Colin Gioia Connors: How do you choose who to include in a book like this and who gets left behind?

Ethelene Whitmire: Boring people. [*laughs*] People whose stories go nowhere and I hate to say it as academic, most of the academics in this study—not that interesting. Several people went on fellowships, kind of like myself, whether it’s a Fulbright or the Guggenheim. The one man—Lloyd Noel Ferguson was a chemist, he actually worked at Carlsberg—they would bring researchers in—and I just thought he was an interesting person, but I met someone in chemistry and when I started to say his name she knew the whole name. He was a very important African-American scholar and also encouraging other people to go into the sciences. He brought his wife and two young sons there. He said that the sons learned Danish, but he said it was interesting—this is the 1950s—for people to see a Black American couple that was not a stereotype of whatever messages they were getting, and that’s what a lot of people said, too, that they would meet Danes and the Danish people would say, “Oh, you’re just like a regular person, unlike what we read or heard about.” So I skip the boring people, I only keep people if something interesting or significant happened while they were there like, for example, Louie Armstrong went—apparently 10,000 people showed up. People like Marian Anderson—when she sang the Danish government actually asked her to stop singing because she was so popular she was taking too much money out of Denmark in the 1930s, and so the Black people who were there were covering it for the Black newspapers and the headlines were like, “Danish government says Marian Anderson makes too much money.” But then the Danish people protested, and she actually wrote a letter, that I have, thanking the Danish people. Alberta Hunter was also a singer there. What was interesting about her—she left before the war, but then she wanted to return, you know, when Denmark was occupied, but why would you want to return to a Nazi occupied country? She said in her State Department letter to renew her passport that, “I can’t work in my country. I can’t—because where my color is a curse, I want to work abroad.” She had been in Paris and 25 other countries in Europe performing and so she actually wanted to go back. So I include that kind of story. Billie Holiday wrote about her time in Denmark in *Lady Sings the Blues*, where she met a Danish doctor and his daughter at the airport, where everyone was greeting her, and the doctor noticed she was sick and he said, “Come to my house! I’ll feed you, I’ll take care of you and fix your cold.” Also she wrote about that, and then this woman, African-American playwright Dael Orlandersmith, she wrote a play about that that I saw in the Goodman Theatre in Chicago last year, and a Danish reporter went to find this family and found the little girl, who lives in America, somewhere here in the Pacific Northwest, and turns out her brother is a famous jazz musician in Denmark, one of the most famous, who worked with all the jazz greats since he was a teenager. So those kinds of stories that stand out, or the fact that Ella Fitzgerald was gonna live there. She bought a house and she fell in love with the Danish man and she was going to start her life there. So if there’s interesting stories, you
know, captured by the Nazis, like Valaida Snow says she was. She was in prison for two years in Denmark during their Nazi occupation, though people are not sure exactly why—but she was definitely in Denmark for two years. And so people want to know—though no one really knows exactly what happened to her. So, yeah, there’s a lot of dramatic, sometimes tragic stories, or sad stories, but most of them are just people being very happy to be away from America, sad to say, but really enjoying a new life, and... and it was like a sense of renewal, remaking themselves—just opportunity to live in a country that’s so associated with, I guess, whiteness, but yet being there and really enjoying it.

[*Intro music starts*]

Colin: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[*Intro music ends*]

Ethelene: My name is Ethelene Whitmire. I'm a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Department of African American Studies and also affiliated with the German, Nordic, and Slavic Department.

Colin: Ethelene Whitemire is an expert on African-American history. Her first book is a biography of Regina Anderson Andrews, an African-American librarian and playwright who was a key mover in the Harlem Renaissance. Regina traveled the world in the 1950's and 60's, and while researching Regina's international travels, Ethelene became aware of the international travels of other African Americans. She noticed that a lot of them went to Denmark, and that they really liked it there, even though it wasn't always easy to get there. The US State Department subjected African-Americans to a higher level of scrutiny than white Americans when issuing travel visas for fear that African-Americans might speak out while abroad and bring international attention to the US's discriminatory racial policies. W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson famously had their passports revoked, so African-American individuals had to be careful how they worded their visa renewal applications when they said they would rather be in Nazi-occupied Denmark than in America. Yet while the US State Department prevented some African Americans from traveling overseas, they funded others whom they believed would counter negative opinions of the US while abroad. Several African-Americans were sent abroad as US cultural ambassadors. At the same time, the Danish government provided funding for music and the arts, and specifically for jazz music. They sought out African-American jazz players to teach in Danish music conservatories and to boost Danish musicians by playing concerts with them. Whereas in many parts of America, African-American jazz musicians were only paid in alcohol and ushered in and out the back door, in Denmark African-American jazz musicians found dignified work and fair wages. Little wonder that many African-American jazz musicians chose to stay. The Danish government's sustained support of jazz music has earned Copenhagen the title of Jazz Capital of the World, and for the past fifty years it has held a two-week Jazz festival every summer. But the story of Copenhagen and jazz is only one of the stories of African Americans in Denmark.

Ethelene: Well, I had two questions guiding my research: why do people go to Denmark and what were their experiences while there? And I looked at their memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, newspaper accounts, usually of the more famous ones covered in the African-American newspapers back home and in the Danish newspapers. Some of the people my study were reporters so they actually reported for the Danish newspapers about African-Americans in Denmark and then they wrote for the Black newspapers back home about what it was like to be Black in Denmark. I also collected—I'm trying to find any photographs of African-Americans in Denmark. Can't find any of them standing right in front of that little mermaid! [*laughs*] But one thing that does interest me is to follow in the footsteps of people to see where they lived, also where they died—I spent a lot of time in cemeteries in Denmark. There
are a lot, mainly jazz musicians, but others who are buried there. I went to prisons where one jazz musician said she was in prison. There's a museum. The famous singer Marian Anderson performed in 1935 for prisoners in Horsens, Denmark, and the prisoners actually wrote letters home, and they have copies of them. The archivist gave me them, and so it's extraordinary to see them writing about what a pleasure it was to see her perform. They knew she was getting paid a lot of money in Copenhagen, and she was doing it for free. You could tell that they were moved. Some of them said, "I can't even put into words what I saw." One man said, "My thoughts are so, you know, mixed up. I have to think about this and reflect on it." They were very excited to see this world-class singer perform for them.

Colin: How do you get access to diaries from people who were traveling to Denmark 70 years ago?

Ethelene: Right! It's strange—one man, the Juilliard trained musician Eugene Haynes, actually wrote a book. It wasn't published by a famous publisher, but I could find it in the libraries and online, like on eBay. I bought a copy of it, and it's a combination of letters, diary entries—he's the only person of all the African-Americans who actually wanted to go to Denmark. He said all his life he wanted to—not sure why—and the very first letter—he's going to France to study with the famous pianist—but in the letter to his mom he says, "I always wanted to go to Denmark. It's so strange I went to Paris first," but while he was in Paris he heard these people speaking what he called "a very strange language," and he's like, "What is that?" and they're like, "Danish!" and they said, "You should come to Denmark!" He said, "I always wanted to!" and they gave him *Seven Gothic Tales* by [Karen] Blixen, and he said, "Oh, I love this, but I'm sure she's dead," and they said, "No, we see her riding her bicycle around," and he said, "I want to meet her!" and for the last 10 years of her life they hung out together. She went to Paris with him and also to New York City, and they had a lovely friendship. There's photographs of them together. She would invite him to her home that is now a museum, too, but he said she was very nice. She never asked him to play the piano, just invited him as a guest to eat dinner—he said so often that's what he gets as a pianist—so he said she just wanted a friendship. And so you just discover this... I didn't even know about him. Someone told me off-hand, and someone told me about a painter they heard of. But generally—There's this database called African-American, like, Oxford Center, and I just put in “Denmark”—it's for African-American biographies—and all sorts of names popped up. Sometimes I thought they were wrong, like a baseball player, Curt Flood, but it wasn't wrong. He actually did go there, and there's about seven books about him that all mention—including his autobiography—that mentions his time in Denmark. It's just, yeah, it's just a crazy story. Just things just pop up.

Colin: I mean that initial reaction, "I've always wanted to go to Denmark,"

Ethelene: Yes.

Colin: —is not the words that I would expect to hear any American say—

Ethelene: Right.

Colin: —and I know about Paris being a place where a lot of African-Americans—James Baldwin famously, like, stayed there for a while—

Ethelene: Right.

Colin: —so why Denmark?

Ethelene: That's a good question because people ask me that, too, and I really can't put my finger on it. But I think my reaction is what I've heard from other people—not them personally. Most people are dead in my study, except for maybe one—but from relatives or from their own writing. A lot of them travelled to lots of different countries, including the baseball player. He went to Paris, and
Amsterdam, Stockholm, but it was Copenhagen that really touched them. Out of the blue, there's a jazz musician, Sahib Shihab. He traveled all over with Quincy Jones in the 1950s, but he decided, “Oh, I really like Copenhagen.” [He] went back to see if he still had the same reaction, and loved it and stayed. There is something about it, I don’t know. People said that people are warm, they’re treated very well, they’re happy there, they can relax. Several of the men—not the women, though—but the men said they felt like human beings for the first time. Though that’s a reaction people get from other countries other than the United States when African Americans go abroad. But, why Denmark? Also, I’m getting a hint, or sense, too, that people like it because it isn’t Paris, that it’s different, they like to be an individual, kind of stand out. They’re actually—most of them are not looking for a community. The jazz musicians had to work with each other because they were parts of big bands, and the painters had communities with other African-Americans in other countries. As far as I know there were three African-American painters within Denmark, but one in a different time period, the 30s, and then two in the 1960s, and that man is still alive today. But the rest of them seem to really want to just be on their own, and I found that also in the 21st century people might meet, say, a Dane, fall in love, and go over there, and then they had their own set of friends, and so there’s not a lot of interaction even in the 21st century. People say, “Where do African-Americans hang out there?” I say, “Nowhere.” [*laughs*] They don’t! There’s not a big hang-out, and that’s not the purpose that people go over there in the past and also in the future. It—but it’s something intangible about Denmark that makes people happy and love it. The baseball player said, “No one bothers me. I’m just a human being. Baseball’s not a thing [*laughs*] in Denmark, right?” and so he would just paint and hang out and go to bars, thought about opening a sports bar there. It was just extraordinary that all the people that I found, that was one thing that stood out, that you never heard of going there.

Colin: Yeah. Well, I think what you’re describing is something that I’ve heard for expats in France describe, African-American expats in France will say, of just having a feeling of being kind of invisible for the first time. You were describing, like, I can just be on my own my own for first time—

Ethelene: Right.

Colin: —Did you find that in these accounts?

Ethelene: I find people are in—well, they’re treated like a human being. They’re not treated as a stereotype as African-American, but they’re visible in the sense of the color of their skin and people remember them, but not in a bad way. Sometimes they’re exoticized, but people said that that’s preferred than being discriminated against or racial prejudice. People said they would get stared at through the 70’s or 80’s. It was kind of unusual to see a Black person. I do notice that when I go to some little villages where that’s not common, but not in Copenhagen. I brought students there last summer and this summer, mostly black women, and they didn’t report any staring, and they also, last year, two of them were counting how many Black people they saw. They stopped after about 350, though I’m not sure they weren’t counting the same people. [*laughs*] But they, you know, you don’t really stand out in Copenhagen anymore, but you stand out in a way—that I’m different, that cafes remember me. They remember my order. I went to a shawarma place in January. I go there during the breaks for two weeks. I don’t think I ate that many shawarmas, but when I went back in June, I couldn’t remember my order. I was like, number two or nine? But when I got to the counter the guy’s like, “Number nine with chili sauce, right?” I said, “I guess?” [*laughs*] …and so, again, people do remember me and maybe my coffee drink is Americano black and so maybe that’s why? The Black American likes Americano black, [*laughs*] but people—so you stand out in a way, but not in a negative way. Yeah.

Colin: Yeah. How did it make you feel?

Ethelene: Odd, because I like to be... in the background and not stand out [*laughs*] and just get my coffee and sit down, but not, and again, in a bad way. No one was staring. It’s... it’s odd being there. Because I live in Madison Wisconsin, you know, the University. I
think it has about, finally made up to, 10% students of color. I think Black people comprise two point something percent, so people said, “How come you feel okay in Copenhagen versus a predominately white, you know, state that you live in?” and I said, “No one bothers me.” Not to say that they’re perfect in Denmark, but I don’t think they have the same stereotypes of what a Black person would be, but also if you’re in Denmark that might indicate that you’re more educated and also have amount of money—you need some wealth to go there—and there’s just a few of you. That’s what many people said in the past and in the study. If a whole bunch of us showed up maybe the Danes wouldn’t be so appreciative, but we—they’re were so few in the past and more exotic, that one man said his potential landlord said, “I’ll lower the rent. I really want you to be here,” versus, this is the 1960’s in America, where some people won’t even rent to you because you were Black. And so, again, it might be odd, and people stand out in terms of their the physical looks, but it’s mainly positive stories. Now, I have very few negative stories, but famously Richard Wright hated it. He thought it was cold, rainy, and that the Danes drank too much. So, he wasn’t crazy about it, and I read a short story that he wrote—one of very few pieces of literature where there’s African-American protagonists in Denmark—I read that first and I thought, “Oh, he hated Denmark,” and then I read his biography that said he hated Denmark, and so I could see that connection, but that’s a rare reaction.

**Colin:** So, Denmark also participated in the Atlantic slave trade for 200 years. Were there no instances of racism that African-Americans experienced in Denmark?

**Ethelene:** A lot of people think if you’re part of a slave trade that there should be more prejudice, but you know Denmark was interesting—I don’t know if it’s unique—but most of their Africans that they took to the islands and didn’t go to Denmark itself, and in Denmark slavery was considered illegal in the country itself. Though, many ended up there. My colleague Pernilla Ibsen and her book *Daughters of the Trade,* she talks about some people getting stuck there when the ships would go to Denmark from the Danish West Indies—now the US Virgin Islands—and not returned. Apparently, there are very few Africans that were there. But in terms of prejudice, people of African descent who live there now, who either were born there or have a parent who was Black and also born in Denmark or were adopted, but anyway, native—I guess you would call them more—native Black people in Denmark, they’re not treated as well. There’s something about being American, where the focus is on your American citizenship, not so much on your race. But people, brown people who live there said that there you feel a lot of prejudice, people don’t even think that they’re Danish, they’ll keep speaking to them in English, or say, “Your Danish is very good!” even though they were born and raised, or their parents were sometimes also born and raised there. But in terms of the slave trade, it’s my understanding—a lot of people were not familiar with Denmark being a part of it because there were so few Black people from the slave trade, you know, descendants, in Denmark now. But luckily I was there on the Fulbright year 2016-2017 when on March 31st 2017 they had the hundred year anniversary of selling the islands to the United States, and they used, Denmark used that time to commemorate and to start addressing their involvement in the slave trade. A lot of the museums and artists, especially a lot of Afro-Danes started doing different activities around that, and so it was interesting to see this happening there, to also see—they invited one of the Black Lives Matter founders to Denmark for a session, and so lots of people are very interested. They have their own Black Lives Matter movement. That is different from what’s happening United States. It’s not about police killing black people over there but it’s interesting to see that they’re starting to try to form an identity. It seems difficult in Denmark where I keep getting things like, “Everyone’s Danish! We’re not different. We don’t call people Afro-Danes or Black Danes.” That’s usually the ethnic Danes, the white Danes, who say that. Not the people of color. They like to be called Afro-Danes, at least the new, young people. That seems to be their identity. But I mean, even a man who I thought was very politically minded, he’s—when I refer to someone as Black Dane—he’s like, “No, he’s just Danish. He never said he was Black.” I said, “But he is! His father’s from Ghana.” Or there’s another man, I guess, a famous professor whose father’s African-American. I didn’t realize he’s from the United States. I said, “But he clearly is,” and I said, “What’s wrong with that anyway?” But I guess there’s this thing to conform and be the same in Denmark, in general, and so it’s hard to see people wanting to identify as another group.

**Colin:** Well, that’s a rhetoric that we hear also in the United States—
Ethelene: True.

Colin: —“Oh, I don’t see color.”—

Ethelene: Right...

Colin: —well you must be colorblind then—-

Ethelene: Right!

Colin: —because that’s the first thing that people notice, and people get treated different ways because of their skin color.

Ethelene: Right. And what’s wrong with that, too, like noticing someone’s gender, or my hair color, but, you know, that I have no problem with that. Yeah, sometimes people won’t describe someone—well, they’ll say, “Oh she was kind of short, there’s,” and then they’re like... I was like, “Is she Black?” They’re like, “Yes.” Like, as if they don’t want to say that. [*laughs*] But, yeah, what’s wrong with that?

Colin: Yeah, so what is the Black Lives Matter in Denmark working on?

Ethelene: Well, there does seem to be terms of people who are in prison that there’s a higher proportion of people of color in prison than should be. I’m not sure exactly what the key is to this Black Lives Matter movement, but they’re generally protesting things like they want to decolonize museums in terms of what images that they’re showing or recognizing. They don’t like the use of the n-word, though, not clear—they’re talking about, my interpretation of this word in Denmark is that it’s “negro” and not the n-word word that we think of in the United States, but they don’t want that to be used either. So there’s a lot of different things going on. I was just there trying to get a sense, and I’m not sure they know exactly what they want to do, and they invited me, but I felt like this is for the Danish young people. A lot of people are trying to figure out their identity because they grew up being told that you’re just Danish, and there’s one young Black woman that I met who actually hosted this whole Black Lives Matter event—she’s now a PhD student at UC Berkeley in their African and African American Studies—and she said growing up, there’s always this itching, but she started to really feel an identity later in life, maybe when she was about 30. Her mom and... her father is dead, the African-American parent, but her siblings are also like, “Why are you always talking about Black stuff?” But there’s a, I guess, a growing awareness, and when I talked to the offspring of some of the African-Americans in my study, it... it’s hard to see how do they identify. Often they say, “No, I’m just Danish,” and then other stories will pop up that show that they do face some racism and prejudice, or not being accepted in society where people keep thinking they’re from somewhere else when they’ve just been born and raised, never lived anywhere else. But they seem uncomfortable about talking about it. My background is as a social scientist, so I don’t come out and ask people, “Oh, is there racism, prejudice?” Really it is, “But what’s your experiences here?” You know, just very broadly to try to get to these things. I’m not expecting everyone to have a racial problem. I even interviewed a famous chef at Noma, and he right away said, “Oh, I haven’t faced prejudice here.” I didn’t ask that, [*laughs*] but that was the first thing to come up, too, when he was talking to me. And most people said they haven’t, *though*, there’s a report about race in different European countries. They say that one thing Black people—whatever the country they’re from, even America—they face problems with housing and employment. I think there’s a housing website, and also sometimes unemployment people put their pictures there, so you can see that they’re Black. One of my Danish friends said, “Well, why not? They can see that I’m friendly.” I’m like, “Because you’re blond and blue-eyed, that’s why!” [*laughs*] It works for you, but it might not work for other people, so... Yes, so, I don’t know. There’s a whole lot of issues going on there. So I do talk about that a little bit in my epilogue, like, 21st century, but mainly focused on the the 20th century and the experiences that African-Americans had. And since that covers most of our civil rights, you know, pre-civil rights movement, things like that, people faced real discrimination or segregation in the United States, so of course they were happy to be abroad in the 20’s and the 30’s and
the 40's where you didn't have to sit certain places. There weren't, you know, certain restaurants you couldn't attend, you know, they were very free when they were over there.

Colin: I'm thinking now of the quote that you included in the article from Booker T. Washington where he said that once he got on the ship he felt stress lifting from his shoulders just pound by pound, like, every mile he got further out to sea.

Ethelene: Yeah! I don't remember that exact quote, but, yeah, it was interesting that he said he didn't even—if I recall right—know what vacations were. He was born into slavery, so, you know, people weren't talking about, “I'm taking a vacation!” And so even his trip to Denmark, to Europe that time, he was supposed to relax and he decided, “Oh, I'm just gonna look at peasants and and do a study.” But, I was, yeah, I wrote an article. I decided to also experience what it's like to go across the ocean, how people got there the first half of the 20th century, a lot of people wrote about it and it's interesting, a lot of them anticipated prejudice, maybe based on Frederick Douglass's famous—infamous, I guess, incident on the ship when he went over in the 1800's. But it all turned out fine in the end. People were treated very well, and so I looked at the ocean as kind of this liminal space where they were throwing off the vestiges of racism in America, and hoping for a new day when they reached another country in the future. Yeah.

Colin: Yeah, that's— it makes me think about this psychological effect called stereotype threat where you're aware of stereotypes about your identity and so you're always doing this mental math to try and make sure that you don't fulfill those because you never know who in the room believes that about you—

Ethelene: Right.

Colin: —and it might be true that no-one in the room believes that, but past experience has taught you that there's always someone in the room and so you need to be playing to that—

Ethelene: Right.

Colin: —and so I'm just trying to imagine that moment of getting onto the ship and sailing away from America, as maybe being a time when you can let your guard down, that you can stop doing that mental math, that may be your idea of, like, at least the probability that someone is going to, you know, want to put me in my place for something I say or I don't perform to their expectations that that just kind of dissipates.

Ethelene: Definitely, and stereotype threat is good, too, but because I think often of double-consciousness, too, with Du Bois, where people, Black people, are often aware of just how they see themselves, but how other people see them or perceive them. I guess most importantly nowadays with police officers, or, you know, they, you don't want them to think that you're some kind of threat. My sister has a male friend who has the most ridiculous pink sparkly cell phone cover because he doesn't want the cops to think, “Oh, that's a gun!” and so to have to think about that when you make a purchase of a cell phone cover is always thinking about how will I be perceived, or just walking around, or as a student on campus, and so I think they were, again, when they said, “I was able to feel like a human being,” like, no-one bothered them. Several Black men—modern-day ones—told me that they're very tall and when they walk down the streets, no-one crosses the street, no-one seems fearful of them. Another young African-American man, who's a computer scientist, lives in Denmark, for quite a while, his friends visit other African-American men and when the police cars went by he said, “The cops didn't even turn around and look at us! We didn't get a double take, a look.” They went into stores, no-one followed them, they said, “What is this?” because they're used to that kind of experience in the United States, and so, yeah, you don't have to be so conscious of that anymore. You can just, again, be a human being, just sit in a cafe, expect to get served and not have people not serve you, or be surely or ignore you, or, you know, not serve you in a restaurant, or have an attitude, or follow you around. Again, I think just being there, they probably think and acknowledge that, yes, you probably have money or education. And that's what struck me
about my study. Most of the people are very highly educated in the 21st century, except for one rapper, he was kind of an anomaly. [*laughs*] everyone else has at least a bachelor's from a prestigious institution in the United States, but most of them have masters and several Black men had PhDs, often in science. It's just an unusual group, and even in the past, it's unusual for Americans to have college degrees until after World War II with the GI Bill when many more regular people went to school. But some of the people in my study are second generation college educated in the early 20's and 30's, and so it was kind of unbelievable to see that level of people, and that's kind of what interested me in a study, too, because I don't want to do the stereotypes of what a Black person is. That's what I liked about Regina Anderson Andrews. She came from an upper middle class family. Her father was an attorney. Her mom was an artist. So I like to tell these stories, some stories that are lost to history, or some famous people like Booker T. But do people know that he went to Denmark and he had a hilarious travel narrative about meeting the Queen and King? And I don't think of him as being very humorous, but, you know, he was giving a speech and he said, “They laughed at my jokes! They understood it!” and he really liked that, too. So some of the people are famous—in their day—then lost to history, so, trying to resurrect those, some never-famous at all but very interesting people that I think other people need to know about.

**Colin:** Well let's talk about some of the individuals. Do you want to tell that story about Booker T. meeting the Queen?

**Ethelene:** Yes! He, again, went all over Europe. He wanted to meet the peasants, or what he called “the man farthest down,” that was the name of his book, and obviously he was equating the man farthest down to Negroes in the United States, you know, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and he wanted to see how they were treated. He talked about some countries, the peasants were eating out of one bowl, with their one spoon, sleeping with their animals, but in Denmark, he said you could tell a lot about a society about how the women and children are. They were healthy, happy, the women seemed very educated and not secondary to the men, he—So anyway, he took the train—I think from Hamburg—and on the train all these people were greeting him—the Danes—when he showed up at the train station. A lot of people were there, they, a lot of them knew about his *Up From Slavery* book. He was hosted by the *Politiken* editor Cavling. I'm taken around Denmark—it's funny, he was looking at peasants but he stayed in Hotel d'Angleterre, the most expensive and still popular hotel—and while he was there he got a letter from the, what we'd call U.S. ambassador—I think his name was... he was a minister back then—saying that the King of Denmark wants to meet with you. And he kept thinking, “I would love to, but I have to see the peasants!” [*laughs*] but they sent a horse-drawn carriage, and it's not far, he went to Amalienborg, and they told him to wait, the King would come out, but the U.S. ambassador told him, “Let the king drive the conversation, pick the topics. Never turn your back on the King.” He gave him all this protocol—he actually came back, the Ambassador, from his vacation so he could actually talk to Booker T. Washington about this audience. And then they brought him in to see the King and he said, “We go into the room and there's nothing but the King and his sword.” He's like, “Not a piece of furniture at all!” and he said we stood there for 20 minutes talking, and he said, “Oh, and I said we stood because, as I mentioned, there's no furniture!” I think he was dismayed, he's like, “I know you have chairs in this castle somewhere.” [*laughs*] And then he said at the end he's like, “I fear that I did not follow all the directions.” He said, “I turned around and walked out of the room like I always do.” He said, “I did that when I met the President of the United States.” And so he wasn't trying to be disrespectful. And then they invited him—he said the King said, “The Queen, Queen Louise, wants you to come to dinner,” and then he was thinking ...the peasants! But he still was able to see the peasants and then go to dinner, but he was very nervous with this formal occasion, fancy, you know, cutlery and dishes and he said, as a enslaved person he would eat out of a little wooden bowl with a wooden spoon. And then I guess there was a ceremony where people would stand up and bow to the King. They would get his eye and bow, he's like, “I have no idea what's happening. What to do?” He was worried that his “tie was gonna burst,” whatever that meant. But he enjoyed meeting with the King and Queen. He met with the Queen first. She seemed to know stuff about *Up From Slavery*, though he said, “I suspected the ambassador filled them in.” I think he was thinking, “They haven't read my book.” But he was very flattered by it, and when he toured all over a Denmark to little towns like Ringsted. people would sing American songs, and there's photographs I have of him there with this huge American flag that they have, which I'm not sure where they got it from in 1910—it's so big that people are holding it up so it won't touch the ground—and along with the Danish flag, which
they like there. That’s everywhere. But he just thought it was interesting when he gave a speech—other places people had to interpret for him, but he said, “I realized after a while, the Danish people understood my English, and I didn’t really need the interpreter,” and, again, they were laughing at the jokes at the right time, and he was just very flattered by that. He loved it. And then he wrote about it, two chapters of two of his books, and I think that encouraged more people like E. Franklin Frazier, the sociologist, went, and then lots of other educators and social workers went to Denmark to see their social programs for the co-operative movement and the adult education movement, their folk schools. They were trying to bring that back to African-Americans who, again, were predominantly sharecroppers or tenant farmers. ...But it didn’t work in America—because of racism. The people were not even generally educated, because they were trying to get the Danish people who had little education to still teach them classical music and philosophy religion. They felt like even if you’re a peasant you should know all these things, too, but they had at least the basic level education—reading and writing first. A lot of African Americans didn’t. And then the farmers were able to pull their resources in Denmark, but in America it was hard to get loans, your property was undervalued, and that system just could not work for African-Americans. But people were hopeful that Denmark was a model for a cooperative movement that they could bring that back to the United States. Yeah

*Colin:* Who else can we talk about? You’ve spent so much time with so many people...I don’t know...

*Ethelene:* Yeah, I mean there are just a lot of interesting people, some that I never heard of. I actually wrote an article about a man from Harvard, who got caught up with the Nazis, too: Reed Peggram. He’s not well-known at all, and unlike, I said most of the people are very middle-class, he came from a very poor background, raised by a mom and a grandmother, on the census it said they were janitors, or janitress, which I didn’t know was a term, but he went to Boston Latin School and then he ended up going to Harvard for his bachelor’s, and then his master’s, and was working on his PhD when his life fell apart in Europe, but he also went to Columbia and then he had a Rosenwald scholarship to go to—I can never say this—in Paris the Sorbonne. Sorbonne? ...the French school that’s famous! And he went there in ‘38 and met a Danish man and fell in love, though he couldn’t say that explicitly in the letters. I was able to piece all these things together. And so they knew war was coming. They fled France, went to Denmark for several months in ’39/1940. They left right before Denmark was invaded, went back to Paris, get their stuff, went to Italy thinking it would be safe, and then they got captured by the Nazis and they were there for a while. But all the time he was in Europe and France and in Denmark his friends kept saying, “Come back to America, you need to leave,” and he couldn’t say, “I’m in love with this man, I won’t leave him,” but he said, “We’re students and we’re studying and we need to write,” which seems irrational, [*laughs*] I’m sure, to the people back home. But his story is interesting and heartbreaking. He had a nervous breakdown was hospitalized after World War II, and his life just went downhill. And you don’t find information chronologically, so I knew he had this extraordinary background at Harvard—class of ’35 for the BA—again, when hardly anyone was going to school, definitely not Black people in great numbers and in an especially prestigious institution, and then I found out like they do annual reports, or every 5 or 10 years. I found an old report where it seemed like he did nothing with his life, and then the stuff started filling in. I said, “Why 25 years later was he just sitting at home?” He said maybe he sings in a church choir. He could never function after World War II. But then other people said it was tragic because he was Black. What was he going to do with all this education, anyway? A lot of African-American scholars could only work at Black colleges and they would accept people with a master’s because a lot of people couldn’t even get a PhD. Most programs wouldn’t accept people, Black people, for a PhD because they said, “Why would you need that? You can work at a Black college.” And in his Harvard files, for Peggram, is like a hundred and fifty pages. They kept trying to get him to to work in Black colleges even though he said, “I don’t want to go to the South at all.” He was born in Boston. He said, “I don’t want to go down there,” but that’s all they looked for. And then also in his file, he applied for a Rhodes scholarship and the Dean wrote a very nice letter and sent a copy to Reed Peggram, and Peggram said, “Thank you so much,” but that same day, the Dean also wrote a second letter to Oxford to say, “You might want to know this is a Black man. You might not be able to tell by his name. He’s a very good Black person, but...” Another person said, “Oh thanks for telling me, we would have been shocked. But that’s not going to matter at all.” But he never did get the Rhodes scholarship. So you see these things in the file. So they say, you know, he was born at a time where it’s hard to be gay, where you couldn’t get married and brought his...his... the man that he was in love with over to the United States, so he stayed behind, and
also, what was he going to do as a Black man comparative literature scholar? And, you know, in the 1930's, what kind of future was he going to have, anyway? So he's one of the people I actually wrote an article about for Narratively magazine. Again, someone you hadn't heard of, but there were all these newspaper articles. And then when I was giving this talk about the the whole project in Denmark, a woman in the audience said, "That's my great-uncle." She says, "I recognized that photograph from growing up." She never knew him because he died in '82, but she said, "We're a very small family, only about 15 people in the world," and her grandfather is Reed Peggram's half-brother, and he's still alive in his 90's. And so it was interesting to have insight into him from another perspective from family members. And there's often this kind of serendipity that that happens when you do research, you know. I was actually going to a conference when I was in Copenhagen in South Africa, and at Heathrow they say, "You should find people and catch an Uber together. Taxis are dangerous in Johannesburg." So I saw a Black couple and I was like, "Are you going to this conference?" and they said, "Yes," and then they always ask, "What kind of research are you doing?" and when I said, "African-Americans in Denmark," the guy said, "Oh my uncle lives in Denmark," —but it's clear he was joking, he didn't really have a white uncle— he said, "Yeah, he's a journalist named Jørgen." I was like, "Well I know a journalist named Jørgen." And it turns out Jørgen was affiliated with a Danish political party that worked with the Black Panthers in Denmark in the 1960's, and now he's mentioned in all these books that are coming out now about the Black Panther Party, and the man, the young man in Heathrow, his father was Masai Hewitt, who was the Minister of Education, one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party. And so it was just weird to meet them, and he's actually, Raymond Masai Hewitt was included in my book, and it was just weird to find out that Black Panthers were there, not just visiting, but they had a small little Black Panther Party—very tiny—and two of the people my study, Skip Malone and Connie Matthews, were the co-representatives. And so a lot of people are talking about the role of women in the Black Panther Parties, and Connie Matthews was one of the more prominent ones, and so people mention her a lot, but then when I interview people, still hate her a lot, and they still trying to diminish her role, decades later, in the Black Panther Party, though it was clear she was very active. But then later we found out that the government has this COINTELPRO... program where they tried to sow dissension into different groups, and they would falsify her name on different documents and make it sound like she was betraying one against the other leader of the Black Panther Party, and so that's why people think that she was a traitor. And then at some point she ran off. No-one knows what happened to her, at all, but very interesting story, and she's one of two Jamaicans in my study, even though I only look at African Americans, because one was part of the Harlem Renaissance, kind of lost to history, and she, even though she's Jamaican, she's a Black Panther, it was like, you can't get more African-American than that. She had never even been to America when she joined in in Denmark. And so those stories are kind of interesting to me to try to resurrect who these people are. A lot of people still remember them, again, I talked to widows and children of other people, and so it's interesting to just hear different perspective.

**Colin:** So you have collected just a vast number of life stories and experiences. Is there anything that you hope that readers of your book will take away from this diverse collection of experiences?

**Ethelene:** I want maybe people to well, several of them could be a book on their own, so maybe someone else will pick up on that? That's how I started my book about Regina Anderson Andrews. There was an article about all these Black women librarians I never heard of and she seemed the most interesting, and I said, "I want to write about her." So there are several people who have book worthy topics to cover. I hope to inspire more people to travel when I go and give talks, especially in front of African-American audiences. A lot of them said, "Oh, I want to go to Denmark! I never thought about going to Denmark. Oh, it looks like a lot of fun!" I hear from people on social media where I post things about my travels and my experiences, and a lot of African-American women, for some reason, when they go travel there, they ask me what are things to do? What are Black things / African-American? Mostly can think of going to dead cemeteries to see dead people, but the Jazz venues are still there. I actually got a map from a cartography lab at the University of Wisconsin. Turns out the woman in charge is of Danish descent. I don't think she's ever been there. And so lots of people are fascinated with this study. So I have a map, and then I was thinking about doing a walking tour, though people tell me I should do my own tour like they do for Black Paris and Black Amsterdam. Amsterdam also does it on the canals and also walking. I mean, I probably could, I'm not sure that's what I want to do with my life, but there's actually an alternative walking tour to talk about
the slave and slave trade related things in Denmark that these young ethnic Danes put together, young white Danes. So I'm thinking about that, too, because people seem interested. I tell them recommendations for restaurants, especially, there's one by a Cameroonian woman. She's not African-American, but has a really beautiful cafe, and there's a Somalian, a woman from Somaliland, too. I used to visit her cafe when I lived there for a year. So maybe I could do something like that. I want people to expand beyond the the Paris story. There's a poet who won the Pulitzer Prize, who's in my book, Gregory Pardlo. He went to Denmark and he writes about that in his memoir, and he actually says, "Paris was a cliche," and that's what I feel that—it—to just talk about the same old people is not interesting, and people said, "But they're famous!" I said, "Maybe they're famous because people were also writing about them," but I want all these other people to be known, too, that I think are very interesting. Just, I like the recovery work, I like talking about people lost to history and bringing them back to the light, again, that might encourage people to know, oh, there were these dancers from Alvin Ailey who lived there, and got involved in another community. People are interested in studying abroad, especially a lot of students of color. When I've done the study abroad last year and this year, it is predominantly African-American people. Last year, one white woman, who was Swedish descent, but it was a Latino man and eight Black women, and this year I had five Black women or six and then two white men, who really wanted to go to Sweden, but they didn't mind really going to Denmark. [*laughs*] But yeah, a lot of these students have never been abroad before. They thought it was odd that that was their first country, but they loved it. A lot of them want to go back again, and so yeah, I want, yeah! to encourage more people to go abroad, think about Denmark, and other Scandinavian countries, or, again, not the same old places, England and Paris, or England and France, but think about other other countries and what they have to offer.

[*Outro Music starts*]

**Colin:** If you are inspired to write one of those biographies yourself or to study abroad with Professor Whitmire, be sure to look her up at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Links to her first book and public articles about African Americans in Denmark can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. If you are looking for other opportunities to study abroad, those are also on our website. The Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington has direct exchange programs with universities in each of the Nordic and Baltic countries. We also regularly offer faculty-led study abroad programs in the summer. This summer, lecturers Kim Kraft and Lauren Poyer are taking students to Iceland and Sweden to study gender equality and climate justice from the Viking Age to today. We also want to announce a new course starting this spring by Lauren Poyer: SCAND 375: Vikings in Popular Culture.

**Lauren Poyer:** I always ask my students at the beginning of every course I teach, "why are you taking this class? What prior experience do you have?" And students would say, "well, I've seen the Marvel movies, but that's not relevant," or, "I've read these comics, but that's not relevant," or, "I watched Vikings the TV show, but that's not relevant," and I was like, “but it is! It is relevant because.. because that's how you have come to experience this material, from, like, a totally different direction.” And so I wanted to create a class where we looked critically at the media products that students are actually consuming and engaging with and using that have to do with Vikings and just ask, really, the basic question of, like, why Vikings?

**Colin:** The course will explore how the Vikings have functioned as vessels for a variety of cultural fantasies about gender, class, race, and religion for over a millennia, and it will offer students the chance to critically engage with Viking metal and, yes, video games. That's right students, you can play God of War for class credit. Registration is now open.

*Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a course or declaring a major. If you're interested in Denmark in the 20th century, Kristian Næsby teaches SCAND 155: Danish Literary and Cultural*