DREAMIN' OF BLACK FREEDOM AND FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Manning Marable, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, 304 pages, ISBN: 0-456-04393-3, $27.50.

Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002, 248 pages, ISBN: 0-8070-0976-8, $24.00.

I began writing this review of Manning Marable's *The Great Wells of Democracy* and Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* on the eve of a historic presidential election. As it turned out, my immersion in these two powerful texts proved to be a perfect counter-balance to the demoralizing election results. Like millions of Americans, I was stunned by the outcome of the November 2004 United States presidential race, especially given the mass grassroots "defeat Bush" mobilizations launched by a range of progressive organizations. In the glut of awkward, and perhaps premature, post-election analyses, the pundits seem to agree that Bush's victory was attributable to some nebulous thing called "moral values." How a White House administration that has violated international law, lied (through incompetence or malicious intent) to the American public about weapons of mass destruction, and taken from the poor to feed the bank accounts of the rich, can claim the mantle of morality, galls many of us on the Left. Still, there is a nugget of truth buried in this nonsense. America is confronted with a monumental moral dilemma about what kind of nation it will become over the course of the twenty-first century. *The Great Wells of Democracy* and *Freedom Dreams* may help us move closer toward understanding how we as a nation, especially African Americans, might help resolve that dilemma, if we are prepared to open ourselves to new possibilities.

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For Marable and Kelley, politics are as much about the ideals we believe in as the practical mechanisms by which we can enact meaningful progressive change. In the wake of the Bush/Kerry electoral showdown, progressives summoned the lawyers, the pollsters, the pundits, and the monitors in order to answer the question—what next? According to Marable and Kelley, they should also summon the dreamers. Kelley says so explicitly. Marable says so indirectly. According to both books, neither a new leftist movement nor a new Black Freedom Movement, can be forged in the dispirited canyons of despair and rage, but rather any new movement needs to find, articulate, and advocate a hopeful alternative vision. Democratic candidate John Kerry spent more time chasing after the Republicans' conservative base in the 2004 election than articulating a vision that progressive voters and prospective voters could believe in. Since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the progressive movement has been more oppositional than optimistic. Even the titles of these two books insist that this has to change. Marable and Kelley are both scholar/activists deeply concerned with Black politics as lived reality as well as an object of inquiry. In the text of both books there is passion and personal revelation. The autobiographical interventions give us a glimpse into what motivates each historian to grapple with the large and amorphous notions of justice and freedom. Marable's childhood memory of King's assassination catapults him and the reader into an examination of leadership, charisma, collective memory, and hero worship. Kelley looks to surrealist poets like Jayne Cortez and the creative wisdom of his own deliciously eccentric mother as a framework for understanding how oppressed people have forged dreams into weapons of political struggle.

As I read the two books, one and then the other, for a second time, a wonderful conversation emerged between Kelley and Marable. Both of these prolific and powerfully elegant writers prod us to think outside the confining boxes of our own time, disciplines, identities, and political habits. They both also write in a language that can engage readers beyond the Academy.

Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* introduces us to some new names and organizations in African American political history, while at the same time re-introducing us to others, but from a distinct vantage point. Kelley outlines several categories of radical visionaries. He does not focus primarily on their strategies and tactics, but on their visions and their ideals. Rather than viewing dreams as a luxury oppressed people cannot afford, Kelley, and the historical actors he describes, view dreams as essential ammunition in the battle to defeat injustice and to craft a more just society. In asserting this, however, Kelley is a bit defensive. He anticipates the pragmatists' cry: "This is not real politics. What about the bread and butter issues, what about the concrete plans with concrete realizable goals?" Kelley's reply is simple. The dreamers and doers are not antagonists: in some of the most successful mobilizations in history, they have indeed been one and the same. As I read Kelley's words I kept thinking of ideas as the fuel for social movements, and strategies as the navigational devices.

Kelley explores the ways that radicals and revolutionaries have embraced and imagined alternative futures as a way to infuse a vibrancy and vitality into their struggles and organizations that would not have been there otherwise. The Garveyites in the 1910s and 1920s dreamed of a new homeland in Africa even though many realized a mass migration was not likely. Still, the thoughts of "somewhere other than here" motivated them to build organizations and communities, and to promote a set of sensibilities that celebrated Africa and Blackness as a counterpoint to the White supremacist ideas that dominated American culture.

On yet another ideological front, other dreams were rumbling in the minds of another group of Black activists. They were the dreams of socialism and a more

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egalitarian society. The "red dreams of black liberation" (p. 36) as Kelley calls them were the collective political ambitions of a cadre of African American leftists from the 1910s on. They were an eclectic and contentious group belonging to a variety of competing and overlapping organizations, but they shared a vision of a future free of capitalism and economic exploitation. It is that dream that united them in a class struggle where race was inescapably at the center, even when White comrades willed it to be otherwise. This group ranged from men like Hubert Harrison of the African Blood Brotherhood, who melded nationalist and socialist ideals; to the Trinidadian-born Communist Party member, Claudia Jones, who dreamed of a Soviet-style system in the United States and was eventually deported because of her beliefs; to the Socialist firebrand A. Philip Randolph, who evolved into a more moderate labor leader by the 1950s. And of course the gentleman scholar, W. E. B. Du Bois, who is most remembered for his early work and writing, but who died a communist exile in Ghana in 1963.

These early twentieth-century socialists and communists looked to allies and intellectuals in Europe for inspiration. They then took those ideas and made them their own. They read and debated Marx, Lenin, and the British Utopian socialists and pondered the ways those ideals could be made relevant to the experience of Black workers and farmers in the United States. Even though communists are generally materialists, Kelley encourages us to think of ideas, dreams even, as a part of the material world of Black politics. Some of the red dreamers were economic determinists who believed that the contradictions of capitalism would dictate its demise. Still, they understood the need for igniting the imagination to rebuild something new in its wake. Many of their expectations proved faulty in terms of capitalism's imminent demise, but Kelley is persuasive in his insistence that we re-calibrate the stick by which we measure political successes and failures. We still have injustice in a myriad of forms, Kelley reminds us; therefore, in a narrow and rigid sense, all revolutionary movements have failed. However, using a more fluid criteria we can see many times that radicals are able to realize unintended or unexpected victories in the process of fighting for their dreams. In the case of Black communists and socialists, their hopes of a classless society propelled them into the fray of class struggle where they fought evictions during the Great Depression, defended striking workers in the 1940s, extended solidarity to anti-colonial movements, and fought racist lynchings, disfranchisement, and persecutions.

Yet another category of dreamers to whom Kelley re-introduces his readers are the "third world dreamers." Citing the Bandung conference of 1955, which launched the Non-Aligned Movement and was a watershed in the global fight against colonialism and imperialism, Kelley illustrates the convergence of the dreams of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with the aspirations of Black Americans who increasingly viewed their plight as bound up with a larger struggle in the world. Exiled Black self-defense advocate Robert Williams went to China and then Cuba. Various leaders of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) went to China, Algeria, and Vietnam. By the late 1960s many of these Black activists began to deploy a language of "Black internationalism," often co-mingled with the nationalist rhetoric of Black power. Artists and intellectuals such as Amiri Baraka, Askia Toure, and Harold Cruse traveled the globe and began to frame the Black struggle as a part of a global struggle. Theirs was a dream of a world not defined by the then prevalent struggle between the superpowers of the Soviet Union and the United States, but a world where the developing nations of the planet were on an equal footing with the wealthier nations and were free to organize societies and economies based on their own needs and values.

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The Non-Aligned Movement and other anti-colonial and anti-imperialist campaigns became a great source of inspiration for many radical activists in the United States during the 1960s. Again, "vision" was at the center. Third World revolutionaries such as Mao Zedong in China, Walter Rodney in Guyana, and leftist intellectuals such as Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, and Patrice Lumumba in Africa, captured the youthful imaginations of Black activists on this side of the Atlantic. Their ambitious dreams of a post-colonial world fueled struggles for justice from Hattiesburg to Harlem.

In the process of mapping the Black radical vision, Kelley also brings out of the shadows and into the spotlight many dedicated Black activists whose stories are rarely told in the more mainstream narratives of Black politics. These activists are often cut out of the story because they are seen as too extreme, or their inclusion would disrupt the convenient binaries and neat summaries that have been constructed to encapsulate the Black political past. Kelley describes the militant activism of Imari Obadele and the Republic of New Africa, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers from Detroit, and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). He also cites the Black Workers Congress, founded in 1971, which advanced the demand for economic justice in the form of reparations, a demand taken up later by the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in American (N'COBRA) and others. In this category of dreamers, Kelley then describes the work of legendary Detroit-based activists James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, former allies of Trinidadian-born Trotskyist C. L. R. James, who advocated change in culture, values, and attitudes as much as structural changes in the system.

Black feminists, Kelley argues, were, and are, a group of radical dreamers who add personal, familial, and sexual issues to the debate about social transformation. In his chapter "This Battlefield Called Life: Black Feminist Dreams" (pp. 135–156), Kelley surveys the little-known and often-ignored history of Black feminist organizing, pointing out aptly that Black women organizing for liberation did not always do so under the banner of feminism. Black women activists fought on many fronts and dreamed of enormous possibilities beyond the realities that were placed before them. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Black women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett spoke out against racism and sexism. And while conforming to notions of ladylike behavior on one level, these women rejected a circumscribed gender role by taking leadership in the fight against racist violence, economic injustice, and political disfranchisement. Later in the twentieth century Black feminists played leadership roles in organizations ranging from the SNCC and the BPP to the National Organization for Women (NOW), fighting alongside Black men and White women, and struggling with those allies at the same time around a broader, more inclusive, notion of gender and race politics. Eventually the Black feminists formed Black and women of color organizations, such as the National Black Feminist Organization, the Third World Women's Alliance, Black Women Enraged, and the revolutionary Combahee River Collective in the 1970s. Holding up the latter organization as a model of radical visionary leadership and practice, Kelley describes the group's mission statement as "one of the most important documents of the radical black movement in the twentieth century" (p. 150). With this assessment Kelley places Black feminism at the very center of his concept of Black radicalism. The Combahee document that Kelley praises called for a rethinking of capitalism as well as patriarchy, and was internationalist in scope.

The final chapter of *Freedom Dreams* beckons readers to take the plunge into the dark night of our unbridled imaginations. In defining surrealism as a revolutionary force, Kelley contends that it "offers a vision of freedom far deeper and more

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expansive than any of the movements discussed thus far. It is a movement that invites dreaming, urges us to improvise and invent, and recognizes the imagination as our most powerful weapon" (p. 159). To flesh out and contextualize the surrealist movement Kelley traces the influences of Martinicans, Black Cubans, Moroccans, and other Black thinkers and artists (in the 1940s and 1950s) who embraced and shaped the movement, claiming it as liberatory and revolutionary in the context of their vision of a post-colonial world. This itinerant group that gathered in Paris and the Caribbean celebrated the improvisational genius of jazz musicians, especially Monk (the subject of Kelley's forthcoming biography), challenged colonialism through their writing and art, and collectively and creatively fantasized about a new way of living. Embedded in surrealist thought is the slippery but seductive concept of "the Marvelous," a just utopia based on freedom from domination. *Tropiques*, a Martinique-based publication from 1941 to 1945 edited by Aimé Césaire and Suzanne Césaire, René Ménil, and others had an impact on surrealist thinkers worldwide, and is one of the factors Kelley cites to challenge the suggestion that surrealism is a Western or European-dominated movement. He emphasizes the extensive influence of the *Tropiques* collective as they strove to blend Marxism, Negritude, and surrealism into the gumbo of a political brew.

Kelley follows the intellectual footprints of surrealism to the Black artistic communities of the United States, where they appear subtly in the work of Richard Wright and more profoundly in the work of poet Jayne Cortez. I say "appears" in their work rather than "was consciously applied" in their work because, according to Kelley, for Black artists surrealism is "confirmation of what they already know—for them it is more an act of recognition than a revolutionary discovery" (p. 184). In other words, there was a surrealist impulse in Black culture and politics, he argues, before Black people had a name for it. In Kelley's eyes, Cortez is the best, current-day embodiment of this radical surrealist tradition, largely because she "embraces the transformative, magical quality of the erotic," in order to compel us to revolutionary thought (Kelley, p. 189). Cortez uses sexual metaphors to jolt and move the reader to critique the *status quo* and to succumb to a new way of thinking, to "a revolution of the mind."

Manning Marable's fifteenth, and most recent book, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life* picks up where Robin Kelley leaves off. If one dares to think about a radically transformed society, Marable asks, what would it look like and how might we achieve it? The first two-thirds of the book constitutes a historical survey of Black resistance and the evolving Black condition. The third section looks at various forms of political and cultural resistance prevalent today. All three sections are peppered with autobiographical vignettes from Marable's childhood and an ample supply of quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But Marable's King is not the safely crafted image so prevalent during Black History Month and Martin Luther King Jr. Day commemorations. King is perhaps Black America's most infamous dreamer, but Marable's evocation of King's legacy challenges the dominant notion about what King's dream was all about. For Marable, founder of the Malcolm X Project, Martin is not merely a moderate counterpart to Malcolm, but a radical dreamer in his own right.

One of the things I have always loved about Manning Marable as I have read his work and heard him speak over the years is that he is a "numbers man." Let me put that in context. The numbers man in the working-class Detroit neighborhood where I grew up was one of the most beloved people in the community.[1] People placed their dreams in his hands on small pieces of paper and every so often he returned with a fistful of cash, which was used to purchase a new refrigerator, car, or pair of shoes.

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But the numbers man was not only that. He was also a wizard with the numbers. Marable is too. He writes eloquently about large lofty ideas, but then he breaks these ideas down into cold hard facts that we cannot wish away or ignore. In *The Great Wells of Democracy* Marable focuses on several key issues facing the African American community: education, poverty, and prisons. The sobering statistics surrounding each key issue speak to an urgency that demands action.

The issue of mass Black incarceration is an inescapable crisis that the Black community and Black leaders must confront. If slavery was the antithesis of freedom in antebellum days, incarceration is the un-freedom of today. Not just in prisons, but in the entire "prison industrial complex" as Angela Davis, Ruth Gilmore, Joy James, and others describe it. Marable describes the complex as a demon, a demon with an insatiable appetite for Black bodies, and Kelley might add, Black dreams. This is a crisis for Black America, and for America. The United States imprisons a higher percentage of its citizens than any nation in history. Over half of those prisoners are African Americans even though African Americans comprise only 13% of the population. Similarly, education is in crisis. And without an educated populace, we are disabled in the enterprise of political struggle and social reconstruction. The majority of men in prison are Black, poor, and under-educated. Most have not even finished high school. Marable describes this denial of education and freedom as a kind of civil death, driven home by the outright disfranchisement of prisoners and many ex-prisoners. Citing the Sentence Project data from 2002, Marable estimates that nearly 4 million Americans have lost their voting rights as a result of felony convictions. Moreover, Black men are disfranchised at a rate seven times the national average.

Ever the historian, Marable insists that we confront the nightmare of the past at the same time that we diagnose the present and envision a brighter future. One of the themes of the book examines two "competing narratives" about race in American history. The dominant narrative frames racism as a blemish on a flawed, but largely smooth, complexion. That narrative must be undone, Marable insists, if we are to move ahead toward undoing racism. His narrative, which embraces the standpoint of the oppressed and disempowered, recasts race as an utterly and inescapably central component of American history embedded deeply in every pore. Labor history cannot be understood without an examination of racial slavery as a form of unpaid labor, and the very notion and rhetoric of democracy is steeped in concepts of citizenship as a White right as well as a class privilege.

Finally, Marable looks at new social justice campaigns around the country that attempt to transcend what he describes as outmoded forms of "race-based"' or "state-based" political strategies. He highlights efforts to mobilize progressive churches, the campaign for reparations, and local struggles against corporate greed, civil repression, and police violence. On the cultural front, Marable points out the political roots and recent re-politicization of hiphop and rap artists. Some of these artists are highly influenced by the Nation of Islam (NOI) and consequently embrace much of the male-centered and conservative politics put forth by the NOI. There is indeed a struggle for the heart and soul of the Hip Hop Nation: the NOI-led summit in 2001 represents one aspect of the struggle, but the more recent National Hip Hop Political Convention held in Newark in June, 2004 (after the publication of Marable's book), which had an explicitly feminist content with workshops on misogyny, women's political leadership, and reproductive choice, represents a more hopeful strain.

Hiphop and the Black church are two complex and contested terrains of struggle, both reservoirs of resistance and, at times, cauldrons of conflict. Black feminist

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politics, I would argue, are at the center of the fight that has to be waged in both of these arenas. Misogyny, reproductive choice, and gay rights are some of the issues of concern to critical sectors of the Black community, but these issues are not always appreciated in communities defined by mainstream religion and popular music culture.

Marable also cites the struggle of K-Mart workers in the Union of Needletrades, Textiles, and Industrial Employees (UNITE) and the support they received from progressive ministers in The Pulpit Forum and the Living Wage Campaigns across the country to counter the notion that the Black freedom movement is dead. Marable gives considerable attention to the reparations movement, an issue that Kelley focuses on as well. Marable outlines the diverse collection of forces from nationalist activists and elected officials to Harvard professors who have advocated some form of reparations for African Americans. Ironically, this diversity might be both a strength and a challenge for the reparations movement. Varied forces are united in the demand for reparations, but how united these varied forces would be in victory is the question to ask. That is, the questions of whether or not reparations should build Black institutions or aid Black individuals, and whether these resources should be allocated to those with credentials or to those in need, are the dilemmas and questions around which consensus still does not exist.

Significantly, both Marable and Kelley finished their books in the immediate wake of the September 11th terrorist attack in 2001. The smoldering ashes of the World Trade Center had not yet settled when each text went to print. Each author's epilogue addresses the historic event. Not surprisingly, however, both Marable and Kelley depart from the dominant narrative on 9/11 offered by the mainstream media, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (known as the 9/11 Commission), and most politicians, Democrat and Republican. Instead of championing the message of "get tough on terror." Marable and Kelley are inspired to sober reflection and call for a reinvigorated leftist response to the militarism and chauvinism of the Bush administration. With Bush's recent re-election that response is all the more urgent.

In the final analysis both Marable and Kelley are, as Kelley puts it, engaged in "an effort to recover ideas" as tools/weapons for social justice. They echo and elaborate on the words of Black feminist and lesbian writer-activist Audre Lorde, who once wrote "[w]e cannot dismantle the master's house using the master's tools" (p. 112). We need to, as Manning insists, look beyond (without ignoring) electoral politics and define a vision that will propel us forward as African Americans and as a progressive movement/community. The world is listening. It is no coincidence that the Web site of the World Social Forum, an annual gathering of thousands of leftists from all over the world, initiated by activists in Brazil to explore ways of redirecting the global agenda toward peace and justice, opens with two quotes about dreams. One reads: "In this age of wonders, no one will say that an idea is worthless because it is new. To say it is impossible because it is difficult is again not in consonance with the spirit of the age. Things undreamt of are daily being seen. The impossible is ever becoming possible."—Mahatma Gandhi. The second quotes the words of Goethe: "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." Marable and Kelley would agree.

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NOTE

1. The "numbers man" refers to individuals, usually men, in the African American community who collected bets, in numerical form, from people as a part of an illegal, but very popular gambling network. The numbers man would deliver winnings when people "hit" the number. Numbers men were also excellent mathematicians who could calculate accurately what was owed and what the odds were on any given bet.

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