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Everyday Conversations with Dr. Rod Bush:  
The Radical Potentials of Mentorship, Intimacy,  
and Practice

The first draft of this essay was written during my second year of graduate school. It was early in the semester and I had gotten a bit of a writer's itch while eating lunch at a café, not twenty minutes from my university. It was, as I remember it, a 'regular' fall day in New England—breezy but not dreary. Absently, I had been amused by the futuristic coffee-holding apparatus placed on my table and internally considered whether it should have been a prop in Michael and Janet Jackson's video for the song "Scream" (1995).

While my musing was cut short by undergraduate students passing by, the curious fact that this particular video's imagery had been evoked does not escape me. Of course, it was not the only—or even most recent—future-based music video I had seen at the time. However, the anguish and emotion the Jackson siblings' song screamed into cyberspace is more than relevant to me at this current juncture: continuously visible attacks by white supremacist agitators, more

blatant structural discrimination by governments and policy-makers, and—on a more intimate level—the consistent erasure of Black and brown humanity in everyday life.

As days press on, we watch the institutionalizing of these violences in ways that can be felt on the body through a process Fanon (2008) calls a [racial] epidermal schema (Fanon 2008:92). While Fanon's corporeal reading is limited to race, his overtone calls us to think critically about the lived experiences of oppressed people and the possibilities—if any, at all—to challenge these frameworks.

The question of justice is particularly concerning for me, as many institutions purportedly built for equilateral discourse continue to reproduce these phenomena. As a Black, queer, gender non-conforming Ph.D. student committed to social liberation, I constantly consider my own place in an academy that actively silences dissent through ideological, empirical, and practical tools.

In this essay, I use autoethnography to explore three major contributions Dr. Roderick Bush has offered both the field of sociology and more broadly, social justice praxis, that contest these structures of violence. Ellis et. al (2011) describes autoethnographic practice as a method that can “disrupt the binary of science and art” through describing personal experiences as they coincide and replicate (or disrupt) social processes (Ellis, 2011).

Through this analysis, I argue that—through his everyday social practice and teaching at St. John's University—Dr. Bush allows us to re-imagine the theoretical and practical implications of 1) intergenerational mentorship, 2) radical intimacy, and 3) public scholarship within the academy.

At this juncture, I cannot claim to know how survival in these institutions ought to happen. Yet, recalling the stories related to my entrance into the academy serves as a “re-memory,” as Toni Morrison describes in *Beloved* (1987), that grounds me in my work as a scholar-activist seeking social change here, elsewhere, spaces in-between, and beyond (Morrison 1987).

## I. Introduction: A New Journey

This was a particularly accidental beginning. By a bit of luck and some hard work, I accepted a scholarship to join St. John's University's incoming class of 2010.

Like many other students, I was awarded work-study in my acceptance package. By the start of June, I had already begun my job search. By July, my search was narrowed down between two places; the Sociology Department and the Psychological Services Center. They paid the same rate, but after having such a warm reception from the secretary of the Sociology Department, I decided to take up a student-worker position there. At the end of the summer, I packed my bags and smiled to my family as they drove back to New Jersey teary-eyed, scared, and proud. And so began a 4-year journey.

Early on, in classes and at my new 'job,' I noticed the parade of students coming and going in and out of the department. At first, I thought: "Sociology is either really hard or really awesome!" Quickly, I realized that many of these visitors were stopping at one professor's door. The sign on the door, which was surrounded by textbook covers and social justice event fliers, read "Dr. R. Bush." Each day, it was like a revolving door: one student exited and another entered until the professor in question—a Black man nearly always sporting a clean suit and tie—would hustle to a class, meeting, or elsewhere, often escorted by students still enraptured in conversation.

As the semester continued, I came to have a general interest in what 'Sociology' had to offer beyond Psychology (my then major)—especially since the graduate and undergraduate students seemed to *enjoy* their visits to professors. Because of this budding curiosity, I attended the Fall Sociology department colloquium. It was a riveting presentation on "Neo-liberalism, Gender, and Political Violence in Argentina" by an invited professor. In fact, it was so riveting that, as an eager 18-year-old would do, my hand shot up during the question and answer session to ask more about neoliberalism—a term I didn't understand at the time—and the relationships one could find between U.S. policies, other nation-states, and potential sites of violence in

spaces otherwise regarded as members of the ‘global north.’ At that time, I didn’t notice the pair of eyes glancing at me inquisitively from the left side of the room. Instead, I listened attentively to the speaker’s answers while scribbling my thoughts on a brightly-colored bundle of sticky-notes.

As I wandered down the department’s narrow corridor some days later, a figure donned in a dark suit, matching tie, and briefcase stopped a few paces in front of me. Looking up, I quickly realized this was the busy professor, Dr. Bush. Moving aside slightly, I said hello, half-expecting him to rush by with a quick nod. Instead, He said “hello” and smiled as if I had been his student for ages.

Dr. Bush continued, his voice sounding as if he was stating a fact rather than asking a question, “I know you’ve only been working in the department for a few months, but you *are* a graduate student, right?” Shyly, I laughed and said that I was a first-year undergraduate student. Two brown eyes, framed by thin, silver-ish wire glasses, widened in front of me as Dr. Bush grinned in surprise. “You know, I was sitting there listening to the questions you asked at the colloquium thinking—I know her, I know she’s *got* to be a graduate student with a question like that! I just *had* to tell you!” I laughed again—blushing.

Before I could say anything, Dr. Bush mentioned that he had to run to class. Before he exited the hallway, he turned back to me and said: “Our department could use more folks like you!” And off he went.

As I remember this moment years later, one facet of this interaction is increasingly salient: in a world that asked me to shrink myself in so many ways, Dr. Bush had not only made space for my potential, but admired my then-present existence and affirmed a young scholar not yet realized.

Through this re-memory and others, Dr. Bush’s work and teachings can be analyzed in relation to the concept, practice, and implications of intergenerational mentorship within the academy.

## II. Intergenerational Mentorship

Many of my interactions with Dr. Bush reproduced an odd paradigm: one that increased my sense of belonging and entitlement within both academic and activist spaces while also fostering an atmosphere of safety and guidance.

Indeed, Rod's reflection on my moment of intellectual curiosity during the colloquium usually marked our subsequent conversations. It was always as if, through remembering his own surprise and admiration, Dr. Bush was conveying a sense of comradeship and care all in the same moment. In some ways, I gained a unique perspective on Dr. Bush that differed from most students: I had not yet taken his classes but was in continuous contact with him through my work at the department.

This meant that sometimes when I came to the office lounge to study away from friends or even just to work, we would fall into conversations about books and politics while restocking the printer or discussing Black lives mattering before Blacks Lives Matter during the last free minutes of his office hours. Sometimes these conversations would take place while eating snacks or the small dinners I had attained after university events but could not possibly eat by myself. At the end of most of these discussions, Dr. Bush—half-joking, half-serious—would ask when I would take his class. I knew this question meant more than simply acquiring students, but furthering these discussions and whatever critical discourse we found ourselves having.

On a personal level, speaking with Rod became a ritual that sustained me throughout trials and tribulations relating to navigating the academy, understanding social inequality, and more. As an emerging “professional” who is very much rooted in activist networks, as a Black person in the Ivory tower, as a Black person in America, Dr. Bush came to represent a disruption of every narrative that told me Black people like me should not exist.

This was done not merely through conversation, but by his active engagement in his community and passion to connect with communities despite oppressive regulations. However, when positioning my

individual experiences alongside the many more that I witnessed while working in the department, a clear articulation of intergenerational mentorship was present throughout his work.

Divesting from ‘intergenerational trauma,’ the more popular term used to describe the cultural, social, and structural passing of oppression, I use ‘intergenerational mentorship’ to signify the individual, institutional, and structural processes of socialization that take shape through the purposeful engagement between differently aged actors.

The importance of this relational process has been increasingly documented in social scientific research (Blake and Ooten 2008; Lloyd-Jones 2014; and Romero 2017). Brunsma et. al (2017) sheds light on the importance of [good] mentors within the growth, development, and experience of graduate students of color navigating the academy. While some scholars, activists, and community members employ mentorship to signify a top-down relationship from an older or more experienced person to a presumably less-seasoned youngster, Dr. Bush’s interactions with students embodied an alternative to this model. His approach was not one of dismissive elitist or overwhelming paternalism; two aspects of mentoring that Romero (2017) describes as key in the reproduction of a white, masculine status quo within higher education. Nor was his guidance to students of color (along with white students) merely a push for diversity initiatives that center quantitative representativeness over structural change to institutions. Scholars, including Dr. Bush, have critiqued the latter approach for its tendency to flatten and erase difference for, as Karen and Barbara Fields argue, “Black people everywhere do not “see” alike” (Fields and Fields 2012:30).

Henderson et al. (2010) use a similar theoretical framework in their research about mentorship in the academy, ultimately suggesting that a critical, intersectional analysis is integral for understanding and effectively mentoring diverse groups. Simply put, Rod Bush had a knack for using critical feminist ideologies to unpack racism and racialized social systems while also recognizing the influence of transnational social movements, along with those from radical gay

and queer organizing efforts. This became apparent to me during a conversation we had during my senior year.

While discussing the racist lynching of young Trayvon Martin, I paused—overwhelmed with emotion. We had agreed that racial violence was a systemic problem, but I had grown tired of the masculinist rhetoric of race theorists and activists alike. However, in not knowing where he stood on the issue, I cut my musing short. Looking over my expression, Dr. Bush nodded. I thought that, perhaps, the too-quick ending of my sentence had given me away as some sort of race-traitor or as academics would say, ignorant of the importance of race as a master status. Leaning against the wooden cabinet full of faculty mailboxes, he spoke in a deliberate, but warm voice: “You know, I’d love to work on a paper with you. A panel for Left Forum. We need to hear more of this, more of you. Would you be interested?” Thereafter, I spoke more freely and Rod kept nodding, almost as if he was taking notes.

In his capacity as a professor, Dr. Bush frequently did what Crenshaw (1989) had envisioned in her call for radically inclusive social policy and practice. As I mentioned earlier, his existence and commitment to advancing both the field of Sociology and the wider academy represented a material disruption to narratives that erase marginalized academics, especially those from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Rod Bush’s enthusiasm—the glow in his eyes after hearing about a student’s research interests or projects—destabilized conventional forms of discourse based on hierarchal frameworks. He did not want to ‘save’ students—or me, for that matter—instead, Dr. Bush opted for a collaborative setting wherein all bodies could enter.

His deep laughs and commanding lectures would end with invitations to not only receive information, but to create and share as well. Yet, unlike many well-meaning professors, his attentiveness to structural and institutional inequality allowed him to avoid color-blind and neoliberal discursive troupes that ignore subject position. Thus, the diversity of students that surrounded Dr. Bush throughout my four years at St. John’s comes to no surprise. What is remarkable, though, is how this intergenerational mentorship was woven into a politics of radical intimacy in masterful ways.

### III. Radical Intimacy

Within the field of Sociology and the wider academic arena, affect and intimacy are policed by marked and unmarked boundaries. One manifestation of this can be seen with the discipline's preoccupation with "me-search," or, reframed seemingly less patronizing, "subjective" approaches to research. Acknowledging this dichotomy, Collins (1986) argued that "encouraging and institutionalizing outsider within ways of seeing" could be an alternative to the epistemological rigidity perpetuated within the academy (Collins 1986:S29). Like his research, Rod Bush's day-to-day work in the academy can be thought of as useful heuristics to help us imagine and begin to operationalize Collins's assertions.

First, I think of a conversation dating back to my second year of university. It was an average day at work: after completing some clerical work, I strode into the hall to address the *quite* out of order bulletin board. Papers were taken down and some articles replaced the empty space that they left behind on the blue backdrop. Some minutes went by and I, thoroughly satisfied, began to walk up the narrow corridor. I didn't notice Dr. Bush's entrance until he greeted me. "Is, by chance, any good news particular to today?" I responded in the negative and his head cocked to the side, seeming to focus on me as I went on to say that joy itself was something that we all have somewhere to hold onto and that, for me, joy was always bubbling under the surface—even in dark times. "You've always got a smile—on your face or in your eyes, shining." Nodding and kind of chuckling in the way that he did when he was impressed or surprised or perhaps some kind of mix of both emotions. Like always, Rod had to run off to teach a class and began to excuse himself. As he picked up his briefcase, he turned back to me and smiled earnestly. "You know, you remind me of my eldest daughter." The affection tied to this comment was lost on me, until months later.

A year later, while at work, I heard the thud of a backpack far down the hall. Since the door leading to the department open, the sound had echoed from the stairway throughout the corridor. Absently, I

wondered what the noise came from since it had been a quiet afternoon in the department and hardly any professors were in their offices—which was to be expected since it was Finals Week.

Seconds later, I heard the muffled noises of what I later confirmed to be a student sitting hunched over the top step leading towards the department's main entrance. I had gotten up to check the sound and from a few feet away, I saw the following scene: a young man whose dirty blonde hair dangled just over his glasses, doing little to hide the tears streaming by his face. His bookbag was leaning against the vertical stair railings on the step beneath him, most certainly crooked from being placed down abruptly. Knowing that the anonymous student was experiencing some sort of crisis, I quietly told my supervisor about the scene as Dr. Bush passed the office door.

Like many other professors had done that week, Rod was rushing to class to give out instructions for a final exam but paused upon hearing my words. Immediately, he gently interjected in the conversation by asking which stairwell the student was located in. I pointed, and he left. Yet, instead of going in the opposite direction, Dr. Bush went to approach the student—almost fully closing the entryway door for privacy. My supervisor, wondering on what action to take, asked if I had known what Dr. Bush intended to do. Stunned and also confused, I offered to see from a distance. Through the door's window, I watched as Rod sat his suitcase down and took a seat next to the younger man, whose cheeks were tear-stained and wet. Dr. Bush talked with him for some minutes and after time passed by; I heard the student mumble "Thank you for stopping. I thought no one would care." I didn't hear Dr. Bush's response or see the expression on his face, only the way his shoulders straighten with both care and strength. Calmly, they both stood up and shook hands—and as a witness—I was left deeply changed.

These magnified moments signified a type of radical intimacy that is largely amiss in academic spaces. The conscious insistence of embodied realness, of struggle, mourning, and the willingness to fight marked Dr. Bush's disposition, discourse, scholarship, and later, I found, the courses that he taught. I still have my notebook from the

Contemporary Theory course that Dr. Bush taught in fall 2013.

The class covered major theorists and featured an ambitious list that he thought students should read. The syllabus, in its own right, was a work of art: it not only incorporated popular sociological theorists, but major works discussing inequality and struggle from all angles like critical race theory, feminist theories, and anti-imperialist thought. Yet, there was more to this than simply great reading choices. This extremely powerful and political course was defined by the way Rod carried himself and each day's lecture. It was as if, in every class, he was giving us an offering, a special gift from his heart—that we would only receive if we were really listening. This was especially salient when he incorporated a critical discussion of contemporary events to contextualize the texts, or when he gave stories of his life as a freedom fighter continuously finding his way. The latter point, which was a practice of reflexivity *par excellence*, often included his discussion of various privileges he had been afforded as man under a capitalistic and patriarchal system.

Those musings never ended with a simple reflection, though; Rod urged that he, along with each of us, consider the powers and privileges we had (in addition to structural inequities) so that we could more fully engage with the text and the social world. Beyond this, Dr. Bush made a point to recognize how transformative teaching was for him. Using a genuinely warm voice, he once told the dozen or so students who had arrived early that we inspired him and gave hope despite the continuous oppressions scattered across our social world. And in reflecting on this, it is not surprising that the last declaration Dr. Bush gave to our entire class after his lecture ended was simply “I love you.”

Such a phrase redefined how I came to conceptualize my orientation to Sociology and the quest for social change. The idea of radical intimacy reaches far beyond “affect.” I believe that, in many ways, Rod asked us to consider the transformative nature of intimacy within an increasingly ‘objective’ academy which relies on constant production—of research, publications, data, and, of course, capital. Moreover, Dr. Bush's many demonstrations of radical intimacy can be

analyzed in relation to other scholars' works.

When writing about black political struggle and futures of liberation, Kelley (2002) rearticulates his mother's life and guidance as a gateway towards potential. Writing that she taught her children that "the Marvelous was free," Kelley argues that her affect and disposition functions as a 'third eye' that allowed for a new interpretation of existence and possibility—which later influenced his affinities to theoretical writings attentive to love-based social transformation like Karl Marx and William Morris. The centering on love and potential is of high importance for Kelley, as he states "[t]here are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces" (Kelley 2002). Likewise, hooks (2000) situates affect—especially love—in relation to a transformative politics of intimacy and the politics of social justice.

When we accept that true love is rooted in recognition and acceptance, that love combines acknowledgment, care, responsibility, commitment, and knowledge, we understand there can be no love without justice. With that awareness comes the understanding that love has the power to transform us, giving us the strength to oppose domination. To choose feminist politics, then, is a choice of love. (hooks 2000:104)

Thus, for hooks, the love is not relegated to physical or romantic spheres—rather it is a politic that can be passed throughout interpersonal realms and practiced within institutions despite their structural orientation otherwise. Rod's political quest for justice can, then, be understood as manifesting through his radical acts of intimacy within an academy that discourages deep engagement and human interdependence. This last point—the everyday nature of doing—is related to the third theme I have found throughout his work: the urge to go beyond theory to practice.

#### **IV. Beyond Theory: A Movement of Practice**

In reflecting about Rod Bush's day-to-day engagements, along with his deployment of radical intimacy, a dialectical relationship between theory and practice emerges.

As a scholar, Rod advanced sociological research on inequality, with particular attention paid to racialized geopolitics, racism, social inequality and struggle, Black liberation, and solidarity in radical movements across the globe. Yet, despite having a mastery of sociological theory and scholarship, Dr. Bush envisioned a world beyond theory. For, as Dr. Bush remarked in a prior lecture, dogmatic theoretical and physical actions leave a problematic stain on our collective struggles.

To explain what this meant, he recalled—in an unwavering yet, uncritical voice—several moments where he had witnessed the pitfalls of dogmatism. The exact location and date of the occurrence didn't quite matter; Rod insisted that dogmatic theory has crept into meetings, events, and conferences. In those moments, wherein folks across generations came together to discuss the intersecting inequalities that emerged from racist social systems and capitalism, he described the ways in which well-meaning folks took up space in the name of theory. "I like that Marx well enough, aside from his utterance of barbarian, which is a different story I will tell ... But I become concerned when young men stand up in meetings, without realizing the postures they embody—and the violence such actions bring—and talk down to people ... shut them out... call them bad activists and at the same time ignorant ... for not pursuing the archetypical Marxian revolution." As he continued, Dr. Bush implored us to learn—and perhaps love—theorists and their contributions to knowledge, but be ready to translate them and if necessary, leave them behind to create the radically just futures we hope for.

This position may present a conundrum for most activists and change-makers, who many times must fervently use theoretical frameworks; along with and community-based work to see social justice collaborations into fruition. I am familiar with this embodied and passionate approach to political organizing and social scientific research: as a young person I have often chanted, recited, and critically argued ideological narratives that failed to translate in meaningful ways to communities engaged in struggle. The question in this situation often becomes, "well, then, what should we do?" In his 2003 article on social justice, terrorism, and global inequalities after 9/11, Rod

Bush suggests that people committed to liberation, especially those that are African American, should not get caught up in theories of nationalism or perpetuate uncritically formulated racialized discourse (Bush 2003). This is repeated throughout his scholarly works and pedagogical approach. Dr. Bush clearly articulates this in his 2011 work “Africana Studies and the Decolonization of the U.S. Empire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”:

Following Melanie Bush’s “Un-Pledging Allegiance: Waking up from the ‘American’ Dream” (M. Bush 2008), I argue here that the central task of Africana Studies in the 21st century is to engage its faculty, its students, and its various publics in the intellectual and political task of decolonizing the nationalism of empire within the United States, and thus moving toward solidarity with the billions of oppressed people in the world-system whose lives are constrained by the overarching power of the US hegemon. (Bush 2011:1)

With this, Rod connects pedagogy with decolonial practice. By challenging the definition of Sociology as discipline and reformulating it as an object for practice, Dr. Bush shifts our focus from advancing and perfecting theory to foster more creative, free-form social transformation. For me, this means not simply arguing my students into submission but to provide a space in which growth can be productive, delicate, and beautiful—even if the ideologies themselves become malleable with the lived experiences of our lives. Without doing this, our classrooms are not spaces but intellectual prisons that are intangible to real hands.

In her keynote speech at University of Connecticut’s 2016 MLK Day general assembly, Melissa Harris-Perry suggested that, as educators, people have a duty to embody patience, respect, and love in the classroom (Harris-Perry 2016). In particular, while we have a right to respect, safety, and academic freedom, we must always remember that every semester will bring a new cohort of students who are there to grow as critical thinkers and social actors. Our duty is to convey our research and disciplines in ways that not only further intellectualism but meet students at their current positions while trying to broaden

their horizons.

Now, as a graduate student and instructor, I try to incorporate a radical imaginary of intimacy within my pedagogy. This means letting go of academic elitism and working to meet students where they are in order to facilitate learning. Outside of the classroom, I would argue that Rod showed us how a commitment to social justice is integral to our everyday interactions with colleagues and students alike. The recollections I've illustrated above are just some of the many examples he gave to demonstrate this point. Overall, Dr. Bush's work can be thought of in relation to how intergenerational mentorship and radical intimacy inform our pedagogical approaches, our epistemological and methodological choices within research, and finally, the ways in which we conceptualize our position within the academy with very real connections to the social world we theorize.

Through these works, Rod leaves a legacy that demands my and our work—as activists, academics, movers and shakers—must be rooted in a radical form of love for people, social change, and hope in the possibilities [re]emerging and yet to come. Such a love allows us to push the strict boundaries of discipline and theory.

## **V. Conclusion: Looking Toward the Future(s)**

Throughout this chapter, I attempted to paint a picture of Rod Bush's work and more importantly, his contributions to social theory and practice. The re-memories I offer, which Morrison (1987) constructed as specters that help us bring the past into future consideration in purposeful ways, have been situated into three analytic categories in an effort to systematize the many lessons Dr. Bush has graciously offered me (and many more folks) throughout my undergraduate career at St. John's University.

Moreover, these themes—intergenerational mentorship, radical intimacy, and going beyond theory—are rooted in conceptualizations of wider social change. As we consider the possibilities of the future, I again call upon Kelley's words "Imagine if that soul were to win out, if the movement's vision of freedom were completely to envelope the

nation's political culture" (Kelley 2002). For Dr. Bush, the path is clear:

And our task, brothers and sisters, is to become partners in the world struggle against international social injustice. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded of us, we should be about bringing it down and helping to create a more just, egalitarian, and democratic world (Bush 2003:12).

Rod Bush's theory, practice, and everyday walks show us what this could look like: many thousands of collective re-memories, struggle, and—despite structural, institutional, and interpersonal pressure—it looks like hope.

### Abstract

This essay authored by Chriss Sneed, titled "Everyday Conversations with Dr. Rod Bush: The Radical Potentials of Mentorship, Intimacy, and Practice," is a chapter in the anthology *Rod Bush: Lessons from a Radical Black Scholar on Liberation, Love, and Justice*, edited by Melanie E. L. Bush, and co-edited by Rose M. Brewer, Daniel Douglas, Loretta Chin, and Robert Newby (2019). Sneed reflects on the teachings and day-to-day work of Dr. Roderick Bush spanning across four years. Using autoethnographic methods to contextualize these memories, the author argues that three themes have emerged: intergenerational mentorship, radical intimacy, and a commitment to praxis. Sneed situates these memories within the field through a critical and intersectional feminist analysis. The chapter ends by highlighting how Rod Bush's theoretical and embodied formulations of these phenomena have both contributed to the field of sociology and given avenues for creating transformative social justice practice.

### Author

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color critique and critical feminist analytics to examine inequality within our social world. Much of their recent work grapples with social inequality, intersectionality, and identity. This focus is evident in a forthcoming book chapter entitled “Ga(y) tekeeping Identity, Citizenship, & Claims to Justice,” and in “Sociology as a Discipline and an Obligation,” a piece co-authored with Dr. David Embrick recently published within a *Contexts* symposium on racism and Charlottesville. Chriss Sneed is the founder and lead organizer of the interdisciplinary conference “Borderlands: A Critical Graduate Symposium” held each year at the University of Connecticut.

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