

## **Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Five Transcript, Episode Six: John King**

**Dr. Kathy Lyday:** This is Kathy Lyday, Vice President of the Melungeon Heritage Association. Congratulations to Heather Andelina and Liz Malone on the fifth season of the Melungeon Voices Podcast. For four years, the MHA has supported the diverse voices of our community through these informative and entertaining programs. I was a guest speaker on season four, and I'm looking forward to hearing this year's speakers.

**Lis Malone:** Presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Liz Malone, and joining me is the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, the magnificent Heather Andelina. Heather, welcome to the show.

**Heather Andolina:** Hi, Lis. It's always a pleasure seeing you.

**Lis:** We get to see each other over Zoom, so we don't sit across the room anymore, but I don't know. How are you feeling about doing the distance recording?

**Heather:** The Zoom has its benefits, but I do miss being right across the table from you.

**Lis:** Heather misses us throwing paper at each other, making faces. Well, we can still make faces, but...

**Heather:** True. Yes, we do at least see each other.

**Lis:** It was more fun when we would be in the same room and then the giggles would start and not stop. I feel like we're more productive by Zoom because I think we're a little more focused. You don't have my dog jumping on you.

**Heather:** I think so. I would have to agree with that. That is true. I think we are more productive.

**Lis:** So Heather, let's prove to everybody just how productive we are these days. And let's talk about a past season, Melungeon Voices guest and what they're up to.

**Heather:** Yes, Lis. Frederick Murphy from Season 1 has finished another documentary titled The Indelible Appalachians and has begun screenings of this documentary as well. So, follow Frederick on social media under the handle at History Before Us to learn more about when the next showing will be.

**Lis:** And just a reminder to all of our listeners, if you've missed any of these hashtags or websites for any of our guests or any of these fun updates that we give about our past guests, please always look in the show notes because we'll include links for you. So now let's talk about this week's episode and your conversation with John King.

**Heather:** Yes, thank you, Lis. John King is an American Cultural Studies PhD candidate at Bowling Green State University and is a graduate of Berea College with a degree in Popular Culture. He studies at-risk populations with a particular focus on poor and homeless groups in the Southeastern United States.

Most recently, King was a contributing author for the Soulful Sounds of Derbytoun, chronicling the history of Black musicians and entertainers in Louisville, Kentucky. In this episode, we will be discussing at-risk populations, specifically the poor, homeless, and mixed ethnic and non-white communities in Appalachia and the Southeastern United States. Our guest, John King, will also introduce us to the conference ClassCon and why he started the conference and what it is all about.

**Lis:** Another remarkable guest indeed, Heather. Let's take a listen.

**Heather:** Hey, John, thanks for joining us. How are you today?

**John King:** I am fantastic. I am overjoyed that you offered to talk to me today. This is fantastic.

**Heather:** You're a Melungeon Heritage Association member and have been for quite a while now. Please tell our listeners about the first time you heard the term Melungeon and learned of your own Melungeon ancestry.

**John:** Oh, well, that's a fantastic question. Yes, I have been a member as far as I can recall, between 10 and 15 years now. And I was aware of "the association before I actually became a member.

I was aware of the term as this was the term that my mother used to describe her family's heritage. And that's nearly as far as it went in my upbringing. I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. So her family moved up from South Central Kentucky about 120 years ago. And then before that, from West Virginia. So, they were kind of cut off from the extended family.

So, we knew this much, but not a whole lot more until I went to school to Berea College in Kentucky. And I should say I'm a very proud graduate of Berea College. The school has given me so much. And one fantastic thing that they gave me was a mandatory class on Appalachian culture. I'm so glad I learned so much in that class. But, you know, we learned about Melungeons, which was kind of the first time I really got a real history and a lot more questions.

And I remember I was working at the Appalachian Sound Archive at Berea College at work and just typed in Melungeon on the computer. And the first thing that came up was the Melungeon Heritage Association. Then that was my start with the association.

**Heather:** Why did you become a member of the organization?

**John:** Another great question. So, when we started to learn about Melungeon's at Berea College, I asked my professor, tell me more, you know, where are they? Where can I meet them?

And her response was, oh, there's some students at Berea College who are researching this now. And she pointed me to them, and they had more questions, not answers, which was they were doing a questionnaire for people of Melungeon heritage. And a few months later, I got the results of that study, which said things that really resonated with me, which is, oh, a lot of Melungeon's feel like they aren't connected, that they don't really have a heritage.

When I was growing up, I grew up in, like I said, Louisville, Kentucky. It's a lot of Irish and German. On St. Patrick's Day, it's a big deal. Oktoberfest is a big deal. And the kids in my class who had German heritage or Irish heritage would be so excited. And I didn't feel connected to any of that stuff.

And so, when I saw the results of the study, I was like, well, yes, that's me. And that's what pushed me to go further and to find a community, which I'm proud to say for over a decade, I've been a part of the MHA.

**Heather:** Well, as you well know, I too am from Kentucky.

**John:** You're a proud Kentuckian, I think, is what you meant to say.

**Heather:** Yes, sir. Your area of study and expertise is in at-risk populations, particularly the poor and homeless in the Southeastern United States and Appalachian region. Would you tell us more about these at-risk populations and share with us some of your findings?

**John:** Well, of course, as I talked about, well, taking several Appalachian history and culture classes at Berea College, we learned all kinds of things, including that between 1929 and 1974, over 7,000 poor and black residents in North Carolina alone were sterilized. This didn't just happen in North Carolina, but in 32 states across the nation due to a 1927 ruling by the Supreme Court in *Buck v. Bell*, which I think a lot of your listeners will have heard of, which ruled that a state statute permitting compulsory sterilization for the protection and health of the state was permissible.

And also, it's quite shocking that this has not been yet overturned. But anyway, unlike the other states, the sterilization law in North Carolina allowed for local welfare officials to submit sterilization petitions. So, this means that North Carolina's eugenic sterilization law extended directly to recipients of public welfare.

What does this mean? It means they were targeting poor people specifically, so that they could save on social programs and breed out undesirables. And this seems like a horrific footnote in North Carolina history, but these sorts of things are still happening today.

Here, happening all the time, North Carolina removes children from those enrolled in public welfare, the foster care program. And that's not just North Carolina, but in 14 other states, including our home state of Kentucky. This is due to a public law named 98378, which was signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1984, that allowed courts to take away children from their families permanently, for not paying court fees.

So, the only thing they did wrong in a lot of these situations was being poor. That was their crime. So, in many instances, children are removed from families due to welfare issues.

But once the families comply and can legally get their children back, if they don't have the money to pay the fees, their children are legally adopted by other families. There was a really impressive investigative report recently by the National Public Radio that showed that these fees were charged almost exclusively to the poorest families, and found that in some cases, the families were never even notified that they had fees to pay, but lost their children regardless. There's one heartbreaking instance of a 15-year-old child who was in foster care, and she gave birth, and her child was immediately put into foster care because she had no money to pay the foster care fees, so her child was taken from her as well forever.

**Heather:** So, John, what are some statistics?

**John:** That's a good question. In 2023, the US. Census ranked North Carolina as the sixth fastest growing state in the nation, which brought on a housing shortage, so we see that the most vulnerable are targeted for removal in these areas.

They are simply occupying space that someone else can make money on. So, removing children from targeted groups, as well as preventing these groups from having children, is considered by the United Nations as an act of genocide. And that's a lot of what my work these days is focused on.

So, for victims of sterilization, having their children removed based on economic factors, the motivator is really to weaken and remove those that are in the way of economic prosperity. So, to cover genocide again, the United Nations definition of genocide states that deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or part, such as removing access to basic needs to survive. And this means not just children, but adults too, particularly homeless adults.

**Heather:** So yes, this is also heartbreaking and devastating. And John, you just spoke at our last conference, which was in Hillsborough, North Carolina. These are all statistics on North Carolina.

**John:** That's absolutely true. And I have even more heartbreaking examples from North Carolina. The one that particularly got me, I was just one day scrolling through the phone in 2022, as we do, looking at news, I came across a photograph taken in Goldsboro, North Carolina.

So that was, I think, just about 90 miles from where our conference was, not too far. And it was a woman standing on the side of a street, wearing a shirt she made, that read homeless, the fastest way of becoming a nobody. And she was seen on the street with a police officer who bought her a pizza.

And a passerby took a photograph of this encounter and put it online. And it was even picked up by local news channels and eventually nationals, which is where I found it. And the person who posted the picture online wrote a caption, law enforcement does so much for our community with a lot of it going unnoticed.

We see you, Goldsboro PD, keep up the good work. With no mention of the woman who was claiming right there in the photograph that she had become nobody. But this image got so much publicity from local and national news.

It was all over Facebook at the time. And even several for-profit websites began selling reproductions of her t-shirt for \$20. So, in this heartbreaking scenario, the police officer was seen, the pizza was seen, the money-making potential of this woman's shirt was seen, but she remained unseen.

She wasn't mentioned in the online posts. People didn't band together to help her. And the desperate plight of poor and homeless are only noticed when there is an opportunity for people to capitalize on it, which is shocking.

But that goes to a lot of the work that I do in ways that local communities or local governments try to dismantle poor and homeless communities, mostly for real estate speculation. These people are worth way more disappeared than they are being within our communities, which is again, very heartbreaking.

**Heather:** I remember that image from your presentation.

**John:** Yeah, it's an image that I can't get out of my mind even almost five years later. It's still a haunting image for me to deal with every day doing this work.

**Heather:** I bet. I bet it is. How are Melungeon communities, mixed ethnic communities, and non-white communities included in your studies and findings?

**John:** Well, we do see that a lot of minority communities are marginalized. When you look at numbers of people living in poverty in the United States, you see that about 10% of white communities are living in poverty, as opposed to 25% of black communities. American Indian communities hold the largest number in poverty So these are groups that are being targeted. Long-standing communities are being pushed apart in order for property speculation, for building new affluent communities. We've seen, and all of us have some sort of story, that we've seen during the COVID pandemic, a lot of people moving outside of city centers and

places, such as North Carolina, were being targeted for these groups of people who could afford to move somewhere, buying up lots of property.

You're starting to see that in West Virginia as well because of the cheap property and the convenient location to our nation's capital. This doesn't happen just in Appalachia, but all across the United States, we see this particularly on the West Coast too, Oregon, California. These have some of the largest populations of poor and homeless, especially those of minority groups that are being targeted.

Now, we talked a little bit earlier about the Supreme Court playing a major role in the eugenics programs of the 1920s through the 1970s, and again, the Supreme Court is playing a major role in dismantling these communities. I think a lot of your listeners might have heard that very recently, June 28, 2024, to be exact, the Supreme Court ruled that US cities can find and even imprison unhoused people for sleeping outside regardless of whether or not there are shelters available in these cities for them to go to. They're basically ruling that criminalizing people with nowhere to go does not violate the Eighth Amendment's protections against cruel and unusual punishment.

And it gets even more wild. This is only the time of us taping this podcast. It's only been about two months, but already state and local governments are jumping on their newfound freedom to imprison poor people simply because they are poor.

So, we look at California where Governor Gavin Newsom gave an executive order for cities in California to remove homeless encampments across the state. And some places, including Los Angeles, pushed back on this. The Los Angeles mayor, Karen Bass, refused it, stating that just pushing people around is not a viable solution to homelessness in her city.

And the response of this was that Newsom said that any municipality that will not comply with removing homeless people from public spaces, their public funds would be redirected to other cities next year. So, they will not get a lot of state funding if they do not do this.

**Heather:** I'm glad there's been some pushback. I hadn't heard about that.

**John:** So yeah, there's been several communities in California that push back on this, as well as nonprofit organizations and other people. But when a governor threatens to take away funding from these cities, they're basically forcing these local governments to do this in order to keep getting state funds. So, there is push back, but there is always a way by the people with the most power to force others to do their bidding.

**Heather:** You mentioned in your presentation at this year's MHA Union Conference, a separate conference you're involved with, which is called Class Con. What inspired you to organize this conference, and what is it about?

**John:** Good question, Heather, because you already know the answer. Which is the conference that I and some other people host every year, Class Con, here at BGSU in Northwestern Ohio, was inspired by you and your work.

Aww it really was. So, I've been going to the MHA conferences for on and off for over a decade, and you know, one of, I shouldn't say the, but one of the beautiful things about your conference is that it's giving a voice to a community that normally doesn't have one, and you're covering subjects that a lot of people do not know about. And as I mentioned, I do this particular work looking at marginalized communities and shockingly in academia, class studies are incredibly underserved.

And after a few years of some of us who do this kind of research, finding only dead ends in our research decided, well, you know, instead of complaining that there is not a lot of research being done in class studies, why don't we do this? And I went and found you, Heather, and said, I don't know how you do it. You put on a fantastic conference every year.

You make it affordable. You make it welcoming. You make sure there's the least number of barriers possible for people to get this information that's available online if people cannot make it physically to the conference.

And I don't even know if you remember this interaction we had. It was at Martinsville, at the Martinsville Conference. And you very quickly said, you do this, you do that. You find money where you can. You find a free space "if you can do that. You make sure it's online.

And I wrote all this down on the back of the Martinsville Conference program and took it back to school and formed a committee. And I got my notes out that that I got from you and we got started. And to much of my surprise, we pulled it off and it went very well.

You know, I was thinking we would get some faculty and some students from my university and maybe Toledo and Kent State, Cleveland. But we got people from all around the country, even some international speakers came in. And as soon as it was over, I got an email from the school saying, well, what's the date for next year's?

So, this has been a few years now. And in March of 2025, will be our third-class conference here at Bowling Green State University. And if I'm lucky, we might have a special guest speaker, if Heather is willing to come up and hang out with us for the weekend.

I'm really hoping you can talk about and convince other people of different communities on how to do the work that you do, to bring together a community, keep the culture alive, and maybe they'll go out and do their thing and inspire other people. And I'm a firm believer that positive change doesn't come from the top down. In fact, we've mentioned a couple instances of the very top Supreme Court doing a lot of damage.

And I really believe that positive change comes from communities first. So, communities get together. They decide of the traditions and the customs that they hold true, that they want to protect the people in their community.

They appeal to local governments and then state governments. And then it moves out from there. And that's one reason why I'm very proud to be a member of the MHA.

Because you all are doing the work and its inspiring other people. Including myself, to pick up the torch and continue that work in my own community. Yeah, and I really owe a lot to the MHA. And I know I'll see all the listeners at the next conference. And then hopefully at ClassCon as well.

**Heather:** Yes, I love what you're doing too. I think this is just great. And I completely agree that it's all grassroots movements You know, it's about community. John, I want to also thank you so much for acknowledging the work that the MHA does. We have wonderful members like yourself, fantastic network of people.

My executive committee, they're amazing. You know, we're all working together just to make this world a better place.

**John:** Well, thank you very much. You have definitely and everyone at MHA given me the opportunity to share my voice and to feel like I belong to a positive community.

**Heather:** And that's what we want. Yes. And I will be at ClassCon next year.

Hey John, before we wrap things up, how can our listeners learn more about you, your work and your conference ClassCon?

**John:** That's a great question. And since everyone is listening to the podcast on their devices that can very easily go to [bgsu.edu/library/classcon](https://bgsu.edu/library/classcon).

That's one word, C-L-A-S-S-C-O-N. And from there, you can look at past conferences, speakers. You can sign up to become a member.

You can sign up to attend the conference, which is always free and available in person and online. You can reach out to me. Our email address is there. So, if you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, send me an email and I will do my best to answer questions and apologize profusely.

**Heather:** And before we let you go, John, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners?

**John:** Well, I'd very much like to say thank you so much to you, to the listeners, to everyone at MHA. Like I said earlier in the podcast, I found the MHA due to feeling isolated. And all these



years later, I feel like I have a community and it's thanks to you all, everyone at the MHA, everyone that comes to conferences, everyone listening to the podcasts. So, continue doing that fantastic work, all of you, and we can create a better, brighter community for all of us.

**Heather:** You're going to make me cry, John. It is always a pleasure speaking with you, John. I thank you for being on our podcast, and I look forward to checking out Class Con next year.

**John:** We cannot wait to see you.

**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](http://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.

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