Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Five Transcript, Episode Four: Dr. Kimberly M Cheek

Lis Malone: Hello, and welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast, presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, and I am joined by the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Madame Heather Andolina. How are you, Madame President?

Heather Andolina: I am fine. How are you, Lis?

Lis: Doing fabulously. Thank you so much for asking. And here we are, Heather. We are in our, as we always say, our hump episode, the middle of the season. And how are you feeling about that?

Heather: I think it's been a great season so far. And then we're in the middle, but there's so much more. There's three more, this one and three more to go.

Lis: Absolutely. That's my favorite part is that we're just in the middle, but there's still so much great conversations yet to come. And so, before we get into this week's guest and what we'll be talking about, you have an exciting announcement from the MHA.

Heather: We have some great new developments with the Melungeon Heritage Association. We now have a new online MHA store. If you haven't seen it yet, be sure to visit our website at http://www.melungeon.org to check out the new MHA store and show your" "support for our organization by purchasing your very own MHA merch today and showing off your Melungeon pride.

Lis: This is really fun news, Heather. So, do you have any favorite merch items that are available in the store?

Heather: I love the coffee cup, the mug, and the t-shirt.

Lis: Who doesn't love a good mug, right?

Heather: Exactly.

Lis: I can never have too many mugs. I think, well, no, I think I could have too many mugs, but I do appreciate a good mug. I'm a hardcore coffee drinker, I have to say.

Heather: I have a lot of mugs too, Liz, but what's another one?

Lis: What else can people find in the store, Heather?

Heather: We also have koozies, hats, and bags.

Lis: I'm definitely looking forward to seeing some of these items for myself, and I encourage everybody listening to visit the website, melungeon.org, and go ahead. As Heather said, show off your Melungeon pride.

Heather: Yes, and we will be adding more items as well.

Lis: We certainly look forward to more merchandise as it becomes available. Thank you so much, Heather, for sharing that news with everybody. Now, let's move into the business for this episode. Heather, who are we talking to and tell us a little bit about them.

Heather: Yes, ma'am. Dr. Kimberly M Cheek is an adjunct lecturer at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and has over 12 years of experience teaching undergraduate students. She also has grant writing experience and has served on three grant committees.

Dr. Cheek's historical areas of focus include race and empire, transnational Black politics and radicalism, as well as US foreign policy during the Cold War. Her teaching areas are global history, ancient history, United States history, African American history, and modern European history. Dr. Cheek's research interests are 19th century African American intellectuals, late 19th and early 20th century European imperialist activity in West Africa and Central Africa, African and African American anti-colonial and liberation movements, African American global civil rights activism during World War II, and the period of European colonialism in Asia and Africa.

The early period of the Cold War, as well as the African American Press during World War II and the Cold War. In our episode today, we will examine the tribal connections to the Underground Railroad in North Carolina and Virginia. How Maroon and Melungeon communities helped and supported African Americans with freedom-seeking" "And delved a little into Dr. Kimberly Cheeks own mixed ethnic ancestry.

Lis: Let's take a listen to your conversation with Dr. Cheek.

Heather: Hello, Dr. Cheek, and welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Cheek: Hello, and thank you for having me.

Heather: I'd like to kick off our discussions with this question. When and how did you first learn about the Melungeon people?

Dr. Cheek: I would have to say that I first learned about the Melungeon people in 2018. And yeah, 2018, I say that because that's when I first started teaching as an adjunct instructor at North Carolina A&T State University. I was still a doctoral student. At the time, Dr. Arwin Smallwood was the chairperson of the department. And he introduced me to his research on Indian woods and just mixed-race communities. I really developed my interest there.

Now, as far as the knowledge in general about Melungeon peoples or mixed-race peoples, I had always had or had that knowledge or known of Melungeon peoples and mixed-race peoples, mainly because my mother's family, she was born and raised in Conway, North Carolina, Northampton County. So, her history is the history of Melungeon or mixed-race peoples.

Heather: That is so cool. And I don't know if you know, we did interview Dr. Smallwood. I believe he's season two, episode seven, I think we did interview him for the podcast as well.

Dr. Cheek: Okay. Excellent.

Heather: It was an honor to have you present at the MHA 28th Union Conference back in June. Your presentation was on uncovering tribal connections to the Underground Railroad in North Carolina and Virginia. We're going to go into a little more detail on some of the topics you touched upon at the conference.

Why and how did Indigenous peoples participate in assisting African Americans in North Carolina and Virginia with freedom seeking?

Dr. Cheek: Great question, Heather. As far as the why, the why stems from indigenous peoples own intimate history, of enslavement, but also earlier, their own traditional lands being encroached upon by European settlers. This was a process that really began as far back as the 17th century.

For example, in my research, I focused a lot on the Pamunkey Indians. This is a tribe that was centered in Virginia, specifically in Eastern Virginia in the Tidewater region. The Pamunkey were among one of the earliest tribes, or one of the first tribes rather, that the English settlers would encounter when they arrived at what became the Jamestown colony in Virginia.

So, considering these early relationships, they were somewhat positive relationships. But as the 17th century progressed, those relationships broke down mainly because the English, as they're trading with the Pamunkey and other Native Americans, these trade relationships became very unequal. By that, I mean that the English were now taking advantage of the Pamunkey and other Native Americans that they were trading with and that was a source of animosity. Another major source of animosity would have to be how the English began to encroach further on traditional lands. They're moving into these traditional lands as the plantation economy is expanding.

This is creating tensions. So, things like this really set the stage for the Pamunkey and even other indigenous peoples to participate in freedom seeking. I would also like to add that with the Pamunkey and their history, during the 17th century period also by 1646, this is when the Powhatan Wars ended.

At this point in time, this is when tribes such as the Pamunkey and other tribes such as the Mattaponi, and the Chikahominy, they're also reassessing their relationship with the English. This is a period in time when the English, they are increasingly enslaving indigenous peoples. Many of these indigenous peoples, they are being enslaved either in Virginia, they're being exported to what became North Carolina and other places.

They're even being exported to the Caribbean to work. So, this is a source of that tension too. Especially when you have members of the Pamunkey and other tribes, they're seeing their women and their children taken.

They're taken to work as domestics. The boys, they're taken to be trained in various agricultural pursuits, trained as blacksmiths, other types of jobs. Whereas the men, they're being taken to the Caribbean, where they're working on these large plantations.

We have all those animosities. And even another layer is that there's a point in the history of Virginia where the House of Burgesses decides that it's going to attempt to try to address Indian slavery. And the House of Burgesses does this by passing a law in 1705 that is intended to outlaw Indian slavery.

Sounds positive. And in some cases, it did work, but in other cases it did not. And enslavement continued. But on the flip side, this is a point in the history of Virginia where we're also seeing the enslavement of people of African descent is now expanding. So, we have that overlap. But all in all, their connections really just stem from that parallel history or that interrelated history of exploitation.

Heather: Okay. So now let's talk about the how.

As far as the how. Indigenous Peoples assisted African American freedom seekers by providing African American safe haven in their villages. For example, to get back to the Pamunkey.

The Pamunkey, they had their own reservation. This reservation was established in 1658. It's one of the oldest reservations in the United States. Many of the slave advertisements published in the Virginia Gazette show how enslaved African Americans were fleeing to the Pamunkey reservation. They're absorbing these freedom seekers in their various communities. They're also intermarrying with them.

They're providing them safe haven. So, they're just some of the how's. Also, another how, when it comes to the Tuscarora. This is a tribe in North Carolina. The Tuscarora also had their own reservation. Their reservation was Indian Woods. And this is a reservation in eastern North Carolina, specifically in Bertie County. The Tuscarora are also providing enslaved people's safe haven on their reservation. So much so, where the Tuscarora are even helping the enslaved people that escaped to the reservation to even escape further north, as far as Pennsylvania and into Canada.

And as far as where that connection goes, there was a Tuscarora reservation also in Canada. So many enslaved people are escaping there. There's a Tuscarora reservation in New York. They're escaping there. And when it comes to those escape routes that enslaved people are using, they're using the same routes that the Tuscarora were using to engage in their trading. So, it's kind of like that overlap of travel routes, just escape routes that Indians were using.

Heather: Yes, that is so fascinating. So, Dr. Cheek, would you explain for our listeners, what is maroonage?

Dr. Cheek: Maroonage is the act of escape. Escape to an isolated community that is free from the watchful eye of any individual or individuals or government that could contribute to your oppression or the oppression of a group of peoples. And when it comes to the act of maroonage, the act of maroonage also involves the fleeing as well as the establishment of autonomous settlements.

Heather: And many times, these settlements tend to be located in very isolated areas. And what were maroon communities like who settled in the Great Dismal Swamp area?

Dr. Cheek: When it comes to these maroon communities, I mentioned earlier that the first characteristic of these communities is that they were isolated. Many of these communities as they're formed in the Great Dismal Swamp, they're picking the swamp because this is a terrain that it was treacherous. European settlers, they did not dare venture into the swamp.

So that's why this was the perfect locale. Also, when it comes to these communities, these communities were always self-sustaining. These were communities where they could sustain themselves by carrying on trading relationships either with other communities, i.e. Native Americans or other indigenous peoples. In addition, many of these communities, they had established alliances with other communities. And these alliances were either for economic reasons, but they could also be for military reasons too.

In addition, when it comes to these maroon communities and those type of conditions, of course, they're going to be harsh conditions. So just imagine people existing in these isolated areas and they're surrounded by poisonous snakes. They're experiencing these tropical conditions, these tropical temperatures.

They're also living in areas with this intense soggy vegetation. You know, they're doing all of this in the name of freedom and just establishing these new lives. But also, you know, as they're establishing these new lives, they're doing so in these isolated places where they're now able to establish their own government.

They're now able to establish their own militia. They're even able to even create this type of distinct culture. And this is a culture that many times is reflecting the intermingling of both African as well as Indigenous cultures.

Also, when it comes to this intermingling, we're also seeing intermarriage. We're seeing people who are engaging in true cooperation. As they've established these communities. And again, they're doing this in the name of freedom and just the preservation of their own autonomy.

Heather: So interesting. The Melungeon people were described as tri-racial isolates. How did tri-racial isolate communities like the Melungeon's, like Maroons, become spaces of safety for freedom seekers?

Dr. Cheek: Oh, another great question. When it comes to them becoming spaces of safety, I think the first thing that I really want to say is that these Melungeon communities, these mixed-race communities, these tri-racial isolates, these were spaces or geographies of true resistance. And I say that because these communities, they, just their very existence, their very existence just bucks that those stringent slave codes that were in existence.

If you look at the Antebellum period, the existence of these communities just bucks those stringent Antebellum racial restrictions that were intended to separate people of African descent, even people of indigenous descent, and I'll even say people of European descent. It's in these tri-racial isolates, in these Melungeon communities, these mixed-race communities, that we're seeing all of these people are co-mingling, and they're co-mingling on this even or these equal terms, on these equal terms. I'll also say, as far as specific examples of freedom seeking in these communities, a prime example would have to be the Winton Triangle.

The Winton Triangle is probably one of the most famous mixed-race tri-racial isolate communities in North Carolina. And it's also one of the oldest of these communities. It's comprising those communities in Ahoskie, Cofield, and Winton.

But as I say all of this, this is also a community that includes a large population of free people of color. So, their very existence challenges racial norms during the antebellum period. So, you're seeing a population of Saponi, Chowanoc, also Meherrin peoples are all existing in these communities.

And these are all people of Tuscarora descent. Now on the flip side, well, you have some of these people, they're landowners, they're farmers, they are prosperous in their own right. They're welcoming in freedom seekers, enslaved African Americans. And as they're welcoming these individuals in, they're going so far as to provide them safe haven. They may be showing them various routes up north. They're even providing them safe haven in their own communities.

And it was commonplace for free people of color in the Winton Triangle to intermarry with enslaved people. So now they're creating these types of networks, these types of kin networks. And these kin networks are basically providing these freedom seekers with safety nets.

Also, when it comes to everything that's going on in these communities, I think the interesting thing, and this is a little bit off the topic of the question, but I do want to mention this, is that as

freedom seekers are entering into these communities that are already tri-racial in their own right, as families are intermarrying, a common thing is to see racial identities in these communities shift back and forth over generations. And so, we're going to see some people are listed as mulatto, mixed race. Some people are listed as white.

Some people are listed as Native American. Some people are even listed as color. And this is within families. But all in all, when I think of mixed race, tri-racial isolates, again, I think of communities that are places of resistance and also places of revolution.

Heather: Dr. Cheek, from your vast research, is there something you found to be especially fascinating or surprising?

Dr. Cheek: I think one of the most fascinating things that I found out as I was doing my research is I found out a lot of fascinating facts about the Cumbo family. I think just to start off, one of the fascinating facts that I found out is that I'm related to the Cumbo family. I found this out through my mother, Rosa Cheek.

I mentioned the name Cumbo as I'm talking about my research with her and she's like, yeah Kim, I know some Cumbo's. You're actually related to some Cumbo's. That right there really pulled me in even more when it came to my research in just really trying to understand the history of indigenous and African American interactions, and just also trying to understand the history of tri-racial isolates.

That was one of the interesting facts that I found out. Also, as far as the Cumbo family, I had never really known the death of the family and just the family's history, and just how it dated back all the way to the 17th century. With just the fact that this is a family that it's able to trace its history all the way back to the continent of Africa.

Not that many African Americans can do that. So, I thought that was very interesting. Another interesting fact that I found out as I was doing this research, is just more about the names or the history of the names of specific towns in Northampton County and also around Northampton County. Towns such as Podokase. Once I mentioned that name, my mom was like, oh yeah, I know Podokase. I used to go there with my grandfather X, Y, and Z.

So, for me, I'm like, okay, now it's coming alive for me and it also came alive to her because she's telling me all these memories from her childhood. Also, something else that I found out, just delving more into my family history. My mother, her grandfather was Will Dickerson.

The Dickerson family in North Hampton County, we have deep roots there. We're actually one of the largest families in North Hampton County. So just learning that type of history really was surprising to me.

Heather: Oh, wow. Yes, Cumbo is a Melungeon surname. Why do you think there is so little being taught on the connection between Maroon and Melungeon communities and the Underground Railroad?

Dr. Cheek: I really think a lot. Well, first off, I think that there's, it's not really taught a lot because there's not really a lot of information that is readily available for people to piece together this history so that they could properly convey it to an audience. So, I feel like that's a, that's a reason.

I believe another reason is that when focusing on the Underground Railroad, there's a tendency to pinpoint 1830 with the establishment of the Underground Railroad. There's a tendency to pin point the activities and the roles of those quote unquote big-name peoples or personalities who are associated with the Underground Railroad. I also think that when it comes to the maroon communities and the Underground Railroad, I feel like that history is touched upon because when looking at the Underground Railroad, the importance of the Great Dismal Swamp, that tends to always be highlighted.

But I do feel that the history doesn't go far enough and it's not looking at the Great Dismal Swamp in just those larger interactions between the Indigenous peoples, the African peoples, and just what this meant for the Underground Railroad.

Heather: Dr. Cheek, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners?

Dr. Cheek: One of the things that I would like to share with listeners is that the topic of Indigenous peoples and their interactions with enslaved peoples or freedom seekers, well, it is an old history based on the timeline. But as far as folks delving into this history specifically, this history as it's focused in the southeastern region of the United States, this is a somewhat new task. It's a task that I'm trying to undertake.

It's a task that other folks are undertaking. I would say that we need people to delve into this history. We need people to contribute to this history to share what they know at times. People have family stories that may have been passed down for generations. They've been retold. And it just takes that one person to sit down and say, you know what, I think there's something to this story.

Let me explore this. Let me share this with somebody else. Because that's really how history like this is recorded and told.

Heather: Definitely. And I think you are doing a great job.

Dr. Cheek: Thank you, Heather. Thank you. Let me say, let me say thank you for that.

I will admit that, you know, I'm still new to this history. And, you know, I'm still learning. And for me, while I have touched on different topics, focus on the Indigenous and the African American

experience and their connection and cooperation, there's still so many more stories to be uncovered. There are still so many more stories to be told. And, you know, even today, as I was preparing today, I was finding a lot of other new connections that really shed a totally different light on this history and kind of add it to the existing research that I've already done.

Heather: There's just so much, you're right.

Dr. Cheek: Yeah.

Heather: It's, and like you said, there's a lot of family stories that haven't been told. And that's a lot of it, you know, and that, and in that is a lot of information.

Dr. Cheek: Yeah, that, and I think too, the one thing that I have learned, and this is something that I really learn as I delve deeper into this research, specifically looking at tri-racial communities and peoples in those communities. The one thing I really did learn that as I was doing this research, I have to tread very carefully. As a historian, I'm excited when I uncovered facts and connections and all of this, and then I can bring them to light.

But understanding that while I think this is fascinating, there are some who see some of this history and the pieces of the history that I'm uncovering, they see it as painful and they see it as they want to keep it buried. Because talking about it just dredges up all of these, these memories of having to deny their heritage, having to deny that either they were Indigenous, having to deny that they were of African descent, having to deny that they were tri-racial. Because of those fears that if they talk about their history, then this could basically mean that they could, in so many words, damn themselves or their families.

As I went into these communities, I kind of realized this is why some folks are reluctant to talk to me. Because they may not know me, and they may have heard of me. But their reluctance is because what is she going to do with this history? That's something that I learned the hard way. And I take, no, I mean, I learned and, you know, I took it and I used it.

Heather: You know, and we've mentioned this on the podcast before. There's a lot of trauma, a lot of historical trauma, generational trauma.

Dr. Cheek: Yeah.

Heather: We have talked a lot about that. And it does, it makes it hard. The Dr. Cheek, I'm sure our listeners would love to know of a way to contact you.

Dr. Cheek: I can be contacted at Kimberly Cheek, 1908 at gmail.com, K-I-M-B-E-R-L-Y-C-H-E-E-K-1-9-0-8 at gmail.com.

Heather: Excellent. It has been an absolute pleasure having you on the podcast, Dr. Cheek. Thank you so much.

Dr. Cheek: Thank you for having me, Heather. It's been a pleasure.

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.

That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N dot O-R-G. The information, views, and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association.

From Melungeon Voices: S5 EP4: Melungeon & Maroon Communities and the Underground Railroad, Nov 1, 2024
https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/melungeon-voices/id1517233900?i=1000675393962&r=1888