

**Intro/Lydia Bangura:** Hello, hello and welcome to this episode of Her Music Academia the Podcast. I'm your host, Lydia Bangura. On this podcast I talk all about my experiences in music. I'm currently a music PhD student at the University of Michigan. I do research on black classical music and I also have experience as an opera singer. And on this show, I have music academics, music performers, music educators on to talk about their work in music. Today I'm so excited to introduce my guest: Dr. Kyra Gaunt. She's a professor at the University of Albany in Women's and Gender Studies and she's also a notable Michigan alum! Go Blue! She graduated in the 90's with a PhD in ethnomusicology. In this episode we talk all about her experiences a singer and as a researcher. We talk about her book "The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip-Hop. And we talk about the book project that she's currently working on, stay tuned for that. Without further ado, here's our conversation.

Lydia Bangura: All right. Hello, everyone, and welcome to this very special episode of the podcast. Thank you so much for tuning in. I'm really excited to feature a series of women for Women's History Month, and the first of which is going to be Dr. Kyra Gaunt. Kyra, how are you?

Kyra Gaunt: I am wonderful. Thank you for having me.

Lydia Bangura: Thank you so much for, for coming on. I'm so excited. You're actually not the only Michigan alum that I'm gonna have so I'm really-

Kyra Gaunt: Go Blue!

Lydia Bangura: Go blue! I'm so excited, ah that I got more than 1 Michigan alum so that we can talk about our shared experiences there but we also obviously shared experiences as black women in the Academy. And so I'm just I'm, really, really thrilled to be connecting with you.

Kyra Gaunt: I am delighted that you even asked me I am, I'm looking forward to our conversation

Lydia Bangura: Great! So let's go ahead and start off with if you could inform me and our listeners just a bit about your musical background. So you know, when you started playing music, writing music, singing, music, and kind of the music that was happening in your household while you were growing up. If you're from a musical family where you're from, and the- the- the music of the place where you're from, all of that stuff.

Kyra Gaunt: Okay. So my origin story. My- I grew up in the, what we call the DMV, The DC, Maryland and Virginia area. I grew up in a 100 year old black community called Lincoln Park, which my great grandfather and his brothers helped found all of them from the DC. Area from Southeast DC. Or northeast. DC. And my ancestors are 9 generations here in these, untied, I mean United States dating back to the era of Springfield, Massachusetts and the de Boises, Wb. De Bois. This clan of people came in Springfield, and I can go further back to 1855. My great great grandfather escaped from slavery from Portsmouth, Virginia, to Springfield, Massachusetts, and to come back forward, my Springfield, Massachusetts family- my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, met my maternal- maternal grandmother

likely in Boston where they were clearly peers with Martin Luther King, and Coretta Scott King, because my grandmother attended New England Conservatory of Music for a short period of time before she got married. And Coretta Scott King, I think, was one of her classmates. So my mother was an opera singer. Although my entire life like I was a knee high, not even knee-high baby I was the grandchild that everybody that- that was always at my grandparents house. My mother was a single parent, and yet I never - I remember her records. She had a Dorothy Maynor album which she would play occasionally but other than that, I would not have known that she was a former trained opera singer.

Lydia Bangura: Wow.

Kyra Gaunt: She was a mother, a mom, a wife who was the matriarch of the family, and that she grew up with some property, and my grandfather was a navy cook. And the gone boys had pretty hair, and came from Springfield, Massachusetts. So all of that to say that when I was very young I started singing. I was singing, since I was 2. I could walk before I could, I mean I could read before I could walk. But my earliest memories are of wanting to be a singer sitting with my mother's knees, while she would braid my hair, comb, brush my hair, and me singing a song by. I think it's a Little Anthony in the Imperials called "Going Out of my Head", no pun intended. And um, I was a very introverted lonely, only child and by the time I was 1- I was singing in choirs. By fifth grade I was being selected to sing out of the choir school choir, but I had- I was deathly- I had horrible stage right for about 20 years.

Lydia Bangura: Wow.

Kyra Gaunt: When I applied, let's see, when I graduated, I went to a community college that moved to American University. All of my degrees are in voice performance a classical voice performance. So I did my Bachelor of Arts at American University, moved from there back, when, to give a little tag on the affirmative action Supreme Court thing that's coming up- back when the GRE is the graduate record exams had a minority student locator, which, when you when you took the exam universities could find students of color to enlist into their program. And so SUNY,, State University of New York City, Binghamton contacted me and offered me an opportunity to audition. So I went to the audition there, and I lost my voice during my audition. I never lost my voice ever before and the voice teacher, Mary Burgess, decided to take me on the basis of my audition tape, so I spent a whole first year - not so I should back up - I always wanted to be Chaka Khan or Minnie Robertson, and never thought anything about classical singing.

Lydia Bangura: Wow! Come on Chaka Khan!

Kyra Gaunt: Now I don't sing- I'm more of a Mini Robertson than I am a Shaka Khan, but I never imagined being a classical singer, but that is all that was offered in 1979. If you went to school as a singer, you had to do classical music and so I'm at Binghamton the first year in my master's program and I can't sing for more than 15 min. So I am, my voice teacher would meet with me every day, and we would try to- we would sing for 15 min, and then my voice would konk out. The the source of my, the my vocal distress, if I could call it that, or lack of voice, was I'm pretty sure it was trauma related on some level. So the first 6

months I had a swollen vocal cords and Mary Burgess, who still teaches SUNY, being a or she might be retired by now. But she sent me to a renowned specialist in New York City. I would drive up on the weekends before I started my 3 years that I spent at SUNY Binghamton to see opera singer and Broadway voice specialist, I cannot remember his name now he was a German guy, and would sit in the office for those people who are old enough with Tatiana Troyanis, and it was just a renowned opera singer on the MET stage at the time. Umm, black there was a blackmail dancer, I cannot remember his name, Would that I was in there with people who are renowned singers and performers. just trying to get my voice back in shape. And then the next 6 months I had hypothyroiditis. My thyroid was affected, so I mean I was just. Something was affecting my system. And so for the first year I didn't sing in any of my classes, and this was an affirmative action placement. So I was the only black student in the program and I went to all of my, like French repertoire classes and I could only sit and watch. I couldn't sing and the debate about affirmative action was surfacing about. The black students are getting, you know, a free ride for going on this affirmative action thing. So it was really psychologically tough to be in that situation and not sing for an entire year of my Master's program so I spent an additional year in the program and in the end, Mary had gotten me to a place where I was singing fairly well and I applied for 3 schools: Eastman, Cincinnati Conservatory, and Michigan. I got into 2 out of the 3, and when I auditioned at Michigan I think this is my- I was telling one of my students. This is my claim to fame, it still was co-opted by my stage fright. I remember going in to the recital hall, which is a little fancier today, but I went into the green room, and I told myself I'm not going to get in here. So I got on my knees and prayed to my grandmother and I said, please, we had passed, and I said, please just let me have fun doing this because I'm not, it was renowned to me. It was like the top of the 3 schools that I was applying to Eastman was big then, but I didn't Michigan. Why, Michigan was better, was because I had a teacher at SUNY Binghamton. Her name is Edith Borough. She was a female composer who had gone to Oberlin, who was told you'll never, you know, be a composer because you're a woman. And ended up at Binghamton and started to teach at a very unusual way. She was very quirky. She taught a high- like a what did she call it? Hills and a Valley course? The hills was Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach and the valleys were their peers that nobody knew about, and I happened to take the valleys course, and in that course all of her, all of her listening exams were featuring black composers, but she didn't tell us until the very end of the semester. So every day we had class she'd give us a listening exam, and say, please do not guess who the composer is, because if you guess you'll lose 50 points if it's wrong. So she just had us outline the features of the music, the stylistic features, the elements. And then she would tell us later the names, maybe, of the-the composers but she never revealed, you know, Chevalier, that they were black composers until the very end of the semester. So Edith Borough recommended I go to Michigan because she knew, she said that I was the only- one of 2 white professors of the black music symposium, 1985, her Richard Crawford and she thought it would be a good place for me to go, and so I knew I was going into a place, and when I got there at the audition. I saw so many black students I'd never seen before in my life in one place and they were crowded around the windows outside the recital hall. So when I made the prayer to my grandmother, I turned off my sensor, you know, I just went in. We had to prepare 6 songs. They asked me for the first one. I sang it second, sang it, They asked me for all 6 of my songs, and I didn't notice. I just kept singing and to this day the former Dean, Willis Patterson, told me that my audition was the best one he had ever seen. But that's not what happened when I came back to my negative senses. I thought: Okay. I got in very quickly. but I thought, what did I do? I don't know how I don't know how to do what I did again. And

so th-that's a long story to say that my first three years in the doctoral of music program at Michigan studying first with a woman named Laruien Haywood and then changing because she threw up her hand, said I, don't know what to do with her. If she actually told me this I would never tell the students, and George Shirley took me on so my last 2 years with George Shirley. My, my undergrad through my doctoral program was me being very a voice major but being a reluctant, there used to be a book called "Soprano on her Head" about anxiety about being a performer um I struggled so much with stage fright that I decided to give it up long, long story short. It's much more complicated but and then I was reluctant so I switched to ethnomusicology after 3 years of my doctoral program. And, um, the rest is pretty much history. I decided I wanted to teach African American popular, really even vernacular music, or at least the thing about dance or embodiment really struck me because I had noticed I hadn't had many classes taught black music. But when they did, the body was missing for me. The idea that, um, emoting, moving, tapping your foot, dancing, you know, feeling the groove, all of those things, they could play Miles Davis or Billie Holiday. They could play, you know at a Jazz course. They might, in the one class that really caught my attention that I could do this that they played public enemy. It was a Robert Walzer, who is a renowned musicologist, does heavy metal and Jazz married to Susan McCleary, taught a class that Rich Crawford was on leave and when I saw what he did. I was like. If he can teach rock music, heavy metal, why can't I teach hip-hop, or whatever is the latest contemporary music? And so- so it's a long story. But I discovered the piece about Black Girls musical play when I was, when we were hosting a mid Atlantic midwest chapter of the Society for Ethnology at Michigan, and 2 little twin black girls played a hand clapping game as I was trying to develop my dissertation topic. And I heard them in the background, and I thought it's like kind of like sampling. There's so many little pieces, snippets of other songs in the game songs. They played like 8 or 9 game songs in a row, and I was talking to somebody. It was the end of the conference, and I- I was like, excuse me, excuse me, I have to go down the hall because this is-I think this might be a dissertation, this this is the connection i'm looking for for you. Long story. But that's how I- that's how I came here.

Lydia Banugra: Yes, thank you so much for sharing. You know it's it's truly my favorite part of the podcast, just to hear how you know how people end up on the path that they end up, especially in music academia, because it is so winding, and we don't normally have, you know, eight-year-olds that are like "I want to be a musicologist" you know. It like is kind of a- a winding road in that way. Okay, so I do, I do want to ask a clarifying question since this is something that you- you skipped over just a little bit as far as the jump from studying voice to ethnomusicology you were having these issues with your voice. And yes I would love to just hear a bit more about why that switch was attractive to you. You know, I've talked on the podcast about you know, how we have very similar backgrounds in voice and when I was at Roosevelt University during the pandemic, and everything shut down and you know I had kind of these 2 professors, Dr. David Care and Dr. William Hussey at Roosevelt, who really kind of stepped in, and we're able to say, you know you write some really great papers, would you consider? You know maybe getting a music PhD and it was something that would not have ever occurred to me if they had not introduced it as an idea. Especially cause Roosevelt was a conservatory there aren't any, you know, I wasn't rubbing elbows with music PhD's so it was really helpful for them to kind of step in say okay we can see that you're kind of flailing right now, have you ever considered, you write good papers-

Kyra Gaunt: They wouldn't have said that! \*chuckles\*

Lydia Bangura: But they knew! But they thought!

Kyra Gaunt: They wouldn't have used the word flailing. They would have said she was -

Lydia Bangura: Panicking? \*laughing\* So they very helpfully stepped in and sort of suggested you seem like you have an interest in music theory. You're really good at it. You've written some papers that are really impressive. I think you could, you know, explore this avenue I would love to hear just more about that transition, as far as if, you know, you've already mentioned a class that influenced you, if there were other professors or other students that kind of opened that door for you further.

Kyra Gaunt: I- I wanna share it in a, in an interesting way. It reminds me of how important the post Jim Crow era has become for black students and predominantly white institutions that there are professors who will look to see what you need to do to be primed toward something that could be an occupation or career for you that you as a person it comes from a background that's not necessarily, I was the first PhD in my family, didn't know anything about that. So I had - There. Was. It's funny. There was a- There were 2 Or 3 white male professors, one of my masters at American university- no one of my undergrad at American University who seemed to plan to seed, that you know you're really smart, and you're right, really well would you ever consider kind of a thing? I think he just slyly dropped it. But you know I'm still and then in my masters, another person mentioned it, and then, while I was at Michigan, so I did 3 years in the DMA. It was while I was doing my doctorate invoice that a professor oh, Dale Monson, sat me down, and he was like, you know, you know you could have your pick of any program if you decided to do musicology.

Lydia Bangura: Wow!

Kyra Gaunt: And I had never had anybody say anything like that to me but I was still clinging to the idea that I was a singer, right?

Lydia Bangura: Yes. Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: And so he said that and I took a course, an opera course with David Crawford and I had decided. I think, when I first got to Michigan because there was so many black students. There were 30 currently enrolled black students. There were 5 of us who were on the DMA or PhD track. I think, Diver Ramsey was one of my peers. Louise Toppen, and who's now on the music faculty, voice faculty, we were there at the same time. There were about 6 of us who were in grad school and the rest were undergrads and almost all of them with the exception of the students who came from Detroit, were always the only black student in the program that they came from. And so it was a big deal to be there and so when I noticed that I was like, you know what I've never been, never been introduced to black studies at all. So in every class, I have any historical musicology, anything class I'm going to write my papers about black subjects. So when I took opera class, Professor Crawford, David Crawford said, you're not gonna find

anything on Black Opera. And I don't know. You know how some people say you, you're inspired by people saying that's not possible. And I caught a little bug for a very short time because I think I was doing my French or my German reading courses and so I was downtown at the library a lot and I was like, Well, let me just look, since he thinks this, there's nothing. And when I started to look what I ended up finding, and I still have this 4 by 6 note cards of a 100 operas. I found the the John Douglas 1864 opera before most people ever heard of it. But what happened to that information? I only thought of this a couple of years ago... I had this 100 4 by 6 cards with the details for all of these operas dating back to 1864 and that professor never thought to either co-publish or encourage me to publish it.

Lydia Bangura: Oh, wow!

Kyra Gaunt: Not at all. And he was the expert and that's what we call anti-blackness. Thank you very much.

Lydia Bangura: Mhmm. Say that. Say that. That's the podcast, end it right here.

Kyra Gaunt: That is what you call anti blackness

Lydia Bangura: Yeah, yeah...

Kyra Gaunt: Which you don't consider that it's worthy of publication. And you claimed at the beginning of the semester that you won't find anything.

Lydia Bangura: And like, how do you confront when a student is proving you wrong about your own expertise right?

Right?

Kyra Gaunt: Never lead it on, but I'm sure that was there. So I had other- I had a Harvard professor who was like, you know you're not that good. You think you're all that hot shi-. You're not that good. I remember crying in his office. I was like, I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to cry. \*crying sounds\* So Dean Patterson came to my aid. He was like, you know, I think you would like Judith Becker's ethnomusicology course I think it's like right up your alley. And so I took the course, and I fell in love. And I thought, Wow! This- this orientation that's about the meaning making side of music and the people side, and the living...communities and culture side of music, and not what was essentially dead white men and a couple of women on the side. And I was the TA for the music for an on. What? What is it? Music for? Non Majors art music with Professor Whiting, and I remember I was very much coming into my black consciousness then, because I didn't have it before and what's now called DACA. I don't...the Department of Africana it- it was called something else when I was there. Africana studies. I can't think of what it is called now. They had changed their name, but I was spending a lot of time downtown with a lot of the black students in sociology, and I became the president of the minority, what was originally the Minority Association of Rackham, which I changed the name to Students of Color of Rackham, because

we were like we're not minorities you know like can't all that rhetoric was the late 1980s into the 1992 and so when I took the ethnomusicology course I was like, I think this is a better path for me. And I think i'd already started to think about well, I started writing about a public enemy. My first publication wasn't- was a conference presentation at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music. And I did a transcription of the samples in Fight the Power and talked about some of the blackest black musical aesthetics that most people don't talk about. And then that eventually evolved into me, studying the the black girls musical play, and as-as a phenomenon I call kinetic orality, which is a term I borrow from Cornell West. I was- I was at Michigan in the heyday of the best and the brightest. There were 650 currently enrolled black and Latino and indigenous Phd. Students at music in Michigan at the time, not ABD, on campus. And now, when I was at the School of Music in 2019 at Michigan, I think I saw 2 black students the whole, and we were there for a conference on black music. And I saw 2 black students in the hallway, and they didn't even notice that we were there. They didn't ask, what are you guys doing here? Why are these black people who look like they're older or might be alum here? None of them came or asked about what was going on with our presence there, which, when I won the Hall of Fame award this past year, I made sure I made a little sip and tea. They asked me to do a little video, and I was like, how can you be a program outside of Detroit where so many black musicians came from. Where so many musicians in my cohort when I was there they were from Detroit. Gerald Clayton who is renowned jazz pianist- a jazz drummer today, , Lydia Cleaver, not Gerlad Clayton, Gerald Cleaver, Lydia Cleaver harp, just phenomenal harpist just so many, including including Louise Toppen and and Scott Pipe, and just so many people came out of that era and to see that the school of music and dance and theater has not maintained the recruitment and retention of black students in particular, outside of a city like Detroit. Not to mention, Dean Patterson is from Ann Arbor. There are people in Ann Arbor. Michigan has a lot of work to do up on North campus.

Lydia Bangura: Yes, that's huge. Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. That's a great point, because you know, we share a lot of experiences, as far as, you know, having to kind of carve out your own curriculum almost by prioritizing okay I'm going to write about black music, I'm going to make sure I'm doing this research, like you know, we can talk about oy know, again, I'm-I'm coming into this program. I've talked on the podcast before, about how you know when my professors at Roosevelt kind of suggested, you know you might want to think about this, and the more I thought about it the more I got excited. You know I applied to Michigan as well as a few other masters programs, and just to see where I got in, and you know, when I got into Michigan that was it for sure. And you know I was so excited to kind of leave this like really stifling, you know, oppressive world of like white opera that I was in to go into music theory, and I felt like this is going to be my time, and I'm going to start exploring black music and doing all this, and they were like... Okay. So you need to read this article by Phil Ewell, let's make sure you know what you're getting into that the society for music theory is 1% black and so like, coming into this program I only have, as you're pointing out I have 1 black colleague who's studying ethnomusicology right now. So it's literally just the 2 of us, and I have to do so much extra work, not only to kind of build a cohort of-of support, of faculty, and colleagues that are outside of the School of Music because they're not there. So I've had to add you know, I'm really excited that I-I've added um an African American Studies and Diaspora study certificate to my PhD so I take a number of black studies classes as well. Which is exciting but it's like I literally have to do all this extra work, take extra course work on top of the

coursework that I already have to take for the degree in order to make the connections to the black professors you know to make black friends like because they're not in my department. I actually, listener's you need to correct me if I'm wrong if I'm forgetting somebody, but as far as I know I believe I'm going to be the first music theory, black music theory PhD.

Kyra Gaunt: You will be. And your classmate will be the second in ethnomusicology. I'm the first. We're talking about a 30, I graduated in '97. There have been others, but they did not finish the program.

Kyra Gaunt: One in particular that I know of. I think there might be. I think-

Lydia Bangura: There was someone. Yeah, there was somebody who, I think, graduated in musicology in like 2019 or 2020

Kyra Gaunt: Yeah musicology, yes musicology. But not ethnomusicology. And that, I had to invite, okay. I won the best, okay 2 things. Just-just so, listeners. Know I'm ringing the bell. She isn't. I have a bell on my desk. I have one in my office. The one in my office says: Nope, not today.

\*laughter\*

Lydia Bangura: Yes! Get them! Get them!

\*laughter\*

Kyra Gaunt: The second is I won the top book prize from the Society for Ethnology in 2006, as the graduate the only black- Okay. The only person out of the ethno proof program who's ever won that award. And the Society of Ethnomusicology, did they invite me back? No, did they? I didn't invite myself back when I was there in 2019, I invited myself back.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: They never even thought of- I mean, everyone knew that's in that things ecology that I won the prize. But I still know for a fact that one of my colleagues in Florida State used my book maybe 4 years ago and he was like I never read and it's amazing. And I'm just like, you know. So some of this is what I call the structural oppression.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: Of being a small insular, and predominantly white oriented institution, even if there are allies. There's not a lot of talk and not enough, you know, like in-in anthropology, they annually discuss major themes together. They publish a document about what some of the best of their field. We don't- we make, we give prizes, but we don't-



Lydia Bangura: We don't make those connections. Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: Yes, yeah. And if it is, I mean, who's going to read a book about black girls? Why is that important?

Lydia Bangura: And it really is just like we're-we're out here doing so much extra work to even prove like you're saying, we're- we're automatically engaging in this multidisciplinary work and having to do the extra work of finding the other resources, of finding the support, of finding the funding, you know, to put together this really new and interesting and relevant scholarship that has, you know, been marginalized and underrepresented just for it to not, you know, be formally recognize, or for you right to not be connected to the few black PhDs that are here like that is crazy! So it's just like you know?

Kyra Gaunt: Not even a thing. Why don't we bring her back? Because we're not training, not only, we we're not only providing representation for students who look like her, we're providing representation for scholars we're training who are going to go out in the field and replicate by us, if we don't see the representation, not of diversity of if inclusion, I'm just so tired. That's why I read this article about diversity on repeat this chapter. Cause I mean like even at my institution it's DEISJ and i'm like oh, the name! The new catch word is social justice.

Lydia Bangura: Sure.

Kyra Gaunt: DEISJ I love these, I hate these acronyms. So but-

Lydia Bangura: Because it really is like what are you saying and how are you actually backing up those claims. If you're not going to go with the extra mile and highlight the scholarship, if you're not going to be right- yes, connecting these scholars like it's so, you know, even thinking about the fact that I'm entering a-and you know there's no...there isn't a black person on the music theory faculty right?

Kyra Gaunt: I came back to Michigan in 2015, for Tedx event. Undergraduates invited that that they curated for an event. That is that power center. And, oh my God, I did so many lovely memories about Power Center. I was a special marketing assistant for the power center as one of my like work study jobs, and I was working the power center when Bobby McFerrin performed in the summer they had like a summer festival. So I was like roaming around. I helped market it on campus and stuff, and Bobby was like, does somebody want to come down here and sing with me, and I was like, excuse me, old woman, excuse me, pardon me, pardon me, excuse me -

Lydia Bangura: Let's go!

Kyra Gaunt: And I get down on the stage and he goes no, you're gonna dance. I'm like whatever you want me to do. And I'm telling you people those white people in Ann Arbor. I would go all over the city, and they're like you the one you the dancing with??

Lydia Bangura: Bobby McFerrin yes that's me baby! That's me!

Kyra Gaunt: Oh, baby, I'm thinking about your face. Oh baby... I was like, I was giggin' up on stage. So when I came back for the Tedx event you can find this online, I decided that I would- I- I have this thing about Ted Talks generally is that in the early days, and I've been a Ted Fan since 2007. If you saw black people on stage, they were singing and dancing. They were never talking. So I decided that I would open my Ted Talk with this like... so ordinarily, when you see black people on stage at a Ted event, they're singing and dancing, so I'd like to begin with a song. But I made a point to say that this is a stage that I used to do my auditions on. That I used to have horrible stage fright on so for me this is a triumph, because I no longer have this kind of stage right. And Mr. Shirley was in the audience, and I sang a little bit of Puccini's um...the aria by Musetta's waltz. Yeah. And-and then when I went ahead and did my talk, which was the story of me being in the in the Green Room and praying to my grandmother, and then pivoting to talk about girls online, which is my latest research about black girls musical, intimate, bedroom, musical play on Youtube, and how it grooms girls for violence in some of the most empowering bedroom moments that young girls may have. They're expressing their own bodily autonomy. They might even see what they're doing as highly empowering, if not just aspirational and fun. It's kind of like black girls video logging with their- with their asses. Let me tell you-

Lydia Bangura: Period. And we be doing it.

Kyra Gaunt: Let me scr-I I miss out for you.

Lydia Bangura: And we be doing it listeners. I talk all the time. People are like, Where can I follow you on this- your my Instagram is private, and you know why. Okay. Cause we be shakin'.

Kyra Gaunt: And you know, with all of that stuff, I am a do or die Michigan, amazing blue girl! I...I came of age on Michigan's campus, all my closest friends in music and outside of music, many of them I'm still very closely bonded to, and almost every job that I've ever applied for somebody from Michigan. The Michigan mafia showed up- was on the committee, you know, like made me feel at home. So you know, I- I really have a special place in Ann Arbor in my heart.

\*instrumental jazz lofi\*

Lydia Bangura: Well, I mean, we can, since you already beg to kind of bring up your work, your books and stuff like that. We can pivot to talking about that. So your dissertation topic ended up you know, becoming your incredible book. So I'd love for the listeners to- to kind of hear a bit about that before we hear about your forthcoming book.

Kyra Gaunt: Okay. So the book that I wrote in 2006 is a revision of my dissertation topic called the- the dissertation was titled Music, Body and Soul. Maybe it was called the Games Black Girls play, but Music, Body and Soul, was the subtext, subtitle. And I wrote a book about how musical blackness was learned, and this- the quick story about this I was just sharing with one of my classes is that I had written most of

my dissertation, which is based on about 7 close readings of hand clapping games, cheers and double Dutch play and chants, the rhymes and chants. I transcribed those and I did close readings of. Since I have it here I should probably-

Lydia Bangura: Yes! Let's go, "shabooya, sha-sha-shabooya role call"!

Kyra Gaunt: Oo-lay, oo-lay na-oo-tay oo-lay. Here is my and here is my game I got the symbol, my potion, got down the ocean. And there's this call and response exchange between like the one "ooh she think, she bad, baby baby, don't give me that. Ooh, she think she cute- cute cute too cute. Ooh she think she fine, fine enough for MO, fine enough for my show, fine enough for hula hoop, fine enough for if enough for all you groove". And this was, I did, I did a summer program, writing program I was a aid, for it was a program for homeless kids in Ann Arbor. And so these kids, so I took my new little sony camera that I got some funds from R-Rackham research grant and I went in, and I just watched how the- when the girls had the gaze or the center of the gaze of my camera, the guys, these are young kids they were like 12 to 15, the guys had to interrupt they're centering. They had to make fun on, push em out of the way, try to get, try to steal-steal focus. Constantly. Or they would play the kind of games to try and one up them, when the girls would always reclaim that gaze, or that space and that got me to think about that girls were important progenitors of something musical, particularly musical blackness, in a way that had been hidden and overlooked. So girls are the hidden musicians and the hidden musicianship, shape, taste, and it has everything to do with kind of heteronormative dynamic that happens between boys and girls where girls have their own little games, these game songs that they play with each other. They often frame a way of thinking about who they are in the world as black girls, as black females, and they can tell narratives about themselves like Miss Mary Mac or Miss Lucy had a baby. Some of the game songs spread because just like music, games or the sounds of the games cannot be contained by a border so if you go to a school or an urban kid sings these songs or one of the game songs in my book, my cousin who was raised on an Air Force base in Denver had learned that her predominantly white school so these things travel, there a network fo sonic landscapes of these game songs. But we don't often think of girls as taste makers. That as soon as you come out of your home the game songs that you may hear are kind of like their own, an earliest formation of black popular music making. So the game songs exchange ideas like eenie mini pestinini, oocha kacha, acha kacha liberacci, I love you two shoe shampoo, then I began to see- so I I can't, the- the I began to see a litany of connections between girls, game songs and male emerging, and male artists songs, usually novelty songs or so dating back to the 1930's all the way through 2000, I could show a pattern between either songs that girls may have adopted from popular songs into the play or that the game songs inspired songs that emerging artists used to taste make so that people would recognize something even though it wasn't commercially intellectual property. It was public domain. So I say, in the beginning of the book you know. while black girls are tastemakers no royalties for the songmakers of double-dutch, right so I make a case for that in the first book. That there annoyed by musical play, they know the texture of the music. It still baffles me that there aren't, except I know why, that there aren't more black girls who are producers and engineers. It's not because they don't have the ear or the skill, it's not because being a dancer where you embody the rhythm section, where you played a series of games with multi-limbed polyphony, where you invented rhymes from here and there and put them together and crafted a piece out of nothing from everyday that these girls couldn't

become engineers and producers. But those spaces are dominated, as we know from the gender inclusion Annenberg study, they're dominated and controlled and policed by men. Both the musicians that we love to listen to and hear and in many cases women have had to comply with this, because was- that I was listening to one of my favorite artists, Santigold talk about that she can't remember in her 20 year career in the music business. She cannot remember but one time working with a female engineer.

Lydia Bangura: Hmm.

Kyra Gaunt: So that- the first book, the Games Black Girls Play, Learning the Ropes from double Dutch to Hip-Hop. My second book is kind of like the digital version, the digital games that black girls play, but I'm calling it PLAYED, all caps, How Music on YouTube Grooms Violence Against Black Girls Online. And um, in this case I'm still telling a kind of um longitudinal orientation like working through the ages. So, using a data set of 650 bedroom twerking videos and about 90 songs that the girls, about a 1,000 girls in those videos chose to dance to...among those 90 songs only less than 10 of them are by female artists. So they're-

Lydia Bangura: Wooow.

Kyra Gaunt: Choosing music by male artists to dance in their bedrooms which might not seem odd. Given the girls, in a heteronormative society, are told that they should identify with, you know, the artists that are predominately male that come out of the music industries or are emerging artists on YouTube as music creators bedrooms. But it is striking that because girls who are twerking in their bedrooms, and not speaking at all, just dancing along with things that tell them what they should do with their body so they're also lip-dubbing which in a cognitive neuroscience world, you're training your brain when you mouth the words even when you read them, it's a great way to add nuance to a learning process by mouthing what you read when you read it. So if you're singing along, but not really phonating but you know, dancing and articulating all of these things that are exploitative, sexist and misogynist about women, girls telling girls to do this with your body and the, my favorite latest version of being ironic, facetious I should say, is Throw Baby by VR Cash I don't know what the stylization, how you say it. It's another song about women sucking dick and I'm like this would not be a problem YouTube wasn't a general audience platform for me. Kids under 13, are exposed to sexualization too early in life. There is a cognitive, adverse experience that happens socially, emotionally for children, psychologically for children, they should not be exposed to sexualization or sexualizing content at an early age. And black girls are inadvertently exposed to, because they are the taste makers for their music. Their dances draws attention to people to listen to those streams on YouTube, and why, I say it's across online generally is that YouTube is the hub for sharing across all platforms. YouTube began as a dating site in 2005. I really recently learned there was another phase of their iterations trying- to as entrepreneurs trying to make it sell. And then they sold their platform on the back of black female up, a particular black woman's body, Janet Jackson, at the 2004 Super Bowl, the so-called nipple controversy. That video was not available and when they figured out that they had a sharing capacity for the platform, the first thing they did was make sure that that video was available so they could generate attention just the way little black girls generate attention for Lil Wayne

songs for Juicy J. songs, for VR Cash songs, and the latest one from the Grammy's just a week ago, I got receipt, is an artist named David. He spells it like DVD. And then the letter, the number 4 is the a. D4vd

Lydia Bangura: Yes.

Kyra Gaunt: so it's D the letter 4, and V. D for David and the song is called Romantic Homicide. And it was a viral hit on Tiktok and he was nominated and appeared in the four-year consideration billboard version that comes out the Grammy preview issue before Grammys, so that voters can decide what they're going to vote for at the Grammy. I'm like...this hidden obvious kind of musical misogynoir. Is what I'm trying to expose with the book about, PLAYED, all caps, How Music on YouTube Grooms Violence Against Black Girls Online. It goes to genius where you, if you haven't, noticed one of the things about an anthropologist or an ethnographer, is that we're trying to make what's hidden obvious, or what is, um, what is so familiar to you, a little strange, so that you understand how culture is seeding a little message behind the context of what you take for granted. And the context of all of this music that girls are spending the most time immersed in as sound, they're also shaping their behavior, the way that they will-they the way that they will not talk, not say anything when things untoward that have been normalized sexualization adultification, is happening and a friend of mine I told them, you know they call this in feminist, in one of the phases of feminism, patriarchal bargains. And this Jamaican friend of mine is a father of a he's raising his daughter co-parenting his his 11 year old daughter, now 14, and he said. So what's the bargain? I don't get it. What's the bargain? He- he said, it's a patriarchal bargain he was. What's the bargain? And for the first time in my life I'd read this theoretical...I was like. There is no bargain. We're being sold. There is no bargain, It's not a bargain, what's the bargain? We get to be on YouTube? What's the bargain?

Lydia Bangura: Yeah, like what is- what is in it for us? What are we getting? Exactly, Exactly. So like the way in which it's normalized. Yes! Well I mean, so, this is so great this point of uncovering what is already there but what is not obvious and what is hidden because of you know the systems that we live under, so it obviously feels normal to us, but kind of exposing, you know how perverse this behavior is. Now I- you know, first of all, it's such a huge point that you brought up about the- the sexualization and adultification of black girls in particular right, which obviously happens to us a lot earlier than our white counterparts. And then also thinking about the platform of YouTube, and how there is like the- the incredibly flimsy safety measures that they have in place to protect children from this type of content. All you have to do is be a child, and lie and say that you're over 13 right? And then you can. I don't even have access to everything.

Kyra Gaunt: I don't even call it lying.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: If they leave the gate open...

Lydia Bangura: Yep.

Kyra Gaunt: If they don't have an age gate, knowing that children are on their platform, to blame the victims. By saying, they're lying...then you left the gate open.

Kyra Gaunt: And you let predators in as well, and you know it. And you just let perverts who don't know any better leave negative comments...negative comments like, why, don't you take off more of your clothes in the next video all the grooming aspects, textbook aspects, treating girls like adults. One of the signs of grooming, treating girls with it, enticing things, saying, oh I'm 31, and I know I'm a little old, but you're the one for me. Comments leaving phone numbers below their videos so the thing...

Lydia Bangura: You're not like the other girls your age.

Kyra Gaunt: Right...and girls who seek attention because they haven't gotten the right attention when they're younger and then the rest of the audience thinks this is normal behavior to do towards them.

Lydia Bangura: Mhmm...

Kyra Gaunt: The thing that's missing is that a lot of these girls and women won't really recognize the trap it is. And it's pun intended trap music is a trap when it comes to women. It is a sexist trap, it is exploitative, it invites women to use their bodies to entice attention on an attention in an attention economy that is driven by what... what bleeds, what's grotesque, what's embarrassing? And if there is one thing that is the source of a lot of that, what's humorous is the twerking is the butt of lots of Internet jokes, lots. And as long as white girls are doing it it's cool. This is my favorite quote. My favorite quote from Nicki Minaj: See, when a white girl do a black thing that's cool. People are like. Oh, that's cool. But when a black girl do a black thing that ain't popping. I love it when she says that. When she said that I was like amen, Sister, you you you are right on on point. Yeah. So the book is..the book is is about a hard subject for a lot of people. But I say, you know, while this may be triggering, it may leave you feeling less alone.

Lydia Bangura: Hmm. Yeah. And I- I think the conversation, you know, because I can already kind of foresee the response to this episode about like, okay, what? What? What then, would be sexually empowering or liberating for women if it's not this music? And I again, we're really trying to ask questions of power. Questions of control right? Questions of like who is benefiting off of their bodies right? And so like you know the fact that these these girls can participate in these dances, and you know even even a larger conversation about women in hip-hop, and in rap, and in in this genre of music um kind of the paradox of desirability, as far as like sure you could be a rich bitch in, you know, hip-hop, and you could be a Meg Thee Stallion, you could be a you know the new girl is Ice Spice. Ice Spice I love you, come on the show. You know it-could-you can. But ultimately you, as the woman are never gonna benefit as much as the system is profiting off of you. And so we have to really-

Kyra Gaunt: Yeahhh...

Lydia Bangura: - right, consider those larger dynamics about like, well what about, when people are pointing to a Nicki Minaj, pointing to a Cardi B, right, these women who are, you know, are kind of leading the-this sexually empowered movement, you know, being sex positive with-with the young black girls in your life is very different from this type of sexploitation. And so, seeing it's not like, you know, this binary as far as like we have to hide young girls from their own bodies, teach them to fear their own bodies, teach them that they can't be honest with the adults in their life, about what's going on in their body, adults that they trust right and have relationships with about what's going on with their bodies. So a body positive and sex positive relationship, um you know, fostering that in young girls is very different from this type of behavior. So I think, like I'm already anticipating the response, being like well so then should we just shield girls from sexuality, or should we just that? It's not that black and white that, you know, there's there's a lot of gray area in between.

Kyra Gaunt: Yeah, for me, it's that we're still treating children are at large as second class citizens.

Lydia Bangura: Yes!

Kyra Gaunt: We don't empower them to understand both the complexity. I mean we have some really amazing young people. Naomi Wadler is a great example. This young black girl, when she was 11, who gave the gun violence speech. That is a tour de force, of the the senior Ted Speaker uses her talk as an example of a great speech like a Martin Luther King's this little black girl, and she's always like, you know, people come up to me and treat me like you know, aren't, you sweet little girl, you know, like she's a whole human being, not the painage of childhood that we tend to create. So I think for this, 2 things I want to say to what you said about. So, so the music that they're dancing to. That's exploitative or inappropriate for their age. Why aren't we encouraging these girls who are tastemakers who understand the texture of the music, because they outline it with their bodies. Why aren't, we saying, use your garage band and make us and make your own music instead of those lyrics, rewrite the lyrics for...and then make a texture. You can get a little app with beats on it. Make your own music. Answer to your own music. Just like you would be like, write your own book, the book you want to see. Tell the story you want to tell.

Lydia Bangura: Period.

Kyra Gaunt: Why not encourage little girls to become beat makers? And not because it's something special, but it is special to do the whole thing. I like the multiplicity of you know the hip-hop era. Graffiti artists were would be beat boys, beat boys were Djs, Djs were MCs. That's that's a very common African orientation to musicing that I can play the bell in the ensemble and the drum, and I can play the small kitty part like I-I know all of the parts. Well, girls are outlining that when they twerk, or when they wine, or when they do bounce, or when they do joke in- in Chicago they're telling you how the music sounds and what the structures are by changing the orientation of the kinetic orality. So why aren't we making the bridge for them? Because the institutional supports aren't.setup for it.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah, yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: Both through K-12 and through high school out into college. We're not making a space for them to say, hey, like someone said to us, you know you could write and I'm like you know you could compose. You could compose. You could be, because there are no women in this space you could cut through the line, you would have you'd have an open space now. It'll be hard to be the first. But not if you're not- a not if you're alone. Not if you're alone. If a bunch of people are doing something whole different ball game just like these kids in the climate change space. Change is the game. As in the gun violence space, change is the game. And you set the mark for the next generation so I'll say that, you know, I began this research on International Women's Day when I saw pardon, Nicki Minaj dancing in a freaks. Montana, French, Montana video called Freaks. Where she had a beautiful jacket on, but her breasts were pretty much fully exposed. They were exposed only covered with little star pasties that were the same color as her flesh. So she really looked like she was nude to me and it was 2013, which is the year of twerking. And I thought. What are little boys and girls gonna think about this? It I mean. I was married briefly, and had a 13 year old stepdaughter, and she was so beside herself the first time she saw something that was really sexually oriented should have been PG-13. My former husband thought, oh, she can watch this! And she was so squeamish and uncomfortable. And so lately I've been thinking about what I call this interoceptive, this part of our body, and it's our fear signal and threat system called interoception. It's also the one that helps us determine whether we need to go to the bathroom, or if we're feeling, upset. It's the way that our organs talk to each other because your palms are sweaty and your heart is racing. You tell yourself I'm scared, or I'm excited. So, if the first time I encounter something like that I'm scared- that's a natural response. But if I'm repeatedly exposed to it, and nothing happens? Then I will turn something that should be threatening into something normal.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: Like I should just sing along with lyrics that tell me what I should to do please men and then flip it around to sexually empowering talk, or I'm talking about dominating men. That's not sexual empowerment to me.

Lydia Bangura: Hmm.

Kyra Gaunt: That's pornographic, heteronormative, toxic battling between the sexes. It's... you know If you. If you can't hold me down, fuck you nigga free. And I'm like, that's-

Lydia Bangura: No, yeah, no.

Kyra Gaunt: -That's cute in entertainment but it's not how it happens every day. And everyday, women and girls and suffering at the hands of violence from family members in their homes during COVID, from siblings, from little kids who can dominate them, because they don't really have power over how to set boundaries with who they are in their bodies, and that's a different game then learning how to dance and hoping nobody will touch you at the club. Megan and Cardi, they have a squad, they have people to protect them. But look what happened to Megan. Look what happened to Megan. That's harm, that's



trauma, that's long term consequences for when she wants to have kids if she's going to have kids. It's going to affect her system. And we just don't think about that, that kind of chronic exposure to no one listening to you. No one trusting you. No one believing you. People spreading rumors that you're not, that you're a man.

Lydia Bangura: And then people sexualizing you, that was, that was something that angered me so much about that trial. Is people then turning the attention to how can people take her serious when she's wearing that? So again, that whole what was she wearing debate as far as suddenly Megan's on trial because her character is being called into question as far as does she deserve to be assaulted? Right...so um...

Kyra Gaunt: That is silencing, it's silencing.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah, yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: And that's self-silencing, it's self-silencing. So for somebody who's so open as a performer, so provocative, so... it is a character. It's not who she is. Megan Thee Stallion is her job, and she's not the same person everywhere.

Lydia Bangura: Yeah.

Kyra Gaunt: We- we really don't see the correlation between voice agency and this difference, which is a kind of empowered misogyny that we're calling it empowerment for a lot of people.

Lydia Bangura: Yes, this is exactly-this is exactly it because if we're teaching women that the opposite of misogyny, or how they should rebel against misogyny, is to also dream of dominance, right, to also dream of becoming the oppressor-

Kyra Gaunt: To get that bag. To make that bag. To... not disturb the bag. I'm entitled, you know, or it's like it's payback or something. I'm like, that's no different. That's 2 sides of the same coin.

Lydia Bangura: Right. And it just- it just doesn't pull as further to liberation. Right. First of all, it focuses on the individual rather than the collective. It's about what I get, how can me and mine be safe? Versus what do we need to do for all women, for the women that have more privilege and for the women that are more marginalized, right, how do we as a collective dream of liberation, right for- for gender justice. But if we're too busy caught in- in like the- the- the furthest we can dream is well, maybe I can get my justice. Maybe I can get my bag, maybe I can dominate over my man or whatever, and I'm going to get mine versus focusing on that collective and just focusing on that- that individual sense of dominance, you know it's- it's it's not getting us anywhere, for sure

Kyra Gaunt: It's-it's time for a collective of female MCs to make an album. And I know for Halle Berry's wonderful, wonderful film, Bruised on Netflix, just amazing that she first directed, she did a soundtrack,

but it doesn't get traction. But what happens is we have to build that effort. Rome was not built in a day, as they say, it has to be okay. That's the first one. What- what didn't go right with it was the timing- was the we got to do that again, because what people are repeatedly exposed to they repeatedly do. They repeatedly get, you know, used to they start to like, but if they only hear it once in a while, then it just doesn't last.

Lydia Bangura: Hmm.

Kyra Gaunt: They don't see women making their own music. They don't hear women dancing to the voices of women not just for the gaze of man.

Lydia Bangura: Hmm.

Kyra Gaunt: I'm looking at a poster I have on my wall, which is by a- an artist that I absolutely love, who is originally from Brooklyn, but lives in Baltimore, and he has a company called Exit the Apple. He's this multifaceted musician, multimedia artist. And he says the these 5 things: say it with your work, find your tribe, there is power and numbers, honor every feeling that passes through you, it's okay to tap out and catch your breath and find a reason to smile every day. And this conversation made me smile. And I had a long day. And I so, so appreciated this. When I saw you at SEM I was like, and you told me you were at Michigan I was like yes!! Haha! In music theory?! Come on! So you know all of us who passed through, whether we finished or not is special and- and so I'm-I'm glad we're part of a little clan of people from the School of Music at Michigan and beyond, and all the places that we're connected to. So thank you for the opportunity to be on your show.

Lydia Bangura: Oh, my gosh, thank you. I- I am truly- this show has been so revolutionary for me, as far as connecting with people at other universities that I wouldn't otherwise connect, because, as you mentioned, Michigan's not really pulling that weight, doing that work to, to help us network, and especially considering there are so few, you know...black scholars in music academia like it's it's... I just understood from the jump like if I don't do this work to build my own cohort and my own network and my own support system, I'm gonna feel so isolated, being a first and being the first black, you know, music theory grad from Michigan, I'm you know, expected to graduate in 2026. Like that's crazy! Right, that I'm gonna be the first, so I'm just- I'm so honored to, to be connected to you and to other, you know, scholars in the field who have just really shown so much support for me and my work and- and just keep me in the space. So thank you.

Kyra Gaunt: Yeah, You know, you're doing something that I- I- I try to encourage my students to think about ways. They can build a career, a career identity while they're still in school, instead of waiting or trying to. And what you've done is by interviewing all of these people, and engaging and connecting with these people that you admire, or that you know or meet, you have a ready made community when you come out, so I mean you said it, but I just want to re-emphasize that that... you can't beat that with a bat as the expression says. You're developing a home, a landing, for yourself, a slew of people not only the people you interview but the people who will listen to the podcast, the people will find it many years

later... And you know, the fact that you can probably turn all of this into a book later so do your thing. Go on and do your thing, do your thing, do your thing, sweet cheeks!

\*Laughter\*

\*instrumental jazz lofi music\*

**Outro/Lydia Bangura:** And that is gonna do it for this episode of the podcast! Thank you so much to Dr. Kyra Gaunt for being on the show. It was truly so fun to record, I hope you heard the joy in our conversation! And I'm just so thankful that she's a part of my community now. I'm so thankful for black women who are doing the work that I want to be doing. She quite literally paved the way for me to be at Michigan so I'm just eternally grateful. If you have any questions, comments, feedback for me, anything about the show that you want to share with me, if you want to be a guest on the show yourself to talk about what you do in music, please send me an email: [hermusicacademia@gmail.com](mailto:hermusicacademia@gmail.com). Go to my website, fill out the contact form there hermusicacademia.com. I'm looking forward to hearing from you. Until next time, thanks for listening!

\*instrumental jazz lofi music\*