

Freedom Dreams

Book review

Don LaCoss

2003

a review of

Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, by Robin D.G. Kelley, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002.

The word “dreams” in the title of this book is both a plural noun and a present-tense verb. In his compelling, daring book from last year (now available in paperback), historian and cultural critic, Robin D.G. Kelley, refuses to be forced to choose between the dreams of last night and the constant process of the awakened imagination now. This makes for an unruly read—the book is equal parts historical narrative, utopian conjecture, and prescriptive plan for rethinking what it means to be Black and what revolutionary transformation would look like from new perspectives.

Kelley starts out by trying to find a means for measuring the real successes of the “failed” Afro-diasporic radical movements of the past. Like the DJ digging through crates of ignored LPs in a thrift store basement, Kelley critically sorts through the dreams of activists and the histories of a variety of movements.

His search takes him through the Garveyite Back-to-Africa ideals, black Marxism and feminism, pan-African consciousness and militant identification with Third World struggles, the philosophical development of the civil rights movement and its context for slave reparations, and the insurgent poetry of bebop jazz. Then, using his well-turned histories as breakbeats, Kelley drops some science to forge possible futures.

Ida B. Wells, C.L.R. James, Thelonious Monk, Malcolm X, Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois, Bessie Smith, Amiri Baraka, and Lucy Parsons are just a few of those who Kelley rewinds and remixes. Throughout it all, *Freedom Dreams* ponders tough questions: “What had happened to the dreams of liberation that brought many of us to radical movements in the first place? How do we produce a vision that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals? How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing dream of freedom, especially in these rough times?”

Restless, playful, and fearlessly curious, *Freedom Dreams* is the antidote to the cheerless, dogmatic specifications endlessly pronounced by all those professional community leaders and the liberal, style-over-substance politicians who dominate public debate, as well as those “progressives” who advocate colorblind multiculturalism as the secret of emancipation. Kelley’s insights, interpretations and imagination make short work of those fools by demanding that we start thinking about what the word “freedom” is really supposed to mean.

For instance, his book’s concluding chapter on how we could rebuild the urban spaces of New York City in the wake of the Disneyfication of Times Square, the Guilianization of the NYPD, and the terrorist demolition of the Twin Towers is intoxicating with its endless possibilities. I wasn’t completely convinced or satisfied by everything in *Freedom Dreams*, though; Kelley’s coverage of anti-colonial guerrilla Maoism and the Black Panther Party was startling, but not enough to overcome some of my skepticism.

Still, the lion’s share of intellectual history, speculation, and prophecy that’s going on in these pages is stunning, such as his remarkable chapter on blues and jazz in the age of Jim Crow. In this discussion (which he will hopefully

continue in his forthcoming full-length study of Monk), Kelley sees surrealism as an essential way of understanding the urgency of transmogrifying poetry and music into revolution.

The key here, he says, is to stay focused on freedom's connection to unconventional self-realization and autonomy: "Juxtaposing surrealism and black conceptions of liberation is no mere academic exercise; it is an injunction, a proposition, perhaps even a declaration of war. I am suggesting that the black freedom movement take a long, hard look at our own surreality as well as surrealist thought and practice in order to build new movements, new possibilities, new conceptions of liberation. Surrealism can help us break the constraints of social realism and take us to places where Marxism, anarchism, and other 'isms' in the name of revolution have rarely dared to venture."

After reading challenges like that, you'll never listen to Sun Ra (or Afrika Bambaataa, for that matter) the same way again. *Freedom Dreams*, like "Freedom Now!," is a slogan well worth rallying around.

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