Red Clay, Blue Hills: 
In Honor of My Ancestors

John Brown Childs

In every place visited among the Sakalava we found events and names recalled by tradition still living in memory...we have heard the Sakalava invoke these names in all important activities of their social life and recall with pride these events...

—Charles Guillain (1845), cited in Raymond K. Kent, Early Kingdoms in Madagascar, 1500–1700

I must speak about my ancestors. It is from them that I have received the desire to contribute to the best of my ability to what I hope is constructive cooperation leading to justice, equality, and peace in the world. I owe it to them to make these comments. What I say in these pages flows from two great currents, the African and the Native American, whose conflux runs through my family and infuses my spirit today. In the 1990s, when I went to visit my family in Marion, Alabama, my cousin Arthur Childs, who had served as lieutenant in World War II in Burma, and who was the family storyteller, took me immediately to the cemetery, where in the midst of red clay dust he told me the histories of those who had passed on.

The African-Malayo grandmother of my grandmother of my grandmother, known as The Princess to her captors, was born in Madagascar, an island peopled by populations from the Pacific and Africa. In 1749, The Princess was a member of a Madagascan delegation on board a French ship bound for France, where she apparently was to go to convent school. Their ship was captured by English privateers. All the Madagascans on board were captured and sold into slavery in the English colonies. My ancestress found herself in chains, being sold as property to a Thomas Burke, a leading figure in North Carolina government, to be given as a wedding present for his new wife at a wedding ceremony in Norfolk, Virginia (Bond 1972, 22). The story handed down within both the Burke family and my relations is that when “the Princess” was brought first to the Virginia plantation where she began her career as a slave, the other enslaved Africans acknowledged her royal origin and gave her the respect due to one of her background” (Bond 1972, 23).

The descendants of The Princess established their families in the red clay country of Marion, where they (as property of whites) had been transferred through the infamous network of the slave trade. Marion, in Perry County, Alabama, has for a long time been a dynamic wellspring in southern African-American life. Marion is where my father’s forebears, Stephen Childs and family, created the Childs Bakers and Confectioners, Growers,
and Shippers store on Main Street. This store was an economic bulwark of the African-American community there. My father, born in the heart of what had been the slaveholding region of the southern United States, was named after John Brown, the revolutionary fighter who gave his life in the battle against slavery.

Marion is where James Childs and nine other African-Americans, newly liberated from slavery after the Civil War, established the first African-American school, The Lincoln Normal School, in the late 1860's....

The school's teachers were housed in a building that had been taken away from the Ku Klux Klan, whose aim was to keep people of African descent in subordination and indignity....

Lincoln Normal School went on to become an influential African-American educational institution. Dr. Horace Mann Bond noted the broad community significance of the Perry County Lincoln Normal School in his study Black American Scholars, which analyzes the roots of southern African-Americans holding Ph.D.s after the Civil War....

Among my relatives influenced by Lincoln Normal was William Hastie, a civil rights legal advocate and the first African-American federal circuit court of appeals judge, as well as an important participant in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet." In 1943 Hastie resigned a government position as assistant to the U.S. Secretary of War in protest over racial segregation of African-Americans in the U.S. military....

My Childs family relations, along with other African-Americans in Marion, worked in the midst of Ku Klux Klan country, to create Lincoln Normal School as a sustaining community in the midst of a dangerous, often lethal environment of racial oppression. They sought to use their roots in the rural and small-town Deep South as a basis for construction of a bastion of justice and dignity.

I was born in 1942, in the Roxbury ghetto of Boston, Massachusetts. As a small child I lived in a housing project called Bataan Court. My birthplace is only a few miles north of a state recreational park; there, in the Blue Hills is a body of water called by its Native American name Punkapoag, which means "The Place of the Fresh Water Pond." Punkapoag is where some of my mother's Native-American ancestors once lived. My relations were members of the Algonkian confederacy known as the Massachusetts—or to be more precise, Massachusetts, which means "The Place of The Big Hills." The Massachusetts nation, like many Native-American nations, was an egalitarian confederacy comprising several communities such as the Punkapoag, the Nipmuck, the Neponset, and the Wesaguset.*

Closely related neighbors of the Wampanoag ("The People of the Dawn"), who, as with the Nipmuck ("The People of the Fresh Water Place") today are vibrant communities in Massachusetts, these ancestors of mine encountered Europeans under the command of Giovanni da Verrazano in 1524. Verrazano described the Massachusetts as a "most beautiful" people who were "sweet and gentle, very like the manner of the ancients." They were, he observed, expert sailors who could, "go to sea without any danger" in boats made "with admirable skill" (Brasser, 1978: 78). Almost one hundred years later, in 1614, Captain John Smith, while "visiting" the Massachusetts, described their land as "the paradise [sic] of all these parts" (Selwen, 1978: 170). This paradise was soon decimated by the wave of epidemics that ravaged much of New England as larger ships carrying more Europeans brought diseases such as smallpox, to which native peoples had no immunity. ...

The Massachusetts people were particularly hard hit this way. Their population plummeted from an estimated thirty thousand to a few hundred by the mid 1650s. By

*Such confederacies were fluid, and their composition could change over time.
that time, the surviving members of those nations that had been undermined were forcibly concentrated into small villages called “Praying Towns” where they were supposed to adapt to and adopt Christianity. One of these towns was Punkapog, originally the main home of the Massachusett, but later turned into a mix of concentration camp/refugee center...

Many of the Praying Town inhabitants, the so-called Praying Indians, although they provided men to serve in colonial militias (against the French) were attacked, dispersed, and killed. For those who survived, and for their descendants, such atrocities clearly drew the final bloody message that their ancient homelands were no longer the richly textured environments of deeply rooted free-life, but had become the places of tears. Many Narragansett, Pequod, Mohegan, Massachusetts, and other natives were now exiles “in the land of the free” (Lyons 1992). As a coherent cultural entity, the Punkapog community of the Massachusett confederacy, with its members forced into exile and finding intermarriage with other peoples the only means of survival, ceased to exist as a social whole.

Responding to long decades of cultural erosion and terrorism directed against them, a gathering of Christian Native peoples, including some of my ancestors, under the leadership of Rev. Samson Occom—a Mohegan man and a Presbyterian minister who had struggled against great odds to attain his “calling”—sought and were generously given land by the Oneida nation in what is now New York State. It was there, in a 1774 ceremony, that they were adopted as “the younger brothers and sisters” of the Oneida.

My Native-American ancestors, whose family name had become Burr, intermarried with the Oneida. Eventually, in the early 1800s, they moved back to their ancestral homeland of Massachusetts (see Doughton 1998). Eli and Saloma Burr; my great, great, great grandfather and grandmother, settled in the western part of Massachusetts near Springfield. Eli and Saloma, and their children Vienna, Fidelia, Alonzo, and Albert, are listed in the 1868 Massachusetts State “Indian” census as Oneida people, Eli’s grandfather had been an “Oneida chief” according to these state records. Eli and Saloma’s children married African-Americans, including Zebadee Carl Talbott, a sharpshooter and one of the best pistol shots in the country” according to a Springfield Republican report. One of the grandchildren, James Burr, became well known as an African-American inventor.

A 1915 obituary in the Massachusetts Springfield Republican newspaper noting the death of one of their grandsons, John Burr, contains information that could have only come from the Burrs, namely, that his ancestors were originally from “Ponkapog” Massachusetts, and that they had been adopted by the Oneida in the 1700s. So, well over 100 years after their ancestors had left New England for the Oneida sanctuary of Brothertown, the Burrs still carried the memories both of their Massachusett origins and of the importance of their adoptive Oneida homeland.

From these currents of Massachusett/Brothertown-Oneida, and Africa came my mother Dorothy Pettyjohn, who was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She became a teacher who, as a young woman, went to “Cotton Valley” in Alabama of the 1930’s to teach in a school for impoverished rural African-American children not far from Marion and its Lincoln Normal School. It was there that she met and married my father. So, the waves of oppression, crashing over many peoples, driven from their land, forged many of them into complex syntheses of memory and belonging that link Africa and Native America for me.

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville’s soon to be famous, vast overview of the young United States, entitled Democracy in America, was published. Among his otherwise astute descriptions based on his travels in “America,” Tocqueville inaccurately pictures what he calls “the three races of the United States.” These are, he says, “the white or European,
Negro, and the Indian” which he claims are always distinctly separate populations. Concerning “the Negro” and “the Indian” he writes that these “two unhappy races have nothing in common, neither birth, nor features, nor language, nor habits” (1954, 343; for an epic depiction of the cross-currents created by oppression in the Americas, see Galeano 1985).

If this assertion by Tocqueville were true, then I could not exist, given my African and Native American currents that have flowed together for more than two hundred years. My family relations cannot be compartmentalized into these rigid sealed-off categories such as those suggested by Tocqueville. Nor can the depths of their courage be plumbed by his superficial description of the “unhappy races,” no matter how terrible their tribulations as they have flowed through so many valleys of oppression. Today I recognize that from Pungapoag in Massachusetts, and Brothertown in New York State, to Lincoln Normal School in Alabama, my relations were among those establishing roots in what they hoped would be sustaining communities that could buffer people against the forces of hatred while offering solid ground for justice and dignity. I know that my connection to my ancestors is not only genealogical, as important as that is. My connection to them is also that of the spirit. I have for many years worked alongside those trying to create places of freedom from injustice, I continue to do so today; I now understand, after years of my own internal development, with guidance from elders and friends, that this work of mine is propelled by those currents flowing from the springing hopes of my ancestors.

I do not feel like one of those “crossing border hybrids” now so much discussed by scholars who examine post-modernity. Nor does the older Latin American term “Zambo” for “half Black/half Indian, “describe how I know myself. It is not in such a divided fashion that I recognize my existence. To the contrary, in the language of my Algonkian ancestors, Noteshehem—I am a man—who stands at newichewannock, “the place between two strong currents.” Without these two distinct streams there can be no such “in-between place” to be named as such. But, at the same time, this place is real and complete unto itself. In the same way, I emerge a full man, not a simple bifurcated halfing, from the two strong currents of Africa and Native America. It is this newichewannock that marks the place of my spirit, and that propels me today.

References


