

Introduction: "History From Way, Way Below"

A Symposium on Robin Kelley's *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan 1994).

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Building on his highly regarded book, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, Robin Kelley's latest historical exploration of Black workers in America is a tour de force in the field of race/class/gender studies. In a series of wide-ranging essays, Kelley tackles diverse topics ranging from African American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War to the controversial meanings of 'Gangsta Rap' and Malcolm X and the zoot suit. He deftly draws on the insights of a variety of scholarly traditions, including the social history of Jacqueline Jones, E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, the 'subaltern' anthropology of James C. Scott, and the brilliant political sociology of C.L.R. James and W.E.B. DuBois. Uncovering the rich intricacies of Black workers' culture and their innovative struggles from 'way, way below,' Kelley challenges historians to look beyond the formal, institutional and conspicuous strategies of social change to the 'hidden' resistance evident in the everyday lives of Black women and men.

This symposium presents a critical appreciation of Kelley's work from three scholars of African American history. Eileen Boris situates *Race Rebels* in the 'culturalist' turn in labour history associated with E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman and the field of cultural studies pioneered by Stuart Hall and colleagues. Significant working-class struggles over the varied traditions, customs, and language of their culture were rescued by these historians from the staid and economic analyzes of those who saw workers as purely objective actors playing in the pre-determined script of

economic structures. In Kelley's analysis, theft from the boss, wiggling, and absenteeism from work are redefined as 'political' and located within the larger gambit of political struggle against oppression.

But Boris sees more than a turn to 'culturalism' in *Race Rebels*. She argues that Kelley extends the boundaries of historical investigation to create an "(em)bodied working class" resulting from a *gendered* and *racialized* class formation. The flourishing Black working-class culture of leisure — dancing, the blues club, zoot suits, and 'gangsta rap' — are shown to be key factors in the construction of a collective identity of dignity, autonomy and rebellion in the face of the racism and sexism of society. Yet Kelley is sensitive to how such cultural creations also incorporate rigid gender hierarchies, prompting Boris to write that "He is so good at excavating the gendered and generational positions of men and within cultural expression that I wish that he applied his gaze to the workings of the family itself."

Eric Lott's piece originally reviewed *Race Rebels* along with a new edition of C.L.R. James' *American Civilization*. Lott compares Kelley's work to the magnificent works of this West Indian Marxist and the great African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois arguing it is "among the few chronicles to attend seriously to the small and revolutionary strivings by black working people themselves to transform oppressive social orders."

Lott details Kelley's exploration of the "hidden transcripts" of Black working-class culture — the sabotage, graffiti and other defiant acts which often broke "the rules of black activism no less than those of white revanchism." Linking it to DuBois' and James' insights about work behaviour and resistance to racism and wage slavery, Lott says Kelley "enjoins the shiftless of the world to unite." But the "hidden transcripts" were also exposed publicly in the very open militancy displayed by Black workers in their rebellion against the entrenched racism in public transit in the 1940s and 50s in the South. Occupying white seats, "loud talking" and overt physical resistance on the buses and streetcars showed that Jim Crow was openly contested by Blacks. Despite focusing on the less

obvious acts of resistance of everyday life, Lott regards Kelley's analysis as sensitive to the traditional historiographical concerns with the public and organized politics of defiance characterized by the civil rights movement.

Lott and Boris also engage with a pointed criticism of Kelley and other practitioners of cultural studies. A persistent criticism of cultural studies is that culture is seen to replace politics, reifying spontaneity and hidden rebellions while downplaying (potential) generalized public political organization. Lott agrees with Kelley that you cannot separate the hidden acts of resistance from the more organized political mobilizations in the public sphere. For instance, Kelley's work on the everyday politics of Black opposition in Birmingham, Alabama at the height of the civil rights movement adds another dimension to the prominent and one-sided narratives focusing on heroic individuals alone such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. For Lott and Kelley, the underlying base of rebellion in Black working-class culture is a much neglected factor in the success of the civil rights movement.

Fitzhugh Brundage places *Race Rebels* in a convergence of labour history and cultural studies. Kelley's unmasking of everyday resistance through dress, music and the labour process, Brundage argues, "is to demonstrate that something resembling class struggle can take place without explicit class ideologies, without collective action, even without well-defined classes." He commends Kelley for exploring both sides of the class struggle: the methods, intensity and success of white power was clearly shaped by the whole range of black resistance, revealing a less one-sided view of the dominance of racist oppression.

If Kelley is attentive to the multifarious networks of gender, class and racial formation, Brundage insists that so too is he sensitive to the meanings of space. "Any understanding of black resistance must take into account the opportunities and limitations that different spaces imposed upon black expression." Unions and resistance through behaviour at work could work well on the job site while public spaces such as the public transit system required different methods.

Brundage also engages with the alleged romanticization of cultural studies. He applauds Kelley's insights into the limitations and potentially destructive behaviour of elements of working-class culture. But he is less convinced of Kelley's claim that the "sexual play" involved in prostitution and the club scene had the potential to empower black women, preferring to see this as "a manifestation of internalized oppression."

As all the reviewers note, *Race Rebels* is an impressive study that is sure to prompt new research in various areas. The labour process, the relationship between the oppressed and left political movements, resistance and popular music, the meanings of dress and public behaviour — all are fruitful pursuits that Kelley has opened up for future scholars and activists. *Race Rebels* is a powerful endorsement of Malcolm X's statement that "Of all our studies, history is the best qualified to reward our research."