

Rehana Episode Introduction:

Hey all, and welcome to this podcast, produced as part of our Activism Beyond the Classroom project on

Philadelphia Communities! My name is Rehana Thembeke Odendaal and I am a first year PhD student in Education, Culture and Society at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. This episode is part of a three-part mini-series created by myself and my classmates for a class called Activism Beyond the Classroom which engages students in participatory inquiry and public scholarship related to activism, education and social justice.

In this episode I interviewed Kalela Williams who is a history enthusiast with a special interest in Black history in Philadelphia (although her interests cover a wide range of other interests as well). Kalela's "day job" so to speak is here role as the director of Neighborhood Enrichment Programming at the Free Library of Philadelphia. The Free Library of Philadelphia is the 13th largest public library system in the US, and is managed as an independent collaboration between the City of Philadelphia and the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation. The library was officially founded in 1891. I interviewed Kalela at the central library branch on Vine street, which opened in 1927. Today there are approximately 55 local library branches in Philly with a massive range services and programs so even if you aren't looking to take out a book, the library has lots of other ways to connect to the city and its different communities

I first came across Kalela when a classmate suggested one of her Airbnb local history tours to me, and then again through her facebook page "Black History Maven" which shares interesting events and articles related to Black history in the US and African diaspora. As a historian interested in public space and memory, as well as a new comer to Philadelphia, I was immediately interested in what drove Kalela's interest in building a community around particular local histories. Kalela was incredibly generous with her time and knowledge, and I hope you enjoy the conversation that follows.

Interview Recording

Rehana: [00:00](#) There we go. Okay. Thank you for your patience and also your assistance in setting up the, the uh, T, uh, the tech. So today's interview really is just for us to, uh, get a little bit of a chance to know about you and the work that you do, um, related to, um, African American history in the city of Philadelphia. Um, and I thought perhaps a good place for us to start is for you to tell us

a little bit about yourself, where you're from, what you do now and how you got interested in Philadelphia is history.

Kalela: [00:37](#) Sure. Okay. Um, so we can start with, um, myself. My name is Kalela Williams. I'm currently the director of neighborhood library enrichment programming at the free library of Philadelphia. I also have a personal interest in black history, um, whether it's in Philadelphia or, um, across the country and really across the diaspora. Uh, and I have a social media site called black history made it, which is primarily on Facebook right now, although that could be expanding. And I also do black history tours during the summer. I do African American history tours of Philadelphia. So those are sort of the three main things that I do. Um, in terms of my interest in, um, African American or black history. Um, as far as where I'm from, I'm from Atlanta, Georgia. That's where I was raised. I lived there for 18 years until I went to college. And, um, I, um, went to college in Virginia and I spent about 12 years in Virginia before moving to Philadelphia, uh, about seven years ago. I think. I think the math is about right

Rehana: [01:35](#) historians. Aren't always great at dates surprisingly.

Kalela: [01:41](#) Uh, let's see. So as far as my interest in Philadelphia, um, and, uh, and I think you asked about my interest in Philadelphia's history specifically. Okay. So as far as my interest in Philadelphia, um, well there's, there's the embarrassing answer. And then there's, uh, the, I guess, well, not embarrassing answer, embarrassing answer is that when I was about 12 or 13 years old, I read a teenage romance, a teenage historical romance about an enslaved girl who, uh, she was about 15 or 16 years old and she had to, um, she escaped and she went to Philadelphia and she ended up with a Quaker, a white Quaker family. She also ended up meeting a young man who was from a well to do catering family and she's sort of exploring this Philadelphia neighborhood, which I later came to know as the seventh ward. And, um, and, and I just thought, is this, did this really happen? Is this because my understanding of African American history has been very different. So that's the sort of, um, embarrassing answer. Um, the non embarrassing answer would be that when I was, um, one of my, one of my many jobs that I've had was I worked in, um, admission for the university of Virginia and I worked in outreach admission for them. So my job was to, um, was to help bring in diverse students into the university. My job was also to sub-versively subversively to help students think about college, uh, whether or not they wanted to attend DVA or not. So it was essay writing workshops to help you write the best essays that you can. Uh, it was workshops for

counselors and teachers on writing the best recommendations that you can. It was, um, workshops for parents on financial aid and demystifying that process. So a lot of the work that my department did under a very just wonderful director within that outreach department was to, um, get students who wanted to go to college and to college.

Kalela: [03:36](#) And so one of the places that I visited, um, that I would do, um, uh, outreach visits, uh, was Philadelphia. And I was really excited when I was assigned. In fact, I pushed to have Philadelphia assigned in part because I wanted to explore this thing that I'd read about when I was a teenager. And so, um, and so here I am, I'm in Philadelphia and I'm having a chance to, you know, obviously I'm busy and going to fairs and going to schools and et cetera, et cetera. But you know, you always have a few, some off hours and you have time to look around and explore and read and learn and, and um, and that's what I did. So that was very much of a thing that brought me to Philadelphia later, but then I got an opportunity to move here.

Rehana: [04:16](#) But I think, I think the, the embarrassing answer is actually really important because it shows like the impact that particularly like fiction and novels can have on the way that people think about history.

Kalela: [04:28](#) Right.

Rehana: [04:29](#) I just read Homegoing and as someone moving from Africa to, uh, to America, it's been, that was, there's a chapter there about Philadelphia as well and yeah, you got me excited in the same, well in the similar way. Um, so I think that like the role of representing black history and in fiction, particularly by black writers is something that also needs a lot of, um, platform.

Kalela: [04:56](#) Ya that's exactly right.

Rehana: [04:59](#) And so can you tell us a little bit about black history Maven and how that came about and yeah. And what, and what you do in particular, you mentioned the tourism. Yeah. So, um, black history Maven was, um, I started it in January of 2019, so less than a year old. It's about a year old. And it basically was, I found myself always posting things on, on Facebook, on my own personal account about, you know, like articles or this or that at one point.

Kalela: [05:26](#) But gosh, I just like sound repetitive about like, Oh, I found this and it's cool, which is fine. There's nothing wrong with that. But

I thought, you know, what, if there's a platform where I could just, what if instead of this being tied to my personal account, this is tied to something that's a little broader and that anyone can access. And so I thought if black history may have been in the sense of a Maven is an expert, uh, I'm an amateur. I'm not trained, I'm not a trained historian by any measure. But, um, I wanted to, I wanted to sort of demystify history. My, my thought was to demystify history and my thought was to post articles, and it's mostly black history Maven is mostly articles, but I try to put a little blurb before each one to sort of give the reader a glance of what's being covered in.

Kalela:

[06:05](#)

Sometimes I'm more descriptive and sometimes I'm not. But I try to like get people in and get people talking and sometimes it's successful and sometimes it's not. I've also done, um, uh, events through black history month and that sprang from my work at the library. Actually, I've done a lot of African American interest events, but of course, you know, there's many other things that I do at the library and many other worthy things that, that are under my work purview. But there's some things I wanted to do that just wouldn't fit into the library series of programming. And I thought, well, you know, I could do this on my own. Um, and so the tours I'm sprang from the idea of, um, actually they sprang from the idea of Jane's walk, which is a national, um, uh, really an international endeavor, um, of walks, um, usually I think the first weekend of may, but they're walks led by different people within the communities who are, uh, sort of amateur experts or sometimes professional experts on whatever it is.

Kalela:

[07:02](#)

And they are, um, they are named after the urbanist, uh, Jane Jane Jacobs. So they are, um, so they're called Jane's walk and they happen all across the the world. Um, actually, uh, and so I was asked to do one on, um, someone suggested black history. So I did the seventh ward. And I also realized that there was a platform to do that on Airbnb experiences. So I was like, Oh, I could do this, you know, um, on Airbnb experiences for tourists, for people who are visiting Philadelphia and she'll have a different side to Philadelphia. Um, and so that became something that I did, but I also thought, well, I don't have to just do this for Jane's walk. Um, so I did the Jane's walk, um, in May, I think, I think it was may and 60 people. It was crazy. It was insane. I, I'm like, how am I going to do a tour for 60 people?

Kalela:

[07:50](#)

Fortunately, one of the people on my tour, um, was named Bob Skiva and he is one of the, he's a leader. He's, I think the president of the association of Philadelphia tour guides. He's also a tour guru. I mean there's nobody who knows how to do

tours better than Bob Schiavo. Um, he happened to just be on my tour. This is a, you know, you know. Exactly. And so he was just sort of giving me advice along the way, like, okay, pull the people in the Valley and maybe stand up on this thing. Make yourself so he was, and just him being there was very comforting. But I did realize after the Jane's walk, I thought, well, there is an opportunity. There are people who want to do these things. There are people who want. And so during the summer I offered a, um, a free African-American tour of the seventh ward.

- Kalela: [08:35](#) And then later in the summer I also offered a free African-American tour of old city looking at familiar landmarks, the landmarks we see all the time that we see in textbooks. And you know, that we saw we were kids, all the field trips looking at that from an African American interest perspective, looking at that from the perspective of slavery and freedom. So, um, so that's really what, what, uh, sparked an interest in that. And then the last thing I did with black history maybe most recently was, um, there is a, uh, there's another Facebook page called African-American nature parks experience. And this person called on women across the country to organize walks in Harriet Tubman's honor because Harriet Tubman was a great organizer, obviously, and she also traveled a lot. And so, um, uh, the idea was getting folks outside to honor Harriet Tubman. And so I worked with Bartram's garden, who was wonderful about, I'm sure you want to bring a bunch of people over here.
- Kalela: [09:30](#) I actually thought at 20 people would sign up. Oh my [inaudible] gosh, it was, it was insane. It was insane how many people signed up and how many people came. It was absolutely incredible.
- Rehana: [09:40](#) And I think I remember that day the weather wasn't like super fantastic that weekend. So, um, the fact that people showed up, even though way there wasn't a dicey ads to the-
- Kalela: [09:49](#) It was, you know, it was dicey that Saturday. Yeah, the walk was on a Sunday and it was actually wonderful that cleared up for us. So it was really amazing and so many people brought their children. That's what I was so excited about. I was excited that a lot of people brought kids, families came together. That was really comforting.
- Rehana: [10:08](#) Um, so I think you've touched on a little bit, you've mentioned tourists and families, but who are the main audiences that participate in, um, in the events that you run through black history Maven.

- Kalela: [10:21](#) Through black history movement and African American interests, events at the library?
- Kalela: [10:25](#) I would say it would be, um, if I had to make a guess, I would say the day demographics would be primarily women, primarily African American women and primarily the ages of say 30 to 45. Okay. Um, sometimes it skews a little bit upward upwards with some of the free library events. But if you look at my Facebook, you know, stats. Yeah, it's definitely, those are definitely the demographics. They don't give you stats as far as ethnicity, but then yeah, give you stats and just anecdotally you can see it.
- Rehana: [10:55](#) And are most of the people that come to events or they do, they seem like they're local Philadelphians or they tourist or they're visiting the city?
- Kalela: [11:06](#) Almost all Philadelphia. Although the Harriet walk was really interesting because I had a few people, there was a conference happening in Atlanta and a couple of people who were just, uh, the Enquirer ran a, uh, a promotion, not a promotion, but they ran an ad, not an ad, an article about things to do in Philadelphia to celebrate.
- Kalela: [11:21](#) Harry Tubmans and the legacy of Harriet Tubman. And so few people just happened to pick that up. And they were like, Oh, I heard about this day. Um, I decided to come. So that was interesting.
- Kalela: [11:31](#) Cool. Um, and from, I mean, you, you mentioned that this started kind of building out of your personal interest in sort of out of the work that you've done here at the library. Why is it important to you that events like this are happening? Um, when, you know, Philadelphia is a city that has so much dedicated to history and there's so much history here. Um, why do you think something like black history Maven is needed? Um, and what, who's it needed by?
- Kalela: [12:03](#) Well, we can start, that's a good question. And we can start locally thinking about Philadelphia. Philadelphia is called the city where America began because of course of the declaration of independence and continental Congress and all that stuff.
- Kalela: [12:14](#) And that's great. All of the things that you learned about, um, and, uh, you know, our us history class when we're, you know, um, but we don't learn, we don't learn the other stories. We learn about enslavement in the South. We don't learn about enslavement in Philadelphia. The fact is there are many

Philadelphians who didn't know that a slavery existed in Pennsylvania and B, that it existed as long as it did and see that Quakers who we always think of art and abolitionists from time in Memorial. We're not always, our ardent abolitionists in fact participated and were major players within these slave trade. So these are things that we don't know. And I think it's really important to know. I think it's important to have a complex view of history. I love any history and I think history is more useful, more engaging, more interesting.

Kalela: [13:02](#) When it's complicated, when its shown in all of its complexity. I think the best way to get people engaged in history is to show it all and not hide anything and not be, you know, dainty about it. So, so that's one thing I think that, you know, just from what's perspective of, do you like history? Do you want people to learn history? Then make it complicated. Don't make it complicated because it is complicated already, but show it. Uh, so that's one thing. Um, and like I said, the, the, the, the idea of Philadelphia, it's complicating that narrative of the city where America began. It is the city where America began it is, and to some extent like Jamestown, the city where, um, one city where enslavement formed and, uh, and really shaped our economy and what that looked like. So that's really important. Um, I think that the other element of why, why this, when there are so many other things going on is because people really want an affirming way to see history.

Kalela: [14:03](#) We know that it's painful. We've learned that it's painful and the pain is all we really learned to black history, you know, where we took classes about, you know, um, American history and that black history chapter was always doom and gloom and horror and terror and which is, which is true, or it's just shown as, um, or it's a happy Darkie narrative. So it's, it's one or the other. But, and for me, growing up in a primarily African American community, it was the doom and gloom and sadness. And I thought, well, there's gotta be something that's affirming. There's gotta be something that I can reach back into and find a better way to understand myself and find a more, um, a way of looking at this that's, that reflects the pain and that, and that shows the pain, but also shows the joy and the love and the community and the beauty of, of African American history specifically.

Kalela: [14:55](#) And then of course, it's looking at diasporic history. Um, it's, it's looking at, and I have a lot to do there. I have a lot to do there, but we're not in a vacuum. Nobody's in a vacuum. And so, and, and of course we know that the history of African American history, the history of black history is a history of all of us

because that every history is a history of all of us. When we think about queer history, when we think about the history of Jews in America, for instance, you know, this is all, this is all everyone's story.

Rehana: [15:28](#) Um, I think that's a really important, um, way of positioning it because I think sometimes there's this idea that we, when we talk about black history, we're separating that from the rest of history, that that's kind of happening. And that integrated way of, of thinking about representing the complexity of, of history, which as you said, it's not making history complex. It's representing how complex our lives have always been. Um, which is, which is really great. Um, what are some of the, like what are some of the feedback that you've got from, um, people in terms of, uh, you know, why they've come to the events that you've organized. You mentioned, uh, the, uh, seventh ward tour and, um, old city. What made you select those spaces? Um, if you could speak a little bit about that.

Kalela: [16:25](#) Sure. Um, so speaking to the first question about what is it that people come away with, it seems that lot of people come away with or come to this for are affirming ways to look at history. So what, you know, what we just talked about. Um, the other thing is that they're looking to fill gaps in their knowledge. They're looking to fill gaps of things they never knew they're looking to fill. Um, I didn't learn this. I didn't know this. How would I know this? No one taught me this. I had no really easy way to read this, read about this. And so, and it doesn't mean that, you know, one of the things that I'd like to do is give people reading to take home and give them a booklist -like here, this is where, this is where I got all this information from.

Kalela: [17:06](#) Feel free, like go to a bookstore, go to the library. Like, here's a way, here's some articles. You could just read this while you're on your lunch break. Um, and so a lot of it is, is filling gaps in their and their knowledge. And that's what I enjoy too. I mean, I love always learning. There's so many things, I don't know, it's not even funny. I'm always learning and I love filling in gaps. I love answering questions. I love answering questions. I'd never even knew I had it. That's amazing. So that's, I th I think those are the key takeaways that people walk away with. Um, and also a sense of, you know, um, people like to bond with each other and meet people they didn't know and have conversations with people they didn't know.

Rehana: [17:47](#) So there's kind of making the past, eh, like making, learning about history, a social event, which is in some ways is a lot more

fun for some people than sitting with a book and just going through the material on their own.

- Kalela: [17:59](#) That's exactly right. So I mean, like for instance with a Harriet walk, we, um, I put people into groups with people who they didn't know and they had to sort of walk together and they had a list of discussion questions that they had to discuss together and they had to share the discussion question. So like one person in the group had a list and they had to sort of read it aloud. And that's kind of forcing people to interact with folks they didn't go there with. So that was kind of fun because then later of course you, you know, like, Oh, I've met this person, I met this person. And there's been some other events that I've done where people are exchanging phone numbers with the library to get a black nature event.
- Kalela: [18:31](#) Again at Bartram's garden we had a literary discussion and the end of that people had exchanged phone numbers and uh, talked with one another. Um, it, so it's really fun to see people come together.
- Rehana: [18:43](#) Um, and I think that also helps to, I guess, combat the idea that representing other stories from the mainstream history is a device act Because I think in some of the, some conversations it's kind of like, Oh, why are we, why are we dragging up this painful past? Because it's going to divide us further when in fact like you're work is showing that, you know, it can bring people together in really meaningful ways.
- Kalela: [19:07](#) It can. Absolutely. And, um, as far as the spaces, I'm the seventh ward and old city LTD. I think I sort of touched on that, that that has to do with, um, uh, turning that narrative of what we, what we're familiar with and making that, um, more complex.
- Kalela: [19:21](#) Seventh ward. The seventh ward was a place of, um, it was a major center of African American history and African American life during the 19th century especially, and the early 20th century. It was extremely important. Um, and in terms of my tour right now focuses on the 19th century. Eventually I want to develop one that focuses on the great migration. Um, so 1914 and on. But um, Oh, it's just, I mean it was a place where you had folks who, um, had resources and had skills, um, who had, uh, jobs, who were able to, they, because of this, you have this cauldron of resources and because of this, people were able to really make a huge impact in the abolitionist movement as well as just generally the black activist movement and equality in Philadelphia equality everywhere. And I mean, my family is not from Philadelphia. My family is all from South Carolina.

Kalela: [20:13](#) But in a sense, my family owes a lot to the community here in the seventh ward because they were working hard for this. They were working hard for the abolitionist movement. They were working hard to train a colored troops where the U S colored troops, um, uh, w when would that opened up. They were working really and they were making enormous impacts. Philadelphia camp, William Penn train the most soldiers, uh, colored soldiers. I mean, that's, that's a huge deal. And that was, was part of the overall war effort that might have actually had some. And I mean, of course the story is, can debate this to death. There are some who think that it was when Lincoln authorized colored troops at the time began to change. So, I mean, my family, my Southern enslaved family owes a lot to, to this, to this movement that was happening here.

Rehana: [21:10](#) Um, a useful way of thinking about how local histories are not just for the locals of a space, but actually understanding how, you know, our different local histories fit together to tell a more complex and connected history of the United States or even the world if you want to think about diasporic history is, and sorry, um, the end of this more. I'm like, I guess, I mean, all of this has been fun, but, uh, sort of fun tips. What are sort of two really interesting pieces of history that you were surprised to find out about in the research that you've done that you'd like to share?

Kalela: [21:50](#) Sure. So, um, I'll start with one that I've talked about a lot because it just really resonated. Um, and that is, um, that is the diaries of a woman named Emily Davis. Before I moved to Philadelphia, I learned that there were diaries in existence that belonged to a woman in her mid twenties, African American woman living in Philadelphia who was free, um, as most women were during the, this was her the 1860s most. Um, by then, uh, really, really all of African American Philadelphia was, was legally free for the most part. Uh, there might've been some tiny exceptions, but historians generally say the 1840s is when the last it's life person was, um, free to Philadelphia. But in any case, um, Emily Davis, I found out these diaries existed at the historical society of Philadelphia of Pennsylvania. And I thought, Oh my gosh, I have to, I have to take a look at these.

Kalela: [22:43](#) Um, I found out that they were in original handwriting and I was like, Oh my God, I'm never going to be able to, but maybe one day when I moved to Philadelphia, I'm just going to like sit there for hours and hours and hours. So here I am, I finally moved to Philadelphia and I find out that someone has already transcribed the diaries. Uh, her name is Dr Judith Gainsbourg from Villanova university. And, uh, she was doing a panel discussion at the historical society of Pennsylvania and I

thought, okay, we're going to that. So it cleared the schedule went to that. It was just incredible. She and her students, she had a, a group of students who who, uh, transcribe these diaries and also annotated them. So providing details about, okay, this is this and this. And so, uh, she had a book that, uh, of course I promptly bought read.

Kalela: [23:26](#) Uh, another historian [inaudible] w a Y his wife had also transcribed the diaries as well. There are some differences sort of you can, and because of the diaries are also digitized, you can also kind of look for yourself. Uh, take a look at them. That was just incredible. That's like, because you see it, 24 old woman, 24, 25, 26 living during the civil war, making a living as a seamstress. Um, and she is so many of us in the sense of she's going out with boys. She's um, you know, she has tiffs with her friends. You know, she sometimes has little arguments with her friends or she wonders, are we still friends? What's happening? She's going out for ice cream. She's sitting to have her portrait. Take it, her portrait. She's sitting for photographs. Um, she's bored with her job sometimes or she's stressed out about money.

Kalela: [24:19](#) Uh, but there's a lot of things that I would never have to worry about, like tuberculosis. So that's a thing that, that, that happens, um, where she loses people in her life due to illness. And that's something that, of course, you know, we all that happens, but young people, you know, she's, she's losing, she loses a young nephew. She loses her sister-in-law. Um, she loses her brother. So, um, she, so, so those are things that, uh, okay, civil war is raging. And then, um, the army of the Potomac is marching up to Gettysburg and kidnapping African-Americans. It's contraband selling them into, to enslavement. And she's terrified because her father lives out there and she cannot call her father and say, are you all right? She's waiting for a letter. Of course he can write. He's, and so these are the things that, that she is, these are the things that occupy her mind.

Kalela: [25:13](#) And that, to me, it was like so real, and amazing. So I think as far as a tidbit from history that would be,

Rehana: [25:20](#) and I think that it's amazing how, you know, you're able to have access into thoughts and experiences and the like loved human experience, which, which often I think gets lost when we think about history with a capital H. so something that's happened in the past and they would these key players, but you forget that, you know, they have these worries about Tufts, what they friends and, and romances and all of those things. So I think the one other question that I wanted to ask is kind of how do you,

you mentioned that black history Maven is quite a recent development. Um, what are your hopes for its development? What would you want to, projects you'd like to see happening? Um, and yeah, so I've always been interested in living history and any living history and there was never a push when I was growing up and we went to these museums.

Kalela: [26:13](#) There was never a push for African American living history. Now that's changing big time.

Rehana: [26:16](#) Can you just elaborate on your, what living history is?

Kalela: [26:19](#) So living history is the sort of campy thing that many, well, the thing that many people think, our camp is campy and it's because it's been badly done sometimes, but it's wearing what people of a different period would have worn. It's addressing people sometimes in a way from that period, sometimes in first person, sometimes in third person. So, but it's, but it's, it's going inside of history to explain to.

Rehana: [26:40](#) So kind of an embodiment of the -, a - Period.

Kalela: [26:44](#) So when you think about colonial Williamsburg, that is living history. When you think about, um, uh, when you think about places like that, uh, Plymouth, you know, and again, it can be really badly done. Sometimes it can be like, Oh, ah, Whoa. And it's really stupid.

Kalela: [26:57](#) And that's why a lot of times people have a really bad impression of it. But I'm interested in it because I've always been interested in the material culture of what people did and what they wore and how they would have gone about their day to day life. So if I'm wearing something, what does that say about, about [inaudible] me. And so that's one of the things that I've been looking to explore. Um, I did, uh, I did a program a few years ago. It's Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. They had a sleep overnight where you could dress, they would put you in a, an 1820s, uh, uh, dress and you would, uh, do chores and you cooked dinner and you had to like learn a trade. And so I was like, okay, sure, I'll go do this. Uh, so I, I paid them some money and went over and they put me in.

Kalela: [27:43](#) Uh, and the first thing I was really surprised about was the addressed, didn't have any, um, I had to secure it with pens and I'm just sort of like, what, where are the buttons? There's no buttons. And they're like, no, they weren't buttons. Those didn't come into play until they could get these 1860s. And I'm like,

really? What are you kidding? Like, I mean, for soldiers they did for like regular people, women did not wear, they were pens because also women had pregnancies. And so, um, pens were just, it was just easier to adjust something when and so like those were really surprising things. And I'm just like, what? Um, and I had to cook, I had to cook food over fireplace and it was in the way, you know, I thought I felt really connected to as I'm sitting here sweltering, um, uh, roasting coffee beans because we had to roast green coffee beans in order to, I feel this connection to like, this is what women did, enslaved free.

Kalela:

[28:34](#)

This is what women did like, and it's hot and it's uncomfortable and there's little fireplace. So in any case, that's something that I've been interested in doing. Um, I had an opera, another opportunity, most recently with the museum of the American revolution. They did a huge event in September. And, uh, they asked, I had mentioned my interest in doing this and they ask them and they were like, okay, if you want to borrow some of our attire. Uh, so I, so I did, um, I had a Stace, which is basically a corset, but the idea of Stace is that they keep you, you know, they, they align your posture a little bit. Um, and I wore full down to the shoes. I borrowed shoes, I had a bonnet, I had a cat on my, I mean, everything was, um, everything like that's exactly right. Yeah, no makeup.

Kalela:

[29:24](#)

Um, you know, um, I wear my hair natural, so that wasn't a problem. But I, you know, kind of pinned it up underneath the cap. I mean, I did everything that was, you know, that would have been from that period. And that was, and I talked to people and talked about African American history. I usually was in third person, but it was just an interesting way to, to talk to be. Yeah. So that's something in terms of the big projects, that's something that I'm looking to do more of. I have an interest in doing more of that. Um, there's a really great person, um, Cheney McKnight who, um, does something called not your mom's history and she's been doing, um, interpretation for a long time. She's incredible. Um, there's also, uam, uh, Michael Twitty who's a culinary historian who does historic interpretation. He's an African American, Jewish, queer, uh, all of those intersecting. That's exactly right. Yeah. Yeah. So, um, so I'm following in their footsteps,

Kalela:

[30:22](#)

but I mean, it's on super exciting. I'm excited to see how things developed because I'll be in Philadelphia for awhile at least. Um, and then I guess to, um, just bring the conversation a little bit to the, some of the issues that we dealing with and I'll, um, activism beyond the classroom class, I'll theme, um, has really focused on the idea of erasure and, um, resistance and erasion

reclamation. And so can you, I mean I see a lot of parallels and connections to the work that you're doing, but from the experiences that you've had with black history and move and, um, what are some of the regions that you've noticed and how do you feel like this work is really enabling a reclamation, um, or a resistance against those erasure?

Kalela: [31:13](#) Sure. So I think the, I think tourism is important as a way to look at, um, and reassure and how that, what that looks like because we have, Philadelphia is one of our biggest industries is tourism because that we are so known as the city where America began. We are the place where school groups come, where the place where, um, people from everywhere come. And so the idea of what are you learning in your touris and that's been addressed. Um, the, uh, association for Philadelphia tour guides for instance, is, has been addressing that a little bit more. Um, and which is, which is really awesome. Um, they recently had a panel discussion where they talked specifically about that and there were tons of folks who came. So that, that I think is really important in terms of reclaiming eraised history, reclaiming history that was taken away or that hasn't been illuminated.

Kalela: [32:01](#) Um, I have a concern about school groups because I'm curious about what they learn if they're not going on an African American history tour, what are they learning as far as an American history tour and women, not just about black folks, but also women. What are they learning about women? What are they learning about Jews? What are they learning about? Uh, Irish Americans? What are they learning about? What are they learning about? Um, folks who came to early F who were here in early Philadelphia and who were part of this, of this city? Are they learning at all? And so I think that, I think that that's one element. When you have a city that is built upon tourism, you have to look at every single angle. Um, and more importantly than all those groups that I mentioned, of course you have to look the Line-Lenape who are the very first, the original people, literally the original people.

Kalela: [32:48](#) Um, you have to look at, um, knowing for instance, okay, a matrilineal society, what does that teach us about what later came, etc. Etc. So these are things that are just incredibly important. Um, when you think about erasure and reclamation.

Rehana: [33:05](#) Thanks so much for that. Um, I know I already said I was going to ask the last question, but last, last question. Um, with you mentioned you're not a professional historian, so can you share with us just a little bit about how you go about finding out the information that you use Julio for your work?

- Kalela: [33:25](#) Yeah, so a lot of it is, um, a lot of it is obviously books by historians who I trust or historians not who I trust, but who the field trusts. So, um, uh, and it, uh, um, uh, Gordon Reed, um, um, uh, IRA, um, Oh my gosh, why am I forgetting his name?
- Kalela: [33:43](#) He just passed recently. Um, uh, um, I'm forgetting names all of a sudden, but in any case, these are historians who are just well trusted within the, within the field. So, um, obviously those are the, uh, David Black Eric Foner. Um, uh, Eric [inaudible]. Um, uh, I always get her name mixed up. Erica Armstrong with Denmark. I mean these are folks who know their stuff and, um, have done the archival work. That's exactly right. So that's one way. Um, secondary sources, the other way is going to the historical society, going to the library company, looking at whatever I can find. Um, looking at, um, the historical society of Pennsylvania who I also volunteer for has an incredible collection of African American history from Philadelphia. That's been really useful. Those are things that, um, you know, there are some things that, that many people don't even know about. Like there might be like, there's a letter from this guy, this uh, kid, this uh, African American kid who's, who's on a Naval boat during the civil war.
- Kalela: [34:38](#) First of all, most of us don't know that during the entire civil war, there are black folks in the Navy. So that was one thing. We don't usually go that, but this kid is writing about like, Oh, we had this battle and it was at, um, in Buford, South Carolina. And we, you know, this many people, he's exaggerating and then he ends with, um, he ends with, he's like, Oh, tell everybody said hello, blah blah, blah. And then he's like, I'm mean, we tore down the Confederate rag and replaced it. And so like, this is like this bravado from this kid who like, it's just incredible to read this. And then he closes with always a lover to the ladies apropos of nothing. It's just like, this is cool. This is cool to actually hold this. This is cool to go to the library company and see the handbook for the student handbook, basically for the Institute for colored youth, which was, um, one of the most important institutions in this city.
- Kalela: [35:34](#) And we can even say a very important institution in the country. So like, these are things to, to see these. And so during my tours, I show images. I had carry around on a little tablet or if it's a really large story, I bring 'em printouts. But yeah, um, I show people things and I also read them. Uh, I read them snippets of letters. I read them snippets of, of, uh, of, of diary entries from Emily Davis. I try to incorporate this first person history. Um, and I try to find new things like library of Congress has letters from Rosetta Douglas, uh, the daughter of Frederick

Douglas who lived in Philadelphia for a little bit. She hated it. So yeah, those are things that I transcribed that, I mean, I'm sure other people have too, but I haven't been able to find that a book. So I went on, looked at the digital records, transcribed them and those are, that's kind of an ongoing project. I mean those are things I'm always finding out new things and I tried to, um, use primary sources to lift

Kalela: [36:29](#) [inaudible] what I know and to make it more interesting.

Rehana: [36:33](#) I mean, I, I think the, just the stories you shared in like our conversation have been really good in, in sort of doing that job of like lifting up the idea of history as ha being full of these characters who like really were, you know, full blooded, colorful and but strange and, and some comments and that sort of thing. So, um, yeah, I think lastly, if people want to find you and follow you and keep an eye on, um, you know what you're doing. Um, maybe join in, in some of the living history projects once you get them off the ground. Uh, where should they look for you? Black history, maven.com is going to be up very soon, uh, probably this week. So wow, that's such good time for black history. maven.com I have the domain name and I just need to set that up.

Rehana: [37:23](#) So that's going to be my weekend project. Fantastic. So a black history made.com was workout. Once the weather starts getting a little bit better, I'll definitely be joining you. So absolutely. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing. Um, if there is anything else you want to add, um, now's the time to do it. And otherwise we'll, we'll wrap up. Now. I don't have anything to add except thank you. And, um, and like History Matters! [can cut off here]