

RODERICK DOUGLAS BUSH – 1945-2013

Rod Bush was the epitome of the scholar/activist. He has been recognized as an internationalist, humanist, and Black revolutionary who devoted his life to fundamental social change. His sociological research was award-winning and his teaching and activism transformed lives. After a very brief illness, Rod passed on December 5, 2013 of cancer of the bile duct.

Rod was born on November 12, 1945 in Sanford, Florida in the then Jim Crow South. He spent much of his childhood in Florida but joined his mother in Rochester, New York in 1959 where he attended Madison High School from which he graduated in 1963. At Madison, he became president of the school's National Honor Society and he excelled in math and science. Following his graduation from Madison, he went on to Howard University in Washington, DC and majored in psychology. He attended Howard during its tumultuous/movement years, 1963 to 1967. This was the period in which students demanded that Howard abandon its pursuit of imitating the "white Ivies" and become a Black university. Toni Morrison and Sterling Brown were among the distinguished faculty with whom he studied while there.

Having completed his B.S. in psychology at Howard in 1967, Rod was accepted into the clinical psychology Ph.D. program at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, Kansas. By 1972 he had completed his course work and was ABD. During this time, he played a key role in the founding of the University's Black Studies program. Being committed to the Black liberation struggle at that time, he left the doctoral program at Kansas to devote himself full-time to community organizing and other efforts toward that end. While engaging in this movement activity, he was employed by several agencies in northeast Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri area serving Black communities. He then relocated to San Francisco where he continued organizing work and served as a research associate for the Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis for several years and a brief spell with Oxfam America. It was with these agencies and the movement organizations with which he was affiliated that Rod was able to demonstrate his commitment to a transformational justice. Rod's life was grounded in love, community and a profound belief in humanity. His love and care for humanity was reflected, as well, in his work when he made his

move to New York. In Brooklyn, he served as the director of the prison education program for New York City Technical College's Division of Continuing Education and a coordinator for State University of New York Educational Opportunity Center.

As an activist, he was a member of some of the nation's most progressive movement organizations. He had been a member of the Congress of African People (CAP), the Student Organization for Black Unity and the Youth Organization for Black Unity (SOBU/YOBU), the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC), and then the Black Radical Congress, all Black nationalist and/or Marxist in their orientations. Unquestionably, these were among the most progressive, cutting edge Black movement organizations. More recently, he played a key role in the Left Forum, and other community based efforts. More importantly, Rod's participation and leadership in these organizations are reflections of his commitment and dedication to producing fundamental change when it comes to combatting race and class oppression. This dedication in more recent years was reflected in his participation in United States Social Forums in Atlanta in 2007 and Detroit in 2010. For the Detroit Social Forum, Rod was surrounded by a number of students whom he had accompanied to that gathering, co-hosting a workshop on "How Things Change as They Stay the Same: Intergenerational Organizing and Personal Transformation."

No doubt it was this experience among others, including his regular classroom teaching that endeared him with his students. They felt empowered by his excitement about ideas, and his belief in them as scholars and engaged members of the community at large. They loved his gentle manner and patient mentorship that challenged them to live up to the high standards he believed they could meet. They loved what he taught and his pedagogical style. He was well known for his gift in story-telling to bring ideas to life.

His research and writings prior to academia included a 1984 volume *The New Black Vote: Politics and Power in Four American Cities*. This work was developed within the context of a debate among and between a number of progressive organizations, activists, and intellectuals about the efficacy of Black electoral organizing as a means of social change for ordinary Black people. This debate took

place at a moment during the 1980s when there was some uncertainty about the future role of a Black radical praxis within a Black community increasingly dominated by a new class of centrist Black elected officials. His position that the emergence and transformation of Jesse Jackson and his call for a Rainbow Coalition constituted an important step forward for Black people and the entire nation. During this period he also wrote a number of articles in which he attempted to understand the situation of the African American working class within the evolving structures of the capitalist world-economy, the changing political culture of the United States, and the restructuring of the world a division of labor. In the papers and articles written during this period he sought to make an explicit class analysis of the African American people, while keeping in sight the reality of the widespread sense of peoplehood which clearly existed, and the particular location they occupied within the larger world capitalist division of labor.

These works include his article "Racism and the Rise of the Right" written in collaboration with a number of other scholars who sought to address the implications of the rise of the right in a thematic issue of *Contemporary Marxism* entitled "World Capitalist Crisis and the Rise of the Right." These scholars included Immanuel Wallerstein, Andre Gunder Frank, Tony Platt, and Marlene Dixon. In this work he began what he perceived as a relatively long-term project of addressing what had been called the African American "national question" in a new way.

It was in this period that he extended the analysis of that article in a talk at the Latin American Studies Association entitled "The Afro-American Movement and the Struggle Against Eurocentric Marxism." Here he began to articulate the notion of a Black radical tradition which benefited from the insights of Marxism but which resisted the ideological tutelage offered by some Marxists. In 1984 he further developed the analysis of race and class and social movements within a world-system in the article, "Racism and Changes in the International Division of Labor," published in *Crime and Social Justice*.

While attempting to deepen the theoretical analysis of the African American experience during this period he also wrote a number of journalistic articles focusing on the general attack on labor, the impact of Reaganomics on Black people, and on strategies for resisting the devastation of Black

communities by these policies. During this period of intense activism, he also wrote dozens of political leaflets and developed strategies for organizing Black communities on a local, national and international level. But by the mid-1980s it became increasingly clear that the strategies for change used by the worldwide family of anti-systemic movements over the last 150 years would not be able to make the emancipatory and liberating changes that its militants had hoped. Immanuel Wallerstein, at SUNY Binghamton was in regular conversation with these militants on a world scale, had been calling for these movements to rethink their strategy. Rod had long agreed with this perspective but found it difficult to implement it within an organization with ongoing commitments and practical campaigns. But as organization after organization collapsed during the 1980s, he decided to return to the academy to try to understand what had happened.

In 1988, Rod began his sociology Ph.D. work at State University of New York- Binghamton to study under Immanuel Wallerstein and Terence Hopkins. He completed his Ph.D. in 1992. His dissertation title was “Social Movements Among the Urban Poor: African Americans in the Twentieth Century.” It was this grounding that set the stage for his award-winning scholarship. His research agenda was dedicated to deepening our understanding of the dynamics of race and class. His first major work was: *We are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and the Class Struggle in the American Century*. This work was an examination of the nexus of Black nationalism and the Marxist tradition in the struggle for Black liberation. It won the 2000 Oliver Cromwell Cox Award of the Section on Race and Ethnic Minorities (ASA) for the outstanding book in the anti-racist tradition of Oliver Cox. The book seeks to analyze both the strategy and tactics of the movements, and the powerful structures against which the movements are arrayed, not as static entities, but as an evolving set of relations. In 2000, *The Black World Today* named this book one of the “10 Indispensable Books.” His next major work: *The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line* was also an award-winning work. In 2010, it was awarded the Marxist section’s (ASA) Paul Sweezy award for the outstanding book. His analyses showed that racism was a constitutive component of capitalism, therefore the struggle against racism must ultimately target the capitalist system and there is a danger in

focusing solely on the particularity of Black oppression. Moreover, Bush's research provided the analysis that the issue is not class or race that has primacy but both. In short, he held that race and class were overlapping and intertwined forms of stratification, which could not be so neatly divided.

His final work is forthcoming. This book is being published by Temple University Press and is co-authored by Rod's wife, Melanie. E. L. Bush. It is titled: *Tensions in the "American" Dream: Rhetoric, Reverie or Reality*. We look forward to the release of that title in fall 2014.

In addition to awards for scholarship, his teaching has been highly recognized, as well. When at Seton Hall, he was the recipient of an "Excellence in Teaching Award" in 1996 and was awarded the "President's Award for Outstanding Service to Students" in 1998. After his move to St. Johns in 1998, he was similarly recognized by being the recipient of the "Faculty Outstanding Achievement Award" in 2011. The lessons of his scholarship carried over into the classroom as did his compassion for those he interacted with, colleagues, students and community. Rod was loved by his students, many with whom he worked took on the work of pursuing societal transformation. In him they saw a professor who was full of life, happiness and a passion to pursue societal transformation with a goal toward economic and social justice.

At annual sociology meetings, Rod's role was critical when it came to bringing race and class issues to the forefront. He served a term as chair of the Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities. He served as editor of "The Griot", the newsletter for the Association of Black Sociologists (ABS). In 2008, he was a major player in organizing a very important conference on "Race and Labor" in Boston. Since the early 1990s, he has played a key role in organizing sessions on the critical issues of race and class.

As a consequence of the quality of his contributions, Rod was highly regarded in the academy and outside. His passing leaves a major void among radical scholars. He reflected the praxis -- theory and practice -- needed for furthering the cause of fundamental societal transformation. He brought to that praxis compassion, integrity, commitment to human rights, and a genuine respect for others. Students and friends alike often mentioned his nurturing character, his warmth, his smile, and his genuine laugh. As stated above, he had a way of making students feel empowered. These were the hallmarks that endeared

him to those with whom he worked whether they were colleagues, students or members of the community.

Rod leaves behind his soulmate and collaborating partner for over 30 years, Melanie E L Bush and their cherished daughter Sarafina F. Bush; beloved son and daughter Malik L. Bush and Thembi N. Bush Tillman (Betty Ann Penda Kane); adored granddaughter Tajalia, four treasured grandsons Angelo, Orlando, Jedidiah, Wisdom, very loved god-daughter Isabella and her parents; longtime friends Arcee “Pete” James and Renzie Taylor, dear mother-in-law “Rozzie”, son-in-law Jamal Tillman, daughter-in-law Donna Bush and potential future son-in-law Christopher Siegenthaler; aunts, uncles and a multitude of cousins, friends and family from many different communities and networks. He was preceded in death by one dearly loved daughter Sojourner Truth Bush (Cynthia Arnetta Holliday).

On Monday, August 18, 2014 the *Critical Sociology Conference* will devote two sessions to the Tributes and Reflections: The Life and Work of Rod Bush at the San Francisco Marriott Marquis San Francisco, CA.

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