

La Francis Rodgers-Rose: A Clarion Call of Scholar as Social Actor

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Abstract

In this article, the children of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose—Henry D. Rose and Dr. Valija C. Rose—provide a compelling presentation of the cultural and social context that shaped the life course of their mother. They provide an analysis of their mother’s theory, research, scholarship, intellectual breadth, leadership, and service contributions, including as Founder and CEO of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) for 4 decades (1983 – present). Reviewing the more than 8 decades of her life, they highlight historical epochs she experienced, and notable African American and African figures she crossed paths with, including: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Cheikh Anta Diop; Marion Barry, James Bevel; Bernard Lafayette; John Lewis; Lindwe Mabuza; Betty Shabazz; Sonia Sanchez; Iyanla Vanzant; and many others. She collaborated with future core members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as well as the Black Panther Party, Civil Rights Movement, Black Liberation Movement, and the Pan-African and other transformative movements. As a Ph.D. student at the University of Iowa, she was the only Black student and part of the last cohort of graduate students mentored by the leading symbolic interactionist, Manford Kuhn. Dr. Rodgers-Rose went on to become a nationally respected Fulbright Fellow, Distinguished Sociology Scholar, founding member and President of the Association of Black Sociologists, and President of the Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists. Within her decades of contributions as a popular and dearly loved university Professor, she produced the edited volume, *The Black Woman*, as one of the best-selling books published by Sage Publications, enjoying 11 printings. Her commitment to African liberation and struggle was recognized in 1993 when she was bestowed as *Nana Obaapanyin Akosua Asantewaa Ofosua, I of Aburi*, Ghana—as the highest honor one can receive in Ghana. She had the largest entoolment ceremony ever to be held outside the continent of Africa in Newark, N.J. In sum, those who know her best, her children, provide a powerful portrait of their mother, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, as someone who has repeatedly put out a *clarion call* to other thinkers, researchers, scholars, community members, and a larger national and international audience to take action to improve the lives of Black people. It is a call for others to emulate her life work in going beyond being a scholar to being a social actor. The result is an article that captures her legacy of scholarship and social action, providing a compelling portrait for others to emulate—and for the historical record. The invitation for others to take action is embodied in her *clarion call*, as conveyed in a line frequently shared at the end of many of her speeches: “*The time is now, the hour is late, and your Mother is calling you.*” In response to what her children have recorded in this article, all should take action and always remember the *clarion call* of this noteworthy figure in history.

Keywords: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Black Panther Party, Civil Rights, Black liberation, Pan-Africanism, self-determination

Introduction

In attempting to properly comprehend and reveal the life works of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, it is necessary to look at the cultural and social context that she was shaped by and helped shape, and then look at her unique theoretical and scholarly contributions.

Starting at the Beginning

La Francis Rodgers-Rose comes from a history of struggle. Growing up in segregated Portsmouth, Virginia with her mother, two older brothers and a younger sister, she experienced riding in the back of the bus, drinking from the “colored” water fountain, and attending segregated schools and movies. She graduated from an all-Black high school two weeks after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954. Seeing the full spectrum of American segregation shaped Rodgers-Rose’s comprehension of the world

and its power relationships. Her mother held different jobs at various times in order to care for her family—as domestic worker, beautician, licensed practical nurse, insurance agent, and waitress. Coming from a family that struggled day to day for economic survival, she was always concerned with fairness and justice. Early on, she thought she would become a lawyer, having asked one of the few Black lawyers in her hometown what his major was in college. He told her sociology, and thus began her career in a field she never left.

Off to School and On to Civil Rights

Going to Morgan State University, she graduated in 1958 with honors in sociology and anthropology. Her

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commencement speaker was the young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Rodgers-Rose became involved with the anti-segregation movement at Morgan State. She participated in demonstrations at the local F. W. Woolworth near the university. Going to Fisk University in 1958 to work on a master's degree in sociology and anthropology, she was on the front end of the student nonviolence movement. Also at Fisk was: Marion Berry, who was a graduate student in chemistry; Diane Nash, a

sophomore at Fisk; and a group of young men from the Baptist Theological Seminary—James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette and John Lewis. These students would form a large part of the inner circle of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The two years at Fisk were very active politically for Rodgers-Rose. Mass demonstrations took place in Nashville and she offered the faculty's house she was renting as a meeting place. As those students headed further south in 1960 to become the core members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Rodgers-Rose headed to Washington, DC to marry her college sweetheart. She continued her participation in mass demonstrations. It was on such an occasion in 1963 that she was privileged to have a chance meeting with Malcolm X. Carrying a copy of the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*, she got his autograph, which she cherishes today.

Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose was at the 1963 March on Washington and had first-hand information on the politics of the march and the process of attempting to keep John Lewis, the SNCC president at that time, off the program; this was because the ruling powers were afraid of what he might say.

By this time, Rodgers-Rose was a doctoral student at the University of Iowa in sociology and social psychology. She was the only Black student and part of the last cohort mentored by the leading symbolic interactionist, Manford Kuhn. In 1964, she was selected the best graduate student in the sociology department. In 1964, she completed her doctorate under Theodore R. Anderson. Kuhn had died the year before of heart failure. Her dissertation was on an empirical test of Harry Stack Sullivan's theory of interpersonal psychiatry.

In 1964, Rodgers-Rose, accepted her first full time teaching position in the Department of Sociology at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, becoming the first Black faculty member. (See photo below).



She was vice president of the Northfield Human Relations Council and played a vital role in the city, hosting the first group of *A Better Chance (ABC)* students in 1966. The ABC students were southern Black students who were identified as intellectually gifted and needed a chance to reach their potential. As the leading prep schools reached their enrollment limits, various cities around the country were asked to be host cities. Rodgers-Rose was instrumental in securing a house and hiring house "parents" for the boys and additional private homes for the four girls.

Paving a New Path

In 1968, Rodgers-Rose was one of several key persons who took over the county's Democratic party for Eugene McCarthy. She was an elected representative to the state convention and was slated to attend the 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago, which never took place. With the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the college community turned to her. With the money they raised, Rodgers-Rose founded and directed *Project Advance*, an eight-week academic summer enrichment campus-based program for forty African American and Native American high school students from Minneapolis. While at St. Olaf College, she also had her students work on winterizing rural Native Americans homes. It was at that time that she met Russell Means, a leading Native American activist.

Moving from St. Olaf in 1969, Rodgers-Rose accepted a position in the sociology department at Case Western Reserve University. While there, she served as a mentor

to both undergraduate and graduate students. She helped support a student from Zimbabwe, Lovemore Farayi Mareya. When he returned home he became a high school principal. While at Case Western Reserve, Rodgers-Rose also befriended a student from South Africa, Lindwe Mabuza, who later became the ANC ambassador to the United States before independence and later became the Ambassador to England. Rodgers-Rose was president of the *Concerned Black Parents of the Cleveland Heights Community*, speaking on behalf of Black students in the public school system. She again participated in mass demonstrations on behalf of the Black community. She met and worked with James and Grace Lee Boggs, two great grassroots organizers. She worked with the *Black Panther Party* and their feeding the poor program. She worked with them for two years before they left Cleveland to organize in Toledo, Ohio.

On the academic front, Rodgers-Rose was at the first organizing meeting of the Caucus of Black Sociologists in 1971; she subsequently served as secretary/treasurer for the first four years of the organization. In 1976, she was elected as the fifth president and second woman head of the organization. It was under her administration that the Caucus incorporated and became the Association of Black Sociologists. She also became a *Distinguished Sociology Scholar*. In addition, she was a past president of the Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists.



Research Sociologist at Educational Testing Services

In 1972, she left academia for a position at Educational Testing Services (ETS) in Princeton, NJ as a research sociologist. She was only one of four sociologists in the midst of several hundred psychologists and the only Black. Rodgers-Rose found out rather quickly that she had been hired to field direct a large study on children who were in structured day care centers versus those in private home care. The research was predominantly on Black children in Washington, DC and Baltimore, Maryland. President Richard Nixon, wanting to decrease funding to day care centers, had asked for a national study to justify his decision. Rodgers-Rose was a first-hand witness to bias in the research; from the selection of testing instruments to the sample selection, the process was biased. Although some changes were made in the testing instruments, these changes were not enough. Ultimately, the Black daycare centers in both the cities of Baltimore and Washington, DC refused participation in the research study. The project was stopped and Educational Testing Services (ETS) lost the five-million dollar grant. Rodgers-Rose left ETS after a year, although she consulted on a national study of effective desegregated schools for an additional two years.

Creating a Classic: *The Black Woman*, Edited Volume

Returning to academia, Rodgers-Rose took a half time teaching position at Princeton University in the Afro-American Studies Certificate Program from 1973-1988. It was at Princeton that she offered their first course on *The Black Woman* in 1974. Finding nothing in the field of sociology that spoke from the voices of Black women, Rodgers-Rose embarked on a mission to create a major textbook that could be used in the social sciences about Black women, being created by Black women from their own perspective. Rodgers-Rose was familiar with a number of seasoned scholars and a new emerging group researching and writing on Black women. Five years later, a final product was delivered after having been rejected by every major publishing company. The general sense was that there was nothing new to write about Black women. Rodgers-Rose proved them wrong and the book, *The Black Woman* (1980) went on to be one of the best-selling books of Sage Publications, going through eleven printings.

In the preface to *The Black Woman*, Rodgers-Rose says, “we need to know not only the contemporary experiences, but also the historical collective experiences of all Black women.” Further she says, “Black women must continue to remember, to be, and to relive the slave and peasant existence of their ancestors. To do so means that the African American woman will never be separated from her reality.” Rodgers-Rose (1980) maintains, “This volume seeks to continue the process of correcting the history of Black women. It aims to go beyond the debunking of the prevailing ideology. We have endeavored to understand the relationship between ideology and utopian thought

and that relationship impinges on the Black woman.” From the very beginning of the volume, she places the discussion and analysis in a historical perspective. In the past nearly 50 years another book of that magnitude has not been published. The field of Black women’s studies owes Rodgers-Rose a great thanks for her persistence in publishing *The Black Woman*. Rodgers-Rose (1980) also afforded a great opportunity to new Black women scholars, as the volume included six original articles from dissertation research, while giving five women their first major publication.

Always an Innovator and Community Leader

Rodgers-Rose helped develop an alternative parent-controlled school, *Children of the Rainbow*, for her children to attend. In 1976, she opened a clothing store on the main business street in the city. At her church, *The Community Church of God*, she convinced members to go back to college and helped enroll them in St. Peter’s College in a program aimed at adults returning to college. At some point, she taught classes in the program. She was the organizer and first president of the Plainfield Chapter of the *National Black Child Development Institute* in 1976. In 1979, she founded *Training Research and Community Educational Services (TRACES) Institute* as a 501 (3)(c) organization. Out of that Institute has grown the *International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC)*, founded in 1983, as well as *Traces Publications* (e.g., Rodgers & Rodgers-Rose, 1985; Aldridge & Rodgers-Rose, 1993; Rodgers-Rose & Aldridge, 2003; Rodgers-Rose & Zai’mah, 2011).

Her Crowning Achievement: IBWC

The *International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC)*; See <http://ibwc.us/>), founded in 1983, has members in more than thirty-five states. As a networking organization, national conferences are held every year to address crucial issues that impact the lives of women of African ancestry. Conference themes have addressed various aspects of health, economic empowerment, political socialization, spirituality and education. The International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) believes that we must build an African-centered view of social and economic development. In addition, the organization seeks to build an African model of womanhood—a model that speaks to the multifaceted roles that Black women continue to play. Some of the most outstanding scholars and activists have participated in the conferences over the past years. Some of them include: Vivian V. Gordon, Betty Shabazz, Sonia Sanchez, Victoria Gray Adams, Aaron D. Gresson, Safiya Burkari-Alston, Delores P. Aldridge, Annie Devine, Safiya Bande, Dessima Williams, Useni Eugene Perkins, Nsenga Warfield- Coppock, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, Nzinga Ratibisha Heru, Queen Afua, Nana Korantemaa Ayebofo, Rkhty Amen Jones, Nashid Fakhrid-Deen, Camille Yarbrough and Iyanla Vanzant.

Each conference pulls together the leading women of African ancestry to analyze the conference theme. The organization can boast some of the leading women theorists in the country. Through the publishing company, the organization has four books, including two edited volumes, as follows: *Strategies for Resolving Conflict in Black Male and Female Relationships* (Rodgers & Rodgers-Rose, 1985); *Rivers of Tears: The Politics of Black Women’s Health* (Aldridge & Rodgers-Rose, 1993, Edited Volume); *Every Black Woman Should Wear a Red Dress: A History of the International Black Women’s Congress* (Rodgers-Rose & Aldridge, 2003); and, *Healing Black Women from Violence: Reclamation and Peace* (Rodgers-Rose & Zai’mah, 2011, Edited Volume).

The IBWC organization has received major grants from foundations, as well as from federal, state and local governments. In the past forty years IBWC has managed more than five million dollars in grant money. The national headquarters is located in Norfolk, Virginia, which was also a prior local chapter location. The Norfolk location had a staff of twenty-two and delivered services to people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. The chapter also trains women who live in public housing to become home healthcare workers. They were the lead agency in delivering a self-improvement program aimed at low-income women in public housing.

A Focus on Africa

Rodgers-Rose has been concerned about Africa since her undergraduate days. Early on she met many of the future leaders of African countries that were still under the rule of Europeans. At the *International House* near Columbia University in New York City, discussions were always lively between students from various African countries and the Caribbean. From these beginning contacts, Rodgers-Rose sought out international students needing any kind of assistance. She assisted families that came to the United States through her church. She gave financial assistance to graduate and undergraduate students at every college or university where she taught.

She played a significant role in assisting a young man from Ghana in enrolling and graduating from Howard University on a tennis scholarship. Two African students have Rodgers-Rose to thank for completing the doctorate degree. Walter Abilla was one of those students. He later became chair of the sociology department at the University of Nairobi. Another student from Kenya, Josephine Mokibu, held a high position in the New Jersey State Department of Education after completing her degree. At another point, she was instrumental in securing a position for the Nigerian play writer, Kabu Obi-Davies, at Drew University. Not only did he put on plays there, but he was the owner of the largest Black production company in New Jersey.

In 1984, Rodgers-Rose was selected as a member of the

first group of fifteen scholars in African American Studies from around the country to study in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Senegal for eight weeks as a *Fulbright Fellow*. As the group moved around the various countries and met with numerous leaders, Rodgers-Rose was elected spokesperson for the group. It was on that study tour that she had the privilege of meeting the great African scientist Cheikh Anta Diop.

In 1984, she volunteered at the United Nations in preparation for the 1985 International Year of the Woman to be held in Nairobi, Kenya. In 1985, she organized and was the leader to the first of sixteen *Annual Educational Tours to Africa*: i.e. to Kenya, the Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Togo, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Zimbabwe, Guinea, Egypt, South Africa and Ghana. These annual tours included taking twenty-two Drew University students to Egypt in 1989 after they had spent a semester studying the culture and language of ancient Egypt. This program was a major decision on the part of the university. In 1991, Rodgers-Rose convinced the university to permit her to hold its first *January Term in Africa*—including Senegal and the Gambia. The group included thirteen students who spent the month studying the history and culture of the people. They traveled throughout the two countries staying with and meeting the people. As a result of this first *January Term in Africa* program, Drew University now has students who spend a full semester in Africa.

With the founding of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) in 1983, monetary contributions have been made to Guinea, Senegal, Ghana and the Gambia. At one point, IBWC had chapters in Kenya, Senegal and Guinea. IBWC has hosted or met with some of the following people over the past forty years: Alice Nkumo, a businesswoman from Zimbabwe; the president’s wife of Ghana in 1995; Maxwell Jumah, former mayor of Kumasi, Ghana; Sarah Johnson, director of communication in the Gambia; musical director of the University of Liberia, Agnes Nebos Von Balmos; Elizabeth Siebko of the Pan African Congress of Azania; Seynabou Ndiaye Sy, president of the Women’s Solidarity Network of Senegal; Yahne Sangarey, foreign correspondent from Liberia; Rudo Gaidzanwa, political scientist, Zimbabwe; and, Bineta Damas, president, and secretaries of the city of Dakar.

Her commitment to African liberation and struggle was recognized in 1993 when she was enstooled as *Nana Obaapanyin Akosua Asantewaa Ofosua, I of Aburi*, Ghana. Her enstoolment was held in downtown Newark, New Jersey. More than twelve other Nanas came to participate in the ceremony. It continues to be the largest held enstoolment ceremony outside the continent of Africa. (See photo at right).

The Theoretical Perspective

The works of Rodgers-Rose have three major themes that supplement and deepen her commitment to activism scholarship. They are: 1) Redefining and reconstructing Black womanhood; 2) The question of self-determination, which still remains the major paradox that plagues Blacks in the United States and globally; and, 3) Scholarship in the midst of struggle to improve the lives of Black people. In attempting to define and create social space for Black woman’s scholarship, Rodgers-Rose creates a new paradigm for what it means to be Black, woman, and scholar.

Rodgers-Rose maintains, “We are concerned with how Black women, who know who they are, discern, and make known the nature of things.” She suggests that we must get back to ourselves, and put on our **red dress**—“the symbol of our queenship; the symbol of our spirit... We need to get back to our colors; back to our red dress, back to ourselves..” Further Rodgers-Rose avers that “an original cannot copy a copier.” Her original African centered model of womanhood includes 20 attributes, as follows: we orientation, respect for elders, spiritual, fair minded, doer, planner, modest, loyal, leader, warrior, intellect, committed, steadfast, diligent, organizer, sister-friend. strong, articulate, self-assured, and self-knowledge [See the Rodgers-Rose (2023c) article, *Black Women Defining Self in the 21st Century: An African Centered Perspective*, in this issue of the *Journal of Equity in Health*].



**Nana Obaapanyin Akosua
Asantewaa Ofosua, I of Aburi, Ghana**

Rodgers-Rose defined intellectualism in her paper “*Black Intellectualism at the Dawn of the New Millennium: Threading the Needle*” (2001) [See the Rodgers-Rose, 2023d version contained in this issue of the *Journal of Equity in Health*: i.e. *Threading the Needle: Will the Real Black Intellectual Please Stand Up?*] Here, Rodgers-Rose (2023d) defines intellectualism, stating “intellectualism must be able to describe reality in ways that push people to act on their own behalf.” In staying true to her larger and more expansive social vision of scholarship and intellectualism, Rodgers-Rose has made numerous career decisions that reflected the above-mentioned definition of intellectualism. From her critical and essential role in the founding and development of the Association of Black Sociologists, to her present role as the Founder and CEO of the International Black Woman’s Congress (IBWC), Rodgers-Rose’s commitment to the development of free space, critical engagement, and structured intervention into the lives of women of African descent has defined and marked her role in Black woman’s scholarship.

In prescribing social remedies for the Black community, Rodgers-Rose focuses the lenses of analysis squarely upon the issues of power, powerlessness, and how the powerless act in ways that collaborate and tighten the very powerlessness that lies at the root of the ailment.

For example, Rodgers-Rose (1983) states, as follows: “Ultimately our concern centers around white male power and the system he has developed to protect his power and his control over the masses. It is this system that has Blacks fighting among themselves, interfering with the structure and function of the family, and destroying their ability to survive and forge ahead to ultimate victory” (Rodgers-Rose 1983).

This attempt to find meaning for scholarship stands in direct challenge and contradiction to the “Ivory Tower” paradigm that marks western scholarship. More so, such a commitment wades deep in the waters of what a model or paradigm of Black scholarship means. For in taking up the mantle of defending and advancing the interests of Black people, Rodgers-Rose navigates the historical path that W.E.B. Du Bois, Ana Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, and uncounted other Blacks have laid. In sharpening and deploying socially relevant scholarship in the service of the masses, the true social worth and significance of Black intellectualism is measured and weighed. Therefore, for a Black to be considered an intellectual, her/his contributions to the ongoing cause of Black liberation and human freedom must stand at the eye of intellectual production. Rodgers-Rose then claims space that intellectual production must be for the sake of and on behalf of the masses of Black people. This implies both knowledge of the conditions, dreams, hopes, aspirations, and potentials of the masses of Black people, as well as the capacity to lay a structured

intervention to make those aspirations a reality. This type of committed scholarship is not defined by awards or recognition from the formal academy, rather by the capacity to mobilize the thoughts, inspire the spirits, and stand as a guidepost for direction. An essential speaking truth to power, and organizing activities to redistribute power is the path to this intellectualism.

Redefining-Reconstructing Black Womanhood

In her ongoing attempt to provide a more real, relevant, and historically appropriate scholarship, Rodgers-Rose begins with the redefinition of Black womanhood. In her works the word reconstruction appears often. Thusly, to comprehend the work of Rodgers-Rose, understanding social, cultural, and economic reconstruction is needed. When Rodgers-Rose speaks of the need for reconstruction, she speaks of taking what is relevant from the past, and tailoring it to face the present and future. This quest for reconstruction begins by probing history for a definition of Black womanhood that is broad and deep.

Rodgers-Rose tells us that “our history did not start four hundred years ago on slave ships that landed in North America. It stretches further back than the Greek and Roman empires” (Rodgers-Rose, 1998). Reconstructing Black womanhood must begin, in the eyes of Rodgers-Rose, by looking at the earliest historical record of the Black woman. As such, Rodgers-Rose probes ancient Egypt (Kemet) for ethical and social paradigms that can both inform and guide a new Black woman. [See Rodgers-Rose, 2023c, *Black Women Defining Self in the 21st Century: An African Centered Perspective*, in this issue of the *Journal of Equity in Health*, pp. 28-37].

This commitment to the ethical text of Kemet has led the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) to sponsor members in learning to read the ancient texts (Medu Neter). The organization has sponsored several trips to Kemet, as well as initiated rites of passage programs to help young Black girls come into womanhood, become committed not only to self but also the community, and be ready to contribute to the on-going development of African people.

Rodgers-Rose contends that the values and commitments of Black women extend at least into ancient Kemet, and that these same values have informed the lives of African women globally. To demonstrate this, Rodgers-Rose did a major study of African-American female elders between 1987-1995 and then compared the values of these elders with the values underlying social thought in ancient Kemet. [See Rodgers-Rose, 2023b, *The Wisdom of Our Foremothers: Reconstructing African Spirituality*, in this issue of the *Journal of Equity in Health*, pp. 19-27]. The values that Rodgers-Rose has systematically uncovered are: be kind to others; work hard; education is important; be truthful; live a clean (righteous) life; faith in God; strict discipline of children; would not accept mediocrity;

cleanliness is next to godliness; you are your brother's and sister's keeper; respect yourself; respect others; depend on yourself; know how to act in public; and be proud of being Black. These core values, Rodgers-Rose contents, must be revisited. "I suggest that for much of the answer we must turn to the early socialization of African-Americans. We must return to the source, to fetch that which was left behind. We must reconstruct the past" (Rodgers-Rose, 1998).

When speaking of revitalization, Rodgers-Rose contends that Black people in America have a problem, and that the problem lies in moving away from the path needed to transform society. In imitating those who have created a warped, materialistic, non-spiritual society, Blacks have forsaken that which is capable of being their salvation.

Rodgers-Rose places such a strong emphasis on values because she clearly comprehends that to birth a new world, a new woman and man must build that world. This new woman and man must have: a compelling moral vision and anchor, allowing them to withstand the rigors of the defenders of this established order; and perseverance, tempered by wisdom and struggle to create that which is good and right. Rodgers-Rose always stresses the ethical and moral point of view in any given situation. Likewise, locating what is just in a situation and then finding a way to adhere to that which is righteous stands as the primary challenge facing humanity.

The history of Black women in America is a record of humanity and pain, of solidarity and suffering, of building and losing. This unity in dichotomy stands as a testament to the strength of African people, as well as the underlying philosophical core of Black people. It is this fullness of human experience that leads to the conclusion that African women's unique human experience is both a needed and necessary corrective to the self-indulgent and ultimately limiting contours of Euro-American social thought. For Euro-American social thought denies its destructive present and past, in an attempt to claim a social healthiness that is not reflective of reality. American society, as a social amalgamation of European linguistic and cultural groups, rests upon a series of social myths, which marginalizes and ridicules African experiences and ultimately African humanity. Therefore, Rodgers-Rose is extremely critical of any attempt to integrate Blacks into mainstream American society. For such integration, on the terms of Euro-American, in fact results in a self-negation of African humanity. "This massive turning away from the spirituality in the Black community reached full force immediately after the 1960's Black Revolution Movement, a movement that was turned from one of human rights to civil rights, from justice to integration; from a viable Black community to one of abandonment" (Rodgers-Rose, 1999).

Rodgers-Rose offers keen insight on self-negation of African physiology, culture, history, and humanity. "I would suggest that eventually Black people become



Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose won the 2020 *Divine Nine Award*, as the highest award from all Divine 9 chapters from Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Norfolk and Suffolk. In 1863 La Francis pledged in the Phi Chapter (now Des Moines Alumnae Chapter).

confused, lose respect for or don't know anything about their history and culture; they imitate their oppressors and do just about anything to themselves and against their people for no particular reason at all. They see little value, little strength, little love (spirituality) in their community. They move away from the built-in spirituality of the community, a community that believes that life itself is a spiritual path back to the oneness of the creator. They become despiritualized; suffer from moral decay, cultural ignorance, and social, political, and economic impotence. Their souls become lost and they are empty inside" (Rodgers-Rose, 1999).

Rodgers-Rose's Pan-Africanism

Rodgers-Rose feels any comprehension of Black womanhood must have a distinctly international flavor, finding similarities and differences, and then probing how Black women have both adapted and caused adaptation, in a nuanced and dialectic process. This Pan-Africanism is displayed in the life works and commitments of Rodgers-Rose.

She has lived her life in a way that privileges institutional building and intellectual development among African women. As such, Rodgers-Rose has participated in not simply cultural exchange between African women on a

global basis, but in creating organizations to help advance the interests of African women globally. The primary example of this Pan-African commitment is of course the development of the International Black Women's Congress (IBWC). In attempting to thread together the continual and profound commitment of Rodgers-Rose to Pan-African institution building, she has in part helped to expand the definition of and our comprehension of the term Pan-Africanism.

This expanded definition of Pan-Africanism locates the definition in ways that first places Black women's contributions to that tradition (a contribution that has been neglected) in daily struggle. Consequently, a Pan-Africanist is not just one who has published articles and manuscripts on the issue. A Pan-Africanist must also be one who has through their lives touched and enhanced the lives of African people on a global level.

Under that expanded and more accurate conceptualization, we see Rodgers-Rose's contributions.

Self-Determination: The Question Still

The blending of engaged intellectualism and reconstructing Black womanhood merge in the struggle for self-determination for Black people. This struggle, rooted in centuries of oppression and resistance, has affected the lives of untold millions of African-American women over nearly half a millennium. Because critical resources, social space, and control over the means of destruction are at issue, this struggle is in fact key and essential to the entirety of humanity.

Rodgers-Rose's concept of self-determination is rooted in centuries of oppression and resistance, which has affected the lives of untold millions of African-American women over nearly half a millennium. Rodgers-Rose refuses to allow anyone to marginalize, make narrow the issues, or define the terms of engagement of Black liberation. For Rodgers-Rose's concept of self-determination is not rooted in a rigid, mechanical definition of Black self-determination. The distribution, control, and access to resources, as well as the capacity to choose how such resources can best serve the interest of humanity are key to attaining self-determination for Blacks in America. Because critical resources, social space, and control are at issue, this struggle is in fact key and essential to the entirety of humanity. Germane to understanding Rodgers-Rose's definition of self-determination is that it must be built in struggle, in a far expanded realm of politics and economics. The theories, structures, and mechanisms to harness and

broaden Black political freedom in this country are yet to be built. To create these institutions is in fact an act of unity, and that without such institutions being created, Black survival in the United States or globally is not ensured. This realization of the limits of the current structure of American society places a historical mission upon the descendants of enslaved Africans; for, much of the distortion and abnormality in American society was initiated with the enslavement of Africans, and the weight of the distortions rest upon the lives, life-chances, and quality of lives of Blacks.

In Rodgers-Rose's work, Black women must also be understood in community, with the larger Black community's struggles, needs, hopes, and aspirations interplaying, created by and creating the context in which Black womanhood is displayed. Clearly Rodgers-Rose means that the Black community, both women and men, those born and the yet to be born, must be considered in any conversation of community. "We cannot separate our identity, personality from the sociocultural environment in which were born and live" (Rodgers-Rose, 1991). Rodgers-Rose therefore feels that defining that sociocultural environment and defining it with clarity and precision is key to being able to cope with and transform that environment. "It is this system which has Blacks fighting among themselves, interfering with the structure and function of the family, and destroying their ability to survive and forge ahead to ultimate victory" (Rodgers-Rose, 1983). "How can we deconstruct the myths and lies of American culture, free our voices that have been silenced" for the past 30 years, and "remove the romanticism around race and racial justice? How can we reconstruct and resurrect our history, our culture? How do we save ourselves?" (Rodgers-Rose, 1996).

Scholarship in The Midst of Struggle

Rodgers-Rose demonstrates that the social conditions of African-Americans and Euro-Americans have been historically shaped by differing factors, and for the most part these factors have not been simply differing, but in fact opposing. Rodgers-Rose claims, "Much of what Blacks do and say to each other was not put in motion by them, but was predefined by the larger American social structure" (Rodgers-Rose, 1983).

In her scholarship and social activism, self-definition that is historical, social, and progressive stands at the heart of Rodgers-Rose's concerns. She asks, "By what process do Black women come to know the laws and causes of reality. Our history, as is the case of all history, is a continuing process of reading, rereading, revising and reconstructing. The past does not change, but the questions we ask to connect the past to the present do change. We must harness our history in the service of humankind" (Rodgers-Rose, 1998). This focus upon the human, the emancipatory and

uplifting aspects of Black history and culture stands at the apex of Black social thought. This discourse leads one to then ask, “Who are we and what is it we should be doing?” In such a manner, Rodgers-Rose focuses on both identity and mission rooted in history. For, if who we are and what we have endured is clear, where we are going and where we are supposed to be going becomes apparent.

Rodgers-Rose then makes clear that (we) the African people in America are the descendants of the kidnapped, the offspring of the survivors of one of the most hellacious holocausts in human history. “How we define ourselves may be the most important thing we do in the immediate future. No one can do it for us. Who we are and how we should live our lives should be defined by us. It is, in a general sense, a collective process but must be practiced by individuals” (Rodgers-Rose 1998).

Rodgers-Rose’s concept of context has both a spatial and temporal dimension. Privileging both space and control over space, as well as a keen concept of time in history, play out in a searing critique of both the established order and Black apologists for that order.

Many of Rodgers-Rose’s speeches end with, “The time is late, the hour is now, and your Mother is calling you.” In this closing Rodgers-Rose first defines what time it is in the history of African-Americans. She emphasizes that this moment in history, this time that we walk the earth is critical, and she then evokes that one’s Ancestors are calling one to come forth at this critical time in history and act in one’s own behalf.

With the breaking of the Black liberation movement and a new social paradigm in America, Rodgers-Rose’s call to time sensitivity is prophetic. For if, as Rodgers-Rose believes, Blacks are not in fact acting on their own temporal rhythms, then they are serving as vessels for another people’s history. Such a temporal distortion of the possibility of humanity is a tragedy, and to not recognize, censure, or treat it as a tragedy is barbaric.

Gender and class issues in America cannot be comprehended without comprehension of the ways racialized oppression has structured and shaped the American notion of womanhood as well as the notion of class. Rodgers-Rose insists that while a triple oppression of Black women exists, this oppression is shaped in the midst of the kidnapping and continuing domination of African people; and shaped by capitalism as an economic system that found birth and prospered with the oppression and exploitation of African people. Gender relationships, she insists, take place within that context, and cannot be understood nor compared without rigorous attention being paid to that context (Rodgers-Rose, 2005).



As such, Rodgers-Rose rejects the notion that while sharing the same gender, women from oppressed communities and women from oppressor communities share similar experiences. The political economy as well as the social cultural context of the United States marks people of African descent as outside the human experience; and deliver treatment that reflects such a designation.

In emphasizing the common history and struggle of Black people, while also being critical of internal gender relations in the Black community, Rodgers-Rose leaves room for reconciliation and struggle on a higher, and more holistic level. Feminism in America in Rodgers-Rose’s estimation mistakes the often complimentary relationship of Black men and women. Rodgers-Rose is clear that the voices of Black women have been stifled and hidden, and that in stifling the voice of Black women, the fullness and completeness of Black history is distorted. When Black men participate in such diversion, Rodgers-Rose clearly points out that such behavior in fact diminishes the humanity of the Black man and robs Black men of the only true partner in life and struggle they have.

Rodgers-Rose’s methodology reflects her sharp belief that any theoretical conceptualization must bear the burden of the weight of history, and that tailoring reality to fit theory is in fact an endeavor in deception; and, for a scholar of an oppressed group to participate in such an endeavor is foolish or criminal. Any class-based theory of reality in dealing with American society must be severely altered to encapsulate the experiences of African people and their enslavement—with links to the founding and prospering of the modern political economic order. As such, Rodgers-Rose continually calls for a theory of reality that rises from the voice of African people. This giving of voice, this privileging of the oppressed is a demonstration of a social based methodology in which those with the least are in fact most worthy of critiquing a society and working to find



La Francis Rodgers-Rose, Ph.D. poses with daughter Valija and son Henry—co-authors of this article. Henry D. Rose is Director of the NYSNA Field Public Hospital Systems, New York State Nurses Association, New York, NY. Valija C. Rose, Ph.D. is Associate Director, Data & Research, Military Community & Family Policy, Military Community Advocacy, Department of Defense, Alexandria, VA.

solutions to the social system that causes their oppression; then, a good and just social order can be constructed. In terms of social class, Rodgers-Rose emphasizes that “class is location in the control of an economy” (Rodgers-Rose, 2005).

This leads Rodgers-Rose to point out that while data show most African-Americans as being middle-class, such statistics often obscure more than they enlighten (Rodgers-Rose, 2005). For if, as she suggests, class is power to control labor and resources in an economy, most Blacks are not middle class, but three pay checks away from poor. Rodgers-Rose demonstrates continually that much of what passes for socio/economic/political dis-course in America is, in fact, a disguised grasp for the perpetuation of an economic and political system founded upon the oppression of Blacks. Blacks lack of control of any of the vital and life perpetuating institutions or resources in America is what seems critical.

Therefore, while Black athletes and entertainers may have the capacity to consume at a large level, their capacity to direct resources to enhance the lives of their people is extremely limited. Rodgers-Rose stresses that the capacity to direct labor and resources in the direction one wishes is key to the determination of class in society.

Class and race have been intertwined and intermixed in the capitalist epoch in a way that blurs differences between them. The world was conquered and an economic system was devised and constructed by the conquerors to perpetuate their control over resources. Using this perspective to dissect the totality of the historical situation, class then has both an in-group and out-group aspect to it. Much like in the animal world, there is a “pecking order” based on one’s place within the group that regulates the resources available to a person. And like the animal world, modern ‘civilized society’ looks to absolutely subjugate or destroy outsiders.

The struggle for self-determination cannot be fought solely in the context of institutional space controlled and directed by forces of oppression; thusly, creating and controlling space is key.

“The African American community has a responsibility to African American children. We cannot expect white America to do what it has never done” (Rodgers-Rose, 1991). In this conversation about Afrocentric education Rodgers-Rose points us towards both an ethic of collective responsibility, as well as a rational critique of American society and the people who control the mechanisms of power within that society. In *“The Psychosocial Need for*



Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose speaks at the International Black Women's Congress (IBWC) Annual Conference, Virginia Beach, VA

Afrocentric Education" (Rodgers-Rose, 1991), Rodgers-Rose's ideas about institutional space and the creation of the good and just social order are explored. The struggle to reshape and re-center African consciousness is the key struggle to create a meaningful Black liberation. "As a group, Blacks must become conscious of who we are, committed to changing their structural position, and culturally grounded in the history and world historical struggle of their people; Black as the most progressive force for justice in this country; Black as a people who though continually pronounced dead, called finished, have risen again and again from the ashes to shake not just this country, but as the Black national Anthem states Earth and heaven ring in our push for freedom" (Rodgers-Rose, 2001).

This passage demonstrates that a comprehensive comprehension of African people serves as both guidepost and beacon to a new future of human freedom; that Black people in America have a world historical role in ushering in this future; and that without the voices of African Americans being added to other progressive voices to create a new world such a world can never come into being. This sense of mission, of destiny, and larger purpose in history is also a core value and belief in Black culture, allowing Blacks to endure and persevere through numerous hellacious social situations. "In seeking to understand the character of African Americans, we have tended to pay more attention to the devastating outcome of living in a society that denies a people its humanity, often missing that which explains the group's ability to thrive and survive" (Rodgers-Rose, 1989).

Rodgers-Rose therefore focuses upon the creation of a mechanism that is under the control of African people as being key to manufacturing an African agenda and struggle to make such an agenda real and relevant. She speaks with great clarity about the need for African people to speak with their own voice.

A Pilot's Role: Charting and Navigating Deep Water

The last fifty years of African American history has featured many critical and crucial changes. Just under the surface of many of these changes lies the labor, the intellect, the life work of La Francis Rodgers-Rose in helping to shape, guide, and mentor these changes. She has stood as a paradigm of scholar as actor in the finest tradition of African American history. Her clarion call continues.



Above, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose celebrates on October 21, 2022 her 20th Heart Transplant Anniversary.

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