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Intersectional Alliances in Soledad Prison: The Exemplary Life of John Brown Childs

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ABSTRACT

This essay, the first of a triptych published in *Jacobin-Italia*, focuses on the contribution of scholar-activist and Black Native American sociologist John Brown Childs, who played an important role in producing and developing “trans-communality” theory and practice. His work came out of his experiences in Soledad Prison, where inmates developed their own trans-racial education system, which included promoting gender consciousness and social empowerment. Childs’ work sheds light on the possibility of overcoming intra-communal conflicts and creating intersectional alliances among different and oppressed social groups or “nations”.

KEYWORDS Conflict resolution; identity politics; Native American studies; radical pedagogy; trans-communality

Black Native American scholar activist John Brown Childs taught sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz. Over the past ten years he taught in California prisons as “Prison Project” volunteer for Barrios Unidos, a community organisation devoted to promoting social empowerment, health, and self-education. As an instructor on “peace-making” and “trans-communal cooperation” in the California carceral system, Childs taught as well at the Soledad state prison, the first and oldest California prison and among the sites dedicated to discipline and correction. But in the rough context of long and life sentences, John Brown Childs witnessed the constantly evolving

ethical creative energies and the intense will for intellectual growth among the prisoners with whom he worked. They offer hope to those trapped in the corrosive circumstances of poverty, social cul-de-sacs, violence, and economic displacement that affects so many rural and urban communities. (Childs 2016)

I met John 30 years ago while he was professor at the University of California Santa Cruz. His ancestors had been enslaved. One part originated from

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Madagascar and the other from the Massachusetts Ponkapoag Nation (Big Hills Sweet Water) who resist in what is now Massachusetts. John is a citizen of the Ponkapoag Nation. As he has recounted, the impetuous waters of the two African and Indigenous cultures course through his veins, as in the case of his genealogical ancestry. On Abya Yala – the ancient name for North America now employed in a decolonial perspective – excavating one's origins is no hobby of heraldry by dynasty enthusiasts, but a recurring theme among Black People. Finding one's roots as John has done is no common feat and a fascinating story emerges from it. Through cemetery-based research he discovered that eight generations prior an Afro-Malay ancestor, known as "Princess," partook of a Malagasy delegation to France. English pirates, however, intercepting and seizing the ship, captured and sold her off to a member of the North Carolina government, Thomas Burke, who gave the Princess to his wife as a wedding-day gift. It would seem that the marriage gift – that is, John's grandmother's grandmother's grandmother – never accepted domestic servitude. She was forced into plantation work in Virginia, where the local enslaved community welcomed her as their queen. She was thereafter transferred with her sons to Alabama, where their descendants remained for the next six generations. It is there that John's grandfather, James Childs, decided to baptise his son with the name John Brown, the great revolutionary who sacrificed his life in the struggle against slavery. Then, with the end of the Civil War, thanks to the official abolition of slavery, John's grandfather James built a bakery with his extended family. With another nine freed Blacks, they established the first African American school in the country, the Lincoln Normal School. The teachers were lodged in a building expropriated from the Ku Klux Klan. I can only imagine how the school was inaugurated: music, sweets, festive clothes, and an effective system of self-defence, rather necessary in an area still infected with white supremacy.

In his famous and still uncritically taught essay *Democracy in America* (1835) Alexis de Tocqueville described Blacks and American Indians as the "unfortunate races." That is quite a contrast to John Brown Childs' writings, where his bicentennial African and Indigenous mixed inheritance is not only represented as his genetic, familial, and social base, but also as a two-spirit mixture. As he put it, "I am a man who stands in the 'place between two strong currents'" (Childs 2003, 20). That place, wherever it may be, is called with an Algonkian concept *newichewannock*. Without both currents merging together (the African and the Indigenous ones) it is not possible to remain in that place, which is a place concrete and complete on its own terms. In the same way, the strength of those two currents makes not for a divided being but for one who is whole, complete. *Newichewannock* marks a spirit's place and propels it into today (Childs 2003).

John Brown Childs has always been true to his own roots and struggled against injustice already during the Jim Crow regime. From 1960 to 1964,

he attended the University of Massachusetts, where he organised groups to take part of the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” at the end of which the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. would give his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. During that time, John joined SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), who mobilised people to protest the war on Vietnam and to support economic justice. As a graduate, he returned to Alabama to aid in the anti-segregationist actions of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), who supported African-Americans’ struggles for the right to vote. In the 1970s, he secured a PhD degree as SUNY Buffalo in Urban Anthropology. His career proceeded as an instructor at Yale University, in the Department of African American Studies and Anthropology.

When I met him in 1990, he was teaching a course titled “Theory and Method” in the Sociology Department in the University of California Santa Cruz. His approach was very participative. This was the department where the founder of Eco-Marxism and my mentor, James O’Connor, was teaching, alongside Walter Golfrank. It was a very white programme with much resistance against an intersectional framework, at that time called “cross-road,” which opposed prioritising class over other forms of oppression. This was especially the case with race/ethnicity and gender, considered secondary by traditional Marxist academics.

Childs resisted such reductionistic readings of class throughout his university career and beyond. To him, always combining university work with political action, the transition from full professor to full-time activist was a natural epilogue for his career. As part of this transition, in 2010, he started teaching regularly in prisons. I had a chance to put a few questions to him via e-mail as I revisited his writings during lockdown. Replying with his usual radiance, he started off by recounting the concepts he found most useful in his activism.

I read Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* with interest. The Southern Question was particularly interesting because it bears important implications for African Americans’ situation in the United States. The concept of “organic intellectual” helps me in prisons, where many inmates with whom I work use it. I see myself as an admirer of Gramsci. I am also influenced by Martin Luther King, whose last essay, “The World House,” speaks of poverty and militarism as corrosive of humanity. Just think, he was killed as he was beginning to develop a global vision and to oppose the war in Vietnam ... and then I have been influenced by Ella Baker, founder and guiding spirit of the student movement for civil rights and for Black people’s vote, as also Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah, on the anti-colonial side. It was dangerous days when I returned to Alabama in 1965: SNCC members and their allies were being shot at, Black Churches were the target of racists’ bombs, and protests were squashed in blood. But we persevered and obtained constitutional victories and the right to vote. The fight continues still today. (personal communication, December 2020)

These concepts and experiences became crucial to him in the early 1990s. The 3rd of March 1992, the day of the Los Angeles riots against yet another case of racist police brutality, marks an important change in John's activism. Author and activist Rodney King was stopped and beaten up by the men in blue, but for the first time, from a balcony, the scene was recorded in that very moment through amateur video camera and, well before the Internet, the recording went "viral," televised everywhere in Abya Yala and then in the rest of the world.

But in the ensuing days, during the riot, no unified movement emerged against racism. Conflicts among the diverse communities flared up instead. Black, Latinx, Asians were not protesting in unity against white supremacy and the discrimination oppressing them. They were ultimately venting their anger one against the other, against Korean shops, against Mexican immigrants, against the neighbouring gang. That event was a turning point for John, who participated in forums and meetings. He proposed the concept of "trans-communality," putting forth the challenge of transforming the armistice among local communities into a permanent peace, so as to find a way out of the war among the poor. There needed to be some way to resolve conflicts between communities, the youth gangs, the different ethnicities and cultures that had come to co-exist forcibly in the same city.

During the summer of that year, Childs participated in the Peace and Justice Grand Truce meeting in Kansas City. This was an important step forward towards trans-community dialogue. He would write about it in *Z Magazine* (Childs 1994). In the early 1990s identity politics were very fashionable, but he was perhaps among the first to notice the limits and problems of such politics, of which we have now more awareness. At the time, he was already speaking about collective identities founded on material needs and a thirst for justice, harbingers of intersectional trans-ethnic, trans-cultural, trans-racial alliances among the various gangs or "nations." These are the kinds of alliances that can involve even those who have been treated as external to class relations, in traditional Marxism, that is, the lumpenproletariat and their invisible organisations.

The Los Angeles revolt marks a point of no return with relations to whites as well. Whites participating in the protests were branded as race traitors in some media. In fact, *Race Traitor* is the title of a leftist magazine founded in 1992, with the first issue featuring a potent image of the Los Angeles riot. But whites' participation in the movement remained marginal and gang war certainly took centre stage in the debate. The debate focused on the internalisation of oppression as a recurring response to white violence; on the self-hatred among Blacks and discriminated minorities; on searching for causes that results in a lack of worth given to those near us; and on a sincere and peaceful discussion with other communities, with whom

alliances are not only possible but necessary. In 1992 an important occasion consequently presented itself for debate, meeting of perspectives, and action over Childs' theoretical and practical trans-community approach. As Childs remarks in my interview with him,

Rodney King, who had survived the police beating, was asking himself: "Can't we get along with each other?" This is the theme of my work on "Trans-communality," which had a lot of success in Soledad prison. The men with whom I worked are Asian American, African American, White American, Native American (or American Indian). They come from different urban areas where different "gangs" or, as they call them, "nations," are at war with each other. Typically, such tension manifests itself even in prison, and Soledad was no exception. But the men taking the Transcommunality courses had overcome those differences and were working together with mutual respect on positive educational projects. (personal communication, December 2020)

A wonderful example of the positive and creative energy Childs describes came out exactly through the meeting of men from diverse ethnic/racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, who took the initiative of developing on their terms a course on "Peacemaking," forming the "Cemanahuac" Cultural Group. *Cemanahuac* is Nahuatl for "One World," which reminds us of the unity of living beings with this planet. Many of Childs' former students at Soledad themselves became teachers for a rising number of students. The aims of the prison courses, as written on the self-managed course syllabus, are peace, that is co-existence, and cooperation among the various communities. It is peace understood in the sense of "mutual respect and tolerance." The "Cemanahuac" group works on nonviolence and trans-community practices, thanks as well to decades of efforts by professor/activist John Brown Childs. The members of the group identify as "Peace Warriors," within as well as outside prison. They struggle as well with themselves and their gendered privileges, against the violent maleness that they carry inside themselves. As one inmate has put it, "We must have 'gender peace in social justice.'" "Male on female violence" betrays the very meanings of "harmony and justice."

One of my Soledad students (an observer of human behavior) says, "within any prison setting, there are dividing lines among those who make up the general inmate prison population. These classes successfully challenge us to break down the prison-based Berlin Wall—Racial Dividing Lines." He attributes a "period of peace" at Soledad partially to the "change in mindset that these classes have brought about." This change in social consciousness helps to open the spaces and the moments that allow for constructive engagement among diverse people coming from different affiliations and cultural settings. (Childs 2016, 2)

Incarcerated youth and men have inspired literary successes like *Always Running*, but it has always been state or religious workers who took care

of them beyond the walls, while socio-political activism reached but the prison threshold, offering solidarity but without fully taking in the epistemological worth of reappropriating and re-signifying the meaning of studying, of self-education, of self-care together with others in prison.

According to Childs, the “Cemanahuac” group produces positive responses relevant to the kinds of questions posed half a century ago by Ella Baker, who, during the struggle for African American civil rights in 1969 stated:

... the big question is what is American society—Is it the kind of society ... that permits people to grow and develop according to their capacity, that gives them a sense of value, not only for themselves, but a sense of value for other human beings? (quoted in Childs 2016, 3)

The answer, to Childs’ mind, lies in the transformative process triggered by the Peace Warriors, and it is in the affirmative answer relative to Ella Baker’s question. We can make the United States such a place because Childs’ courses help deconstruct exactly those white roots of peace and study conflict resolution as practised in Native American communities. To this end, they also read the works of Martin Luther King and Ghandi, though certainly not in a form reduced to social movement fire-fighting mode, but as contributions to a nonviolent politics intra- and trans-communally, practising self-management and self-government. This reading practice is for us a different example of “revolutionary prison schooling,” where those who have studied, political prisoners, the graduates, teach common inmates. Instead, it is exactly those common inmates who self-organise and take their social and political destinies in their own hands.

The “Cemanahuac” Peace Warriors take up rigorous tasks, group discussion themes and readings, giving concrete examples of how perspectival diversity can be put into practice safely and produce awareness. Each student in a course is responsible for making analyses and presenting their thoughts on a key theme at each class meeting. Everyone contributes to creating new and useful modalities of interaction through constructive consensus and dissent, both of which are very helpful to learning.

Their enthusiasm for learning and a strong work ethic put them on a par with the best students I had at Yale, Harvard, and Utrecht, and in at the University of California. Their efforts overturn all the negative stereotypes and effects of prison while they delineate through practice paths of personal and social growth. (personal communication, December 2020)

A former student of Childs now lives near the Mexican border and organises houses of refuges for those released from prison. He does so by using trans-community principles to create the basis for successful interaction among former inmates in both English and Spanish, as they look for dignified work. Another former student works with veterans coming back from the many wars and who are mainly Blacks and Browns. They are

psychologically exhausted and often unable to return to the former life they led, at work, with family. They often become homeless, alcoholics, and end up in jail as a result of brawls or petty crimes. Another former student now works in large cities as an educator of youth who want to escape the folly of street violence and avoid drugs and prison.

The history of Soledad and many other prisons is encouraging regarding the potential of people who find themselves in tough and dangerous situations, to build bridges in the human spirit through which communities can be built that are filled with respect, reason, and compassion. (personal communication, December 2020)

In his book on transcommunalism Childs (2003) holds that no ethnic or social group, however marginalised or oppressed, needs an outside force to intervene and organise them, and he discusses how the civil rights movement from its very beginnings could count on their own internal organising forms, making it grow in the desired direction. Accordingly, it is best for white activists, who usually act, even if unreflectively, on an assumption of superiority, to go and teach how to do politics, as this is perceived as a supremacist position. Forms of “cross-fertilisation” or mutual enrichment are instead necessary, in the framework of mutual respect and recognition of diversity. John Brown Childs underlines how a high degree of respect is indispensable for trans-community work, which may be intermittent, peppered with instances of people stepping in and out of commitment, but which can never be a stepping on of others’ subjectivities.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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