

*To Make Our World Anew*, edited by Robin D. G. Kelly and Earl Lewis

Reviewed by [Matthew Johnson](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

This history of African Americans is a quintessentially American history. It presents the perspective of a people who have been among the most eloquent voices for and embodiments of America's cherished ideals of the essential liberty and equality of all people, the right to self-determination and the pursuit of happiness, the sanctity of individual life, and equality before the law. *To Make Our World Anew* can be read as a continuous narrative. But it works even better when approached as ten independent essays, each about a different time period, since there is considerable overlap between essays.

According to the editors, the experience of African Americans is best understood as an ongoing effort to remake their world--in Langston Hughes's words, "to make our world anew." Though African Americans have only partially succeeded in this effort, they have exerted a powerful influence on key aspects of larger American life and culture. Indeed, the editors claim that African Americans' efforts to reshape their world "are responsible for some of the most profound economic, political and cultural developments in the modern West." They summarize these developments as follows:

Black labor generated unprecedented wealth and helped give birth to capitalism; black resistance slowly destroyed the system of slavery and prompted new methods of coercion and punishment; black creativity influenced virtually all forms of Western art--from music and dance to theater and the plastic arts; black visions of freedom and efforts to realize them not only transformed American politics but inspired uprisings the world over--from South Africa to Tiananmen Square.

The book provides a fresh and provocative encounter with material that many of us mistakenly assume we already know well. It highlights African Americans' emphasis on building institutions, the spontaneous and rather decentralized eruptions of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, and the continuation of the efforts of that era in a diverse and ongoing struggle. The authors discuss the continuity and

methods of white resistance to change, and the rich diversity of African-American interpretations of their own situations, visions of liberation and strategic possibilities. And they trace how various strategies played themselves out in different spheres, from organized labor to the arts.

Finally, the book provides some, though not enough, of a much-needed emphasis on the international vision of many African Americans. African Americans historically have understood their plight and their responsibilities in global terms. They have seen themselves "as both Americans and part of a larger, international Black Diaspora." The book contextualizes the slave trade and makes clear that the U.S. was not the only place where Africans were enslaved in the New World. It considers whether or not African Americans should have stayed in America after the end of slavery or returned to form a colony in Africa. But the book fails to provide substantive material on the interrelationship between the struggles of African Americans and those of other Africans in Africa and throughout the world.