

Is it all coming together?

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

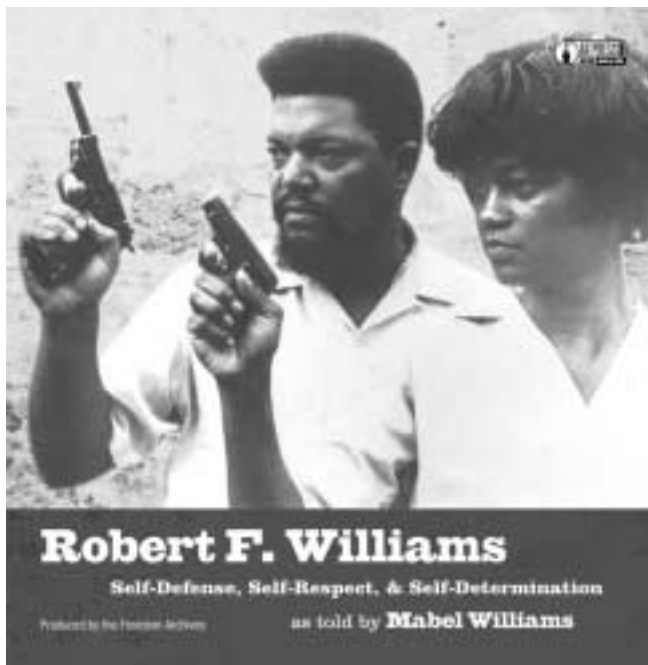
Bob Catterall

‘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)¹

‘... 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)²

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 Archives³ 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 solidarities, right up to the global level, we need such stories and the kind of work in alternative 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 psychological studies that allow space for individuals' own telling of their stories provide access to crucial dimensions of the interiority of experience that are often lacking in standard documentary sources. Biography, autobiography 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 without a supporting social movement, what types of movements and actions are supportive without 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 perspective 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 townspeople an armed self-defense group that held the local racists in check in a small town, Monroe (North Carolina) that was also a Kl

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

- 1 Sourced from Politics in the Zeros - whose quotation is attributed to Robert Williams' *Negroes with Guns* (1962) - in 'Alternative Tentacles', <http://www.alternativetentacles.com/bandinfophp?band=robertwilliams> (accessed 10 March '06)
- 2 Cornel West from his lecture/rap given at Berkeley in 2001. See Catterall, B.(2002), 'It all came together in New York...' *City 6:1*, pp145-155
- 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.

- 4 But coverage has begun to multiply on the internet.
- 5 'Is it all coming together?...', variously subtitled and numbered 1 to 6 in *City* 7:3, 8:2 to 9:3.
- 6 Kihei, Hawai'i: Koa Books, 2005
- 7 Email from Claude Marks to the author, 10 March, 2006
- 8 Sourced from Politics in the Zeros in 'Alternative Tentacles', <http://www.alternativetentacles.com/bandinfo.php?band=robertwilliams> (accessed 10 March '06)
- 9 Introduction to The Papers of Robert F. Williams, Part 2, of Black Studies Research Sources: The Black Power Movement, UPA Research Collections:

African-American Studies, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/academic/2upa/Aaas/bpower.asp> (accessed 10 March '06)

- 10 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.

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