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Review

Reviewed Work(s): From Escambray to the Congo: In the Whirlwind of the Cuban Revolution by Victor Dreke and Mary-Alice Waters

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ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION of this text comes from its willingness to go beyond the boundaries of the United States to not only explore the intellectual imagination of black radicals within the African Diaspora, but to reveal the dialectical affects of dreaming within, across and between continents. Kelley chronicles how revolutions in Cuba, Africa and China impacted African American radicals, ranging from Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver to the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary Action Movement, revealing the fluidity and invisibility of borders. *Freedom Dreams* resists the temptation of incorporating Diaspora as a superficial concept, demonstrating the reality of Diasporic consciousness and Third World solidarity. Dreams and intellectual postulating travel with great speed, bypassing national, cultural, racial and ideological boundaries.

A second strength of *Freedom Dreams* lies with Kelley's treatment of gender and women. Throughout the narrative Kelley incorporates discussions of female dreamers, avoiding the failure of many radical storytellers in centering women within each chapter. For example, in the narrative dealing with "Red Dreams and Black Liberation," Kelley goes beyond recounting the visions of Du Bois, Robeson, Claude McCay and members of the African Blood Brotherhood. He incorporates a discussion of Lucy Parsons (for her shortcomings), Ida B. Wells and Claudia Jones as a step toward a complete understanding of how black radicals "seeking justice, salvation and freedom" found power in the vision of socialism. Beyond the inclusion of a number of black women radicals, Kelley additionally explores the ways black feminists have envisioned alternatives to their present reality. Concluding that black women feminists have led the way in their treatment of intersectionality and coalition building, *Freedom Dreams* positions black feminism as a powerful source of inspiration in the imagination process. "What the old guard male militants really need to do is give up the mic for one moment" and "listening to the victims of democracy sing their dreams of a new world, and take notes on how to fight for freedom of all."

KELLEY DOES NOT OFFER an innovative or profound theoretical hook within this book. Whereas in previous efforts, where he speaks about "writing history from below" and poly-culturalism, this effort represents a more straightforward historical treatment. This is by no means a criticism of the book, but rather praise for its project. At the surface, a discussion of the history of intellectualism within the struggle for black freedom may sound unoriginal and traditional. Kelley is certainly not the first person to explore the his-

tory of black intellectuals vis-à-vis their statements on black progress. Few have even incorporated discussions of the Diaspora to demonstrate commonality of struggle and oppression. Kelley's contribution, however, is unique not only because of his analysis and narrative, but in terms of its organization and conclusions. Unlike many works that focus on intellectuals or visionaries, Kelley does not set up *Freedom Dreams* with each chapter representing a particular individual or time period. Rather he uses themes and tropes (motherland; class; black feminist; surrealists) as the point of organization, elucidating how particular concepts have been central to Diasporic imagination throughout history. Covering a spectrum of themes, individuals and organizations, Kelley introduces readers to the variety of spaces in which dreams of freedom have originated throughout the black Diaspora.

ROBIN KELLEY PRESENTS HOPE for the future of social movements and challenges to hegemony with *Freedom Dreams*. He does not, however, offer naïve hope; he challenges us to look at social movements in new ways. Change is the result of struggle, but this cannot be initiated or sustained in a vacuum. The necessary people power will never develop without the dreams and alternative visions. "Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action," Kelley argues. "But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means to fully realize our humanity, all protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about liberation." Kelley's narration sheds light on the historic reality of this process, elucidating the power and centrality of dreaming within all challenges to hegemony. Struggles originate not in strategy meetings or even at demonstrations, but "in the mind."

**From Escambray to the Congo: In the Whirlwind of the Cuban Revolution, Victor Dreke; Mary-Alice Waters, ed., Pathfinder Press, March 2002, Hardcover, 182 pages, \$50, ISBN 0-873-48948-9; Paper, 182 pages, \$17.00, ISBN 0-873-48947-0. Reviewed by Baxter Smith**

A BIG REGRET EXPRESSED BY CHE GUEVARA, the Argentine revolutionist who was a central leader of the Cuban revolution, was that although he knew Spanish and French, he never learned Swahili. The lingua franca of much of sub-Saharan Africa, Swahili was the gateway language to understanding the culture and political nuances of the liberation struggle in the Congo, where Guevara and a detachment of Cuban revolutionaries were invited in 1965.

Victor Dreke, second in command to Guevara in the Congo, relates this and a rich assortment of other remembrances of Guevara in the Congo, as well as the early strains on the Cuban revolution and efforts to dismantle racial discrimination in that island nation in the Pathfinder Press book, *From the Escambray to the Congo: In the Whirlwind of the Cuban Revolution*, edited by Mary-Alice Waters.

The 182-page book is the latest project by Pathfinder to make available the experiences of the founding Cuban revolutionary leaders for a new generation of thinkers and young activists seeking a way to surmount the big social questions facing humanity.

The book is not solely about Guevara or Cuba's role in Congo and Africa. Rather, through the eyes of Dreke, it presents the steps a young revolution took to consolidate victories and lift a semicolonial nation from under the brutal Batista dictatorship into the Cuba of today. "We were ready to die to bring down the Batista dictatorship," Dreke recalls in the book, admitting, "but we didn't know the first thing about revolution."

Dreke, a black Cuban, has held numerous high posts in the Cuban military and government. He has been vice president of the Cuba-Africa Friendship Association for many years. He embarked on the road of activism in the early 1950s, ignoring the words of his father. "Don't join anything," Dreke recalled his father saying. "Things will always stay the same." He remembered his father urging: "Study and get an education and don't mess with strikes or any of that. It won't get you anywhere. Besides, that stuff's not for blacks." "Fortunately," says Dreke, "I didn't listen."

**D**REKE WAS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT when Fidel Castro and other revolutionaries attacked the Moncada army garrison on July 26, 1953, which was a major step in the struggle to overthrow the U.S.-backed Batista regime. Even though he was not part of the attack, the police arrested Dreke and others because they had previously protested Batista's taking power in a coup d'etat. "Speaking for myself, I was filled with admiration to learn that a group of young people had tried to take the garrisons," recalls Dreke. "This courageous deed by Fidel inspired optimism and led Cuban youth to admire and respect him."

The young Dreke eventually found his way to Fidel's rebel movement and became a leader of the revolutionary overthrow of Batista. He describes how Cuban workers and farmers offered their support to the revolution because of the progress it brought to their lives. He writes of literacy brigades fanning out around the country, gains in rural healthcare delivery, as well as popu-

larly backed agrarian reform initiatives that gave more than 100,000 peasant families the deed to the land they tilled.

Improving literacy was a major goal of the revolution in the early years, Dreke remembers. Prior to the 1959 revolution, 23 percent of the population was illiterate, and illiteracy reached more than 40 percent in the countryside. But from late 1960 through the end of 1961, the Cuban government organized a literacy campaign that taught one million Cubans to read and write. More than 100,000 young people were organized in literacy brigades. Today, Cuba leads Latin America with the highest literacy rate.

**I**N A CHAPTER TITLED "REMOVING THE ROPE," Dreke describes the racial segregation barriers that flourished in pre-revolutionary Cuba. He refers to an example of removing a rope used to separate blacks from whites at a dance in a public park in Cruces, in central Cuba, not long after the revolution's triumph in 1959. Prior to the revolution, such forms of racial segregation were common. But in the opening months of 1959 the government abolished state-sanctioned racial discrimination. By March 1959, discrimination in employment was illegal. "Over the next several weeks, all stores, shops and other public facilities including the beaches were declared open to blacks," according to the book. "Rebel Army soldiers and militia members enforced these new measures on the spot, and any facility refusing to abide by them could be shut down forthwith."

During this period Dreke was a captain in the rebel army. When another army commander removed the rope allowing blacks and whites to mingle in the town of Cruces, it touched off a controversy. Dreke was sent to the area to begin a discussion of how the revolution's purpose was to remove all barriers to full participation by workers and farmers in Cuban society. Looking back on the incident, Dreke writes, "With the advance of the revolution, that type of racial discrimination has disappeared from our country."

**T**HE BOOK DEVOTES CONSIDERABLE SPACE to Dreke's description of routing out counterrevolutionary bandits in Cuba's Escambray region in the immediate years after the revolution. The bandits aimed to build a base of support in the Escambray mountains, through which Washington could then exploit opposition to the revolution. But the attempt was defeated, Dreke says, by a combined military effort and by strengthening the society through the accomplishments of the revolution.

"When the first clean-up operation began in 1960, when the army arrived, when Fidel arrived,

the peasants responded, and entire battalions of peasant militias from the Escambray were formed," Dreke says. "The peasants asked for weapons and they defended the Escambray. So what the enemy thought was going to be a den of thieves was, by determined revolutionary combat, turned into a bulwark of the revolution."

**F**OLLOWING THE VICTORY over counterrevolutionaries in the Escambray, Dreke turns his focus on Africa and Congo. The Cubans were invited to Congo by forces that were loyal to assassinated Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Cuba's goal was to aid them in their struggle to oust the country's neocolonial regime who had taken power through a coup d'etat involving the assassination of Lumumba and many of his administration, with the active involvement of Belgian and U.S. government agents.

Cuba's 1965 Congo experience laid the grounds for subsequent internationalist missions in Angola and elsewhere in Africa. Between 1975-89, thousands of Cuban internationalists helped to defend Angola against a South African invasion that aimed to install a government more pliant to the apartheid regime

According to Nelson Mandela, Cuba's support was "a milestone in the history of the struggle for southern African liberation," and a "turning point in the struggle to free the continent and our country from the scourge of apartheid."

Later in the 1960s and 80s, Dreke was attached to Cuba's diplomatic-military mission in Guinea-Bissau and the Republic of Guinea.

**N**OW A RETIRED COLONEL of the Cuban armed forces, Dreke notes that Africa left a big impression on himself and his fellow Cubans. "The thousands of Cuban companeros who have been fighting or working in health care, in education, in sports or in other areas in Africa have brought back knowledge to Cuba. Cuba and Africa have influenced each other deeply. Our doctors have brought back experiences in treating diseases they had read about but never seen. These experiences have helped save lives there, in other countries, and then even here in Cuba. Our doctors have worked in the most difficult places. They've taken care of the people and they've won their affection. But in addition to those kinds of things, the Cuban people have also developed real affection and respect for their African brothers and sisters."

He added, "We say we have African blood in our veins and you see this in Cuba every day, with our dance, our music, everything. It doesn't matter whether your skin color is lighter or darker. There's an African presence in all of us."

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