

# **Uneasy Ambiguities: The Disappearance of the Melungeons from Reconstruction-era Historical Analysis**

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The human impulse to define and categorize has led to unsurprising abuses of power and acts of subjugation based on a universal desire to force unnatural labels onto groups of people. These labels have the ability to elevate or degrade, depending on the faction that is crafting the categories. However, many humans cannot be so easily classified, and it is in these instances that their lack of categorization can lead to outright erasure. This is indeed the case for the Melungeons of Appalachia, a tri-racial group relegated to the margins of American history, mostly unacknowledged due to their perceived lack of race. Melungeons have long defied attempts at systematizing, as their ethnic makeup of European, African, and Indigenous ancestry resulted in a mixture of skin tones, physical features, dialects, and accents that white Southerners found alienating and unclassifiable. Because of their mixed backgrounds that did not fit neatly into any one bracket, Melungeons were consequently neglected by history books and academics.<sup>1</sup> One of the repercussions of this neglect is ubiquitous throughout the literature written about them, and it is a curious gap in analytic writing: Melungeons are missing from the mainstream history of Reconstruction in the American South. In a wide survey of texts related to the Melungeons, there is little mention of their lives and activities directly after the Civil War. Lengthy examinations of their actions can be found that take place during the antebellum period, but this is followed by a deep silence that persists until the onset of the twentieth century. An interview with one expert of Melungeon history, Wayne Winkler - himself a Melungeon - affirms that "...there really isn't much material available concerning the Melungeons during the

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<sup>1</sup> A resurgence in Melungeon scholarship in the late 1990s has led to many new publications and previously unearthed primary documents. Spearheaded by Melungeons themselves, these acts of reclamation speak to a real desire in a real community to establish themselves in mainstream society after centuries of erasure. Mercer University Press has been the publisher for many of the texts, printed under a long-running research series titled "The Melungeons: History, Culture, Ethnicity, and Literature." This movement was ignited by N. Brent Kennedy, since deceased, and Scott Withrow, the current president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, who was consulted and interviewed by the author of this paper.

Reconstruction Era” and that he is “unaware of much pertaining to the Melungeons during Reconstruction.” Winkler’s testimony is borne out by the silence of many academic texts on the subject of Melungeon history during Reconstruction, itself a period of great upheaval in racial identity. Freed blacks were forced to re-examine their relationships to themselves and the rest of the newly emancipated black community, while whites had to re-orient with a populace that, until recently, they had owned as property. The ambiguities of a tri-racial group did not easily integrate into such self-examinations and narratives. The Melungeons became increasingly isolated, as there was no linguistic scaffolding upon which to explain their existence; it is posited that the inability of white Southerners to situate Melungeons into strict racial categories contributed to their absence in history books. Brewton Berry’s *Almost White* describes myriad accounts of whites at the time referring to Melungeons as “...America’s outcasts... ‘forgotten men’...[trapped] in a social limbo...” (vii). In effect, those that could not be categorized were marginalized, and this can be seen the most during Reconstruction, when it would have been preferable to compartmentalize race into a binary of nonwhite and white. Grasping the concept of a tri-racial heritage in Melungeons, already a group long associated with mythology and folklore, would have complicated an already perplexing new social order. Melungeons were both socially and geographically isolated, as their ancestry made it difficult to be accepted by any one group, be it whites, blacks, or Indigenous populaces. The lack of clarity around their heritage prevented them from merging into mainstream society, and, in turn, mainstream academic literature. The disconcerting gap in Reconstruction-era historical analysis pertaining to the Melungeons is a result of the reluctance of white Southerners to incorporate tri-racial groups into the rebuilding of a postbellum societal infrastructure. Consequently, Melungeons appear to have

vanished from many texts analyzing Reconstruction, as prejudices on the part of white Southerners after the war curbed the ability for adequate research to emerge.

In his Preface to *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, Eric Foner<sup>2</sup> writes on the radical shift in awareness of identity and one's place in the new South that were part of the psychological fallout of the Civil War:

The transformation of slaves into free laborers and equal citizens was the most dramatic example of the social and political changes unleashed by the Civil War and emancipation...Southern society as a whole was remodeled...the black experience cannot be understood without considering how the status of white planters, merchants, and yeomen, and their relations to one another, changed over time. By the end of Reconstruction, a new Southern class structure...[was] well on [its] way to being consolidated (xxiii)

Any prolonged, armed conflict creates chaos in the institutions and constructs of a population, and Foner speaks to these ideas of a “new...structure” and a total “remodel[ing]” that would have been traumatizing for those benefitting from the status quo. Therefore, it would have been tempting to maintain order by clinging to severe racial classifications, resulting in color lines built around narrowly defined characteristics of skin color and anatomical features. Melungeons displayed all of these and none of these. Many Southerners responded to the shock of emancipation and the visceral carnage of the Civil War - now seen across the country with photographic evidence unheard of during previous conflicts, showing a scale of damage that changed American attitudes towards death, mourning, and their very psyches - by attempting to replicate the binary, halcyon days where black meant slave and white meant master. Historian Mitchell Snay notes in *Fenians, Freedmen, and Southern Whites: Race and Nationality in the*

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<sup>2</sup> Curiously, with roughly 650 pages comprising Foner's magnum opus, there is not a single mention of the Melungeons once during the span of the entire book.

*Era of Reconstruction* that “Southern whites spoke naturally about a biracial South” (115).<sup>3</sup> For Snay, this binary system and obsession with an individual’s race was at the heart of Reconstruction: “Race and ethnicity were another key framework in which [S]outhern [and] freedpeople...sought a collective identity and struggled for political self-determination... Ethnicity became an increasing concern in the period after the Civil War” (114). It can be asserted that what made postbellum Southern whites so disproportionately hostile to Melungeons was a combination of geography - Melungeons typically resided in mountainous, remote areas in the Appalachians, or in small rural communities far from cities - and a race theory based upon overly simplified notions of what distinguishes one race from another. White panic conceived over fears of their own floundering identities helped shape their attitudes towards Melungeons. Wilbur J. Cash, ruminating on the collective neuroses of whites during Reconstruction, writes in *The Mind of the South* that “...rising fears and hates native to the old Southern pattern... contributed to the renewal of a concern in the years before 1900...[with hopes] to preserve... ancient pattern[s]” (296).<sup>4</sup> Free blacks challenged these hopes, and anxiety over their potential dominance over whites kept elementary language of race preferable to a more inclusive view of

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<sup>3</sup> Another scholar provides additional analysis of the South as encouraging a binary system of racial classification. In Anita Puckett’s essay, “The Melungeon Identity Movement and the Construction of Appalachia Whiteness” in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, she writes: “Racial classification in the United States is ultimately binary, categorizing individuals as “white” or “nonwhite.” How this binary system is discursively constituted depends upon the ways in which elements of a repertoire interconnect to distribute or consolidate power and privilege across discursive contexts. Circulation of the revitalized lexeme Melungeon as a valued ‘object’ within Appalachian discourse reveals linguistic processes by which white racial privilege is constructed and expanded, mixed-race classification excluded, and nonwhite disenfranchisement reproduced” (131).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that historian Joel Williamson, in a critique of *The Mind of the South* in his book, *The Crucible of Race*, argues that Cash had a narrow view of race and could not understand that “...black culture was always changing” (2), and that Cash’s interpretation that “...the thinking of whites about Negroes were unitary and fixed” (2) was an oversimplified conception of race. This thesis posits that Cash’s attitudes fit well with Reconstruction-era Southern values towards racial classification, and that while Williamson’s assessment of antiquation is valid, Cash nevertheless presents a theory that lines up squarely with notions of white Southerners as bound by rigidly defined racial tropes.

color and ethnicity. Melungeons were casualties of this thinking, and their very existence defied Southern aspirations for a world in which racial categorization could continue to be defined in basic terms.

The diction used by white Southerners to describe Melungeons was always steeped in bigotry and the unknowability of the Melungeon identity. The term “Melungeon” itself was originally a slur, and was later adopted - or re-appropriated - by the group as the moniker for their particular blend of unclassifiable ancestry.<sup>5</sup> Whites projected their insecurity about postbellum shakeups of racial classification onto Melungeons; thus, the Melungeons became proxies for frustrations over how to use language to address identity. The way white Southerners found to express their desire to maintain rigid racial structures was to apply uniquely alienating slanders to the group. Wayne Winkler, in *Walking Toward the Sunset: The Melungeons of Appalachia*, cites a host of insults and attributes given to Melungeons contemporaneously during the period: they were “mysterious” (4) and “cursed soul[s] abandoned by God” (6), with more racially coded language such as “sneaky...tricky” (8) and “swarthy” (10) sometimes taking over. Winkler observes that “...in a society whose members were defined in large part by their ethnic category, the Melungeons simply did not fit in” (2). White Southerners found themselves using terms that connoted a sense of off-putting foreignness, separating Melungeons from race (and humanity) entirely - Melungeons were seen as *inhuman*. Winkler quotes one anonymous Texas legislator in 1890 as lamenting that ““God only knows what [this Melungeon] is”” (1). These types of slurs emphasized the impossibility of Melungeons joining mainstream white society if

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<sup>5</sup> Even with a name to bring them together, not all Melungeons identify with the term, with other sub-groups identifying differently or not at all. This level of complex, inter-community diversity would likely have been utterly foreign to the Reconstruction-era white Southern mentality, in which Melungeons rarely registered in collective racial thought as being capable of autonomy or organizational capabilities.

they did not (or could not) find a way to fit into a certain racial box. According to Winkler, "... those living near Melungeons [knew] exactly who 'belonged' with white people and who did not. The history of nearly all tri-racial groups has been marked by their efforts to overcome their inferior social status" (11). Centuries of relationships between Europeans, Indigenous Americans, and slaves kidnapped from Africa led to a melting pot in microcosm, from which came generations of mixed race people ostracized for their supposed peculiar appearance and murky bloodlines, who typically were only defined by language meant to alienate them and purposefully keep them from joining traditional social circles.

Lacking classification and inundated with assumptions based upon regional and racist stereotypes that were intentionally meant to create literal and metaphorical distance, the tri-racial Melungeons were not accepted into mainstream Southern society as they did not meet conventional standards of mono- or bi-racial lineages. This led to further geographical isolation, with groups of Melungeons forced into a type of exile not dissimilar to the resettling of Indigenous tribes occurring in the same century. Pat Spurlock in *Melungeons: Examining an Appalachian Legend*, spends many moments in the text arguing that the forced migration of Indigenous peoples (particularly along the Trail of Tears) was analogous to the treatment of Melungeons by their white peers. Socially marginalized, Melungeon communities became more insular and tightly intertwined, rejected by whites who, according to Spurlock, even went as far as using the word "isolates" (79) during the Reconstruction period as a smear against Melungeons. These negative depictions exacerbated any feelings of Otherness that likely possessed many whites familiar with Melungeons. With the group quite literally moving to the

periphery, out of sight, it became easier for contemporaneous public records<sup>6</sup> and subsequent historical analyses to inadvertently fail to evaluate their lives and contributions. In a vicious circle, Melungeons retreated from populous areas, thus making their Other status easier to maintain from afar; this perpetuated a cycle of ignorance that continues to the present day. Pat Spurlock points out that "...geographical boundaries ensured that young people had to choose mates who lived within a few miles from home...the term *inbred* was a slur used to portray [Melungeons]...Such beliefs helped perpetuate the myth that Melungeons were a strange breed..." (80). In essence, location became one of the main features of distrust towards Melungeons, made ironic by the fact that they were pushed out by the very people that were perplexed and fearful of their mixed racial heritage.

Issues of class certainly played a factor in the white disdain for this tri-racial group. Melungeons typically belonged to the poor or lower middle classes, and were arguably specters of what could become of those who profited directly from slavery, as emancipation and the end of the Civil War created new economic and educational opportunities for ex-slaves (as limited as they were). Anxieties about shifting economic fortunes in the South contributed to the identity crisis of those that had profited in any way from slave labor. Compounding this was a lack of faith in the ability of Melungeons (and people of color in general) to conduct themselves in ways

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<sup>6</sup> Melungeons were not entirely unnoticed; there are several infamous legislative accounts related to Melungeons, perhaps the most famous being that which is known as "The Celebrated Melungeon Case," whose date is indeterminate but is usually ascribed to one of the years between 1872 and 1874. This Reconstruction-era judicial ruling is said to contain the first use of the term "Melungeon" in recorded American history. Lewis Shepard, the Defense Attorney for a Melungeon woman named Betsy Bolton, argued that she was not actually black but rather had a genetic makeup of multiple races - in other words, a Melungeon ancestry - which, concisely, allowed her to win her inheritance from a white father and Melungeon mother. There is some mystery and ambiguity that surrounds the case; accusations have long floated that Shepard exaggerated or embellished aspects of the trial. Nevertheless, it was a significant moment that recognized the existence and validity of the Melungeons. This synopsis was condensed from an accounting of the trial in *Children of Perdition: Melungeons and the Struggle of Mixed America* by Tim Hashaw.

that were behaviorally acceptable to whites. Winkler observes in *Walking Toward the Sunset* that whites saw Melungeons as being “...completely unaware of serious breaches of local etiquette” (8). The idea of manners and niceties is itself subtle language that is often associated with white gentility and upper class domesticity, typically with implications that nonwhites could not understand rituals of decorum. Ultimately, though, it was a genuine inability (or unwillingness) on the part of white Southerners to understand or engage with Melungeons in a way that could transcend arbitrary constructs of skin color, and with it, the negative connotations associated with Melungeons in regards to their geography and class (both of which themselves often have racial components).

If Melungeons faced their own doubts of personal identity and threats of erasure amongst their real-life neighbors, then the fight against stereotype and obscuration was compounded even more in fiction, with Melungeon characters playing to the nervosa of white audiences. The Melungeons were stock characters often utilized in esoteric Southern fiction, written by and for white readers, and whose primary mannerisms were exaggerated so as to elicit the most disgust (or perplexity) from the audience. On the rare occasions that Melungeons did make it into works of fiction, it was only to underscore already negative connotations that affirmed what many whites already assumed of them. In *How They Shine: Melungeon Characters in the Fiction of Appalachia*, Katherine Vande Brake writes that fictitious representations of Melungeons often showed that they “...[could not] be trusted to behave predictably...[they] live in extreme poverty [and] sneak around through the woods...[and they have] little to no education” (7). These descriptors are uncannily similar to the language used by Reconstruction-era whites to describe Melungeon personality traits. What makes this consistency so striking and telling, however, is

that these fictions that Brake references were all but absent from Reconstruction-era literary output. Brake can only explore literatures written after 1900, as Melungeons in Appalachian fiction are missing almost completely from literary analyses before the turn of the century. It has taken an overhaul of scholarship by a small academic niche intent on reviving the voices of Melungeons who have been silenced for so long. As has been seen, Reconstruction was a time of Melungeon obfuscation, where even escapist fiction<sup>7</sup> hesitated to portray them. Unnerved by their inability to fit in, whites kept Melungeons marginalized within fiction *and* non-fiction literatures, where their mixed heritage could be left unexamined. It wasn't until the cessation of Reconstruction that Melungeons slowly began appearing in fictional accounts, perhaps due to a perceived stabilization in race relations on behalf of white Southerners. This would become, after all, a period that saw the evolution of slavery-era thinking transposed from the plantation and cotton fields to a new Southern economy and society that legally could not be dependent on complete human bondage. With the onset of the Jim Crow laws (where delineations between white and non-white became even more binary and subsequently further institutionalized and enshrined in bureaucracy), it is posited that white Southerners, finding a means of racial control outside of slavery - through extrajudicial vigilante justice<sup>8</sup> and legislative action such as

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<sup>7</sup> Around the time of Reconstruction and from thereafter, dime novels and serialized Western novels such as the long-running *Deadwood Dick* were grotesque fantasies where "Cowboy and Indian" could be substituted for "black and white." There was no room for Melungeon ambiguity in this kind of escapist literature; there were good guys and bad guys, and a tri-racial group known for their *unknowability* would find themselves continuing to be absent from even the lowest forms of popular literature.

<sup>8</sup> In *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894*, among many other works, Ida B. Wells makes great use of post-Reconstruction journalism and reportage to condemn mass lynchings and violence that flared up as a result of tensions and lingering resentments that left whites struggling to re-define their racial identities in relation to newly freed blacks.

Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924<sup>9</sup> - became more comfortable acknowledging tri-racial heritage now that the essential question of black versus white appeared to be reaffirmed and upheld after an initial postbellum radar blip.

Somewhat paradoxically, one of the proposed causes for Melungeon absence in Reconstruction-era literary history - along with the period's historiography itself - comes from an abundance of source material that appears in the record *after* Reconstruction. Melungeon fictitious representations became more popular once the 1900s were in full swing, as the shellshocked South had regained its footing with many decades between themselves and the gory war. This was in direct proportion to the South's ability to control non-whites, and thus, the racial narrative. Melungeons were allowed to slowly re-engage with the wider Southern populace now that the old order had been reestablished (and where old language was masked behind new methodologies). This is one explanation for why Melungeon fiction in the decades after the Civil War is so hard to come by - and why so much of it was written well after Reconstruction. Indeed, all of Brake's case profiles of novels were published exclusively after Reconstruction, yet her close readings of the fictions yield analyses that remain relevant to the ways mainstream Southern society understands Melungeons, whether they are from the 2000s or the 1800s. Brake writes passionately, frequently weaving in characters from actual fictional texts from her research to underline her points:

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<sup>9</sup> N. Brent Kennedy writes in *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People*, that eugenicist Walter Plecker, the first Virginia state registrar of vital statistics and proponent of the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, sought to "...reclassify all people into one of two racial categories: 'White' and 'Colored'..." (95). Kennedy goes on to argue the following, based upon the flaws of a binary method of racial thinking: "By denying the possibility that any...cultures other than 'English,' 'Indian,' or 'slave,' or a combination thereof, could possibly exist in...America is not only unrealistic but imperialistic and racist in every sense of these words. To shove all multiethnic people into this generic pigeonhole and assign to them a racial label [in] which they have no input - which is what the tri-racial isolate theory inadvertently did - is an incredibly hostile action" (99-100).

All the literary works I have considered talk about and illustrate the prejudice against people with Melungeon heritage that has existed for many years in Appalachia. This prejudice is the one thing the Melungeon characters in these fictions all endure. We can remember Haun's despicable character Linus who hates Melungeons with startling intensity. We can hear Claud Hulett telling his daughters [that] 'A Melungeon is all alone in the world.' We remember John Fox, Jr.'s 'Malungion' with his head cracked open... [what] makes Melungeon characters so attractive is the elusive mysterious puzzle of their natures. It's the quality that inspires old man Harkryder to say, 'Ain't no telling what them folk will do.' It's what makes Catfish think about banning Melungeons from his smokehouse...an author would choose a Melungeon character [because] it makes that author's task so much less arduous. The author has said already a great deal with this one etymologically disputed word: *Melungeon*...Remember: the winners write the history. It will take more than one aside in a work of fiction to bludgeon down...firmly entrenched presuppositions (280-282)

The fact that Brake can make such assertions in 2001 (the publication date of *How They Shine*) based off of texts from the 1900s<sup>10</sup> and have them still ring true to the linguistic evidence gathered from the Reconstruction Era, speaks to how Melungeons still have yet to be in charge of their fictional counterparts. Currently, a search for any novelization of the Melungeon experience before the 1900s is futile; the odds are dramatically lower for those penned by Melungeons themselves. It cannot be known whether these stories are unaccounted for due to a strong history of oral storytelling and folklore in the Melungeon community, an act of willful suppression of Melungeon narratives on behalf of white Southerners, or a lack of resources (education, literacy, access to urban areas for publication) predicated on racial exile from mainstream Southern societies. What can be discerned is that, when Melungeons do appear in literature, it is with clear malevolence or, at best, provincial ignorance. It is clear that a lack of understanding of the mixed

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Brake's analysis of one novel, Sharyn McCrumb's *She Walks These Hills*, was a fiction piece published in 1995. In it, "...Sabrina, the Melungeon, is a minor character...Her heritage seems to be the reason that she has no internal resources to fall back on. The years of marginalization force her into a corner from which she cannot escape" (48-49). The fact that *She Walks These Hills* entered the market so close to the twenty-first century - and with such a lowly depiction of a Melungeon - shows how pervasive and long-ranging stereotypes and assumptions about Melungeons continue to exist.

heritage of Melungeons in the real world led to a continued lack of understanding in the fictional realm; white Southerners, unable to reconcile Melungeons to a binary system of race, could do no better in the novels in which they sentimentalized or demonized tri-racial citizens.

As with race, as with history, as with people: shades abound, ambiguities arise, gaps persist. The omissions and questions without obvious answers are what keep the wheels of academia grinding. It is frequently the things we cannot see that need to be looked at the most. The Reconstruction Era of American history was a fulcrum in the development of new concepts of racial identity, where relationships between people of different races could be renegotiated or transcended. But pre-existing institutions based upon white supremacy were hard to shake - even with a civil war - and old systems of power pressed on through the postwar years. The Melungeons became an unwilling fatality of the white Southern infatuation with condensing race into unshakeable binds of white and non-white. By doing this, white Southerners allowed themselves to believe they could keep like with like, and in doing so, maintain order in a world radically shaken by emancipation and secession. Melungeons did not have a voice in this overt and oftentimes deeply psychological societal discourse, often becoming proxies for a Southern populace terrified by the postbellum shake-ups of race, class, and, indeed, *classification*. The forced absence of Melungeons from history about the period and in cultural scenarios perpetuated stereotypes and one-dimensional portrayals of their communities, on the rare occasions that this occurred. With Melungeons represented in the historical record before the war, but not after its conclusion, it can be surmised that Melungeons were most present in literature and historical analysis when racial control was still firmly perceived to be in the hands of Southern whites. In this way, the Melungeon experience seems predicated on the ability of

white Southerners to believe they have the upper hand. While the temporal gap of Reconstruction-era Melungeon representation in historical writing and literature is not solely a construct of white power - geography played and will always play a major role in the lives of those living in the Appalachian Mountains - racist epithets associated with mountain people and their associated lack of money and education certainly fed into ideas about race that spoke to a Southern ear keenly attuned to such slander. While there are myriad reasons in the history of the Melungeons for why their populations have become so alienated from mainstream historical documentation, there can be little doubt that the white Southern mentality of a binary racial code during the Reconstruction Era pushed Melungeons out of larger Southern communities to live out existences as forever unknown and, by such a measure, forever punished by a system whose language had no room for ambiguity.

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