

Reviewed by Courtney R. Baker

Queer Times, Black Futures

by Kara Keeling

New York University Press. Sexual Cultures series.

2019. 288 pages.

\$89.00 hardcover; \$30.00 paper; also available in e-book.

Queer Times, Black Futures examines and models the “‘freedom dreams’ that issue from Afrofuturist imaginings . . . so that those of us living today . . . can consider what in those freedom dreams might survive us and our limited perceptions.”¹ The book’s prose and logic strive toward the poetic, in the senses intended by both Karl Marx and Audre Lorde, as “poetry has the capacity to deterritorialize language, making uncommon, queer sense available to thought.”²

Kara Keeling’s effort echoes Lorde’s excavation of deep-earth Black wisdom that, as the late poet writes, becomes a “jewel in . . . open light” and that might service what historian Robin Kelley has termed *freedom dreams*—“the dream of a new world” entertained and envisioned by activists and artists that might form the “catalyst for . . . political engagement” in our time.³ Keeling enhances Kelley’s principle by considering Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s trope of the “Black Swan event,” which is “characterized by ‘a combination of low predictability and large impact’” and manifests as reliance upon what is known rather than the inevitable eruptions of the unknown.⁴ Keeling leverages Taleb’s principle to explain how the long history of revolutions can still be narrated as surprises within the colonial mindset. The supposedly unforeseen Black freedom dreams that gain from disorder have appeared as, variously, the Haitian Revolution (which “proved that Black belonging, anchored in love of freedom and of Black people, could be an antifragile revolutionary force”) and in “Black culture, as technē,” characterized by “mobility, dispersion, disruptive

1 Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), xiv.

2 Keeling, xii.

3 Audre Lorde, “Coal,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 6; and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 3.

4 Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 2007), as quoted in Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 20.

potential, and endurance.⁵⁵ Freedom dreams are also, as Keeling demonstrates in her book, expressed in such layered texts as Grace Jones's video for "Corporate Cannibal" as well as C. L. R. James's 1953 study *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*.⁶

This orientation toward a more just future to come—one that "requires (re)creation and imagination"—is recognized as "what Frantz Fanon referred to as a 'real leap.'⁷ Keeling's interest in these potentialities, "(re)turns," and "the (im)possible" is constructed as anticapital; the resources she identifies are for the enactment of a sustainable, ethical world that is not just divested from but radically un-invested in property, accumulation, and the injustices that follow investment in those capitalist, settler-colonial fictions.⁸ If poetry resists the lure of rendering the felt into material, so too does it effectively transmit queer dreams of a radical future because "[p]oetry is a way of entering the unknown and carrying back the impossible."⁹

Keeling's book resonates with Stephen Best's 2018 monograph, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*, in their shared concern about the character of Black study and the utopianism of queer thought.¹⁰ But whereas Best is invested in critiquing the Black history-bound subject of Afropessimism and the queer utopian subject who is alienated from an insistence upon a future bound up with narratives of reproduction, Keeling's approach seems much more expansive in its characterization of Black and queer radicalism. That is, Keeling targets not those subject to time and space but the subjectivizing functions of temporality and spatiality. Black and queer ontologies are less recognizable sites of resistance in *Queer Times, Black Futures* than they are recurring surprises and disruptions of social orders. These radical breaks are what Keeling terms, after Marx, "poetry from the future."¹¹ However, she enhances that phrase with the poetic theory of Lorde, whose injunction that "poetry is not a luxury" imbues functionalist Marxism with the Black-femme-wit of poetry's capacity to combat "the estrangement of the senses by Capital."¹² As Keeling explains, "'poetry from the future' interrupts the habitual formation of bodies, and it serves as an index of a time to come when today exists potently, even if not (yet) effectively, but escapes us, will find its time."¹³ This gesture deprivileges the present as well as the subject of the present, preferring "what Octavia Butler's character Lauren Olamina from her novel *Parable of the Sower* calls 'the only lasting truth': change."¹⁴

Queer Times, Black Futures draws upon various narratives of past, present, and future located across media forms, particularly the short story, jazz, cinema, philosophy, and speculative finance. Nineteenth-century white English and white American literature rub up against Black American sonic forms. Multinational corporate speculative scenarios are held in provocative conflict with indigenous logics that

5 Keeling, 22, 161, 161.

6 C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1953).

7 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, x; and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 229.

8 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, xiv.

9 Keeling, xii.

10 Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

11 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 81–82.

12 Keeling, xii.

13 Keeling, 83.

14 Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner Books, 1993), 3; and Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 16–17.

upend the inevitability of the settler colonial project. Through it all, a Black swan is vaguely visible, threatening to expose the fragility of world systems based on practices of containment and resource extraction, like a Dickensian Ghost of Christmas Future or Sun Ra's intergalactic sonic prophet. *Queer Times, Black Futures* explores the philosophical principle of the "'Black Swan' event"—that which "appears to be a random, unpredictable, outlier," otherwise called the unthinkable—through and against another of Taleb's books, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*.¹⁵ In so doing, it offers that what is radical, unpredictable, and capable of surviving the disasters of late capitalism and environmental catastrophe is identifiable (though not knowable) as Black and queer thought. The queer utopian visions speculatively and nostalgically mapped by José Esteban Muñoz and Samuel Delany, respectively, but also, as Keeling reveals, by Herman Melville's Bartleby recommend other networks of just relationality.¹⁶

The book begins with a preface and introduction, both of which indicate Keeling's investment in situating the book's utterance in a present informed but not determined by history, a present poised to become a number of unimaginable futures. The first of these sections explains the book's investments in the future, poetry, queerness, and Blackness. The introduction abruptly launches its reader into a speculative moment, one orchestrated and circulated by the oil company Shell International. Here we are introduced to the "now" of speculation via a capitalist corporation that is financially if not ethically invested not only in surviving the future but in profiting from it. Keeling's deft exploration of the rhetoric of Shell's current speculative scenarios is situated in geopolitical time, connected to the exploits of the company's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ventures in colonialism and wars in Africa, Latin America, East Asia, and the Middle East. The Shell episode inaugurates the book's interest in "scholarly, artistic, and popular investments in the promises and pitfalls of imagination, technology, futurity, and liberation that have persisted in Euro-American culture since the beginning of the twentieth century" and the alternatives that "creative engagements with Black existence, technology, space, and time" might yield.¹⁷ This long view of capitalist survivability enjoins us to interrogate other models of investments in survivability beyond the modern, Western logics of individualism, settler colonialism, and accumulation.

Echoing Bartleby's and others' freedom dreaming, the author of *Queer Times, Black Futures* would prefer not to have the book's contributions calculated and instrumentalized. The book holds up even as it resists holding onto the potentialities endemic to radical queerness and the always unexpectedness of Blackness. It disarticulates the contemplation of futures from present pragmatism, in part by intermittently visiting Melville's Bartleby in his hold—a queer loophole of retreat from the functionalism of colonialist, capitalist accumulation—and voyaging into sonic Black otherworlds (e.g., the intergalactic vibrations of Sun Ra and the Eastern-facing sounds of Alice Coltrane). Its deterritorialized futurist freedom dreams sit alongside Bartleby and many other figures and images that are unaccountable to history: queer

15 Keeling, 23; Nassim Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

16 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); and Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (New York: Dover, 1990). Keeling states that "*Queer Times, Black Futures* turns to Melville's story to offer a series of provocations about power, language, space, time, and resistance." See Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, xiv.

17 Keeling, 4.

cinematic figures including “M—” of the documentary *The Aggressives* (Eric Daniel Peddle, 2005), who disappears victoriously from a screen and a narrative that would fix and de-queer her (chapter 2); the chimerical Black flesh in the digital cinemas of John Akomfrah and Arthur Jafa (chapter 3); Grace Jones, whose song and video “Corporate Cannibal” frustrate presumed networks of consumer and consumed (chapter 4); and worldly Black women like Coltrane as well as Asha of the Kenyan science fiction film *Pumzi* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2009) (chapter 5).

Even in introducing her work, the author resists the colonizing determinism of speculative futures that characterize the temporalities of capitalist accumulation. The book promises and guarantees no such thing as such claims to possess knowledge are ideologically and structurally opposed to the anti-accumulative logic of knowledge being studied here. *Queer Times, Black Futures* conducts freedom dreaming with a commitment not to foreclose the dreaming of other readers and other texts. This book is not the final word, which is its strength, rendering its contingencies more (not less) relevant as the world evolves in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Call the author “Keeling” (as she writes, “if there is such a thing”), Dear Reader, and pursue the pursuit into the unforeseeable abyss, for the book “does not pretend to know where the insights it generates might lead.”¹⁸

How does one write a review of a work that rejects the tenets of capital accrual (including the accumulation of intellectual and cultural capital)? How does one recommend a work when the outcome of that work is intentionally stymied and denied, enacting its own politics of refusal to be put to work? How might one write of the value of (a) work without limiting the possibilities of that work’s influence and importance for a future that is unknowable even as it is currently unfolding and for a past the value of which has not been and can never be fully accounted for? These generative frustrations are at the heart of *Queer Times, Black Futures*—an incredible, (im)possible work that is invested in worlds to come with the necessary caveat that its readers divest from a critical project that is measured in immediate returns.

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18 Keeling, xv, xvi.