From Tensions in the American Dream to “As the World Turns”: Lessons from Rod Bush’s Last Projects

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From *Tensions in the American Dream* to “As the World Turns”: Lessons from Rod Bush’s Last Projects

The Preface to the work Rod and I co-authored, *Tensions in the American Dream: Rhetoric, Reverie, or Reality*, opens with this statement:

*Tensions in the American Dream* is, in a way, the story of our quest (individually and collectively) to understand the world we were born into, grew up and came to live in. It is an expression of our hopes, our dreams, our disappointments, and our rootedness in the struggle for justice. This project sought an understanding of the perspectives of those around us and whether, for them, the American Dream is just rhetoric, articulates their visions and reveries of the good life, or has indeed been their reality. We hope that you find yourself somewhere in this journey—in the history, in our analysis of contemporary times, or in our assessment of the future. For us, remembering and being centered by our roots is a matter of principle. We have so often been reminded by our elders never to forget where we came from. It is in this spirit that we share some of that personal history here. (Bush and Bush 2015:iix)
We then move to trace the experiences that led to our conceptualization of the research project that *Tensions* was based upon. This chapter explores the elements of Rod Bush’s life story that led to his interest in understanding the way people in the United States view the “American Dream,” and their relationship to it. Why was he determined to know how ordinary people view the connection between “race,” “nation,” and empire, and the life circumstances of different communities? The reasons were similar to the experiences that provided the inspiration for the project we developed subsequently, based on our findings.

Drawing extensively from our joint work, this chapter offers lessons on liberation, love, and justice that can be garnered from Rod’s contributions to the focus and process of these two endeavors. While they were integrally a collaborative effort for which it is difficult to separate the contributions of one of us from those of the other, for the purposes of this chapter, I will speak mostly of Rod’s connection to the projects as if he were the single author.

**Lesson #1: Knowing Who You “Are” and Where You Came From**

Given the political nature of research, it is important to situate and contextualize the process and the content of our project in the historical moment as well as the our life experiences and positionalities. This principle was important when Rod and I formulated the projects, as we conducted the research and in the analytic, summarizing and writing processes.

Here is an excerpt of what Rod shared about his personal history that led to his interest in exploring people’s thoughts about the “American Dream.” This passage provides the context for Rod’s desire to conduct this study, and serves to situate his political and personal trajectory up until the time he passed:

Rod, born during the era of Jim Crow, was a son of the southern Black working class whose mother followed the migratory path to northern urban marginality that had been the fate of so many. The circumstances
of his birth and his deeply religious upbringing predisposed him toward an abiding interest in the questions of the elimination of poverty and disenfranchisement and promoting transformative social change. Since he believed fervently in the biblical injunction that the last shall be first, he was more than skeptical of the condescending visions of the poor that he found in much social science literature when he entered college in the early 1960s. But his close association with the sons and daughters of the Black upper middle class at the historically Black college Howard University undermined his confidence in his own self-worth over time.

In “Black Internationalism and Transnational Africa,” Rod explains that because his intellectual coming of age was influenced by Black social thought during the Black Power rather than civil rights period, he did not develop a patriotic sensitivity. More so, his grounding was tied to the religious views of his family, not connected to the notion of striving for an “American’ Dream.” In Tensions, he goes on to explain,

One of the most frequently invoked declarations about those who were not from an upper-middle-class background was, ‘Some of us just aren’t ready,’ implying that those from the lower classes did not have the sophistication and polish to fit into the Black bourgeoisie, much less white society. These ideas shattered Rod’s self-esteem, and for a while he felt totally off-balance among his middle- and upper-class peers at Howard, an experience familiar to many Black and Latino students today in predominantly white university structures with similar class distinctions and the added factor of racial differences.

A dormant social consciousness was complicated by the nationality question mostly unarticulated among African Americans in the South during the 1950s. Grade schools did not teach politics, civics, or history in any meaningful way in the Jim Crow schools that Rod attended; instead, they taught what he came to call ‘Booker T. Washington–ism,’ strategies for accommodating oneself to the brutality of white supremacy, ways to impress white people and avoid antagonizing them, and demonstrations of studiously subservient and nonthreatening comportment in the presence of whites.

This approach was undoubtedly geared toward self-protection, but young minds do not necessarily make the distinction that adults minds
can, and internalizing a subservient demeanor can greatly damage a developing personality. Conversely, this instruction fostered very little connection to patriotism or identification with triumphal Americanism. Instead, his community was rooted in churches and in African people’s triumphs against great odds, wherever they were evident. In Rochester, New York, the primary destination of migrants from Rod’s birthplace in central Florida and where he moved at age 14, the idea and practice of questioning the status quo was largely dormant except for the interest sparked by the rise of the Nation of Islam in the early 1960s among the inner-city residents.

Rod discusses more of this history in “Black Nationalism and Transnational Africa” because to him it was the identification with something larger than nation—one that Rod felt was more salient. Little in his life experience reinforced the idea that he belonged, mattered or was a true “citizen” of the U.S., privy to all the rights and benefits that such a status supposedly bestowed.

Rod continues the story of his experience at Howard in a discussion of his developing awareness of the role of class, though also of the power of knowledge as he came into contact with leading Black intellectuals of that era.

He had been quite troubled by the Black bourgeois pretensions of the Howard University scene, both because of his own class position and because of the heightened awareness he gained by reading the works of E. Franklin Frazier, Hare’s predecessor in the university’s sociology department and the author of Black Bourgeoisie. At Howard, Rod was fortunate to be exposed to a rich Black intellectual tradition that included such scholars as Toni Morrison, Owen Dodson, Frank Snowden, and Hare. After a junior-year class with Sterling Brown, the great Harlem Renaissance poet and literary critic, Rod began the long search for a way to give voice to his skepticism.

During the last two years of his studies at Howard University, under Brown’s tutelage, Rod undertook a course of study to gain literacy in the great writings of all people. As a child of the working class at a university whose traditions were primarily those of the Black middle class, he was in a confusing position. Although he did not understand class as an analytic construct at that time, he knew the experience intimately. As
he sought the tools to understand the context for his racial and class backgrounds, he struggled for clarity. He graduated in 1967, carrying the weight of a great uncertainty about the causes of poverty, inequality, and racism and the possibility that change might never occur.

Rod tells the story of his experience moving to Lawrence, Kansas, to pursue a doctoral degree in clinical psychology (c.f. “Black Internationalism and Transnational Africa”). He at once was confronted with raw housing discrimination, and an emerging political consciousness that led him to become involved with both student and community movements for change. The emerging analysis of society’s constraints and violence toward people of African descent resounded with his experience. Rod speaks of this convergence in these terms:

Students at the University of Kansas, stirred by the Black Power movement, demanded that the university select a Black student to be on the school’s Pom Pom Squad.¹ This action was the impetus for the formation of the Black Student Union on campus; meanwhile, some students (including Rod) also joined members of the community off campus in the Movement for Afro-American Unity (MAAU), which was consciously modeled after Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity. These were heady times.

Rod vividly remembers sitting in Leonard and Alferdeen Harrison’s living room during a meeting of MAAU and (at the age of 23) solemnly dedicating his life to the liberation of Black people.² At the time, young people often said that they could never trust anyone over 30, because they will change their views and become part of the system. But by the time Rod reached age 30, his convictions were stronger than ever, and there was no turning back. And now, there is certainly no turning back.

In this period, Rod’s path forward was established, leading him to develop his radical and deep intellectual gifts in service to the struggle. His two acclaimed books about the struggle for Black liberation (We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the

¹. Also known as the cheerleading squad.

². The Harrisons had been veterans of the Greenwood Movement of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1964.
American Century, and The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line) were an expression of this commitment. This provided a firm foundation for his interest in the research about peoples’ understandings of the “American’ Dream” and notions of nation, within the United States.

He goes on to explain:

From MAAU in Lawrence, Kansas, and the Black Student Union at the University of Kansas, Rod went on to join the Congress of African People and then the Student Organization for Black Unity (which later changed its name to the Youth Organization for Black Unity [YOBU]). In the mid-1970s, YOBU joined the Malcolm X Liberation University, the People’s College, the Lyn Eusan Institute, and the Marxist–Leninist Collective in San Francisco to form the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL), a Black Marxist organization. RWL merged with an offshoot of the Young Lords Party to form the Revolutionary Wing, but this formation was marked by an extreme form of leftist dogmatism and purged the great majority of its members for their lack of ideological purity.

During this period, Rod left the psychology doctoral program at the University of Kansas (ABD) to devote himself more fully to the struggle for justice. He was unaffiliated for a year or so and then moved to the San Francisco Bay area, which was the locus of considerable social ferment and creative organizing.

It was here that our paths came together, as we worked in opposition to the burgeoning attack on the working class and the social compact that had been constituted in the New Deal and in the civil rights and liberation movements in the United States. We were involved with such projects as several Tax the Corporations initiatives and campaigns against U.S. involvement in southern Africa and Central America (U.S. Out of Central America [USOCA] and U.S. Out of Southern Africa [USOSA]).

We also worked with people from the women’s liberation movement, solidarity networks, and intellectuals involved with Latin America, SDS, the Nation of Islam, and the left wing of the Black Power movement. Our activism was organizationally associated with the Institute for the
Study of Labor and Economic Justice, the Grass Roots Alliance, the Full Employment Project of Oakland, and the Democratic Workers Party. These organizations recruited thousands of people from the Black, Latino, and older white working classes into mass formations.

We worked with church folk in the Black and Latino communities and with Christians for Socialism, led by Reverend Jose Luis Lana. There we learned about the vast possibilities of class unity based on opposition to racism and sexism. We ultimately succeeded with a Tax the Corporations initiative in 1980 in San Francisco and took this campaign to cities throughout the United States. The California Supreme Court later declared the initiative unconstitutional, but the effort represented a professional grassroots electoral organization that was more powerful than any other political force in the region.

When Ronald Reagan ran for the presidency in 1980, many asked how anyone could take him seriously—he was just an actor. But the poet Gil Scott-Heron was analytically prescient on this issue when he argued that Reagan was just what America needed in the face of the challenges at that time...3

... These were indeed serious challenges. During the early 1980s, we thought the task was to push beyond the reformism of the 1960s to the elaboration of a genuine revolutionary vision centered on what we called the lower and deeper working class (based among women and communities of color). Then Reagan became president, the air traffic controllers were fired, and the Nicaraguan contras were actively being supported by our tax dollars. We needed new intellectual leadership and activist vision; the organizations of the New Left within which we had come to intellectual and political maturity dissolved one by one. We returned to New York City (having lived there together in 1984) and once again tried to piece together an understanding of the world and a new perspective on local issues.

This life trajectory continued with Rod’s deepening political commitment and determination as a movement scholar to make a difference in the project of analyzing the contemporary moment, particularly the experiences of African Americans in the United States

and what he argues is their central role in the way forward.

Part of this commitment was study, and a return to a formal educational setting. This was also evident in the books and many articles Rod wrote as well as our final research projects. These articulated his understanding of key elements of the contemporary world—the political as expressed by the “American’ Dream”—and the economic—as expressed through solidarity economy projects.

... In 1988, Rod entered the doctoral program in sociology at the State University of New York, Binghamton. Coming to adulthood in a period when the capacity for ordinary people to fight for social justice and social change was evident everywhere, Rod embarked on a research program that was infused with a spirit of optimism and possibility. He engaged in an effort to revive and reassess the analytic traditions derived within the Black freedom struggle by such scholars and activists as W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others who were victims of official retribution and prevented from completing their intellectual agendas. At Binghamton, Rod had the opportunity to work with such world-class scholars as Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence K. Hopkins, and Giovanni Arrighi.

_We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century_ (1999) presents the first stage of this research. In this book, Rod contends that while the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding the modern world is a historical social system larger than the United States, the hegemonic position of the United States enormously magnifies the anti-systemic potential of African American social movements. Because the evolution of the racial order after the abolition of slavery has been inextricably intertwined with processes of class formation in the United States and globally, Black activists and scholarly activists are able to speak clearly to the logic of a struggle for human rights over civil rights, a clearly universalistic position (though often in nationalist clothing) that transcends boundaries of race, class, and nation.

His 2009 book _The End of White World Supremacy_ (as Malcolm X deemed somewhat prematurely) moves this analysis a step further by emphasizing changes in the global and domestic relations of force.
between the Euro-American world and the Dark World\textsuperscript{4} and the role of African American agency in this ongoing transformation of the twenty-first century.

It is relevant here to note how we decided to research “tensions in the ‘American’ dream, together.

In 1994, Melanie entered the doctoral program in anthropology at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, where she worked with leading scholar Leith Mullings. There she formulated the research project that was published as *Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness* (2004) and later as a second edition with updated primary data, *Everyday Forms of Whiteness: Understanding Race in a ‘Post-Racial’ World* (2011). She sought to investigate the relationship between the thinking of everyday people (particularly whites) in the United States and patterns of racial inequality and injustice—how consciousness affects action and thus shapes how we might challenge historical social patterns that promote privileges for few and agony for many. A significant component of this investigation involved inquiry into the origins of white supremacy and how in national terms it translates into beliefs about ‘American’ identity, the American Dream, and notions of equality, democracy, citizenship, and belonging.

In 2006, both of us were overlength on chapters we were submitting to a handbook on race and racism. We were both writing about the relationship to race and nation of particular constituencies (Rod writing about Blacks in the U.S.; Melanie about the experiences of whites). As we commiserated about our mutual dilemmas, and what we planned to cut, we realized that in fact this is one interconnected story—not two separate trajectories. And so, we formulated this project and decided to add an ethnographic dimension to our research. We sought an understanding of the views of a representative group of people in the U.S. (as defined by race, wealth, gender, nationality, age and regional affiliation) about the “American’ Dream” in this historical moment.

Through the convergence of our fields of study, questions about nation,

\textsuperscript{4} Using Du Bois’s terminology, particularly for the uprising of African peoples against colonialism and white supremacy.
empire, race, capitalism, and democracy have arisen. In this book, we bring together these inquiries to suggest new ways of looking at the past, the present, and the future by focusing on what King meant when he argued, ‘We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.’ King emerges in this period as a world leader, a drum major for justice, who ‘tried to love somebody,’ sought to redeem the soul of America, and called for a revolution of conscience wherein all people of goodwill should side with the shirtless and barefoot people of the world. It is in this spirit that this book is dedicated. (Bush and Bush 2015:xii-xvii)

As this history infers, ideas are situated in social realities, not abstract, nor divorced from their impact on people’s lives. It was our rooting in the mass line and in the belief in the “power of the people” that underlay our desire to hear what people had to say about the United States as a nation, and the American Dream as an expression of the character of the nation (however critiqued).

Rod was adamant that the true and the good can not be separated. Ideas matter and have significance in real terms on people’s lives. Social science inquiry is as susceptible to social forces and to narratives of power as any other discipline. The lesson here is about the importance of knowing why you are pursuing an understanding of this subject. Who might benefit? Who might be harmed? With whom do you stand? Research matters. Positionality matters. Intentionality about these issues matters.

Rod’s personal history shaped his interest in how people in the United States reconcile the rhetoric with their lived experiences and how we came to do this project. It also shaped how he went about conducting the research as well as analyzing what he heard, through the lens of the speaker. How and what we “hear” and understand is influenced by who we are, what experience we’ve had, and why we are

6. The Mass Line is a concept developed by Mao that asserts that the work of organizers is to learn from the lived experiences of “the people” as they are the makers of history.
interested in knowing the answers to our questions. Rod was extremely aware of this and gave generously of himself as a listener. In turn, Rod felt a deep sense of responsibility to those who shared their stories, insights and experiences about the “‘American’ Dream” with us.

For, if you are lucky enough to have a job where you get to do research, it is important to be clear about what you want to know and why—for what purpose you seek understanding. Rod employed humility, listened hard, engaged the “mass line,” recognized complexity, determined the principles that shaped the lens through which we would analyze our data. He engaged to learn, especially when someone would voice a perspective that was contrary to his own. He positioned himself in the perspective that every privilege received brings responsibility, including the opportunity to hear what people had to say. He worked hard to embed conscious, deliberate, intentional practice in his scholarship, no different than everyday life. He consciously combatted dogmatism, rhetoric, ideological frames that disregard complexity, especially his own. He was very conscious and deliberate about the values he sought to bring to the project.

**Lesson #2: Recognizing One’s Own Perspectives and Asking Real Questions**

In *Tensions* Rod and I offer our own theoretical perspectives as well as an ethnographic survey of the views, attitudes and beliefs of the over 100 people we spoke with in interviews and focus groups. Demographically, participants mirrored the U.S. population in age, race, gender, national origin, economic position and educational attainment. They spoke with us about their reflections about the position of different groups in society, the United States as a nation, capitalism and the current moment in history. The reasons why we felt this was important to investigate, especially in the contemporary moment, is reflected in this passage:

> As we explore the contours of belonging, nationalism, and the American

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7. For a full explanation of our methodology, see https://roderickbush.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/tensions-methodology-final-final.pdf
Dream, we take heed of the cautionary remarks of Smith, Olsen, and Wallerstein about the simultaneous inclusiveness and exclusiveness of citizenship in the United States. While this component of the tension is similar to what exists in all nations, the scale of the phenomenon in the United States requires special comment.

We argue that to understand the modern world, we must recognize the inherent connection between capitalism/imperialism, white supremacy/Euro-dominance, the emergence of the U.S. nation as a “city on the hill,” and the concept of the American Dream. Each of these has worked in synchrony, simultaneously supporting the development of the historical world-system aimed toward its contemporary crisis. The question is what will come next for each of these social realities.

We examine this history to understand whether an idea that seems so innocent—that of the possibility of a better life—could possibly have a dark side. Do these “tensions” coexist in a bipolar reality? Is it only a dream or reverie? Is it all rhetoric? Is the dream in fact a reality and questioned only by those unwilling or unable to achieve it? These questions formed the substance of our inquiry. (Bush and Bush 2015:5–6)

Our description of the ways that the creation of the U.S. nation was intrinsically linked to the development and reproduction of coloniality, capitalism, and white supremacy is as follows:

“Nations” exist in a worldwide system of inequality, ordered around the ideology of pan-European racism, which derived precisely from the European colonization of the Americas. During this period, the idea of race was invented to naturalize the power of the Americas, the enslavement of Africans as a labor force in “new world,” and the subsequent generalization of pan-European supremacy to the rest of the world as European conquest spread to the far corners of the globe. This concept involved the construction of a hierarchical social-economic-political system that elevated Europeans above all other people in the world. What we refer to as “white world supremacy” is the structural and ideological bedrock of the modern world-system, a capitalist world-

8. Here, we mean the conquest of all of North and South America, not just the area that would become the United States.
economy.

The “nation of immigrants” story of the United States masks the reality that this fabled liberal utopia, the “shining city on a hill,” is part of the European conquest of the non-European world and the very creation of race to naturalize the conquest of the so-called inferior peoples, so that it is viewed as simply a fact of life, an example of survival of the fittest. We contend that the United States of America was a settler colony, born of the conquest of the land of the indigenous people, the capture and enslavement of Africans to use as labor, the conquest of Mexican territory in the U.S. American Southwest, and imperial intervention in Cuba and the Philippines and throughout what is arrogantly referred to (with all too little self-reflection) as the U.S. backyard.

The geopolitical and geo-cultural elements of our social world are fundamental and not ancillary to the stratification order. Some have sought to understand racial domination as a form of internal colonialism or internally colonized “third world within.” This is not some “colonial analogy” but part of the reality of the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system. Though the U.S. American trajectory from settler colony to global hegemon fits well into the narrative of U.S. American exceptionalism, we argue that the very concept of the American Dream has come to imply that the dream of human possibility is not the dream of all humanity and does not (coincidentally) consider how our practices in the global arena restrict the possibilities of others.

The contradictions between the vision of the nation as a “shining city on a hill” and the vision of the nation as an imperial nation have led ultimately to tensions in the American Dream. A sector of the population sought to replace the American Dream of opportunity for all with a vision of a nation that focused on the survival of the fittest. ...

The ensuing conservative backlash taking form in the neoliberal counterrevolution and the neoconservative justification of inequality were sustained efforts to stem the tide of the surging social power of the social strata and the people of goodwill who supported their rise within American society. (Bush and Bush 2015:24-25)

Why did any of this matter? Drawing from our life experiences, we
sensed that entangled in this complex narrative about an “American’ Dream” was a hidden clue about the glue that maintains an inhumane and violent system with corresponding structures (coloniality, white supremacy, capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, etc. Rod’s detachment from an identification of being as “American” and the recognition of the false assumptions that the United States is a meritocracy such that hard work leads to upward mobility was contradicted by his parents’ experiences as well as his own, his friends and other family members. His confrontations with structures and practices of race and class ran throughout his life, in central Florida growing up under Jim Crow, educational tracking in Rochester, NY, in the class dynamics at Howard University that left him feeling he did not belong, and when seeking housing in Kansas.

These life experiences made Rod very interested in the thinking and the stories that people from diverse walks of life would share. He wanted to know how people understood their experiences and to what extent they questioned the state of the nation, during a period of historical crisis.

For, such historical record makes no sense to a nation that espouses equality, opportunity and democracy. White supremacy and capitalist organizational forms are a significant part of the structures and the psyche of the society and its people. This is most particularly true for those who reap benefits even in the period of increasing challenges given the collapse of the world and were central to the development of the U.S. nation.

This contradiction has significant implications for how change can and will occur, for if the frame used for understanding contemporary issues is shaped by white supremacy and capitalism, there is no way out. Rod knew this instinctively and gutturally from his life experience. We elaborate more on the above as follows:

Neither nations nor citizens are truly separate. Falsely constructed borders and boundaries obfuscate the inherent interconnectedness of all humanity. While the concept of nationhood emerged in Europe, the founding and development of the U.S. nation embedded the idea that this way of organizing society makes sense. This is an essential Tension
in the American Dream. We are led to believe that these constructs reflect a “natural” rather than human-created arrangement and that they are to be assumed, protected, and defended at all costs.

... [T]he structure of the world-system in the past five hundred years presumes capitalist, white-supremacist, and patriarchal forms of organization and discourse. With the emergence of the “new” world, U.S. exceptionalism was (and is) articulated in origin narratives that shaped (and shape) the psyche of the nation’s peoples in hegemonic terms.

The story of “America” provided a framework for justifying the national and global racial hierarchy and explaining why some people and groups have been (and are) particularly poor or rich, powerful or less so. This tale explains the U.S. hegemonic and material rise in the twentieth century as an extension of past centuries’ establishment of Euro-dominance and justifies imperialist practices while rationalizing both increased impoverishment of nearly all peripheral regions of the globe and the increasing peripheralization of some segments of the core. This follows the logic of an inherently polarizing social system that operates on the basis of the endless accumulation of capital, which is not socially possible. This system, like all historical social systems, will come to an end at some time in the future. ... (Bush and Bush 2015:25-27)

Everything in Rod’s life led him to recognize these contradictions and to commit himself to revealing the underlying foundational lies that allowed them to co-exist. A case in point is the title of his second book, We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century.

Complexity is thus embedded in our analysis for in order to orchestrate the current levels of violence the system requires that the main explanations for economic and political crisis convey a story that is about individual and not systemic failures. There must be some people who provide examples of “success” to look to deny the structural patterns. There must be an explanation that distracts from the systemic roots of this highly unequal society.

Through the next set of lessons I summarize our thoughts in relation to that explanation, and how that led to the formulation
of our next project, “As the World Turns: Actors on the Stage of Transformational Social Change,” a study of solidarity projects and the people who create and sustain them. We were to do that 2014-2015 on a full year sabbatical.

Lesson #3: Listening and Learning from the People

In embarking on the *Tensions in the American Dream* project, we chose to learn from the views of the general population about the nature of the U.S. nation. Some were college-educated; others never attended. Some were participants in a post-incarceration program; others had worked on Wall Street.

We wanted to understand how people who had not necessarily formally studied these questions understood the forces that provided the background for the contemporary crisis and whether the concept of an American Dream played the role we suspected.

We asked questions such as:

- What is the meaning of the “American Dream” for you? Do you believe in this idea?
- In your opinion is the American Dream accessible to all people? To all people who work hard?
- Do you believe there are groups who particularly have an easier or harder time at achieving upward mobility in U.S. society? If so, why do you think that is the case? What do you think might change that pattern?
- In your opinion, why are some people rich and others poor? Some groups versus others? What role do you think the “work ethic” plays?
- Did what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina have implications for how you think about the American Dream?
- Has there been a decline in the power of the United States in the last 35 years?
What does it mean to you to be patriotic?
What are the characteristics of a democratic and just society?

This section provides a few responses from the interviews and focus groups we conducted for the “Tensions in the American Dream” that they reveal. It is here that we open the conversation with the people who participated in the research.

This material draws on excerpts from respondents’ thoughts about “Expressions of Revolt against the Systems.” In general, we found the participant comments and stories to be “thoughtful, though often contradictory” (Bush and Bush 2015:27). “These passages,” we argued, “provide evidence of deep internal struggles about how the ideological narratives that people ascribe to sometimes explain but more often disregard the challenges they face in everyday life” (Ibid.). We further noted:

These “Stories of My America” provide insight into the everyday struggles engaged to reconcile the rhetoric, reverie, and realities embodied in the notion of an American Dream. Participants’ reflections demonstrate the simultaneous contradictions evident in the ideology and lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion embodied in the history and present-day realities of the U.S. nation, thus forming the Tensions that we speak of in this book.) (Bush and Bush 2015:27)

Participants reflected on their observations of resistance to the systems within which their lived experiences are located. Some reflected on their experiences in relation to other national affiliations and how they paralleled or differed from their experiences of belonging in the United States. They often upheld dominant narratives about things being organized in the best way possible and that when people face challenges it is because of their own failings, yet were simultaneously critical of what they saw as the decks being stacked in favor of the very wealthy.

For example, Joe (Chinese, male, U.S.-born, age 26–45) explains:

“The American Dream is very alive and real. It used to be that America
was one of the few places that you could get it, but a lot of other world
countries are becoming first-world countries. It is a lot easier for China,
for example, to have a Chinese Dream. You know, ‘one world, one
dream,’ the Olympics phrase!

“Speaking about the Olympics, they were an important factor in showing
that China is also a world power, and they deserve respect. In the past,
I rooted for the U.S. and my parents would root for China, and I would
think, “Why are they rooting for China?” But 2008 came around, and
I found myself rooting for China first and America second. You feel
kind of conflicted when they are playing against each other. I ended up
cheering for China, because I know that if I were to go to China, people
would say, ‘Hey this guy is Chinese, let’s show him some respect.’ But
if I were down on my luck here in America, people would say, ‘Hey this
guy is Chinese, screw him.’”

Other participants of Chinese descent echo this critique of U.S.
nationalism:

“I have a very negative view, because people use democracy only to benefit
and profit for themselves; they are selfish. ‘One world, one dream’ is
what I dream of! The American Dream is false, because the American
Dream doesn’t help people; it fools people. The politician fools people.
People believe that only Americans have this dream. They fool people.

“The American Dream is false; it is not a dream for me. The American
Dream [is] only a dream for others. I don’t agree with that. You enjoy
one world, one dream equally, because we are all created equally, not just
all Americans are created equally. (Edward, Chinese, male, born outside
the U.S., 26–45)” (Bush and Bush 2015:133)

Others raised this question as well, wondering what is particularly
“American” about this dream:

“The American Dream is advertised all over the world, but it originated
in the United States. They went to different countries—even with the
countries that the pilgrims came from. They was like, “Yo man, check it
out. We got this here.” I don’t know if it was called the American Dream
back then, but they was advertising pictures, and then they came over.
But these people come, and they be like, “Dang, it don’t feel like it,” but it’s embedded in their mind.

“My family, my grandmother and my mother, came up to the city to better themselves. They brought their families up here. My grandma from Puerto Rico, she brought her family up here knowing something was better. When you look at it, though, you really don’t have to come to America to do all that. There’s probably better opportunities elsewhere in different countries. The American Dream is cool, though, but they really don’t have to just look at America. (Paul, Puerto Rican, male, U.S.-born, 18–25)” (Bush and Bush 2015:134-135)

Underlying each of these reflections is a question about why and how the United States came to claim “the good life” for itself and also a distinct puzzling over who is and isn’t entitled to that good life. For Rod, this idea about US exceptionalism was an essential and central element to the nation’s hegemonic rise and hold, globally. For the depiction as a “city on a hill” spoke only to the experiences of a very few, though was publicized as if it were the norm. He wondered how this ideological position could achieve such widespread acceptance given the struggles that the ordinary faced, even while recognizing different communities faced very different struggles. The upward mobility staircase offered for example to white ethnic groups meant that while they were not positioned at the top, they were comfortable enough to defend the system in the hopes that one day they indeep would be on top.

Lesson #4: Waking Up to the Structures Shaping Your Life

Rod often described his discovery of the social sciences as initially an extremely abrasive experience. What he was told reinforced the notion that Black people and poor people in general had a lot in life that was the result of their poor values, decisions and family structure. So much was a rationale for inequality that was rooted in disdain for those who provided the foundation of the nation’s wealth and expansion yet received little in return from the system. This included the hierarchies of race, class and gender. He was initially caught off guard, without the
tools and intellectual exposure to challenge what he was being taught to believe.

At first his resistance was mostly an instinctual response to narratives that condemned him, and those he loved, negating their humanity. Then he began to wonder whether there was something in fact much larger and insidious at work—something about the system and the narratives—rather than about him and the people who mattered to him. Rod began to deeply question the roots of the social reality of the times. He began to wonder what others thought—and what a time to have that awakening, in the mid 1960s when all of society was in turmoil.

It was his great fortune to then be in contact with the rich Black intellectual traditions leading Black scholars at Howard University. They provided him with a way forward in developing his understanding of the systemic nature of white supremacy and Eurocentrism, of the brutality of capitalism and the powerful resistance of African-descended peoples that made forward motion the inevitable outcome of their struggle. He often noted that when he was at Howard, studying with Sterling Brown and others, his whole world changed. He explained that this included his understanding of who he was in the world. For understanding history, structure and system through this lens provided him with a language to articulate what he already knew from experience. This led him to be very curious about what people understood and thought of the structure of US society.

This thread of interest was embedded in Rod’s subsequent decisions to commit his life to Black liberation and the liberation of all, his choice to return to study world-systems at the Braudel Center—critiquing the “Declining Significance of Race” by William Julius Wilson, his dedication in all his many publications and ultimately in his curiosity about the relationship of race, class and nation that underlie the research we conducted for *Tensions in the American Dream*. This was a significant component of the interviews and focus groups that we conducted.

The following excerpts are examples of the insights that people shared with us:
“Even though the majority may not be aware, I look at it kind of like *The Matrix* at another level. It’s going to be an awakening. You’re always going to have that group of sheep that are just going to go with the flow, but then you always have that one or two that says, “Hey, why am I even walking this way? Why can’t I walk that way?” Oh man, these young cats are going to be off the chain. When the group that does wake up and realize it’s not what they thought it was, it’s going to be a whole other thing. It’s going to be something big.

“I don’t even know if it’s going to be people of color. It’s going to be more so the haves and have-nots. That’s what it’s going to come down to. The race thing is going to play itself out, because now you have a new common enemy. You know? The money man.

“That’s who do what they want when they want—the rich. The oppressive. Now instead of only having a culture being oppressed, you have a caste that’s being oppressed. You have millions of people who have lost their jobs, but the CEOs are still getting their bonuses and golden umbrellas. Come on, man. What is that about? They are vulnerable, because this country was founded on robbing, stealing, and killing, and they’re still robbing, stealing, and killing ...

“The middle class is slowly getting eradicated ... Somebody’s going to wake up and be like, ‘Say what?’ (Harold, Black, male, U.S.-born, 26–45) ...” (Bush and Bush 2015:135-136)

Carmella (white, female, U.S.-born, 26–45) suggests that most people are fed up with the system as it stands:

“I wonder how much further materialism can go with people who have enough. Does it reach a point where people are like, “This is not it.” I’m sure you’ve heard of research by the Center for the New American Dream. They found out that, like, overwhelming amounts of people, people who are comfortable, middle-class Americans, say, “I don’t need more stuff. I need more time.” But then on the other hand, you have people who don’t have enough to eat in the world. You know? Even in America, people don’t have enough to eat, so less materialism is not very appealing for people who, like, don’t have shoes.” (Bush and Bush 2015:137-138)
Rod was particularly heartened when discovering that a 2011 Pew Research Center survey evidenced support for socialism by different demographic groups, with younger people, Blacks and Hispanics, and people from lower-income sectors indicating more positive views toward the idea of caring for the common good than older, white, and higher-income groups.


Furthermore, in conducting the research we learned that a November 2012 Gallup poll found that among Democrats and Democratic leaners,

53 percent said they had a positive image of socialism. Ironically, of this group, 55 percent expressed positive views of capitalism, 75 percent expressed positive views of the federal government, and 88 percent expressed positive views of free enterprise. Clearly, these views may appear contradictory and are certainly complex; however, they stand in contrast to those of Republicans or Republican leaners, who expressed positive views of the following: socialism (23 percent), capitalism (72 percent), the federal government (27 percent), and free enterprise (94 percent).¹⁰

Rod’s perspective that what is causing the evident and continuing racial disparities, economic inequalities and social injustices is firmly rooted in history and structure allowed him to see another future. He wanted to understand whether people more broadly recognized that as well. Systems and structures that were made can be unmade and remade.

Lesson #5: Listening, Reflecting, then Analyzing, Rather than Judging

As Rod viewed knowledge of structure, history and system as liberatory, he firmly believed in the wisdom and the power of the people. This influenced all of his analyses and writings, including Tensions in the American Dream, where we discovered a significantly deeper level of questioning of the system than we anticipated.

Immediately apparent as we began this research was that those we spoke with had already thought about many of the issues we raised. While some felt certain about their own beliefs, many expressed uncertainty or confusion about how to make sense of commonly referred to explanations that did not really explain either their life challenges or good fortunes. Many appeared to be rethinking some of the assumptions on which they had built their lives thus far.

It became clear that numerous mechanisms enact loyalty to the standard ways that modern history is explained, even when some of them contradict the lived experiences of ordinary people. The emergence

¹⁰. Ibid.
of the United States as a nation with narratives based on notions of benevolence, superiority, freedom, equality, justice, diversity, and being a superpower provides a strident image of strength with which most would like to associate. The expectation of unquestioning support for the military shores up this image of power and might. Who would not want to be on the “A” team?

... many of the people we spoke with made clear that they were questioning what they had been told and what they had believed to be true about the U.S. nation. There was a significant degree (both quantitatively and qualitatively) of challenging most of these notions. Many people expressed frustration and even anger at what they perceived to be hype about the United States. Heightened global awareness was evident as a result of access to information and because of U.S. involvement in global affairs, such as the wars of the last decade. Many people openly engaged questions of morality and believed that something was wrong with the current level of violence and poverty. They expressed a great distrust of those in charge, particularly of the government and corporate leaders, and an acute sense that these individuals were disconnected with the concerns and challenges of ordinary people in the United States. ...

There is greater awareness of inequality and violence as part of the reality of everyday life in the United States and an increased feeling of vulnerability. The “spread the wealth” discussions of Obama’s campaigns and first presidency raised the level of understanding of the economic structure of the United States. Younger people are more exposed interracially and express a lack of understanding of their parents’ biases. However small the increase, there are more interracial marriages and individuals openly identifying themselves as being of mixed backgrounds. The challenges for young people, even those with college degrees, are leading some to question the narratives about work and lack of satisfaction from a lifestyle that means always being tired and rushing, with difficulty finding time for friends and family.

Lastly, during this period of upheaval, there is a scarcity of widespread ideological explanation for the vast levels of inequality that leave many people questioning whether what they have been led to believe about capitalism, race, and the United States’ place in history is accurate. Repeatedly evident in the different ways that people framed their
reflections was a deep desire for a loving world where all were cared for, had a way to contribute to society, and were considered valuable. What that would mean in practice was rarely articulated, but the vision, the dream, and the soul were almost without exception voiced, loud and clear. (Bush and Bush 2015:146-148)

What is implicit, though not as evident, in these passages is participants’ insistence that we tell them who is doing something about “this mess.” They tasked us with an investigation that ultimately led to the formulation of our project, “As the World Turns: Actors on the Stage of Transformation Social Change.” Rather than look toward protest movements, electoral campaigns and reform initiatives, we chose to investigate “be the change” projects, following the wise analysis of movements like the Zapatistas and people like Grace Lee Boggs and the examples all over the world of focused energy on building the world envisioned rather than reshaping the current system and structures.

The final set of excerpts from Tensions in the American Dream provides insight into how we decided upon that focus for our next research project. We briefly summarize some of the developments of the last decade such as Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the Spanish Indignados, and the Chilean youth and Puerto Rican student mobilizations.

In the writing process of this section, Rod was often riveted by the expanding activism particularly of youth, globally. There were times he was so excited by what he was learning that he did not want to stop in order to eat or to sleep. For, to be living at the moment of historical rupture was an incredible privilege, albeit even with the awareness of the increasing levels of violence and brutality that the moment also incurs. Yet, he would say that this is all the nature of revolutionary periods.

So we chose to look toward those people who are responding to this historical moment by building alternative structures and communities based on a very different set of values than what capitalism, coloniality and white supremacy presume. We concluded Tensions with this passage, which articulates Rod (and my) overall stance.
The emergence of the world liberation struggle against global neoliberalism, during a period when world capitalism has entered into a structural crisis, means that now human agency is decisive, unlike during the long period of relative stability of our historical social system, historical capitalism. Now we must engage in discussion of our collective dreams (for humanity, and not just “America” or a small part of the nation’s citizens). We must organize and build communities that transcend the old paradigms that we see everywhere in the social struggles now being engaged. We must put aside sectarian bickering about which organizations should lead and establish a system of community building based on the highest principles of inclusion, representation, self-determination, democracy, and respect. We must dismantle the existing social hierarchies in our practice.

We must do more than embrace this human dream: We must get on the right side of history by not only protesting but also building community on the basis of a collective human dream, which is not simply about the redistribution of wealth but also about our collective responsibility for each other and for Mother Earth. That struggle begins with each and every act and exchange, each and every day, and extends to putting a stop to the violence that results from differential valuation of human life based on race, gender, religion, sexuality, nation, class, and all forms of exploitation and domination. The time on the clock of the world is way past due. (Bush and Bush 2015:209-210)

This orientation, with the prompting of our research respondents to go find out what people are doing about “this mess” then led to the formulation of our next research project. This was based on the yearning of those we spoke with, for a loving world where people, the environment, and all living things matter. We took seriously their charge as the gift of being able to engage this investigation brought with it enormous responsibilities, a lesson of love, justice and liberation.

Lesson #7: Striving to be Relevant Even When All Around You Just Seems Like a Changing Same

Rod’s life was dedicated early on to Black liberation and freedom for all peoples. These research projects were intimately expressions of that
commitment made almost 50 years before. Since the 1970s, we had both been involved in projects related to social change, as scholars and community activists. In the research for *Tensions in the American Dream*, we explored the history and contemporary realities of social and racial inequality in the context of the crisis of the historical capitalist world-economy, the consequences to the structure of U.S. and global society, and the agency of ordinary people and social movements. We considered the implications for the institution of nation and the lived experience of community. In this new project we sought to examine social forces that have emerged in response to this economic, political and social movement. We were intensely interested in the efforts of those whose activities seek to move us toward a more democratic and egalitarian future.

We wanted to understand movements seeking not only to address increasing inequality in the U.S. and globally, but also the demise of democratic practices. These would be organizations and projects that choose to “be the change” rather than protest or demand change from political and economic leadership. Many have asserted that it is time to transition from insisting that leaders respond to the needs of the majority, toward developing the means to address these needs within communities themselves. For example, Detroit’s “City of Hope” campaign has resulted in the growth of an estimated 1400 urban farms and gardens, a variety of local sustainable economic structures, and community based projects.

While there are many extraordinary and important contemporary organizations and movements working to ameliorate the misery brought about by the historic crisis of our times, we specifically focus on those whose mission and practice aim at broader and deeper systemic social transformation. We planned to document what is being built and how. We asked: who is involved; what forms of social organization are being employed in the process of creating new structures and relationships among people in self-sustaining enterprises? What principles center the decision-making, distribution of resources, caring for basic human needs? Finally, we wanted to understand the beliefs, attitudes and visions of people involved in this work, and their constituencies. How
do they view contemporary possibilities and their projections for the future?

We turned our attention to a question that so many of the participants in the “Tensions in the American Dream” research project raised as urgent. That is, what happens next? As people spoke about how they were reconciling the current economic and political crisis with the rhetoric of endless possibility, many participants were concerned about the callous disregard for the poorest among us. They talked about wanting to know what was being done and what could be done about what they perceived to be a vast divergence from the democratic and hopeful nation. They expressed a desire to know about projects being worked on in the U.S. and around the globe that seek to bring about more social equality and democracy. Discussions frequently turned to questions about and an interest in understanding the potential for significant social change within the world that they confront today. In view of such a broad consensus, we could not avoid a sense of responsibility to explore broader perspectives on community engagement and social change, which would allow the public to gauge the possibilities for effective social change in today’s world. Participants articulated a sense that there is something profoundly wrong with the system and wanting to know what was being done about this problem—is it hopeless?

While Rod passed before this research began, it was his determination that we must go to the “people” to learn that oriented our formulation of the “As the World Turns: Actors on the Stage of Transformational Social Change” research project and design. I have proceeded with the project as best as I can, specifically learning from the dedicated people of Cooperation Jackson, Mississippi and those involved in the Brattleboro Time Trade. Cooperatives, community land trusts, time banks and many other models are rooted in historical experiences of people who have been forced by circumstances outside their control such as coloniality, capitalism and white supremacy to find “a way out of no way.” These are not “new” economic forms and they are also not monolithic. And hence the question—what is represented in the
It is apparent, however, that long and short-term goals are not necessarily exclusive of each other. Some of the projects evidence an intersection between the work they are doing to address immediate needs and their vision for long-term structural change. I move forward with the grounding established in my conversations with Rod as we analyzed what we heard from people in the research we did for *Tensions*. No doubt, this next project is one explicitly centered on seeking and understanding how people today articulate and enact love and liberation as they pursue the means of survival in a world of violence, and crisis of all sorts.

To do so, the frame must be unapologetically rooted in a belief in humanity, possibility and the power of the people. Rod would have it no other way.

**Acknowledgment**


**Abstract**

This essay authored by Melanie E. L. Bush, titled “From *Tensions in the American Dream* to “As the World Turns”*: Lessons from Rod Bush's last projects,” 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). The chapter engages an examination of the principles and lessons embedded in Rod Bush's last two research and writing projects. The first is a co-authored book titled *Tensions in the American Dream: Rhetoric, Reverie or Reality* (with Melanie E. L. Bush) which explored the meaning of nation, race and the United States both from an analytic perspective and one drawn from ethnographic research conducted with over 100 people. The second project was designed in response to the findings from *Tensions*, as was seeking an understanding of efforts underway to build a better world. Unfortunately, Rod Bush took ill and passed before actually being able to start that research. The lessons
outlined here speak to how love and liberation were embedded in the very questions being asked, the methodology and ultimately the analysis.

Author

Melanie E. L. Bush and Rod Bush were partners in life as husband and wife for over 30 years. Their lives together were dedicated to love, family, community and justice. Melanie E. L. Bush is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Adelphi University and a Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of South Africa. Her publications include: Tensions in the American Dream (with Rod Bush), Everyday Forms of Whiteness: Understanding Race in a “Post-Racial” World as well as many articles and book chapters. Her current research flows from the work she and Rod did together and focuses on solidarity economy projects and resistance to coloniality, white supremacy, capitalism and all forms of domination, oppression and exploitation. She has long been active in movements for justice and is currently on the Leadership Committee and Strategic Team of May First People Link. At Adelphi she is the founder of the Collaboration Project and the Racial Justice Alliance and continues to be actively involved in raising awareness and engaged action. It is in the everyday struggle for social and racial justice and a more loving world that she finds home.

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