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Becoming Melungeon

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Becoming Melungeon

Making an Ethnic Identity in the Appalachian South

MELISSA SCHRIFT

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln & London

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Set in Iowan by Laura Wellington.

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In memory of mentor and friend, Nina Etkin

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INTRODUCTION

Race, Identity, and the Melungeon Legend

I entered the outdoor pavilion to see hundreds of people talking, laughing, and walking around. Clusters of people surrounded Brent Kennedy, who was shaking hands and posing for pictures with his newfound kin. A child who appeared to be twelve or so was singing on a makeshift stage. Donned in country attire, she had big brown eyes and long hair carefully shellacked around her head. According to the eight-by-ten glossy her mother handed me, her name was Shalacey Manderson, and she was singing "The Melungeon Song," written by her parents. I began to wander around as Shalacey sang the chorus.

> Once they stood with heads held high
> On fertile lands of green
> They must not be forgotten
> They're a part of you and me

I noticed a group of Turkish dancers off to the side preparing for a performance. They wore colorful scarves and layered clothing that billowed brilliantly against the stark Appalachian background. A couple of Turkish women huddled together, looking around the pavilion with interest. Shalacey continued her song:

> A people called Melungeons
> Their heritage unknown

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Whose different way of life
Was all their own

Someone handed me a Turkish transcription of the song. I looked at a table stacked with memoirs and treatises on Melungeons. Other booths sold Native American jewelry and new age trinkets. Most of the people around me appeared to be middle-aged or retirement age. I passed a group of white-haired women talking excitedly about genealogy. One was knitting while she talked, sporting a round button attached to her shirt that read, "Maybe Melungeon?"

I was visiting Third Union, a four-day event sponsored by the Melungeon Heritage Association (MHA), packed with speakers, genealogical chats, and entertainment. It was May 2000, and I was in the early stages of a research project on the Melungeon legend. I came to Third Union hoping to talk to Melungeons. Save for the Melungeon books and buttons, Shalacey's song, and Kennedy's tireless affability, I might have thought I was in the wrong place at first. I had understood the Unions to be a meeting place for descendants of Melungeons. I did not necessarily go to the Union anticipating live versions of the Melungeon characters so vividly described in Appalachian legend—the exotic, dark-skinned rogues who rejected the outside world. However I also was not quite expecting to stumble into what appeared to be an elaborate family reunion of people who seemed so ordinary. In fact I remember thinking, throw in a few potato salads and drunken uncles and this could have been my own family reunion.

Like observers before me, I was familiar with the basics of the legendary tale: that Melungeons were a mysterious, multiethnic population who hibernated in the remote and rugged mountains in the farthest corner of northeast Tennessee. The alleged unknown origins of Melungeons drove the legend, resulting in myriad exotic-origin theories that

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involved everything from the Lost Colony to shipwrecked Turks. Since the late 1800s popular lore fancied Melungeons to be a wayward group of bandits who deeply resented the name given to them and were not to be trespassed upon. This mythical image also reflected a more romantic image of a mysterious and oppressed people who survived by their wits and integrity. Though nobody self-identified as Melungeon before the 1960s—and only a small number did then—by the 1990s Melungeonness had become a full-fledged phenomenon, resulting in a zealous virtual community on the Internet, the establishment of the MHA, and annual Melungeon Unions where a new movement of self-identified Melungeons gathered.

Unlike others interested in the Melungeon story, I am not interested in debating Melungeon origins. Instead my interests relate to the ways in which the Melungeon legend has been socially constructed vis-à-vis the media, and how that social construction evolved into a fervent movement of self-identified Melungeons in the 1990s. My interest in the social construction of Melungeon identity involves a number of interrelated questions: Who are the individuals today who claim a Melungeon identity, and by what processes do they establish and legitimate such claims? What does it mean to be Melungeon to those making the claim, and to what extent do these meanings represent and/or digress from the experiences of those labeled Melungeon historically? How have portrayals of Melungeons in popular writing changed over time, and to what extent have portrayals been internalized and/or resisted by individuals in Hancock County and those who self-identify as Melungeons? Finally, and on a broader level, how does the articulation of Melungeon identity resonate with larger racial and cultural politics in the contemporary United States?

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It was at Third Union that I made my first attempt at interviews. I began with a boisterous man, Herbie, who was seated comfortably in the middle of the pavilion. He saw me passing with my notebook, leaned forward, and said, "You know who I am?" I did not but was thrilled to talk to someone. We began the interview with Herbie explaining who he was—in a nutshell, a "real" Melungeon, as well as one of the only real experts on Melungeons. I tried to redirect Herbie to talk about what he understood Melungeons to be. He laughed and told me that Melungeons were a cultural group who liked to have fun and said whatever they thought. As proof he told me how much he disliked my sandals.

The next person I spoke with was Larry Gibson. Larry was born and raised on Newman's Ridge and held the enviable status of being directly descended from Melungeons understood to originate on Newman's Ridge—an undeniable "Ridgemanite." At the Union Larry was leaning back on a chair under a shade tree, at some distance from the crowd. He was taking it all in with an amused expression. When he learned that I was an anthropologist, Larry was "tickled" and invited me to sit with him. He then goaded me with questions regarding why an anthropologist wanted to know anything about Melungeons. I liked him immediately.

While Larry and I were talking, an acquaintance of mine from the university passed. I knew she self-identified as Melungeon. She whispered conspiratorially to me that she would be sitting with the "Newman's Ridge clan." Larry leaned forward with feigned curiosity and asked, "Who are the Newman's Ridge clan?" She told him they were the first Melungeons and their clan leader was Jack Goins. Goins was known widely as one of the oldest core Melungeons, as well as one of the most determined and thorough Melungeon genealogists. He was also friends with

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Larry. As my acquaintance walked away, Larry became even more animated. He kept repeating "clan leader" in his slow drawl, a big grin spreading across his face. After about an hour, I reluctantly moved on from my shady spot with Larry—though not before he got the chance to yell to Jack, "I heard from some lady here that you was the clan leader of the Melungeons." Larry was relentless as he teased Jack, laughing with abandon.

When I asked my next interviewee what it meant to be Melungeon, she told me not to worry about all the talk about Melungeons being from "here or there." "Melungeon only means Portuguese," she said. She told me that she had only recently discovered that she was Melungeon. She quickly followed with, "I have always thought of myself as white. I still think of myself as white—Melungeon white."

The final conversation I had that day was accidental. I was listening to a speaker and chose a spot on the outskirts with only one other woman there. She was one of the few still listening to the woman at the podium. We began to make small talk, and she introduced herself as Thelma. It was her first visit to a Union. She had only come because her mother had recently passed away; she felt like she could finally check it out without betraying her family. Although Thelma had moved outside of east Tennessee as an adult, she was born and raised in Hancock County; her mother grew up on Newman's Ridge. She had to leave the Union to go to work but agreed to meet with me at another time.

When I visited Thelma months later in her home, her husband joined us at the kitchen table. She spoke in front of him in a more censored way, and I got the impression that he was monitoring our talk. Having grown up in Hancock County, Thelma did not remember hearing people use the term Melungeon, but she remembered knowing about it as a young woman. She recalled one of her early arguments with her husband. He accused her of being stubborn, and

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she blurted out, "I guess that's just the Melungeon in me." They looked at each other with shock, laughed, and did not speak of it again. Her husband said that he knew Thelma was Melungeon when he married her, because her family was from "the ridge," but that they did not talk about it. He said that it was never a problem for him, making a point to say that there was "no nigger in a woodpile here." Thelma looked embarrassed and changed the topic to her interest in the Melungeon movement as an adult. When she had asked her mother about being Melungeon, her mother had reacted negatively. Thelma's mother told her that Melungeons in Hancock County had always had to hide who they were and that Thelma's interest in resurrecting family history would only put them back "under that rock." Thelma abided by her mother's wishes to not pursue her interests in Melungeons until her mother passed away. Third Union was her first foray into the new world of Melungeons. She was not critical of the event, but she had satisfied her curiosity and did not plan to return.

My introduction to Thelma and others at Third Union left me with a couple of strong impressions that shaped my research pursuit. The first was that issues of ethnicity, race, and identity were far more nuanced and complex than I, even as a cultural anthropologist, realized at the time. The second was that the real story about Melungeons no longer existed in the mysteries of the past but rested with the contemporary amalgam of Turkish dancers, knitting grandmothers, Ridgemanites, and shoe critics who gathered together as Melungeons in the present.

Melungeons: An Overview

According to C. S. Everett (1999), the term "Melungeon" most likely derived from the French *mélange*, or mixed people. The earliest reliable ethnographic sources understood Melungeons to be one of many southeastern tri-racial isolates

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that emerged from intermarriage among whites, blacks, and American Indians. By 1800 these isolates occupied Newman's Ridge, in an area that included much of east Tennessee and southwest Virginia and today lies in Hancock County, a poor and remote corner of northeast Tennessee. The most common family surnames associated with these early Melungeons include Bolins, Bunch, Collins, Gibson, Goins, and Mullins.

No evidence exists that anyone self-identified as Melungeon before the late 1960s; thus it is reasonable to suggest that the term was imposed by outsiders as a derogatory one. The earliest printed reference to the term can be found in the minutes from the Stony Creek Primitive Baptist Church in 1813. In the minutes one church member accused another of harboring "them Melungins" (cited in Winkler 2004, 55). This reference occurred at the same time that individuals with Melungeon surnames were either reprimanded or removed from the church. As Everett (1999) points out, the context in which the term was employed suggests that it served as a pejorative epithet. At the same time that Melungeons were banished from the church, they settled in larger numbers on Newman's Ridge. No tangible proof suggests that the settlement of Newman's Ridge was the result of any kind of coerced geographical retreat; Melungeons bought and owned the land they settled. Although the extent of discrimination faced by Melungeons is the topic of some debate (DeMarce 1996), it is reasonable to accept that, like other mixed-race groups, Melungeons faced varied forms of intolerance.

As Helen Rountree (1990) points out, from the 1830s on, the stage was set for conflict between multiracial groups in the Southeast and the dominant white society. While Native American tribes were forcibly removed to reservations at this time, many mixed, or fringe, groups in the Southeast stayed behind; due to their ethnic ambiguity,

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they were typically understood as marginal, and, therefore, not real Indians (Rountree 1990). These non-reservation Indians, or tri-racial groups, were assumed to have some African descent and, most often, carried the label of "free persons of color."

The indeterminate lineage of these groups upset society's increasingly strict racial categories. Philosophies of racial purity were becoming entrenched in the nineteenth century, epitomized by the "one-drop rule"—a belief that any individual with even one drop of negro blood would be categorized as black. Growing concerns about racial purity were eventually formalized into law throughout the South, targeting negro and mixed-race populations. Virginia's laws of 1831 and 1832 were particularly stringent, downgrading the status of free negroes and Indians to that of slaves (Rountree 1990). Laws in North Carolina (1835) and Tennessee (1834) followed suit, enacting blood quantum legislation for Native Americans that disenfranchised individuals with any African descent.

In the wake of the disenfranchisement laws of the 1830s, mixed-race groups basically had two options: to assimilate (with blacks or lower-class whites) or to strive to become publically legitimate Native American tribes. For the dozens of mixed-race groups in the Southeast, the latter would be much more difficult than the former; as Karen Blu reasons, in the climate of the one-drop rule, "Indianness is easy to lose and blackness is easy to gain" (Blu 2001, 4). Groups who did aim for Indianness had to work within a system of racial classification imposed by white society.

One of the best-documented examples of a multiracial group who pursued formal recognition is the present-day Lumbee, a group of Indians in Robeson County, North Carolina.[1] In the wake of the 1835 North Carolina disenfranchisement law, the Indians of Robeson County adamantly rejected their classification as free negroes and, instead,

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fought for legal recognition as Indians. In the attempt to establish a tribal identity, Robeson County Indians had a couple of strikes against them, including the long-held assumptions of their partial African heritage and their relatively comfortable degree of assimilation into the white society around them. However by 1885 Robeson County Indians received state recognition as Croatan Indians, based on state legislator Hamilton McMillan's theory that Robeson County Indians provided refuge as well as marriage candidates for Europeans from the Lost Colony (Lowery 2010). This linkage to the Lost Colony authenticated Robeson County Indians by providing the necessary "historic aura" of the time. As Malinda Lowery describes it: "For most non-Indians at this time, being 'Indian' depended on what 'tribe' one descended from. Identifying a historic lineage was necessary in the minds of white North Carolinians, who desired assurance that these Indians were a distinct racial group and not in fact African Americans. An identification as Croatan provided not only a tribal name but also a noble heritage. Hidden behind the name 'Croatan' was a legend of white ancestry, white sacrifice, and white heroism" (Lowery 2010, 26).

As with the Lumbee, the blood quantum laws became inextricably linked with the ethnogenesis of a handful of southeastern Native American groups. In the process of becoming Indian, however, it became mandatory to deny blackness. In her work on the Powhatan and other Virginia tribal groups, Rountree (1990) explains that eschewing blackness not only enabled Native Americans to escape the negative ramifications of being black but, indeed, became a necessary criterion to prove one's true Indianness. With the abolition of slavery, Reconstruction, and the introduction of Jim Crow laws, it became ever more necessary for American Indians on the eastern seaboard to separate themselves from their mixed-race legacies and strategize a

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distinct group identity (Lowery 2010; Rountree 1990). Formally recognized American Indian groups tightened their tribal boundaries, inevitably excluding mixed-race individuals outside those illusory ethnic parameters. In her discussion of the evolution of the Lumbee in the Jim Crow South, Lowery (2010) points out that these exclusionary tactics mimicked the tenets of white supremacy at the time, despite the fact that they posed painful inconsistencies with Indian notions of kinship and family.

While Native American groups maintained vigil to both become and remain Indian, those mixed-race individuals for whom Indianness was not an option faced a similarly perilous environment. In response to this historical legacy of discrimination, claims to a partial Portuguese ancestry became necessary and expedient for many mixed-raced individuals, including the Melungeons (Everett 1999; Hashaw 2006; Price 1951). As many mixed-race people found themselves less Indian, this Portuguese escape valve became all the more critical. The idea of Portuguese heritage stands as a point of contention in discussions about and among Melungeon descendants. While theories of Portuguese and Mediterranean ancestry remain popular today, academics are quick to point out that it was quite common for historic mixed-race peoples to claim a Portuguese or Mediterranean identity to obfuscate black ancestry while explaining darker skin (DeMarce 1996; Everett 1999; Henige 1998).

While certain families with Melungeon surnames were legally established as white by this time and, thereby, less vulnerable to the laws of the 1830s, the stability of their whitened identities was negligible. With the dawn of the twentieth century, their status became increasingly threatened, owing primarily to a eugenics crusade against Virginia's "mongrels" or mixed Indians, catalyzed by W. A. Plecker, head of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics in the early 1900s. A former physician and eugenics enthusiast, Plecker

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dedicated his career to unearthing and subjugating tri-racial people. Plecker's fixation on mixed-race groups was fortified by other eugenicists as well. One of his most notable allies was Dr. Arthur Estabrook who traveled through Virginia to conduct his own study of mixed communities. His resulting publication, *Mongrel Virginians* (Estabrook and McDougal, 1926), provided a compendium of gossip, innuendo, and his own unsubstantiated observations to argue for the degeneracy of mixed-race peoples.

The work of Estabrook, Plecker, and other popular eugenicists of the time contributed to Virginia's 1924 Racial Integrity Act, legislation that demanded stricter definitions of racial purity to prevent miscegenation. The law unleashed Plecker's crusade against mixed-race communities, including Melungeons, and he worked tirelessly to "correct" racial identities on birth certificates and redefine a history of census identifications. In a 1942 correspondence with Tennessee's state archivist, Ms. John Trotwood Moore, Plecker solicits evidence of Melungeons' racial lineage. Dissatisfied with conjecture regarding Melungeon claims to any Indian and Portuguese heritage provided by Moore, Plecker determines the formal fate of Melungeon classification in his response: "We have found after very laborious and painstaking study of records of various sorts that none of our Virginia people now claiming to be Indian are free from Negro admixture, and they are, therefore, according to our law classified as colored. In that class we include the melungeons of Tennessee" (cited in Winkler 2004).

One year later Plecker's work culminated in an ominous declaration to all Virginia county officials. With regard to Virginia's "mongrels," Plecker writes:

> Now that these people are playing up the advantages gained by being permitted to give "Indian" as the race of the child's parents on birth certificates, we see the great mistake made

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> in not stopping earlier the organized propagation of this racial falsehood. They have been using the advantage thus gained as an aid to intermarriage into the white race and to attend white schools and now for some time, they have been refusing to register with war draft boards as Negroes. . . . Some of these mongrels, finding that they have been able to sneak in their birth certificates unchallenged as Indians are now making a rush to register as white. . . . Those attempting this fraud should be warned that they are liable to a penalty of one year in the penitentiary. . . . Several clerks have likewise been actually granting them licenses to marry whites, or at least marry amongst themselves as Indian or white. The danger of this error always confronts the clerk who does not inquire carefully as to the residence of the woman when he does not have positive information. . . . Please report all known or suspicious cases to the Bureau of Vital Statistics, giving names, ages, parents and as much other information as possible. All certificates of these people showing "Indian" or "white" are now being rejected and returned to the physician or midwife, but local registrars hereafter must not permit them to pass their hands uncorrected or unchallenged and without a note of warning to us. One hundred and fifty thousand other mulattoes in Virginia are watching eagerly the attempt of their pseudo-Indian brethren, ready to follow in a rush when the first have made a break in the dike. (Plecker 1943, cited in Winkler 2004, 143)

As a result of Plecker's work, Melungeons were vulnerable along with multitudes of individuals who existed in the ill-fated space between black and white. While a handful of mixed-race groups rallied for formal Native American recognition, for most tri-racial peoples assimilation was the best option. It is important to reiterate that the concept of ethnogenesis does not apply to Melungeons historically. Unlike the Indians of Robeson County, or the Powhatan

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of Virginia, individuals did not self-identify as Melungeon until the mid-twentieth century. The net result of the eugenics onslaught against mixed-race individuals was the disappearance of many peoples with rich, historically significant ethnic legacies.

Paralleling this figurative disappearance was a physical one. With the industrialization of Appalachia beginning in the late 1800s, many mountain communities dissolved as individuals left their farms to find work in the mining, timber, and textile industries. Families moved from their rural farms to company towns that offered substandard housing, dangerous working conditions, and labor unrest that led to violence and death. By the early 1900s many of the industries that promised to secure Appalachia's financial prosperity folded, leaving Appalachian individuals and families impoverished and embittered (Drake 2001; Eller 1982).

By the time the nation was felled by the stock market crash in 1929, mountain families were already destitute, without the land and kinship ties that would allow even the most meager self-subsistence. The ensuing years of the Great Depression decimated Appalachia, with disease, hunger, and cold weather plaguing the area. Relief programs that began with the New Deal in 1933 bore a modest impact on Appalachia; however by 1936 close to half of its inhabitants survived on welfare, unable to sustain their families (Eller 1982).

The most prominent symbol of the New Deal policies in Appalachia was the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Proposed as an economic development initiative, the TVA promised flood control, agricultural support, and electricity to the Appalachian region. Despite the best intentions of the government, however, the TVA exacerbated the downward spiral of the Appalachian economy, primarily through its aggressive acquisition of land. Massive purchases of land by the TVA resulted in

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the displacement of thousands of mountain families. Hydroelectric facilities built by the TVA replaced prime farmlands, relocating families whose traditional way of life was being interrupted by modernization. Writing about the impact of the construction of the Norris Dam, Michael McDonald and John Muldowny characterize TVA's effect on families as a "disastrous wrenching away from familiar surroundings and a disruption of the sense of community established through generations" (McDonald and Muldowny 1982, 195). In his critique of the TVA, Ronald Eller (1982) quotes a letter written by a displaced farmer, William Wirt, in 1938. Describing the changed environment around him, Wirt writes:

> One day we were the happiest people on earth. But like the Indian we are slowly but surely being driven from the homes that we have learned to love, and down to the man we are not a friend of the Government for the simple reason that every move they have made has increased our poverty. . . . Now what are we going to do, move on and try to fit in where we do not belong or undertake to face the situation and gradually starve to death? In the little mountain churches where we once sat and listened to the preaching of the gospel with nothing to disturb us, we now hear the roar of machinery on the Sabbath day. After all I have come to believe that the real old mountaineer is a thing of the past and what will finally take our place, God only knows. (cited in Eller 1982, 242)

While many Appalachians like Wirt bemoaned the razing of the Appalachian landscape and culture, many others sought redemption in the northern factories catering to the World War II defense industry. This mass migration brought welcome economic opportunities that also came with more family separation and, for those who left, a similar sense of displacement. At this time, many individuals from core Melungeon families migrated north.

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For Melungeons, migration held the distinct advantage of evading the full impact of Plecker's assault on multiethnic groups. Melungeon individuals who were suspect, by virtue of their genealogical and geographic associations, could escape the denotations of their last names by leaving the region. Often their identity choices changed with their move to the North; their opportunities to pass as white expanded, and, in general, the stigma associated with their names and histories was diluted as they joined a working force whose priority was production instead of ethnic gatekeeping. Reflecting on the migration of southeastern mestizo groups from the 1940s on, Brewton Berry (1963) writes: "If you ask them why they have migrated, they will speak of steady work, good wages, better living conditions. They will not admit that they also enjoy the privilege of attending integrated schools, making friends with whites, dating white boys and girls, even finding white wives or husbands. Yes, and if they choose to boast of their Indian blood, they can do so with pride, and not with the fear that it might evoke smirks and sneers" (Berry 1963, 173).

The industrialization of Appalachia inevitably generated a public nostalgia about a lost culture and vanishing people. According to David Whisnant (1983), it is this sentiment that was inextricably linked with the Appalachian cultural revival of bluegrass music, quilts, and crafts vis-à-vis missionary idealism. It is also within the shadow of this postindustrial wistfulness that the legend of the Melungeon gained more momentum in popular media. While Appalachians, in general, begin to stake a claim in their cultural presentation to outsiders, individuals from mixed-race backgrounds had no incentive to distinguish themselves from other Appalachians. As a self-identified group of people, Melungeons did not exist; yet, in the media they were consistently treated as one of Appalachia's best-kept secrets. Indeed as Appalachians became increasingly quaint and folksy in the

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public eye, the Melungeon legend served to perpetuate the idea of the exotic mountain other. With the increased access to Hancock County, Melungeon spottings by outsiders mushroomed, and public curiosity peaked. At the same time, many of those individuals who left their mixed-race legacies for the prosperous North — removed in place and time from their oppressive legacies — began to muse over who they were and where they came from. Though individuals would not actually begin to self-identify as Melungeon until the 1960s, the industrial fallout of migration, nostalgia, and increased outsider access formed the early alchemy of the Melungeon revitalization movement.

Melungeon Scholarship

A handful of academic writings in the 1940s and 1950s temper the media production of Melungeons with research-based descriptions of mixed-race peoples in the Southeast. William Gilbert (1946, 1948) conducted the most prolific early research on mixed-race peoples as part of his work with the Library of Congress. Gilbert defines the individuals in these racial islands as descendants from intermarriage among underclass whites, black slaves, and rebellious Indians. Though Gilbert offers only a brief sociological nod to these mixed-blood peoples, he provides valuable, comprehensive inventories of these surviving Indian groups of the Southeast. He estimates each group to include fifty thousand to one hundred thousand individuals across approximately twenty-eight states.

Another early researcher for the US Census, Calvin Beale, provides similar writing on tri-racial isolates (a term, according to Winkler, coined by Beale). As a worker for the 1950 census, Beale had a practical interest in studying mixed-race groups; it was his job to count and classify them. Like Gilbert, Beale provides less ethnographic information but produces a useful compendium of the varied people in the Southeast who existed as racial others (Beale 1957, 1972).

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Offering slightly more ethnographic context than his contemporaries, a geographer named Edward Price conducted doctoral research on these same mixed-blood groups (Price 1951, 1953). Though Price recounts media folklore about Melungeons, he does so critically, noting the scant evidence of a distinct group of people who call themselves Melungeons. Price writes: "The core of reality within the legend is not easily discovered. There is no group of people who call themselves Melungeons or who would recognize themselves as thus separated from the rest of the country population. Non-Melungeons, however, are in general agreement as to who are Melungeons" (Price 1951, 258).

Though Price may well have discerned a larger community conceptualization of Melungeons, he does not provide evidence. In all of these early writings, a researcher named Brewton Berry attempts ethnographic detail on what he termed the "mestizos" of the South (Berry 1963). It is important to note that Berry's descriptions appear to rely wholly on his own perceptions of appearance versus any underlying reality; however Berry's work is interesting in that he travels to different mixed-race communities where he spends time observing and talking to people. His analysis of Melungeons and similar groups is consistent with his colleagues—that they represent tri-racial isolates once classified as "free persons of color." In describing Melungeons, he writes that "neither in their culture nor their economy are they distinguishable from other mountain folk. Among those bearing the telltale surnames are individuals of dark complexion and straight black hair, whose ancestry might well be Indian. But physical features of most of them suggest no other ancestry than white" (Berry 1963, 18).

Berry provides brief commentaries on the impressions of mixed-race people in the general community. Members of these communities instruct Berry on the specifics of detecting negro blood (varying from blue gums to misshapen

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feet). Others are more vague: "It just takes experience," or "You sort of know it instinctively" (Berry 1963, 43). At least one respondent admitted his ignorance about the mixed peoples in his community, suggesting to Berry: "I wish you would find out what they are and tell me. I want to know whether I ought to Mr. them or not when they come in here" (Berry 1963, 75). Berry concludes this about the perceptions of whites: "In short, the attitude of whites toward mestizos is a jumble of ignorance, indifference, prejudice, suspicion, pity, fear, bewilderment, and, above all, contradiction" (Berry 1963, 55). Berry reports that blacks in the community view mestizos striving to be Indian as misdirected. One respondent reasons: "They think they can solve their problem with feathers. . . . They ought to forget all that foolishness and join with us. We could do more for them than anybody else" (Berry 1963, 72).

In the 1970s and 1980s academics directed increased attention to Melungeons as individuals began to self-identify. The most valuable of these include a succinct ethnographic piece by Anthony Cavender (1981) and an unpublished dissertation by Sandra Keyes Ivey (1976). Cavender conducts interviews in Hancock County, resulting in one of the few field-based explorations of perceptions of Melungeons in the region where Melungeons are purported to exist. Cavender's work is significant in that he resists romanticizing Melungeons; instead he provides an ethnographic rendering of local understandings of Melungeonness in a specific time and place. He not only provides important primary source material, but he is the first, and one of the few, to critically reflect on Melungeonness as a social phenomenon. Ivey's (1976) work is similarly grounded in field-based research in Hancock County, and she also provides a wealth of primary source material through her interviews with individuals in the region. In addition Ivey explores representations of Melungeons in academic, folkloric, and journalistic

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writing up to the 1970s, when her dissertation was completed. Though she is less critical than Cavender, her work is unique in that she conducted field research in Hancock County during the staging of the Melungeon-themed outdoor drama, *Walk Toward the Sunset*.

Another piece of writing during this time period is Melanie Sovine's (1982) dissertation on what she terms the mythology of Melungeons. In her work Sovine delineates media themes on Melungeons through the 1970s; though she provides useful primary source material, she delivers the material in a telegraphic way that lacks analysis. Still, Sovine's work is distinctive in providing a long-overdue critical analysis of the media manufacture of Melungeon identity.

While many of these academic works remained unpublished and under the radar, Brent Kennedy's (1994a) self-proclaimed pseudo-academic writings on Melungeons in the mid-1990s shifted the focus once again to a more romantic Melungeon story. Though journalists from the late 1800s on toyed with the alleged exotic origins of Melungeons, Kennedy attempts to substantiate a Melungeon heritage that transcends the tri-racial framework. Taking account of early reports that Melungeons asserted a "Portyghee" identity, Kennedy proposes an ethnic admixture that includes early Mediterranean sailors, soldiers, and slaves, hailing primarily from Portuguese and Ottoman Turks. Kennedy lends particular weight to a Melungeon-Turkish connection and has expanded this notion into a well-established relationship with Turkish scholars and officials (Scolnick and Kennedy 2003). Though some scholars acknowledge potential Mediterranean admixture among Melungeons — noting the cases of Spanish and Portuguese explorers and settlers in early colonial America (DeMarce 1996; Everett 1999) — they also argue that Kennedy's preoccupation with Mediterranean origins has resulted in the invention of a race that offers an exoticism that obscures

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African origins as well as sidesteps a more mundane northern European ancestry (DeMarce 1996; Henige 1998). From my perspective, both critiques are on point—and certainly are reflected in the ethnographic research in this book. I would argue, however, that, while Kennedy's work provides a framework for multiple racialized interpretations of identity, such interpretations are not at all implicit in Kennedy's assertions. In fact, to my knowledge Kennedy has never denied *any* ethnic ancestry—African, northern European or otherwise—but, instead, poses a Melungeon identity with ever-expanding parameters.

Some of the scholarship following Kennedy's writing offers a more judicious analysis of Melungeon history. Most notably Wayne Winkler's (2004) book on Melungeons represents the most comprehensive and balanced perspective to date. Written in journalistic form, Winkler's book is accessible and full of information wrought from a careful research ethic. The only drawback in Winkler's work is his tentative engagement with the new Melungeon movement. One senses that Winkler makes the choice to not pursue the post-Kennedy revitalization in depth; as Winkler is one of the more visible Melungeons himself, his choice is understandable and, overall, does not detract from an otherwise superb piece of work. Equally thorough, though more narrow in scope, Everett (1999) writes about Melungeons from a historical perspective. Responding to debates in the *Appalachian Quarterly* between Kennedy and his critics, Everett employs a fastidious methodology to reiterate the notion of historical Melungeons as a tri-racial isolate. He also provides a provocative commentary that contextualizes the new Melungeon movement within the "exotic origins craze." Finally, one of the newest writings on Melungeons by journalist Tim Hashaw (2006) contextualizes Melungeons within a history of mixed peoples in the United States, providing a refreshing and useful vantage point on the Melungeons.

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A number of anthropological writings on Melungeons also appeared, beginning in the 1990s, including Anita Puckett's (2001) linguistic analysis and Patricia Beaver and Helen Lewis's (1998) reflection on resistance to multiculturalism in Appalachia. While Beaver and Lewis tend to be more sympathetic to the notion of Melungeons as a multicultural force in the region, Puckett invokes Bourdieu to suggest that individuals in the Melungeon movement find a distinction in being Melungeon that prioritizes a specific kind of ethnic whiteness. The Melungeon culture and history series at Mercer University Press has, likewise, produced an array of writing in recent years, most notably Katherine Vande Brake's (2001) book on Melungeon images in fiction and Jacob Podbers (2007) oral history work on the role of the Internet in sustaining a contemporary Melungeon community.

Defining Melungeons

The cacophony of Melungeon characters I met during the Melungeon Third Union—and the many more I met throughout my research process—presented a conundrum that became a fundamental component of doing research on Melungeons. Working on the topic of Melungeons felt like a project of chasing ghosts. When I became convinced that Melungeons were solely a figment of the public imagination, I would meet someone like Thelma who existed under the public radar with a story to tell. Other times I felt sure that if I just spent enough time scaling Hancock County, I would stumble across some kind of tangible experience among those identified, more often than not, as "real" Melungeons. I spent hours talking to people in this context and usually left more confused. Most of these individuals had no problems with their direct genealogical connections to core Melungeon families, yet they lived lives with no tangible memories of ever hearing the word Melungeon

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prior to the mid-1960s and no sense of being discriminated against or different beyond the fact that they were poor. Thus, in my research, interviews with individuals living in Melungeon-related areas resulted in an overwhelming lack of oral history evidence that being Melungeon related to any kind of experiential reality distinct from being Appalachian. Compounded by a dearth of convincing archival material, there is simply no evidence that Melungeons existed as a culturally bounded group of people.

This is not a particularly popular thing to say, given the media and public infatuation with the Melungeon story; yet the few ethnographers who have conducted research on Melungeons offer a similar interpretation. Reporting on his research in Hancock County, Cavender (1981) concludes with the following: "There is no consensus among Hancock Countians as to who or what is a Melungeon, but the identity persists because it functions as a symbolic marker of social class in the minds of a few Hancock Countians. Likewise, members of the country elite are involved in perpetuating Melungeon identity. They seek to keep the 'mysterious' connotations of the identity alive in an effort to capitalize on tourist interest, much to the dismay of many Hancock Countians who would like to forget about Melungeons forever" (Cavender 1981, 34).

Ivey (1976) reflects at some length about the contradiction inherent in trying to do field research on Melungeons. She writes: "To use the term Melungeon as if it refers to a group whose membership is defined by means of precise and generally accepted criteria within Hancock County is to reflect a contradiction which exists in that community. . . . In other words, county residents tend to speak of Melungeons as a group in a way that suggests that the group is defined by consensus. There may be considerable disagreement, however, as to whether a particular individual does or does not belong to the group. There are certain

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individuals, for example, who may be identified as Melungeons in certain contexts, but as non-Melungeons in others" (Ivey 1976, 15). Ivey's pursuit for answers to this contradiction within the community offers particularly valuable primary material that reinforces the notion that Melungeonness has long been, and continues to be, a social construction related primarily to social class. For example one of Ivey's respondents explained to her: "We don't sit around discussing it all the time, we just live with it. It's here and we don't talk about it much except when outsiders are here. Still, you do wonder about it, but not in relation to specific people" (Ivey 1976, 15).

Remarking on her choice to abandon fieldwork in Hancock County to shift focus to mythical representations of Melungeons, Sovine (1982) explains: "My first inclination was to design a fieldwork approach that would result in a more accurate portrayal of 'Melungeons' from the perspective of those to whom the term is applied. This inclination was based upon the assumption that an empirically designated and bounded Melungeon group exists which therefore can be identified for field research purposes. After careful review and to my present understanding, the assumption is wholly erroneous. It is nevertheless a persisting idea that a Melungeon population exists" (Sovine 1982, 8).

My goal in writing about the social construction of identity is not to deny the existence of or prove anything about core Melungeon families or individuals who currently claim Melungeon descent. Instead I find it more productive to conceptualize the Melungeon story as a regional legend that, similar to the structure of all legends, is a loosely structured narrative with an appealing story, a basis in actual belief, and a cultural message (Brunvand 1991). To write about a Melungeon legend points to an underlying theme in this work—that the only information that we can find out about a historical Melungeon identity is based almost

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exclusively on media and folkloric accounts. As addressed in the first part of this book, these accounts are social constructions that reproduce a story that has come to be accepted as truth. This legendary construction of Melungeons is central to the larger thrust of this book—that the contemporary Melungeon movement exists as a creative extension of the Melungeon legend from which individuals borrowed, perpetuated, and shaped to establish an identity that functions in meaningful ways in the twenty-first century.

Writing about contemporary Melungeonness requires certain important—if problematic—semantic distinctions. For example, those who embrace and celebrate a Melungeon identity today have become Melungeon in a context wholly different from the families in Newman's Ridge and elsewhere for whom the term itself was a misnomer. This irony results in an intriguing and perplexing scenario in which to pursue research on Melungeons. For the purposes of clarification, I use the term "Melungeon descendants" to refer to those individuals who self-identify as Melungeons today. As discussed in a later chapter, Melungeon descendant tends to be a preferred self-identifying term among individuals in the contemporary Melungeon movement.

It is important to note, however, that Melungeon descendants include a wide array of individuals with varied genealogical and geographical connections to those areas and individuals with surnames that reflect the tri-racial isolate of Melungeons historically. Thus, in parts of this book I opt for the phrase "core Melungeons" to refer to individuals born and/or raised in Melungeon areas with direct genealogical connections to historical Melungeons. I realize that these are imperfect categories, and they are not intended to presuppose that any particular group represents a more authentic version of Melungeonness. My interviews in core Melungeon areas certainly do not point to anything quintessentially Melungeon. Still, modest contrasts do emerge

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between groups that allow insight into a community of people whose reference point for discussing Melungeons is related to a specific sense of time and place. To ignore these differences assumes a false homogeneity and misses the nuances of the identity politics that are central to Melungeonness today.

The Racialization of Identity

My interests in the social construction of Melungeon identity via the media and the contemporary Melungeon movement relates to a broader literature on *racialization*, defined as the process by which racial identity and meaning is created (Omi and Winant 2004). Ethnic claims represent a significant extension of racialization in that they draw from a legacy of representation to adopt and enact identity narratives. Thus the racialization of identity becomes *performative*, whereby individuals selectively create identities, imbue them with meaning, and employ them in their everyday lives (Waters 1990). While individuals choose to stake identity claims for a range of idiosyncratic reasons, cues for when and how to construct and reproduce that identity are readily available through larger historical processes and social movements. For example the Melungeon revitalization is one of many examples of what Matthew Jacobson (2006) refers to as a post–Civil Rights "ethnic reverie." This reverie points to the escalation of white ethnicity as response to the new language of ethnic pride that emerged in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement. According to several critics one legacy of the Civil Rights movement was a white identity crisis in which whites came to be linked with oppression and a vacuous culture (Jacobson 2006; Omi and Winant 2004). On one hand, ethnicity in general came to represent a premodern haven of authenticity distinct from industrialism, materialism, and commodification. In addition whites wanted to remove themselves from a history

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of domination. According to Jacobson (2006) the resulting "roots craze" involved genealogical searches among whites aimed to resurrect their ethnic ancestry.

Mary Waters (1990) addresses all of these issues in her extensive ethnographic work on the ways in which white individuals choose and understand different ethnic identities in the contemporary United States. Addressing the symbolic nature of such identities, she reveals the flexibility and flux with which individuals invent and drop self-identifications, as well as the elements of identity deemed preferable. According to Waters (1990) individuals base their choices on how they perceive the standing of various ethnic groups, with a tendency to opt for the more ethnic European ancestries, such as Polish, Irish, and Italian. These eastern and southern European identities hold the dual appeal of being not quite white (Brodkin 1998) while also being alchemized in the United States as more white than black (Jacobson 1998).

Waters explains the appeal of symbolic ethnicity as a mechanism to gain a sense of rootedness while still feeling distinctive. Waters also elaborates on the ways in which this white ethnic revival is problematic in terms of larger racial politics. She points out that nonwhite ethnic groups are typically not afforded the same leeway in identity choice; thus symbolic ethnicity becomes another component of white privilege. Waters persuasively argues that one of the end results of white ethnicity is the notion that all ancestries are equal. For example her respondents focus on stories of discrimination and adversity when speaking about their ethnic ancestors immigrating to the United States. Many respondents parallel their ancestors' toil with the oppression of nonwhite ethnic groups, concluding that all groups should be able to succeed, with the right degree of initiative. Reflecting on her respondents' ideas about ethnic discrimination, Waters states, "If the Irish had to sit at

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the back of the bus sometimes in the past, and now being Irish just means having fun at funerals, then there is hope for all groups facing discrimination now" (Waters 1990, 163).

Research by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2004) and Jacobson (2006) reiterates the notion that issues of racism recede from the forefront as ethnic whites frame their newfound identities in relation to all other ethnic groups. The bootstrap mythology so replete in the immigrant story enables an analogous claim to historical suffering that excuses ethnic whites from historical tyrannies. At the same time it makes those tyrannies relative to any other hardship.

Given the disillusionment with whiteness about which these authors write, it is, perhaps, not surprising that seven million Americans chose the new multiracial option on the 2000 Census (Hartigan 2005). A large majority of these new white ethnics resort to a familiar refrain—claims to a white and Native American identity. In her critical analysis of the appropriation of Native American identity among whites, Eva Marie Garroutte (2003) describes this kind of ethnic switching or ethnic fraud as an access card to the cultural capital associated with Native American spirituality and identity. More recently Circe Sturm (2007) explores these issues of what she terms "racial shifting," with primary focus on whites becoming Native American in the last decade. Sturm relates these shifts to the historical phenomenon of racial passing, whereby nonwhite individuals aspired to a social and legal whitening to ascend in status (Burma 1946; Harper 1998; Henschel 1971). Like Garroutte, Sturm argues that racial shifting relates less to perceptions of financial benefits and more to intangible benefits, such as a perceived spiritualism associated with Native American culture. In most cases becoming Indian is fraught with cultural politics steeped in issues of cultural appropriation and racial essentialism.[2]

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In the case of Melungeons the context is similar to that posed for all individuals shifting to a white ethnic identity, be it from Native American or Italian American. In this book I argue that the contemporary revitalization of Melungeon identity borrows from the past to create a new white ethnicity that capitalizes on the cache of the cultural exotic while underplaying stigmatized aspects of heritage. I trace the ways in which individuals employ genealogy, blood metaphors, narratives of oppression, and physiological traits as they become Melungeon. In this way the process of becoming Melungeon reflects a kind of racial passing from a collectively imagined whiteness to a more desirable nonwhite, or, perhaps, off-white, otherness. This idea of otherness involves ideas about whiteness, blackness, and Indianness that purport to imagine race in new (but no less essentialized) ways in the twenty-first century. This "imaginary," or ways to conceptualize identity, concerns itself with an attempt to not just pass between races, but to surpass race altogether.

Researching Melungeons

Drawing from fieldwork with working class whites in Detroit, Hartigan (1999) crafts a particularly useful framework for ethnographic pursuits on the racialization of identity:

> In order to think differently about race we need to pay attention to the local settings in which racial identities are actually articulated, reproduced, and contested, resisting the urge to draw abstract conclusions about whiteness and blackness. . . . The assertion that race is culturally constructed will remain a stunted concept unless it is linked to a heightened attention to the ways people actually construct meaningful lives in relation to race. (Hartigan 1999, 4)

My research process on Melungeons includes the two broad components of ethnographic and archival data

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collection. The majority of my data collection took place from October 1999 to May 2002 while I was living and working in Tennessee. After moving to Wisconsin, then back to Tennessee, I conducted additional follow-up interviews and archival research from August 2002 to the present. In terms of ethnographic work, I relied on semi-structured interviews, an in-depth questionnaire, oral histories, and participant-observation. I attended the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Melungeon Unions, each of which lasted approximately three days. I also participated in a gathering at Newman's Ridge in Hancock County, Tennessee, and observed a formal hearing in Nashville, Tennessee, focused on state recognition for Melungeons. The Newman's Ridge and Union gatherings involved observation of dozens of presentations and performances, including the opportunity to join several family chat sessions where a group of individuals with common surnames gathered to discuss their heritage. I conducted semi-structured interviews with Union participants, ranging from thirty minutes to one hour in length. I created and distributed a lengthy questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to participants at Melungeon Unions and received seventy-six completed questionnaires. Questionnaires solicited basic demographic information, as well as qualitative responses to over forty questions related to Melungeon identity. Questions concerned perceptions of race in general as well as specific ethnic groups. Respondents answered questions on Melungeon self-identification and the meanings they associated with Melungeon identity.[3]

I also completed multiple trips to Hancock County, Tennessee, and Wise, Scott, and Lee Counties in Virginia to conduct life history interviews with individuals who grew up on Newman's Ridge and were directly descended from core Melungeon populations. These individuals were typically born and raised in Hancock County, as well as in Lee, Scott, and Wise Counties. They typically possessed

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one of the original Melungeon surnames and without exception have established direct descent from historical Melungeon families. Some of these individuals have become visible public figures in the Melungeon movement; others have lingered on the sidelines or showed little awareness of or interest in Melungeons. All of the individuals were at least in their mid-fifties, and most were in their seventies or older. The overwhelming majority grew up on Newman's Ridge. Interviews ranged from one to three hours in length and involved multiple visits with approximately fifteen individuals. In Hancock County I also visited Melungeon sites on Newman's Ridge, including Mahala Mullins cabin and the refurbished church and school of the Vardy Historical Society. The church and school served as a missionary outpost for the Vardy community that was comprised primarily of core Melungeon families. Finally, I conducted extensive archival research at several special collections on Appalachia. I gathered hundreds of regional and national newspaper and magazine articles on Melungeons, dating from the late 1800s to the present.[4]

Chapter Overview

This book contains two main foci related to the social construction of Melungeons: 1) media portrayals; and 2) perceptions of identity among Melungeon descendants and core Melungeons. The initial focus of the book explores media representations of Melungeons from 1880 to the present. In chapter one I examine the earliest media articles on Melungeons, beginning in the late 1800s, to critically examine the foundation of the Melungeon narrative. Chapter two is closely related, providing textual analysis of media representations over the last two hundred years. Specifically I examine ways in which the media reproduce the Melungeon legend through an inspired repetition of fanciful tropes based primarily on borrowed information rather than

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firsthand experience. Chapter three discusses the outdoor drama on Melungeons, *Walk Toward the Sunset*, held in Hancock County in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The drama represents a substantial turning point in the Melungeon legend as it publically introduces the term "Melungeon" for the first time in Hancock County and stages the Melungeon story in the local community. I begin by discussing the formation, promotion, and community reception of the Melungeon drama, drawing from Hancock County newspaper articles and interviews. I also examine the regional and national publicity associated with the play, including the popular, but short-lived, "Melungeon tours."

Chapters four and five deal with the social construction of Melungeon identity, presenting ethnographic research on the contemporary Melungeon movement. Chapter four addresses what it means to be Melungeon from the perspective of those who encounter and claim the identity in their adult lives. My intent is to outline the contemporary Melungeon imaginary by reporting on how Melungeon descendants conceptualize their newfound identity and their process of becoming Melungeon. I also suggest ways in which individuals aim to secure their Melungeon identity through genealogical evidence, narratives of oppression, and physical characteristics and illnesses popularly understood to be Melungeon. Finally I focus on the personal and cultural meanings intertwined with becoming Melungeon.

In chapter five I focus on the ways in which Melungeon identities become racialized in the contemporary United States. More specifically I address ways in which self-identified Melungeons understand race on a general level, as well as how they internalize and resist understandings of blackness, whiteness, and Indianness. I then consider the additional category of Mediterraneanity in contemporary Melungeon identity-making.

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Chapter six continues the theme of contemporary Melungeonness with a shift in focus from the larger movement of Melungeon descendants to core Melungeon individuals. I draw from fieldwork and oral history interviews to discuss the perceptions among core Melungeons of the contemporary Melungeon movement and how their experiences with and meanings of Melungeonness differ from Melungeon descendants. I also include an excerpt from an in-depth interview with Brent Kennedy. Kennedy reflects on his own experience in learning that he was Melungeon and on his place in the larger movement. Kennedy also engages questions related to the cultural and racial politics that form the premise of this book.

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