

LISA ALTHER: MELUNGEONS ON MY MIND

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I grew up in Kingsport, Tennessee, a few miles up the road from here. The first time I ever heard the word Melungeon was when I was five years old. I'm going to read a short excerpt from my memoir KINFOLKS about that experience:

"My younger brother Bill is clutching his teddy bear, the noose still knotted around its neck. My older brother John and I sit on a carpeted step in the front hallway as the gray-haired babysitter with the crooked brown teeth informs us that the Melungeons will get us for having dangled the bear on a rope from the upstairs landing, just out of Bill's reach in the downstairs hall.

"What's the Melungeons?" I ask.

"The Melungeons has got six fingers on each hand," she says. "They grab mean little chilrun and carry them off to their caves in the cliffs outside of town."

John and I glance at one another uneasily.

When my parents get home from their tea dance at the country club, John and I wait for Bill to tell on us, but he doesn't. He's a nice kid. The Melungeons won't be interested in him when they arrive.

My mother is very glamorous in her silvery cocktail dress and the spike heels that make her look like a toe dancer. The top of her head comes to my father's chest. He's the tallest man we know. He claims he has race-horse ankles. He's madly in love with my mother and is always coming up with corny new ways to tell her so.

Tonight he says, right in front of the babysitter, "Kids, isn't your mother just as pretty as a carnival queen at a county fair? If I put her in a pageant, she'd win the 400-pound hog. But how would I get it home?"

Her face freezes halfway between a smile and a frown as she tries to decide if this is a compliment.... Since my mother is from upstate New York, she doesn't gush like normal mothers. She used to teach high school English, so she's always coaching us on how to pronounce "cow" in one syllable. Our friends look at us as though we're lunatics whenever we say "cow" as she recommends. But our cousins in New York still mock our Southern accents when we visit them in the summer. They say Southerners are stupid. Our Tennessee playmates say Yankees are rude. But I don't get it because I've met plenty of rude Southerners and stupid Yankees.

In the car on the way home from dropping off the babysitter my father, who's a doctor, confirms that some babies in East Tennessee are born with extra fingers, which are usually removed at birth. He points on my hand to the joints from which they can sprout.

Before turning out my light that night I look under the bed and in the closet for lurking Melungeons. I'm often bad, and apparently the Melungeons, like Santa, have their ways of finding out.

Lying in the dark, I convince myself that I'm safe so long as my body is completely covered by the top sheet. It's summer, and we don't have any fans. We don't buy things that aren't on sale, and whoever heard of a fan sale in the South? So the air that drifts through my window, carrying the screeching of the night insects, is hot and humid. But the notion of being seized in my sleep by six-fingered cavedwellers is so appalling that I endure the sweaty sheet. However, I become alarmed as I try to figure out how to stay encased in my magic sheet if our house catches fire and I have to jump out the window."

That was one of the few times I ever heard the word Melungeon during my childhood. Those were the days of no internet and hardly any TV. We kids entertained ourselves with games in the yard and with listening to the adults talk, during meals and on the porch after dinner as the day cooled into evening, usually in the form of anecdotes and stories. Looking back, I realize that some of those stories were Melungeon-related, even though they weren't identified as such. For instance, we heard the story that DruAnna Overbay told yesterday at Vardy about the man who blackened his face with charcoal and then had his friend sell him as a slave to a plantation owner. He washed the charcoal off in a creek, and the two men fled to the mountains with the money. But the men in this telling weren't identified as Melungeon. We also heard about sailors shipwrecked along the North Carolina coast who worked their way inland and married Indian women, but no connection was made to Melungeons.

My grandmother, Hattie Elizabeth Vanover Reed, was born in Darwin, Virginia, near Clintwood. Her father was a farmer, and she became a teacher. My grandfather, William Henry Reed, was born in Skeet Rock, Virginia, also near Clintwood. He was orphaned at age ten, but he managed to get through school and also become a teacher. He and my grandmother met and fell in love and married. He had always wanted to be a doctor, so he managed to get a scholarship to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. My grandmother worked in a department store to support them, and he worked in the Confederate Veterans' home there. Once he had his medical degree, they returned to Clintwood. He had a stable of six horses that he rode into the hills on house

calls. They heard about a new town being founded in East Tennessee, Kingsport, so they decided to move there. My grandfather opened the town's first three hospitals.

My grandmother did a makeover on herself. She went from being a daughter of the mountains to being a daughter of the Tidewater, descended from Confederate generals and English cavaliers. She and some friends started the Virginia Club. They met every month to discuss how lucky they were to have been born Virginians rather than Tennesseans. They also gave reports on famous Virginians. There was a rumor in our family that her ancestors were part Cherokee, so we kids used to bug her all the time, trying to find out if this were true. Finally one day she turned on us and said, "My family may be a tiny bit Indian, but it's not Cherokee. It's Pocahontas, and Pocahontas was a Virginian."

At my high school, Dobyns-Bennett in Kingsport, our mascots were an Indian chief and squaw. The students picked for these roles had darker skin. Our squaw was Jewish, and our chief, I now realize looking back, was probably a Melungeon descendant. When I look at my high school annuals now, I can see that I was surrounded by Melungeon descendants, kids surnamed Mullins, Collins, Goins, Bolling, Gibson. A Bolling girl was a cheerleader, and a Mullins boy was a basketball star. Some were popular, and others weren't. Some made good grades, and others didn't. But they were never identified as Melungeon, never singled out in any way or discriminated against. They blended right in with all the other Kingsport teens. It may be because Kingsport was a new town. People came there for work and left their origins behind.

While I was in high school, I became interested in William Faulkner. I read everything of his that I could find. He has a lot of vivid characters, but two had an especially big impact on me and have remained vivid in my mind ever since. One was Charles Bon in ABSALOM, ABSALOM. The main character of this novel is Thomas Sutpen. He arrives in Mississippi with a gang of slaves, and he buys a hundred square miles from the Chickasaws. He builds a plantation house, marries a local woman, and

has a son named Henry and a daughter named Judith. When Henry goes to Ole Miss, he meets a sophisticated young man believed to be from New Orleans – Charles Bon. He brings him home, and Charles and Henry’s sister Judith fall in love. But it seems Thomas Sutpen has had a previous life. As a young man he lived in Haiti, where he married a woman who gave birth to their son. When Thomas discovered that she was part African, he deserted her and his son. This son is, of course, Charles Bon, who is now in love with his own half-sister, in addition to himself being biracial. All kinds of disasters too complicated to go into occur.

The other character I recall so vividly is Joe Christmas in *LIGHT IN AUGUST*. Joe is an orphan, abandoned on the steps of the white orphanage. His mother is a white woman who has died. His father is unknown, though the rumor is that he was a circus worker passing through town who was killed by the white woman’s father. Some say Joe Christmas’s father was Mexican, others that he was African. The great tragedy of Joe Christmas’s life is that he doesn’t know who or what he is. He flails around trying to figure this out and, again, all kinds of disasters result, including his murdering two people.

I don’t know what Faulkner himself intended, but I took these two novels to be Faulkner’s metaphor for the decline and collapse of the plantation South – because of the inability of many white southerners to grant full equality to their black brothers and sisters (literally brothers and sisters, in some cases), and because of their refusal to face the reality of interracial relationships and the children that result from them.

Those of us who do research into Melungeon matters often confront the claim that Melungeons have no culture – no songs or recipes or holidays distinct from those of other Appalachian people. Those claiming this blame it on the fact that so many Melungeons were intent on distancing themselves from their heritage in order to dodge the discrimination that came with that heritage. But my feeling is that there was a substratum of Melungeon myths and stories and attitudes in Kingsport as I was growing up. It

wasn't identified as such, but it was there and it had an impact on us, and I believe it primed those of us exposed to it to recognize the truth and importance of Melungeon material as it began to emerge into the daylight in the 1970's with the outdoor drama in Sneedville, and in the 1990's with the publication of Brent Kennedy's ground-breaking book THE MELUNGEONS: THE RESURRECTION OF A PROUD PEOPLE, and all that followed from that.

Those of you who are genealogists may have had the experience I've had of being in a dusty little county courthouse looking for information about a long-dead ancestor and suddenly finding yourself in exactly the right deed book to give you the information that you need -- or walking through a country graveyard where you've never been before and finding yourself standing in front of the gravestone you've been searching for. In other words, I believe that the non-rational, the irrational, the intuitive, the imaginative is perhaps more important than the rational and analytical in terms of leading us to the knowledge that we need to have to make sense of our lives.

When I started writing fiction, I invented a character for my first published novel KINFLICKS named Clem Cloyd. I made him Melungeon. My conscious motive was just to make him more interesting. This was in 1975. Strangely, twenty years later when I saw Doris Ullman's iconic photo titled "Melungeon Boys", Clem Cloyd in my mind looked exactly like one of those boys. I want to read a passage from KINFLICKS about Clem:

"I had always known Clem. We were inseparable throughout childhood, riding our ponies all over the farm and swimming in the pond and building forts in the woods. There was an old springhouse on a hill above his house; it was a weathered board construction that sheltered the spring, which bubbled out of the hillside, and flowed across the stone floor in a wide channel, exiting into a pipe leading to the Cloyd kitchen. It had formerly served as a refrigerating area for the farm's milk until the truck came to get it. It was deliciously cool and damp there during the endless sticky Tennessee summers, and Clem's parents let him have the ramshackle shed for a playhouse. He had built crude furniture from scrap lumber – a table and benches and shelves. He had installed a lock and a knocker on the door, and he kept all his most cherished possessions

there on the shelves – his Swiss army knife, a hatchet, his marbles and comic books and magic stones. I was the only other person allowed inside. Because, in a secret pact in which we pricked our index fingers and mingled our blood, we were married. I gathered pieces of bark for dishes and twigs for silverware. He made me a broom with his knife by peeling and tying a small witch hazel limb. I cooked ghastly concoctions from berries and nuts and mud, and cleaned more zealously than I've ever cleaned a real house since; and Clem stalked the woods pursuing manly activities, returning for our mock meals and bedtime, in keeping with our abbreviated time scheme in which six play days might very well pass during one real day.

Clem as a little boy was short and slight, with a tangled mat of black hair that hung in his dark serious eyes. He was an ideal subject for a Save the Children ad. His family was part Melungeon, members of a mysterious, graceful, dark-complexioned people whose ancestors were found already inhabiting the east Tennessee hills by the first white settlers. Admirers of the Melungeons claimed for them descent from shipwrecked Portuguese sailors, from deserters from DeSoto's exploring party, from the survivors of the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island. Detractors portrayed them as half-breeds, riffraff from the mating activities of runaway slaves and renegade Indians. The truth was anyone's guess. And in any case, the Cloyds themselves couldn't have been less interested. Their forebears having endured various persecutions due to being labeled "free persons of color", the present-day Cloyd family longed to forget all about their obscure origins and get on with the business of living. All that remained to mark them as Melungeon was their gypsylike good looks."

Ginny, my main character, alternates between relationships that offer her safety and security but lead to boredom, and ones that offer her adventure and excitement but lead to catastrophe. Clem is in the latter category and almost kills her in a motorcycle wreck. I meant for Clem to function rather like Heathcliff in *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*, representing the wild and the untamed and the nonrational life on the English moors, in contrast to the civilized, well-mannered, orderly life of the town. Looking back, what interests me most is that I saw Clem just as a plot device. I didn't realize then that he had anything to do with me or my family origins.

But this is how fiction often works. You find yourself writing things, and only later do you recognize their significance. Someone once said that writing fiction is like

driving your car at night through fog with no headlights. In other words, it's a process of discovery. It's not that you have a plot outline that you fill in. It's more that the story evolves as you write it, revealing to you things that you didn't know you knew and couldn't have foreseen.

And that was how it worked for me with Clem Cloyd. Once I'd invented him, I started wondering who the Melungeons really were and where they came from. I got a commission from NEW SOCIETY, a sociological journal in London, to do a feature on them. I went to Newman's Ridge and Sneedville, and I prowled around. But I couldn't find anyone who would acknowledge being Melungeon, or knowing any. This was in 1976 and the outdoor drama WALK TOWARD THE SUNSET had been running in Sneedville for several years, so I'm sure there were people around who would have talked to me about the Melungeons, but I never found them because I'm not a very good journalist. So I went back home and wrote my article, saying that the Melungeons had once existed and describing the various myths and theories about their origins. But I concluded that the Melungeons no longer existed. They had departed from Newman's Ridge and had been absorbed into the American mainstream, much as my Melungeon-descended high school friends had been assimilated into the teen culture at Dobyns Bennett in Kingsport.

So I thought this put the issue to rest for me. But as with unwanted guests, you usher them out the front door, and they circle around your house and re-enter through the back door. So twenty years later I was minding my own business when someone handed me a copy of Brent Kennedy's book. Well, it blew my mind, as I know it affected many

of you. Brent is a self-acknowledged Melungeon, and he included in his book his family tree. One of the branches on his tree is also on mine, twice because my grandparents were cousins. Brent and I turned out to be both third and fourth cousins. Not long after, I met Jack Goins, another skilled Melungeon genealogist, and he and I discovered that we're distant cousins on another line. So I appeared to have Melungeons hanging from several branches of my family tree.

This set me off on a quest that was to last for ten years. I was trying to determine who the Melungeons really were, where they came from, and whether or not my ancestors had been among them. I took a series of seven trips to places associated with the different myths and theories of Melungeon origins. I don't have time to say much about these trips, but in brief I went (1) back to Sneedville and Newman's Ridge. Whereas in 1976 no one would talk to me about being Melungeon, in 1996 no one would shut up about it. People were wearing tee-shirts that said PROUD TO BE MELUNGEON, and the local diner was featuring the Melungeon burger on their menu. A sea change had occurred.

(2) I went to Clintwood, Virginia, near where my paternal grandparents grew up. Both had seven brothers and sisters, but we'd never met any of them. This is something you often hear in Melungeon-descended families, as various family members try to distance themselves from their origins. I met several of my father's aunts and uncles and cousins and learned some very interesting things about our family.

(3) I went to Santa Elena off the South Carolina coast. There's an archaeological dig there. Santa Elena was founded by the Spaniards in the 16th century. From there an

exploring party of a hundred soldiers under a Portuguese captain named Juan Pardo set off to explore the southern Appalachians and to build a series of five forts staffed with soldiers. The Spaniards deserted Santa Elena and moved to St. Augustine, abandoning these soldiers in their wilderness forts. Some believe the soldiers survived and were absorbed into local Indian tribes and that this has something to do with the origins of the Melungeons. I also visited another archaeological dig near Morganton, North Carolina, of Joara, one of Juan Pardo's forts. The archaeologists there have found evidence that this fort was burned shortly after it was built.

(4) I visited Roanoke Island. You probably remember from American history classes that Sir Walter Raleigh sponsored a colony there. The leader returned to England for supplies, and when he got back, the colonists had disappeared. Some believe they moved inland and merged with Indian tribes, and that this has something to do with the origins of the Melungeons.

(5) Then I went to Jamestown. Several Jamestown settlers married Powhatan Indians, the most famous being John Rolfe and Pocahontas. Also in and around Jamestown were several free black men who married white indentured servants. So very early there was a tri-racial population in the Tidewater, and some believe they had something to do with the origins of the Melungeons.

(6) I also went to Lynchburg, Virginia, where there was a state hospital. Early in the 20th century many mixed race people were sterilized there at the behest of Walter Plecker, the state registrar who detested racially mixed people and was trying to eliminate them by preventing them from reproducing.

(7) I wanted to find out what it was like to cross the Atlantic in a sailing ship, since that was a journey all my ancestors except the Native Americans had to take. I did that crossing from Barbados to Lisbon on a ship with six computerized sails and a back-up engine, so that the journey took us two weeks instead of the six to eight weeks it took my ancestors. But two weeks were plenty for me since I get seasick! Once in Lisbon I went to Galicia in northwestern Spain where some of Juan Pardo's soldiers came from. I also went to Turkey to look into the theory that Melungeon origins have something to do with some two hundred Turkish soldiers who were enslaved by the Spanish in Cartagena, Colombia. Sir Francis Drake freed them and, some believe, dumped them on Roanoke Island, from where they may have moved inland and merged with Indian tribes.

During this time I was also attending the MHA Unions and hearing about the research others were doing. It was a very exciting and heady time, as so much fascinating information and speculations were being aired. I seem to remember Scott Withrow doing a riveting presentation on French Huguenots in the Southeast. There were papers on the Angolan presence in Virginia, Roma input, Sephardic Jewish and Moorish conversos trying to escape the Spanish Inquisition, etc., etc.

One of my great grandmothers was national genealogist for the DAR, and one of my Vanover cousins is a very skilled genealogist, so our family tree is quite fleshed out on the branches they researched. However, there are also big empty voids for which records often don't exist. Many of my ancestors were living on frontiers where records weren't kept in the first place. Or they were kept but later destroyed, as during the Civil War when many courthouses were burned down. Also, sometimes records were

destroyed by family members who wanted to eliminate evidence of ancestry they didn't care for.

Sometimes the only way to access hints about your ancestry in such blank areas of your tree is to do DNA tests. Luckily, DNA tests were becoming available to the public when I was on my Melungeon quest. My maiden name is Reed, so I started a project to test the Y chromosomes of Reed males. I still run that project, and we now have over 550 members and have identified well over 50 unrelated DNA signatures for Reeds in America. I also did every autosomal DNA test as it came out. These are the tests that give you percentages of your ethnic make-up. Unfortunately, as those of you who've taken these tests may have discovered, you get different results with each test you take. However, I think they're gradually becoming more reliable. As more people test and the databases grow larger, technicians are able to extract more of what they call Ancestry Informative Markers.

But one thing I've noticed is that although my percentages of minority ancestry keep shrinking with each successive test, the categories remain pretty much the same. In other words, I once had fairly large percentages of Native American, Subsaharan African, and Middle Eastern ancestry. The percentages are now much smaller but are still there, suggesting that the racial mixing in my family occurred some eight or nine generations back, probably in the eighteenth century.

So after ten years of searching, I had all this information, much of it conflicting. I was deeply confused about how to make sense of it. As I drove around on my trips, I enjoyed the witty signs we all enjoy on the marquees at the small country churches. But

one especially comforted me in my confusion: NEVER GIVE UP. EVEN MOSES WAS ONCE A BASKET CASE.

I decided to do what I always do when I'm confused about something: to write a novel about it. There are many reasons writers write novels, but one of the most common is to try to figure out who they are. If you look at the history of American literature, you find groups of writers trying through their writings to work out their identities, in contrast to the American mainstream. In the nineteenth century there were the New England writers. In the early twentieth century, the Southern writers. Then the Jewish writers, the African American writers, women writers, gay writers. And I think we can safely say that in the last twenty years there have been the Melungeon writers. The number of writers who have emerged from such a relatively small group of people is nothing short of amazing. There hasn't been much fiction, but a huge number of non-fiction books have been published by people inspired by the Melungeon story, or lack of a story: DruAnna Overbay's memoir of her childhood in Vardy; Mattie Ruth Johnson's memoir of growing up on Newman's Ridge; Wayne Winkler's excellent history of the Melungeons; I've already mentioned the incredible importance of Brent Kennedy's books; Manuel Mira writing about the Portuguese in the Southeast, and Eloy Gallegos writing about the Spaniards who were also there; Elizabeth Hirschman writing about the Jewish and Moorish conversos trying to escape the Spanish Inquisition; Frank Sweet in his writings about racial mixing in the United States, and many of the books he's published with his Backintyme Press; all the books in the Mercer University Press Melungeon series; Katie Vande Brake's literary criticism of Melungeon characters in fiction and her book about

the effects of technology on Melungeon identity; Jack Goins' books on Goins genealogy; Darlene Wilson on Appalachian metis; Arwin Smallwood on the Tuscarora; Paul Johnson on the Pell Mellers; Scott Withrow on free blacks; Stacy Webb on the Red Bones; Marvin Jones on the Winton Triangle. (I apologize to anyone I've left out, but this list is just off the top of my head.) It's been an amazing outpouring, one that probably isn't over yet, and it's been largely inspired by this pressing question of who we are.

So anyway, I wrote a novel to organize my research into my own identity. It's called WASHED IN THE BLOOD, and it consists of three parts. The first part is set in the sixteenth century. It features a sixteen-year old hog drover from Galicia who joins a Spanish exploring party into the interior of the Southeast. This character is loosely based on my Phipps ancestors. The sister of my great great grandmother Phipps is quoted in an oral history as saying that her ancestors always said they were Portuguese Indians, something heard in other Melungeon families as well. A recent DNA study done on the Y-DNA of descendants of those living on Newman's Ridge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found that those signatures were predominantly African and northern European. From this, the study concluded that the myth of Portuguese Indians was just that – a story made up to cover the fact of African ancestry. Speaking as a Phipps descendant, though, I feel quite indignant at having my ancestors called liars and cowards. I believe that they were trying to tell us, their descendants, who they thought they were. Many slaves in Virginia were from Angola, and Angola was a Portuguese colony. So if some Melungeons were descended from Angolans, they were telling the

truth when they claimed to be Portuguese. There's much more to be said about this issue and about the limitations of that particular DNA study, but I don't have time right now.

The second part of WASHED IN THE BLOOD is set in North Carolina at the time of the Cherokee Removal, the Trail of Tears, early in the nineteenth century. Its main character is loosely based on my Vanover ancestors. They came to New Amsterdam in the seventeenth century and worked their way down the Shenandoah to North Carolina, where my four times great grandfather Cornelius Vanover supposedly married a Cherokee woman.

Part three of my novel is based in Virginia early in the twentieth century. It's the era of the one-drop rule in which anyone with a single drop of African blood is required to be reclassified as African, including all Indians in the state of Virginia because their tribes had accepted Africans over the centuries. The Ku Klux Klan is reviving, and Walter Plecker and other state officials are trying to flush out and eliminate mixed race people by having them sterilized. The main characters of this section are loosely based on my grandparents. Coming from a mountain area with a racially mixed population, my two main characters, a couple, move to a new town and strive to distance themselves from their origins and rise in society.

Once I gave the manuscript to my editor in New York, he said, "Nobody's ever heard of the Melungeons, so why would anyone want to read a history about them?" He said the really interesting part of the story was how I had made all these discoveries about my family, so why didn't I write a memoir about that process? This seemed like an interesting idea to me so I did that, and the resulting memoir is called KINFOLKS. After

KINFOLKS came out, Mercer University Press published WASHED IN THE BLOOD. So KINFOLKS was published first but written second, and I never could have written it without first writing the novel. In other words, fiction allows me to imagine my way into the lived reality of my characters. Only once I have that experience of them as real (to me) people, can I back off and analyze them and make generalizations.

But I never used the word Melungeon in WASHED IN THE BLOOD, and that was deliberate. I didn't want to limit the process I was describing to any one particular group. During my ten years of research I had reached certain conclusions. One was that the Southeast was densely populated with Indian towns in the sixteenth century. When the early Spanish, Portuguese, and French Huguenot exploring parties, fur traders and settlers arrived, they brought diseases that killed off most of the Native Americans. You see figures as high as 97%. Many of the surviving women mated, by choice or force, with the Europeans, most of whom were young men. In 1619 the first slaves arrived in the Tidewater, and the plantation system took root. Various laws passed throughout the seventeenth century severely restricted the rights of "free people of color".

By the eighteenth century it was dangerous to have dark skin in coastal America, whatever the origins of that skin – African, Native American, Jewish, Moorish, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian, or any combination of those. If you had dark skin, you were in danger of being kidnapped, taken farther south, and sold into slavery. You were also in danger of being denied the vote, having your land seized and your marriage invalidated, and having your children barred from public schools. So these threatened people grouped together and moved to land the northern

European settlers didn't want, such as swamps and mountaintops. They kept to themselves and were often despised by the surrounding settlers. And this was the origin of many of the some two hundred mixed race groups similar to the Melungeons who lived throughout the southeast, as far west as Texas and as far north as New Jersey.

My second conclusion was that there is no one Melungeon story. I believe that every family has its own story – about how they arrived at the Atlantic coast, where they lived before their arrival, what ethnicities they brought with them, which ones they picked up as they worked their way inland. This means that any or all of the many Melungeon myths and theories could be true for one family or another. From the DNA results I've seen of various Melungeon-descended families, I would hazard a guess that many are true.

So those of us in this room, and others who couldn't be here today, have been on an amazing journey together. Writing is a lonely job. You're locked up alone in a small room for days on end. But it helped me a lot to be able to discuss what I was doing with others who shared my interests, and I thank the members of the MHA for keeping me company.

As to what I'm up to now, while I was doing DNA tests on my father and siblings, I was also doing them on my Yankee mother so that she wouldn't feel left out. I expected to find British and German and French ancestry for her, since that's all we'd ever heard about. But she turned out to have small percentages of North African and Native American heritage. I started reading New England history, and I was amazed to discover many of the same factors that produced the Melungeons and related groups in the South:

There were Portuguese fishing stations on the Maine coast in the sixteenth century. European ships wrecked off the coasts of Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard, and some survivors were rescued by local Indians. British soldiers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony went to live in native towns. Some British and French fur traders took native wives and had children with them. Slavery officially ended in the northern states in 1805, but unofficially it continued in some areas into the 1840's. So there was the mixing that occurred when slaves lived in close proximity to their masters.

All this resulted in racially mixed gene pools in the North, just as in the South. In fact, a friend of mine knows some Wampanoag Indians (the tribe native to Martha's Vineyard), and she asked them if they'd ever heard of the Melungeons. They said, "Yes, they're our Southern brothers and sisters."

Those of you who've taken some autosomal DNA tests may have received your percentage of Neanderthal ancestry. Unless you are purely African, you have a certain amount of this – between two and three percent for people of western European ancestry. The Neanderthals were living all over Western Europe when homo sapiens arrived. We don't know exactly what happened between them, but we do know that mating occurred and that those of us alive today contain DNA from Neanderthal ancestors. They must have been very bright and skillful because they managed to survive an ice age. So we are hybrids of Neanderthals and homo sapiens. And this appears to be how population formation works, all across the globe and throughout history. A population exists, invaders arrive, a new hybrid population emerges, containing some of the strengths and weaknesses of the parent populations.

I always used to feel envious of people who could say that they were Italian, or Irish, or whatever. But I've come to realize that they can say this only because they haven't looked very closely at their own genomes. I have a French friend who is about as French as you can get, both of her parents' families having been French for many generations. She recently did an autosomal DNA test and learned that she is not only French and German (they being almost identical genetically speaking), she is also Italian, Spanish, Scandinavian, and British. Thinking about it, I realized that her genome could possibly be said to mirror the history of France – the Roman invasions from Italy, the Moorish invasions from Spain, the Viking invasions from Norway and Denmark, the British invasions from the endless wars back and forth, the Norman Conquest of England, and the close ties between Lorraine in eastern France and Scotland.

By the same token, our Melungeon genome, taken as a whole, mirrors the founding of America – the Native Americans who were already here; the early Spanish and Portuguese, Jewish and Moorish and French Huguenot explorers and traders, trappers and settlers; the free blacks and enslaved Africans; the British and Dutch and German settlers. It's an enormously rich heritage, and one we should be very proud to possess.

So the truth is that in this country we are all racially mixed and we are all immigrants (including Native Americans), and the sooner we can recognize this, and accept it, and honor it, the better off we'll all be. Thank you very much.