah, left out of the story. And there's so much scholarship, certainly from Kira and from others, so much scholarship over the centuries to validate the fact that, yes, we, we are an excellent people and we have contributed it and we are contributing. So the, the curiosity has really led me to your, your show and being here today and speaking with the always amazing Kira Thurman.

**JVN** [00:05:02] Well, thank you so much for giving us your time, both of you. I think also that's the first time in my life I've ever heard of, like the word scholarship in reference to, like, amount of work that someone in academia has done on, like, a topic. And like that's like how that is, like that's, I always tied like a scholarship to a school, you know, like you get a full ride or a partial ride or. Like that is, I-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:05:21] Right. Right. As opposed to a body of work, a body of like articles. Things that you have written and published that then hopefully other people get to read.

**JVN** [00:05:31] Yeah, I'm always learning a whole new thing on this podcast that I never, never did get to learn. I so am curious about classical music and how race intersects in all of this. I think some of the questions that, you know, we've asked on "Getting Curious" is like, how do some of those legacies of Jim Crow and slavery and the marginalization and oppression of like voting, for instance, has affected all sorts of social things now. But it has such a huge intersection with music and arts that I think very much due to people like me and are like, I mean white people's privilege. We didn't even know. But we got to know.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:06:10] Right. I mean, if I can help provide some historical context to that. And I think Ashe can provide, I think, really helpful perspectives on the contemporary situation, which I can't because I'm not a professional musician in the industry like she is. You know, I think from a historical perspective, you're absolutely right to sort of make these connection that so much of how we understand race in America also affected classical music and the classical music world, and that there was deep segregation and deep institutional racism that that sort of really prevented a lot of Black musicians from, you know, from, from entering major opera houses, from performing in major symphony orchestra halls, you know. And that really sort of I think, you know, if you, if you were going to succeed as a Black classical musician, you know, in the 19th and 20th centuries, it took so much to be able to do that.

If I can offer an example, I don't, hopefully that's helpful, but I mean so two examples come to mind, you know, and they're connected. One is Marian Anderson, the famous contralto singer. Performing at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1955. And she's the first Black woman to perform there and to break this racial barrier, you know, but if you're a talented kid before 1955, where are you supposed to go? What are you supposed to do? Where are you supposed to perform?

You know, so funnily enough, actually, the Metropolitan Opera House had staged a competition in 1925 to try to find the first Black Aida, the sort of Ethiopian princess that's an opera by the composer, Giuseppe Verdi, about an Ethiopian princess who sort of falls in love with an Egyptian and they'd never had a Black woman perform it before. And so this Italian tenor said, "Well, why don't we see if we can find a Black woman to sing the role?" So he put out this open call for, for Black singers to sort of sing the role of Aida to audition for it. Thinking, I, I don't know what they were thinking. Maybe they'd get a handful of people, and over 200 women would have wrote in immediately and said, yes, I'm ready, I'm ready to sing the role. And it was so overwhelming that they shut the competition down

and didn't, I mean, they wouldn't even pursue it any further. They thought perhaps nothing would happen, would happen with it. So that's just one example of sort of the various ways in which there's always been sort of barriers and obstacles and pleas for, for Black classical musicians. And they've just had to find a way to succeed anyway.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:08:44] Yeah, to touch on that certainly within, within the operatic and vocal, Roland Hayes, as well, too, who had to take through his own initiative and his own funds, which were certainly not much of the time, to self market his sold out Symphony Hall performance in the early 1900s. Sold out so much so that there were hundreds of people who couldn't get in because his German and, and various lead that he was singing as well as spiritual recital, just tenor and piano on stage was completely sold out. And similar to James Baldwin and other ex-pats, Roland Hayes made his, his sort of big claim to concert stage in Europe because the American system was just not accepting, was not open enough to be able to embrace such artistry and excellence. Right? And having to go elsewhere in a system where things were a little bit more open armed to prove your worth, to then come back to the states where he eventually got management from, from the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:09:48] That's such an excellent point. Basically, I think one way to think about it is if you're a talented musician in let's say the 1920s, 1930s, what are your options? Right? One is to try to keep making it through anyway, even though you're facing all of these barriers. Another is to leave the world of classical music altogether, which a lot of people did. They went into jazz. They went into popular music, things like that. Nina Simone, Miles Davis. Or, and this is what Ashe was saying. The other option was to go to Europe, because in theory, in Europe, you could get gigs, you could get, you know, a deal at an opera house or with a symphony orchestra when you couldn't do that in the United States.

**JVN** [00:10:26] And even now, and part of that essay that I read that you wrote, Kira, it's like, Black classical musicians forever have faced so many different extra layers to just to even pursue that passion of enjoying classical music.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:10:44] Right. Right.

**JVN** [00:10:47] And I guess-

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:10:47] No, you're right.

**JVN** [00:10:49] But those those reverberations, they last so long and I think that they impact people now in such a cutting way.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:10:58] They do. I mean, I, you know, I, I don't want to speak too much for, for Ashe, I will let Ashe also sort of chime in here. But, you know, but I think there is a way in which, you know, I think the classical music world to a certain extent, is trying to change and trying to sort of, you know, bring in perhaps more people of color to it. Although, again, the point is that we, we've been here, we've, we've done been here right this whole time. You know, but I think that there, that you're right. There's a way in which, you know, how do I put it? There's a, there's, it's understandable why there's such a strong Black criticism against classical music and why oftentimes, perhaps African-Americans don't necessarily sort of leap to this genre, leap to this style, if, if in a lot of ways the main historical examples we have are those of oppression.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:11:52] Absolutely, oppression and white Eurocentric.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:11:55] Yeah.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:11:55] Right. With, without any other sort of colorism associated with that. And then also this, speaking of sort of the historical trauma, Jonathan, that you were referencing and generational inheritance that we have, the feeling of having to be not only excellent, but excellent plus, within a Black community and certainly within a highly competitive, perfectionist world such as classical music, definitely is deep seated and is one that we are still trying to butt heads against and needing to go into that audition that is screened and then the screen comes up and and you realize who's behind the screen having that weigh on your mind while you're trying to play your, your excerpt or in an operatic audition or something like this, or even colleges and conservatories, right? And being five years old and wanting to study violin in the local community program and having, having to sort of face a barrier that you don't necessarily fully recognize that is just sort of attributed with you because of who you are, is very much pervasive and very much still prevalent.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:13:05] Building on Ashe's last point, I think one of the thing that's been so frustrating oftentimes for Black classical musicians are the ways in which they're oftentimes judged and the ways in which you're judged is sort of you know, they're told it's on aesthetic terms like, oh, well, you're, you know, we didn't, we weren't, we didn't like your interpretation. It wasn't sort of, you know, good quality music. But it turned out oftentimes behind it is racism. Right? So hence this line from Leontyne Price, a fabulous famous African-American opera star who said, you know, in the 50s or 60s that she knew she had to be three times as good to get noticed, three times as good to get attention. You know, if she was going to make it in this business, she had to be three times as good.

And this is also something to sort of use a Nina Simone example again, this is something that Nina Simone faced as a kid, as well as sort of a budding young pianist trying to sort of audition and get into music conservatories, you know, and, and getting sort of, you know, getting rejected by them, being told her musicianship wasn't that good to her face, and then finding out later, via gossip that, no, she didn't get in because they didn't want to have a Black girl in their conservatory of music. Right? So this is the sort of problem, in the words of Toni Morrison that, like racism makes you paranoid. Right? It sort of makes you, and so it's, it's insidious. And it's oftentimes hard to pinpoint, where it's been to-, sometimes hard to pinpoint for a lot of Black classical musicians, sort of what's going on, why they're not getting reject-, why they're not getting auditions, why they're getting rejected and things like that.

**JVN** [00:14:39] If the question is why don't we know George Bridgetower. And I think that that has such a clear reason for why both we have a historian here and then someone who knows a lot about historical music but is also a contemporary musician like in this space now, is that, I guess what I was trying to say is that there is a reason why we don't know who George Bridgetower was. So, but the point is, is who is George Bridgetower? And like, what era did he live in, honey? And Bee-, and, and, and Beethoven because when did he even exist because-? Because I know that I probably shouldn't say that right now because I had two such incredible musical historian people with me. But a lot of people listening, they don't even know what Beethoven was. Like was he 1600s?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:15:18] That's true.

**JVN** [00:15:19] Yeah. Like, so we just, I just need to know a little bit of that history so that we're all on the same page.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:15:23] Yeah. George Bridgetower was an Afro-European violinist. He was born and raised in the Esterhazy Palace in part of the Habsburg Empire, a part of Austria, it's now part of Hungary. And he lived in the 18th century to the early 19th century. So early, sort of 1800s.

**JVN** [00:15:46] Yes.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:15:48] And, and he was a very, very talented violinist. He studied with a very well-known composer named Franz Joseph Haydn, who was part of this, what people called the first Viennese school of composers. So Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. They sort of represent this oftentimes Trinity or something of, of composers in European art music. So Bridgetower studied with him. He performed with him in Vienna. At some point in the early 1800s, I think 1801 to 1803, he settled in Vienna. And that's where he

met composer Ludwig van Beethoven, who, you know, we oftentimes associate with genius and all kinds of other things, a composer of nine symphonies, you know, all of these other works. And so they became friends, Beethoven dedicated a violin sonata to him, which he had named, actually, the "Sonata Mulattica." Which is sort of interesting and maybe problematic. Right? Right.

**JVN** [00:16:41] Oh, I thought that, I thought that that second word meant like something about like, my brain always just goes straight to gay stuff. So I thought that maybe meant, I was like, oh, my God, were they in love or something? Like it's this gorgeous love story.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:16:54] No. Well-.

**JVN** [00:16:54] But then after you said that, I realized that it was, what was actually the word that you said?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:16:58] "Mulattica" like Mulatto or something.

**JVN** [00:17:00] Yeah. That, that sank in afterwards. I think my brain wanted it to be a love story, but then the actual words, so my bad.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:17:06] I know.

**JVN** [00:17:06] Get it together.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:17:07] I know. Sorry. They're very hetero.

**JVN** [00:17:09] But so he dedicates-. They were. So there's no sort of?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:17:12] Yeah, unfortunately, so what happened, to, to prove that sort of, I guess the hetero-ness of it.

**JVN** [00:17:17] You don't have to prove it, but-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:17:18] So they were-. They were friends and then Beethoven dedicated the sonata, but then they got into a fight over a woman and stopped being friends. And then-.

**JVN** [00:17:29] Well, maybe it was a polyamorous thing that they weren't even ready for in the 1800s.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:17:34] You know what? Yes. I will have to consult the sources.

**JVN** [00:17:37] But wait. That's actually a really good moment for this cliffhanger because we're going to take a really quick break and we'll be right back with more Kira and Ashleigh after this. So basically, it's, like we're in Austria, honey. It's like the 1830s, 1820s. This is like way before World War One. But like slavery is still very much going on in the United States. But, but Europe is giving us more liberal vibes at this point. We're having more racial-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:18:04] Mmmm. In some ways.

**JVN** [00:18:07] Well, like libe-, as compared to the United States. Well yeah, I guess that's kind of what I'm curious about. What was the deal with that, with racism in Europe? In the 1700s, in 1800s. Like, what were the people going up against then?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:18:18] So unfortunately, I think oftentimes, you know, it's tricky. On the one hand, yes. Black classical musicians, especially coming from the United States, did historically have more opportunities in Europe. But that's not to say that Europe was somehow this land, you know, of racial acceptance and racial tolerance as well. And I think here, that part of the thing that we're fighting in terms of an erasure, which Ash mentioned earlier, is we're finding that only the sort of an erasure of Black people from classical music, but we're also fighting the erasure of Black people from European history. Right? That, you know, there are famous examples of Black Europeans, for example, Naomi Campbell or Idris Elba. Right? Who are Black and British. But so often they're not written into history textbooks either. Right? And so there were, of course, sort of Black people in Europe going through sort of, you know, back to medieval Europe early, modern and before about as well. But it's been hard work for historians to sort of trace the, you know, trace them, find them, tell their stories, tell their biographies again. You know, so I think right now the consensus seems to be that for a lot of Black Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries, there is a way in which they were, like, hyper visible and also invisible at the same time. So people like George Bridgetower would have been, on the one hand, hyper visible as a sort of, you know, minority in, in Austria and in sort of a Habsburg empire. But then the fact that he sort of then ends up in obscurity, even though he was a friend of Beethoven, sort of gives us an example of how he could also be rendered invisible at the same time.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:20:05] I'd like to add a little bit on to that. So, I mean, going back to the middle passage and the slave trade and actually bringing in Black people as servants, as homeworkers, if they played a musical instrument, it was for purely entertainment. So there was this fetishism on an exotic sort of entertainment side. So playing violin, being Ignatius Sancho, for instance, who owned a business and became the



first Black Brit-, British man in the early 1800s to vote and wrote treaties and music theory and wrote music himself. You know, it was seen as certainly not normal, was seen as an oddity or isn't, isn't that nice? Kind of a thing. Again, this sort of exotic air that is related to, as Beethoven wrote in his title, the, you know, Mulatto symphony. It wasn't, it wasn't as if it was revered in any kind of, like, likeness to, to Beethoven as being of excellence and of craft from the beginning. It had a feeling of otherism and entertainment.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:21:16] And if I could piggyback off of that to offer perhaps a historical example, which I've been thinking about a lot, which is that there is a contemporary of George Bridgetower in Vienna at the same time as him named Angelo Soliman, who was a Black servant at the Habsburg court. And, and he was a Freemason. He was known to Mozart. Apparently Mozart, the composer, had a character in his opera, "The Magic Flute," that was sort of supposed to be based on him. It's a, it's a really ugly character, actually. It's a caricature in a lot of ways. And to give you a sense of the exoticism associated with being Black in Europe at the time. And this is really tragic and awful. When he died, in, I think, 1796, his body was stuffed and put on display in the Habsburg court. And his daughter had to petition the court to have his body removed from display and given the proper Catholic burial, I found out a couple years ago, which the Hapsburg court denied, and he was put on display for years. You know, in the 19th century, in the 1800s. So this is just to say, you know, that's an example of being hyper visible and invisible at the same time. Right? And also, I think to get closer to Ashe's point is an example of how Black people were sort of always exotic-ized and fetishized in a lot of ways by white Europeans in European history.

**JVN** [00:22:49] Something that I wrote down there is that I think part of the erasure that I think even is part of why, you know, there's such, the conversation we're having now in America, is that like, because I think the reasons it's hard for historians it must be because I'm sure a lot of stuff was covered up. I mean, a lot of Europeans probably knew what they were doing was wrong. And so a lot of that was probably like that history has been harder to find and cover it up and so that people didn't know how messed up there was and to take maybe perhaps taking credit for, you know, Black-, or like Black musicians' contributions or just like not wanting, like, people to know some of the messed up stuff about, about that.

And I think another thing that I wrote down is just in the history of that, is that one really awful way that like because, you know, you think about in terms of a child, right? You should be able to get into violin or viola because you hear it and you think it's beautiful and you want to learn to play an instrument. And what gets saddled on people now is this, like, you know, kind of what you were saying earlier, Ashe, Ashleigh, about what a little kid

who just wants to learn about playing the violin or viola, like all this extra stuff you end up learning about throughout your career as you grow up.

And I think that part of that is because in order for us to all have an agreed truth, you have to have kind of an agreed acceptance upon the stuff that's happened. And I think that so much of that starts with education. And that's kind of what I keep learning, is that like the education in America is in, in school, in young kids school, like we don't have an accurate understanding of how, of how the dots are connected so that people kind of, you know, understand that. And I think that's partly why it's important to talk about, like all the obstacles that the Black musicians would have faced because they didn't have the choice to do it just because they wanted to or because it was fun. Like even just the finances and the resources of like, 'cause isn't that true? Like, how, how would have you even gotten your hands on a violin or like learn how to read the music or gotten the lessons and like? Whereas like even if a white kid did it like couldn't they just have did it because they're were like, "Mommy, I want to do this." But like in the 1800s. But would've those opportunities have been afforded for a, like a Black person living anywhere then? Probably not I feel like.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:25:02] There's a lot within Black culture that is an oral tradition. And so that, that certainly, generationally, without the needs of anything else, can, can be transmitted as well as body percussion and really, literally as a resilient community taking the environment that you have, including your body and being able to reproduce. Even, even further back in the 19th century with Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who is an Afro-British composer, grew up with his grandparents and his grandfather taught him violin. When Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was old enough, he had saved up to buy a piano, and "piano" in air quotes because it was basically a box that had some strings in it, but very resilient, very community, family-oriented to be able to with the means that we have provide. And from that, he was, I think, Kira, you can correct me, but in his teens, when he went to Royal College-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:25:59] Yeah, mmhmm.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:25:59] And studied composition, he studied violin. He ended up writing an amazing, among other things, Clarinet Quintet that rivaled Brahms' Clarinet Quintet and, and grew to be able to have a really prolific career during his lifetime. And then certainly we know from other historical examples what happened after he died. But in any case, the idea of taking family very much to heart, taking an oral tradition, taking the means at which you have in order to be able to support a community and support our own people, I think is very, very prevalent in, with respect to Black music.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:26:38] I agree and I, I sort of second that wholly, that there are so many historical examples of, you know, very talented Black kids with parents who would do anything to try to save money to get their child lessons, to get their child an instrument. Yeah. I mean, I think you're right that this all goes back to the issue of sort of the various economic, structural social barriers that have been in the way. But then I really love Ashe's focus on resilience and the ways in which African-Americans, as well as Black Europeans, have sort of constantly tried to overcome various barriers that might have been in their way.

**JVN** [00:27:16] So with both of you like so I mean, for me, growing up, like I was like Christina Aguilera, honey, like where is the Spice Girls like, I love that you are two people that are, I'm pretty sure are younger than me, grew up to be, like, obsessed with classical music and knowing how to read it and play it. And so, like and, you know, Ashe when we introduced you, I, like it was like this much of a sentence. But your, your list of credentials is so impressive. And I would just love to hear about, for you to just tell people about a little bit about your, well actually more than a little bit. Tell us everything about yourself and your performative car-, like your performance career, like what you love about viola. And tell us everything.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:27:58] Yeah, sure. I started out quite young on piano and remembered my piano instructor had long red nails, which Kira, who is also a pianist, knows that you can't have long nails.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:28:12] You can't.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:28:13] Period. When you play piano.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:28:14] Yeah, that's weird.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:28:14] So anyway, I always remember just the sound of her nails. And it was very, very grating. So I quickly switched over to violin and then really in college when again, Kira and I met each other, I switched over to, I called the age of reason and playing viola, which is the best, best instrument ever.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:28:32] Ok.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:28:32] And I think really, well, maybe piano, maybe violin, but the viola. One thing that really attracts me to it is if, if it were a person, I think it would be me. We, we share, I think, a lot of traits in the sense that the viola in really intimate, you know, four people in, in a room, chamber music style, is a, kind of the peanut butter of the

group in the sense that it that it blends and sticks to things. So you might have the violin, who is singing away and you might have the bass, who's holding it down, but if you don't have that middle gel to really keep things going, it's also sort of quietly in the background. If it's not there, you notice it, but if it is there, you really feel it. And I think that really speaks a lot to sort of me as a person and the work that I do with my organization, Castle of our Skins, as artistic director, executive director of violists and sort of all the other behind the scenes things, is that I'm very much interested, along with my co-founder, to really create this platform that is able to celebrate and to highlight two things, two sort of attributes that are not, especially in America, as synonymous with Blackness, celebration and highlighting and uplifting, but really trying to do that through excellence, through artistry, through music, as well as through other arts.

And it's so, so not about me needing to be on stage and making my ends meet and paying my own rent, but really being able to provide as big and broad and colorful a stage as possible. Because as, as you're mentioning before, education did not necessarily serve me to, to know that there were other musicians like myself. There are certainly other creators like myself and have been here since the Renaissance and medieval times. So the curiosity that, that we took to, to heart, very much to heart, to be able to create this platform and invite and share and elevate is, is really what, what drives me in a lot of the work that I do onstage, offstage as an administrator, as an educator, and really encouraging other people to find whatever aspect of curiosity that they can sort of latch on to, to then go further investigate themselves. So we can plant as many seeds as possible, hopefully seeds of empathy, to be able to encourage as many other people to just grow along with us in this journey of discovery.

**JVN** [00:31:04] So what are your, both, this is a question for both of you. What are your hopes for people, specifically people young-, people younger than us or people, I guess really everyone. But it's really, like, more for, like, children are the future. What is your hope for kids and little boys, little girls, little non-binary youngsters who want to be passionate about music and who, and what do you think that, that the world slash more specifically, we in the United States need to do to create an environment that lets people do that? Especially young women and young Black women, 'cause I think that that's historically been harder for women-, Black women and women to even get in, get in there in the first place.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:31:55] Yeah, I can answer that first. I think with both with what Kira and I are doing and so, so many others in the field is culture representation. So for, for our generation, right? To realize that for me specifically, my strongest feat that I can stand on are me being a Black woman violist. And I, and I carry that proudly in every situation. So whether I do a career day for kindergartners, I'm a Black woman violist, and you can be this

too. And owning that and being, and being proud of that. I think definitely along the lines of representation in, in the narratives that as educators we're sharing, it is one of not even inclusion, but it is one of, of welcome and embrace and normalcy. So we're not including this story because it's this month, in this particular time period. And isn't this nice? But it is literally a welcomed, all seats are equal at the table here. And this is the world that, that you live in, which is one that has, again, everyone represented at the table in a normal human, every single day, kind of, kind of fashion. So really being active and intentional about changing those narratives as, as educators. And then likewise, I think with certainly our generation and certainly those who have the most reach, which include those, those in media, to really make sure that you are, you know, that we are pushing stories that are far more truthful and representative of the the youth who are incredibly diverse, coming up. Now and coming up after us as well too.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:33:32] Yeah, I, I, I agree wholeheartedly with all of that. I mean, as an academic and really big nerd, I feel like it's my responsibility in a lot of ways to think critically about, you know, textbooks, music history textbooks and curriculum. European history textbooks and curriculum. When and where do kids come across Black musicians? Under what guises? Under what forms? In which stories? You know, so I think that's a huge sort of issue to sort of work out and think through is how do we make sure that both K-12 and also at the university level, people are learning these stories and not simply just encountering them on, frankly, sort of, you know, Martin Luther King Junior Day, which is like the one day of the year where we get to sort of celebrate Black people it feels like sometimes. But, but that they're, they're really sort of part of the curriculum in meaningful ways that we celebrate their works and their legacies while also sort of using them as a way to think critically about the histories of race and racism in Europe and the United States. I mean, I think the other thing is we're still in need of a lot of structural change when we think about who runs classical music organizations and societies and, you know, all of, in all of these different ways. We're still sort of, I think, in need of better conversations about, about just who is on the board of things, who's a director of things and why, why are they the ones doing that?

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:34:59] I think a lot of work can be done in very small, intimate ways, so in thinking about the, I don't remember the actual title of it, but something like the Queens Story Hour with, with Queens, going into books to read children's stories to kids like that, that I think is amazing. We at Castle of our Skins just finished up with our Kids Corner newsletter, which had story-time reading sessions, by and about Black characters, picture books, right? "Old Macumba had a farm e-i-e-i-o," and just sort of singing about and reimagining a world that is very Black and Afrocentric. Great. Excellent. And I think that doesn't need to happen necessarily in, in big flashy ways. But it can and should happen from an individual level. And we as, as individuals, as citizens first, I think, have a

lot of power in that kind of ability to be able to reach a small group of people. Right? Who then exponentially reaches a small group of people.

**JVN** [00:36:04] So, yes, you know, one thing. So obviously, like, I am a white person and I'm, so just stick with me for one second. So obviously I'm a white person. When I wrote a book last year about my life and I talked about, you know, my HIV status and I talked about surviving sexual abuse and I talked about some of the hardest things that I've been through. But another thing that I talked about is how some of these, the hardest things that I've been through also live next to some of the most joyous, most things that I'm most proud of. Like some of my most successful moments have lived like literally two doors down from some of the things that have made my life the hardest, which has nothing to do with my skin color, so not trying to say that, but I just, sometimes when I go on interviews with people, I feel like, you know, I'll come on to talk about something, whether it's a children's book or whether it's about something fun. And then it's like you survived HIV exposure and drug addiction and blah, blah, blah. It's like and that kind of reminds me like sometimes, it's like, well, why it's always got to be about that? On that note, what is some of the cool, amazing stories of like joy, like the amazing Black excellence? Not only from history, but now and like, who are you into? And if there's like any like kids listening or parents listening now who are like, oh, you want to get into like classical music and classical music like this can be sexy, honey, like this is how these like fierce fucking ladies did it on this podcast.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:37:23] Yeah. Ashe, want to go first?

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:37:30] Yeah. You can-. Sure. Yeah. Well, I mean that's that's the heart of everything that we do with Castle of our Skins is about celebration. So yes, we do talk about mass incarceration and prison reform and Civil Rights era and things like that, but at the heart of what we do is celebration because again, that's not necessarily synonymous with Blackness, especially in this country. So everything.

**JVN** [00:37:46] Wait, say that one more time. Say that, break that down one more time for us.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:37:50] Yes.

**JVN** [00:37:50] Blackness is?

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:37:51] Is, Blackness is not synonymous historically with celebration and joy in this country. Especially with, with, what it is externally perceived as. So we're pretty intentional about elevating that in the work that we do so that it is a

association as opposed to violence, drugs, you know, X, Y and Z. So in any case and I mean, any and everything that we do, I think would be related to that. We're also just launching a founders' chat series with other Black founders, largely women, all across actually the world and hearing, hearing their stories.

So we just had one today with the String Queens, which is this super dynamic, high energy performing group, it's a string trio in DC. I love them to death. There is the Arkestra, which is in Berlin, that's also doing amazing work. The Vaasa Ensemble, which is also doing amazing work, Black led, as well too, performing the Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Clarinet Quintet and having conversations and concerts and things like this too. Decomposed in Chicago, which is, which is another great group that has yoga sessions with music. And will improvise. And they have a coloring book and just all sorts of, you know, playlists for, for June of LGBTQ+ composers that have, that have and are living. And in any case there's, there's a wealth of energy and excitement and organizations and musicians who are just doing amazing work in this country that I have been fortunate enough to engage with and certainly outside of this country as well too, both Kira and I have connections with the Chineke! Orchestra in London, which is Europe's first Black and minority ethnic orchestra. And I had the fortune of playing with them in BBC Proms, with their gilded lights and things like this, and feeling so much energy and so much joy to for, for people listening to George Walker "Lyric for Strings" is really heartfelt piece. George Walker being the first African-American to win a Pulitzer Prize.

But there's, there's so much celebration and so many firsts and so many heartwarming, beautiful lyrics and melodies in classical music by Black composers, Margaret Bonds comes to mind. Florence Price comes to mind. And they're beautiful songs and, happening now, just having, listening to an interview just the other day with Daniel Bernard Roumain, who's, who's music we've played a lot, Asian-American composer, violinist, improviser and just writing with so much heart and so much passion, that's completely sort of unbridled. It's just raw. And in your face, an unapologetic for who he is and-.

**JVN** [00:40:50] Ooh.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:40:50] So many. So many composers and so many people who are sort of like, you know, screw the system, this is me and this is what I'm going to give to you. So there's, there's a lot to celebrate for.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:41:1903 Oh, man, I. I love everything on Ashe's list. I think I would mention in terms of moments where for me it was extreme joy. It was finding out that Anthony Davis had won the Pulitzer Prize as a composer for, I mean, he just does amazing operas, "Central Park Five" and another opera called "Malcolm X." And these are

daring, daring works. Oftentimes in an industry that just hasn't really had these conversations or hasn't been willing to have these conversations. So the fact that he wants to sort of compose operas that sort of center Black men, center Black experiences, it's just, it's amazing. So that's been a huge moment of joy for me this year. Anytime I can hear, for example, the Kanneh-Mason family, which is a bunch of siblings getting together and performing music, I'm always happy. Yeah, you find your joy where you can, right?

**JVN** [00:42:00] Yes. OK, wait. We're using a really quick break and we're gonna be right back with more Kira and Ashleigh after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Dr. Kira Thurman. We have Ashleigh Gordon. But who did just give me permission to call her Ashe, for short, so we are conversationally Ashe from here on out. So we're obsessed with that story. So I'm from this, like, little tiny baby town, obviously a lot of people are not from tiny-, but I was, I feel, like how did you guys get into classical music? Like did I just, was there, like I played violin in fourth grade. But I just, I don't, like if you're, like, in a rural community or if like if you're not in a community that has like a theater or if, like, classical music isn't like as a thing to do in your comm-, how can kids get into that? Or even if it's not a kid, like an older person, like, where can we go to learn about operas? Like I want to know who that person was, who won the Pulitzer that you just said about-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:42:56] Yeah, Anthony Davis.

**JVN** [00:42:57] Yeah. Where do we go, honey? How do we learn about it? Like, where do you guys? Is there like a, is there a BBC world for, for classical music? Is there a newsletter that we can get on to, to learn about stuff?

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:43:10] There totally is a newsletter. AfriClassical has a daily newsletter that is just filled out a whole bunch of things, as well as a website, they have a blog where you can go and learn more about, we didn't quite mentioned today, Chevalier de Saint-Georges. You can go learn about Florence Price and Margaret Bonds and-.

**JVN** [00:43:27] What's it called?

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:43:28] AfriClassical.

**JVN** [00:43:30] AfriClassical, honey, signing up. I-.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:43:32] Yeah, that's my go to.



**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:43:38] How I got into classical music, I will say, I cheated. I grew up in Vienna, Austria, so I grew up in a different country. And Vienna has classical music everywhere. So. And I started playing piano at age 4.

**JVN** [00:43:45] That's not a cheat, that's just your truth, honey. It's fine.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:43:48] Sure, sure. Thanks. Yeah. And I think, you know, I think everybody has perhaps, or least for me, I had a couple of different moments of hearing a piece of music on the radio or hearing it on a C.D. that I bought that sort of, you know, so moved me that I wanted to learn more, you know? So I think in, when I was like 12 or 13, it was like Bach "Air on a G String," which everybody sort of knows and hears. But it was my first time, I think, really encountering it and falling in love with-, falling in love with it. So that's sort of, I guess, how I would say I got into classical music. I'm a pianist and then sort of started listening more when I was in middle school and high school. Yeah. Ashe?

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:44:36] Yeah, I am the youngest of three kids and we had a piano in our house. So that was kind of the first for everyone to play piano. But like, like you, Jonathan, I started in fourth grade on violin and sort of stuck with that. And remember, in high school, I was working with a really fantastic teacher, Elle Rathjen, I grew up in Rochester, who was part of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. And such a nerd. I know Kira, you said you're a nerd, but I'm also a nerd. So I would, I would sit in, you know, the third row, the 11th seat, so that I could see right, you know, be right in front of her. And I remember they were playing this really high octane piece of music, "Short Ride in a Fast Machine." And could literally, if there was like an animation attached to this concert, could see the balls, you know, ping pongs like hopping around from section to section. It was like there was so much kinetic energy onstage. I was like, I want to be part of this. I, this is so cool. So the energy was really infectious for me. And then when I was studying, I came to Boston, went to New England Conservatory, and then eventually went to Germany, close, I guess ish to, to Austria, went to Germany to study contemporary classical music.

So making not so much necessarily melodies, let's say, but really using your instrument as though you were a sound engineer to really explore the kind of colors you can do. That really resonated with my visual side of wanting to really try to sculpt color and image. And what abstract thing with five legs can we make with our instrument? And those, the idea that I'm literally creating a sound that no one else has created really, really struck to me was was really something that I was attracted to. And I think very much so with with the music largely that I play today, which is from composers of the African diaspora, most people have not heard it. Right? So for all intents and purposes, whether it was fresh ink written today or whether it was, you know, Chevalier de Saint-George written, who predated Mozart, written, written in the classical period. Most people have not heard of it.

So I am therefore giving, giving birth, for instance, to this music and, you know, creating and shaping it in such a way that is new. So therefore, I'm able to create that narrative. I'm able to really paint that picture, which is awesome and I, and I take such pride in being able to showcase that.

**JVN** [00:47:15] I, yes, I just love everything you said so much. I mean, like, literally when I finished your essay, the "Singing Against the Grain" essay that you wrote in September 2018, it like, there's two different points where it like moved me, all the, like so, yeah.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:47:32] Thanks.

**JVN** [00:47:33] Like. Yeah, whenever I talk to someone who's really passionate about like an art thing, it makes me like. That's all.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:47:40] Right. I guess maybe to get back to your point, though, about like how, how are people supposed to find this music? You know, that's such a really important question. I think if you're at all studying with a teacher, it's definitely, I think, a conversation you have to have with your teacher whether, and parents of kids, you know, also start asking these questions. You know, if your, if your kid is, is a fourth grade violinist, you know, doing orchestra for the first time, asking the teacher, asking the conductor for more representation.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:48:12] Yeah, I would, I agree with Kira and I would take it a step forward and not ask, but demand. I think we're very much in the point where we can, we can demand things now and then also that that really ties into the individual speaking up. So don't necessarily wait for your educational institution or person who is, who is your revered teacher to provide all the answers, because that that is just not how we're going to advance quickly enough. So really taking ownership into your own hand.

Someone else had had shared in a Zoom, you know, Mama Google and Papa Wikipedia can very much be your friends just to sort of start, you know, and then you can go down multiple rabbit holes. We have on our website, [CastleSkins.org](http://CastleSkins.org), a resource page, AfriClassical is listed on there, as well as a bunch of other books that you can find articles, other organizations, the day most Recording Company, if you want to get your, your jam on, as you had said before. Black Composer Speak has a 10 disc remastered album, ironically, no Black women on all 10 discs. But in any case-

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:49:22] Oh.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:49:22] It's a great initiative, initiative, an initial start about representative music from Chevalier to, to modern time. And in any case, there's, there's a wealth of information, Spotify, YouTube, iTunes has, have various playlists that, Decompose, another group I mentioned in Chicago, among others, have been putting out. There's, there's just at this point so much information, certainly historical as well as now that is out there, that it's, it's no longer acceptable to say, I don't know where to start. I mean, literally just type in Black composer and see, and see where that brings you.

**JVN** [00:50:00] Yes, I mean, literally that.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:50:04] I mean, just for an example, for context, Ashe, I mean correct me if I'm wrong, but we went to conservatory together and I think our four years together, I don't know if we really encountered the music of Black composers. Either in, you know, an orchestra or in our music history lessons or in our piano lessons or, or viola lessons. You know, I, my senior year did a recital. My piano recital was all music by women composers because women in general have been marginalized and told they can't compose music. And I think that's when I started programming music by Black women. And I played Margaret Bonds on my, on my senior recital. But Ashe, I think maybe you could correct me, but I mean, that's just one example, right? Like here we are, we're both two advocates for Black composers and Black classical musicians. But I don't think we encountered it in our own curriculum.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:50:58] No, it definitely was not through any educational institution, but our own sort of initiative. And then really just looking like anything else, kind of doing an archeological dig, you realize you don't have to scratch the surface very deep.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:51:12] No, no.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:51:12] In order to be able to find literally an entire world. For instance, Florence Price, her home in Chicago, a couple who just moved in. I don't know, within the past five, six years or-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:51:29] Something like that.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:51:30] Found her, Florence Price's archives, manuscripts and letters and journals and all sorts of things, just like living-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:51:39] In a basement.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:51:40] Past Florence Price. Yeah. In the house. And it's physical examples like that where the music is so close to you. You can literally touch it. And then also again at your fingertips with just even doing any kind of like Internet search. The music and the stories and the histories and the audio, videos, documentations, they're, they're all there.

**JVN** [00:52:03] Who, is there anyone who, like, celebrate, who does celebrate? I mean, we talked about AfriClassical and also the work that you've done, Ashe, is incredible. Is there, is there, is there been like any mainstream moment where you were like, oh, look at those people doing something interesting or like or no? Or is there something cooler where like in, like in, like in our like in the last like five years you were like interest that they use that composer there in that movie or like in this thing?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:52:33] I think perhaps we still have a ways to go. I mean, things that I found really exciting were hearing the Chineke! Orchestra perform for BBC Proms in 2018, it's one of the largest music festivals in Europe. And seeing them get the recognition that they so rightly deserved was a sort of wonderful moment for me. So there are things like that, I think I've been celebrating lately.

**JVN** [00:53:00] Love.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:53:01] Yeah. There's the Sphinx organization based out in Detroit, which is kind of our national beacon for Black and Latino string players with competitions and conferences around equity and and the arts and funding and advocacy, that kind of thing. So certainly nationally, they have been putting out just so much string quartets that they're forming and soloists that they're helping to give rise to, so, so that is definitely a good thing. There are, on this side of the pond, other orchestras like Chineke!, Gateways, for instance, biannual, also in my hometown in Rochester, bringing together classical musicians from the African diaspora to play chamber music and to, to have fellowship together and recognize that we are, we are here, give us visibility. Other orchestras, Soulful Symphony, music and things like this-.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:54:04] Ebony Opera.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:54:04] That are doing, Ebony Opera, thinking beyond orchestra, Trilogy Opera in New Jersey, doing, doing something very similar. Elevating Black voices, elevating the Black people on all sides of things. The administrators, the creators, the who you see on stage, behind the stage. All of those things. So that's that for me is very exciting. And I know with respect to Europe and Chineke! specifically, the states are sort of further along in the elevation, in the sort of grassroots elevation of being able to showcase

Black artistry that way. But that has been very exciting for me to be able to engage with and feel like I'm joining this train.

**JVN** [00:54:49] As two, you know, young people who are in the, you know, your life and your, like your careers are music. And this is obviously not only been I mean, I think prior to coronavirus, there is all sorts of like very real obstacles that we've kind of touched on that like maybe classical music and people who want to get involved in classical music. It made it harder for, you know, for minorities to get involved in the first place. Now we have coronavirus and then also there's like that forever for anyone in the arts. There's like that existential threat of like funding and like, you know, if you're in school and how all that works. So as people who've navigated the school systems and are now, you know, in the world and as you see everything kind of going around, what do you think is the biggest hope for music? And what do you think is the biggest threat to, to music and to musical education?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:55:48] I mean, at least from my perspective as an academic, I think one of the things that does fill me with hope is that fields like musicology are changing and have changed a lot. Musicology being sort of the study of music and music history. And that there are so many wonderful music historians who are dedicated to completely changing how we teach music history and how people sort of learn about the men and women and non-binary people who were apart of music all along. So I think that's sort of making some huge strides these days. And I'm really excited to see how a revamped music curricula, how they change music history textbooks, and so that we see a sort of much better and richer representation of those involved in music. I mean, the challenges to, that to my mind, still remain are, are always going to be structural, are always going to be about leadership and sort of how, you know, how the, the top sort of communicates, you know, and sort of promotes messages and ideas that might encounter a sort of larger experience of kids, you know, K-12 again, around the United States and in Europe as well.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [00:57:07] Well, well, I think, to sort of tie this back in to our original sort of start where we had this conversation around classical music, the classical period is certainly visually one that is very structured with gilded moldings and perfection, kind of naturally sort of associated with that. And we need to totally get rid of that. So even, even as fundamental as the language, so not calling it classical music and then other music or classical and then world music, which is, I think, the most ridiculous distinction you can possibly have. But just very much with language about what we are including as being representative of a community. So it's common music or music with people that we present, as opposed to classical music types of things. So really trying to think very, very at the, at the root, going to Kira's point about structural, what we are actually classifying as

being a representative art form of the people, which is how classical music started from being popular music for the people. Right?

And I think in, in addition to really taking a look at the root, taking a look at within an organization, within an institution, taking a look at its mission and its vision and at its, at its core values to really make sure that it has an equitable lens well beyond the tenure of whoever is helming that ship, whoever is in administration, so that the organization can preserve the conversations and decisions that, that are being realized today for the next generation. So we're not in this cyclical, what did we talk about? And let's have these conversations yet again, sort of, you know, cycle. Laundry cycle. And then I think with also perspective, I like to also think about too, is is being something that we can also change. So one thing that I have an issue with is the sort of missionary colonial mindset of going into a community and we're presenting this to you and here to educate and save and then, you know, sort of go back home, kind of a model. But to really reevaluate structurally how we do engagement with community and whose voices are actually at the table to be able to say what kind of output and institution, whether it's academic, whether it's a music institution, something like this, or whether it's a tech industry, who knows? But really, what, what are the ways of communicating and how that communication can therefore lead to a really collective output of what it is that we're actually creating.

**JVN** [00:59:55] Have you seen an example of that happen?

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [00:59:59] I mean, I'm putting on my historian's hat again, I guess you could say. I mean, I'm really struck by, I, I discovered this looking through old historical newspapers from the 1960s that constantly we see orchestras deciding to start some, quote unquote, "urban project" where they try to reach the quote unquote, "urban youth." Right? Which is all sort of coded for trying to reach sort of poor Black communities. And they sort of present it as, again, this, As Ashe said, the sort of civilizing mission like we're reaching, like we're going into these into these lost worlds and giving them, you know, classical music, which is superior to all others. And everyone always presented us this new initiative. But then I realized when I was looking for these historical newspapers, well, wait a minute, that's not true at all. People have been doing this since the 60s, like orchestras and institutions have been doing the kind of move since the 60s. And so realizing that there's this constant, repetitive notion of trying to save somehow, you know, poor communities of color from themselves or something. It's just it's infuriating to sort of encounter that over and over again.

**JVN** [01:01:08] We had this incredible writer and, on "Getting Curious" a few weeks ago called Masha Gessen, who is a writer for The New Yorker. And they write a lot about Donald Trump and, you know, how he's kind of an autocrat. And one thing that, or he is an

autocrat basically, and one thing that they talk about is how you have to have an agreed mutual understanding of reality. And I think that's so much the conversation of privilege and white privilege when we talk about these things because it must be so fucking frustrating to talk about classical music, because it's like, if anything is, according to classical music is like it should be like anything that was me before 1900, but really, you think about it is like Mozart. But if like if that classical music was made like anywhere in the world, if it was in Costa Rica, if it was in Canada, if it was in Africa, like let's call all that classical, why is it like? So I guess I never even thought of that.

So structurally, I think it is, for me, I keep thinking it always comes back to education. I mean, I just recently was looking at pictures of my family and ways that I used to look at pictures of my family, think like, oh, that's so cool. Like those are the things that they did. Now I think, like, when that picture was taken, there was like, you know, like there was colored fuckin' waiting rooms and stuff, and that's not that long away from where we are. That's like 50 years ago.

And I feel like what I'm noticing is and I've been a participant in that in certain ways, based off of things that I've learned and encountered, where it's like we don't have an agreed mutual understanding in the United States about what slavery really did and how in so many ways, slavery never really ended because of the way that legislatures, legislatures work. What really happened to native or to indigenous people in, in the United States? And we don't really have an, and that all kind of goes back to this really great conversation I got to have with Ashlee Marie Preston about this whole idea of, you know, white privilege. It's like this, you know, no one wants to have to look at that mirror and it makes you question like, oh, if you're like a good person or not.

And I think that until you have that mutual understand-, until we have that mutual understanding and that that gets reinforced in schools and in workplaces, I think that it's, that is going to be a real fucking issue, and I don't like that that's an issue, but I think that we do or not, we, but like people like me, I have to, I need to know more about fucking classical, gorgeous contemporary composers and incredible people stories and it needs to not be like the first time ever heard about it.

I would soft pitch you both on doing your own podcast after this though. I do. I think you could literally just do it, like, just like bye bye. I hope I gave you an idea just like really like, not saying bye bye, but you guys should really do your own podcast. It would be incredible.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [01:03:57] There is actually a podcast run by two African-American students at Eastman School of Music called "Classically Black."

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [01:04:02] "Classically Black."

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [01:04:02] Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Right. Right. So we might, I might sort of try to mention that in the, if there are links or whatever for people to if they want to sort of you know-.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [01:04:12] I was just listening to them yesterday. Katlyn is also a violist.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [01:04:17] Oh yeah. Ok.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [01:04:18] We played together. Close to my heart. Very small world.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [01:04:22] Yeah, violists.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [01:04:22] Doin' all the good things.

**JVN** [01:04:23] Well, Dr. Kira Thurman, Ashleigh Gordon, thank you so much for your time and for coming on today and sharing your incredible, just, work with us.

**DR. KIRA THURMAN** [01:04:34] Thank you. Thanks for having us.

**ASHLEIGH GORDON** [01:04:35] Yeah. Thanks so much for having us.

**JVN** [01:04:40] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dr. Kira Thurman and Ashleigh Gordon. Dr. Thurman is an assistant professor of History and Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. Ashe is the co-founder, Artistic and Executive Director and violist of Castle of our Skins. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson.