

"WHEN HISTORY SLEEPS": A BEGINNING

When history sleeps, it speaks in dreams: on the brow of the sleeping people, the poem is a constellation of blood. . . .

Octavio Paz, "Toward the Poem"

My mother has a tendency to dream out loud. I think it has something to do with her regular morning meditation. In the quiet darkness of her bedroom her third eye opens onto a new world, a beautiful light-filled place as peaceful as her state of mind. She never had to utter a word to describe her inner peace; like morning sunlight, it radiated out to everyone in her presence. My mother knows this, which is why for the past two decades she has taken the name Ananda ("bliss"). Her other two eyes never let her forget where we lived. The cops, drug dealers, social workers, the rusty tapwater, roaches and rodents, the urine-scented hallways, and the piles of garbage were constant reminders that our world began and ended in a battered Harlem/Washington Heights tenement apartment on 157th and Amsterdam.

Yet she would not allow us to live as victims. Instead, we were a family of caretakers who inherited this earth. We were expected to help any living creature in need, even if that meant giving up

our last piece of bread. Strange, needy people always passed through our house, occasionally staying for long stretches of time. (My mom once helped me bring home a New York City pi-geon with a broken leg in a failed effort to nurse her back to health!) We were expected to stand apart from the crowd and befriend the misfits, to embrace the kids who stuttered, smelled bad, or had holes in their clothes. My mother taught us that the Marvelous was free—in the patterns of a stray bird feather, in a Hudson River sunset, in the view from our fire escape, in the stories she told us, in the way she sang Gershwin’s “Summertime,” in a curbside rainbow created by the alchemy of motor oil and water from an open hydrant. She simply wanted us to live through our third eyes, to see life as possibility. She wanted us to imagine a world free of patriarchy, a world where gender and sexual relations could be reconstructed. She wanted us to see the poetic and prophetic in the richness of our daily lives. She wanted us to visualize a more expansive, fluid, “cosmos-politan” definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers.

So with her eyes wide open my mother dreamed and dreamed some more, describing what life could be for us. She wasn’t talking about a postmortem world, some kind of heaven or afterlife; and she was not speaking of reincarnation (which she believes in, by the way). She dreamed of land, a spacious house, fresh air, organic food, and endless meadows without boundaries, free of evil and violence, free of toxins and environmental hazards, free of poverty, racism, and sexism . . . just free. She never talked about how we might create such a world, nor had she connected her vision to any political ideology. But she convinced my siblings and me that change is possible and that we didn’t have to be stuck there forever.

The idea that we could possibly go somewhere that exists only in our imaginations—that is, “nowhere”—is the classic definition of *utopia*. Call me utopian, but I inherited my mother’s belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds

us. Now that I look back with hindsight, my writing and the kind of politics to which I've been drawn have more to do with imagining a different future than being pissed off about the present. Not that I haven't been angry, frustrated, and critical of the misery created by race, gender, and class oppression—past and present. That goes without saying. My point is that the *dream of a new world*, my mother's dream, was the catalyst for my own political engagement. I came to black nationalism filled with idealistic dreams of a communal society free of all oppressions, a world where we owned the land and shared the wealth and white folks were out of sight and out of mind. It was what I imagined pre-colonial Africa to be. Sure, I was naive, still in my teens, but my imaginary portrait, derived from the writings of Cheikh Anta Diop, Chancellor Williams, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Kwame Ture, and others, gave me a sense of hope and possibility of what a *postcolonial* Africa could look like.

Very quickly, I learned that the old past wasn't as glorious, peaceful, or communal as I had thought—though I still believe that it was many times better than what we found when we got to the Americas. The stories from the former colonies—whether Mobutu's Zaire, Amin's Uganda, or Forbes Burnham's Guyana—dashed most of my expectations about what it would take to achieve real freedom. In college, like all the other neophyte revolutionaries influenced by events in southern Africa, El Salvador and Nicaragua, Cuba and Grenada, I studied Third World liberation movements and postemancipation societies in the hope of discovering different visions of freedom born out of the circumstances of struggle. I looked in vain for glimmers of a new society, in the “liberated zones” of Portugal's African colonies during the wars of independence, in Maurice Bishop's “New Jewel” movement in Grenada, in Guyana's tragically short-lived nineteenth-century communal villages, in the brief moment when striking workers of Congo-Brazzaville momentarily seized state power and were poised to establish Africa's first workers' state. Granted, all these movements crashed against the rocks, wrecked by various internal and external forces, but they left behind at least some

kind of vision, however fragmented or incomplete, of what they wanted their world to look like.

Like most of my comrades active in the early days of the Reagan era, I turned to Marxism for the same reasons I looked to the Third World. The misery of the proletariat (lumpen and otherwise) proved less interesting and less urgent than the promise of revolution. I was attracted to “small c” communism because, in theory, it sought to harness technology to solve human needs, give us less work and more leisure, and free us all to create, invent, explore, love, relax, and enjoy life without want of the basic necessities of life. My big sister Makani and I used to preach to others about the end of money; the withering away of poverty, property, and the state; and the destruction of the material basis for racism and patriarchy. I fell in love with the young Marx of *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, the visionary Marx who predicted the abolition of all exploitative institutions. I followed young Marx, via the late English historian Edward P. Thompson, to those romantic renegade socialists like William Morris who wanted to break with all vestiges of capitalist production and rationalization. Morris was less concerned with socialist efficiency than with transforming social relations and constructing new, free, democratic communities built on, as Thompson put it, “the ethic of cooperation, the energies of love.”

There are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces. The socialists, utopian and scientific, had little to say about this, so my search for an even more elaborate, complete dream of freedom forced me to take a more imaginative turn. Thanks to many wonderful chance encounters with Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, Ted Joans, Laura Corsiglia, and Jayne Cortez, I discovered surrealism, not so much in the writings and doings of André Breton or Louis Aragon or other leaders of the surrealist movement that emerged in Paris after World War I, but under my nose, so to speak, buried 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.

I traced the Marvelous from the ancient practices of Maroon societies and shamanism back to the future, to the metropolises of Europe, to the blues people of North America, to the colonized and semicolonized world that produced the likes of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and Wifredo Lam. 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. Members of the Surrealist Group in Madrid, for example, see their work as an intervention in life rather than literature, a protracted battle against all forms of oppression that aims to replace "suspicion, fear and anger with curiosity, adventure and desire" and "a model space for collective living—a space from which separation and isolation are banished forever."

The surrealists are talking about total transformation of society, not just granting aggrieved populations greater political and economic power. They are speaking of new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes toward work and leisure and community. In this respect, they share much with radical feminists whose revolutionary vision extended into every aspect of social life. Radical feminists taught us that there is nothing natural or inevitable about gender roles, male dominance, the overrepresentation of men in positions of power, or the tendency of men to use violence as a means to resolve conflict. Radical feminists of color, in particular, reveal how race, gender, and class work in tandem to subordinate most of society while complicating easy notions of universal sisterhood or biological arguments that establish men as the universal enemy. Like all the other movements that caught my attention, radical feminism, as well as the ideas emerging out of the lesbian and gay movements, proved attractive not simply for their critiques of patriarchy but for their freedom dreams. The work of these movements taken as a whole interrogates what is "normal"; shows us how the state and

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official culture polices our behavior with regard to sexuality, gender roles, and social relationships; and encourages us to construct a politics rooted in desire.

Black intellectuals associated with each of these movements not only imagined a different future, but in many instances their emancipatory vision proved more radical and inclusive than what their compatriots proposed.* Indeed, throughout the book I argue that these renegade black intellectuals/activists/artists challenged and reshaped communism, surrealism, and radical feminism, and in so doing produced brilliant theoretical insights that might have pushed these movements in new directions. In most cases, however, the critical visions of black radicals were held at bay, if not completely marginalized. Of course, there are many people still struggling to realize these dreams—extending, elaborating, and refining their vision as the battle wears on. This book is about those dreams of freedom; it is merely a brief, idiosyncratic outline of a history of black radical imagination in the twentieth century. I don't pretend to have written anything approaching a movement history or an intellectual history, and I am not interested in explaining why these dreams of revolution have not succeeded (yet!). Rather, I simply want to explore the different ways self-proclaimed renegades imagined life after the revolution and where their ideas came from. Although *Freedom Dreams* is no memoir, it is a very personal book. It is loosely organized around my own political journey, around the dreams I once shared or still share—from the dreams of an African utopia to the surreal world of our imagination, from the communist and

*Let me emphasize that I am interested in *black people's* dreams of the new society. A fascinating book by William H. Pease and Jane Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, looks at white abolitionist and liberal designs for black communities whose main goal was to "train the Negro for complete freedom" (p. 19). Freedom was defined according to Jeffersonian values, determined of course by the white architects of these Negro villages. While most communal societies were socialist or communist oriented, the settlements created for black people centered on enterprise, thrift, and individual accumulation—in short, their goal was to instill ex-slaves with middle-class capitalist values in order to prepare them to be productive members of the mainstream. Black people in their study are largely objects of white liberal ideology, not agents pursuing their own vision of freedom.

feminist dreams of abolishing all forms of exploitation to the four-hundred-year-old dream of payback for slavery and Jim Crow.

My purpose in writing this book is simply to reopen a very old conversation about what kind of world we want to struggle for. I'm not the only one interested in the work of dreaming—obviously there are many activists and thinkers having this conversation right now, ranging from my sister Makani Themba-Nixon, Cornel West, and Lian and Eric Mann to Cleveland's Norma Jean Freeman and Don Freeman, Newark's Amina and Amiri Baraka, and Detroit's Grace Lee Boggs, to name but a few. For decades, these and other folks have dared to talk openly of revolution and dream of a new society, sometimes creating cultural works that enable communities to envision what's possible with collective action, personal self-transformation, and will.

I did not write this book for those traditional leftists who have traded in their dreams for orthodoxy and sectarianism. Most of those folks are hopeless, I'm sad to say. And they will be the first to dismiss this book as utopian, idealistic, and romantic. Instead, I wrote it for anyone bold enough still to dream, especially young people who are growing up in what critic Henry Giroux perceptively calls “the culture of cynicism”—young people whose dreams have been utterly coopted by the marketplace. In a world where so many youth believe that “getting paid” and living ostentatiously was the goal of the black freedom movement, there is little space to even *discuss* building a radical democratic public culture. Too many young people really believe that this is the best we can do. Young faces, however, have been popping up en masse at the antiglobalization demonstrations beginning in Seattle in 1999, and the success of the college antisweatshop campaign No Sweat owes much of its success to a growing number of radicalized students. The Black Radical Congress, launched in 1997, has attracted hundreds of activists under age twenty-five, and so has the campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. So there is hope.

The question remains: What are today's young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are

they fighting for? These are crucial questions, for one of the basic premises of this book is that the most powerful, visionary dreams of a new society don't come from little think tanks of smart people or out of the atomized, individualistic world of consumer capitalism where raging against the status quo is simply the hip thing to do. Revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge. While this may seem obvious, I am increasingly surrounded by well-meaning students who want to be activists but exhibit anxiety about doing intellectual work. They often differentiate the two, positioning activism and intellectual work as inherently incompatible. They speak of the "real" world as some concrete wilderness overrun with violence and despair, and the university as if it were some sanitized sanctuary distant from actual people's lives and struggles. At the other extreme, I have had students argue that the problems facing "real people" today can be solved by merely bridging the gap between our superior knowledge and people outside the ivy walls who simply do not have access to that knowledge. Unwitting advocates of a kind of "talented tenth" ideology of racial uplift, their stated goal is to "reach the people" with more "accessible" knowledge, to carry back to the 'hood the information folks need to liberate themselves. While it is heartening to see young people excited about learning and cognizant of the political implications of knowledge, it worries me when they believe that simply "droppin' science" on the people will generate new, liberatory social movements.

I am convinced that the opposite is true: Social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression. For example, the academic study of race has always been inextricably intertwined with political struggles. Just as imperialism, colonialism, and post-Reconstruction redemption politics created the intellectual ground for Social Darwinism and other manifestations of scientific racism, the struggle against racism generated cultural relativist and social construc-

tionist scholarship on race. The great works by W. E. B. Du Bois, Franz Boas, Oliver Cox, and many others were invariably shaped by social movements as well as social crises such as the proliferation of lynching and the rise of fascism. Similarly, gender analysis was brought to us by the feminist movement, not simply by the individual genius of the Grimke sisters or Anna Julia Cooper, Simone de Beauvoir, or Audre Lorde. Thinking on gender and the possibility of transformation evolved largely in relationship to social struggle.

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. It is that imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call "poetry" or "poetic knowledge." I take my lead from Aimé Césaire's great essay "Poetry and Knowledge," first published in 1945. Opening with the simple but provocative proposition that "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge," he then demonstrates why poetry is the only way to achieve the kind of knowledge we need to move beyond the world's crises. "What presides over the poem," he writes, "is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole." This means everything, every history, every future, every dream, every life form from plant to animal, every creative impulse—plumbed from the depths of the unconscious. Poetry, therefore, is not what we simply recognize as the formal "poem," but a revolt: a scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking. Consider Césaire's third proposition regarding poetic knowledge: "Poetic knowledge is that in which man spatters the object with all of his mobilized riches."

In the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in the cultural products of social move-

ments, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born. Recovering the poetry of social movements, however, particularly the poetry that dreams of a new world, is not such an easy task. For obvious reasons, what we are against tends to take precedence over what we are for, which is always a more complicated and ambiguous matter. It is a testament to the legacies of oppression that opposition is so frequently contained, or that efforts to find "free spaces" for articulating or even realizing our dreams are so rare or marginalized. George Lipsitz helps explain the problem when he writes in *Dangerous Crossroads*, "The desire to work through existing contradictions rather than stand outside them represents not so much a preference for melioristic reform over revolutionary change, but rather a recognition of the impossibility of standing outside totalitarian systems of domination." Besides, even if we could gather together our dreams of a new world, how do we figure them out in a culture dominated by the marketplace? How can social movements actually reshape the desires and dreams of the participants?

Another problem, of course, is that such dreaming is often suppressed and policed not only by our enemies but by leaders of social movements themselves. The utopian visions of male nationalists or so-called socialists often depend on the suppression of women, of youth, of gays and lesbians, of people of color. Desire can be crushed by so-called revolutionary ideology. I don't know how many times self-proclaimed leftists talk of universalizing "working-class culture," focusing only on what they think is uplifting and politically correct but never paying attention to, say, the ecstatic. I remember attending a conference in Vermont about the future of socialism, where a bunch of us got into a fight with an older generation of white leftists who proposed replacing retrograde "pop" music with the revolutionary "working-class" music of Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie, preelectric Bob Dylan, and songs from the Spanish Civil War. And there I was, comically screaming at the top of my lungs, "No way! After the revolution,

we STILL want Bootsy! That's right, we want Bootsy! We need the funk!"

Sometimes I think the conditions of daily life, of everyday oppressions, of survival, not to mention the temporary pleasures accessible to most of us, render much of our imagination inert. We are constantly putting out fires, responding to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present. As the great poet Keorapetse Kgositsile put it, "When the clouds clear / We shall know the colour of the sky." When movements have been unable to clear the clouds, it has been the poets—no matter the medium—who have succeeded in imagining the color of the sky, in rendering the kinds of dreams and futures social movements are capable of producing. Knowing the color of the sky is far more important than counting clouds. Or to put it another way, the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling. This is what poet Askia Muhammad Toure meant when, in a 1964 article in *Liberator* magazine, he called black rhythm-and-blues artists "poet philosophers" and described their music as a "potent weapon in the black freedom struggle." For Toure, the "movement" was more than sit-ins at lunch counters, voter registration campaigns, and freedom rides; it was about self-transformation, changing the way we think, live, love, and handle pain. While the music frequently negatively mirrored the larger culture, it nonetheless helped generate community pride, challenged racial self-hatred, and built self-respect. It created a world of pleasure, not just to escape the everyday brutalities of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, but to build community, establish fellowship, play and laugh, and plant seeds for a different way of living, a different way of hearing. As Amiri Baraka put it in his famous essay, "The Changing Same," black music has the potential to usher in a new future based on love: "The change to Love. The freedom to (of) Love."

Freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us, and yet as intellectuals we have failed miserably to

grapple with their political and analytical importance. Despite having spent a decade and a half writing about radical social movements, I am only just beginning to see what animated, motivated, and knitted together these gatherings of aggrieved folk. I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that freedom and love constitute the foundation for spirituality, another elusive and intangible force with which few scholars of social movements have come to terms. These insights were always there in the movements I've studied, but I was unable to see it, acknowledge it, or bring it to the surface. I hope this little book might be a beginning.