



Being Southern Is Being Invisible

Pura Fé Crescioni

I was not born or raised in the South. But I know what it is to come from Southern values and roots. Roots that are older than America can ever be.

My grandparents and my grandmother's six sisters all moved from North Carolina to Harlem during the Great Depression. My grandparents met each other in New York, married, and raised seven daughters and several grandchildren. I was the first grandchild and spent my earliest years with my grandparents, their sisters, my mama, and her sisters at our family house in Corona in Queens, N.Y. My great aunts, always around helping grandma in the house, and my grandfather told me many stories. As a child, I knew these stories would become my source, my love, and my dedication: I would restore my silenced ancestors' names and give them back to my people. In time we'd return to our Southern homeland and our culture, tell the true stories, and claim our achievements — which became known as "American achievements." I was fed from the "old spoon" — old hands, eyes, and voices that reminded me of the places we have called home for a million years.

I didn't get home till the age of thirty or thirty-one. My cousin Erich drove a van full of us cousins to Smithfield and Newton Grove, N.C., which happens to be the birthplace and headquarters of one of the many offshoots of the Ku Klux Klan. There we

met relatives and visited the old tobacco and cotton fields our families had worked and lived on. Going South made me realize where all the skin games came from that were played out within my own family in New York. I recognized the load that Grandma had dragged with her up North — bits and pieces of internalized hate and shame that she then passed out to us without explanation.

I have family ties down South from both sides of many fences: Black folk, Indian folk, colored folk, and the skeletons of White folk in our closet. (No one talks about the master we were related to.) When visiting relatives you're often asked, "So whatcha go fo'?" That means, "What race of people do you identify with?" Down South, you can't be everything that you are. You've got to choose, and denial is the norm.

A long time ago strategies were developed to divide people of color and to subvert the many slave revolts and underground societies that grew from associations between Black and Red folk. Today, there is a lot of hate and fear among these two very separate communities, yet we share one another's blood and ancestry. Sometimes it's a fine line — you can't even tell which group a person comes from. People don't know about Indian slavery and deportation, and how we survived in the South by sacrificing our identity in backwoods counties as "Free People of Color." Over and over again my grandma and her sisters were told by their grandma, "When the census man comes, don't tell him you're Indian. Tell him you're colored! Or else he'll take you back 'round the house and shoot you in the head."

So for me, being Southern is being invisible.

Pura Fé grew up with her mother's family, the Monks, who are distant relatives of jazz composer and pianist Thelonious Monk. In her family's long musical tradition, she can identify four generations in her maternal line each with seven singing sisters.

Pura Fé is a "mixed blood Tuscarora" from North Carolina.

Photo courtesy Crescioni Family Archives



Suggested Reading

Forbes, Jack. 1993. *African and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red and Black Peoples*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Hudson, Charles. 1994. *The Forgotten Centuries*. Albany, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.

Sertina, Ivan Van. 1976. *They Came Before Columbus*. New York: Random House.

Silko, Leslie Mammon. 1992. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Viking.

Wright, J. Leitch, Jr. 1981. *The Only Land They Knew: The Tragic Story of the American Indian in the South*. New York: Macmillan.

Suggested Listening

Crescioni, Pura Fé. *In the Spirit*. EBI Records. (Distributed by SOAR Records, 1-800-890-SOAR.)

———. *Caution to the Wind*. Shanachie/Cachet Records 5013.