The Lumbee Indians
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I have no memory of her, except the stories I’ve heard. Everyone in my family holds up my father’s mother, Lucy Sanderson Maynor, as the exemplar of how women retained authority through reciprocity. She died of cancer in her late fifties, before I was born. Her mother, my great-grandmother Martha, was a bootlegger who converted her extra income from selling wine into providing more for her family and neighbors. She probably showed Lucy that growing and canning enough food to give away to people in need was not only moral but profitable. Lucy’s husband, my grandfather, had no say over this redistribution, and on one occasion such redistribution extended to informal adoption: Lucy decided to raise her sister’s daughter, Anne, when Anne was three or four. Lucy often complained bitterly that Anne was neglected. My father, who was in elementary school at the time, clearly remembers coming in from working in the fields one afternoon with his sisters Faye and Millicent and seeing their cousin Anne standing on the porch. They immediately knew that she was to be their sister, and all the children began weeping with joy and relief. When he told me this story, almost eighty years later, my dad cried again, recalling the extreme emotion of the moment, their happiness, and memories of his mother as savior of his soon-to-be-sister Anne. Taking on another child in lean times would not have been an easy decision, and I asked my father what my grandfather had to say about it. “Well, nothing,” my father said, looking a bit puzzled at the question. “I mean, he might have driven her over there [to get Anne], but it was her decision, not his.” Keeping the family whole was one of my grandmother’s legacies.

Lumbees recognize a distinction between keeping a family “whole” and keeping a family “pure.” Blood, especially “pure” blood, acquired enormous value in the South of my great-grandmother Martha. Her generation followed the Lowry War and its possibilities for interracial cooperation; she witnessed the ascension of white supremacy in the absence of slavery. Without slaves as property, family—and blood—became property. White blood was the most...
valuable type of this property. In this new era, white blood didn’t make you white; only “pure” white blood made you white.

Great-Grandmother Martha’s family history illustrates how this transition came about. I have two “white” ancestors whom I know of. More accurately, I’ve always been told they were white (when they came up in discussions at all), but the written record is murky at best. Both are on my father’s side, one great-grandfather and one great-great-grandmother. My great-grandfather Tom Sanderson married Great-Grandmother Martha in 1903. He was twenty, she seventeen. Though he produced plenty of children, Tommy wasn’t much of a family man. He preferred drinking and died at age forty-eight, and so Martha lived another four decades, providing for the family by taking in laundry and bootlegging. It apparently never bothered her that her source of income was the thing that kept her husband incapacitated; maybe she never liked him much anyway, and my sisters tell me of her independent mind. My oldest sister, the adventurous one, recalls spending lazy, sunny afternoons on an old mattress in the yard, underneath the pecan trees, listening to Martha’s ribald stories. It was from Great-Grandmother Martha that my sister learned the brazen, nay revolutionary, phrase, “The woman who taught me to read was a dangerous woman.” My other sister, next in age and the polished one, had a different reaction: “Ooh, I was scared of that mattress!” Martha was earthy and practical, and because of her profession she came into contact with every manner of person and could converse equally with all of them. Martha died eight years before I was born; the fact that I know nothing about Tom from family tradition but a lot about Martha signals that kinship knowledge outweighs racial categories in Lumbee memory. But it also fits neatly into the story of race after emancipation, the “one-drop rule” that explains how my great-grandmother’s Lumbee “blood” made her children Lumbee.

Except consider the paper trail, which like our river twists and turns in unpredictable ways, ever thwarting the historical traveler. On the 1900 U.S. Census, Tom is listed as Indian. On the 1903 marriage index, Tom and Martha are both listed as “Croatan Race.” On the 1910 census, Tom and Martha are white. When he registered for the draft in World War I, he was Indian. In 1920, they are Indians. Dead, he was Indian. Nevertheless, my family regards Tom as white, possibly due to his derelict behavior as much as what his race may have been. Crossing the color line in Robeson County wasn’t an act of passing so much as it was a bureaucratic bungle. Record keepers—and Lumbees—could make up racial identities as they went along, and it changed very little about kinship realities.²

But we can’t fully understand race and kinship without knowing Martha’s family tree. Martha’s father was Patrick Lowry, a Methodist minister and justice
of the peace during Reconstruction. He preached at New Hope Church, where his great-grandson, my father Waltz, along with Patrick's many other descendants, was baptized. Patrick was also Henry Berry’s oldest half-brother; Allen was their father, but they had different mothers. But Patrick and Henry Berry were really of different generations; when Allen and William were killed, Patrick was already in the ministry while Henry Berry was just seventeen. And even though both men undoubtedly knew how to do the same things—farm, build, hunt, shoot, kill—Patrick channeled those skills in a different direction. In any case, Patrick used his influence to promote racial harmony and Indian advancement. When Robeson County drew school districts in 1872, the same year Henry Berry disappeared, it grouped black and Indian children together. In Burnt Swamp Township, where Patrick resided, he chaired all six school committees; three committees were all-Indian, and three had both Indian and black members.3

Ten years later he married his third wife, Mary Callahan, who was thirty years his junior. Mary also had three husbands; Patrick was the second. My great-grandmother Martha came along three years after Patrick and Mary’s wedding, in 1885. Mary might have been white, or maybe not. I’ve seen a picture of the lady, and while I wouldn’t rely on appearance alone to judge someone’s identity, she looks white, maybe Indian. I’ve certainly been told she was white. However, Mary is listed on the 1870 census as mulatto; this actually means little, because “mulatto” was a common census designation for Lumbees through 1900. But since Callahan is not a common Lumbee surname, we might assume that she was black, or perhaps that her father was either white or black and her mother was Indian.4 The marriage records, however, list both Patrick and Mary as Negro, as they do for all the Indian couples in Robeson County through 1886; then in 1887, all Indian partners are abruptly listed as “Croatan.” The census also described her first husband as mulatto, but their marriage certificate says both of them are white. In 1910 and 1920, during her marriage to her third husband, the census lists them both as Indian. Her own obituary says she is Indian, and she was buried at Harper’s Ferry Church, where Patrick Lowry also lies. It would seem that racial arbitrariness continued unabated in Robeson County, but Mary came to identify as Indian, whatever her background.5

In 1882, it was Negro for Patrick and Mary; in 1910, it was white for Tom and Martha; in 1920, it was Indian for Mary and Martha. All this nonsensical crossing of the color line partly indicates that white record keepers did not judge race by appearance; the mark made on the paper conformed to whatever social expectation white supremacy dictated at the moment. Especially regarding marriage, census takers and county recorders must have been reluctant to
actually write down that the couple belonged to different races and so made them the same race, whatever their ancestry was. To write down that they were of different races would have violated state laws about intermarriage between whites and nonwhites. Under slavery, the mother’s blood determined racial identity and legal status; without slavery, either parent’s blood could determine racial identity, but legal status was a different matter—everyone was free.

But that didn’t mean everyone was equal. Because of my two “white” ancestors, my “white blood” is approximately one-eighth. If we turned the tables of white supremacy, I would be considered white, racially speaking. But descent from whites does not make me white in this society. White men who had lost their slave property turned blood into a kind of property that they could define and divide however they wanted to suit their purposes. Purity became something white men monitored and controlled. Race and blood purity was a magician’s trick that led to the end game: maintaining white supremacy without slavery.

I’d laugh if I didn’t feel like crying. Lumbees seem to have a particular reputation for multiracial ancestry. Perhaps the problem is how people have taken “race” as a concept for granted. Definitions of race are inseparable from unrealistic notions of purity and the corrupt enslavement of people’s bodies, the system that nurtured the nation’s very founders and founding principles. The way that Lumbees have discussed the difference between race and kinship in our stories is evidence of the instability of race. We are Indians not because we have to be racially Indians—we belonged to this land and to each other long before settlers applied the concept of race here. Martha’s descendants were Lumbees because they had Lumbee family, because they knew the community’s expectations and followed them, and because they belonged. Racial systems exclude; kinship systems include. In a kinship system, Great-Grandmother Martha is unquestionably Indian, as are her children. In a race system, they would be half-breeds, or at best excluded from both the Indian and white communities.

But for Lumbees, belonging was everything, a shield from outsiders’ ideas about who we were. My mother liked to recall how on occasion my grandparents would allow her to ride with them to Lumberton on tobacco market day, in the 1940s and early 1950s, when she would have been six or eight years old. One of twelve children living in a three-room house, she craved her parents’ attention: “I used to sit in the back of the car and pretend I was an only child,” she said in a sarcastic, wistful tone, mocking her own naïveté. Those memories eclipsed any others of Lumberton during the Jim Crow era. I asked her about the restrooms for “White,” “Indian,” and “Negro,” and the separate water fountains for each race, and the movie theater, with its balcony divided into two sections,
one for blacks and one for Indians. She claimed she didn’t remember any of that and instead quipped, “Mama never would let us go to the movies anyway—she’d just say, ‘What if Jesus returned and found you in a movie house?’,” a chestnut that speaks volumes about my grandmother’s religious conservatism, her wily ways of diversion, and her protectiveness. The fact that my mother remembers little of the overt signs of discrimination speaks to her belief that hard work brings success, a belief so strong that she has excised experiences that might contradict her maxim.