

INTRODUCTION

THE FORECAST IS HOT!

REVOLUTION AGAINST WHITENESS

SURREALIST WOMEN

BLUES & THE POETIC SPIRIT

MEMPHIS MINNIE'S BLUES

SURREALIST EXPERIENCES

WHO NEEDS THE WTO?

IMAGES OF DESIRE

POETRY

TIME-TRAVELERS POTLATCH

REVIEWS

RELATED LINKS

BLACK SWAN PRESS/ SURREALIST EDITIONS



## REVIEWS

In "The Surrealist Review of Books" participants in the Surrealist Movement comment on new or recent books and pamphlets of interest from the surrealist point of view. Similarly, "The Surrealist Review of Periodicals" examines current journals, magazines, newspapers and zines.

### THE SURREALIST REVIEW OF BOOKS

[Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination](#)

by Robin D. G. Kelley

[Discourse on Colonialism](#)

by: Aimé Césaire

[Anthology of Black Humor](#)

by: André Breton

[The Fan-Maker's Inquisition: A Novel of the Marquis de Sade](#)

by: Rikki Ducornet

[Revolutionary Romanticism](#)

by: Max Blechman

[Labor Struggles in the Deep South and Other Writings](#)

by: Covington Hall

[Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor and Images of American Radicalism](#)

by: Paul Buhle

[Back to Topics](#)

**Robin D. G. Kelley**, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press: 2002. 248 pages. Cloth, \$24.00

Few writers have done more to stimulate new ways of looking at surrealism than Robin D. G. Kelley, and the reason is simple: He himself has dared, again and again, to look at surrealism in new ways. His important and exhilarating new book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, fully confirms his central role in the current resurgence of the surrealist movement throughout the world.

In refreshing contrast to the complacent majority of today's intellectuals, who pretend that social revolution is impossible, passé, and in any case undesirable, Kelley in all of his books has boldly posed the question of revolutionary transformation. He is, however, far from being any kind of Old or New Left dogmatist; his criticism of "the same old protest politics" is explicit and severe. In his view, the revolutionary project needs not only to be rethought, from top to bottom, but above all to be reimagined and dreamed anew.

*Freedom Dreams* grew out of such troubling questions as these:

"What had happened to the dreams of liberation that brought many of us to radical movements in the first place? What had happened to socialism the way we imagined it? What had happened to our New Eden, our dreams of building a new society? And what had happened to hope and love in our politics? . . . 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?"

In his quest for answers, Kelley admirably steers clear of the inhibiting sectarian notion of one-size-fits-all political blueprints and programs. Instead, his inspiring and far-ranging narrative focuses on key and recurring moments in the history of the Black radical imagination: their emergence, their immediate and long-term impact, their strengths and weaknesses, and their diverse meanings for us today.

The first five chapters show us visions of a resurgent, independent Africa; an impressive panorama of revolutionary Black nationalisms and Third World liberation movements, and their interaction with the civil rights, Black Power, and Black Arts movements; Black involvement in, and transformation of, Socialist, Communist, and other Marxist-influenced currents; the age-old and still vital dream of reparations for centuries of slavery and Jim Crow; and the long and resplendent tradition of Black feminism.

These are major currents in the history of U.S. and world radicalism, and all sincere seekers of social change need to know about them. The sad fact that many of the groups and movements that Kelley discusses are omitted from so-called mainstream studies demonstrates the truth of Jayne Cortez's observation that "mainstream" often signifies *whitestream*.

All through Kelley's Black radical history tour we meet dozens of imaginative activist dreamers, including such celebrated figures as Lucy Parsons, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Hubert Harrison, Claude McKay, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, C. L. R. James, Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X, James Forman, and Amiri Baraka. We are also introduced to less-well-known but no less fascinating figures such as Anna Julia Cooper, "Queen Mother" Audrey Moore, and the Combahee River Collective, whose contributions to the cause of making the world a better place should be part of the curriculum of every grade school, high school, and college in the land.

Revisiting the dreams these dreamers dreamed so long ago not only sharpens our awareness of the "paucity of reality" in our own time, but also inspires new dreams and therefore new ways of transforming that reality.

The sixth and concluding chapter of *Freedom Dreams*—one of the longest in the book—is devoted to surrealism. Here Kelley expands on the insights that illuminated his superb introduction to Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000), his forceful response to an inquiry in the "Surrealism in the USA" issue of the journal *Race Traitor* (Summer 2001), and his long, searching essay, "Freedom Now Sweet: Surrealism and the Black World," in Ron Sakolsky's *Surrealist Subversions* anthology (2002).

In *Freedom Dreams*, Kelley points out that "Surrealism may have originated in the West, but it is rooted in a conspiracy against Western civilization." This remark appears in his excellent short survey of the early European surrealists' interest in, and interaction with, Black politics and culture—a topic most academic "experts" on surrealism have preferred to ignore. After providing the reader with a sound historical and theoretical context, he moves on to the authentically surrealist dimension within the Black radical tradition itself—the surrealism he found "in the rich, black soil of Afrodiasporic culture. In it I found a most miraculous weapon with no birth date, no expiration date, no trademark. . . . The surrealists not only taught me that any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind, but they have also given us some of the most imaginative, expansive, and playful dreams of a new world I have ever known. Contrary to popular belief, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine but an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought. . . . total transformation of society. . . . new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes toward work and leisure and community. . . ."

Hailing the contributions of surrealists from Africa and the African diaspora—the Martinicans Etienne Léro, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, René Ménéil, Pierre Yoyotte, Simone Yoyotte, Lucie Thésée; the Cuban Wilfredo Lam; the Senegalese Cheikh Tidiane Sylla; and the African Americans Ted Joans and Jayne Cortez—Kelley emphasizes their importance as poets, artists, and agitators in the cause of global Black liberation. He recognizes, too, the powerful undercurrents of surrealism in certain works of Richard Wright, and in the music of Thelonious Monk, as well as the vernacular surrealism so abundant in blues lyrics. Discussing surrealism's "sexual revolt," as exemplified in the work of so many surrealist women, including Toyen, Valentine Penrose, Leonora Carrington, Meret Oppenheim, Claude Cahun, and Mary Low, Kelley speculates that this revolt might have gone even further and deeper had the surrealist women known of the "poetics of sexual freedom" developed by such blues artists as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Memphis Minnie, Lucille Bogan, and Ida Cox. Although the language barrier impeded that kind of collaboration in the 1930s, Kelley insists that such "lost" or unfulfilled connections are well worth dreaming about today: "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."

Unlike the lock step art historians, literary critics, and gossip columnists who dominate "surrealism studies" today, Kelley obviously feels no need to pretend that surrealism, as an organized movement, is over and done with:

"From the 1920s on, surrealism has recognized the decadence of Western civilization, and has never ceased to sharpen its critique of the West's institutions and value systems, but it has always refused to fall into the trap of cynicism or technopias or fatalism or false prophets. After all, surrealists have consistently opposed capitalism and white supremacy, have promoted internationalism, and have been strongly influenced by Marx and Freud in their efforts to bridge the gap between dream and action. In other respects, surrealism is right to Marxism's day . . . turning to poetry as a revolutionary mode of thought and practice."

Indeed, the principal theme of *Freedom Dreams* is that the unfettered imagination is just what the world needs today:

"Surrealism is not some lost, esoteric body of thought longing for academic recognition. It is a living practice and will continue to live as long as we dream. . . . Surrealism considers love and poetry and the imagination powerful social and revolutionary forces, not replacements for organized protest. . . . Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity. . . ."

Far from diverting our energies away from radical social change, "Dreams of the Marvelous" are—in Kelley's view—the heart and soul of that change.

In short, for Robin Kelley, surrealism—also known as poetry, love, and freedom—is "a matter of great urgency":

"Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us."

Franklin Rosemont

[Back to Topics](#)

**Aimé Césaire**. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Introduction by Robin D. G. Kelley. New York: Monthly Labor Press, 2000. 104 pp. Cloth, \$30; paper \$14.

The *Discourse* is the most important and influential political essay by the great surrealist poet and co-founder of Negritude. Focused on the barbarism inherent in all colonialism, Césaire's merciless critique of white supremacy and European racial hypocrisy concludes with a ringing indictment of U.S. imperialism as the most oppressive force on earth. First published in 1950, the book did much to shape the theory of anticolonial struggles in Africa, the Caribbean, and throughout the world. Its attentive readers included Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Amílcar Cabral, and the young activists who raised the cry of Black Power in the U.S. in the 1960s. When the revised, expanded 1955 *Présence Africaine* edition (translated here) appeared in Paris, André Breton hailed it publicly (in a speech at a meeting to protest France's war in Algeria) as "a de-finitive work in which the argumentation is as rich and solid as the expression is ardent and beautiful" and as "today's spiritual weapon *par excellence*."

Robin D. G. Kelley's superb introduction analyzes Césaire's work not only in the light of later anticolonial and postcolonial thought, but also in the light of surrealism. He emphasizes that in fact the *Discourse* "should be read as a surrealist text. . . . It is full of flares, full of humor. It is not a solution or a strategy or a manual or a little red book with pithy quotations. It is a dancing flame in a bonfire." Bristling with insights, Kelley's discussion of the ways in which Aimé Césaire and his brilliant wife Suzanne "introduced fresh ideas to Breton and his colleagues" and "contributed enormously to theorizing the 'domain of the Marvelous'" makes his introduction a key text in the critical reassessment of surrealism in our time.

This is a book that *must* be read to grasp the real potentialities, as well as the difficulties, in the global struggle for freedom in the world today.

—Penelope Rosemont

[Back to Topics](#)

**André Breton**. *Anthology of Black Humor*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1997. 356pp. Paper, \$18.95.

It is a sad state of affairs that this classic compilation had to wait until the end of the century before seeing its first publication in English. The publisher is to be congratulated! With contributors as diverse as Swift, Sade, Rimbaud, Jarry, Kafka, Duchamp, and Carrington (to name only a few), and with Breton's headnotes to all 45 authors who appear, the diversity and scope of the surrealist appreciation of black humor is revealed. Breton clarifies the nature of black humor: both rebellious and nonsensical (in the sense of anti-common-sense), with its roots in Hegel's "objective humor" and its aplomb scarcely hiding its craving for the diversity with objective chance. At the same time, the versatility of its character, its method and its sources make it nearly indefinable, except by example. —Paul Garon

[Back to Topics](#)

**Rikki Ducornet**. *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition: A Novel of the Marquis de Sade*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999. 212 pp. Cloth only, \$22.

Disdaining the obnoxious, fashionable cliché that mistakes the Marquis de Sade for a forerunner of the Nazi concentration camps, Rikki Ducornet in her new novel argues that if Sade's books had been seriously read and discussed instead of condemned and burned, there never would have been any concentration camps. Her splendidly written story contrasts Sade, the imaginative writer and atheist thrown into prison for his ideas, with the devout Christian imperialists who instituted slavery and genocide in Mexico, and reduced the great Mayan library to ashes. A work of fantasy rather than history, the author simply does not do justice to the French Revolution of 1789, or to the Jacobin regime Citizen Sade loyally served for three years as chief spokesperson for the *Section des Piques*. But Ducornet's sparkling language, her deep appreciation of insubordination and revolt, and her fierce hostility to church, state, bookburning, and all repression add up to a passionate defense not only of Sade, but also of poetry, love and freedom. —Penelope Rosemont

[Back to Topics](#)

**Max Blechman**, ed. *Revolutionary Romanticism*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1999. 250pp. Paper, \$15.95

Breton's conception of surrealism as the "very prehensile tale" of romanticism is elucidated and expanded in this anthology compiled by the editor of *Drunken Boat*. Often surrealism is explored directly, as in the contributions by —Michael Richardson or Marie-Dominique Massoni, but just as frequently surrealists themselves—Michael Löwy, Annie Le Brun—investigate aspects of romanticism from a surrealist perspective. Löwy's investigation of the traces of romanticism that permeate the works of Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse is especially compelling. We are living at a time when the romantic roots of every radical social movement need re-emphasis. The ascendance of technocracy combined with the unleashing of monumental greed impels us to oppose those forces with the same spirit the romantics brought to bear in their opposition to industrialism. Only now the stakes are higher! —Paul Garon

[Back to Topics](#)

**Covington Hall**. *Labor Struggles in the Deep South and Other Writings*. Edited/introduced by David R. Roediger. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1999. 264pp. 42 illustrations. Index. Cloth, \$34; paper \$14.

Hall's fascinating first-person account of labor struggling in the South toward class solidarity across racial lines has been published at last! Languishing for decades as an unpublished manuscript, the combined efforts of historian David Roediger and the Charles H. Kerr Company have finally brought this underground classic to the light of day. Here Hall recounts his lifelong commitment to organizing white and black lumber and waterfront workers into militant interracial unions, with particular focus on the Brotherhood of Timber Workers and the Industrial Workers of the World. Roediger's powerful introduction articulates the contradictions that Hall struggled with throughout his life, and assesses his legacy for our time.

A true cousin in spirit to IWW bard T-Bone Slim, Covington Hall was a poet as well as an activist (see his poetry collection, *Dreams and Dynamite*, published by Kerr in 1985). In *Labor Struggles*, Roediger has appended a selection of Hall's poems, short stories and polemics (including his mini-manifesto, "In Defense of Dreaming") to round out the portrait of this intriguing labor organizer, revolutionary and free spirit who fought for the overthrow of capitalism and dreamed of the "republic of the imagination." —Paul Garon

[Back to Topics](#)

**Paul Buhle**. *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999. 315 pp. Paper, \$18.00; Paul Buhle and Edmund Sullivan. *Images of American Radicalism*. Hanover, MA: Christopher House, 1999. 457 pp. Paper, \$39.95.

In the 1960s Paul Buhle founded *Radical America*, the leading journal of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in its most revolutionary days, during which RA devoted an entire issue to the Chicago Surrealist Group. Now one of the best known historians of American radicalism, he has never ceased to be a staunch ally of the Surrealist Movement. Just out in paperback, *Images of American Radicalism* is a sumptuous feast of left iconography, with 800 images, 100 color plates and an illuminating text. In *Taking Care of Business*, Buhle ably documents the sorry process by which shameless bureaucrats, white supremacist, sexist, and pro-capitalist-in other words, fundamentally hostile to workers' interests-came to dominate organized labor. Reflecting on the recent break-up of Cold War business unionism and the question of what to do now, Buhle notes that "Models of solidarity inevitably return to the Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World, those two historic movements despised and in considerable part destroyed by the machinations of Samuel Gompers's AFL." —Franklin Rosemont