Preface

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Yes I’m proud to be a Lumbee Indian, yes I am.
When I grow up into this world
I’m gonna be just what I am.
My mother and father are proud of me,
They want me to be free.
Free to be
Anything I want to be.

Willie French Lowery,
“Proud to Be a Lumbee,” 1975

Other Americans sing their national anthem at baseball games, but Lumbees sing theirs at funerals. We sing it when we need to tell our story, at times and places when our people come together to overcome obstacles and to heal. The song that many members of the Lumbee Indian tribe, including myself, consider our national anthem is Willie French Lowery’s “Proud to Be a Lumbee,” which he originally wrote as a children’s song. With its memorable tune, the song is like any national anthem: a creed, an affirmation of values and beliefs about the best of our community. But it also tells us who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Willie passed away in 2012, and at his wake, a former speaker of the Lumbee Tribal Council proposed that we indeed make “Proud to Be a Lumbee” our official national anthem as he called for the 300-person crowd to sing it.

Our wakes are wonderful examples of Lumbee pride—pride we take in how we defy expectations, in how we readily celebrate our victories, and in our refusal to give up. Our wakes are not always somber occasions, especially when the departed was much loved or had suffered mightily. They are thick with hellos and how-are-yous, loving embraces, laughter, and tears. Singing, at least
Music had a special significance for me at Willie’s wake; he was my best friend and husband until he died at age sixty-eight of Parkinson’s disease and dementia. The first time I laid eyes on him, he was singing “Proud to Be a Lumbee,” and in the intervening years I spent thousands of hours with him and his music.

When the speaker called for Willie’s anthem that night, I turned around to look for our then four-year-old daughter, Lydia, who had been exuberantly socializing with the crowd as she was passed from lap to lap of watchful, caring family and friends. Lydia knew the song, and I wanted to sing it with her. Before I could locate her, I heard her voice over the loudspeaker. Confused, I looked to the front of the church and saw a cousin lifting her up to stand on the podium, microphone in hand. Like her daddy would have, Lydia led the whole crowd in the song—the younger generation carrying the older one into the next world. I watched Lydia stand over her father’s casket and sing with her ancestors and her living community to back her up, and I shed a new round of tears. Even in death and pain, we still rejoice. Lumbees see ourselves as blessed, privileged even, to be able to sing through our tears.

With Willie’s words, Lydia sang not just her own story; she told the stories of generations of Lumbees who—through European settlement, African slavery, wars against tyranny at home and abroad, and renewed commitments to justice—have survived to be a self-determining people. Willie’s national anthem crystalizes the importance of freedom and justice, those most American of values, to the Lumbee people, despite—or because of—the ways the United States has marginalized us. The story of America and its defining moments is not complete without the story of our people.

Lydia will learn one version of the history of the country in school; at home, she will learn the history of her people. Between the two, she will come to understand herself both as an American and as a Lumbee. In a few years she will learn about the first English “Lost Colony,” one of many origin stories that define who belongs and who does not. Her Lumbee ancestors appropriated that story and made it their own. She already knows that America marks the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence at the same time Lumbees hold our annual reunification celebration—what we call Lumbee Homecoming. Eventually, she’ll hear classmates deride her people as downright dumb for celebrating the birth of the country that killed them and took their land. She’ll learn to respond that
we’re very much alive and still on our land and that there is no conflict between the Lumbee people and independence.

After those early stories, veiled by loss and legend, the Lumbee experience with America’s defining moments becomes even more dissonant. Lydia will learn about the Trail of Tears, not as a chapter of America’s Manifest Destiny but as her own ancestors’ near erasure from the land. She will learn about the wars of empire and assimilation on the Plains and in the Southwest. She will learn that back home in North Carolina, her great-great-great-grandfather Henderson Oxendine and his cousin Henry Berry Lowry lived and died, hunted down like the Indians of the Wild West. She will, unfortunately, encounter disbelief from classmates who tell her “You don’t look Indian” because those Wild West images are all they know. They will not know, though I expect she will tell them, that her elders, many of whom were veterans of World War II, defied those stereotypes when they ambushed a Ku Klux Klan rally in 1958. She will defy the expectation that she and her people are violent degenerates, an image born of our forceful resistance to white supremacy, nurtured by the westerns, and matured during Ronald Reagan’s war on drugs and the criminalization of the poor. And she will hear the story of the first Lumbee inauguration ceremony, before she was born, when her daddy played “Proud to Be a Lumbee” to an overflowing, cheering crowd. Lydia will learn how finally, after fighting to establish and uphold the U.S. Constitution, the original people of this place wrote their own constitution.

“When we are young,” wrote the novelist Louise Erdrich, “the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so also are we, sentence by sentence, until the story takes shape.” Words and stories about herself and her people shape who Lydia is. She is fortunate to have “Proud to Be a Lumbee” ringing in her ears; she can make her own decisions about being American and being Lumbee. Her future depends on how Americans make and remake the United States and on whether they fully acknowledge the existence and survival of American Indians. We are not only villains or victims; not just a collection of myths, legends, and stories. American Indians are the co-creators of this nation of “one, yet many,” on which rests so much of the world’s hope.

Any project on American Indian history begins with recovering the words, sentences, and stories that have been erased. That invisibility shaped me from a young age, as I absorbed my family’s stories. Sometimes they emerged whole, but they mostly came only as tidbits of information, puzzle pieces—not because the story is unknown but because no one person knows the whole story. This book is one Lumbee person’s attempt to assemble those pieces, a task made even more interesting amid other southerners’—and Americans’—routine
mourning over lost histories, lost colonists, and lost causes. Growing up in
North Carolina, outside of the Lumbee community but still connected to it,
I’ve been conscious that my ancestors were the original southerners, here be-
fore something called the South ever existed. Yet other Americans, especially
southerners, freely mourn and memorialize their histories being lost or erased,
all the while challenging our right as Lumbees to do the same. Instead, others
look at the history we know perfectly well—if in pieces—and tell us we are not
who we say we are, that we don’t have a history, that we are not important. This
book is an answer to that hypocrisy.

Lumbee history teaches us that the United States is a constellation of communi-
ties bonded together through success and failure, death and rebirth, family and
place. Each of these communities has a right to self-governance, but not at the
expense of its neighbors. Our failures teach us that we have a responsibility to
be fair. Native people have played integral roles in the struggles to implement
the United States’ founding principles and distinct roles in the expansion and
defense of their own and the United States’ territory. They have done so not
just as the “First Americans” but as members of their own nations, operating in
their own communities’ interests. Accordingly, Native peoples have the right to
open debate and disagreement within their tribes, just as other Americans argue
about their own differences of opinion.

Nations emerge from both civil debate and violent clashes; in this sense,
the Lumbee tribe is not different from the American nation. But often, when
tribes debate either with other tribes or within themselves, the U.S. federal gov-
ernment labels them as illegitimate or dysfunctional. “Can’t you all just agree?”
is a common refrain among policy makers when confronted with differences of
opinion. Yet to insist that all Native nations must agree when the United States
does not hold itself or any other nation to that standard is a simple, profound
hypocrisy.

Surviving Native nations—groups of individuals with unique claims on
this land—are forcing Americans to confront the ways in which their stories,
their defining moments, and their founding principles are flawed and inade-
quate. The myth of U.S. history—that we are a nation of immigrants, struggling
to find common ground and expand freedoms for all—leaves no place for Na-
tive nations. Excluding Native peoples, or telling only their stories of dispos-
session, does not honor the complexity of those communities or of American
history. Lumbee history provides a way to honor, and complicate, American
history by focusing not just on the dispossession and injustice visited upon
Native people but also on how and why Native survival matters. Native nations are doing the same work as the American nation—reconstituting communities, thriving, and finding a shared identity to achieve justice and self-determination.

In many respects, Lumbee history does not conform to the expected story of Native Americans. The federal government did not remove us, nor has it fully recognized us as a sovereign Native nation. And like so many other Native groups, the federal government does not define us. Lumbees have consistently faced, and often aggressively challenged, the categories Americans use to describe people by race, tribe, or recognition status. Lumbee history suggests that the need to rationalize slavery, segregation, and the elimination of Indian people created those categories.

These three systems of oppression ran distinctly counter to the nation’s founding principles but nevertheless became normalized. All of these systems were seen, felt, and experienced by Indians as well as by non-Indians. Through Lumbee history, we can see how they are related. Structural discrimination based on race and federal recognition of Indian tribes emerged from these three interrelated systems and continues to prevent Americans from fully implementing our founding principles. At the same time, Lumbee history shows how coexisting systems—of kinship and place, celebration and reciprocity, togetherness and debate—also provide ways of making sense of our world.

The history of Native people, just like American history, is a story of survival, not disappearance. The integrity and coherence of Native communities, even in the face of the intense destruction and ambivalence of colonialism, is a fundamental principle rather than something to be proven or justified. I chose Lumbee history as the vehicle to explore a relationship between U.S. history and Native American history because I know it best, but not just because I am Lumbee: I have made our history the primary subject of my intellectual work since the 1990s. The combination of my identity and my professional interests has given me many sources to draw on, including oral and written sources, conversations that have sprung from personal relationships, and my own experience with our people and places and with other Americans’ ideas about us. For more distant time periods, the sources I have drawn upon are much the same as any historian would use—often fragmentary documents, public records, and observations (more or less accurate) about the Lumbees. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the written evidence is more detailed and complex, and oral histories, told by Lumbees rather than about them, have become more available. In these more recent eras my own relationship to the community has become most visible. I explore this relationship through
the first-person interludes that precede each chapter, and sometimes in the chapters I cite personal conversations with family, neighbors, and friends who participated in events. I am bound by two sets of ethics that overlap heavily: a Lumbee’s obligation demands accountability to the people who have lived history, and a historian’s responsibility demands accountability to the widest possible sources.