Creating Real and Virtual Communities Among the Melungeons of Appalachia
by Jacob J. Podber

While the growth of the American "Sunbelt South" has become somewhat of a symbol of United States economic progress, Appalachia is often overlooked. As R. Eller writes in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* (1999), "Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite so persistently as Appalachia" (p. ix). This article examines how the inception of the Internet into this region of the country has altered people's lives. Oral history interviews illuminate ways that the Melungeon community, a tri-racial group in rural Appalachia that historically has been perceived as "other," has begun to use the Internet to define itself, as well as reach out beyond its geographical borders to form an electronic virtual community. The interviews raise the question, does this redefining of Melungeon identity mean that they have actually recreated a larger, electronically—rather than geographically—defined Melungeon community?

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan predicted that we were at the dawn of a new era of global communications where electronic technology would bring mankind into a "seamless web of kinship and interdependence" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 50). In the 1990s, the rapid expansion of the Internet seemed to suggest that this vision had already been realized. Certainly, in some areas of academic and business research, the Internet has provided an immediate global forum for access to new information and the exchange and diffusion of ideas. Many rural communities, however, have had some difficulty accessing this electronic "global community." In searching for rural Appalachians who have actively embraced the Internet, I found that few of the elderly participants whom I had previously interviewed about radio and television's arrival in Appalachia were Internet users. In fact, for some, the mere mention of the Internet brought suspicious looks. Several felt they were too old to learn about something they viewed as "not very personal" or "too technical." As I continued my search for an indigenous group within the Appalachian region that had actively embraced the Internet, I became aware of the Melungeon Heritage Association, which had been holding national conferences celebrating their tri-racial heritage for several years. In 1997, the Association held its first gathering called First Union. Second Union followed in 1998. In 1999, the Association

held a genealogical workshop, which I attended. Prior to the gathering, I placed a notice on the Melungeon Web site announcing that while at the conference, I would be doing face-to-face oral history interviews to discuss participants' Internet usage. I also relied on a snowball effect resulting from recommendations of friends and neighbors of those initially interviewed. This required interviewing participants living in diaspora who either had migrated to regions where their Melungeon heritage was not suspect or moved in search of better economic opportunities. I also traveled to Sneedville, Tennessee and Wise, Virginia (currently, areas with large Melungeon communities) to conduct interviews. In May 2000, I attended Third Union in Wise, Virginia, where I was listed on the program as someone who would be conducting oral history interviews. Most recently, I interviewed participants at the Association's Fifth Union in Kingsport, Tennessee, in May 2004 and at the Frankfort, Kentucky gathering in July 2005.

The Melungeon Community of Appalachia

Over the years, scholars and authors have constructed an identity for the Melungeons, variously defining them as "others" from outside the Appalachian community. For instance, *Webster's Dictionary, 2nd Edition* (1962) describes the Melungeon as "a member of a dark-skinned people of mixed Caucasian, Negro, and Indian stock, inhabiting the Tennessee mountains." According to Kennedy (1997), the Melungeon community descends from Turks, Jews, Portuguese, Spaniards and others who arrived on the southeastern seaboard of North America during the period between 1492 and the founding of Jamestown in 1607. Others have described the Melungeons as a people of Mediterranean descent who settled in the Appalachian Mountains as early as 1567 (see Bible 1975 and Ivey 1976). Today, sociologists and anthropologists have identified Melungeons as "tri-racial isolates" (see Berry 1963).

Indeed, the origin of the very word "Melungeon" is shrouded in mystery. Perhaps the most widely accepted explanation refers to the French word *mélange*, meaning mixture or mixing. In his memoirs, Tennessee jurist Judge Lewis Shepherd (1915) stated that "the term 'Melungeon' is an East Tennessee provincialism; it was coined by the people of that country to apply to these people and is derived from the French word, mélange, meaning a mixture or medley and has gotten into modern dictionaries." Cambiaire (1935) examined how French traders and trappers must have given the name of Melangeons[1] to the descendants of a few white men and Indians, who originated the strange race of people now lost among descendants of the first American pioneers (pp.4-6). As Melangeons from the French word, *mélanger*, means, "mixed breed," and as these people have English names, and speak old-time English, they certainly have English ancestry. They could not have invented this name, because they did not want it, and the few American settlers in Tennessee at the time did not know enough French to call these newcomers Melangeons. Either they brought this name with them after some Frenchmen gave it to them, or some Frenchmen who lived and trapped in the vicinity, gave it to them.

A far more exotic term, "melungo," possibly from the Afro/Portuguese word meaning shipmate, supports the legend that African/Portuguese sailors jumped ship while approaching the Southeastern seaboard of North America. They may have been escaping slaves or mutineers fleeing to the mountains to hide. Some support this version based on the fact that Melungeons can still be found on Tennessee and Virginia mountain ridges. In his well-received article "Melungeon History and Myth" in the *Appalachian Journal*, Everett (1999) points to suggestions that the Melungeon was descended from "marooned" Portuguese sailors, but continues that "never has anyone

demonstrated that any actual cultural or ethnic Iberian connections exist between the handful of 17th century Eastern Shore 'Portuguese'—or for that matter, Portuguese from anywhere else—and the late 18th, 19th and 20th century Melungeons of Southern Appalachia" (pp. 372-373).

The embracing of mythology to come to terms with identity is found throughout Melungeon folklore. In her doctoral dissertation, Ivey (1976) addressed the "exotic traditions of exploration in North America by a variety of national and racial groups . . . [who] became linked with the Melungeons" (p. 80). In addition to Phoenicians and Romans, legend traces the Melungeon back to the Lost Tribes of Israel. The finding of Hebrew-inscribed coins dating from 132–134 C. E. in Kentucky added some credibility to this belief, although the fact that they were not professionally excavated casts additional doubt on this theory (see Gordon 1971). Other legends contend that Melungeons are descendants of the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island, while still others trace Melungeon heritage back to Madoc, allegedly a Welsh explorer who landed on the southeastern part of North American in 1170 (see Deacon 1966).

Whatever their origins may actually have been, over the years, Melungeons have faced discrimination from other Appalachians, often because of their mixed ancestry. As a result, many have kept to themselves, settled in isolated communities, or migrated to other regions and are currently living in diaspora (see Price 1951). Discrimination also kept many Melungeons from claiming or celebrating their heritage. Triggered by recent books and documentaries, however, lately there has been resurgence in the Melungeon community as many have begun to reach out to embrace their diversity. Through their involvement with the Internet, they are becoming the authors of web sites that define their identity. In addition, this community building has led to the annual face-to-face gatherings that have attracted people from Appalachia, in addition to many living in diaspora, who are seeking to affirm their Melungeon heritage.

Conducting Oral History Interviews

Given the oral traditions of rural Appalachia, I believe oral history interviews can best convey how the Internet has helped Appalachian residents construct identity. In *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Thompson (1978) points to the fact that until recently the lives of ordinary people were given little attention by historians, who have traditionally focused their attention on social and political leaders. But examining the past from the point of view of the unprivileged perhaps provides us with a fairer reconstruction of history, thereby allowing history to become more democratic. It seems unreasonable to rely on history written exclusively from the point of view of the governing elite, given their isolation from the lives of ordinary people.

Using oral histories to record a community's history, however, is often fraught with challenges, particularly when the interviewer is viewed as an outsider by the interviewees. Some participants, uncomfortable with an interviewer entering into a region where many are burdened by low education levels, were at first reluctant to be recorded. Given the way the media often depict Appalachians in movies (*Deliverance*), television (*The Beverly Hillbillies*), and comic strips (*Snuffy Smith*), their reluctance is not surprising. As Williamson (1995) describes, John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey's "political pity and piety" during the 1960 West Virginia presidential primary "were mythologized by enough television and print media to transform 'Appalachia' overnight from a previously antique folk culture, on the periphery and therefore vaguely threatening to urban America, into a liberal cause, a social problem just begging to be solved and solvable given enough federal cash and volunteers in service" (Wil-

liamson, 1995: 251). In fact, Williamson argues that the media's coverage of Lyndon Johnson's 1964 visit to the front porch of a poor coal miner in Inez, Kentucky, forever established that "starving, dirt dumb" coal miner in front of his "tumbledown" porch as representative of Appalachia in the American psyche.[2]

It is therefore my intention to allow the participants I interviewed to express themselves using their own words. Doing this, I hope, will lead to a better understanding of Internet usage in rural Appalachia and its connection to the formation of Appalachian culture, identity, and community.

While conducting research for this project, I had the opportunity to interview 42 participants. Interviews took place at Melungeon Unions, individuals' homes, neighborhood potluck dinner parties, and barbershops throughout Appalachia. Some of the introductory questions I asked were:

> Do you use the Internet? (If no, why not?)
> What do you use it for? (Genealogy?)
> When do you use it?
> With whom do you use it?
> Has it changed your daily routine?
> Has it changed your life?
> How did you get interested in the Internet? (Who got you interested?)
> Where do you use it? (At home, work, library/public access?)
> Do you have Internet access at home?
> What sites do you visit? (Do you visit the Melungeon Web site?)
> Do you consider yourself to be a Melungeon?

This last question led to the examination of Melungeon identity construction.

Although there may not be a definitive written record of Melungeon history, through my oral history interviews I attempted to garner rich folkloric evaluations of how the participants view their ethnic heritage.[3]

Community and Identity

In the process of creating on-line communities, Melungeons have reexamined how others have historically labeled them. They have begun to challenge this identity through the creation of their own Web sites and listservs that define their ethnic community in a positive manner. In addition, the establishment of these virtual communities has helped to facilitate the annual re-Unions that attract both people living within Melungeon geographic communities and those in diaspora, thereby enlarging the face-to-face community.[4] These processes of Melungeon identity and community building can be illuminated by a number of concepts that have been examined by scholars in the past.

For instance, a number of studies have examined the relationship between the geographical definition of communities and their cultural construction. In looking at analyses of what constitutes community, Wilbur (1997) examines the word's etymological origins and finds that it refers "primarily to relations of commonality between person and objects, and only rather imprecisely to the site of such community"[5] (p.8). In *Imagined Communities,* Anderson (1983) examined how a community could be imagined around shared cultural practices, while Deutsch and Foltz (1966) have contested the notion of the nation as a geographically-based construction. To a certain extent, the Melungeons have been both culturally constructed and self-defined. On

one level, Melungeons historically have been defined geographically. At the same time, Melungeon identity in the past has been culturally constructed by "outsiders," as negative. This negative image was often defensively internalized by insiders through the construction of memory and myths. Today, the use of the Internet has created the opportunity for the Melungeon community to reach out beyond its geographical borders and construct its own identity in a positive way.

Another area of recent scholarship that helps to illuminate the process of Melungeon identity creation is the study of identity and self-presentation via the use of computer mediated technology. Dominick (1999) and Mitra (1997) examine self-presentation on an individual level via web page production. Dominick writes, "Simply defined, self-presentation refers to the process by which individuals attempt to control the impression others have of them. A personal web page can be viewed as a carefully constructed self-presentation" (p. 647). Others, like Mohammed (2004) and Fürsich and Robins (2002), examine the self-representation of groups or countries on the World Wide Web. Perhaps the most obvious concept that could be applied to the Melungeon case, however, is that of the "virtual community." Rheingold[6] (1993) describes virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. 5). Jones (1995) looks at relationships between individuals and virtual communities, arguing that electronic virtual communities are places where "individuals shape their own community by choosing which other communities to belong to . . . . [We] will be able to forge our own places from among the many that exist, not by creating new places but by simply choosing from the menu of those available" (p. 11). However, within the Melungeon community, members are not simply "choosing which other communities to belong to," they are in fact creating their own Web sites and listservs that help further redefine their identity more positively than past historical representations. Computer mediated technology has enabled Melungeons to establish a virtual community larger than the original geographic community through its inclusion of members from a common location (e.g. Sneedville, Tennessee and Wise, Virginia), in addition to members living in diaspora.

Indeed, many scholars have examined the impact technology has had on issues of communication. Some, like Postman (1993) and Pacey (1994) have been somewhat dubious about any positive influence technology has had on society, while others view the use of technology as an augmentation to the communication process (see Gates 1996 and Negroponte 1995). According to Baym (1998), "the dominant concern underlying most criticism of on-line community is that in an increasingly fragmented off-line world, on-line groups substitute for 'real' (i.e., geographically local) community, falling short in several interwoven regards"[7] (p. 36). In looking at virtual communities, Sherry Turkle (1996) states that "virtual experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we've achieved more than we have" (p. 3). However, it appears that a large number of Melungeons who initially met one another via the Internet took their cyber-friendship experience to the next level by actually meeting one another at the re-Unions, thereby creating a unique face-to-face community that combines elements of their geographical and virtual communities.

In *The Roots of Modern Media Analysis,* Carey (1997, p. 45) describes early communication technology as promising the distribution of information everywhere, "simultaneously reducing the economic advantage of the city and bringing the more varied urban culture out to the countryside." Because of their geographical isolation,

Melungeons living in rural communities appear to have much to gain from computer mediated communications, especially given its ability to dramatically decrease the significance of spatial distance. In *Communication and Culture,* Carey (1989) also states "Communication under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (p. 7). As Melungeons began to reach out to one another in hopes of forming community via electronic communications technology, some of their practices reflect Carey's ritual view of communication. At the same time, their use of the Internet has allowed many to trace their genealogy and form communities, both virtually and geographically. What follows are some of their oral history stories.

Finding Identity on the Net

Individual Identity

Many Melungeons have found a new way to reconfigure the past and reconstruct their identity through genealogical research, which, as a result, introduced them to the Internet. Tracking genealogical information on her grandmother, Nancy Sparks Morrison, originally from Charleston, West Virginia (more than 200 miles northeast of Sneedville, Tennessee), spoke of getting on the Net:

> I got a computer [in 1997] and started putting my genealogy into it. And I got on the Internet, and I put a note on one of the [genealogy] message boards saying I'm looking for this Indian grandmother, her name is Mary Collins. And I got a reply from a girl who lived in California and she said your Collins is in the area of the Melungeons, in the area where the Melungeons were. And I wrote her back and said, "Who the heck are Melungeons?" So she gave me a little brief thing, I went to the library and I found Brent [Kennedy]'s book and I sat down and read the book and it just clicked. I knew immediately that this was where this family belonged, was in this character. So, I began doing more research. I have about seven lines that I think are Melungeon connected . . . . . I don't think I would have found it without the Internet.[8]

Barbara Langdon, originally from Lincoln, Nebraska, tells a similar story of finding a Melungeon family connection on the Net:

> Well, when I first started doing research, the first thing I did was get on the Internet. There are several genealogy sites [where] you can post your names you are looking for and dates and regions and all that sort of thing, and I had posted information on my grandfather's family and within just a couple weeks I had contacts from distant cousins....A cousin I've never met told me this family story about how we were Melungeon, and the way he told his story, and the way that his family reacted to being Melungeon was very, very similar to my own experience with being told that we were Indian and the sort of barrier there about, you know.[9]

Having grown up in diaspora, neither of these women was ever told of their Melungeon ancestry as children, yet each credits the Internet with helping them find a part of their heritage. Some participants who found a Melungeon connection on the Net spoke of their families' acceptance (however reluctant) of Native American ancestry while avoiding any mention of African or Melungeon heritage. When speaking of how their parents and grandparents described their family heritage, the word "black" was often used euphemistically. Barbara explains: "They would say they were Black Dutch or Black Irish, or French, or Native American. They'd say they were anything

but Melungeon because anything else would be better . . . because to be Melungeon was to be discriminated against."[10]

While searching for her roots as a child, Barbara recalled a conversation with her grandmother:

> I remember asking her one time, kids at school were talking about nationalities, you know, what nationality are you? And I came home and I was asking what nationality we were and we were supposed, I think we probably were supposed to talk to our grandparents or something, so I asked my grandmother what nationality we were and she said, this is horrible what she said, but anyway, what she said was, well you know your grandfather was Irish and she says, you know that good strong Irish blood eats up any of the bad stuff, so don't you worry about it, you're Irish and, yeah, and so I kind of grew up with this Irish sense, that that was my culture, and then when I went to do the research I discovered that I have Melungeon, but the grandfather that she claimed was, you know, purifying our blood, was really only half Irish and that was it. That was all the Irish there is in the family.[11]

Seldom would participants even recall hearing the word Melungeon in connection with their families' ancestry. As Judy Bill, from outside of Knoxville, Tennessee, remembered, "We thought we were Black Dutch. We were told we were. My great grandfather said he was Black Dutch and he said his father was Black Dutch." When I asked Judy what that meant, she replied, "Nobody ever knew, nobody knows today. There's no such thing as Black Dutch I've learned, you know, so if I'm not Black Dutch, what in the world was I and it turned out I've got Melungeon connections. But, no, there's no such thing as Black Dutch."[12]

In *Almost White*, Berry (1963) writes,

> No one admits to being a Melungeon . . . . If you move among them, and win their confidence, an informant may tell you with a malicious glint in his eye that his next-door neighbor belongs to that worthless caste . . . . It is not a group one chooses to join, nor to which one takes pride in belonging. It is a caste, into which one is born and from which one escapes only surreptitiously. (pp. 39-40)

However, like Nancy and Barbara, many participants I interviewed appeared to be ready to embrace their identity. This is especially poignant given the history of discrimination many Melungeons faced over the years. However, there still appeared to be a great deal of soul-searching among the participants with whom I spoke. As Barbara put it, "I think right now my question that I am trying to answer is, how do we define Melungeon? And, in some ways it's, you know, it is a self-identifying, uh, let's see, how do I want to say that? Uh, in a lot of ways, people that are Melungeon are self-identified."[13] Fitzgerald (1991) tells us: "By defining itself, ethnically or otherwise, a group escapes classification by others" (p. 202). Perhaps this is the objective of the self-representation towards which the Melungeon community is headed.

Construction of a Virtual Community

Today, a simple Google search of the word Melungeon produces over 59,000 hits. Back in the mid 1990s, while a graduate assistant at the University of Kentucky, Darlene Wilson started one of the first Melungeon Web sites. Her intention was to create "a free space for all different ideas, all different theories . . . that was the potential that I think I

saw at the beginning, and many people saw at the beginning . . . an opportunity to begin to push over those barriers to trans-ethnic, multi-ethnic understanding."[14] As people began to use the Internet for genealogical research, the Internet became an invaluable tool. "The computer/Internet made it so much easier to do genealogy," Darlene continued. "People began to define family groups, family communities. That's still probably more resilient than larger trans-ethic or trans-family groups like the Melungeons . . . I think the Internet coincided with the inexpensive PC and a . . . exponential growth and opportunity for genealogical research. Okay . . . Without those three things in combination, there would not have been a Melungeon movement."[15]

For many, Melungeon Web sites became locations where those interested in their heritage, especially those living in diaspora, could find information not easily available elsewhere. Tammy Mullins, whose father was originally from Sneedville, Tennessee, grew up near Knoxville. The information Tammy found on Melungeon Web sites helped her identify with the group:

> I always knew that I was from someplace else because I was always looked at a little different in my county because of my hair and my skin type and things like that . . . . Well, I have very curly hair and dark skin and the eyes. I've also recently, through the Web page, found out about the bump in the back of the head and the shovel teeth[16] thing and I've got all of that and I'm like, this is just really weird because, you know, in school I felt like I was the only one, you know, because everybody else was like Hey, where are you from? because I looked so different. I felt alienated, really stood out from my Mom . . . she would hate to go to town with me in the summertime. I was really dark. She was really embarrassed.[17]

In addition, Melungeon Web sites proved important in getting participants involved in a virtual community. As Connie Mullins Clark recalled:

> About six months after I got my computer [in 1997], this article in the paper was explaining about a picnic about Melungeon heritage. People could send in, over the Internet, they could fill out the form, send it in, and you could be part of the picnic. So, I did that. I went directly to the Web, you know, hooked on the Web site, went in there, filled out my application, printed it off and sent it. So, I have been, since that time, I have worked directly with the Internet, helping with Web pages and working on research with Melungeons . . . . There's different Web sites now that you can go to and find the Melungeon information, but that's how I first got started with Melungeons. I had it [a computer], but to really get involved in the Internet itself was with the Melungeon connection.[18]

One way some people participated in community building was though developing common and inclusive rituals, which Carey (1989) describes as being "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.... The archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality . . . . Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama" (pp. 18-21). In joining the Melungeon listserv, I was surprised by the large number of e-mails I would receive each day. Often, the same individual would post ten to twenty messages within a twenty-four hour period and the content seemed to become less important than the ritual of posting messages. At times, the information conveyed via the unmonitored listserv was merely chitchat. For instance, over the course of one week, there were hundreds of messages discussing whether a type of heat rash was indicative of Melungeon heritage.

Madonna Cook, who was already aware of her Melungeon identity, used the Web

sites and Melungeon listserv to research her legacy. "I already knew of the Melungeon connection for my family when I went on-line so I started looking for other people who were researching these same lines to see if they had something that I didn't have. [I use] the Melungeon list, which has automatic e-mails coming to you, where they have a lot of discussion about the Melungeons. I was getting like 300 e-mails a day off that one list."[19] To those tracing their lineage, the number of postings could be overwhelming. Barbara spoke of trying to keep up:

> Just to keep up with what's happening with the Melungeon research, you know, at first, I was using the Internet, oh gosh, I was on there hours, you know, listening to everybody tell their stories. There are a lot of stories on that listserv. People telling their stories about, you know, why they think they are Melungeon or why they got interested in the Melungeons because of, you know, some story in the family, or they always knew, or they have a history of Black Dutch.[20]

As Melungeons began to reach out to one another on the Net, their multiple postings of messages on the listserv appeared to be in many ways a ritual that drew "persons together in fellowship and commonality" (Carey 1987, p. 7).

Coming "Face-to-Face"

Many have pointed to the Internet as the main catalyst for bringing so many members of the Melungeon community together for their first annual face-to-face meeting in 1997. Originally planned as a picnic for 50-60 people, First Union was attended by over 1000 people, many of whom expressed an interest in learning more about their heritage. Most attribute the large attendance to the Internet's broad reach. As Darlene recalls, "I will never forget the first show (First Union), when we were expecting a picnic of 60 people and close to 1,000 showed up. It was all by e-mail . . . it was all by Internet."[21] Cleland Thorpe spoke of meeting others at the Unions from outside of the Appalachia region, many of whom he had originally met on the listserv. "I talked to people in California and I then talked to people in Arkansas and Tennessee, up in Ohio and it was just, you know, it's really weird how we all have so much in common, and it really had to come from our heritage. I mean, it passed on, it had to be."[22] Had it not been for the simultaneous postings on the Net, it would have been unlikely that people Cleland met from California, Arkansas, and Ohio would have had access to the local newspaper article that announced the First Melungeon Union.

At the re-Unions, some Melungeons turned their internalized marginalization into a positive ethnic group identification that welcomed others, including myself. For example, because of my olive-colored skin, I was often assumed to be someone tracing his Melungeon heritage when I attended a re-Union. On more than one occasion, attendees would approach me and ask my last name in hopes of finding a link that would take them to a Melungeon surname missing in their family tree. When Darlene Wilson, author of one of the first Melungeon Web sites, invited me to stay with her at her home, she would often introduce me as a "pseudo-Melungeon." In my copy of Brent Kennedy's book, *The Melungeons,* the author inscribed the message "To my dear friend who without a doubt is an *original* Melungeon!" When attending my second and third Unions, participants I had interviewed during the previous years' conferences would often run up to me with open arms as if greeting a long lost family member. Even the use of the term "Union" in describing these gatherings conjured up images of a family reunion, as there was certainly a familiar feeling at each of these

conferences. In addition, I felt a palpable longing in the participants for connecting to one another, which brought to light the tie between the words common, community, and communication, as discussed by Dewey (1916). The bonds made in cyberspace seemed to create a bond similar to that of a real family which was reinforced when participants met at the re-Unions. As Nancy put it, "It amazed me, the emotional feeling that I got. It was just like we were coming to a family reunion."[23]

Is it Real or is it Virtual?

Turkle (1996) and Stone (1991)[24] address the issue that in certain situations, virtual communities can, for some, become a substitute for the real world. However, a large number of Melungeons who initially met one another via the Internet took their cyber-friendship experience to the next level by making a point of meeting one another at the re-Unions. In fact, many participants mentioned how nice it was to make human contact with people with whom they had created an electronic community. Nancy Sparks Morrison admits, "It's interesting because I never really felt that I belonged. I've always been kind of a private person . . . . I never felt really comfortable in this group or that group or the other group. It was just not—and when I found the Melungeons and the first time I went to Wise, Virginia, [where the First Union was held] I felt like I was coming home. It amazed me, the emotional feeling that I got."[25] Claude Collins had similar feelings: "It was more interesting Saturday up at Berea [at the Melungeon genealogical workshop] when I could look people in the eye and hear them talk. I was standing there Saturday in one of these meetings and this lady come runnin' up and she threw her arms around my neck and she said 'Oh, I'm so glad to see what you look like', 'cause she had e-mailed me dozens and dozens and dozens of times."[26]

So, it appears that for many Melungeon virtual community members, the establishment of a face-to-face community was an important evolution of their on-line experience. As Wayne Winkler explained, "It was a real virtual community and one that really made itself more of a real physical community by creating First Union and then the subsequent Unions. These people who had met only on-line wanted to meet in person. And they wanted to just get to know each other as real people so a . . . a . . . the Internet, I think, is really the thing that brought all this together starting in about 1997-1998 . . . right along in there."[27]

As with any first meeting, for some participants, like Barbara, there still was a bit of apprehension:

It was sort of strange coming to Wise the first time and not having met these people, but having created a community, an electronic community, I'd had experiences before with having a community and bringing that community together through electronic media, through the Internet. And so I was sort of nervous about what was going to happen since all of us had met on the Internet and had not met each other yet, because people that I didn't even know were paying attention to what I was saying, you know. "Oh Barb, I've been listening, you know I've been reading what you've been saying on the Internet and I'm so happy to meet you and what do you think about . . . . " You know, it was strange in a very pleasant sort of way, but, it, I didn't know what to expect, I was a little apprehensive and I wondered if I was nuts and what am I doing going to meet all of these people from the Internet. Yeah.[28]

The phrase, "What am I doing going to meet all of these people from the Internet," suggests that the Internet is an actual place in space rather than an electronic medium. Addressing the metaphor of a digital world, Sproull and Faraj (1996) tell us, "When

e-mail is used for group conversations, the network takes on the characteristics of place—like the office coffee pot or the local watering hole"[29] (p. 143). In fact, the bonds made in cyberspace by most participants I spoke to appeared to last. When speaking of people she has met on the Internet, Barbara admits, "I keep checking the [Melungeon] Web pages to see what's going on and I keep in contact with, there's key people, there's some people that I have long-lasting relationships with now through the Internet that I stay in touch with."[30]

In addition to meeting cyber-friends at Unions, some, like Nancy, spoke of how she gets together with virtual community friends whenever they pass through the region. "I have had some people who were traveling who came by my house and stopped in the area and we had luncheon and visited. They were doing genealogy research. Going to visit family . . . . We go to dinner and lunch here and talk and meet. So it's the Internet. The friendship started on the Internet then continues here or as people are coming through."[31]

So it appears that, even for those living in diaspora, the Internet has enabled individuals interested in Melungeon heritage easy access to the virtual and face-to-face communities. For participants like Tammy Mullins, whose father grew up in Sneedville, but who currently lives outside of counties with a notable Melungeon presence, the Net brought information about the Melungeon community she might not have found elsewhere. As Tammy explained: "I feel like the Internet has really opened up the world to everyone. And also, it's really opened up the world for Melungeon people because, basically, without the Internet and there are very few books that are written, I mean, where would you be? You wouldn't know where to start so actually, the Internet really opened up a big space for me to be able to do research."[32]

Conclusion

The Internet has allowed participants to connect to one another and to the world at large. It has also allowed the Melungeon population, including those living in diaspora, to redefine their individual identities, to re-envision their community as being more numerous than they had originally imagined, and to define themselves less as a geographic community than as an electronic community. In addition, unlike some virtual communities that may become substitutes for real geographical communities, Melungeon Net users often expanded their on-line experiences to include face-to-face relationships. Thus we see that the Internet can be used as a powerful tool to unify even the most isolated and dispersed groups. Its potential as a public forum is especially powerful in a region where getting to a town meeting could require traversing mountainous terrain or traveling great distances, as is the case in much of Appalachia.

It may be too soon for participants to accurately gauge the Internet's immediate impact on their lives given that this new medium is evolving on almost a daily basis. The Melungeon case demonstrates that further research in other rural and/or dispersed communities throughout the world will show the Net's potential for becoming a unifying, perhaps even, an egalitarian tool.

Endnotes

1. Although "Melungeon" is the accepted current spelling, to remain faithful to cited text, other spellings will be found throughout this body of work.

2. It could be argued that the "Hillbilly" icon was well established in the American psyche (for example, in nineteenth century literature and newspapers) long before these images appeared on TV news programs in the 1960s.

3. For a fuller discussion on methodology see, Podber, 2003.

4. For further discussion of diasporic communities that have developed on the Net, see, Gabrial, 1998.

5. Also see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. Oxford U P, 1989.

6. Also see Davis, 1999; Gaines & Shaw, 2001; Hafner, 2001*;* Hill & Hughes, 1997; Holmes, 1997*;* Jones, 1998; Kim, 2000; Kolko, et al., 2000; Norris, 2001; Preece, 2001; Rheingold, 2002.

7. Also see Silver, 2005; Kolko, et al., 1998.

8. Interview with Nancy Sparks Morrison.

9. Interview with Barbara Langdon.

10. Ibid. Given that I was on a first name basis with most of the people I interviewed, after using a participant's full name the first time I refer to them, I will use only their given name on subsequent reference or citation.

11. Ibid.

12. Interview with Judy Bill.

13. Langdon interview.

14. Interview with Darlene Wilson.

15. Ibid.

16. In addition to dark skin and hair, other characteristics generally accepted as identifying markers of people of Melungeon heritage are a pronounced bump on the back of the head and a curving of the inner surface of the front teeth which makes the shape of a shovel.

17. Interview with Tammy Mullins.

18. Interview with Connie Mullins Clark.

19. Interview with Madonna Cook.

20. Langdon interview.

21 Wilson interview.

22. Interview with Cleland Thorpe.

23. Morrison interview.

24. For a discussion of how the Internet is not simply understood as either a "place-less cyberspace" or a place separate from the "real world," see Miller and Slater, 2000.

25. Morrison interview.

26. Interview with Claude Collins.

27. Interview with Wayne Winkler.

28. Langdon interview.

29. Also see Jones, 1995.

30. Langdon interview.

31. Morrison interview

32. Mullins interview.

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