

Kristyn Scorsone (KS): Hello and welcome to the Queer Newark Oral History podcast. I'm Kristyn Scorsone, your host and a PhD student in American Studies at Rutgers University Newark. This podcast is a part of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, a community-based and community-driven initiative supported by Rutgers Newark. Hi, everyone. Today I'm at the Queer Newark office in Conklin Hall at Rutgers Newark, and we're talking with Noelle Lorraine Williams. So welcome, Noelle.

Noelle Lorraine Williams (NLW): Hi, Kristyn.

KS: Noelle is one of my colleagues and also one of my friends in the American Studies program here and also as a member of Newark's LGBTQ community, she also did an oral history for the Queer Newark Oral History Project, which of course you can find on our website. So Noelle is an amazing artist. She's a scholar. She's an activist, but I would like to give you a chance to introduce yourself, so if you don't mind telling us a little bit about who you are.

NLW: Okay, great. Thank you for this opportunity to come speak here and share some of the stories that I have about Black abolitionist Newark, or just telling the histories of Newark or just empowering our communities through telling history. My name is Noelle Lorraine Williams. I live in Newark, currently in downtown at Lincoln Park. I am a visual artist, but I use various media to explore culture and history. I study the ways in which people get ideas around liberation and justice, and I also create my own work that looks at our ideas and memories around liberation and justice. Some of the medium that I use are photography.

KS: That's cool.

NLW: Beadwork, telling stories through beadwork. I've also worked somewhat in film. I'm just starting to do that part.

KS: Are you, like, directing?

NLW: Well, I'm directing and I kind of tell stories. I think you saw, like, a short piece that I did, like, two years ago and it was where I took a part from Queen Latifah's autobiography where she discusses being called a tomboy and reclaiming her identity by renaming herself Latifah and so, like, I use stories like that because not only do they speak to who we are as women, African American folks, queer folks, but they're also within the context of Newark history. So even though in that story, Latifah is talking about her gender identification and how she wants to identify herself, it also gives us a clue into Black spiritual liberation movements in Newark in the 60s.

KS: That's really cool. And you work at the Newark Public Library as well?

NLW: Yes, I work at the New York Public Library as a librarian associate teaching artist, and also I'm working as a curator, researcher. Next year's anniversary celebration for the 19th amendment celebrating the women's right to vote, but as we all know, various women, including Native American women and Black women, didn't really truly have the vote in a free way until, like, the 60s and 70s and 80s. I think in a way, we can even kind of question that now, whether all the barriers to the vote are gone.

KS: Yeah. No. Yeah. I would agree. There's lots of question there.

NLW: Yes.

KS: Just real quick about the library, it made me think of the fact, like, I was looking at your oral history before this interview, you know, and my favorite part was when you were a kid and you—the librarians showed up at your house cause you took out too many books. That's hilarious.

NLW: Yes, yes.

KS: That is adorable and hilarious. As a kid that read a lot, that made me laugh. But yeah, so now, like, thanks to your research, so you documented that Frederick Douglass, who most people know, but was an escaped slave and became a prominent abolitionist and author, public speaker. But he gave a speech at a church here in Newark in 1849.

NLW: Yeah.

KS: Which is now the site of Rutgers Newark's athletic field, right. So thanks to your work in part, and largely, it has been named the—renamed the Frederick Douglass Field.

NLW: Yeah.

KS: So how did you discover that he spoke here?

NLW: Yeah. I just want to be clear, I wasn't the one who discovered that Frederick Douglass spoke here. It was actually Todd Allen. Todd Allen regularly gives talks at Saint Benedict's about Frederick Douglass. He's working with Frederick Douglass's great-great-grandson. Actually, what I did and what I've been doing is I've actually contextualized Frederick Douglass's visit. So what is the significance of his visit besides the fact that Frederick Douglass came to Newark? And one of the things that's important about the whole project to me is that what Frederick

Douglass came here for was to visit the African American community of activists who were working against slavery and working for the vote.

KS: That's awesome.

NLW: So big up to Todd Allen.

KS: That's really cool.

NLW: For his work. Actually, one of the librarians at Newark Public Library had actually connected me with Todd.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: And Todd and I were discussing it and actually, I had just included it in my notes, and so Todd contacted the chancellor's office by himself, and he was like, "we need to do something about this." And then I had developed a project where I wanted to do large, oversized photographs on the various sites around Newark, commemorating, like, the Black Hospital, Underground Railroad site, and this church, so separately I contacted the chancellor about making a marker for the Underground Railroad site, and then the vice chancellor. Marsha was like, "what? We're having a meeting in the next couple of weeks about this, so please join us" and so it's put me on this amazing journey.

KS: That's awesome.

NLW: For the past 13 months with the chancellor's office and commemorating it, and I'm very happy to be a part of the committee and providing the historical context of Frederick Douglass's visit and also coming up with a visual representation of what that would mean.

KS: You mentioned the Underground Railroad. Where was the site for that and is there a marker there yet?

NLW: No, there isn't a marker there yet. If we—if we imagine the field, which was formerly known as the Alumni Field, which the chancellor Nancy Cantor so graciously proposed to the board to rename as the Frederick Douglass Field, what we see is kind of, like, the core of the African American activist community here in Newark in the 19th century. So we see the church, where Douglass visited, which has a whole bunch of different names. One of the names is Plane Street Colored Church and basically that church was born out of African Americans refusing to stand for the segregation in the 1830s that was going on at Old First Church. So basically at Old First Church, you know, we—we have evidence that there were African Americans who were

often forced to stand during services and there is—it's more than likely that they were also probably forced to sit in these pews that were nationally called the Negro pew or the African corner.

KS: Wow.

NLW: And so they were members. They were African Americans who were members of that church. One of the things we have to understand about Newark during this period is that you have these African Americans who do have a little bit of wealth. They've purchased land, they've purchased houses, as a way to try to get the vote, but also just to build community, and they're attending these churches and they're giving money and they're being forced to stand during services.

KS: Right.

NLW: And they're being told, particularly if we look at ideas of masculinity, the Black men are being told, "well, you know, we'll take your money and you guys can be members, but you either have to stand or probably sit in the—the nether regions." There's—if you go to Old First Church now, you'll see, like, in the second floor, they probably had to sit back there. And there's another theory that's a third theory that I won't even bring up.

KS: Okay.

NLW: As far as them sitting in the—in the far most regions. Either way, we know it was strong enough that they broke off and that they started meeting in their homes, which was the tradition if you kind of left the church, and then at some point there were white benefactors who helped buy the property and they moved into the church. And this is the church that Frederick Douglass visited.

KS: Wow. Do you know how long the church stood there for?

NLW: The church was there up until the 1920s and then at some point they moved over to the 13th Avenue Church and some people say it's due to like—like, kind of early gentrification or what was it they were calling it later on, like in the 40s and 50s, city revitalization. So they had to merge with 13th Street Church and they merged with that church. And then eventually they had to move again. They made that area into Society Hill. And what's interesting about that site—

KS: Yeah.

NLW: Where Society Hill now is that they have kind of marker that's dedicated to it, right.

KS: Oh wow.

NLW: So they have some pieces of the church. It's actually some stones of the church. And then they have the story.

KS: Wow.

NLW: About the folks leaving Old First Church. Old First Church was the founding church of Newark, so it's basically—when the Puritans came from Connecticut, they—they are the folks who started it. A lot of them are the folks who would go on to, you know, support like Princeton and Yale. So it's a very, like, historic church. So yeah, so there is the actual history of these African Americans who left this church and they tried to preserve it in that space. A lot of what the—the work that I've been doing is connecting these various small parts of stories and then contextualizing it. I think what Frederick Douglass's visit does is that it helps to connect us to a national story. So a national story against, like, colonization, which was the movement of that whites—the white elite, and what's so spectacular about the colonization movement is that you have, like, rich whites in the north, like Frelinghuysen, Theodore Frelinghuysen, uniting with slaveholders, white slaveholders in the South to come up with a solution for what to do with all of these articulate, organizing free Black people.

KS: Wow.

NLW: Yeah. And they're like—they're like, you know, we have to do something with them and—but they try to create it as if it's something philanthropic and Christian, meaning, like, "oh, you know, we're going to, like, do them a favor and help send them to Africa" Obviously—

KS: Oh, right.

NLW: Yeah. So it's just, like, interesting. So Frederick Douglass was very involved in this whole story about colonization. As we all know, even though there were African American advocates for emigration, which was for—for folks to move to different places like Haiti, Canada, or Africa, many folks did not favor colonization. There was an early meeting in Philadelphia with thousands of African Americans where they basically declared that they were not for it. Frederick Douglass was definitively against it, and actually, Frederick Douglass actually wavered on the concept of Black churches throughout his career and one—at one point, he felt like if the church had an African—African corner or a Negro pew is what they called it, he felt that you just stayed in the church and you did activism against the church.

KS: Okay.

NLW: Or stayed in it to fight in it. Then at some point he supported churches that broke out on their own, then at other parts, you know, and that's what's kind of amazing about Frederick Douglass is he wasn't really afraid to be wrong, in a sense.

KS: Okay.

NLW: He was often—not changing his mind, but trying to figure out the best strategy for things. And so yeah, it's awesome that he comes here and I, you know, as I do the work, I—I'm thinking that he's probably came here a whole bunch of times and he was definitely colleagues with a lot of folks here.

KS: Wow. Yeah, cause Frelinghuysen, wasn't he a chancellor or something here, or?

NLW: Yeah, he was a chancellor, is—I think—is it New Brunswick?

KS: Maybe. Yeah.

NLW: Or Rutgers Newark? Yeah. So he's a significant part in the Rutgers story, unfortunately. As, like, they spoke about in *Scarlet and Black*, the publication out of New Brunswick, is that Frelinghuysen was—he was the vice president of the Colonization—American Colonization Movement. Yeah. It's—it's really sad. But yeah.

KS: Yeah, that's interesting. Are you gonna use this in your—for your—for your degree? Like, are you going to be writing about this for your masters or?

NLW: Yeah, I'm actually doing a traveling exhibition around it that—

KS: Wow.

NLW: Will most likely start at Newark Public Library and go to other places. And then there are parts of the project that will kind of break off, so there'll be a video portion of it where I'll have people, like, reenacting, like, poems and also scenarios that are kind of complicated. There's a—there's this piece I have where—in the 1820s, there was a Black woman named Jenny, and she offered to pay money for a woman named Flora to free her, and this guy, Dodd, he was like, "great and I'll give you a paper." And it's—it's very, like—it's very confusing, like, reading the story. But basically, Jenny is thinking she's just going to pay for Flora, and Flora is going to be free. But this Mr. Dodd is, like, trying to get her to pay longer. And what the story brings up is how the inability to read and these various relationships that we have, how they had during that

period, are still kind of bitter. And I'm trying to think of another word for it. I just—right now I'm even artistically just working through the piece.

KS: Right.

NLW: Like, what does it mean to think you're going to buy—like, I'm not sure how Flora is related to Jenny. I don't know if she's her daughter, if she's her friend, she's her lover.

KS: Right.

NLW: If she's her mother, her sister, I don't know who she is.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: But all I know is that she has this money and she's thinking, you know, this loved one of hers is going to be free and then she's told that actually, someone is trying to hoodwink. And just seeing these—reading these stories as early as the 19th century about, you know, literacy, about contracts, about people's bodies, about people being deported, about people being policed, just gives us a longer history into injustice, but also a beautiful story about how folks fought for—fought against it, you know.

KS: Right.

NLW: That I think needs to be a part of the story of Black Newark.

KS: Yeah, for sure.

NLW: Yeah.

KS: That's really awesome. So for—for the renaming event, it's gonna be April 17th at 2:30.

NLW: Yes.

KS: And it's gonna be at the field, right?

NLW: Yes.

KS: Can anybody attend?

NLW: Yeah. Anyone can attend. You can just go to the site and RSVP for it, and yeah, and we welcome everyone.

KS: That's awesome. What's it gonna be like?

NLW: Well, the mayor is going to be there and some council folks, but Frederick Douglass's great-great-grandson, pardon me if I got that wrong, he is also the grand—great-great-grandson of Booker T Washington.

KS: Wow.

NLW: I know. He's, like, double pro African American. He's going to be at the ceremony as well. And actually Theresa Vega, who has done a lot of the work on her blog, Radiant Roots, about the Underground Railroad site. She's a descendant of the people who live there.

KS: Wow.

NLW: On Warren Street. Another site on the field. I neglected to say that Christopher Rush was one of the first African Americans who bought land there in the 1820s, and he's—he was on the West side of the field. You see the Kings with their Underground Railroad side on the east, or I would say—no, the north side of the field. The church is over there. I mean, it's really just, like, a power center of African American activism.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: So her family is going to be there. She said she's bringing 200 people. I don't know. I don't know if there'll be 200 folks there. All I know is that their family is, like, remarkable. I mean, they own the African American Underground Railroad stop house for more than 100 years.

KS: Wow.

NLW: And one of the things I found in my research was that even after the Civil War, their house was still a place where African Americans stayed while they were traveling in the north. I found this article in either—I think it was Frederick Douglass's newspaper or another one where they were like, "thank you, you know, we stayed at the King House, which has always been, like, a safe space for African Americans to travel" and I was like, "Wow, this gives so much more amazing context to the Underground Railroad."

KS: Yeah.

NLW: And also, like, more—more context to just these, like, spaces, right, and how they function so that these Underground Railroad stops are like heavens and then for to continue being that space even in so-called freedom, you know.

KS: That's really cool. Did you—have you met the great-great-grandson? I don't know if I'm saying it right.

NLW: I know, I know. I'm sure we got it wrong. I'm sorry, Kenneth. No, I've only met him over the phone.

KS: Yeah. Is he from Newark?

NLW: No, he's not from Newark. Where does he live? Does he live in California?

KS: That'd be cool for him.

NLW: Yeah, yeah, he has, like, a—a whole foundation.

KS: That's cool.

NLW: Yeah. And actually, he's a part of some speaking engagement the day before the event.

KS: Yeah, that's awesome he's coming out here for that.

NLW: Yeah, yeah, he's been great to work with on the committee as well.

KS: Yeah. And also, so you have some other work that you do, like, through social media. So you have that Instagram that I think is really awesome. It's @black_abolitionists_newark.

NLW: Yes.

KS: How did you come up with that? And what's your, like, concept and what do you hope, like, followers get out of it?

NLW: Yeah. I mean, I think one of the things while working on this project is I'm very much a process person. One of the things as a visual artist I had to really come to understand was that I was not a gallery artist. You know, I'm not really—I don't really have this agenda to make, like, 50 prints and try to sell them for \$25,000. It doesn't mean that I'm not still a part of the market.

KS: Right.

NLW: I still do offer things for sale, but I realize that really, my investment is in the process of research, in the process of developing ideas, in the process of creating community, usually creating community in the realm of discussions or other opportunities for people to engage, right?

KS: Mm-hmm. So very, like, participatory, I guess.

NLW: Yeah. So whether it's, like, an Instagram or whether it's, like, a talk around a film or whether it's an installation. And so coming to understand that was very important for me because my artwork has always been around history. Now doing the Instagram page was—I started that because I've just always believed in documenting my process, so a lot of the things on the Instagram page are about Black abolitionist Newark and then some of the things are just about, how are people talking about difficult things in other spaces, you know. One of the things I spoke about on the Instagram page was my visit to Eastern Penitentiary this weekend.

KS: Right.

NLW: Yeah, the folks at lifelines.org, the—they're fighting to get rid of death by incarceration, which is, folks just, you know, being in prison for the rest of their lives, you know, for crimes that they committed and they invited me to come speak. I was a part of a visual art project with them where I worked with someone who's on the inside and we developed what her story was, what she wanted people to know about the inside.

KS: Wow.

NLW: So they invited me down to Philly to come talk. And it was just amazing, just exchanging ideas in that forum. And one of the organizers, Emily, was like, "thank you and the other artists participating in this because we're able to engage audiences through having these art shows that we weren't able to do by just simply having talks," right, and I was like, "well, that's the goal of my work is the ways in which culture is used to engage folks," you know. So even with this Frederick Douglass project and, you know, one of the things I'm pushing are, like, poetry that's written during that period and other things. Now, with the Instagram page, I mean it's simply that. It's a way to engage people about these ideas. Hopefully, you know, folks look at things and they add, you know, they find it to be interesting. My other goal is that it—it sparks ideas within them about things they might want to explore more. As an activist, you know, I always have an agenda to possibly present information that makes folks want to act on something and do something around it. You know, for 15 years I was in, like, meetings, doing, like, organizing work. Now I don't do that as much. A lot of my activist work is now actually coming through my research.

KS: Right.

NLW: And my teaching artist work. So whatever I can do to encourage people so they can see where they can come in and it's exciting, but yeah, that's the focus of the Instagram page. And I'm developing my blog more on my website. My website is noellelorrainewilliams.com.

KS: Okay.

NLW: That was a plug.

KS: Yeah, plug away.

NLW: So yeah, because for me, you know, the end isn't until, you know, my body decomposes, you know.

KS: Definitely.

NLW: And exhibition is never the end, you know, exhibit—you know, this—this commemoration we're doing the—for Douglass is not the end. Actually, for that, I'm actually—I'll be doing the design for the monument or sculpture for it, so we're really not at the end with that.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: And that sculpture and monument, we're still working it through, will be a facade of one of Douglass's photos. As many of you folks will know, or maybe don't know, Douglass really felt like photography was the most democratic art representation.

KS: Wow.

NLW: I think he had gotten, like, a painting done and I think I know what painting it is. I think it's the one at the National Portrait Museum and basically the artist had rendered him as almost like what I see as like a caramel colored, you know, like, white gentleman, you know. Now I might be wrong. It might have been another painting that was horrible that he put. I don't know. Maybe he felt like he looked tired or something in it. But, you know, the one at—the National Portrait one, whenever I show it to people, they're like, "who is that?" And that was before he started taking lots of photographs. So anyway.

KS: Okay.

NLW: He felt like photography was, like, the most democratic way, democratic art, for all of us, cause it represented us as we were and we could duplicate it. So I'm using one of his photographs from when he actually came to visit Newark, right, so it's a younger Douglass. It's not the Douglass we usually imagine in our mind's eye. And then I'm doing that in steel or iron and then the background is going to be done in stone. The heading is, like, it says the North Star cause he came here to promote his newspaper, but it also will illustrate the stories that were in the North Star or in other newspapers or just the stories, right. So one of those stories is, like, you know, when, Reverend Weeks, who's a white reverend here in Newark, decides to give a lecture about anti-slavery and he brings a Black Barber here in Newark. As we know, Black barbers and Black coachmen were the middle class of African Americans during that period. And he brings him to church and he does this lecture and basically all of these people, white people, destroy the church. They turn over the benches. They rip down the curtains.

KS: Wow.

NLW: And they basically try to, like, destroy the Black man that is there. There are two accounts. One account is that he had to be transferred to the jail to be kept safe from the crowd, you know, killing him. The second account was that they came to his church, they went to Reverend Weeks's house, where they tried to, like, destroy Reverend Weeks. So it was basically a mob, and what's fascinating about this, as someone who does history work, is that then if we look over in Manhattan, even though this is the 1830s, there's actually a similar mob going on in Manhattan. So a lot of this 19th century work, and I think that's why Frederick Douglass and all these other folks are becoming so relevant now, is cause, like we started this discussion talking about the 60s, talking about Latifah in Newark and the Muslim, like, in Islam and how folks are taking on these Muslim names as a way to empower themselves, and we generally think of that period of Black power as the essential Black power in Newark, Harlem, and Brooklyn. But what we're seeing now in the scholarship, you know, through abolition Brooklyn through Weeksville really developing their center, is that this, the 19th century, is really, like, the primary stake by African Americans to accumulate Black power, you know, through institutions, through communities, and things like that, that all support, you know, being a part of the public discourse and so—but what's so important about this work in the 19th century is that it's not, you know, before we were thinking of them as this, where I was, right, so sometimes I was like, "oh, you know, sometimes when people were forced to sit in the churches in the corner in Boston" or "oh, they had to do it in Philadelphia," but then we started to see it's—it's actually a movement. And it's Africa—it's the first desegregation movement. But that the way some folks responded to it was to break the barrier in Boston. They bought a pew.

KS: Okay.

NLW: Yeah, cause in churches—folks might not know, in churches during the 19th century, people bought pews.

KS: Yeah, did know that.

NLW: You rented pews. Whites rented pews, Blacks rented pews. And he somehow was able to finagle a pew as an African American and buy it in Boston. And they didn't know.

KS: Wow.

NLW: So basically what happened was he came with his family and they sat in the box. For folks who are familiar with churches, it's almost like the pew is like a box. And the—they first tried to, like, push him out.

KS: Right.

NLW: His family stayed. Then the next thing they did was they brought what they—what they called in the text "unseemly liquids," which we can assume to be, like, urine and things like that and they threw it on the family to try to get them out the church. This was all in response to folks breaking this Negro pew, African corner. They resisted. And then the people in the church ultimately pulled the floor out of the church to make them leave.

KS: Wow.

NLW: And even though everyone in the church was freezing because there's a draft coming in, this was what they were doing to avoid integration. And I think what's so disturbing about it is just how it's a process, right, how segregation is a process, because I think probably early, early in the 19th century, you probably have just Blacks who are the enslaved and a couple of free folks just sitting with white folks at the church. But then it's all becomes a response to free Black agitation.

KS: Right.

NLW: So the more free Black agitation there is, the more segregation comes to the fore. So it's—we see it in the 19th century. You guys, please visit [@black_abolitionist_newark](#), cause I could do this for three weeks.

KS: Oh, yeah, no, this is fascinating. So it's, like, taking the longer view, I guess, of like—

NLW: Yes.

KS: Civil rights and Black power and—

NLW: Yes.

KS: Rather than just confining it, I guess, to the 60s, 70s, 50s.

NLW: Yeah. Rather than just confining it to the 20th century, we're seeing in the 19th—in the 1800s that, you know—

KS: That's so fascinating.

NLW: Yeah, creating poems, resisting segregation, you know, and just—all of these land owners, you know, people really just taking state. And actually, if you look at scholars like Manisha Sinha, she really sees the—the first or the primary strike by African Americans against slavery was when folks were joining the fighting against the Revolutionary War.

KS: Wow.

NLW: You know, Sinha, you know, Dr. Sinha's like, "that's the first," you know, and it's—and you know, you know, with Queer Newark stories, right, and we know in developing oral histories and everything is that you have to—sometimes the story needs to be reimaged with the public.

KS: Right.

NLW: So a lot of Black resistance, in any way we've seen it, has been seen as, like, speckles and dots rather than coherent, organic strikes against white supremacy, racism, sometimes heterosexism. I, you know, even—one of the things that's been a challenge for me as a Black feminist, as a Black lesbian feminist, is just writing and having to read all these stories about men.

KS: Right.

NLW: I mean, I love Frederick Douglass.

KS: Right.

NLW: But—and I love Samuel Cornish who's here in Newark and, you know, he writes a 30-page letter to Frelinghuysen. It's one of the best—it's the most striking letter against colonization, and he's, like, to Theodore Frelinghuysen, like, you know, explaining, like, "how

can you guys even say anything about where African Americans go in your Christian theories when you guys have basically decimated African—I mean, Native American communities?"

KS: Right.

NLW: Not only here, but in the Caribbean.

KS: Right.

NLW: I mean, this letter—a friend of mine just posted on Facebook, like, "what would you suggest for history students?" I'm like, "they should read this letter." I mean, this is not only, like, a critique of who decides which bodies should exist, but also putting it within a historical context. Like, you know, you all—this is all a part of a project of dispossession. Jack Chan at the Clement Price Institute, he uses the word dispossession and I think for some of us who have problems thinking about land ownership and who owns things, the term dispossession, I think folks can identify with because what does it mean to have a home and be pushed out?

KS: Right.

NLW: And so, yeah, so I'm hoping with, like, the Instagram page and other things, you know, folks will see it. They'll learn more. They'll, like, do whatever they want to do. They'll create their own things and that, you know, have a stronger idea of what Black power is.

KS: Yeah, I think it's so important because, like, even, like, thinking about myself.

NLW: Yeah.

KS: I went to—I'm from Kearney and, like, in grade school and high school, like, we learned about slavery.

NLW: Yeah.

KS: Martin Luther King. We watched Roots. That's about it.

NLW: Yeah.

KS: You know what I mean? So, like, a lot of people don't know any of this, and even myself now that I'm studying a lot of this stuff, even now, like, reading your Instagram, I'm always like, "wow, like, I didn't know that. I didn't know this. I didn't know that." You know what I mean? Like, it's so great, the work that you're doing, and so important.

NLW: Oh, thank you. And thank you to the vice chancellor, Marsha, for inviting me to the meeting. I had a difficult time trying to find supporters for this project just to get the Black power sites in Newark. Also, thank you to Christina Strasburger who connected me with folks, even though those—they didn't end up supporting the project, but what was amazing, you know, thanks to Christina—

KS: She's awesome.

NLW: And folks like that. Also thanks to Mary Rizzo for sharing the information about this program and also offering, like, rigorous techniques on how we can share information with this—with the public. One of the hardest things for me is I—I mean, I love stories.

KS: Right.

NLW: So I go to lectures, I go to talks, I go read public things. So my work—the hardest part of my work is distilling it, you know, like, breaking it down so folks can enjoy it, learn more.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: Have more to work with and understanding the context of our community, so thank you to her. So it's, like, even though I'm not doing the Black power site right now in the way I originally thought I would do it, through working on—with this project with the Frederick Douglass Committee and being able to share the stories as a part of the Frederick Douglass sculpture monument and writing the history of it and doing other things, which really provide a context for Todd's discovery.

KS: Right.

NLW: It's exciting for me. I mean, anything that furthers the understanding of Black Newark for Black Newarkers.

KS: Right.

NLW: And how they have contributed to discussions around justice in this space and fought for it, and that's something that spans way past the Newark Rebellion, way past the Great Migration. And even, you know, and further up to—to Frederick Douglass, you know, standing on the stage, looking at the faces of these people, some of them with money, a lot of them not, you know. The African Americans with wealth here, you know, they could have easily found, like, kind of, like, school somewhere for their children to go to in little pockets. And you know, you can see on

your corner struggle with that, you know, the school system here, he eventually had to move back to Manhattan or send his children back to Manhattan to go to school, but you see them, 1824, going to the city council like, "Okay, you guys have now passed that there's a resolution for money for the public sphere. What about for these Black poor children," you know? And these are men of wealth and men and women who could have done—who could have just stayed silent or moved to someplace else, right? But they decided to stay here and fight.

KS: Right, yeah.

NLW: And that's who Douglass is coming to visit.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: And that's amazing.

KS: Yeah.

NLW: That's what makes me happy.

KS: Yeah. That is so rad. You also—you, as we said, like, you did an interview for—an oral history for Queer Newark. What—how did you decide to do that? Were you nervous about it or were, like, what—why did you share your story with the project?

NLW: Well, I decided to share my story with Queer Newark because I believe in oral histories. I mean, if it was up to me, every single person would have their own, like, oral history, you know, and every family would document it. That's something that I tried to do with my mom, you know, years ago. I probably will have to do it again and upload it to my Google Drive, because right now it's like on a—a floppy disk. So yeah, so the reason why I chose to do it with Queer Newark is as someone who's had a deep investment in feminists and women's activism and actually, wellness, cultural wellness, so ideas of how we—ways—the ways that we think about each—ourselves as women, as Black women, Latinas, and also like white women and other women of color, is very important to me. But I've always believed that culture—so writing, video, films, play a significant role in the development of that, you know, and the media. So I wanted to share it. I also wanted to share the stories of other queer folks in my life who I'm affiliated through in my life. So some of the, like, really hard stories, right, so like, when I was living on 16th Avenue, I think I shared the story of the young man who was being chased by his father.

KS: Right.

NLW: With an axe. You know.

KS: That's terrifying.

NLW: It was terrifying. And it also contributed to, like, feelings of terror within myself, you know.

KS: Was he chasing him because he was gay? Is that what it was or just, like, or did you know those people?

NLW: Well, we don't know. All I know is that he was calling him a fag.

KS: Okay.

NLW: While he was chasing him.

KS: Okay.

NLW: You know. And how everybody—no one helped. Everybody, you know. And I was so young and it was just—it was horrible for me, you know, but also sharing the stories about, you know, working with Paris and working with other folks and Ashanti here at Newark Gay Pride here as a way to document that work, because as I said earlier, I mean, there's so many things that go on and people will be standing right in front of them. I mean, I've—I've spoken to Black and Latino youth or Latinx youth who can be standing in front of La Casa de Don Pedro or Aspira and they'll be like "no one gives a fuck about us in our community," and it'll just be like, uh. And I think there's so much more we can do in our communities, but it, you know, it's—it's hard, you know, I think that's one—one reason I've always been interested in outreach, and also how the public understands things. I think, you know, it's sad if we have a program at Newark Public Library and, you know, there aren't that many folks there and then they go to a community program and hear folks talk about how we need more programs in the community or even just, like, if I'm in the teen room and, like, this young woman was telling me about going to this LGBT conference, and I was trying to tell her about Queer Newark. And then also, you know, being out myself is always, I think, essential, you know, because whatever resources there are, I want those resources to be used up. And so yeah, that's why I believe in engagement at any level, you know, whether it's community, Instagram, Facebook, talking to folks on the street, if people invite me to speak or me inviting other folks to hear other folks speak, I just think that communication and engagement is essential.

KS: I agree 100% and I know you have to—to run out cause you have work to do, but just to close, I wanna reiterate to everyone that's listening to make sure that you attend the Rutgers

Newark celebration of Frederick Douglass and abolition. It's April 17th. It's 2:30. You can find it, if you Google online you can find the invite and it's going to be held again at the Rutgers Newark Athletic Field, which will now be named the Frederick Douglass Field. So come celebrate the renaming but let's also celebrate Noelle that day, and even in your own mind because she is doing really important public history work. Much thanks to you for all that you that you do.

NLW: Thank you, Kristen, and thank you for the work that you do.

KS: Thank you.

NLW: I mean, this is amazing.

KS: Thank you. Alright. Bye Noelle.

NLW: Bye Kristyn.

KS: The Queer Newark Oral History podcast is produced by me, Kristyn Scorsone. This episode was recorded in the Queer Newark office located in Conklin Hall at Rutgers University in Newark. Our theme music was remixed by DJ JustLove, an amazing local Newark DJ, and is from an original song by K. Sparks. The title is "Music" and you can find more from K. Sparks on freemusicarchive.org. As for DJ JustLove, you can find her on Twitter @DJJustLove and on Facebook. Thank you so much for listening and we'll see you next time.