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“What Are You?”:  
Exploring Racial Categorization  
in *Nowhere Else on Earth*  
by Erica Abrams Locklear

In his introduction to the 1985 collection of essays entitled “*Race, Writing, and Difference*,” Henry Louis Gates rightfully asserts: “Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction” (4). Even so, contemporary disputes centered on race remain one of America’s most glaring problems. Although laws supporting atrocities such as the Jim Crow South rest in the past, the systems of classification that inspired them still operate on many different levels of present-day American society, ranging from the way people describe themselves, to the labels people place on difference, to the way the American government decides what fraction of “blood” constitutes race. Fiction writer Josephine Humphreys explores the complexities, falsifications, and implications of racial classification for the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County, North Carolina in her historically based novel *Nowhere Else on Earth*. First published in 2000, the work’s 2001 Penguin edition includes a reader’s guide following the text in which Humphreys explains her impetus for writing about the Lumbee people. She admits that when she first encountered a Lumbee aboard a train, upon discovering that the woman was not white, Humphreys asked, “What are you?” (6). She goes on to remember that the young woman explained the story of the Lumbee people, as well as the infamous tale (among

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Lumbees) of Henry Berry Lowrie and Rhoda Strong. Enthralled by the fact that Henry formed an outlaw gang to avenge the unjust death of his father, Humphreys also learned of the marriage between Henry and Rhoda, their ensuing popularity among the Lumbee people, and the mystery surrounding Henry's fate—even today Robeson County residents debate whether Henry escaped authorities.<sup>1</sup> Humphreys then declares, "I promised myself that one day I would write about Henry and Rhoda" (6). Humphreys undoubtedly found that promise challenging, because in re-telling her first "Lumbee encounter" she remembers that the young woman's answer to "What are you?" only "further bewildered" and "hooked" Humphreys' curiosity about this racially ambiguous group (6). However, when Humphreys writes about the Lumbees, instead of creating a novel that answers the "What are you?" question in racial terms, she uses Rhoda's discovery about herself and who she is to ground identity in a particular place and people.

In this essay I interrogate the troubled nature of Lumbee racial classification in both fictional representations and historical events by relying in large part on theorist Samira Kawash's assertion from her essay, "The Epistemology of Race," that "Race, we might say, is not a nothing-at-all, but a *something* that says nothing" (155). It is that something that Americans insist on naming (that in fact only takes meaning in the act of naming), and it is this same something that Humphreys addresses in *Nowhere Else on Earth*. In discussions such as this, group naming becomes especially significant: does one use terms like Indian and Native American synonymously or rather pass judgment and declare one term more appropriate than another?<sup>2</sup>

While exploring the nuances of the impossible nature of racial classification, we must simultaneously ask why these classifications weigh so heavily for Humphreys' characters and in current American mindsets, politics, and value systems. To honestly evaluate the importance of these categories, we must admit that for Humphreys' fictionalized community (as well as the non-fictional perceptions of Americans today) race and identity are so deeply entangled that the absence of one calls the validity of the other into question. In her essay "Weaving/Framing/Crossing Difference: Reflections on Gender and Ethnicity in American Literary and Art Practices," Teresa Gomez Reus writes: "Never so poignantly as today has one been made to realize how wholly contaminated our experiences are, how problematical it is to reproduce organic concepts of identity, and how, in a culture of diversity, the question of identity is always a matter of constantly crossing and (re)drawing boundar-

ies" (99). Humphreys' characters stand firmly by the boundaries they have drawn—they are Indian—but as with the history of the Lumbee people, others outside the group find such boundaries delineating Indian-ness unsatisfactory. As evidenced by the infamous "one drop rule" found in many American ideological notions of race, any blurring or passing of race ultimately results in the confusion of identity, usually for those assigning the labels rather than those receiving such designations. Thus when groups like the Lumbee people reveal conspicuous problems with racial categorizations, questions of identity (and where identity resides) result. The fact that Humphreys' contemporary experience aboard a train sparked the idea for a novel set in the nineteenth century signals the historical longevity of the Lumbee struggle with racial categorization. By exploring both the similarities and the differences between Humphreys' text and historical accounts of the Lumbee people, we can better situate the important "something" invoked by Kawash to describe "race." In particular, Rhoda's character, and her decision to align her identity with the people and place of Scuffletown<sup>3</sup> (instead of following her husband elsewhere), posits a much different response to America's modes of thinking about race than the "real-life" Lumbee response, yet each reaction resonates with the same realization—despite their impossible nature, racial systems of categorization prove inescapable in American society, both in the latter part of the nineteenth century and today.

Early in the narrative Rhoda remembers that her mother, Cee, stopped trying to define herself racially: "she decided to quit answering the question *What are You?* Because the bigger question was why they [anyone not Lumbee] asked" (10). For the Lumbee Indians of the twenty-first century, economic implications driven by dominance and power lie at the root of why non-Lumbees so adamantly question Lumbee racial composition, and why Lumbees feel compelled to provide an acceptable response. As Abdul JanMohamed points out in "The Economy of the Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," "The perception of racial difference, is, in the first place, influenced by economic motives" (80). Unlike many other Indian tribes in the United States, the Lumbees never gained full federal recognition and thus never received federal funding. In an effort to secure these much-needed funds, present-day Lumbees continue to participate in the impossible battle of "proving" racial identity. As recently as August of 2006, North Carolina senator Elizabeth Dole sponsored a bill that would grant the tribe full federal recognition, and the bill is currently under review in the U.S. Senate.

Conversely, Humphreys' non-Lumbee characters searching for answers to the "What are you?" question seem largely driven by a virtually insatiable curiosity. Dr. McCabe, for example, tries to excavate bones in hopes of finding some physical clue of race; he constantly questions Cee about her ancestors, and he even asks an anthropologist to visit the settlement to measure physical attributes of the settlement's Indians. In many ways, the novel's characters have no choice when it comes to facing the "What are you?" question. Some are even fooled into answering, for a time. Humphreys' description of rare Carolina parakeets near the beginning of the novel parallels the predicament of her characters:

Some days he [Dr. McCabe] might stand two hours at the edge of a swamp to count parakeets, a scientific curiosity as the only ones of their race remaining in America. Jungly, remote Robeson County was their last stand, but they were sociable and fearless in spite of their diminishing numbers, and allowed themselves to be observed. The doctor would . . . shoot a couple to study at close range . . . sometimes forgetting them until his daughter found them days later. (9)

Dr. McCabe operates as a figure of white domination and power, and Humphreys' characters have virtually no say in whether he observes them or not. Unfortunately, Dr. McCabe's probing questions almost symbolically kill Rhoda (mirroring the death of his aviary subjects) when she allows herself to be physically measured in an effort to prove her Indian-ness. Eventually, however, Rhoda stops answering the question for Dr. McCabe and for others, and in the beginning of the novel Humphreys presents a mature Rhoda who is ready to "drop [her] disguises" in re-telling how she came to discover her own identity as Indian (2). Rhoda explains: "Our answer never satisfied, and they kept on suggesting something else until we learned to keep quiet" (10-11). Consequently, Rhoda answers the "What are you?" question for herself but remains silent when asked by outsiders, as when she refuses to sign her name when applying for assistance at the county courthouse.

Despite her eventual resolution, Rhoda's lineage initially causes her to struggle with the ambiguity of her own racial identity. Her father, John Strong, hails from Scotland, while her mother claims Native American ancestry: "She was a Lowrie through her father's mother, and the Lowries are Indians. The whole place is Indians. And that is the answer to what we are in Scuffletown. It is an answer the rest of the world don't like" (6). Rhoda continues, explaining that whites, African Ameri-

cans, and Cherokees alike all deny the Indians of Scuffletown, and “no-body of any sort wants us to be what we are” (7). From the beginning Humphreys leaves no room for doubt that as an adult reflecting back on her life, Rhoda feels secure in identifying herself (and her family) as Indian, but this sense of self takes years to cultivate. When Rhoda leaves her childhood friend and mentor, Margaret, to study with Miss McCabe (Dr. McCabe’s daughter), Margaret resents Rhoda’s choice of an older, white woman as teacher and snaps at Rhoda that she no longer has time for “a little thin old white girl and some fake schoolbooks” (23). Rhoda recalls that she “was so surprised, [she] didn’t have a ready answer, [and her] mouth dropped open” (23). By referring to Rhoda as a “white girl,” Margaret implies that Rhoda is not Indian and therefore not truly a member of the community. The accusation shocks Rhoda, and she only later thinks that she should have replied, “I’m not the first Scotsman’s daughter in Scuffletown” (23). At this point in the narrative Rhoda equates race with identity, yet this equation proves inadequate since in biological terms she is only “half Indian,” but she self-identifies as wholly Indian.

In many ways, the same rings true for the modern-day inhabitants of Robeson County, North Carolina. The majority of residents call themselves Lumbee Indians, and like the characters in Humphreys’ text, they insist on Native American heritage. It remains an insistence rife with dispute and controversy. From 1783 until 1835 members of the group were able to vote, perform military duties, build schools, and erect churches. However, in 1835 the North Carolina constitutional convention denied these privileges to all “free people of color,” and the Lumbee Indians fell under this category. Before 1835 the group enjoyed far more rights than other Native Americans, but between 1835 and 1887 they too experienced disfranchisement since they were not “white.”<sup>4</sup> Before 1887 the group had no official name, even though they identified themselves as Indians, and on census records they appeared under the broad category of “mulatto.” In 1885 a local white politician, Hamilton McMillan, initiated a landmark effort to provide the group with separate schools by enacting legislation based on the theory that the group descended from the Lost Colony—that is, the English settlers who disappeared from North Carolina’s Roanoke Island in the late 1580s and were thought by some to have intermarried with local Indians.<sup>5</sup> To provide the group with a name, McMillan connected the only physical remnant left by colonists of John White’s 1587 expedition (the word “Croatoan” carved on a tree) with the Lumbee people: his claim resulted in state recognition, and the

Indians thenceforward identified themselves as Croatan Indians. Since then, the group has struggled to maintain their Native American identity, enduring no less than four official name changes (Croatan Indians, Indians of Robeson County, Cherokee Indians of Robeson County, and Lumbee Indians)<sup>6</sup> and a host of unofficial designations, including Sioux, Cheraw, and Tuscarora. Humphreys' authorial decision to write about the Henry Berry Lowrie story places her text during the Civil War years, roughly twenty years before McMillan's legislation, when the Lumbee people were completely disfranchised. Unable to vote or exert any of the previous privileges of a "free person of color," the Indians in *Nowhere Else on Earth* cling desperately to their Native American identity.

Humphreys' reliance on Rhoda to narrate the entire novel from a removed perspective as an adult looking back and remembering the events of her life lends a certain knowing to the text. Able to interpret what she saw as a child, Rhoda's reflections reveal a constant obsession with race, not from Lumbee Indians themselves, but from others trying to answer the "What are you?" question. Rhoda recalls: "Some say we are too dark to be Indian. Some say too light. And we do vary. 'What can I do about that?' my mother used to say. 'To hell with them'" (7). As Kawash points out, "the modern concept of race is therefore predicated on an epistemology of visibility, but the visible becomes an insufficient guarantee of knowledge" (130). Indeed, the tawny-colored skin and light eyes of many Lumbees escape generally accepted methods of racial classification in American society, as evidenced by relatively early accounts of the Lumbee people. One such report, Stephen B. Weeks's 1891 article entitled "The Lost Colony of Roanoke: Its Fate and Survival," describes a Lumbee man with "steel-blue eyes" and a face "pure Greek in profile," as well as a historically English last name (132). Descriptions such as this hardly resemble stereotypical ideas about what Native Americans "should" look like, or what their last names "should" sound like. Thus, even though the racial designation of Indian occupies a space accepted as different from African American or white, for the characters of Humphreys' text (as well as the Lumbee Indians), claiming undisputed Indian-ness proves impossible because of the group's physical characteristics and the inability of others to look elsewhere to determine race, identity, or any combination thereof.

At one point in the novel Rhoda recalls the vast array of skin color possibilities in Hestertown (a nearby town), revealing her contempt for the inaptitude of government-sanctioned ideas about race:

And there was at least one of every color in Hestertown, white and black and Indian side by side, plus other shades you surely never heard of—claybank, sandlander, smiling, laster, brass ankle, redbone, tarheel, copperneck, blackleg, and some they called the strawberry people. All strayed in by ones and twos, looking for a refuge, a place where they would not have to declare themselves in one of the categories the world had been narrowed down to by bishops and legislators, who I doubt had any idea how many there were that didn't fit—how many different kinds roamed an inland backroads belt from Carolina to Tennessee. (129)

In addition to pointing to the inadequacy of categories created by bishops and legislators, Rhoda's commentary vividly describes the variety of skin colors in the area. In doing so, Humphreys implicitly interrogates the notion that race and skin color operate equitably. Rhoda goes on to think, "In Hestertown, those lines weren't even drawn. They couldn't be. In Hestertown there was so much color it was only color, it didn't mean anything" (129). In towns such as this, the blurred lines of color cannot operate as markers of identity, but the gathering of similar individuals (similar in their inability to fit within rigid racial categories) links these individuals to a particular place.

Humphreys further elaborates on the tendency to ascribe physical characteristics to race when describing Rhoda's Hestertown friend, Nelly: "She was dark, but she didn't call herself Indian . . . Dr. McCabe said she could have some Portuguese or Turk in her, judging by her thin nose and love of silver bracelets, and some African by her hair; or maybe she came from Gypsy stock" (36–37). Dr. McCabe vainly searches for certain aspects of Nelly's physical body, as well as her preferences for jewelry, to "discover" her racial make-up. Listening to Dr. McCabe's theories, Nelly laughs and says that "she [is not] anything but Hestertown" (37). For Nelly and eventually for Rhoda, a connection to place and a people clarifies identity more than any racial category ever could.

While historically accurate, the swamp setting of the novel also functions as an effective metaphor for the ambiguous nature of Rhoda's identity. It is a place where land and water converge to gradually form an identity for Rhoda that is centered on place and community rather than race. After witnessing the horrific scene between Jake Barnes and his mentally disabled brother, Clelon (in which Mr. Barnes brutally kills an ox and then uses Clelon to pull a plow), Rhoda wades into the Lumbee River on her way home. She holds the branch of a tree to keep from



floating away, and as she narrates she remembers: "Anyone passing on the bank would have seen a girl's thin arm hanging from a tree, and might have thought I was trying to drown myself, but I was trying to do the opposite" (67). Rhoda allows herself to physically float in the water while remaining attached to the land, an act that symbolizes the liminal nature of her own conceptions about self identity. A few pages later Humphreys evokes this image again by describing the settlement as similarly flexible: "Scuffletown as a place was anchored, but driftable, and as an idea it had the floating nature of a dream" (73). Yet at the same time, the settlement operates as something solid since the people of the community define its boundaries: "The town limits weren't set by geography. Wherever we were, that was Scuffletown" (72). As Nelly conceives of herself as a member of Hestertown, place becomes increasingly important for Rhoda in recognizing various facets of her own identity, not because geographic location innately harbors any specific identity, but rather because communities of individuals infuse a place with elements of identity; for Rhoda, Scuffletown radiates an Indian presence. Later in the novel she explains that Scuffletown is the "mack [Scottish] name for it, a joke name, a nothing name . . . among ourselves . . . we more often called our place the settlement. Why name it if you already live there and don't need to ask directions? The names are invented by outsiders, for their own purposes" (126). Just as the concept of racial categorization is deeply important to those outside of the community, so too are names designating place. Rhoda eventually comes to realize that identification with a particular place and people, not what those places or people are called, designates identity.

Before fully granting Rhoda this clarity, Humphreys makes it clear that to "really" be Indian, the characters of her text (as well as contemporary Lumbee Indians) are expected to embody characteristics typically associated with Native Americans. Since the Lumbee Indians have no native language of their own (the earliest recordings about them note that they spoke only English), nor any "authentic" customs similar to other Native Americans (such as the Cherokee or a host of other officially recognized tribes), people outside of the group are slow to accept claims of Native American-ness. At one point in the novel, Rhoda remembers the incessant questions of those outside the group: "*Where's the proof? They always want to know, Where's the language and the relics?*" (7). Just as Kawash points out that physical markers of visibility operate as poor identifiers of race, so too do the presence (or absence) of language and relics. Reluctant to accept this fact, Dr. McCabe patiently ex-

plains to Rhoda's mother, Cee: "Where history is dark, we must cast a searching beam. Archeological evidence is what we need. If there were real Indians here, what's left of them? A pot or tommyhawk, some sort of beadwork or headdress . . ." (8). In these lines the doctor reveals that in addition to ascribing race to color, he also associates authenticity with physical objects, and without those objects to support claims of Indian authenticity, the group's identity becomes hopelessly blurred. This blurring, of course, becomes problematic only for those operating outside of the group. Cee angrily responds: "What's left of them? What's left of them is me! Me and the Lowries and the Braveboys and the Oxendines and the Locklears and all of us. The relics is standing before you in person alive and kicking. The relics speak for themselves" (9). Cee doesn't hesitate to identify herself as Indian, and she demands agency in asserting that her body is the only "relic" necessary to prove her Indian identity. Thus for Cee, her identity operates as a cultural reality, and she finds Dr. McCabe's racial categorizations arbitrary and unnecessary. She is Indian because she believes that she has a right to assert the identity of her own body, and while this statement may not provide the scientific evidence Dr. McCabe (and the rest of the community) seeks, for Cee it is plenty. Sadly, without visible markers for proof, the rest of the community refuses to accept her claims, as when Dr. McCabe replies: "We can't have history by say-so" (9).

The same applies for contemporary Lumbee Indians. They believe they are Indian, but their socio-historical claims of culture and heritage do not provide sufficient proof for the United States government. The web site for the Lumbee tribe<sup>7</sup> explains the group's century-old quest for full federal recognition, lamenting: "In one form or another, Congress has deliberated on the status of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina for more than 100 years. On numerous occasions . . . Congress has . . . investigate[d] the Tribe's history and conditions. On all such occasions, the Tribe's Indian identity and strong community have been underscored." As such, the document outlining the group's quest for recognition goes on to explain that in the late 1930s over two hundred members of the group allowed a physical anthropologist (Dr. Carl Seltzer) to conduct physical examinations to determine whether the examinees were at least "half Indian"; Dr. Seltzer certified twenty-two members as having one-half or more "Indian blood."

Because this study occurred over seventy years ago, we may rationalize that people no longer conceive of race as something that contains certain percentages of "blood." Unfortunately, we need to look no further than

the documentation which federally recognized tribes require for membership to see that conceptions of blood connected to race are alive and well. First and foremost, the Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) reveals that both government agencies and Indian tribes conceive of race as something tangible and biological. The BIA asks the question "What are you?" by issuing the cards, and Indian tribes answer in racial terms because the tribes need membership cards to receive federal assistance. Even the Lumbee web site falls prey to these notions of blood, as when they proudly assert that Dr. Seltzer's intrusive examinations "proved" that at least twenty-two members were "officially" Indian by blood in the 1930s. Today the web site adamantly states that the group descends from the Cheraw, and this continuing goal of proving "authentic" tribal connections ironically reveals that by subscribing to the government's insistence on proving race, the Lumbees fighting for federal recognition actually maintain the system that oppresses them by trying to classify the unclassifiable.

Not surprisingly, Humphreys' character, Dr. McCabe, assumes that race is somehow provable not only by physical markers and artifact remnants but also genetically. Rhoda recalls his asking her mother if she remembered older people in the settlement speaking another language, or if she had any government papers or land deeds, and even if she knew of any Portuguese, Gypsy, Turkish, or Italian ancestors (7). Dr. McCabe's obsession represents that of a much larger population, both fictionally and historically. In exploring the race and origin of Cee's ancestors, Dr. McCabe searches for the "parts" that comprise Cee. Any discovery other than Indian would complicate Dr. McCabe's conception of Cee and therefore weaken her claim to the rest of the community that she is Indian.

Just as Dr. Seltzer performed physical examinations on the Lumbee people in the 1930s to determine viable amounts of Indian "blood," Humphreys includes an investigator from Philadelphia in her text to fictionally fulfill the same role as Dr. Seltzer (even though Humphreys' story takes place approximately sixty-five years prior to Seltzer's examinations). Rhoda remembers that the procedure took place in the courthouse, and the man examined her fingernails, teeth, and hair, in addition to measuring her limbs. He even measures the degree of curvature in her feet. After the doctor notes the size of Rhoda's head, she sees his collection of skulls, as well as their labels<sup>8</sup>. One symbolically laden label reads: "Female child, Cheraw," and this experience has a great impact on Rhoda, as when she recalls: "After that, I changed. I felt yanked flat" (77). In this instance Rhoda realizes that instead of helping Dr. McCabe

(as she was told), she fulfills the role of a test subject and is ultimately found lacking. As an eight-year-old girl she blames her father because he is white, and because her body undergoes literal subjection to physical interrogation in search of markers of race, the experience leaves her bewildered and even more confused about her identity. In an effort to console Rhoda, Cee comments: “And honey, think about it. If they ever *had* certified us—if we’d proved ourselves to their satisfaction, with relics and bones or a language or a treaty paper—we might *not* have continued. We could be dead or in Oklahoma, and it’s better, probably, to be alive in North Carolina” (77). Cee’s rationale points to the foundational reasons driving the “What are you?” question. Once physical markers, language, or artifacts acceptably label a group (acceptable for those giving the labels, not necessarily those receiving them), then that group becomes subjugated and quite often functions at the mercy of white domination and power. Even so, the sarcastic tone of Cee’s comment that “it’s better, probably, to be alive in North Carolina” implies that the burden of constantly trying to prove racial identity is only slightly better than the possible alternatives: death or removal to a reservation.

The desirability of claiming Indian “purity” makes miscegenation an issue that the characters of Humphreys’ novel must confront. Any nineteenth century white person with racist views (which would include most, although not all, North Carolina whites) would find mixing between black and white people abhorrent, insisting that blackness contaminates whiteness. This kind of world view would also denigrate any mixing between Indians and white people, but if it occurred, mixing with whiteness would somehow elevate the Indians; Hamilton McMillan based his seemingly liberating 1887 legislation on such a premise. However, ironically, for the characters of Humphreys’ novel mixing of any kind—whether with white, black, or any other race—is frowned upon. Although the community accepts John Strong as one of their own, Cee admits that her marriage to him was “a hazardous step” since he is a Scotsman and not an Indian (110). Cee also explains to Rhoda that even though Betsy Oxendine (an Indian) and John Applewhite (a runaway slave) love each other, they should not marry because “it would only fuel the fire . . . against [the Scuffletown Indians]” (110). Through Cee, Rhoda learns that those in power place a great deal of importance on categories, and any confusion of those classifications (such as occurs with miscegenation) creates a dangerous dynamic for those caught between the boundaries of racial groupings.

Historically, McMillan’s Lost Colony theory did, in fact, allow edu-

cational opportunities for the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County, and instead of discouraging all incidences of miscegenation, as Humphreys' characters do, the Lumbee Indians stressed connections with whiteness to benefit politically (these claims granted them the right to vote once again and to attend their own schools) and firmly denied any relation whatsoever to blackness, since such an admission would repeat disfranchisement. Therefore, as a result of McMillan's 1887 legislation, which "proved" that they were descendants of the Lost Colony and the Hatteras Indians, the Lumbee people then found themselves arguing that they were not "contaminated" with other blood—they were Indian and white, and nothing else, least of all African American.<sup>9</sup> In 1887 the Croatan Normal School was founded in Robeson County, but Indians in surrounding counties lacked such schools, and pleas for schools in nearby areas began appearing regularly. Perhaps the most telling of these is George Butler's 1914 document, *The Croatan Indians of Sampson County, North Carolina: Their Origin and Racial Status. A Plea for Separate Schools*. In it, he chronicles the history of the Croatan Indians, calling them a "mixed blood people," but he fully supports McMillan's claims tying the group to the Lost Colony, and he goes on to explain that the children of Sampson County need separate schools because they should not attend school with black children. To further his argument, Butler includes multiple photographs of Indian families and individuals in Sampson County, as well as their oral histories testifying "pure blood."

Butler's sketch of Betsy Simmons functions as a particularly revealing testament of the importance placed on the connections between physical features and race. Butler includes the following photograph (Figure 1) of Ms. Simmons, along with a description: "The subject of this sketch was formerly Betsy J. Thornton . . . She is the mother of William Simmons and had numerous grandchildren residing in Sampson County who claim to be free from all Negro blood. Betsy has grey eyes, straight hair, high cheek bones, and in general appearance was half Indian and half white."

By combining physical traits generally associated with Native Americans, like high cheekbones, with those connected to Caucasians, such as light eyes and straight hair, Butler attempts to prove the absence of blackness, or any other race besides white and Indian. Butler's efforts at affirming the absence of African American "blood" through visual representation points to the absurdity of the idea that race is provable or classifiable. Moreover, Butler's document places great responsibility on race



BETSY J. SIMMONS  
Sampson County

Figure 1: Portrait of Betsy Simmons. Documenting the American South (<http://docsouth.unc.edu>), The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, North Carolina Collection

in assuming that photographs of people that do not “look black” will convince those in power that the Indians of Sampson County are a separate race, thus allowing the emergence of separate schools. Even though Butler makes his claims in order to secure education for the Lumbee people, by relying on vague statements denying intermixing with blackness he furthers Kawash’s assertion that race is “a something that says nothing.” In his essay “The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race,” Anthony Appiah writes: “The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask ‘race’ to do for us. The evil that is done is done by the concept and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions as to its application” (35–36). In searching for visual markers of race and even displaying pictures of real people to prove an absence of one race and the presence of another, Butler only succeeds in further confusing the identity of the subjects of his photographs.

Although Humphreys’ characters discourage racial mixing (whether with black, white, or any other race), they also recognize its benefits when the mixing involves whiteness, and in this way Humphreys’ char-

acters mirror Lumbee history. Just as Margaret insults Rhoda by calling her white, Mr. Lowrie comments on Rhoda's light skin, but unlike Margaret, he advises her to use it to her advantage. During the years of disfranchisement a lack of education became a very real concern for the Lumbee people (as evidenced by Butler's document, even though it occurs well after partial recognition), and Humphreys addresses this reality by highlighting the difficulties Rhoda faces in finding educational opportunities. Even though she studies and lives with Dr. McCabe's daughter throughout part of the novel, when she returns home to be with her family Mr. Lowrie tells her: "Well, never mind, you'll get your learning one way or another when the war's done. A light skin is nothing to brag on, but maybe you can use it to talk your way into a real school. Anything it takes" (51). By placing his hopes for Rhoda after the Civil War, Mr. Lowrie operates as a Union sympathizer since her chance at an education lies in a Union victory, but, perhaps more importantly, his statement reveals the inadequacy of skin color in proving racial identity. In discussing connections between race and identity, Kawash writes: "Identity is not what we are but what we are passing for" (147). In associating dark skin with Indian-ness, Mr. Lowrie's statement reflects a certain pride associated with Native American identity, and he insists that lighter skin is "nothing to brag on." Yet his statement also teaches that when light skin color will allow it, Rhoda should forsake her racial identity as Indian (which in this case is tied to visible markers of color) in order to gain an education. His advice encapsulates an important lesson for Rhoda: you are Indian, but if your skin does not betray you as such, use it to your advantage to receive an education. This lesson further complicates the manner in which Rhoda conceives of her own identity, and her adult perspective in re-telling the incident reveals an adolescent confusion that finds reconciliation only in maturity. As the text progresses Rhoda gains a better understanding of what comprises identity apart from race, and in Rhoda's case, identity is not something that she "passes for" (as Kawash suggests). Instead, Rhoda's identity as Native American operates as a representation of self-assurance, reliance, and an insistence on remaining in Robeson County, where her identity as Indian is emotionally and geographically bound, despite the troubles associated with that self-identification.

Part of the uniqueness of Scuffletown results from its role in the turpentine industry, and Humphreys uses this historical fact to erase racial differences when Rhoda considers turpentine workers: "the men, no matter what color (some were slaves, some were us, and some were oth-

ers), were called turpentine niggers, partly because the job was so low ranking and partly because after a month in the woods . . . all were dusky, all were wooly-headed from resin and dirt” (143–144). Rhoda’s reflection signals that in some cases she connects identity with occupation, rather than race, even though the job renders the men physically similar. Humphreys goes on to highlight the increasing importance of place for Rhoda:

Turpentine was a secret pleasure to me. Not as an emblem of future prosperity—not as an emblem at all—but as a real elixir, made from this particular spot of God’s earth. Each clean yellow barrel stamped *Spirits of Turpentine, Robeson County, N.C.*, held thirty-two gallons of our sun and soil and rain, our trees and men, distilled. Our spirits indeed. Our essence. (145)

Here Rhoda explicitly reveals that while she has no delusions about the social status of products from Robeson County, she nonetheless feels an innate pride in a product made from her native land and by the people who inhabit that land, regardless of their race. The common industry of turpentine bonds the workers together, much like the ambiguity of color unites the citizens of Hestertown.

As the novel progresses, Humphreys further shifts Rhoda’s views about the correlation between race and identity as she becomes involved with Henry Berry Lowrie. When Henry proposes marriage, Rhoda reflects: “What I wanted from him wasn’t his soul, but my own. I thought I saw myself in him” (209). Henry functions as a full representation of Indian-ness to Rhoda: everyone in the community respects him, and no other person exemplifies what it means to be a Scuffletown Indian as much as Henry. In marrying him, Rhoda believes that she will gain a greater sense of her own self, and in many ways she does. After they agree to marry, Rhoda asks Henry if she reminds him at all of Donohue McQueen (a man raised by Scots who is biologically half-Indian and constantly seeks acceptance in the Indian community). Henry laughs and replies: “I can’t think of a single likeness between you and him” (213). Relieved, Rhoda begins to feel better about herself and more secure about her own identity as Indian. Henry’s comments bolster her confidence when she tells Miss McCabe that she has accepted his marriage proposal and Miss McCabe pleads: “Rhoda, I promise you . . . when the war’s over I’ll send you off to school. You can get out of North Carolina, become a teacher, you can marry well and no one will ever know—” (244). Before Miss McCabe can finish, Rhoda finishes for her:



“Where I came from, and who I am?” (244). Here, Rhoda consciously connects place and identity, and the character who was once wounded by being called a white girl firmly identifies herself as a Scuffletown Indian by rejecting Miss McCabe’s implication that she should feel ashamed of her heritage.

Even so, Rhoda does not fully realize her connection to the place and people of Scuffletown until her wedding day. As she surveys the attending crowd, she says to herself, “*I am being married to Scuffletown*” (262). Humphreys intensifies Rhoda’s marriage to the land as time progresses, and when Rhoda’s sister-in-law, Flora, worries that Rhoda and Henry may leave the swamp together because of Henry’s trouble with the law, Rhoda assures her: “I won’t do that. I’m raising my children here where they belong. There’s no other place I want to be” (305). Although Rhoda loves Henry and remains his wife, she knows if she leaves Robeson County she would risk losing the sense of her own identity that it took her so long to find. Additionally, Rhoda places great importance on what she teaches her children about the history of their people. After her childhood friend, Henderson Oxendine, is wrongfully executed, she recalls the special nature of Henderson’s tombstone, since he found the stone years before, while the two played together as children. Because such rocks were a rare find in the swamps, many believed that the earth made them, which once again emphasizes Rhoda’s connection to the land. Recalling the tombstone she thinks: “I will take my children to that burying ground every year, and then I’ll take my grandchildren. We’ll stand under the trees and I’ll tell them, ‘The old ones are all around us . . . I can’t tell you where they came from. They were just here’” (316). Now that Rhoda has found her own identity, she wants her children to know that theirs is tied to place as well as to generations past, present, and future.

Soon after Rhoda considers the importance of taking her children to the burying ground every year, Henry decides that in order to survive he must leave the swamp, and he asks Rhoda and the children to accompany him. Rhoda decides against it, and Humphreys’ description of how Rhoda reaches her decision once again signals the centrality of place in the novel. Rhoda remembers that the decision not to follow Henry must have come to her in her sleep, “as if from the earth itself . . . what flooded me now was not love and the other rages but *home*. There was nowhere else for me” (328). She goes on to explain that she wants to raise her children in Robeson County. She rationalizes: “If I raised Del [her son] in a western state, maybe he would never get those stony

eyes—but then what would he know of himself?” (329). The stony eyes Rhoda refers to bespeak what happens to children raised in the swamps: subjected to constant interrogation probing “what they are,” they harden and somehow change, as when Rhoda feels “yanked flat” after her physical examination. Even so, Rhoda’s statement reveals that the challenges her son will undergo will strengthen his self-identity in the face of opposition to his claims of Indian-ness. By choosing to remain in a community fraught with disputes over “what they are,” Rhoda and her children defy the systems of racial classification. While these systems continue to operate, Rhoda refuses to participate in the debate about who, and what, she is. Rhoda’s rejection of the commonly held idea that race is provable, and that it results in a pre-determined identity, strengthens her claim of Native American-ness, ultimately granting her the power to provide herself with her own label, regardless of the labels others try to place upon her. Cee sums up Rhoda’s final attitude about racial classification when she responds to Rhoda’s question about whether Dr. McCabe will think more highly of them now because of his Lost Colony theory (which mirrors Hamilton McMillan’s historical claim): “To him, yes. He’ll think more highly of us now . . . Are we leftovers of Sir Raleigh? I don’t know. I do know *I* wouldn’t think any more highly of us for it, if it was true. Looks to me like it would only matter to someone who didn’t think much of us to start with” (284).

Unfortunately, Rhoda’s self-actualization stands in stark contrast to the current Lumbee battle for full federal recognition. On one hand, we could view the Lumbee “battle to be Indian” as empowering—by fighting for an authoritative recognition, Lumbees challenge the American government’s flawed systems of racial categorization. Additionally, federal recognition would allow the group to open and run casinos on Indian land, thus boosting an increasingly stagnant economy. While the quest to prove racial difference revolves around much more than monetary issues, we cannot ignore the importance of financial matters tied to power and systems of classification. The notion that Lumbee Indians could receive much-needed money from the government by finally proving an identity seems almost liberating.

On the other hand, in order to “prove” their Indian-ness, the Lumbee people will have to resort to making biological claims involving “blood,” as well as connections to “real” Indian ancestors, like the Cheraw. Endeavors such as this defeat their socio-historical and cultural claims as a Native American group and ultimately belittle very real claims of Indian identity. While Rhoda’s fictional response does not function free

of problems, at the novel's close she feels secure in answering that same question for herself—she is Native American. Conversely, as long as the Lumbee Indians strive to “prove” their racial identity to the American government, by engaging in conversations based on the something that says nothing, they jeopardize discovering the answer to the “What are you?” question for themselves.

#### NOTES

The author wishes to thank Dr. Tena Helton for her inspiration and assistance in the early drafts of this essay. I am equally indebted to Dr. Katherine Henninger for her invaluable feedback and suggestions during the revision process. I also wish to thank Dr. Sarah Liggett for her editing expertise.

1. During the Civil War the Home Guard (a group of loosely bound Confederate soldiers) exerted a relative amount of control over inhabitants of Robeson County, including forms of vigilante justice. In 1865 the Home Guard accused Henry Berry Lowrie's father (Allen Lowrie) of stealing hogs, and after searching the Lowrie home, they executed Allen and his son, William. Along with his brothers, Henry formed the Lowrie Band, hoping to seek justice for what they believed was the wrongful execution of their father and brother. The Lumbee people also credit the Lowrie Band with stealing food from the wealthy and distributing it to those in need; in many ways, the stories surrounding Henry Berry Lowrie mirror those of Robin Hood.

While still a member of the Lowrie Band, Henry married Rhoda Strong, and their romance quickly became a favorite topic of discussion among Lumbees. Much of Humphreys' novel adheres to historical facts surrounding Henry and Rhoda's relationship, including the ambiguous nature of Henry's escape from Robeson County. Some historians and present-day Lumbees speculate that Henry successfully left the area, while others insist that authorities captured and killed him. In either case, the story of Henry and Rhoda lives on in the imagination of many Robeson County natives, as evidenced by the annual outdoor drama, *Strike at the Wind*, which portrays the Henry Berry Lowrie story. For more information, visit [www.strikeatthewind.com](http://www.strikeatthewind.com). Also see Adolph Dial and David Elliades' book, *The Only Land I Know*. San Francisco: The Indian Historian P, Inc., 1975.

2. Some people prefer to reserve the term Indian when referring to people of India, but since the Lumbee people have self-identified as Indian since 1783, while also referring to themselves as Native American, I respectfully use the terms interchangeably in an effort to represent how the group conceives of its own identity. Humphreys also uses the term Indian throughout her novel.

3. Better known as Pembroke, North Carolina, Scuffletown was so called because historically, the locale was fraught with disputes and was literally a town of scuffles. Humphreys only refers to the town as Scuffletown (not Pembroke).

4. All male citizens, regardless of race, were granted the right to vote in 1870, with the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment. Despite this legislation, Native Americans could not vote until the Snyder Act of 1924, which granted Native Americans born in the United States full American citizenship. Consequently, since the government initially labeled Lumbees as “free people of color,” rather than “Indian,” until 1835 Lumbees were allowed more political privileges (including the right to vote) than those the government recognized as Indian.

5. Financed by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1584, Arthur Barlowe and Philip Amadas sailed two ships from England to the West Indies and then north to the islands surrounding the North Carolina coastline. Upon returning to England they reported vast areas of fertile land, and in July of 1585 Raleigh sent an all-male colony of over one hundred to Roanoke Island. The men eventually ran out of supplies, and in the summer of 1586, when Sir Frances Drake landed on Roanoke Island on his way to England from the West Indies, the colonists returned to England with Drake. Two years later, in 1587, the British sent another group of colonists of about one hundred and twenty men, women, and children. Governor John White was a member of the expedition, and in 1587 he sailed back to England to secure much-needed supplies for the colonists. However, he was delayed in returning because of the war between England and Spain, so he did not make his return voyage to Roanoke Island until 1590. When he arrived he discovered that all of the colonists were gone, and the only clue suggesting their disappearance was the word “Croatoan” carved on a tree. The group of missing colonists is known as the Lost Colony, and historians are not sure if the group integrated with the friendly Indians south of Roanoke Island, if they were killed by Spanish troops from Florida, or if hostile Indians killed them.

Some scholars speculate that when Sir Francis Drake landed on Roanoke Island in 1586 he brought with him as many as five hundred Moors, Turks, South American Indians of both sexes, Spanish and Portuguese soldiers, and a small number of black slaves. Some historians theorize that Drake left these prisoners on Roanoke Island in order to make room for the returning English colonists. Scholar David Beers Quinn hypothesizes that this group of prisoners may have connections to the Lumbee people and/or the Melungeon people of the Appalachian mountains. For more information see David Beers Quinn’s text, *The Roanoke Voyages, 1584–1590. Vol. III*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1955 and Brent N. Kennedy’s (with Robyn Vaughan Kennedy) book, *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People: An Untold Story of Ethnic Cleansing in America*. Mercer UP, Macon, GA, 1997. Still other scholars believe that the Lumbee Indians are descendants of shipwrecked Croatians. For more information about possible ties to Croatia, see George J. Prpic’s article, “Early Croatian Contacts with America and the Mystery of the Croats: Were Some Croats Present at the Discovery of America?” *Journal of Croatian Studies* 1 (1960): 6–24.

6. Since 1953 the group has officially referred to themselves as Lumbee Indians. As with Humphreys' text, place functions as an important part of the group's identity, as evidenced by their naming themselves after Robeson County's Lumber River (Humphreys calls the river the Lumbee River).

7. [http://www.lumbee Tribe.com/recognition/100\\_year\\_quest.pdf](http://www.lumbee Tribe.com/recognition/100_year_quest.pdf)

8. Dr. McCabe's obsession (and Dr. Carl Seltzer's) reflects the preoccupations of the American School of Anthropology, which operated under the premise that different races had separate origins and were consequently separate species. Anthropologists supporting this theory conducted extensive research, claiming that physical variations proved their theory, particularly differences in cranial capacity between races. Such research explains why Rhoda's head is measured and compared with the skull of a Cheraw child. For more information, see William Stanton's *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America 1815-59*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960.

Additionally, a study that began in 1923 attempted to trace the biological roots of the Win tribe (white, Indian, and Negro) of Virginia and their claims to Indian ancestry. Their story parallels Lumbee history in that both include tri-racial theories. Estabrook mentions the Lumbee people, but he calls them the "Rivers" of "Robin County" (since he keeps names fictitious). For more information see Arthur Estabrook's *Mongrel Virginians: the Win Tribe*. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1926. To view photographs of Lumbee people from Estabrook's field notes visit the Eugenics Archive at <http://www.eugenics archive.org>.

9. Interestingly, if the Lumbees had been able to claim solely Indian heritage, they could not have escaped disfranchisement; it is only the connection to whiteness that afforded them the right to vote, even though the admission of mixing with whiteness brought about questions of mixing with blackness as well. Many scholars argue that the most plausible theory includes Indians, whites, and runaway slaves. For more information about the tri-racial isolate theory, see David Henige's article, "Origin Traditions of American Racial Isolates: A Case of Something Borrowed" in the *Appalachian Journal* 11.3 (1984): 201-13 and Adolph Dial and David Elliades' book, *The Only Land I Know*. San Francisco: The Indian Historian P, Inc., 1975.

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