

Robin D. G. Kelley

Foreword

I first encountered Rod Bush in 1981 in the pages of a little-known but immensely important journal called *Contemporary Marxism*. I was nineteen, an aspiring revolutionary just beginning my sophomore year at Cal State Long Beach. At the time, all I knew about Rod was that he was based in the San Francisco Bay area, he was a Marxist, and I guessed that he was Black since his critique of racism was so effective and unsparing. He was a model for those of us trying to reconcile class struggle and Black nationalism. Little wonder that Rod's writing on racism and the rise of the Right, the international division of labor, and apartheid South Africa really spoke to me. In my imagination, Rod Bush was a towering figure, an afro- or dreadlocked coifed militant, a cross between Paul Robeson and Kwame Ture, armed with Lenin and Malcolm under one arm and a semi-automatic rifle under the other. When I learned that his political trajectory brought him to groups such as the Congress of African People, the Student Organization for Black Unity, Youth Organization for Black Unity, the Revolutionary Workers League (Marxist-Leninist), and the African Liberation Support Committee, this only confirmed my image of Rod.

Thirteen years later, one cold, late night in March of 1994 on a New Jersey Transit train heading to New York Penn Station, I met my hero in the flesh. He may have been on his regular commute from Seton Hall. I may have been coming back from a conference. I don't recall exactly. I do remember that he came over to me and introduced himself. I had to do a double take—could this rather short, soft-spoken man with the gentle smile be *the* Rod Bush? Fumbling for words, starstruck, excited and humbled, I rambled on about *Contemporary Marxism*, his piece on Southern Africa in *Crime and Social Justice*, *The New Black Vote*, Ethiopia, how many times I re-read "Racism and Changes in the International Division of Labor" in *Our Socialism*, and things I've since forgotten. His smile and his kindness set me at ease immediately. He was unfazed and probably embarrassed by my flattery. As we talked quietly on the ride to the city, Rod mainly talked about *my* work, barely mentioning his recently completed doctorate in Sociology. It quickly turned into a conversation about our *lives* and our families and why we do what we do.

Of course, this was just the beginning of a beautiful friendship and comradeship, but that is not the main point of the story. Rather, I learned in a matter of minutes that Roderick Douglas Bush was, as his beautiful and dedicated partner Melanie put it, "all about love." His arms and heart were always open, not out of naiveté but because this was his moral, ethical, and *political* compass. He was not the caricature of the revolutionary I had conjured up; he was the real thing. Before we parted that night, I learned that Rod's lifelong commitment to liberation derived not out of hatred of the system but love for the people. I later learned that Rod once worked as a clinical psychologist and an urban planner in Kansas City, devoting his skills to helping Black working class communities transform their lives and neighborhoods. And I watched him devote his time and energy to movements such as the Black Radical Congress, to students at Seton Hall and St. John's University, to young activist/intellectuals from every part of the globe, to independent spaces for radical thinking like the Left Forum, and to his extraordinary family.

As the essays in this book demonstrate, Rod Bush embodied the

unity of theory and practice. His scholarship, pedagogy, activism, personal relationships, and everyday interactions were governed by an ethic of love, social responsibility, a commitment to radical social change, and, in Marx's words, "a ruthless criticism" that is not "afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be."¹ His commitment to study and struggle in the service of human liberation knew no boundaries. His vision was planetary. He wrote critically and brilliantly about Black radical movements—here and abroad—and about the destructive power of racism, colonialism, capitalism (the modern world-system), all with the goal of transforming a society based on exploitation, subjugation, and war into a society rooted in mutual benefit, life, and love.

In this time of unprecedented global crisis, with the specter of fascism on the horizon and the prospect of planetary extinction a reality, we need Rod's revolutionary praxis more than ever. He gave us a model for movement building and knowledge production devoted to ushering in a radically different future based on love and justice. The purpose of this book is to revisit his life and distill its most crucial lessons for current and future generations. And I do not say this because of Trump's ascendancy to the White House, as if a Democratic replacement would bring the current crisis to an end. Trump's election hardly signaled a state of emergency for most people since many have been enduring such a state for years: living in ghettos and barrios with underfunded, crumbling schools that are now annexed to the criminal justice system; living under the day-to-day violence of the war on drugs or the war on terror; locked up along with 2.6 million people; living under the constant threat of state-sanctioned violence or enduring and endless loop of police killings of unarmed black and brown people on television and social media; living in the shadows of legality, immigrants mainly from the Global South vulnerable to an expansionist, militarized deportation and detention machine. These are the social and structural realities Rod and Melanie confront in their extraordinary book, *Tensions in the American Dream*, and have spent

1. Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 8.

the better part of their lives confronting in the streets, the classroom, and the political arena.

Before Rod left us on December 5, 2013, he bore witness to the emergence of a new generation of radicals—in the people’s takeover of Zucotti Park launching the global Occupy Movement, in the streets of Athens and Cairo, London and Santiago; in the city of Jackson, Mississippi, where a genuinely revolutionary movement is building America’s first cooperative commonwealth dedicated to the principles of human rights, workers’ power, environmental sustainability, and socialism; and perhaps most poignantly, near Rod’s hometown in Sanford, Florida, where the killing of seventeen-year old Trayvon Martin by vigilante George Zimmerman birthed a new movement in the form of the Dream Defenders, Black Lives Matter, and a global struggle against state-sanctioned racial violence. From the Movement for Black Lives to Jackson Rising to South Africa’s Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall movement, a new generation of radicals are groping towards a politics of love and liberation resembling everything Rod Bush stood for, lived for, fought for, and wrote about. They are committed to dismantling racism, along with class exploitation and inequality, hetero-patriarchy, homophobia, and rampant exploitation of the environment. They insist that divesting from prisons, demilitarizing the police, abolishing money bail, decriminalizing drugs and sex work, and ending the criminalization of youth, trans, and gender non-conforming will make us safer. They believe that investing in education, universal healthcare, housing, living wage jobs, community-based drug and mental health treatment, restorative justice, food justice, and green energy will make us healthier and begin to make us whole. And they believe that by giving power to the people—that is to say the most marginalized and vulnerable among us—to control the institutions that have governed our communities for decades without accountability is the only way to ensure peace.

As we struggle to rebuild our movements and develop an expansive vision of liberation, Rod Bush can be our guide. He showed us how to struggle from a place of love, how to model the change we hope to see, and how we might work toward building what Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr., and later Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs, called the Beloved Community. Rod understood love not as sentimentality but as a constant struggle to build and rebuild community. Making community requires a kind of nakedness, leaving one's armor at the door, opening oneself up to others and giving freely, being vulnerable, speaking truth while allowing others their voice. Love, in other words, is not a thing you adopt or embrace; it's a process of making community, nourishing relationships, re-making oneself over and over again. And like James Baldwin, Rod understood love as agency, as action. As a product of a deeply rooted Black culture with all of its sacred and secular dimensions, with its history of suffering and celebration, with its deep blues epistemology, he knew that active, agentive love meant loving ourselves as Black *people* (not just bodies); it meant making love the motivation for making revolution; it meant envisioning a society where everyone is embraced, where there is no oppression, where every life is valued.

Rod Bush may no longer be with us in person, but thanks to the foresight and tireless dedication of Melanie Bush and the co-editors of this volume, the lessons he imparted will continue to live on. Of course, those of us who knew him also know that he would have refused to be the focus of such a book. His inscription in my copy of his extraordinary book, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century*, says it all: "With deepest appreciation, Rod Bush, Melanie Bush, Sarafina Bush." This was Rod, our mentor, our model, our example, living according to radical, democratic, egalitarian principles, refusing to be the sole signatory.

Abstract

This essay by Robin D. G. Kelley is a foreword to 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). Kelley tributes Roderick Douglas Bush as one who "understood love not as sentimentality but as a constant struggle to build and rebuild community. Making community requires a kind of nakedness, leaving one's armor at the door, opening oneself up to others and giving freely, being vulnerable, speaking truth

while allowing others their voice. Love, in other words, is not a thing you adopt or embrace; it's a process of making community, nourishing relationships, re-making oneself over and over again. And like James Baldwin, Rod understood love as agency, as action." Kelley further states that Rod Bush as "a product of a deeply rooted Black culture with all of its sacred and secular dimensions, with its history of suffering and celebration, with its deep blues epistemology, ... knew that active, agentive love meant loving ourselves as Black people (not just bodies); it meant making love the motivation for making revolution; it meant envisioning a society where everyone is embraced, where there is no oppression, where every life is valued."

Author

Robin D. G. Kelley is the Gary B. Nash Professor of U.S. History at UCLA. His books include *Theblonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (2009); *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (2012); *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002); *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990); *Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class* (1994); and *Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (1997).