

FUSE

A BOMB PODCAST

VISUAL ARTIST & AUTHOR

Ja'Tovia Gary & Kaitlyn Greenidge

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Ja'Tovia Gary is a Brooklyn-based artist and filmmaker. Her films include An Ecstatic Experience, Giverny I, The Giverny Suite, The Giverny Document, and most recently The Evidence of Things Not Seen (forthcoming). Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and other renowned cultural institutions.

Kaitlyn Greenidge is the author of the novel We Love You, Charlie Freeman. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Believer, Virginia Quarterly Review, and American Short Fiction. Greenidge and her two sisters recently started a podcast called Sharpening Our Oyster Knives which examines history through a Black feminist lens.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. In each episode, we bring together artists across disciplines to discuss their work and creative practice. We've been taking this approach since 1981, delivering the artist's voice. Here's how it works. We invite a distinguished voice in visual art, literature, film, music, or performance for a conversation with whomever they'd most like to speak with. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked artist and filmmaker Ja'Tovia M. Gary who she'd most like to speak with.

Ja'Tovia M. Gary So I met Kaitlyn recently, maybe about six months

ago, and I was like, Oh, wow, yes, you know, a black woman writer. I grew up reading lots of literature from black women and to know a contemporary black woman writer whose work is really focused on, you know, historical research was really fascinating to me. And I thought, Oh, this would be a really good conversation because there is indeed some overlap in our creative practices.

CM Kaitlyn Greenidge is the author of the novel *We Love You, Charlie Freeman*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *American Short Fiction*. Ja'Tovia M. Gary is a Brooklyn-based artist and filmmaker. Her films include *Giverny 1* and most recently, *An Ecstatic Experience*. Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and other renowned cultural institutions.

JMG I'm really interested in folks who have, you know, a research-based process, and they're interested in history and the archive. And I just wanted to know more about her process, and I thought the conversation between us would be really fascinating and interesting.

CM In an expansive examination of academia and the archive, Gary and Greenidge underscore the importance of expanding access and redistributing power.

Kaitlyn Greenidge So when we first met, we met at orientation as Radcliffe research fellows. And the research fellowship is super, sort of interesting because it's interdisciplinary—it's not just artists, it's social scientists, it's academics. And I just remember that you stated your anxiety about this whole thing, straight up, (*laughter*) which that's—those are the people who I'm always drawn to—are the people who are able to just really just name the exact emotion that's on the table. The reception was, you know, in this big brick 19th century Victorian hall. You and everybody there has on their little name tag with their fellowship name and what their discipline is, and everybody there is very, very impressive. And so it is always nice to just have somebody say, This is a really surreal, strange experience and. And sort of, What are we doing here?

JMG I remember thinking, This is somebody who is familiar to me. And then to find out that you were researching about Haiti, and that you write books. So that was my first impression: Oh, this is somebody that I've never met, but there's a connection here. And there's a connection that can be, you know, fostered.

KG Right.

JMG So I'm going to go for what I feel like is the most readily accessible human being.

KG Right. *(laughter)*

JMG Which sounds very, not very courageous, but I think it's, it's smart. It's something that has not failed me.

KG Yeah. Yeah.

JMG You mentioned how you were interested in academia, but you are a novelist. Can you talk about how you have...why you've chosen that?

KG Yeah, so the reason why I am a novelist and not an academic, even though I worked a lot with archives, and I'm interested in sort of research, is because I think when I was applying for MFA programs, I only applied to one because I had, before that I had been applying to PhD programs in American Studies, and I would get in, and I would be like a month away from going, and then I would pull out and I would defer, and that happened, like, two years in a row. After it happened again, I sort of thought, I need to really figure out why I literally can't viscerally, like, go to this thing. And I was thinking sort of, in my mind, when I was applying to those programs, I would think, Oh, I'll become an academic and then I'll write fiction on the side. Because, you know, like, being an academic is so easy, you'll have so much time to do that sort of thing. *(laughter)* I was a little bit delusional. And then I was thinking, I work with all these stories that are so fascinating and so interesting. And, for me, the question was access, democratic access. You know, I can work at a museum,

but really, only the people who come there can really access those stories. I can become an academic, but really only my students and other academics have access to this history. Or I could work with a medium where there's a lot more access, where there's a lot more people likely to come in contact with it. And I like fiction. I like writing literature because I think it is an art form that is very much about the interior. It's an art form that's very much about if you're doing it right, if you're reading a novel that is sort of truly original, it's sort of slipping into a completely different consciousness than your own. And so that's what makes me really excited about fiction and marrying that to looking at these stories or perspectives or artifacts or even just images that are lost in the archive or are buried away in an archive, and beginning to think about sort of how those two can come together is what's exciting to me about doing that kind of work.

JMG Mhm. You mentioned how you were talking about democratic access, and I think that's great, but for me, it was really about power.

KG Mhm.

JMG I talk a lot about power in my artist talks or with the films period, because I'm very much interested, if not obsessed, with unearthing unnamed power and attempting to usurp it or redistribute or embolden myself with power or the viewer with a certain type of power. As an actor, I definitely felt disempowered. I went to a performing arts high school where it was a beautiful experience. I really blossomed as an actor, as an artist. Period. And then once I got to New York, and I was training, it felt like, Oh shit. You know? You're having to come to terms with the very real obstacles of what it means to be a black actress. Whereas in high school, it wasn't—there was colorblind casting, I could be cast as the matriarch of a very distinguished matriarch of a family, and my son is Asian, his wife that he's marrying is white. It was a dream world. But when you come into the reality of the situation, if you're thinking about the theater world, if you're thinking about, God forbid, Hollywood...

KG Mhm.

JMG It's very limiting in terms of what types of roles black women and black men have access to historically and contemporarily. So my last role was for a video game, a really violent video game. And I played this character who was the wife of a drug dealer, or the girlfriend of a drug dealer, and in the video game, he's beating me...

KG Oh god.

JMG ...and you as the player, you're the white guy player, you can decide on your mission to save me or not. You know, you can just get the money that you need and keep it moving. And during the process of recording this, there were parts of it that were really exciting: being in a video game, they take your body image, putting these sensors all over your body.

KG Mhm.

JMG But then doing the voiceover aspect, where you have to voice this character, I was being told by people who were not black to blacken up a little bit.

KG Right.

JMG Uh, can you make it a little bit more urban? And here I am thinking, Oh, shit, this, we're in *Bamboozled* now? We're really in a Spike Lee film right now?

KG (*laughter*) Right.

JMG So it was a real make-or-break moment for me, I had to kind of come to terms with the fact that even if I continue to progress and be successful in this realm, there's still going to be some compromises that I'm probably going to have to make. And are you going to be comfortable with that...those compromises?

KG Right.

JMG Not saying that there aren't compromises that one has to

make as a filmmaker, but my position of power is structured as such that those compromises are fewer and far between, and they're not affecting me in the same way that the compromises I would have had to make as an actor would have affected me.

KG Mhm.

JMG The work that I make is from my own experience as a black woman, my own subjective experience. It's me crafting the reality, or it's me examining my relationships. I'm in the driver's seat. So it was really about power. It was really about control over the narrative and being able to push against that dominant narrative that I know is not true. So here's what my reality is.

[CLIP FROM JA'TOVIA GARY'S *GIVERNY I (NÉGRESSE IMPÉRIALE)*]
"My boyfriend just went like that. Keep your hands where they are! Yes, I will, sir. I'll keep my hands where they are. Please don't tell me this, Lord, please don't tell me that he's gone."

"Let me see your hands! Exit now! Keep 'em up! Keep 'em up! Where's my daughter? You got my daughter? Face away from me and walk. Walk backwards towards me. Keep walking, keep walking. Keep walking. Get on your knees, get on your knees."

KG So I should say that I saw snippets or parts of your most recent project. You showed three pieces, and the last piece that you showed is the piece that you're currently working on, which is your feature length film, right?

JMG Mhm. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*.

KG *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. And what sort of excited me about all three of the pieces that you showed, but especially the last one, is how you are working with archival footage. Like you're finding these pieces of film that are sort of older, that are lost, that are not necessarily sort of like iconic pieces of film, and you're incorporating them with things that you have shot yourself. And you're sort of juxtaposing the two. I've always been super interested in archival

work, so that's my in, but then it also sort of occurred to me that it's rare for me to see that used so sort of artfully, I think, in, for lack of a better word, like nonfiction film or documentary film. In your work, the archival images are often being used to make sort of a larger statement, and they're clearly from the past, but they're from a past that most of us don't remember, or haven't really reckoned with. And so I'm super interested about how you find those pieces of archival footage. And particularly with your feature length, which is about yourself and your family, how you make the process of which pieces of archival footage you're going to use, and what draws you to which pieces of footage to use alongside the really personal interviews that you're doing.

JMG That, those are great questions. I'm scouring the internet. *(laughter)* And, and also, you know, physicals, like IRL, in real life, you know, there are libraries. You know, they decommission this, these 16mm reels of film.

KG Mhm.

JMG There are, you know, flea markets, estate sales. So I have my own archive in my home of stacks of 16mm films. Old educational films, old television specials, you know, one hour specials.

KG Yeah.

JMG So I am constantly searching, without even having a use for that particular thing in mind. Just what I see that I think might be fascinating, that's within the realm of my interest, which is of course blackness and black womanhood and spirituality and ritual and you know, craft, psychoanalysis. So there's certain things that are within my—the scope of my interest that I'm basically casting a very large and broad net and stacking it. You know, hoarding these images.

KG Mhm.

JMG In terms of how it's used with the feature...so the feature length film is about...I say it's about myself and my family, but it's really

about everybody's family. It's about you, it's about your relationship to your mother and your sisters and your father. It's about these personal, very intimate connections that we have with people. And how oftentimes those are the ones that are the most difficult.

KG Mhm.

JMG Because the stakes are very high, right? Everybody has a mama. And if they don't, they feel some type of way about that. Everybody has very, very strong feelings about their first love.

KG Mhm.

JMG And so this film is about that. I'm kind of mining these relationships and looking for some sort of understanding.

KG Mhm.

JMG It started with my mother, of course, because that's the point of departure for a lot of my work. But it was me attempting to try to bridge a really large chasm between us. We have quite a tumultuous relationship. And so I thought, you know, if I make this film about her, as an undergraduate, she will see my feelings for her, and maybe she will be warmer towards me. Or maybe, maybe this will make me warmer towards her. And then it bloomed into, Well, you know, you also got issues with your daddy.

KG *(laughter)* Right.

JMG You also have this, this first love that, you know, really scarred you. And what are the connections between that relationship with your first love and the way that your parents loved each other? So it's an examination of these repeated behaviors or this inheritance. What are we passing down?

KG Mhm.

JMG So in a lot of the synopses that I write, in terms of like

looking for money for this film, it's like, oh, we're thinking about intergenerational trauma. But we're also thinking about intergenerational wisdom, because I'm not interested in trauma porn.

KG Mhm.

JMG I am interested in mining the very difficult subjects and the very difficult experiences. But I'm also thinking about what are we... what else has been imprinted onto the genetic material and passed down to us? Is it just violence and alcoholism and mental illness? Or is it also that thing that's greater than resilience, the fact that we're still alive, the ability to create, the ability to worship in a way that sustains us, the ability to care for one another and love one another in ways that sustain us. So that's the film. And so when using archival, I am not thinking about representing just a specific historical moment or event. I'm thinking about how does this piece of archival invoke a certain emotion, a certain visceral response. So I'm using these images in abstract and impressionistic ways. (clip)

JMG It may not seem like I should be using chickens in a field that are clucking because they're hanging upside down about to be slaughtered. It doesn't seem like that should be used in this interview with my mother. But in a way I can use it to heighten this emotion that she's talking about, when she's referring to her parents' very violent relationship.

[CLIP FROM JA'TOVIA GARY'S *THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN*]

I do believe that they loved each other. It's just that they didn't know how to communicate effectively. They wanted to be together but at the same time they wanted to do their own thing. And it didn't work. My parents was hardworking parents. But they were young and they made young decisions.

JMG So it's me thinking about the emotional response more so than a kind of direct correlation, see and say.

KG Mhm.

JMG And a lot of this archive I'm making...

KG Yeah.

JMG ...myself, so...

KG Wait can you...what do you mean? You make the archive yourself?

JMG So if I get, you know, a 16mm film, and I see a piece of it that I like, I'm going to take that piece, like the Ruby Dee portion of *Ecstatic Experience*...

[CLIP FROM JA'TOVIA GARY'S *AN ECSTATIC EXPERIENCE*]

"I ain't gonna grieve no more. No matter how you all done treat me and my children. The Lord has shown me the way, and someday, we ain't gonna never be slaves no more."

JMG I'm going to etch directly onto the surface of it. I'm going to scratch certain parts off, I'm going to bleach parts of the emulsion off, I'm gonna paint. Or I might start with a very clear leader, where nothing's on it. It's just clear film.

KG Mhm.

JMG And I will paint all over it, it becomes now a canvas. So it's now a series of moving miniature paintings that are happening rapidly. It's called direct animation or direct filmmaking. It's an older avant-garde filmmaking technique that's camera-less, and I feel like it gives me... it gives me more latitude in terms of visual vocabulary, if that makes sense. So I don't have to just go to the archives, I can now make this very abstract moving painting...

KG Yeah.

JMG ...that looks like cellular material. It looks like some sort of dreamscape. It has no figures, it's completely abstract. So I can put

this with anything now. So it opens things up.

[CLIP] "I'm free. I'm free. I'm free. I'm free."

JMG But can I ask you about your current archive? And I have not, you haven't given your Radcliffe presentation so I don't have a lot of tea...

KG I have not, I have not yet.

JMG ...on what you've been doing in that office of yours. *(laughter)* But I do know it is about one of my favorite places on the globe, the first free black republic, Haiti.

KG Mhm.

JMG So maybe you can talk to us about this project, but also the archival process.

KG Yeah. So the novel that I'm currently working on, it's my second novel, and it's based on the life of the first black female doctor in New York State, Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward. She grew up in Weeksville, which was a free black community that was founded in central Brooklyn in the 1830s. It was specifically founded for black people to eventually get enough land to become a viable voting bloc in New York politics, so it has this very specific political reason why this community was created. And then it became, of course, a force to fight slavery for abolitionists. And it became a sort of haven for people who were escaping from slavery. But all that is to say, that part is very interesting, but that's not the part that I'm writing about. I'm reading about her daughter...

Annie Peaches McKinney, and she married the son of the Episcopal Archbishop of Haiti, who was another member sort of this black, burgeoning free black community before the Civil War. He saw the way the political winds were going in the US right before the Civil War, and he decided that black people would never be free in the US and that we should start emigrating to Haiti. So that's

basically, 1861, he left here, took, I think, like three-hundred people with him to Haiti, and attempted to establish a sort of bulkhead for black Americans to come to. His son comes to the US to study at Boston Music Conservatory, he meets Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward's daughter, they only meet for like a couple days, and then he's studying, and then he goes back to Haiti, but they have this long romance over letters. They decide to get married, their parents all get involved, on the day of the wedding they meet each other again for the first time and the daughter realizes that she's made a terrible mistake and that she has romanticized this guy in her mind. And she begs her mother not to go through with it, and her mother says it's too late, we gotta do this. We will be embarrassed if you don't do this. She goes back with him to Haiti. She manages to escape after she has her second child. To escape she doesn't want to arouse suspicion, so she pins her children's diapers to the underside of her skirt so nobody will know that she's leaving for a long time. And she says she's gonna go meet a friend. And she takes a carriage to the US Consul. And she says, I need to get out of here.

JMG Wow.

KG So the US Consul helps her escape, and they smuggle her out. The woman never returns to Haiti again and just raises her sons basically in New Jersey...

JMG Wow.

KG ...and gets all these letters constantly from the family in Haiti saying, Come back, complete your wifely duty.

JMG Mm!

KG You need to come back here. (*laughter*) You're letting down this whole family. But she herself maintained a real love of the country of Haiti and a deep, deep nostalgia for it. And then the other question that sort of is now animating what I'm doing and sort of thinking about how the novel goes is sort of this question of how do we define freedom? Especially because so many of our definitions of

freedom are based on what you can or can't get away with doing to someone who has less power than you.

JMG Mhm.

KG So if you take that out of the equation, how do you measure what your freedom looks like? What freedom looks like? And I don't—in a larger sort of cultural conversation, we don't really have a way to talk about freedom without talking about that.

JMG Domination, right.

KG Without talking about domination. Exactly. And even when we're not talking about sort of dominant stuff, I'm always super interested in Black history, the stories that get less known and don't get told, which are usually the stories about queer people...

JMG Mhm.

KG ...usually the stories about women, usually the stories about working-class people, usually the stories about violent people.

JMG Yeah.

KG Those are the stories that oftentimes you have to dig even deeper to find, and then on top of it, you have to dig deeper to find some sort of objective viewpoint that is not, "this person was terrible," and also is not, you know, some sort of happy rewrite of what their life was like.

JMG Whitewashing.

KG Yeah, exactly. *(laughter)* So those silences or absences are always super interesting to me. And then when we say that something has been silenced, figuring out why, because sometimes the why is very obvious, but oftentimes the why is a little bit less, less apparent.

JMG Well, I always was somebody who was really really interested in blackness because I was raised around a bunch of white folks, and it caused me to have a kind of like weird identity crisis for a really long time, you know? And so I guess the most obvious thing to do is to go super black, right?

KG Yeah.

JMG So I was super angry. I still am really rage-filled. *(laughter)* Very much a Black, angry Black woman. I don't feel any type of way about that either.

KG Mhm.

JMG I think the rage is important and useful and insightful. But, yeah, when I got to...well it's kind of a long story 'cause I dropped out of undergrad when I was, you know, my first undergrad experience, I was an acting major...

KG Mhm.

JMG ...at a private college on the Upper East Side studying acting. I hated it, and I was kind of going through it psychologically. I was like losing it.

KG Mhm.

JMG And so I dropped out and, but I started waiting tables, and I started doing all of the things that actors do, going on auditions. But I knew that I had to get back into school because I wanted to continue with storytelling. I wanted to continue with being an artist, and I wanted to know more about blackness.

KG Mhm.

JMG I knew that I was going to have to go back. So I knew that it wasn't just going to be about film, that I also was going to get this

black history or Africana, you know, diasporic education.

KG Mhm.

JMG So while I'm waiting tables, I'm taking classes, I'm taking this course. It was called The Black Experience in Ghana, and it was, you know, a three-credit summer course. And I forget my professor's name, Paula...something. She was a Caribbean woman, light-skin, with locs. She took us there. And she was, listen, she didn't play, and this...I have a history of really amazing teachers.

KG Mhm.

JMG But it's always been black women who don't play...

KG Mhm.

JMG ...that have kind of shaped my life. Shout out to Miss Washington. *(laughter)* There's just a slew of them. And she was just a woman who didn't play, and she was like, I'm letting y'all know now, y'all aren't gonna get over here and embarrass me.

KG Right.

JMG Like and get your minds right because whatever you're thinking about Africa, throw it out of your mind.

KG Mhm.

JMG I want you to come in with an open heart and an open mind and not throw your expectations, right, of homecoming...

KG Right. *(laughter)*

JMG ...on these people! Because you're an American.

KG Right.

KG Right. (*laughter*)

JMG ...on these people! Because you're an American.

KG Right.

JMG Don't forget it.

KG Right! Exactly.

JMG And....I did, I thought that I had emptied my mind of these expectations, but I definitely got over there and got a rude awakening. So while we're there, it's basically a history course but also an anthropological sort of excursion.

KG Mmm.

JMG So we are charged with these research assignments and mine was I wanted to learn about skin bleaching.

KG Mhm.

JMG And why a country where everybody, most of them look like you and me...

KG Yeah.

JMG Why were people choosing to engage in this practice? And so basically, this is my first time holding a camera in the field.

KG Oh, wow.

JMG I took a really, you know, at the time it was top of the line, but it's the little small mini DV cameras...

KG Mhm.

JMG ...camcorders, and so I'm snapping, everywhere we go,

advertisements for bleaching creams. Gorgeous advertisements for anything—feminine care products or music or hair—everybody does not look like us in these advertisements.

KG Mhm.

JMG They're at least three shades lighter.

KG Yeah and they have black...they give them blue eyes. *(laughter)*

JMG Yeah, and so to me it was a mindfuck as someone who grew up, you know, dark-skinned in the American South.

KG Mhm.

JMG With, you know, with a mother who was not dark-skinned.

KG Mhm.

JMG Right? With a brother who was not dark skinned, but very much picking up on the social cues of what it means to be dark skinned, what it means to have this type of hair, what it means to have this type of nose. So really interested in the politics of embodiment...

KG Mhm.

JMG ...but didn't have the language. And so this trip gave me the opportunity to develop that language...

KG Yeah.

JMG ...the opportunity to develop my thoughts around what it means to have your mind and your psyche under attack from white supremacy. Like what does it mean to rub abrasive chemicals on your beautiful skin...

KG Mhm.

KG Mhm.

JMG ...where it's removing layers.

KG Yeah, so I just finished writing a really long piece about colorism for *The Guardian*. So...

JMG Can't wait. (*laughter*)

KG I've been thinking about this a lot, and thinking specifically about how much, in a majority people of color countries—because this happens also in Asia a lot—the advertisements for skin bleaching is so out in the open, in a way that it is not here. And is sort of matter of fact, in a way that it is definitely not here...

JMG Yeah.

KG ...and what that changes. And I was trying to figure it out, because I was actually talking to two writers who I talked to this a lot about...they are not black women writers, they're women of color writers, Mira Jacob and Tanwi Nandini Islam are two women who, in their cultures, are considered dark-skinned. And so we have these conversations about like, What does this mean? And, What does it mean when you are, when you have lived with that expectation of beauty? And we all also have much lighter skin mothers (*laughter*).

JMG Yeah. Mhm.

KG So I think that usually also brings it home a lot more. And for me the question is always like, I don't believe that Americans are so much more enlightened...

JMG No, absolutely not.

KG ...than these other cultures, I don't think that's what's going on. Because, you know, some people have said to me like, Oh, it's because we had Black is Beautiful in the '60s. I'm like, that's not why.

JMG Mmmmm...no. (*laughter*)

KG You know, like, the Holy Grail for me would be to see what marketing research actually says when you try to outright market skin bleaching cream in the US. There has to be some sort of algorithm that they have come up with which is why they don't...

JMG Absolutely, it wouldn't work.

KG ...do it. Why, why it doesn't work.

JMG It has to be on the undertier.

KG Right. Exactly. And what's super interesting to me about, specifically talking about colorism, because this is another theme in the novel, is, compared to other countries, in the US, how unspoken it is. And so I'm always super interested in, in that—in sort of why we have entered into this silence that, as far as I can tell from reading the archives, has sort of always been a part of the conversation of colorism. I was reading sort of this book about the black elite, sort of right after Reconstruction to like the 1910s. And so there's this whole section about how, in like the 1870s, 1880s, there's this whole proliferation of black newspapers, because finally we're free. We can write about our own experiences, and people are really excited too. And there's these black newspapers run by dark-skinned people, which are like, Colorism is real, what is going on? Like, we have to talk about this.

JMG Mhm, mhm. Right?

KG This is gonna tear us apart. It's messing up our self-governance because, you know, lighter skinned people are getting jobs in this stuff, regardless of their commitment to black people or black freedom.

JMG Mhm.

KG And then there are a bunch of newspapers run by light-skinned

people saying, It's all in your head. It's not real. (*laughter*)

JMG Good old gaslighting.

KG Yeah, you're making it up. It just happens to be this way for some people, but, you know, you're actually dividing us by saying this, and it's all in your head.

JMG This is what fucks me up.

KG (*laughter*) And so the fact that that's still a part of our conversation about it, whatever how many years we are later, and we never get past that part of it.

JMG Mhm.

KG Part of that person saying, This thing hurt me, and another person saying, You are making that up all in your head.

JMG You're crazy.

KG You're crazy.

JMG Get over it.

KG Get over it.

JMG Stop being a hater.

KG (*laughter*) Right? Exactly.

JMG I can barely talk to my damn mama about it.

KG Mhm. Yes.

JMG Without them looking at me like, Well, what are you saying?

KG Yeah. Yeah, it's so interesting because my...so my mom is much

lighter than me, and her mother was my complexion, was darker. And my mom always made a big deal—and I'm the darkest of my sisters—she made such a big deal, in a positive way, about my skin color. And I remember, one of my sort of vivid memories is being four or five and her saying you have to take care of this, this treasure.

JMG Oh wow.

KG (*laughter*) You have to make sure that this...you have to put lotion on this every day, you have to take care of this. So I really credit her for that part of it. And my grandmother never sort of explicitly talked about it, of course, because she's from a generation that wouldn't talk about it. But I remember when my grandmother passed away, one of my relatives saying to me sort of very, very proudly, you know, like 'cause she was the first dark-skinned woman to be elected head of the social club, the sort of socialite club that she was sort of in, in the suburbs. And I made that expression. I sort of said, What are you about? (*laughter*) Number one? And number two, why is this a point of pride? Like why are you...

JMG Oh, wow. (*laughter*) She's dark skin, and she got into the light skin group!

KG Yeah! And we talked about it a little bit more recently because my cousin is working on doing his PhD as a social worker. And so he's, he's doing like a family genealogy right now. And so he talked about it again over Thanksgiving, and he's sort of like, well, you know, he's being trained as a therapist, so he's much at better asking questions than I am, which is just like, What're you talking about? (*laughter*) He was like, Well, how do you think she actually got that position?

JMG Hmm.

KG Which was a really, a really smart question to ask. And so my mom was sort of like, Well, you know, she was very charming, and she just, no matter what somebody would say to her, she would always come back with kindness and write a million thank you notes

KG Which was a really, a really smart question to ask. And so my mom was like, well, you know, she was very charming. And she just, no matter what somebody would say to her, she would always come back with kindness and write a million thank you notes and send a million presents and, you know, make sure she was dressed to the nines at all times, and had...

JMG She was above reproach.

KG Yeah.

JMG She was respectable times a hundred.

KG Yes, yeah.

JMG And I think that's what we forget, that dark skin is considered anti-respectable.

KG Right? Exactly, exactly. And I actually have all of these letters from her, from my grandmother's father, my great grandfather, to her—because my grandmother married a little bit later in life—writing to her saying, you'll never get married in the North. You need to come to the South because there aren't enough prospects for you. Basically meaning like the people who are there in the North are going to pick somebody lighter than you.

JMG Wow.

KG And her, I don't have her responses. I just have his letters to her, sort of saying this to her, expressing real regret about her siblings living in New Hampshire and him having to go to the South to teach, and wanting her to sort of be in this space just with more black people where she could hopefully find sort of someone.

JMG Wow. But she didn't; she stayed in New England.

KG She didn't, and she found the lightest man possible. *(laughter)*

JMG Shut the fuck...

KG And she stunted on everybody...

JMG She's like actually, bitch, actually I have AI B. Sure! So you hoes can choke.

KG Basically, basically, yes, yeah. *(laughter)* Basically, yes.

JMG That's hilarious.

KG Yeah, yeah. That's what she did.

JMG That's hilarious. I don't know. You know, it's weird because sometimes I think the same thing, not that I'm like in the market for a husband, girl. But I'm like, you know, if I were to go down south, sometimes I do think, Oh, I'd get scooped up quick. *(laughter)* Maybe I'm romanticizing that.

KG No, I don't think so. I think, you know, I think about that a lot. I think about who you...because I'm married to a white man, and I think...he teases me about the marriage prospects essentially, and who you choose as your mate. I do think a lot about, sort of, how much location, geography...

JMG Oh, yeah.

KG ...local history plays into all of that, which many people don't feel comfortable saying.

JMG Yeah.

KG Because you don't want...you know, you want to believe your true love is...and you...and it was inevitable to be, but, you know, it really is, so much of those sort of intimate decisions are already determined by things that are outside of our control.

JMG Absolutely. I think that's very true. I'm so glad that you were

able to sit down and talk to me more about your practice and about your research because it is very exciting to me.

KG Thank you.

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