

# Words and the Man

## Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin

By John D'Emilio  
Free Press  
ISBN 0-684-82780-8  
HB, \$35.00, 568 pp.

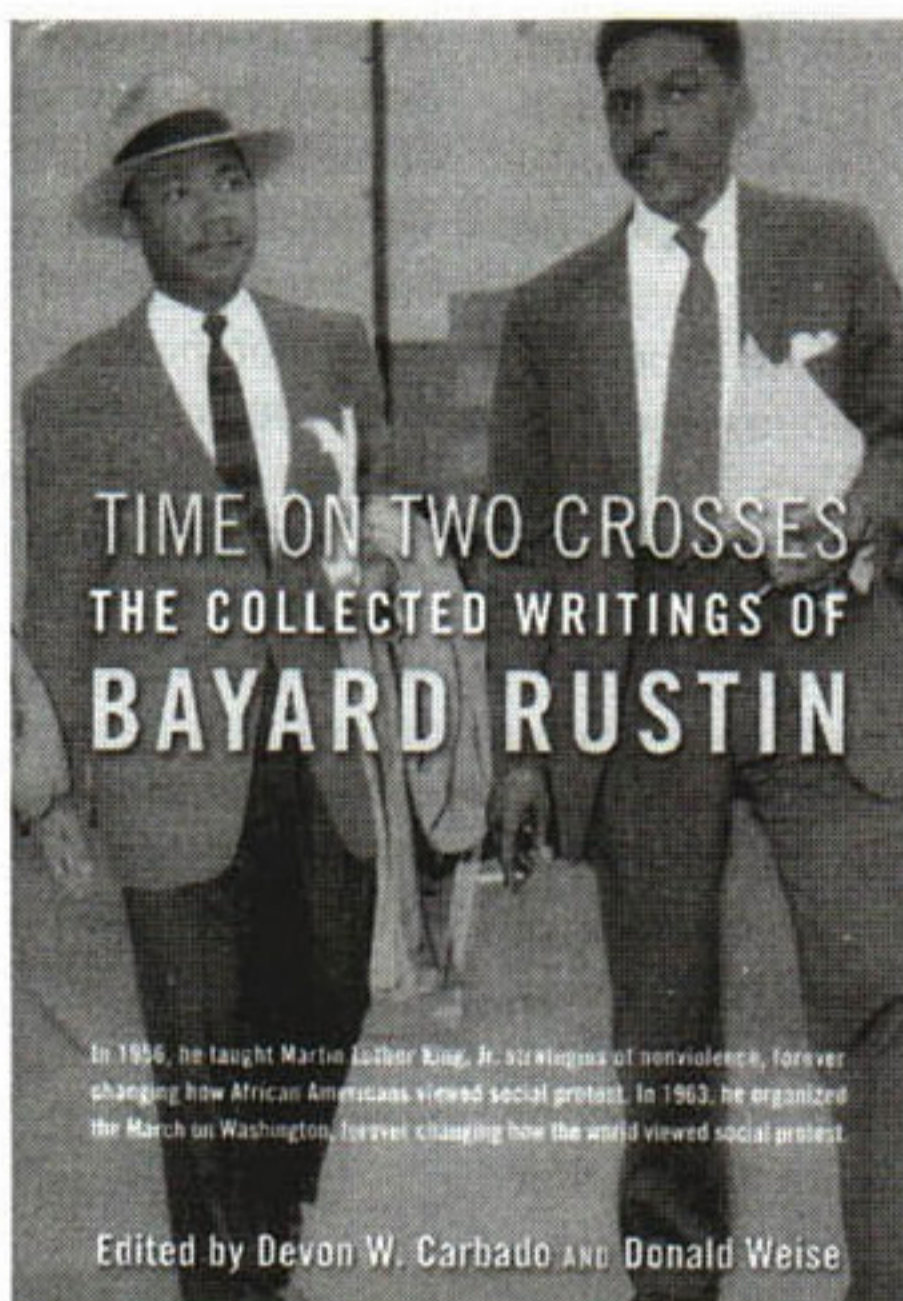
## Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin

Edited by Devon W. Carbado  
and Donald Weise  
Cleis Press  
ISBN 1-57344-174-0  
PB, \$16.95, 350 pp.

### Reviewed by Benjamin Shepard

If ever there was a testament to the adage that history is not defined by events as much as by people, it is the complex, sometimes idiosyncratic life and career of civil rights leader Bayard Rustin. Two new volumes detail the struggles of the strategist who taught Martin Luther King, Jr. how to apply the Gandhian repertoire of nonviolent civil disobedience to the American scene and coordinated the 1963 March on Washington. To contemplate Rustin's life is to grapple with some of the most pressing issues faced by activists fighting for social and economic justice for the last half century. Queer man, pacifist, African-American civil rights activist, and socialist: Rarely has there been a political actor in American life and letters who inhabited quite so many complex social and political identities.

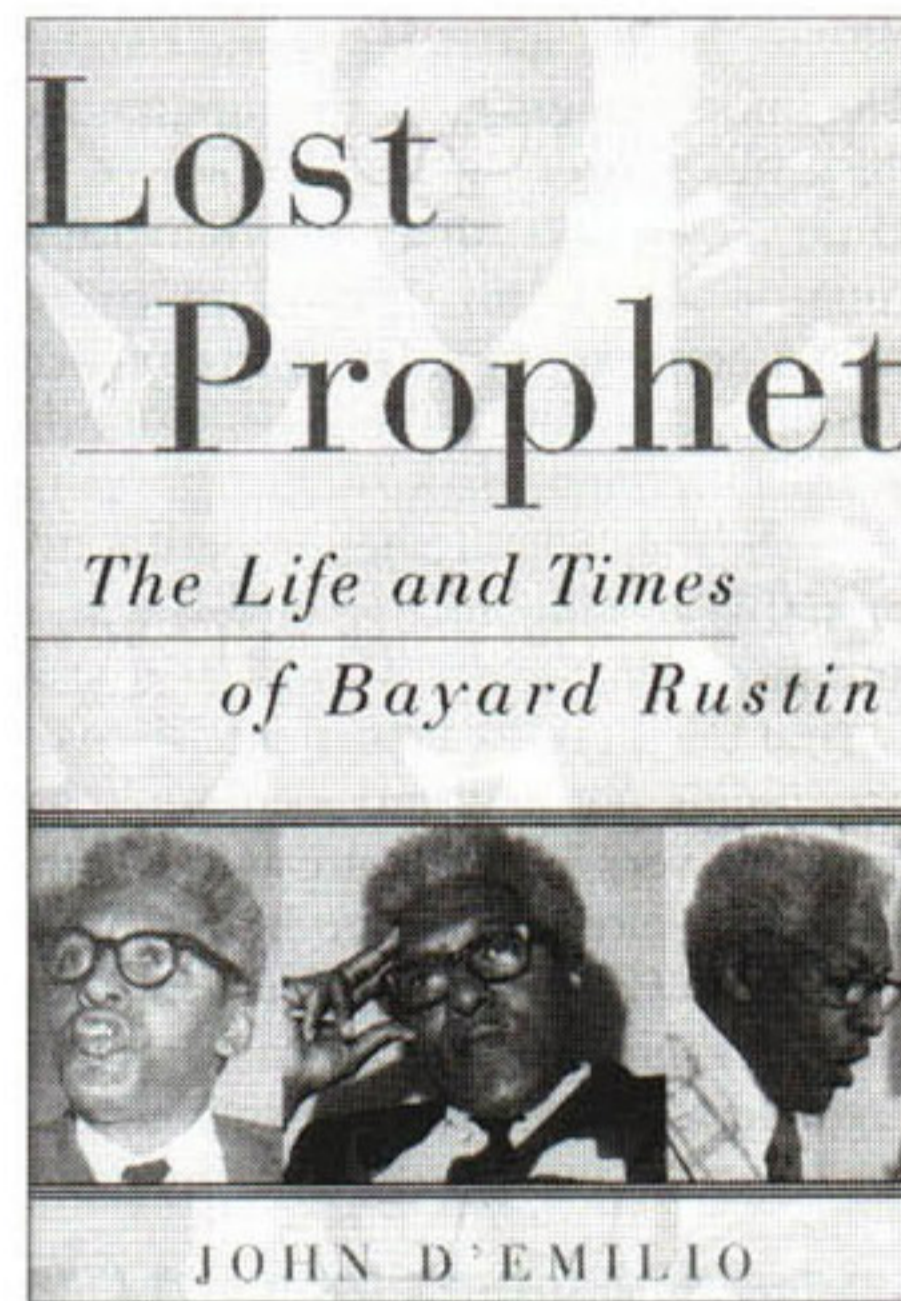
*Time on Two Crosses* is Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise's striking compilation of political Rustin's writings. Yet the two crosses of the title are only the beginning of the story. In the 1940s, to be a pacifist refusing to fight the "Good War," World War II, was an act that risked a long prison sentence. To be a civil rights leader willing to defy Jim Crow laws and not sit at the back of the bus presented an equally courageous, often bloody challenge. To be a radical socialist and gay man willing to face



jail time for engaging in both civil disobedience and public sex during the peak years of the McCarthy era was to court personal and political disaster. Yet Rustin did these things, repeatedly, years before the civil rights or gay liberation movements took hold.

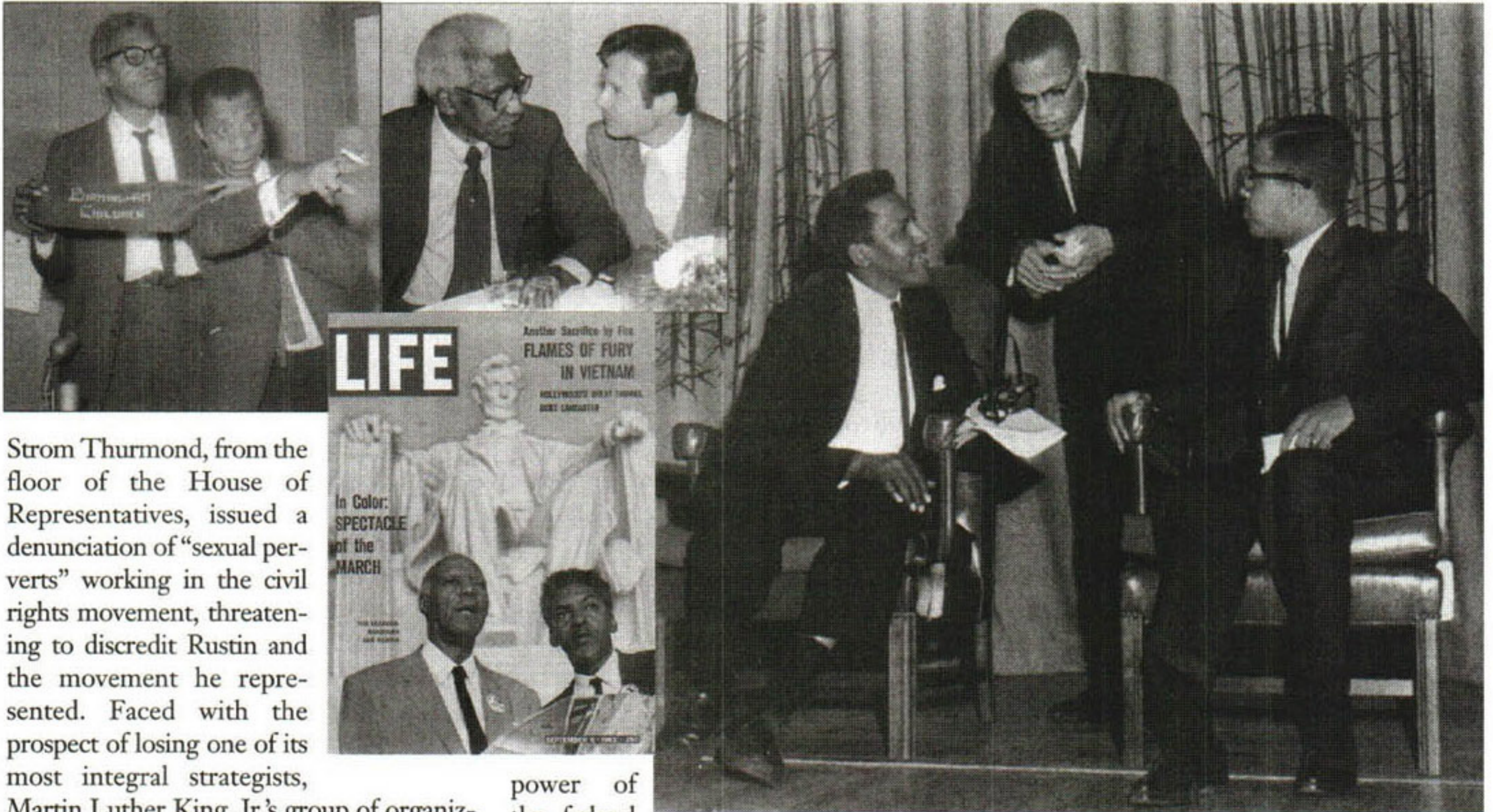
The richness of these two volumes is their insight into the methods behind these acts of personal witness. "He believed that ordinary individuals could make a vast difference in the world, and he communicated this conviction widely," John D'Emilio writes in the introduction to his new biography of Rustin, *The Lost Prophet*. And without any safe harbor—a Castro or a Christopher Street—Rustin's queerness invited repeated trouble from both the society he sought to change and the movements within which he worked.

D'Emilio's long-awaited biography of Rustin has spurred a new chapter in scholarship regarding this generally little-known behind-the-scenes player in the civil rights movement. Carbado and Weise specifically cite D'Emilio in their acknowledgements. Many of us have waited some five years for D'Emilio's biography. His 2002 collection, *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*, offered two essays on



Rustin, including the riveting "A Biographer and His Subject: Wrestling with Bayard Rustin," in which D'Emilio expresses his difficulty with the biographer's task of contending with his own projections, assumptions and relationship to his subject—a process psychoanalysts call transference. For a biographer, this has everything to do with which details of a subject's life are emphasized, deleted or further explored. For D'Emilio, a politically active gay historian and strategist himself, the task involved allowing Rustin's life to stand on its own, without using this queerest of lives to serve the author's own agenda. While the project could have turned into a hagiography, D'Emilio allows *Lost Prophet* to breathe with the complexities of Rustin's experiences. The match between biographer and subject is fascinating and complementary. D'Emilio's first book, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, offered a comprehensive history of queer life and persecution during the peak Cold War years. With *Lost Prophet*, D'Emilio takes on the story of one man who thwarted these obstacles.

During Rustin's most active years, as he was organizing the March on Washington,



Strom Thurmond, from the floor of the House of Representatives, issued a denunciation of “sexual perverts” working in the civil rights movement, threatening to discredit Rustin and the movement he represented. Faced with the prospect of losing one of its most integral strategists, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s group of organizers condemned the attack. It was one of the first moments in American political life when a reform-minded movement publicly rejected homophobia as a threat to the larger good. Whether King recognized this move as more than political expedience, few will ever know. The march was a success, ushering in an end to Jim Crow laws and the introduction of the civil rights laws of the Great Society.

Yet in future years the movement would maintain a distance from Rustin. From 1966 through the end of the decade, his relationship with the civil rights movement remained tenuous. While more militant branches of the movement called for Black Power and opposition to the war in Vietnam, Rustin called for an agenda based on economic justice. The irony is that, having spent time in jail for his opposition to World War II, Rustin was less concerned about the injustice of the Vietnam War than about the economic prospects for African-American soldiers when they returned home. If the movement made Lyndon Johnson and liberals the enemy, support for an agenda based on racial and economic justice would disappear. Ever the student of history, Rustin was keenly aware of the difference an administration willing to use the

power of the federal government to ameliorate the plight of African Americans could make. Conscious of how tenuous such commitments could be, Rustin was not willing to aid the conservative backlash waiting to condemn the real progress made for civil rights under Johnson. Rejecting separatism, Rustin argued that the civil rights coalition needed to work with liberals and trade unions to battle poverty and inequality as a part of a governing majority coalition in American politics. While the New Left scorned this analysis, a generation removed, these new volumes recognize Rustin may have been onto something.

While Rustin’s biography details the story of these events, Carbado and Weise offer the story about Rustin’s life from his own point of view. Essays, such as “Nonviolence vs. Jim Crow,” a 1942 work about refusing to sit in the back of a bus over a decade before Rosa Parks’ action and without a movement’s support, serve as key markers and narratives of the lived experiences of the civil rights struggle. Testimonies such as the 1970 essay, “The Failure of Black Separatism” in which

**(From left) Rustin with James Baldwin, calling on President Kennedy to intervene in Alabama, 1963; Rustin and his lover Walter Neagle; Rustin and A. Philip Randolph on the cover of Life; Rustin, Malcolm X and moderator Michael R. Winston at a 1961 Howard University debate.**

Rustin suggests, “ignorance of the economic dimension of racial injustice is most dangerous, for a Negro, whether he be labeled a moderate or a militant,” outline the often unpopular, yet intellectually rigorous, choices Rustin made as a lifelong socialist willing to defy convenient choices or conventional wisdom.

*Lost Prophet* and *Time on Two Crosses* offer testament to the challenges of a queer actor truly struggling and succeeding against both Jim Crow and homophobic regimes of the normal. Many continue to criticize Rustin. Yet, until any of us have spent the time struggling as he did, none of us are in a position to judge this most complex of lives. The world would be a better place if there were more of his ilk.

**Benjamin Shepard** is co-editor of *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Verso, 2002) and author of *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (Cassell, 1997).