Is it all coming together?

Further thoughts on urban studies and the present crisis: (7) Media and militants, violence and love

Bob Catterall

‘The Afro-American is a “militant” because he defends himself. His family, his home, and his dignity. He does not introduce violence into a racist social system – the violence is already there, and has always been there. It is precisely this unchallenged violence that allows a racist system to perpetuate itself.’ (Robert Williams)

‘... you can have the most sophisticated and acute analysis of power in the world, but if you don’t have compassion in your soul and love in your heart, you are still going to end up with a movement that cannot touch people at the deepest level and in the end, reproduce structures of domination that are unaccounted for with those leaders who claim to be speaking on behalf of common folk.’ (Cornel West)

The photograph could easily be misread. It could be seen as a black version of ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ (‘They’re young! They’re in love! They kill people!’), except for the fact that this photo was taken in the 1950s and the film ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ appeared in 1967, that Robert and his wife Mabel Williams did not kill people, and that their action was principled. That principle, as expressed on the cover of the documentary CD produced...
by The Freedom Archives on which the
photograph now appears, was Self-Defense,
Self-Respect, and Self-Determination.

The Williams’ militant opposition to
established violence took them from local
struggles in North Carolina to the national
arena. Their approach challenged and
perhaps supplemented that of Martin Luther
King. They moved on to transnational
struggles based at first in Cuba and later in
China. They produced their own media,
first a newsletter, ‘The Crusader’, and then
Radio Free Dixie. It is a remarkable and
little-known story, one that the dominant
media have found too disturbing to
countenance.4

For an urban studies that can contribute
to defining and reclaiming a meaningful
dimension of localism and associated solidar-
ities, right up to the global level, we need
such stories and the kind of work in alterna-
tive media that Freedom Archives provide in
their telling of the Williams story.

Moving out of entrapment

In this series of post-9/11 thoughts5 I have
been looking at the phenomenon of trapped
circularity, of entrapment within oppressive
social arrangements, and at struggles to
escape from them, with some emphasis on the
individual, at attempts to define and to move
beyond such entrapment. Fiction (novels,
drama, film, music, poetry, rap) and psycho-
logical studies that allow space for individu-
als’ own telling of their stories provide access
to crucial dimensions of the interiority of
experience that are often lacking in standard
documentary sources. Biography, autobiog-
raphy and good investigative journalism can
provide a valuable middle ground. Finally,
‘streetwork’, one’s own investigations on the
ground (not conducted as research safaris
into alien territories) provide an essential
experiential and reality check.

Some of the stories touched on here have
been those of the mothers of soldiers whose
sons have been killed in Iraq and have taken a
stand against that war - notably Lila Lipscomb
in Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 film and
now Cindy Sheehan’s stand, of which she has
given us a preliminary record in her book Not
One More Mother’s Child.6 A primary concern
has been with how far such a stand can go with-
out a supporting social movement, what types
of movements and actions are supportive with-
out being too constraining/oppressive.

Though The Freedom Archives’ telling of
the Williams story is dramatic, it does not take
us all the way with these concerns. What single
source does? But, combined with the perspec-
tive presented in, for example, the interview
with their son, John (from which I quote
below), it makes a vital contribution as well as
providing invaluable insight into dimensions
of power from the local to the global, and into
the (necessary?) relationship between the
measured threat and possible exercise of
communal violence, on the one hand, and, on
the other, of communal non-violence,

‘In tandem with nonviolent protest’

Returning, then, to the photograph of the
Williams, the immediate context, as Claude
Marks, one of those who researched and
produced the CD, puts it, was as follows:

“The photo was taken by Rob’s brother, part
of a series during the training of community
women in self-defense. The key to the
photograph is contextual, night riders,
attacks on women walking alone, massive
mobilizations (imagine rallies of 15,000
 Klansmen in a town with a population of
only 25,000 people). They were resisting
terror and protecting their lives. Remember
the local and state cops rode along with the
Klan.”7

It is the story of a self-defined militant
who used his very considerable intelligence,
tactical and strategic sense, and the skills he
had acquired in the factory, Marines and
army to build with his wife and other towns-
people an armed self-defense group that held
the local racists in check in a small town,
Monroe (North Carolina) that was also a Klu
Klux Klan regional centre. Bit by bit Monroe became a national symbol of effective resistance.

William’s approach to black struggle in the civil rights era, one of ‘independent black action, black cultural pride, and armed self reliance operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protest.’8 Despite the tensions between the two approaches, militant black power so disturbed established ‘law and order’ that it galvanized local police and the FBI in 1961 into framing, and then seeking to hunt them down (including ‘Shoot to Kill’ posters).

The Williams escaped to Cuba, where they continued with their newsletter (printed for free by union members in a local printshop) and set in motion ‘Radio Free Dixie’ (with funding from Fidel Castro). When USSR-inspired communists, particularly from the USA, started using the term ‘nationalist’ against Williams as a term of abuse that was sometimes echoed in Cuba while Mao delivered in 1963 a message of solidarity to the African-American people, Williams knew that it was time to move to China. His nationalism was within a growing internationalist vision and within networks built bit by bit by his travels and media work.

Eventually disturbed by in-fighting among the leadership in China he was able, as part of US-China rapprochement under Nixon, despite FBI protestations, in 1969 to return to the US (to Michigan that had never returned ‘escaped’ Afro-Americans to the South).

Once again at the national level disturbed by political infighting, he opted out. He spent his remaining years, increasingly undermined by ill-health, working as a China specialist at the University of Michigan, writing his autobiography, and involved in local politics. He died in 1996. As Timothy Tyson so admirably sums him up:

‘His role as a national leaders subsided, but his image among the succeeding generations of black power advocates remains profound. Like the black folk hero ‘John Henry,’

Robert F. Williams outwitted and tormented the oppressors of African Americans.9

‘Compassion in your soul and love in your heart’

Yet the story does not end there. There is, first of all, the continuing calm, clear interpreter of what they struggled for, his wife, Mabel Williams. And there is the further pioneering work of their son, John, as a pastor in a Baptist church in a poor community in Detroit and as an ongoing interpreter of what it’s all for.

In a fine account of the Williams, journalist Wanda Sabir reported on Mabel’s talk with her about her political awakening through her relationship with Robert, about the power of love as a tool of transformation. Sabir moves on to John, who momentarily echoes Cornel West’s plea for a movement that can touch people at the deepest level, presenting the case for a form of agency that involves compassion and soul. As John puts it:

‘It’s that genuine love of the people that’s so critical and fundamental. You have to genuinely love and care for the people to make personal sacrifices and understand when struggle comes, the individual effort is critical, and you can’t make other people do what’s right’ 10

Notes

3 It can be ordered online at www.freedomarchives.org http://www.akpress.org or within the United States for $15.00 plus $3.75 shipping to AK Press, 674-A 23rd Street, Oakland, CA 94612, USA. There is also a Robert & Mabel Williams Resource Guide This 84-page book, published by The Freedom
Archives, includes a complete transcript of the audio CD and the full text of a 1962 article on the events in Monroe, North Carolina by legendary radical journalist Truman Nelson. The book also contains historic photographs and other commentary on the contributions of Robert and Mabel Williams. It features rare speeches, interviews, and radio broadcasts of Radio Free Dixie, the short wave radio series Robert and Mabel broadcast from Cuba. There is also a film, *Negroes with Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power*, VHS, DVD 53 minutes, 2005, Writer/Co-Director: Sandra Dickson; Co-Director: Churchill Roberts, Sponsor: The Documentary Institute, University of Florida, This is also useful.

But coverage has begun to multiply on the internet.

‘Is it all coming together?…’, variously subtitled and numbered 1 to 6 in City 7:3, 8:2 to 9:3.

Kihei, Hawai‘i: Koa Books, 2005

Email from Claude Marks to the author, 10 March, 2006


Wanda Sabir, ‘Growing Up Revolutionary : An Interview with John Williams…’ in San Francisco Bay View, 3/8/06; http://www.sfbayview.com/051805/growingup051805.shtml (accessed 10 March, 2006). Another example of the inspirational effect of ‘compassion and soul’ was provided by John La Rose in Trinidad and Britain. See Linton Kwesi Johnson’s fine obituary including the passage: ‘The depth and breadth of his contribution to the struggle for cultural and social change, for racial equality and social justice, for the humanisation of society, is unparalleled in the history of the black experience in Britain. He was a man of great erudition whose generosity of spirit and clarity of vision and sincerity inspired people…’ (The Guardian, 4 March, 2006). For a preliminary account of his importance, see Catterall, B. (2005), City 9:1, ‘Is it all coming together…’, particularly p. 156.

Bob Catterall is the Editor of City. E-mail: Bobcatterall@ntlworld.com