

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Five Transcript, Episode Two: Simone El Bey, Brooke Gibbons, and Joanna Henry

Lis Malone: This is the Melungeon Voices Podcast, presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, and it is always my honor and privilege to introduce everyone to the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Heather Andolina. Heather, how are you this week?

Heather Andolina: I am doing well this week, Lis. How are you doing?

Lis: I am feeling excellent as usual, at the very least, striving for excellence. And you have three excellent women who are joining you today to speak about this exciting exhibit that's coming up.

Heather: Yes, in which the Melungeon Heritage Association is collaborating on. So, we're super excited.

Lis: Everything that the Melungeon Heritage Association touches turn to gold. So, I am fully on board with helping to spread the word on this event. I'm very excited to have the opportunity to see the event for myself.

And I know we're kind of priming the pump right now with this, right?

Heather: Yes. Oh, yes. People will want to definitely see this exhibit.

Lis: Okay. So, before we... I know everyone's like, what is this exhibit?

I know we're just talking about this great thing that's coming up. Okay. So, let's talk about Simone, Joanna and Brooke, who are "the guests for this week and what you're going to be doing.

Heather: This week, I welcomed three wonderful guests, Simone El Bey, Joanna Henry and Brooke Gibbons, for a discussion about an important new exhibit happening here in Charlotte, North Carolina this season. Simone El Bey serves as the Visual Arts and Education Director at Cain Center for the Arts in Cornelius, North Carolina. As part of her role, Simone curates two gallery spaces, oversees a multitude of adult and youth education programs, and leads the center's community impact initiatives.

Originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, Simone comes from a family of strong community commitment. She has taught in the school system in both North Carolina and Texas, and has worked with many non-profit organizations over her 15-year career to help build the presence of arts and education in the community. She has curated in spaces of academia, recreation, and fine arts.

Simone recently served as a juror for the Esteemed Art Fields Competition in Lake City, South Carolina. Simone studied at the University of North Carolina and Southern New Hampshire University. She loves to read, travel, and hike. And she and her family continue to reside in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Next, we have Joanna Henry. She is a South Carolina-based painter and ceramicist. She is an ArtPop Street Gallery alum and the artist development specialist for the Catawba Indian Nation. Her work analyzes Afro-Caribbean and African American culture, its connections, and the positioning of a Black woman as the author, reclaiming the narrative through her compositions in the process. Originally from Florida, Joanna moved to the Carolinas in 2007, where she began her education in art and has received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Winthrop University in 2015.

Also joining us is Brooke Gibbons, who is an Arts and Cultural Organization leader, an exhibit curator and advisor. As a consulting curator and advisor, she works with cultural heritage museums and spaces to preserve and highlight stories, art, and history. She has worked with Wells Fargo Museum, Guam Museum, Charlotte Art League, and Thankful Heritage Black History Museum.

Brooke is currently the Director of Impact and Sustainability at ArtPop Street Gallery and serves as an advisor for the Organization for the Democratization of the Visual Arts, a Berlin-based group working on the framework for the certification of equality and diversity for art institutions. Her “areas of expertise and interest include cultural heritage preservation, land back and decolonization efforts, eliminating environmental racism, and creating equitable and just futures, specifically among the Pacific Islands and Southern Black and Indigenous communities.

In this episode, we will be talking about an all-new exhibit called Generations, an Indigenous exhibit in which the Melungeon Heritage Association will be collaborating with the Cain Center for the Arts, the Catawba Cultural Center, and others in bringing this wonderful exhibit to the public from November 12th, 2024, through January 11th, 2025.

Lis: This sounds like a spectacular discussion as usual, Heather. Without further delay, let's listen in.

Heather: Hello ladies, welcome to the Melungeon Voices podcast. I always like to start off with this question. When was the first time you heard the term Melungeon or had heard about the Melungeon people?

Simone, let's start with you.

Simone El Bey: I think it's when me and Brooke were going through the list of tribes and we had a meeting about something completely different. And at the end she was like, so I want to talk about something different in her Brooke fashion. And so, I was like, okay, what's up?

And she brought it to me and she gave me all of this information. And we just both left really inspired. And then I went and did some digging.

So, this was actually based on the idea around the exhibit and our cultural events, where it was introduced to me. And I have just been like diving so deep into the information and trying to understand all the facets and all the different caveats of Indigenous peoples and the tribes.

Heather: And how about you, Joanna?

Joanna Henry: I have a South Carolina education. I really first heard about the Melungeon tribe and people when Brooke and Simone brought this idea to me and asked for me to participate. And then also I've heard the name before since I worked with the Catawba tribe here in Rock Hill.

So, it's come up and I'm like, there's just so many different tribes trying to figure it all out. Who's where, who does this, things differently. So really getting into like the tribe and who they are really came from Brooke and Simone.

Heather: And now Brooke, how did you learn of the term Melungeon?

Brooke Gibbons: I learned it from you, Heather, when we worked together at the Wells Fargo Museum, which no longer exists. And you had recently discovered that you had Melungeon heritage and you were just getting involved with everything involving the Melungeon people and the Melungeon Heritage Association. And it was so fascinating to follow you along on your journey.

And what's so interesting, this had to have been, you know, five, six years ago now, I have heard the term Melungeon so many times, not just from you, but just random people. Someone I was speaking to just this past week was talking about how he wanted to connect with Melungeon people. And I literally started like screaming, like, I know somebody, the best person to go to. And he was very excited.

Heather: Next though, I would like to have each of you share a little bit about your own unique mixed ancestry. And Brooke, we'll start with you.

Brooke: Yeah, so I am mixed. My father is Scotch-Irish. And his family came here a long, long time ago. And they immigrated, I guess, from Europe. They were poor folk. So, which makes me feel better about history and things.

You know, we weren't landowners, let's just say that. And then my mother's family was from Guam, or she's still alive. But I was born in Guam, which is a Pacific island.

Our native term is Guahan. And our people are called Chamorro. We were colonized many times over, unfortunately. But we are a matriarchal society. So, we have been able to hold on to our stories, our language, which is endangered. We are still trying to hold on to that. So, it's just been very interesting to live so far away from my people, but still stay connected as possible.

Heather: And you, Joanna?

Joanna: So, my family, they all come from Jamaica. And that is a whole jumble eye of different ancestry. My personal family, we have British, Chinese, and Irish, and then Taino, which is the native people of Jamaica, all mixed in there.

I can say like I have a whole, a lot of different references and culture and heritage within myself and my family. But we all, well, let's see, my mom and dad, they immigrated there from Clarendon and St. Mary. Those are parishes in Jamaica and they landed in Rochester, New York and then after they had my older brother and sister, they moved down to Florida, had me and my twin” “sister and then we ended up in the Carolinas.

Heather: And Simone, what's the story behind your ancestry?

Simone: My parents are both from New York. Their families do come from a couple of different places. On my mother's side, we have West Indian, we have Blackfoot, and we have Cherokee.

And then on my father's side, we have Apache and we have Cuban. And so, my parents are bilingual. They speak Spanish and they are very West Indian.

On my mom's side, it is very, very there. The food, the culture. And to my parents point, I didn't lose any of my culture from any point of my ancestry. Like my mother was very big on learning every single aspect of where we come from. We spoke Spanish in the house. That was actually my little sister's first language because we spoke it so much.

Yeah, we didn't know she spoke, that she was picking it up. And then her babysitter who was Spanish told us and we were like, oh, she's listening. And so, like she, we spoke Spanish to her first before we spoke English to her.

And I mean, my parents, they've always believed in learning and having your history, no matter how many points of history you have, and like making sure you have a space and that it's just not like, oh, I'm Apache, or oh, I'm Cherokee, or oh, I'm Blackfoot. It's really about like understanding each component, especially my West Indian family members. Like they're big on knowing how to fix the food and how we talk to each other and how we integrate as a family. So, history in my family is huge.

Heather: All right, Simone. So, let's get into why we're all here today. And that's to discuss an amazing new indigenous art exhibit called Generations, An Indigenous Exhibit, which we've all been working on.

The exhibit will open on Tuesday, November 12th, and will run through Saturday, January 11th, 2025, at the Cain Center for the Arts, located in Cornelius, North Carolina. Brooke had approached me, asking if the Melungeon Heritage Association would be interested in collaborating on an Indigenous exhibit. And I told her, sign us up.

Brooke, are you the mastermind behind this exhibit? Or did you, Simone, and Joanna brainstorm together? In other words, how did the idea for this exhibit come about?

Brooke: Great question, Heather, because I” “don't remember. Simone and I have worked together previously, and we continue to work together for my day job at ArtPop Street Gallery. And Simone works at the Cain Center for the Arts.

So, we worked together pretty often in our daily lives, but we became friends as well. And we just start talking about all these great exhibit ideas since we both come from a curatorial background. And we have so much in common that we just love working together, coming up with ideas.

And I think we both have the type of personality where if we have an idea, we're going to see it through fruition. And that's pretty much how it came about, Simone. I don't know if you want to add anything that I don't remember.

Simone: For sure, I think that we were talking about what we do on an annual basis, just getting a very large exhibit together. And we worked through the idea portion of it very early on, just to make sure that we are providing a variety of different disciplines and mediums and all those things. And to Brooke's point, the friendship that has blossomed, even with you ladies, I mean, I” “am just enthralled to be surrounded by like-minded individuals.

And I have really enjoyed creating this vision. And I do think, I think we were just talking about it, and we were just talking about some of our day-to-day lives and like some of the things that we want to see happen in fine arts, and we want to see happen in galleries, that we want to provide to communities from an educative standpoint. And we were just throwing things out.

And I think this one went up the air and we both caught it. Like Brooke said, and we are like one of those, if we catch an idea and we love it, we are going to see it through fruition. And then we start thinking through, like, who else can we do?

I think Brooke threw out Heather and Joanna's name. And I'm like, I'm all in. Let me know what I need to do. And from there, it had just sparked an entire journey with me and Brooke, but also you ladies. And it has just been fun. It's just been fun.

Heather: Joanna, they came to you and got you involved in it as well?

Joanna: Yeah, so, I used to work with Brooke as an intern for the Star Art League a long time ago. Myself, I'm an artist, so I definitely understand the background or the artist's perspective of being involved in an exhibit like this. So, after I left Brooke, I ended up participating in the ArtPop Street Gallery's competition to be featured on one of their billboards.

And then later on, Brooke got hired on with them. And then we kind of stayed in touch with each other here and off. And I started working for the Catawba tribe.

Brooke reached out to me about this amazing idea. And I was like, yes, I definitely want to do it. I want to include our tribal artists because they only show their work within the tribe, within the community.

And me coming in, not tribal, and having the experience that I have, I felt that it was important for them to get a chance to show their work and be recognized for the amazing talents that they have. So as soon as she told me like, hey, I'm doing this exhibit with Simone and the Cain Center for the Arts and I'm like, yes, include me, just let me know what I need to do. I will get people there. I'm in. So, I'm really excited about it.

Heather: What should exhibit visitors expect to experience and learn about Indigenous culture, stories, and histories? And Joanna, we'll start with you this time.

Joanna: Visitors should expect to learn that these Indigenous and Native cultures and Native American people have always been here and will continue to be here. Their perspective, their voice, their culture, it matters and influences everything that we experience as non-Tribal people, even if we don't really notice that. Subconsciously, we don't pay attention to it, but it's there.

And I think that they'll take away the importance of having these groups of people here and just their knowledge and of the land and everything around us. They'll take that piece of them with them.

Heather: Love it. Simone, your thoughts?

Simone: My hope and my goal are that we provide a platform, as Joanna said, for Indigenous people to really showcase their work and talk about their history and educate the community. But from our perspective as being the Cain Center, it is one of our missions and values to be able to educate our community on the various different experiences that artists have of all types of mediums from all walks of life. And I think it's important that we, when we're talking about different historical aspects of different cultures and different ways of life, that we actually bring in the people whose narrative matters the most about it.

And I think that it's important that we don't try to explain the history, that we bring people in who can show the history, who can talk about it. So, our goal is to merge communities, to bring forth people who don't know, who would like to know, who might know a little bit, and hear from, you know, the words of mouth about exactly what's happening in these cultures and these tribes, and to be educated in a way, and to bridge gaps. Like I'm a big, I'm a middle child.

I'm always mediating the middle. So, I would love for the goal of this is that people walk away feeling inspired, educated and connected.

Heather: And Brooke, what would you like to add to what you hope visitors take away from the exhibit?

Brooke: So, to Joanna's point, I love that she mentioned that we have the art, we have the culture, we are preserving these things. But traditionally, it's only been in our own spaces. So, to be able to get out there and bring it to a new audience is so important.

Like Simone said, we're merging communities. This space that we are going to be in at the Cain Center in Cornelius, it's a whole new audience will be experiencing all these different cultures. Traditionally, I would say around Cornelius, we have folks that may not know about all these different tribes and Indigenous folks.

We have a lot of people in the area who have moved down from other areas. So, it's a great opportunity to tell the stories and share the culture and the arts of the people that live around us and have lived around us for many, many years and also bring in people who live in the area, who are Indigenous but live in a diaspora such as myself. So, it's nice to bring those two together.

Heather: Simone, can we talk a little bit about how the Cain Center became the venue for the exhibit? And also, what is the Cain Center? Tell our listeners a little more about the Cain Center.

Simone: Well, when Brooke brought the idea to me, we were going over our exhibition schedule. So, I am the Visual Arts and Education Director at the Cain Center for the Arts. And so, I scout art, I scout artists, I scout talent, and I go look for what are some different varieties of work and mediums that we can provide to our audience for the years.

So, we do about nine different exhibits. And as we were talking about our ArtPop Street Gallery exhibit, we were talking about, I was telling her some other ideas and how this exhibit would mesh into the cohesiveness of the actual exhibit schedule. And then we started to talk about other things.

And she started to filter this idea. And I immediately thought that it was a wonderful opportunity for our organization to be a part of this. Just because we are a new facility, we just opened up to the public about a year and a half ago.

So, we're toddlers in this, but we are fierce and mighty. We are a performing arts theater that has 401 seats in our theater. Very intimate, very beautiful. It's one of those theaters that literally do not have a bad seat in the house. We offer visual art exhibits to the public for free. We offer visual art receptions. We offer a multitude of performances for our fall series and as well as for our spring series. And then on top of that, we do visual art classes. We do dance classes.

We have partnerships with Davidson Community Players. We have partnerships with Neighborhood Care Center, the Ada Jenkins Center. And because we are surrounded by such a community of people and a diverse community of interests and a lover of arts that have a passion for what we do and what we provide for the community, I was like they would love this.

Our audience is growing and is expanding. Again, we're babies in this and we're learning and we have had so much fun putting it together. We have some values.

Our values are community, inspiration, education, and entertainment. This sat right in the middle of our values as an organization. Justin Dion, our executive director, is very thoughtful about his placement of his staff and how we engage with people, how we engage with our patrons coming to performances, how we engage with our students coming into classes, how we engage to our community coming in for our community exhibits and our exhibitions, and our community partners.

We're all very intentional. And this is a very intentional exhibit. To Joanna's point, the platform is important. And it is our goal that we offer our resources as much as we can for what we do in the arts, to the people that see us and people that know us, our neighbors. I tell people all the time, like I go, I walk to the store and I see my neighbors and I say, hey, and I say, how are you doing? And things like that.

So, I think that this is a perfect example for us to be able to come together and connect those two communities in a way that's thoughtful, intentional, and really kind of inspiring.

Heather: And I had no idea that the Cain Center has only been open for a year and a half.

Simone: We are fierce and mighty. I tell people that all the time because we are very intentional about our work. We're very strategic about our plans and our engagement with our performances, our classes, our community impact.

So, it doesn't, it feels like we've been here for a while, but we've really only been here for a year and a half. And we're taking our charge and our responsibility and we're having fun. We got a bunch of art kids in the office. We all get it from classical theater to dance and theatrical performances. We have all of these different mediums and disciplines in the office. So, we're just a bunch of kids having a great time providing resources and entertainment for the community.

Heather: That's fantastic, Simone. Would one of you like to provide details on the opening reception? Brooke, perhaps?

Brooke: Absolutely. Well, we are doing a very big closing reception programming, but what visitors can expect from the opening is to engage with all sorts of types of art, 2D art, 3D works. The art will be primarily in the Cain Center Gallery, which faces the street and has beautiful windows and lighting.

But there will probably also be art throughout the space in the lobby, upstairs. People can engage with fashion, with all sorts of things, painting, with works that are new and contemporary, with works that are more traditional. There will be a variety and something for everyone.

Prepare to have a good time. Prepare to come in to see some art. Prepare to be to be introduced to traditional, non-traditional, modern, contemporary.

Simone: I mean, the goal is to really, again, merge these two communities, merge these different communities, give a platform for tribal artists, for them to come in and to showcase and honor and be proud of their history, their ancestry and to provide this platform. We have a pretty strong lineup. We have the exhibit that's open again from November 12th to the January 11th, but we have a film showing by History Before Us and Black Indians, which is called Duality, a Collection of Afro Indigenous People. It'll be shown on January 9th and November 21st. So, we're just excited. We have a lineup that we think that is going to make our people proud.

And I think that that's the goal, is that you come in, you learn, you have fun, you engage, just have a good time.

Heather: So yes, Simone, and we have had Frederick Murphy from season one of the Melungeon Voices podcast, episode one, and Kimberly Knight, she was on season two, episode one of the Melungeon Voices podcast. So, they both have been on our podcast discussing their documentary Duality. So that's going to be very exciting for everyone.

I have seen it. It is fantastic. Is there anything else anyone would like to share with our listeners about the Generations Exhibit? Joanna?

Joanna: To Simone's point about, you know, everyone just coming and having a good time, it's definitely going to be a like a full immersive experience. There's, well, there'll be like live performances. You'll have art. There'll be food, like traditional Native American food. So just really come and just be immersed in it and you may have a good time.

So, for the end of the exhibit, we are actually having a series of several days, about three days that we're we doing different events.

Heather: Simone, can you go a little more into detail about what these three days are going to consist of?

Simone: Absolutely. The last few days of the exhibit actually being in our space, that Thursday, January 9th, that Friday, January 10th, and that Saturday, January 11th, we have something every day to offer to the public. We have the film showing of the duality, a collection of Indigenous people, as we mentioned before, which will be provided by History Before Us and Black Indians NC.

On Friday, we have a dance troupe, we have a drummer, we also have a performance by Charlie Lowry that will be provided, and you can buy tickets for. Then also on Saturday, we are going to have a storyteller, we are going to have fashion pieces that are going to be spoken about, we are going to have a spoken word artist come in and do a performance for us. Then I think this might be my favorite part, where we actually have a panel discussion that will be moderated by our very own Brooke Gibbons.

We are going to talk about a few different things. We are going to talk about food, we are going to talk about clothing, we are going to talk about the education, and we are also going to talk about the day-to-day routine of tribal members, because I think that people, we hear a lot, you know, when you talk about history, you hear a lot of different parts of it. And so, for me, because I'm also a former instructor and teacher, I love understanding how people just lived and how they were able to integrate into their own systems and their own way of life.

We are going to have a panel discussion kind of hitting a little bit on all those topics. And again, Brooke Gibbons is going to be the moderator. So, there's definitely lots for people to do towards the end, outside of just coming by during the time to just see the work and see the exhibit.

I definitely encourage each and every single one of our listeners today to Thursday, Friday or Saturday, you pick a day and you come out and I can guarantee you're going to have a good time.

Heather: Fantastic, Simone. Looks like there's going to be all kinds of stuff for visitors to be able to do. How can our listeners get more information or order tickets for the exhibit or opening reception?

Simone: We actually have a web page that actually has a few different items on there. So, our web page has a specific web page specifically for this exhibit, Generations Highlighting Indigenous Peoples, Cultures, and Artists and Artwork Alike. You can go onto our website, icainarts.org, where you can go in and you can actually click on Generations, the exhibit and you'll start to see the lineup.

We have an open call that's out. So, for those artists who actually want to provide and participate in this exhibit, by all means, you have the ability to do that. You'll start to see as we

trickle closer to the date, you'll see that there will be a web page showing a list of all the dates that we have something, what you're going to do and where you can click to either RSVP or purchase a ticket.

And again, that's in cainarts.org. If you go to our exhibition in our education tab, you'll be able to see the web page where it lists out this entire scope for our closing events. And you can click on each one of those days that work for you and choose an activity to either RSVP to or purchase a ticket to the performance with Charlie Lowry.

Heather: Before we wrap up, I would like Brooke to go in to some more detail about the panel that we will be having for this exhibit during the last closing days. Brooke, can you go a little more into detail on the panels?

Brooke: This panel, it will be a representation not only of the tribes that we have represented in the exhibit itself, but it will be a callback to the name of the exhibit, which is Generations, meaning that we will have folks on the panel representing elders, we will have a new generation because what we have seen, I think amongst Indigenous tribes is there's a resurgence, a renaissance with our own culture, and that will be really interesting to tie together all these generations in a panel and talk to everybody.

Heather: I can't wait. I am so excited for this exhibit and cannot wait for the opening. I want to thank each one of you for taking the time to talk with us and I'll see all of you at the opening of the exhibit.

Thank you so much, ladies.

All three: Thank you, Heather. This was so much fun.

Lis: You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA Executive Committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at melungeon.org.

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