Interlude: Watts Street Elementary School, Durham, North Carolina, 1978

Published by

Lowery, Malinda Maynor.
The Lumbee Indians: An American Struggle.

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I blurted out the first thing that came to mind: “Well, I was born in a tipi.”

At the lunch table in elementary school, a little girl had just told me that she didn’t believe I was Indian, because to her I didn’t look “Indian.” Some Lumbees do match the stereotype, but with my curly hair, average cheekbones, and freckled, olive skin, I don’t. Until she tried to tell me I wasn’t who I said I was, I’d never realized I was supposed to look different than I did. If I couldn’t look “Indian” enough to please her, then I thought I should tell a story about myself that sounded “Indian.” My dad loved Gunsmoke and everything western, and I had become so accustomed to associating images from those movies and TV shows with “real Indians” that my little brain believed that real Indians were born in tipis.

It didn’t really occur to me that I had told the girl an outright lie (I had been born in a hospital in Robeson County), but I didn’t doubt that I was a “real Indian.” I learned Lumbee history at home and American history at school; I learned to think of myself as an American and as a Lumbee. I knew the Lumbees were not the same as other Americans who came here later; we had different stories. At the age of seven, I had absorbed America’s narratives and collective memories of Indians. These stories were like a static interference that ran between my education as a Lumbee person and as an American person. They not only influenced me but also influenced this other young person who demanded a truth from me that did not match the one I carried. I found myself forced to tell a truth—not the truth as it happened, but a truth that both she and I could accept as logical and authentic. That was the first time I remember authoring my own story. And even though I got it wrong, I don’t reject it now—it was the honest reflection of a child who had no true idea of how much her identity did not match the stereotypes or of how powerful the stereotypes were.
American governments—both state and federal—have built their policies toward the first Americans on the same architecture of logic and authenticity my classmate possessed. When American Indians tell their own stories, they sound dissonant, out of sync with these arrangements. To me, as a Lumbee and an American, this architecture is distracting, but it doesn’t interfere with who owns the story and how we use stories to become a people.