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Sasha Link, 2016 (Photo credit: Thomas Sayers Ellis).

Tracing My Lineage, Finding Myself

Sasha Link

I travel with a note pad and pen tucked away in the pocket of my blue denim purse. My passion for writing storms inside of me as I ride in the back seat of my mother's brown and beige Chevy Cavalier station wagon. We travel around Boston, passing railroad tracks, streetcars and the city's legendary three-decker homes. I write during these rides, jotting down things I want to become: a writer, an actress, a teacher. Though my creative instincts were apparent to me at an early age, I have been working to develop the *depth* of my character ever since.

My genealogical research started as an undergraduate at Bridgewater State University. I was awarded an Adrian Tinsley Program Grant (ATP) to present my work at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research at Indiana University. *The Link to Finding Myself* is a creative writing capstone project that was birthed in 2013. It infuses prose with recipes, poetry and interviews that trace my mother's history as the youngest of 17 children in the rural southern town of Henderson, North Carolina, during the early 1950s. This project is a reflection on the work of archiving aspects of my family's past. It analyzes some of the oral testimony from interviews with my

family members, and combines photographs and prose reflections centered on four themes: family, food, music, and Henderson, North Carolina. In crafting this literary genealogy, I look at places where I've never been and talk to people I do not know, but who are nevertheless a part of me. And through this work I begin to discover my own history, an American History.

My mother inspires me; she is my greatest ally. She is a devoted champion, selfless confidant, and strong example of resilience. My mother is the youngest of her siblings, the last to leave the little house in Henderson where they were raised. She knows little about my

grandfather. Unlike most children, whose first memories of their fathers stretch way back, my mom does not have any intimate or personal recollections. She was not accompanied by her father to her first recital, nor was she chaperoned to her first high-school dance. My mother was born without a father, and consequently without a chance to experience a father in her life. As I seek to find the details that make up my history, I look to my aunts and uncles, older cousins and distant relatives to learn about who I am, and who we are as a family.

I am often told that I am a light-skinned version of "Sister." That's what they call my mother, Sister. When I look at pictures from my mother's childhood, I come to the same conclusion. I resemble her in many ways. We share the same thick hair. We have almost identical eye lashes and eye brows, and even the shape of our eyes is the same. I have the shape of her mouth, nose, chin and cheeks. My mother looks like my grandmother. She resembles her strength. I look like my mother. I resemble her tenacity.

My grandparents are descended of slaves. The uncompromising reality is that, for centuries, my family, like all slaves, were heavily policed, barred



My mother, Patricia Link, Boston Raytheon Keyboarding School award ceremony, 1979.

from learning anything other than religious content, and prohibited from reading, associating with others from outside of their race, and purchasing land. This is incomprehensible to me. I am fascinated, however, by the power they did possess: their unbreakable drive and inner power to persevere, cling to oral history, tell meaningful stories, sing healing hymns, and join forces to unify culturally, traditionally, and motivationally.

My grandfather, Alvin Link, was born in 1895 in Franklin County, North Carolina. He and my grandmother met in the mid-1900s during my grandmother's career as a home-care worker, while she was taking care of his previous wife as she grew sick and died. My grandparents started a new chapter that same year. They married and moved to Henderson, a small city in Vance County, located 40 minutes from the capital, Raleigh. In 1860, at a time when the tobacco industry was flourishing, Henderson was home to a host of mercantile stores, industrial brick buildings, cotton gins, and several newspapers. Years later, parts of Granville County, Franklin County and Warren County were combined to form Vance County. According to the 1860 U.S. federal census slave schedule,



Sasha in high school, 1999 (Link family photos)



Photograph of my Grandmother, Mary Magdalene Link, surrounded by nine of her 17 children, Boston, Massachusetts, 1970 (Link family photo).

in Granville County, there were 10,610 Black slaves. My grandparents' parents were among them.

The four decades after 1915 was a tumultuous time in the South. During those years my grandfather, a quiet man who liked to sit under a large oak tree neighboring their small house in Antioch, North Carolina, spent most of his days as a sharecropper. He was well-versed in agriculture, an avid guitar player and a passionate musician. He lived a simple life and, unfortunately, lost it tragically. On a warm day in April, 1951, my grandfather's car was struck by a truck while he was out running an errand. It wasn't the impact of the truck that ended his life; it was the lack of extended medical care. He was transported and admitted to nearby Jubilee Hospital, a Black-owned facility, where he was diagnosed with a broken rib cage. After several days of care, hospital personnel concluded there was nothing else they could do. My grandfather was discharged and sent home where he bled to death.

My grandmother and grandfather had already raised 15 children when my

mom was born. On the morning of May 12, 1951, my grandmother, Mary Magdalene Link, gave birth to my mother, Patricia Link. After my grandfather's death, she faced the final stage of pregnancy alone. My mother was their smallest, most fragile child—four pounds at birth, small enough to hold in one hand. Though she never had the chance to meet her father, see his face, or feel his hand touch hers, she claims that she senses his presence—a security, serenity and a presence of light she carries today.

I was fortunate to grow up with my grandmother in my life. She was a strong woman, a woman of sustenance, faith and determination. My grandmother was steadfast, unmovable, unshakable, and resolute in her pursuit to provide for her family—even more so after the death of my grandfather. She taught herself how to sew, and was an ardent baker and cook. She baked and cooked regularly: sweet potato, chocolate, and coconut pies; pineapple upside-down and tea cakes; cookies, loaf bread and homemade vanilla ice cream; chicken and dumplings with

collard and turnip greens, string beans, gravy, and biscuits.

My grandmother was Black and Cherokee Indian. She had long, soft hair, supple skin and a serious disposition. Like many Black women in the New South, she persisted and endured through difficult times. I aspire to be as remarkable as she was, a mother and cook like she was; to be a freedom fighter, to seek wisdom and achievement in our own challenging era. *How did she get through rough times? What drove her to not give up? What mechanisms did she have in place for survival?* While I do not know the answers to these questions, I do know that, in the midst of turmoil, she thrived.

Sweet Ole Henderson

Pots of potatoes
Sautéed
With onions
Seedless grapes,
Growing in the garden
Family gatherings
Baskets of pies,
Henderson North Carolina—is
Where chopped pork
Over grits makes sense.

Where Grandma's skills surpass
Just cooking in the kitchen.
Henderson is where a natural nurturer
Blends many ingredients
Never missing—
Touch,
Always marinating,
And generating recipes: love and harmony.

Standing strong in Henderson,
cooking homemade sweet potato,
Custard pies and cakes,
Finger licking good
Sweet Henderson, oh, sweet Henderson

When I see the tattered photos of my family, I see heroes. I see myself. I see my daughter, Nia, whose deep, obscure eyes are a mystery, and whose resolve leads us to believe she may become a doctor or a judge someday, because she can. I see endless opportunity. I see my lineage, my heritage, my history. I am a proud descendant of overcomers, a proud writer who proudly worked as a beat reporter for newspapers in Boston and on the South Shore of Massachusetts, interviewing entrepreneurs and mixed-media artists and designers, discovering historic landmarks, reporting on political events, community meetings, and rising

Today, as a writing instructor, I aim to teach with an all-encompassing passion wherever the experience transports me—Christ Church, Barbados; Île-à-Vache, Haiti; Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. I proudly share my passion for writing and teaching with audiences all over the world. In the classroom, I am committed to challenging students to become engaged facilitators of their own learning process. Learning is a form of art, and intersecting that art with my own scholarly research and teaching has given me deeper purpose. This past August, I joined a host of teacher-scholars at Bridgewater State in a week-long

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performances. I see a first-generation college student—the first in my immediate family to earn a bachelor's degree, the first to gain a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, and the first to pursue doctoral studies. I am because they were. My grandparents' journey in the rural South during the early 1900s made way for my journey. I read freely. I sit wherever I want on a bus, or on a plane. I own a home on land that was not available to my ancestors. I have a voice and the choice to articulate my concerns in ways my grandparents could only dream of.

workshop that pushed us to examine our own pedagogy. Participating and engaging in stimulating conversations on topics related to innovative teaching practices re-energized my passion for teaching and reminded me of my good fortune: the opportunities I have that my grandmother, grandfather and ancestors could never have imagined. Today, I hold their torch, and it drives me to pursue all that I can.

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