Epilogue

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And the last enemy to be destroyed is Death.

1 Corinthians 15:26 (NIV)

ADOLPH DIAL AMPHITHEATER, NORTH CAROLINA INDIAN CULTURAL CENTER, RED BANKS, SUMMER 2007

The Adolph Dial Amphitheater seats 700 people and overlooks a small man-made lake in the middle of the North Carolina Indian Cultural Center. The lake was created for fishing and canoeing; the Lumber River runs behind the theater. One can no longer eat the fish caught there because the mercury levels in the water are too high. Despite its pollution, we would not reject the river any more than we would reject a family member with a disability. In fact, the land where Strike at the Wind! was born is a remarkable oasis, not amid a dry desert but within a landscape suffused with water. It is an oasis because it is a place where Indian people have come together to tell our stories and be just who we are. Our celebrations are not devoid of strife—we commemorate death, sorrow, betrayal, and mistakes alongside victories and good fortune. The celebration of both pain and joy is an exercise in belonging—an exercise of sovereignty.

Around 2005, Indian, black, and white community members came together to resurrect Strike at the Wind! The drama had struggled off and on for years, but volunteers kept it going. Its location far from any tourist destination meant that ticket revenue was limited. Nevertheless, over the years we believed that if the drama’s benefactors, Adolph Dial and Hector McLean, and its creators, Randolph Umberger and Willie French Lowery, had had the nerve to take this risk, then we would dishonor them if we shied away from it. Gradually, however, it became impossible to sustain, and the drama needed philanthropy to keep it
alive. I assumed that non-Indians, the ones with the deepest pockets and best connections, had come to accept the value of Henry Berry Lowry’s story and the existence of Lumbee people. I thought that they would support an event that was a multiracial economic engine—a small one, but one of the few that Robeson County had—that brought people into their county to spend money.

We did raise money from donations every year, but it was almost exclusively in small amounts from Indian people and never enough to adequately subsidize the costs of the production. The tourism organizations in the county and the state partnered with us reluctantly, if at all—they had no notion that Indian people and their history might be an economic asset. At the same time, cast members reported to me that when they’d talk about the drama to their non-Indian coworkers, the response was sometimes derogatory: “Why would you want to honor that murderer? He was an outlaw!” Even almost 150 years later, our closest neighbors could not empathize with injustice, and they willingly refused to recognize the value of our stories. Eventually financial circumstances forced us to close the production down. The last performance was the weekend I gave birth to my daughter, Lydia, in the same hallway of the same Lumberton hospital in which I had been born almost thirty-five years earlier.

Lydia’s birth, even as we closed a chapter of Strike at the Wind!, reminded me that the Lumbee story not only would live on but would regenerate. Regeneration also produces forgetting; for me personally, the event of Lydia’s birth virtually erased my memories of the backbreaking work involved in taking care of the amphitheater, not to mention the legions of mosquitos, fire ants, thunderstorms, heat waves, and vandals we endured—one summer I received so many mosquito bites on my legs that I lost count after fifty-five.

Strike at the Wind! tells one episode of the larger Lumbee story, the events of Henry Berry Lowry’s time. Other moments, such as the events that his uncle George Lowry described as an origin story, show how the Lumbee people have been shaped within and alongside the American nation’s own plagues of prejudice, corruption, and injustice. But for those of us who worked on Strike at the Wind!, both Indians and non-Indians, Lumbees and Tuscaroras, telling the story was an opportunity to renew ourselves and combat the doubt that so many other Americans had cast upon us over the centuries. Acting, singing, dancing, directing, cleaning, sewing, rebuilding, greeting—all of these tasks made us allies in what we believed was a sacred act of naming who we were. It was a way to destroy the forces of suffering that repeatedly threatened to bring about the end of our people. And the names we used—family names, place names, names for injustice when we saw it—had little to do with the federal government’s need for a tribal history that met their criteria for authenticity.
Strike at the Wind! also offered a way to connect to being American, beyond those entanglements with federal expectations. The play’s finale was “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The lyrics about truth marching on, about transfiguration, carry a whole new meaning after you have heard the story of a man seeking justice who was persecuted and then vanquished his enemies by vanishing into the dark, still swamps. In a spiritual, if not bodily, sense, Henry Berry defeated death, and we have come to see his story as not only ours but as America’s. The community’s ongoing dedication to Strike at the Wind! shows how truth defeats fear, maybe not in the short term, but eventually.

In 2006, because of my work with Strike at the Wind!, then tribal chairman Jimmy Goins presented me with a dance shawl made by elders who worked with the Lumbee tribal government. The shawl was white with royal blue fringe and featured the tribe’s emblem, the pinecone, stitched with red, white, and blue fabric and sequins. The commendation he read with the presentation highlighted my education and upbringing away from the tribal territory and how I had returned to help revitalize this expression of our history. Even now the honor reminds me of how we are at once Lumbee and American and always expressing both.

Federal recognition, that peculiar American marker of legitimacy as Indians, has eluded Lumbees. Congress has yet to authorize the government-to-government relationship between the United States and the Lumbee people. But a lack of federal recognition does not disrupt our ability to exercise our sovereignty as indigenous people, nor does it constitute a “struggle for identity,” as so many outsiders have remarked. We are not struggling for identity; Lumbees know exactly who we are and what it means to belong. The struggle is for fair treatment within a system that was built on our ancestors’ disappearance and that is in a constant state of reformation by citizens whose stories have also been silenced but who often forget that Native people share their struggles.

Still, Lumbees—and American Indians everywhere—have been part of those reformations. At the same time, we reasonably expect the federal government, to which we have been loyal, to not impede our own ability to determine our futures. The Lumbees’ compromised federal recognition status is evidence not of our faults but of double standards and shifting criteria. The policy’s flaws pose a danger for all Americans’ abilities to exercise and protect their freedom to determine their own futures.

Political will is a key ingredient of federal acknowledgment for the Lumbees. It can be engineered with money, as tribal leaders attempted to do in making a deal with Lewin International. It can be generated through compromise, as politicians tried when they proposed a bill that eliminated the possibility of
gaming in the twenty-first century or when they proposed the Lumbee bill in the 1950s. Both seemed to advance Indians’ interests as well as Congress’s. It can also be built through consensus, which is possible with deep and thoughtful engagement between Lumbee people and their leaders. The Lumbee Sovereignty Coalition was a more recent manifestation of this, but older ones, such as the Siouan Council, the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association, and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, have served as conduits for dialogue and action. The forums built through worship and learning have lasted the longest and been the most effective. The Lumbee Constitution articulates the inherent power of the Lumbee people to determine our own future, within, alongside, and sometimes against the United States. When leaders are faithful to the messages they hear from their people in those settings, they will understand that power and privilege is theirs to invoke as they face the second century of this fight. They will see that the Lumbee people are with them, praying for them.

At the same time, our history shows that Lumbees do not always work toward progress peacefully and prayerfully. We have been targets of violence, and we have also wielded violence for our own benefit. Sometimes our violent acts have been conscious efforts to disrupt the work of authorities whose exercise of freedom does not square with our own ideas. These flashpoints, such as the 1958 confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan, the Lowry War of the 1860s and 1870s, and even the Revolutionary-era Drowning Creek army, show that we use violence to defend our territory and our lives against mistreatment by neighbors or state-sponsored discrimination. But less noble episodes, such as the murder of Julian Pierce, the burning of Old Main, the riots over school integration, and the crimes committed by bootleggers and drug traffickers, cannot be ignored. Those who would demonize or erase us feel justified in doing so when this selfish vein of Lumbee violence is exposed. Its purpose is not justice or coping with change but the acquisition or protection of cultural or material property.

Notably, the expressions of these different types of violence seemed to dominate at different points in American history. Collective violence took place when the mainstream economy was rooted in agriculture and its reciprocal expectations. When wage work, powered by migration and an individual’s place in the larger industrial economy, overtook the American economy, our use of violence shifted. After the Great Depression, individuals explicitly trying to protect their property readily used violence. These patterns are not perfect. Those participating in the illegal economy since the American Revolution employed violence to acquire or protect property, while using violence to defend territory, such as punishing the Ku Klux Klan, went hand in hand with the exposure resulting from a nonagricultural economy. Whether as individuals or as a
community, we have consistently used violence to cope with change and assert pride, to protect what we have, and to rebuild and reconstitute.

At the root of both collective and individual violence is the quest to restore or retain power and to acquire notoriety against the pressure of invisibility. Lumbees and Tuscaroras constantly fight the story that we are not here, that Indian people have disappeared and are irrelevant. For example, the Lumbee community has never accepted the official version of events that led to Julian Pierce’s death, and his family has doggedly pursued justice for Julian since that time. After twenty-eight years of advocacy and assembling evidence, the Pierce family persuaded North Carolina’s attorney general to acknowledge that there were enough holes in the narrative to justify reopening the case. Among other evidence, the Pierce family and their attorneys gathered credible, convincing statements from family members of sheriff’s deputies about their involvement in a plot to kill Julian. In 2016, the state finally conceded that the story told by Sheriff Hubert Stone was insufficient to explain Julian’s killing. Tellingly, the attorney general’s office notified the Pierce family of its decision three hours after the death of Julian’s former opponent, Joe Freeman Britt, was announced. As of 2017, the North Carolina governor has indicated his support for reopening the case, but the State Bureau of Investigation has not cooperated.1 The state’s decision recognizes Indian violence for exactly what it was—a product of oppression rather than an inherent feature of the Lumbee community.

We’ve used violence to insist that others see us for who we are, not for who they wish we would be. Today, that pattern of violence is even more internal; Indians use it against other Indians. While its motives are similar, we are waging war on ourselves, turning inward to acquire power against an invisibility that stems from poverty but that has changed because of prosperity. Now that wealth and opportunity have come to the community, Lumbees are more visible than ever, the stakes are higher, and our customary means of coping with conflict are more intense.

When my grandfather Foy died in 1997, Reverend Dr. Dalton Brooks, the first chairman of the Lumbee Tribe of Cheraw Indians, gave his eulogy. He posed a question that has never left me: How will we, as Lumbee people, survive prosperity? He lifted up my grandfather as exemplary of a generation who fought poverty and invisibility to bring their descendants into unprecedented prosperity and visibility. My grandfather and so many others like him understood that poverty is a difficult, intractable problem, but it is not a natural or unsolvable part of being Indian. Nor is poverty only the result of our own choices; it is also the work of legal dispossession and illegal corruption, a decidedly unnatural outcome of a system that guaranteed liberties for some free
people but not others. The way that our American system’s failures extend so clearly into the present demonstrates the very real need to incorporate the truth of dispossession and hypocrisy into our American story, not just as accidents or exceptions of the past but as fundamental flaws woven into our nation’s cultural and political fabric. We all share this nation, this land; the more we can understand and accept how we came to share it, the more power we have to address the problems generated by prosperity.

Much of the Lumbees’ ability to turn this system to our collective advantage depends on federal recognition, both the policy itself (whether it can truly accommodate the varied realities of American Indians’ existence) and how we pursue it (whether we do so with transparency, respect, and accountability to our own differences). The Lumbees’ federal recognition dilemma represents the continuation of a practice—holding different Americans to different standards for belonging and legitimacy—that social movements since the Civil War have attempted to eliminate and replace with a more equal union. In Lumbee and American Indian history, we see how the federal government still controls one of the most important realms of sovereignty—authenticity and representation—despite the self-determination policies it promotes. American Indians are reckoning with the consequences of these contradictions, but they continue to fight for their visibility and opportunity and their right to tell their own stories.

Lumbees everywhere are succeeding as individuals and becoming problem solvers instead of bystanders or problem makers. They are doing so in business, education, health care, industry, the arts, government, the military, and every other sector of American life. The University of North Carolina at Pembroke still serves as a starting place for much of this achievement, as do our churches and family networks. Becoming a doctor, lawyer, or professor is no longer unheard of, even though the people Lumbees encounter in those professions have usually never heard of us.

Pembroke is as much an Indian place as ever, with the college at its center, dotted with banks, businesses, enormous houses, historic structures, public housing, and mobile homes. Outside Pembroke our settlements have retained their character and salience thanks to Lumbees’ consistent attachment to home-places and family. Lumbees face the difficult divides that mark all Americans—haves and have-nots, insiders and outsiders, men and women. We face those divides while we roll the heavy stone of a particular history in a particular place, a place that made us who we are and that we have no intention of abandoning. Under the pressure of European settlement, our ancestors abandoned many of
our oldest homeplaces, but having existed as a coherent society for nearly 300 years along the Lumber River, we will not forsake this place.

The blood of these ancestors is in the sandy loam and black water of our homeland along the swamps and streams flowing from the Lumber River. Our connection to this land is blood—not pure blood but whole blood—blood passed from mother to child in the womb. While the Lumbee peoples’ crises are American in making, they are not American in solving. The way forward is not to recall racial difference but to recall kinship; not to insist upon rights but to insist upon responsibilities; not to hoard goods but to redistribute them; not to possess our legacies jealously but to release them generously and thus, paradoxically, keep them part of us forever.

These stories now serve to recall our power to find solutions, to point our way forward as a Lumbee and American people. This power is all around us, in our bodies, our land, our relations, our stories. As the Lumbee national poet, Willie French Lowery, wrote,

You don’t have to die to see the glory,
You don’t have to live your life in vain.

Henry Berry Lowry, Julian Pierce, Bricey Hammonds, Helen Maynor Schierbeck, and so many others did not live their lives in vain. We remember them and their families today as warriors in our struggle for independence as a people. Their stories belong to all of us. The Lumbees’ continued rising through death is like our pine trees: a deep taproot makes them difficult to dislocate. Our sandy soil filters rainwater quickly, so the tree needs the deep root to gather the water it needs. Our endurance, too, is flexible like a softwood pine, adaptable to seek the nourishment it needs. But the wood is soft and can snap under a strong wind. When it snaps, however, the root remains, and the tree will become new again.
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