From Mouth to Page: Will Allen Dromgoole and the Reproduction of Melungeon Folk Stereotypes

"The Melungeon is confined…to this permanent underclass that ain't never gonna get white enough. Appalachia is that place that ain't never gonna get white enough but they've got an ugly history of trying. There is nothing mysterious or hidden about Appalachian history or their people. They have always been on the bleeding edge of modernity."
-Darlene Wilson, a Melungeon woman, from Tamara L. Stachowicz's *Melungeon Portraits: Lived Experience and Identity*

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Ethnic groups are often erroneously defined by the slurs and negative stories that circulate about their communities. The more marginal and obscure the group, the easier it is to maintain and perpetuate those aspects that keep them marginalized. Outsider groups, unable to change the narrative, persist in the popular imagination through tales that may not adequately reflect reality. The oral tradition of trading stories and superstitions meant to emphasize a group's Otherness has profoundly affected the Melungeons, a tri-racial population in Appalachia consisting of individuals with American Indigenous, African, and European ancestry. Since the founding of the United States, Melungeons have been ostracized by regional neighbors in the South, suffering in a racial climate where biracial classifications were preferred and promoted over the more complex heritage of those with a tri-racial lineage.[1] Throughout the Appalachian states, Melungeons were characterized in folklore as devilish, unclean, and monstrous. Such characterizations were often genderless and informed by the supernatural. Melungeons were typically discussed only in conjunction with their race (or lack thereof), and gender stereotypes rarely entered the equation. These racial clichés, often harmfully atavistic, reduced Melungeons to a primal, almost animalistic state where their skin color played a more important role than their gender. While these representations had typically remained oral in nature, a figure emerged at the end of the nineteenth century to reproduce these perceptions for a wider audience, thereby cementing unfavorable images of Melungeons - and women in particular - in print. Will Allen Dromgoole, a white female Tennessean using a male nom de plume, visited Melungeon

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[1] 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 many in their geographic region found alienating and unclassifiable. Because of their mixed backgrounds that did not fit neatly into any one bracket, Melungeons were consequently neglected by history, particularly when there was no linguistic scaffolding upon which to define them. Brewton Berry's *Almost White* describes myriad accounts of whites during the 1800s referring to Melungeons as "…America's outcasts…'forgotten men'…[trapped] in a social limbo…" (vii).

communities and used her platform as a journalist and author to maintain and perpetuate unfavorable depictions of Melungeons. Deviating from the previously genderless state of Melungeon folklore identity, Dromgoole placed women at the forefront of her investigations. Using gender and fertility to degrade an already isolated group, her articles emphasized Southern stereotypes of mountain inhabitants and worked within the structures of scientific racism that were widespread and well known to her at the time of her writing. Dromgoole played a key role in mainstreaming disparaging perceptions that have relegated the tri-racial group to near obscurity. Intentionally or not, Dromgoole was influenced by the folklore of her childhood, and this influence was used to further denigrate the lifestyles of her subjects. Dromgoole transplanted post-Reconstruction mores onto the Melungeons, and incorporated preexisting legends and stories meant to frighten children into submission into her writings. Insensitive to the modern eye, her approach was commonplace in the Gilded Age, and would have been familiar in tone to much of her reading populace. While such biases were endemic in the time period, Dromgoole nevertheless contributed extensively to adverse attitudes towards and about Melungeons, often fixating on women and fertility in order to accentuate the perceived biological inferiority of the mixed race mountain people of Southern lore.

Melungeons were a part of the historical narrative long before the United States solidified as a nation. For most of the 1600s, interracial marriage and relationships between those of different races were frequent and often tolerated, resulting in mulatto[2] offspring conceived through the interaction of different cultures that came together during the early colonization period. Freed or bonded blacks, white indentured servants, and Indigenous individuals frequently

[2] In many documents and stories predating the Civil War, “mulatto” was used interchangeably with any mixed race individual, and “Melungeon” and “mulatto” were often conflated.

partnered,[3] resulting in children that were difficult to classify. Tamara L. Stachowicz, in *Melungeon Portraits: Lived Experience and Identity*, asserts that "From the beginning…whites and blacks established sexual contact, producing offspring that shared the genes of both parents and the identity of neither" (37).[4] By the mid-1700s, marriage between races had been outlawed in the Southern region, and increasing intolerance for interracial relationships drove many with mixed heritages to the fringes of Southern society, both geographically and culturally. As the taboo of miscegenation was reinforced by chattel slavery - and its accompanying prejudices - the attitudes towards those who could not outwardly classify as a free person or an enslaved person grew more negative and hostile. In *Walking Toward the Sunset,* Wayne Winkler notes the following about Melungeon communities: "…many of their neighbors considered them untrustworthy, unfriendly, and inferior…Melungeons did not fit into any of the racial and ethnic categories which define an individual or group…" (2). In pre-Revolutionary America, those of tri-racial background were initially able to exist in their social and regional groups without classification and without the stigma associated with race mixing. Their origins are a result of the

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[3] Tim Hashaw writes in *Children of Perdition: Melungeons and the Struggle of Mixed America* that racism "…began in the wealthy, scholarly, aristocrat-conscious planter class and, because the social taboo developed at the top, working-class white women in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America were not averse to marrying black men…" (21).

[4] According to Winkler, it was in the 1790s that the term "Melungeon" entered the written lexicon: "The most commonly accepted theory is that the word derived from the French *mélange*, meaning mixture. In 1793 and 1794, [a French aristocrat] acquired thousands of acres in southwestern Virginia, near an area where many Melungeon families lived…the first written record of the term 'Melungin' [sic] occurred just a few miles from this French settlement" (6). "Melungeon" thus began as a term coined by outsiders that disseminated informally throughout communities until finding its way onto paper. Importantly, Winkler writes that "…the stigma attached to the name 'Melungeon' leads most researchers to the conclusion that the name was imposed upon these people and that it was not a name they used for themselves" (8). No matter its origin, "Melungeon" was often used as a racial slur, many times in conjunction with misinformed epithets concerning inbreeding and reproduction. In Pat Spurlock's *Melungeons: Examining an Appalachian,* he notes that even up until the 1980s, "…the term *inbred* was a slur used to portray rural Southerners as people who only married cousins…such beliefs perpetuate the myth that Melungeons were such a strange breed that their dark skin 'could not be bred out'" (80).

forced interactions that resulted from a colonization period that threw together otherwise disparate cultures,[5] but as the nation moved from colony to coalesced whole, the obscuration of Melungeon personhood emerged with a new reliance on the rule of law, which inherently favors classifiable persons of verified background. With the founding of a country came the founding of a mythology surrounding the Melungeons, and the racial anxieties of slaveholding, mono-racial Southerners revealed themselves in their folklore. The American legal system's emphasis on racial classification and the banning of interracial marriage played a major role in alienating Melungeons from mainstream Southern populaces, but the rejection of their differences would have been impossible without an accompanying shift in cultural perception. In the decades following the American Revolution, a more fluid approach towards racial interpretation had morphed into a strict binary,[6] with Southerners effectively isolating Melungeons and giving rise to the stereotypes and superstitions that would plague Melungeons up to the present day. When pushed to the periphery, it was easy to circulate bigoted opinions that were based more on rumor

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[5] In *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People*, N. Brent Kennedy resists the notion of Melungeons as being simply *tri*-racial isolates: "While there is definitely Native American and African influence in at least some, if not all, Melungeon populations, it is far more complex and probably from a much older source than historians have generally recognized. [There was a] sizable Melungeon population that existed prior to 1750…[there were] very few 'escaped slaves' that resided in the Appalachians at that time period…[and there were] strikingly Mediterranean appearance[s] (as opposed to purely Indian or African) of the earliest known Melungeons" (91-92). Scholars in the Melungeon community, including Kennedy, have posited a Portuguese ancestry, troubling the narrative of Melungeon heritage: "…even the skeptics have admitted the difficulty in dismissing outright the possible Portuguese link, primarily due to the early, widespread nature of these claims among even the most widely separated Melungeon settlements, and seeming cultural and linguistic evidences" (91).

[6] Anita Puckett's essay, "The Melungeon Identity Movement and the Construction of Appalachia Whiteness" in *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, expands on the idea of a binary racial system in the South and its impact on Melungeons: "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).

than fact, and many Southerners participated in the marginalization of Melungeons through the sharing of folk songs, stories, and slanders throughout the 1800s and beyond.

It is quite common in Melungeon scholarship to be regaled with anecdotes told by adults who remember cautionary tales relayed to them as children. By 1889, images of Melungeons as borderline supernatural could be found in periodicals, where oral stories were recalled, almost nostalgically so. Swan M. Burnett wrote in *American Anthropologist* about his early introduction to Melungeons, in which the group suffers from a litany of half-truths and myths:

> Legends of the Melungeons I first heard at my father's knee as a child in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee, and the name had such a ponderous and inhuman sound as to associate them in my mind with the giants and ogres of the wonder tales I listened to in the winter evenings before the crackling logs in the wide-mouth fireplace. And when I chanced to waken in the night and the fire had died down on the hearth, and the wind swept with a demoniac shriek and terrifying roar around and through the house, rattling the windows and the loose clapboards on the roof, I shrank under the bedclothes trembling with a fear that was almost an expectation that one of these huge creatures would come down the chimney with a rush, seize me with his dragon-like arms, and carry me off to his cave in the mountains, there to devour me piecemeal. In the course of time, however, I came to learn that these creatures with the awe-inspiring name were people somewhat like ourselves, but with a difference. I learned, too, that they were not only different from us, the white, but also from the Negroes - slave or free - and from the Indian. They were something set apart from anything I had seen or heard of (347)

It can be argued that perceptions of such outsize proportion as these - Melungeons are thought of as having "dragon-like arms" that are capable of cannibalism, on par with the ogres and giants of fairy tales - are not something that can occur overnight; turning humans into monsters must be done over time through repeated retellings. These hyperbolic descriptions hint at the possibility of a habit of Melungeon horror established long before this story was told to Burnett. Here, Melungeons are marginalized enough to transcend humanity and gender, becoming preternatural

creatures whose defining feature is their fluctuating skin color.[7] Winkler quotes one anonymous Texas legislator in 1890 who lamented that "'A Malungeon isn't a nigger, and he isn't an Indian, and he isn't a white man. God only knows what he is'" (1). Burnett's childhood recollections that mirrored the antagonism shown towards Melungeons were pervasive enough to inform scholarship over fifty years later, when Edward Price, writing in *Geographic Review*, referenced Burnett, writing that "…at times the Melungeons have had to fill the place of the bogeyman in holding children in the straight and narrow path - 'The Melungeons will get you!'…The persistent folk tale, however, insists that the Melungeons are unusual racially…" (256).[8] Further, in *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*, Lisa Alther documents the persistence of the idea of the Melungeon monster as an urban legend by the mid-1900s: "When I was a child, babysitters used to threaten us with abduction by six-fingered Melungeons who reputedly lived in trees on the ridges ringing town" (29). The familiar undercurrents seen here are also present in other colloquial legends; there is a continuous preoccupation with physical deformities, the magical, and the primal. Indeed, it was these types of stories - conflating what

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[7] Carol Ledford of the Gowen Research Foundation recovered an anecdote from family lore dating to the 1800s that explicitly addresses the distaste for mixed race individuals. The story depicts a man named Sterling Mayes, and the tale emphasizes an obsession with race(lessness): "Sterling even instructed his children to taunt the Goin children with the mulatto label…Sterling had gone so far as to make up a little song about blacks and mulattos which he sang to the tune of 'Old Dan Tucker,' [a] popular jig tune of the day…Sterling sang his doggerel verses in church…He made his rhymes fit the hymns that were being sung…mulatto slurs drown[ed] out the gospel words" (Ledford).

[8] Price's source was Burnett's 1889 article in *American Anthropologist.* It is not unusual for Melungeon literature to take a circuitous route. Academic work and histories in this domain often use the same records and stories from the limited amount of known mentions pertaining to the Melungeons, so that many sources lead back to a source that has already been consulted more than once. This trend has the potential to reinforce similar viewpoints, or recirculate the same visions of the group. Breaking away from this path is difficult in a field where resources are slim and many facets of Melungeon life have been transmitted orally. Many accounts come from storytellers after the fact, and are recited from memory. The limitations of neurological recall, the romanticization of adolescence, and the biases of racism combine to make any story about Melungeons subject to skepticism. While legal documents from the time do provide some empirical evidence of their existence, the system's failure to learn how to classify Melungeons makes deciphering contemporaneous judicial proceedings laborious and sometimes unproductive.

was considered to be atypical skin color and monstrosity - that prompted Will Allen Dromgoole, a writer from Tennessee with a male name and a woman's body,[9] to engage with the Melungeons. This lead to a confrontation whose repercussions would solidify in the Southern imagination a bleak, long-lasting image of the Melungeon community. The interracial nature of their origins was seen as particularly abhorrent and primitive, and Dromgoole presented Melungeon fertility, womanhood, and race mixing as both unlawful and lewd. This criticism of lifestyle and biology permeated her work and polluted the reputations of Melungeon folk in the South. Indeed, in a presentation for the Melungeon Heritage Association Union Meeting in 2011, Kathy Lyday noted that Dromgoole's descriptions of Melungeons "…did substantial damage to the very people she sought to understand and reveal to the public…" (3).[10]

Born in 1860, immediately before the onset of the Civil War, Dromgoole first heard of Melungeons in the same way that many of those around her did: through legends and folk stories. According to Hashaw in *Children of Perdition: Melungeons and the Struggle of Mixed America*, "…Dromgoole had heard ghost stories of flying Melungeon ogres as a child, but when she heard the name again as an adult she was astonished that the fantasy characters of her childhood might be real. Dromgoole immediately began questioning state historians. Some flatly dismissed Melungeons as a myth" (4). A fascination borne out of the grotesque stereotypes

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[9] Dromgoole changed her name at the age of six from William Ann to William Allen. No explanation is given in the historical record as to the nature of the young child's sophisticated decision to change her name. This act of proto-transgendering could possibly have played a role in her depiction of Melungeon women; coding as masculine early on in her life had the potential to impact her views of gender, though to what degree this directly led to her derision of women is purely speculative.

[10] Lyday is currently writing the first definitive biography of Dromgoole. Currently Professor of English and Language Studies at Elon University, Lyday has spent decades in the Melungeon community, and her unique expertise on Dromgoole's life and times has led to this biographical project, with research to take place in the summer of 2019 in Nashville and Knoxville.

passed between families and over generations,[11] Dromgoole's notions of and biases towards the group were based in the oral tradition and likely influenced her later treatment of them. Aside from the embellished and supernatural fantasies[12] that shaped her early initiation into Melungeon culture, an abiding dislike of interracial pairings underlies much of Dromgoole's Melungeon oeuvre, and ultimately colored her portrayals of them. As Lyday points out:

> [Dromgoole] had very close relationships with blacks…as can be seen in the stories and columns where she uses blacks as her subjects. Her attitude [was]…never racist in the way we define it today. However, her perception of the Melungeons was very different, [and] written about differently - often with criticism and disgust. Because of this, one should conclude that it was this specific group of people that she found fault with, possibly because they violated the rules of society and the laws of her beloved Tennessee, while the blacks she writes about "stay in their place." When she speaks of being appalled at seeing interracial couples and families, one must remember that the constitution of Tennessee in 1870 prohibited interracial marriage…the poor whites of Nashville need to be placed into the context of her time, upbringing, and education - not excused, but studied in historical context (1-2)

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[11] Hashaw quotes James R. Aswell's *God Bless the Devil!: Liars' Bench Tales* in recounting more folkloric depictions of the Melungeons: "A consistent thread in the earliest Melungeon folk superstition was the claim by blacks and whites that the strange Melungeon was a 'born rogue…mean as the devil…dark and treacherous as their mammy,' and anyone who was pulling a fast one was said to be 'tricky as a Malungeon'" (87). Of note here is the binary of black and white, as well as the specific mention of the "mammy" figure. Here, the Melungeon children are just as "dark and treacherous" as their mother, implying that the female somehow passes on these traits through birthing. In *Children of Perdition*, Hashaw relays Aswell's retelling of an early Appalachian origin story that depicts Melungeons as being the offspring of the Devil, or "Old Horny" as he is called in the tale. Old Horny sires the Melungeons when he flees to Earth in order to escape his "shrew-wife." It is there where he takes up with an "Indian gal." Old Horny returns to Hell after his Melungeon children deceive him to exasperation, where the Devil laments that he might as well "'…be in Hell with my old crabby wedlock wife.'" It is crucial here that the Melungeons are portrayed so negatively as to frighten the Devil himself. Further, while gender is not altogether absent from the narratives of devilish Melungeons before Dromgoole, she still buttressed their existence in the regional imagination and underscored the importance of reproduction in her scorn of them. The emphasis on the wives in this story points to the idea of heredity and conception as fundamental to the Melungeon stereotype.

[12] It should be noted that the presumption of the otherworldly was not particular just to those outside of Melungeon society. In *North from the Mountains: A Folk History of the Carmel Melungeon Settlement*, John S. Kessler and Donald B. Ball write that a belief "…in the supernatural was apparently commonplace" (73) and Elizabeth Caldwell Hirschman, in a survey of Melungeon descendants outlined in *Melungeons: The Last Lost Tribe in America*, noted that respondents affirmed that "…witches, ghosts, and 'haunts' existed" (143). Thus, Dromgoole's observations of Melungeon superstition are not altogether out of character for many in the community at the time, Melungeon or not.

The courtroom was an arbiter of racial policy, and it was a system that did little to negotiate the ambiguities of mixed couplings, let alone those that had a claim to triple or quadruple racial genealogies with phenotypes that reflected the combination of their heritages. Lyday suggests a two-pronged explanation for Dromgoole's dislike of Melungeons: she viewed their existence as both a violation of social norms in the 1800s and "…the laws of her beloved Tennessee…".[13] Her abhorrence was legal and moral in nature. Truly, the law was a powerful force that institutionalized prejudice, and it was the legal system itself that forced Melungeons into figurative and literal exile. (Ironically, Dromgoole, highly educated in litigation by her father, would be unable to practice the law because of her gender, thus being excluded by the very apparatus that also spurned the Melungeons.) Despite - or in spite of - rejection from pursuing a career in law, Dromgoole turned her hand to writing and her eye to the rural areas of her state. It was her visits to Melungeon communities in the mountains of Tennessee that resulted in Dromgoole's infamous articles. Hashaw remarks that Dromgoole "…channel[ed] the fantasy elements to reach the same conclusion still present in the American perception - race mixing, whether acceptable or not, is 'uncivilized'" (85). Bringing with her childhood notions of the fantastical and a distaste for mixed race partnerships and reproduction, Dromgoole left for Newman's Ridge, Tennessee in 1890 to record Melungeon life and lore, and in the process, started a chain reaction that would lead writers like Alther to hear the vicious stories that originated and were disseminated a century earlier.

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[13] Lyday emphasizes a link between Dromgoole's attention to both the law and social custom: "Tennessee law during this time made mixing of the races illegal, so when Dromgoole writes of being outraged and appalled by the many colors of people she finds living together, having children together, and attending church together around and on Newman's Ridge, she is expressing a personal opinion as well as a legal observation…Over a century ago, however, when these views were published and descriptions recorded, society was less informed, less enlightened, and decidedly more biased" (5-6).

While Melungeon "scary stories"[14] circulated only informally before Dromgoole's writings - and, indeed, spurred her towards the community because of their proliferation - the associations the tales made between Melungeons and Otherness became enshrined in the public record in the South when Dromgoole published her initial findings in the Nashville *Sunday American.* They were decidedly grim and exaggerated.[15] Lyday notes that "Dromgoole was not a genealogist, historian, or ethnographer, and her suppositions [and] theories…[were] not based on scientific analysis, but rather on oral history traditions and hearsay" (9) and that her columns regularly "repeat[ed] stories she heard" (11). Relying on folklore that spread across the region, it can be argued that Dromgoole viewed Melungeons through the lens of the fable, culling images both from her childhood and the stories that she heard and reproduced in her articles. Her observations, influenced by a firmly held belief in the inherent immorality and illegality of racial mixing, were predisposed to imaginative renderings. Indeed, in "Land of the Malungeons" in the Nashville *Sunday American*, Dromgoole writes in a way that is significantly influenced by folkloric interpretations of Melungeon culture, and marks one woman in particular for scorn. Visiting the home of one Melungeon woman, Mrs. Gorvins, Dromgoole describes her thusly:

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[14] In a series of letters published by the Nashville *Sunday American* in response to Dromgoole's article, "Land of the Melungeons," one respondent, known only as C.H., shared this story from their youth: "Since childhood I have been anxious to know if such a people really existed or not; have thought perhaps it was only a myth hatched in the very fertile brain of our imaginative negro nurse who used to entertain us with stories of the Malungeons, ghosts, hobgoblins, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, etc. They would frighten us by saying, 'If you don't behave, the Malungeons will get you,' and if angry with one another they would say, 'You are as mean and low-lived as a Melungeon.'"

[15] Lyday gently pushes back against the idea that Dromgoole was outrageously exaggerating in her depictions of Melungeons: "Did Dromgoole lie to her readers about what she encountered or saw? Having studied her writing and life for over thirty years, I am inclined to think that she did not misrepresent her experience…but at the same time, she did not seek out other experiences to give a more accurate look at a people, instead basing her 'report' on only a few families and stories and generalizing it to include all Melungeons" (10-11).

> [T]he saints and hobgoblins! The witch of Endor calling dead Saul from sepulchral darkness would have calked her ears and fled forever at the sight of this living, breathing Malungeon witch. Shakespeare would have shrieked in agony and chucked his own weird sisters where neither 'thunder, lightning nor rain' would ever have found them more. Even poor tipsy, turvy Tam O'Shanter would have drawn up his gray mare and forgotten to fly before this, mightier than Meg Merrilles herself. She was small, scant, raw-boned, sharp-ankled, barefoot, short frock literally hanging from the knee in rags. A dark jacket with great yellow patches on either breast, sleeves torn away above the elbow, black hair burnt to an unfashionable auburn long ago, and a corncob pipe wedged between the toothless gums…I never saw an uglier human creature, or one more gross-looking and unattractive… (10)[16]

Previously, most myths and perceptions about Melungeons were focused on their grotesqueries as a group. Here, Dromgoole makes the legends individualized, and uses the blazon technique to evaluate the woman on a microscopic level, breaking her down into parts - feet, knees, hair, teeth, as well as clothing - in order to emphasize her primitive side.[17] With a highly allusive gaze (she references William Shakespeare, John Keats, and Robert Burns) and an ear tuned for the fantastical - "hobgoblins" and "witch[es]" - Dromgoole carries with her a literary and cultural canon that is in immediate juxtaposition with the surroundings she describes, and she is more than willing to dichotomize the two. It is difficult to find folkloric accounts of Melungeons outside of Dromgoole's writings that singularly focus on appearance in such a way, and even more so for those relating specifically to women. In a way, Dromgoole is marking their bodies as sites of deformed femininity. Dromgoole reinforces this idea in her article early on: "The women are small, graceful, dark and ugly. They go barefooted, but their feet are small and well shaped. So, too, are their hands, and they have the merriest, most musical laugh I have ever heard" (10).

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[16] It should be noted that Dromgoole goes on to praise Mrs. Gorvins's maternal instincts, saying that she "…never saw a gentler, sweeter, truer mother" (10).

[17] In another article for *The Arena* in 1891 ("The Malungeon Tree and Its Four Branches"), Dromgoole is quite candid in her opinion of Melungeon culture: "…their customs have lost but little of the old primitive exclusive and seclusive abandon characteristic[s] of the sons of the forest" (751).

While ostensibly using words that have positive connotations - "graceful" and "well shaped" - what Dromgoole does here is insidious. By examining Melungeon women in terms of their body parts, she is erasing their identities and degrading their autonomy in an age where the colored body was until very recently considered a form of capital. This was especially damaging in a time when Melungeons were already so critically lambasted, and, as Dromgoole confirmed, "They are exceedingly lazy. They live from hand to mouth and in hovels too filthy for any human being" (10). Emphasizing their primordial characteristics, Dromgoole presented for her Southern readers a means of consuming and reproducing the idea of the Melungeon as inhuman, and saved her intimate, microcosmic profiles for the women. Though less steeped in lore than the regional stereotypes learned by word of mouth - there are no dragon-like wings here - Dromgoole nevertheless perpetuated the stigma of Melungeons (and, most nastily, of Melungeon women) for a wide audience, with Winkler pointing out that Dromgoole's writings "…were the foundation for most of what was written about the Melungeons for the next 100 years" (102).

A year later, in 1891, Dromgoole continued her exploration of the Melungeon community in an article entitled "The Malungeons,"[18] published in *The Arena*, a Boston-based magazine that had a national circulation. Importantly, *The Arena* catered to a milieu that resided outside of Dromgoole's native Tennessee, particularly on the East Coast, which was culturally and geographically distant from life in Appalachia. Dromgoole's assertions would have likely been

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[18] Interestingly, Dromgoole uses an example of Melungeon oral folklore to open her 1891 article in *The Arena*: "Were you ever when a child half playfully told 'The Malungeons will get you'? If not, you were never a Tennessee child, as some of our fathers were; they who tell us all that may be told of that strange, almost forgotten race…" (470). It is curious that Dromgoole would consider the oft-repeated refrain of kidnapping Melungeons to be relatable to those outside of Appalachia, which suggests a dissonance between her audience and the perceptions she had of that audience. Further, her words also emphasize the idea of Melungeon lore as being passed between people over time, and hints at the heavily partial way in which notions of ethnic groups can be transmitted across generations.

taken as authoritative to an audience that was far removed from the reality of Melungeon life. This popularization of stereotype and myth - this translation from mouth to page - highlighted interstate notions of Melungeons as degenerate and backwards, and, most crucially, unknowable.[19] The women, however, were the targets of a specific type of speculation and denigration. Dromgoole questions their fertility, and in so doing, pathologizes Melungeon race mixing, and, in turn, the women themselves: "Yet if we will consider a moment, we shall see that a race of mulattoes cannot exist as these Malungeons have existed. The race goes from mulattoes to quadroons, from quadroons to octoroons, and there it stops. The octoroon women bear no children, but in every cabin of the Malungeons may be found mothers and grandmothers, and very often great-grandmothers" (472). Women stand apart from the men; there is no concern for the male in child-making, only the biologically female. Hashaw, analyzing this passage from *The Arena*, proclaims, "That 'octoroon women bear no children' is of course erroneous, but it was believed in Dromgoole's day, even by scientists. A mixed person was called a mulatto because the mule, a mix of a horse and a donkey, was sometimes sterile, as mixed people supposedly were" (97). Dromgoole assumed Melungeon women to be sterile by applying a racial and biological framework that is linguistically ill-equipped to fully understand the nuances of interracial relations.

Up until Dromgoole's writings, stereotypes had centered on Melungeons in terms of the magical. Now, Dromgoole was ushering Melungeon folklore into a new century, when scientific

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[19] Dromgoole concludes "The Malungeons" by noting that "…the Malungeons are, and will remain, a mystery…The most that can be said of one of them is, 'He is a Malungeon,' a synonym for all that is doubtful and mysterious - and unclean" (479). Representing the group as ultimately alien and unfathomable does little to help those outside of Appalachia understand them as human beings, let alone as those with needs, desires, and contributions.

racism and eugenics brought new methodology to old racist ideas. Dromgoole displays her fluency in the empiric differences between mulattoes, quadroons, and octaroons, while taking pains to guess - but not verify - the sterility (or not) of an entire group of women. The tone, anthropological in nature, is often interrupted by more biased discussions of interracial reproduction: "At this church I saw white women…some, indeed, having three separate races represented in their children, showing thereby the gross immorality that is practised [sic] among them" (475).[20] Dromgoole's obvious distaste for race mixing arguably colored her view of reality. Painting women in this way is the very thing that validated the reigning ethos of the period, wherein racial purity was linked to bloodlines and good genes; breeding between races was seen as a tainting of the blood. Women, being the child-bearers, bore most of the pressure associated with delivering racially homogeneous offspring. The idea of an infertile Melungeon woman, having mixed with a variety of races to belong to a tri-racial group, fit a narrative that validated the perceived link between muddied blood and biological inferiority. Just like the stories predating Dromgoole's articles, Melungeons continued to be the stuff of untruths, be they cannibalistic goblins or sterile, infecund savages. More still, it was not the virility of men that was called into question, rather, Dromgoole's discourse puts the spotlight on the woman; even with views consistent with those of her time, Dromgoole nevertheless seems to hold women to different standards than Melungeon men.

At the crux of the matter in Dromgoole's depictions of Melungeons - male and female - in both the Nashville *Sunday American* and Boston's *The Arena* is that preceding her

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[20] Katherine Vande Brake writes in *How They Shine: Melungeon Characters in the Fiction of Appalachia* that "One of the things that most startled Will Allen Dromgoole…was the fact that a single Melungeon family could have members with several different phenotypes. Detractors, of course, used this variation to suggest that Melungeon women were promiscuous and had children by many different men" (130).

publications, such unflattering images had been confined to a specific region in the South, mostly through the oral tradition. Now, through publication, they were entering a cultural lexicon that, in the postbellum years, was not particularly friendly to ambiguous racial categories. Preserving in print what were previously just informal, vocal, and colloquial attitudes made these detrimental portrayals concrete - and resonant. Addressing Dromgoole's legacy, C.S. Everett asserts the following in "Melungeon History and Myth" in *Appalachian Journal*:

> She was untrained in historical ethnography or methods of historical research, and despite having been a law clerk before embarking upon a writing career, her lack of legal research regarding Melungeons is noticeable. Nonetheless, Dromgoole was reasonably capable of rendering fairly accurate portraits of mountain life - at least as seen by her. Her writings on Melungeons were her first; they were raw, biting, drenched in romance and personal value judgments…She penned the first widely read popular media accounts of Melungeons, still cited and relied upon to this day…Dromgoole's influence was reflected in the U.S. Department of the Interior's *Report of Indians Taxed and Not Taxed*, published in 1894…which accepted at face value the assertions [of Dromgoole]…After exposure in *The Arena* and in the federal *Report of Indians Taxed and Not Taxed*, the literary exploitation of the Melungeons took off (378-379)

The progression from the whispers and retellings of folk stories between communities to published and widely disseminated magazine articles for national consumption was one that did not benefit the Melungeons. Dromgoole's long-lasting images illustrated only the facets of Melungeon life that she selected for outsiders to consider, and they were consistently negative. Previously, stories that passed from mouth to mouth stayed in the region; while unflattering, the stories were nevertheless confined to a small section of the country. Dromgoole, projecting these images to the nation, crafted an identity that would serve as the dominant picture of the Melungeon. Indeed, many in the Melungeon community today continue to hotly discuss and debate Dromgoole's portrayals, which speaks to the enduring impact of her writing on both outsiders and insiders. Though they were and remain an esoteric group, the few characteristics

that are known about Melungeons are frequently sourced from Dromgoole's articles and from the scary stories and legends of mountain lore. While some of Dromgoole's more extreme observations about women have been debunked, it could be argued that, without Dromgoole, Melungeon women could have continued to be treated in the same vein as their husbands, fathers, and sons,[21] but a preoccupation with heredity and reproduction that flourished in both Dromgoole's time and psyche prevented any semblance of gender equilibrium. Dromgoole, magnifying traits she saw as distasteful, had a writing platform that would ensure that stereotypes about Melungeons - including the discredited claims of female sterility - would still, in Everett's words, be "cited and relied upon to this day."

Well into the twenty-first century, Melungeons have yet to enter mainstream conversations about race or gender; positive discussions about their cultural contributions are even less frequent, if present at all. The preservation of Melungeon history has been relegated to those within the community, and it has only been through the work of small, independent publishers and individuals that collections of anecdotes and analysis are available. It is mainly through e-mail chains, listservs, and online discussion groups (themselves the electronic inheritors of fireside stories) that Melungeon-identifying scholars and those seeking to bring their stories to light have been able to start separating fact from fiction, story from reality. Signs of progress are tentative but discernible, even if distribution of those signs remains in Appalachia. An in-depth study of Melungeon characters in Appalachian novels was carried out in the early

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[21] Stachowicz cites an interview with one Melungeon woman, Darlene Wilson, where Wilson is quoted as saying that " …your momma's people are just as important as your daddy's people. In Appalachia the women are the place keepers" (34). This inversion of Dromgoole's perceptions is notable for its seeming disregard for patriarchal-based hierarchies in (some) Melungeon communities. Extrapolating from Wilson's testimony, the gulf between how Dromgoole saw women and how Melungeons saw their women is remarkable.

2000s by Katherine Vande Brake in *How They Shine.* Her findings allude to a more nuanced approach being taken in recent years to present a multifaceted vision of Melungeons. Vande Brake uncovered multiple female protagonists that did not conform to the stereotypes perpetuated by Dromgoole in novels published between the 1970s and 1990s. While these novels tend to only circulate regionally, the emergence of female autonomy in Vande Brake's rendering are a symbol of potentiality. There is perhaps an implied suggestion that negative perceptions of Melungeons can be revitalized and recontextualized using the pen, just as Dromgoole used hers to relegate Melungeons to a mythic past that never truly existed. Vande Brake warns, however, that "…it will take more than one or another paragraph buried in a novel or short story to change prevailing notions and the history of textbooks" (283).

Melungeons are still unspooling the damage that Dromgoole's writings spun, and conceptualizations of women in literature seem to be the wispy beginnings of what could be a shift towards Melungeon multidimensionality in the South. Reaching the rest of the country, however, will be a more substantial challenge. Yet, while Appalachia is isolated enough to still rely on folk traditions and stories, the speed and ease of Internet communication and interaction has made possible - though not inevitable - the likelihood of changing the historical and recurring stereotypes regarding Melungeons. A resurgence in Melungeon scholarship in the 1990s - underscored by a series of books published by Mercer University Press - has led to many new publications and previously unearthed primary documents, much of it spurred on by electronic research and collaboration. Spearheaded by Melungeons themselves, these acts of repossession speak to a real desire to establish their own history after centuries of erasure, and with the Internet, the resources to do so are not as far out of reach as Dromgoole's *Sunday*

American would have been in the 1890s. The Melungeon community now has an opportunity it did not have when Dromgoole entered their homes. With enough new material generated and disseminated (be it on paper, in a country store, or by blog post), this marginalized group may finally be able to start scrubbing away the slurs from the past, and reclaim an identity that does not rely solely on their reproductive abilities or the color(s) of their skin.

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