



Hit Play Transcription

Episode 24: Personal Histories

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Show Intro

Gentle electronic instrumental music plays underneath.

Kyra: 24. Personal Histories. Hey, I'm Kyra—a New York Neo-Futurist. While our on-going, ever-changing, late-night show, *The Infinite Wrench*, is on hold for the foreseeable future, we wanted a place to keep making art for you. And thus, *Hit Play* was born!

If you're already a fan of The New York Neo-Futurists, or any of our sibling companies, hello! We can't wait to be telling you a story on the subway platform and then have to pause awkwardly halfway through as a subway train goes by. If this is totally new to you—welcome to it!

We play by four rules: We are who we are, we're doing what we're doing, we are where we are, and the time is now. Simply put: we tell stories, and those stories are our own. Everything that you hear is actually happening. So if we tell you we're recording while sitting as still as possible because this is a really creaky chair, we are really sitting as still as possible because this is a really creaky chair. Like I am right now.

Kyra moves around and the chair creaks.

Ah, jeez.

In honor of Juneteeth this week, and the continual efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement, this week we're featuring plays that keep conversations about race going.

Just a heads up that some of the plays in this episode may contain sensitive topics. For more specific content warnings, check the timecodes in the show notes.

Kyra: And now, Topher will Run the Numbers!

Topher: Hey, I'm Topher, a San Francisco Neo-Futurist. I'm excited to be joining our sister company in New York today.

In this episode we're bringing you 4 plays by Kyra Sims, Julia Melfi, me--Topher Lin, and Hilary Asare featuring Rayne Harris, T Thompson, Nicole Hill, and Robin Virginia.

That brings us to 99 audio experiments on *Hit Play*. Enjoy!

Music winds down.

Play 1: Making Tracks: Walk #7 (Protest Songs) (2:06)

Kyra: Making Tracks: Walk #7 (Protest Songs). **GO!**

Gentle keyboard music underscore, eventually joined by Kyra playing Otto, her French horn. The melodies drift as she mentions different protest songs.

Kyra: Direction: Union Square to Washington Square Park, then North. Before the march on June 6th, I hadn't ridden the subway since Friday, March 13th. Therefore, I made every subway mistake one could possibly make on a Saturday morning: I walked to a station that was closed and had to walk to the one in the opposite direction from my apartment; my subway rhythm was off and I missed my stop to transfer; and I almost went to the wrong platform to fix my mistake. But somehow, I eventually made it to my destination.

Excitement, strength, and purpose vibrated out from everyone around me, and soon the rehearsal spilled into the march, moving south towards the square without ever stopping the music. As we flowed down the eastern border of Union Square, a trumpet player began the opening strains of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", and my heart swelled. The Black National Anthem.

Piano underscore plays "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"

Union Square has been home to so many political movements, marches, protests over the centuries. Its name, however, is only a coincidence—yes, Emma Goldman spoke here. The very first Labor Day drew 10,000 people to the area, but the Square itself merely unites two main roads: Broadway, and 4th Avenue. It's literally just a Union of streets.

But, as the city grew, so did Union Square's role in the city. By the mid-1800s it had become a public gathering place for a variety of political demonstrations, most notably the pro-union rally that erupted there underneath the statue of George Washington after the Civil War-inciting

attack on Fort Sumter in 1861. There even existed for a while a pavilion in the northern section of the park that was built expressly for mass gatherings and demonstrations.

Piano underscore is subtly joined by crowd/protest noises

Our next stop on the march was Washington Square Park. This park I love so much and one of the big reasons is that we wouldn't even have it today as it is, if it weren't for community activism. Starting in the mid-1930s until 1959, a fierce battle over the fate of Washington Square Park raged between parks commissioner Robert Moses and local activists, including Jane Jacobs, Shirley Hayes, and area resident Eleanor Roosevelt. Moses wanted to expand 5th Avenue, which currently ends at the north end of the park, through the park and down into lower Manhattan. Thanks to the work of Hayes and others, every proposal involving diverting traffic into the park was rejected, and soon a proposal of their own was drafted and approved: which banned non-emergency vehicles from the park forever.

Going back even further in history, Washington Square also has some significant black history that I never knew about before recently. When the Dutch settled here in the 1600s, they used slave labor to help them build a wall on the northern border of New Amsterdam. That street is now called Wall Street. Then in 1643 they gave land grants to "half-freed" slaves to settle the land north of the wall—not out of the goodness of their hearts, but to act as a buffer from attacks by indigenous groups north of the wall. They were "half-free" because they still had to share their profits with the Dutch West India Company, pay an annual land fee, and their children were still born slaves. The area owned and cultivated by these people went by different names, including "the Negroes' lots", and "Land of the Blacks". This, however, developed into a cultural norm in New York of "freed" black people working and co-existing alongside slaves, which helped bring about rebellions like the New York Slave Revolt of 1712, which *then* led to a slew of anti-black laws and over-policing, the effects of which we are very obviously still feeling today.

And of course we can't talk about protests and riots in the Village without at least mentioning the Stonewall Riots of 1969, especially as it's Pride Month and we are *still* fighting the police just like they were, to this very day. That riot started an organized movement that's benefited LGBTQ people to this very day. I hope in my heart that what we're doing right now does the same. One of the songs that reportedly was sung the first night of the Stonewall Riots was "We Shall Overcome", and fittingly, we played that too while marching through those same streets.

Kyra plays "We Shall Overcome" on her French horn, accompanied by piano underscore

When we got to 34th St, it started to rain. Our heads tilted up, grateful for the relief.

The sound of rain joins the underscore.

For a few moments it really started to come down, and we all cheered. My French horn looked beautiful in the rain, her bell adorned with droplets like dew. We revelled in the moment, and soon the whole march erupted into song.

Kyra plays "Empire State of Mind" on her French horn, accompanied by piano underscore

I am fully and deeply in love with this problematic city. I love the layers of ugly truths and beautiful stories that meld and cake the streets like dust. I love the energy that runs through it, even now, a quiet ever-burning furnace. And I love the absolutely and incredibly indomitable populus. The more I learn about the history of New York, the more assured I am that we are doing the right thing (not that I needed any convincing on that). Even in this “free” state, my ancestors were lynched and beaten, their homes and businesses destroyed and sabotaged. AND COPS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN BAD.

This is our city. Keep showing up. Keep speaking out. We got this.

Music plays out.

Play 2: Two Legacies in Five Parts (8:08)

Julia: Two Legacies in Five Parts. **GO!**

Percussive and tonal underscore. Changes in tone with each section.

Julia: 1. Present, Part I

I’ve been reading a lot about the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest in Seattle. Black Lives Matter protestors secured 6 blocks of police-free city after weeks of East Precinct’s use of violent force including continual use of tear gas during a fucking pandemic.

When the Seattle Police Department vacated the area, Black leaders spoke their demands at 12th & Pine, calling to center Black liberation when overhauling Seattle’s institutions. There’s a link to those demands in the show notes.

People are camping in Cal Anderson Park, distributing food, teaching each other to be street medics—it’s like a big mutual aid hub.

2. Personal Past

When I think about Capitol Hill, I think about being a teen and taking the bus across the bridge just to walk around and see gay people living their lives as I browsed through The Shin’s CDs or whatever. I think about my tattooed, shaved-headed, key-ring-wearing coworkers who snuck me beers at that park like I was one of them because, as it turned out, I was. For me, it was the first place where I really recognized I was queer, and that I could live a happy life full of community like that. To me, it was utopia—a legacy that when I was brave enough, I would inherit.

It was not utopia. All of those coworkers were also white. Except for the ones who worked security at night, and we weren’t friends with them.

3. Historical Past

The reverberations of historical redlining and racist homeowner organizations are still felt in Seattle today. In 2019, the average worth of white households in the area was almost twenty times more than Black households.

And those boundaries were drawn on stolen land from the Duwamish people who signed a treaty at Elliot Point in 1855, which the US Government almost immediately broke. They named the city after the Chief, but we don't even say his name right. I couldn't even tell you how to pronounce it.

The city worked hard to erase the legacy of Black trans women and other BIPOC activists to intentionally segregate this city we call a liberal haven. But the very fact that a visibly gay neighborhood like Capitol Hill exists is *because* of the constant work done by those same people.

Without the Stonewall Riots led by Marsha P. Johnson, Miss Major, and others whose names have been hidden from us, there would be no wide acceptance of queer people in America. It would have been much harder for me to come out, first to myself in that park, and again and again ever since—maybe even to you right now. This is another legacy I inherit.

4. Present, Part II

Today, a white cis gay person (and in my case, a white queer, not-so-in-the-binary person) can get a high-paying job at major tech company in Seattle, drive up the price of rent, and continue to segregate spaces like Capitol Hill. We easily trade in our queerness for even closer proximity to white supremacy.

I sometimes mistake being queer for being automatically radical. I think it actually just means there is more specific work to do—that I am indebted to do always.

Black folks at CHOP are calling for the continual centering of their experiences and leadership in the space, even recently changing the name from “Autonomous Zone” to “Occupied Protest” as a reminder that being in the space is a continual action—not a party.

5. Questions, now and for the future

If you're white and queer like me, like a lot of our audience is, we've gotta ask ourselves more questions in our queer spaces. Here are a few I'm working with—track me down and ask me yours.

Who owns this space?

How does this space enact safety? Is that *really* safe?

Can I set a calendar reminder for two months from now to make sure I'm still reading and reflecting and acting?

Where can I make room in my budget for a personal reparations plan?

What are my daily practices to activate my responsibility in holding these spaces, and myself, accountable?

How can I responsibly hold these two legacies at once?

Music plays out

Play 3: Yellow Power, Black Peril (12:30)

Topher: Yellow Power, Black Peril. **GO!**

Topher: I remember the first time I was different. The memory is fuzzy, but it's the first day of preschool.

Droning underscore crescendos underneath until it cuts out

I'm on the playground, and a kid comes up and says something to me. Probably he wanted to play. Problem is, I don't understand. I only speak Mandarin. So I take what I'm sure was a perfectly reasonable course of action to a three-year-old—which is to smack him on the head. I get sent to the principal's office, and my dad has to come defend my behavior to her. She lets me off with a talk about "friendly hands."

Drone cuts out

That was around the same time I met a Black kid for the first time.

Droning underscore crescendos underneath until it cuts out

The memory is fuzzy, but it's another day of preschool. We were gathered around for a reading circle, and I saw this new kid across the way. I remember feeling confused. I hadn't seen anyone Black before. Not at church, not at the supermarket, not in the picture books lining my shelves at home.

Drone cuts out

It would be a while before I met anyone else who was Black.

Droning underscore crescendos underneath until it cuts out

Like most of the other Chinese families we knew growing up in the Bay Area, my parents worked hard to make it that way. They knew that when it comes to surviving in this country, whiteness, or as close to it as you can get, is where you want to be. And it came out in small ways, like what color to keep your skin, how to pull on the bridge of your nose to make it longer, who we were supposed to play with, supposed to date, what neighborhoods we tried to move into.

Drone cuts out

We got so good at that last one that it drove the whites out, grumbling about their schools getting taken over by uncreative drones.

Droning underscore crescendos underneath until it cuts out

(on right stereo) Foreign flood. *(on left stereo)* Yellow peril 2.0.

It's this otherization that earns us our place in the pantheon of POC. A useful term that lets us into the club of laughing at the yt ppo, (*echoey laughter bounces around stereo*) calling them out; gives us the cover to lay slightly more claim to Black culture—the music, the fashion, the language. You know, at least we're not white. At least we can dance. We count ourselves in on the joke.

Drone cuts out with more echoey laughter bouncing around

And all the while--

Droning underscore with some scraping noise crescendos underneath until it cuts out
We work the jobs that betray them, we move into redeveloped neighborhoods, we call the cops to keep us safe, and we look side-eyed at the schools that might lift up our Black brethren at risk to our admission.

Drone cuts out and then crescendos even louder with scraping noises

I think part of it is that we don't want to lose what we have. We've studied up on our Steely Dan, our tuna casserole and Christmas, and now we're "one of the good ones." But we know we're teetering on the edge, and it doesn't take much to tip us off. Trade war. Virus. Exclusion Act 2.0. But threatened though we are, we are not in the same kind of peril, the kind that daily threatens body and breath.

Drone cuts out with one loud quick scraping noise

Other though we remain, we have gained a foothold into the power of whiteness. And I don't see a way forward without giving up some of what we've hoarded for ourselves. The wealth. The status. The comfort and security. We're afraid that someone has to bleed, and we don't want it to be us.

Scraping noises crescendo

The thing is, there's already blood on our hands. The question is what we'll do about it.

Play 4: Variations on Black Joy (15:39)

Hilary: Variations on Black Joy. **GO!**

All sing this song: "I'm tired of sorrow I want to enjoy - Black giggles, Black whimsy, Black Love, and Black Joy." The first line is full volume and then the song fades to underscore levels until noted. Supplemented by tonal underscore music.

Nicole: My joy looks like creative flow...

My joy tastes like salty fried wonderful...

My joy smells like, mmm, the earth after a summer storm...

My joy sounds like endless jazz riffs... (*Nicole makes a jazzy badum tshhh sound*)

My joy feels like a question to be eagerly answered in all the ways...

Rayne: My joy looks like dimples, bright colors, and sunshine
My joy tastes like the first bite of cookie dough bluebell ice cream
My joy smells like a vanilla bean scented candle and the smoke from the flame
My joy sounds like laughter - unbridled laughter
My joy feels like a room full of soft fluffy velvet pillows

Hilary: My joy looks like purple clouds
My joy tastes like warm stock, savory, satisfying
My joy smells like mom's Thanksgiving stuffing
My joy sounds like iridescent bubbles
My joy feels like a micro fleece on a crisp day

T: My joy looks like bright eyes and a confident smile
My joy tastes like coffee and a spliff
My joy smells like sweet potatoes and broccoli roasting in the oven
My joy sounds like a deep belly laugh
My joy feels like a full body hug with my love

Robin: My joy looks like a bright glowing orb of sunshine and glitter
My joy tastes like the first bite of a perfect meal
My joy smells like lavender
My joy sounds like *(Robin lip trills into a yell)*
My joy feels like magic

Underscore cuts out

Nicole: My joy is being released from her tower of limited past perception.

Hilary: My joy is mine, undeniable and energizing

Robin: My joy cannot be crushed

T: My joy is priceless and not to be fucked with

Rayne: My joy comes in waves and I am grateful for its stay - regardless of the deep deep pain, I know my joy will be back. It has to.

Rayne (singing): I'm tired of sorrow I want to enjoy - Black giggles, Black whimsy, Black Love, and Black Joy

All (singing): I'm tired of sorrow I want to enjoy - Black giggles, Black whimsy, Black Love, and Black Joy

Show Outro

Gentle electronic instrumental music plays underneath.

Kyra: Thanks for Hitting Play and then listening to *Hit Play*. If you liked what you heard, subscribe to the show and tell a friend! If you want to support the New York Neo-Futurists in other ways, consider making a donation at nynf.org, or by joining our Patreon—[Patreon.com/NYNF](https://www.patreon.com/NYNF). Patreon membership gives you access to bonus content like video plays and livestreams. And if this episode gets over 1,000 downloads, we'll order one of our Patreon supporters a pizza on us. We'd really appreciate any support in these difficult times. Contributing to our Patreon helps us continue to pay artists, like me!

Take care of yourself, sing your favorite song into your favorite coffee mug, and share it with us on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook.

This episode featured work by: Kyra Sims, Julia Melfi, Topher Lin, and Hilary Asare featuring Rayne Harris, T Thompson, Nicole Hill, and Robin Virginie. If you would like to read the unabridged version of my play *Making Tracks: Walk #7 (Protest Songs)*, you can find it on my [Medium.com](https://medium.com) page. The link is in the show notes.

Our logo was designed by Shelton Lindsay. And our sound is designed by Anthony Sertel Dean. *Hit Play* is produced by Anthony Sertel Dean, Léah Miller, and Julia Melfi. Bye!

Music fades out!