



2009

african  
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essays

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GERALD EARLY, SERIES EDITOR

DEBRA J. DICKERSON, GUEST EDITOR

# BEST AFRICAN AMERICAN ESSAYS: 2009

GERALD EARLY, Series Editor  
DEBRA J. DICKERSON, Guest Editor

BANTAM BOOKS



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## INTRODUCTION

During my life I cannot remember a time when black folk did not fuss, cuss, quarrel, and remonstrate with one another (and with whites) about their condition, about the world, about their humanity, about why we are here, and about what it all means. Probably because of the conditions that blacks had to endure for a good deal of their time in this country, they have always felt that in any public argument or debate about rights, freedom, or fairness, the stakes were especially high and “as serious as your life,” to borrow a phrase from Valerie Wilmer. African Americans have been, if nothing else, a people of polemics, a people who have passionately argued in defense of themselves and against injustice and inequality. If at times their arguments were self-interested or self-serving, ethnocentric or chauvinistic, they served the best interests of the nation by forcing it to confront its own blood-soaked hypocrisy.

Since writing fiction so often seemed a luxury that the severity of their condition could hardly afford, African Americans have always vested a great deal of importance in writing nonfiction. And once upon a time blacks were more likely to read nonfiction. Nonfiction was the arena where arguments were made, facts amassed, ideology sharpened, statistics formulated, and corrections made. Within that arena

the essay has long been a major weapon in the overall thrust and parry. Indeed, ever since the days of slavery, the essay has been the form of choice to carry the burden of black people's complaint with the visible world. The black essayist offers testimony, both for the religious (about God in an uncaring cruel world) and for the irreligious (about fate and how we are all predestined to lose). Black witnessing of the absurdity of life has given us both spirituals and the blues, allowing both God and the devil their due. Black folk have made their preoccupation with their condition a philosophical meditation on life itself. To express this meditation is why black people write essays.

When he was not producing various versions of his autobiography, Frederick Douglass was largely an essayist and journalist. W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the most highly regarded nonfiction work by an African American in American intellectual history, is a collection of essays. Du Bois also wrote books and monographs, such as the sociological treatise *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and the polemical *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd Birthday* (1952)—he even wrote novels. But he reached his audience primarily through the essays he published in magazines and newspapers. (Interestingly, Du Bois described one of his most important books, *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940, as “an essay toward an autobiography of a race concept,” in short, a book-length essay. It reveals how important and how complex the concept of the essay was for him.) James Weldon Johnson, a contemporary of Du Bois, as well as a songwriter, diplomat, novelist, poet, and NAACP official, spent several years writing op-ed pieces for the *New York Age*, one of the great black newspapers of the early twentieth century. Early versions of Afrocentric thought were introduced to the black public back in the 1920s, through the columns of J. A. Rogers in black newspapers. George Schuyler became a sort of black H. L. Mencken through his 1920s magazine and newspaper essays. Black journalists like Carl Rowan and Chuck Stone became known to the world through their newspaper columns. Even Jackie Robinson spent time writing a newspaper column! And everyone should remember that Martin Luther King's most famous and influential piece of writing was an essay: “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963).

As I learned in my teen years during the 1960s, nonfiction of all kinds—not just essays but autobiographies and political treatises—

was the arena where the most confident and tough-minded black writers were wont to tread. It was the age of argument and manifesto. Writers, I suppose, were trying to make sense of the chaos of their time. Perhaps writers have done this in all ages, as everyone's time is, to a greater or lesser extent, an epoch of chaos, cruelty, rude opportunity, and misunderstood change. But when I was a teenager in the 1960s, the explosion of black nonfiction, and especially of essay writing, struck me as heroic, as if some grand ideological, mythological shift was emerging right before my eyes, or as if explorers were discovering an uncharted frontier that would redefine us all. Significant works of fiction were produced during this time, including James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), and John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), but the nonfiction overshadowed the novels. Two volumes of essays were among the most important books of the era: *The Fire Next Time* (1963) by James Baldwin and *Soul on Ice* (1968) by Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther Party's minister of information. And two landmark autobiographies by two very different men were highly influential best-sellers in 1965: *Yes I Can* by Sammy Davis Jr. and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley. Like Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn*, the nonfiction works were being published not as books in the conventional sense but as book-length essays. For the essay had become an attempt to express something in prose—an idea, a feeling, an argument, an attitude, a proposition—that transcended its subject matter, and when it was successful, it took on the power of narrative. An essay is both searching and assertive, a contradiction that necessitates its artistry. Nonfiction prose, at its best, can do something for the mind, the heart, and the senses that is beyond the reach of other writing: it can make you doubt and believe at the same time. The essay especially seeks to achieve that end, to attain subtlety and suppleness, a daring nimbleness, to go beyond the mere conveying of information or description. Yet the essay never loses its accessibility, its charm, its magic, its ability to make ordinary language extraordinary, to induce the reader to see the visible anew. The essay, unlike poetry, aspires not to make the prosaic sublime but rather to make the prosaic complex and urgent. By the time I was sixteen, the world for me was not an epic poem to dream upon but an essay to be read and revised. For an essay is a trial that always invites another, better effort; it is the narrative of the road we're on and what we're thinking about that

road at any given moment. It's a rough draft map that constantly needs to be reworked.

In 1967 *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* by Harold Cruse and *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton were the most talked-about books of the year, at least among black folk. I remember struggling to read them as a high school sophomore (a struggle I lost, finishing them only about ten years later) because they were the hip books to read among black nationalist types and college students who talked their fair share of revolutionary theory, everything from Maulana Ron Karenga's Kawaïda Studies (which gave us Kwanzaa) to the Marxist-Leninist patter of Black Panthers like Huey Newton. This kind of work was not just some aberration of the 1960s, a time when radical political writing and ranting seemed to fall from the trees like leaves in autumn or bird droppings in the morning. Its origins go back as far as 1828, the year of David Walker's *Appeal* (a book made up of four essays), in which he argued that black folk had better get it together and that slaves were bound by Almighty God to rise up against their masters. We have been issuing nonfiction as jeremiads, warnings, and prophecies ever since. Among the most-read black books of the 1950s, for instance, when the United States was supposedly asleep and complacent, were E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), a lively diatribe against the superficialities of the black middle class, and Martin Luther King's *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), the story of the Montgomery bus boycott.

The two most influential literary essayists of my time, indeed in black American history, were James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. As highly literate and personal essayists, even old-fashioned belletrists in some respects, their reputations equaled, and in Baldwin's case exceeded, their renown as novelists. Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" (1955) remains the best essay about the complexities of race ever written, and Ellison's "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" (1962) remains one of the finest essays on American music. When I began writing essays nearly thirty years ago, my models were Ellison and Baldwin (along with George Orwell and Jacques Barzun, for clarity). As a teenager how I loved the essays of Amiri Baraka, wielding words as he did with the derring-do of a swashbuckler, the mad Pied Piper of black cultural nationalism. And Langston Hughes's Jess B. Simple pieces were always a treat to reread.

Because I had read so many great essays by black writers—I used to sit in the public library and read them by the hour—I wanted to write them too, convinced that being an essayist was as close as I would ever get to glory on this earth and to conversing with all the black writers I admired. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright had all written seminal essays during their careers, as have Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and the guest editor of this volume, Debra Dickerson. To me, the mark of greatness was not to write the great novel but rather to write a great essay, whether it was the length of a newspaper column or the size of a book.

My youngest daughter, when she was nine years old, discovered one day through a teacher at school that her father wrote essays, and she found this curious. When she came home, she asked me not what an essay was, but rather, “Daddy, why do you write essays?” It was a hard question, such as children are wont to pose, and it demanded a real answer because it was being asked completely without guile or any implication of an agenda. And embedded within it was her other question, “What is an essay?” which she chose to ask only indirectly, by asking about my connection to something that she did not understand. “I write essays,” I said, “in order to say something that is worth saying in the best way that I can say it. That is why anybody writes anything that you would want someone else to read.” That was the wrong answer. She looked puzzled, even a little distressed. I tried again. “I write essays because they are fun to write and people like them when I do them well.” She grinned at that. “I’m glad they’re fun because they sound hard,” she said. “Well, sometimes even something that is fun to do can be hard,” I laughed. “Is it fun when it’s hard?” she pressed. “Sometimes, and sometimes it’s just hard when it’s hard,” I said. And it was her turn to snicker. “I know what that’s like,” she said.

It is my hope that the *Best African American Essays* anthologies will remind the reading public that African Americans have a grand tradition in the essay. This new annual series is meant to showcase the range and variety of the essays we write: personal, literary, polemical, intellectual, comic, contemplative. Each volume will highlight a particular year. This first volume focuses on literature published in 2007. But it also contains two pieces from 2006, Kenneth McClane’s deeply moving “Driving,” and Brian Palmer’s informative “Last Thoughts of an Iraq ‘Embed,’” because Debra and I could not resist using them.



Also, I did not want future guest editors to feel that they could not include a piece or two from the year previous to the one that the volume is highlighting. Possibly, as these volumes continue, something may get overlooked, or one guest editor may value something that another guest editor does not. So including pieces from 2006 here is meant to serve as a precedent, to give future guest editors (and me) a bit of latitude.

The *Best African American Essays* series is intended to accomplish three goals:

1. to bring to the attention of a wide variety of readers the best essays published by African Americans in a particular year;
2. to bring to their attention some of the lesser-known sources that feature the African American essay; and
3. to offer an organic, ongoing anthology wherein, from year to year, one may observe shifts and changes, trends and innovations, in African American essay writing.

A point of clarification: What is an African American? This question has no obvious or even objective answer. For the purposes of these volumes, I choose a broad definition: an African American is any person of color from anywhere in the recognized African Diaspora who lives in the United States either temporarily or permanently, who writes in English, and who is published by an American-based publisher or in an American-based publication.

A second point of clarification: While the *Best African American Essays* series promises to feature writers of African descent, it will also, from time to time, reprint good writing by non-African Americans on African American subjects. Debra and I have included three such essays in this volume. Historically, black colleges—"oases of civility," as the historian John Hope Franklin once called them—admitted white applicants and hired white faculty members. The *Best African American Essays* series can do nothing less but follow this tradition of openness. Besides, I have learned over the years as much about African American life from non-African American writers as I have from African Americans: old-school Negro Studies scholars like August Meier and Melville Herskovits; more recent scholars like

Lawrence Levine, David Garrow, and William Van Deburg; and writers like Susan Straight, Peter Guralnick, and Brad Snyder. It takes a village to raise a child, goes the old cliché, and it apparently takes a village to tell a story as well, particularly the story of the village.

Finally, although all the selections in this volume are essays, the series is about presenting the best of black nonfiction writing. So future volumes may contain excerpts from nonfiction books as well as essays—whatever constitutes the best of that year. For this volume, we had a good number of strong essays from which to choose.

I wish to thank guest editor Debra Dickerson, an old sparring partner, for making most of the selections for this volume. I added a few more to round it out. Dickerson is the author of *The End of Blackness: Returning the Souls of Black Folk to Their Rightful Owners* (2004) and *An American Story* (2000). It was a pleasure to work with her. She works with great energy and care. I cannot think of any current nonfiction writer better suited to get this series off the ground. She is just the person you would want with you in a foxhole, surrounded on all sides by the enemy. She'll get you out alive. She is the last of the great fighters.

I wish to extend gratitude to Keya Kraft, Jian Leng, and Barbara Liebmann for all the work they did to make this volume possible. I very much appreciate their dedication and their support.

Gerald Early

Series Editor

## INTRODUCTION

### Black for No Reason at All

To be a minority is, among many other things, to live as a sort of cultural vampire: one is forced, by bad luck at birth, to subsist on the popular lifeblood of a majority which bogarts (if only by sheer force of numbers) the airwaves, bandwidths, museums, and performance halls. It's to search hungrily for your group's face in the zeitgeist's mirror and rarely find it there.

We at the margins hunger for glimpses of ourselves in the cultural viewfinder, for proof that we leave footprints in the earth, footprints that will still be visible in millennia to come when archaeologists, even extraterrestrials, comb through America's myriad scientific, cultural, and artistic layers to figure out who, what, and why the hell we were. How we long to see black footprints embedded in amber and not just in the shifting, momentary sands of fads like novelty rap, *Barbershop* movies, and gauche clothing lines. That search, subconscious though it may be—and more necessary because of it—is not even primarily for the “positive” images that blacks so justifiably demand to offset America's insatiable preference for encountering us via inner-city perp walks and welfare statistics. Rather it's the unexpected, off-topic encounters with ourselves for which we most long. Blacks climbing mountains. Arguing environmental policy. Composing symphonies.

Spelunking for lost treasures. Singing our children lullabies. Producing literature about the human condition. Blacks where you least expect to happen upon them and encounters that don't require our race, which should be the ultimate non sequitur, to be what matters most about us or, most daringly, even to matter at all.

Blacks, in other words, are human; and all humans are narcissists, enamored of their own existence and frustrated as hell not to be widely acknowledged as the fascinating creatures we, no less than every other self-absorbed group, most definitely are. *We're here. We're black. Get used to it.* Get used to it, and for the love of God, let us talk about something else for just a few minutes please. That, dear reader, is the purpose of this anthology.

Here, we are creating a space in which blacks may be unpredictable. Off message. Quirky. Individuals. Human. Black for no reason at all. Where better to happen upon ourselves than in the essay? Essays about life, essays about history, essays about nothing much. Essays by blacks, but not necessarily about *being* black, though that's all right, too. With this long overdue inaugural collection, we'll go spelunking for memorable essays, by or about *diasporic* blacks, on any subject at all. Anything. Whatever they happened to be thinking about that day and felt compelled to share with the world. With this series we announce the hunt for black essayistic art. Art—not protest or politics, unless those topics are rendered with transcendent, time-testing mastery. If you're interested in beautiful writing or thought informed by blackness but not required by it, this series is for you. *Best African American Essays* calls a time-out on the black artist's duty to his people, his country, or his livelihood and provides a place simply to be an artist. It's a place for the black artist to be free.

### BLACKS LANDING ON THE MOON

In the 1960s, when blacks were first integrating television in real numbers, we set the phone lines asizzle, letting each other know whenever one of our own was on the small screen. As if the entire black community hadn't already planned Sunday dinner or the kids' homework around those pre-VCR, bated-breath events. Whenever Sammy Davis Jr. or Diahann Carroll was on TV, the streets of black America were deserted, just as they were during America's landing on the moon, both

paradigm-shifting, fish-out-of-water events that changed American life as we knew it. For the entire half-hour of *The Flip Wilson Show* or *Julia*, Afro'd kids would sit entranced while adults just held the phone that connected them to another equally bemused Negro. All silently watched ourselves take part in America as artists and not, for once, as invisible, underpaid, much abused labor or—god help our psyches—as the all too visible “Negro problem.”

Shaking our heads in prideful wonder at seeing ourselves in the tuxedos and evening gowns of the day, finally invited into America's living rooms, blacks accepted that our public presence then had to be *qua* black people. We could not be simply the new neighbor—we had to be the new *black* neighbor that America could practice not calling a realtor at first sight of. We could not be the new co-worker, but the new *black* first-of-his-kind office mate, whose every utterance *had* to be wackily misinterpreted by well-intentioned whites (who *had* to be construed as well-intentioned, or integration was over) as racial protest, so that high jinks, neutered of any substantive politics, could ensue and be resolved before the credits rolled. It was Kabuki theater, a highly stylized enactment of catharsis whose preformatted, feel-good outcomes threatened the white psyche not at all and that achieved nothing but teaching whites that they could remain calm with us in the room without police protection. It was enough for us then—it had to be enough—simply to be allowed into the room.

Cultural encounters with us then, as America took baby steps toward racial tolerance, could include us only as the proverbial Other, extraterrestrials landed on Main Street. People who'd been here for centuries, people who'd both cared for and borne the children of the majority—the inscrutable, unpredictable strangers who'd lived in America since before it was America—were taking blackness for a wary stroll on the other side of the color line. It was a perp walk of a different kind, the kind intended to teach America it could encounter us as humans, fellow citizens. We were free but on our best credit-to-our-race, closely-monitored-by-both-sides behavior. Literal chains were replaced by existential ones.

Popular culture was the way America got to know its blacks—got used to its blacks—as something other than its volatile serfs; there was nothing then but for blacks to serve as the one-dimensional proxies via

which America could confront its integrationist terrors: its terrors, its guilt, and its fear of justified confrontation. Hence the ritual thrashings from the overly but impotently politicized Negroes of *Maude*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. Indeed, blacks then also felt a need for the existential training wheels of participation as symbols and tokens only, as refutations of innate white supremacy or black quiescence; our art, understandably, focused mainly on the black condition. In the 1960s, as we had for centuries, we primarily sought to answer the mind-strangling question that W.E.B. Du Bois implored us to resist: “How does it feel to be a problem?” As he did, black artists have either “smile[d] or [were] interested, or [were] reduce[d] to a boiling simmer, as the occasion [required].”\*

But them days is over. Now, more than a century later, we’ve caught up to Du Bois: “To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? [We] answer seldom a word.”

*That’ll tick them off.*

The question is, and always was, stupid, a subject-changer, not to mention ingeniously devised to keep us on the defensive, looking up at our interrogators, trying to figure out what they were thinking and what we could do to change it. But it’s 2008. Let those determined to figure out what’s so fundamentally wrong with blacks—and who require *us* to flail in vain for the answer to the wrong question, *their* question—spin their wheels on that racist, white supremacist, and *narcissistic* notion (i.e., “why do we find you, with your Quintellas and your swagger, to be so disturbing?”). However fascinated by the construction of blacks as problems, as defectives, as Other, the world might be, blacks have increasingly struggled uphill to change the bloody subject from their race to their minds. As late as 2002, the acclaimed sculptor Ed Hamilton, who labored in obscurity until his commemorations of black heroes like those of the *Amistad* and Booker T. Washington brought him prominence, had to unleash his frustration at race’s constriction of his art. In an installation called *Confinement*, “faces peer out of holes in slabs, as if looking to break free . . . [his curator] Julien Robson sees in *Confinement* an African American artist

\**The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 43, 44. W.E.B. Du Bois, Signet Classic, Penguin Books. Introduction by Randall Keenan, 1995, originally published in 1903.

struggling to become visible on his own terms.”\* Unfortunately for him, a *Best African American Sculptures* is not likely in the offing.

Hamilton faces the same realities all black artists do: museums and editors industriously keep us on speed dial whenever “black” issues arise, but not when there’s a mortgage crisis, an ecological issue, or a humanitarian disaster on another continent. We seldom occur to them except through our blackness. But art must take risks, and black artists have always done so; homes such as this collection will make that task a little easier. The only way to make the world see us as human is for us to act human—offering up, with great boldness, our two cents on whatever catches our fancy. Most excitingly, we hope this series will encourage more black writers to take a breather from the beaten path of the salable essay or the latest “black” controversy and ruminate on . . . life. Increasingly freed from the requirements of race, we have art to create and art already created to be unearthed from its non-race-related obscurity. In that regard, at least, the black writer has it easier than most of his brethren artists; we don’t need twenty-foot ceiling heights and scarce gallery walls to be seen. Just anthologies like this one, which will hopefully inspire more editors to think of black writers for nonblack subjects and inspire more black writers to branch out.

In this inaugural volume, James Hannaham recounts for us an uneventful night out and about with his famous artist cousin, Kara Walker (“Coincidental Cousins”). Emily Bernard beautifully bangs her head against the wall over a friendship that has inexplicably, one-sidedly ended (“Fired”). Black but more than black. Art.

These essays will help the world understand that the culture produced by blacks must be understood as exactly that—as culture, not “black” culture. As long as racism does, black art as protest can, will, and should continue. “Jena, O.J. and the Jailing of Black America” (Orlando Patterson), “A Dream Lay Dying, Parts I, II, III” (Bill Maxwell), and “What IQ Doesn’t Tell You About Race” (Malcolm Gladwell) are just a few examples of the internal, antiracist critique included herein. The time is long overdue, however, for blacks to abandon Du Bois’s double consciousness—the impulse to understand and explain ourselves through white eyes and the strictures of race—and

\*“History’s Sculptor” by D. Cameron Lawrence, *American Legacy* magazine, Spring 2008, p. 31.

to explore what essayist Albert Murray describes as the “ambiguities and absurdities inherent in all human experience.”\* Whites can’t move on until we do.

Writing in 1969 in his now canonical essay collection *The Omni-Americans*, Murray argued, among other things, that America’s myopic reliance on bare statistics and the other tools of social science to “understand” its blacks was at best a dodge, and at worst a gambit designed to keep us “constructed” as a dysfunctional national problem. We were not neighbors, not humans, not fellow citizens, but a naked litany of negative “facts” in a vacuum that appeared to speak for themselves. Whites might be understood via Shakespeare and Milton, but for blacks, poll data alone sufficed. He wrote:

The prime target of these polemics is the professional observer/reporter (that major vehicle of the nation’s information, alas) who relies on the so-called findings and all-too-inconclusive extrapolations of social science survey technicians for their sense of the world [where blacks are concerned]. The bias of *The Omni-Americans* is distinctly proliterary. It represents the dramatic sense of life as against the terminological abstractions and categories derived from laboratory procedures. Its interests, however, are not those of a literary sensibility at odds with scientific method. Not by any means. On the contrary, a major charge of the argument advanced here is that most social science survey findings are not scientific enough. They violate one’s common everyday breeze-tasting sense of life precisely because they do not meet the standards of validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness that the best scientists have always insisted on. As a result they provide neither a truly practical sociology of the so-called black community nor a dependable psychology of black behavior . . .

[These essays] are submitted as antidotes against the pernicious effects of a technological enthusiasm inadequately

\*Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970. Da Capo Press paperback, Plenum Pub. Co., 1990, p. 5.



counter-balanced by a literary sense of the ambiguities and absurdities inherent in all human experience.\*

Leave it to a Negro to believe that literature is more valid than statistics! But with a group as targeted as blacks have been, an overreliance on agenda-driven statistics, coupled with a profound lack of interest in black interiority, can only lead us all astray.

Increasingly, blacks are secure enough in their civic identities to resist the siren call of statistical debate and are instead striving to provide that “everyday breeze-tasting sense of [black] life.” We want to talk about ourselves as ourselves. Preoccupied as we’ve been trying to survive, we’re almost as much of a mystery to ourselves as we are to others, something Dr. Carter G. Woodson well understood when he wrote, “The most inviting field of discovery and invention, then, is the Negro himself, but he does not realize it.”† But he’s beginning to, as this collection will prove. With more opportunities to talk about ourselves in our own right, we’ll be discovering and inventing enough to give white narcissism a run for its money.

No process of black self-discovery would be legitimate without significant offerings from the black diaspora, so this collection ferrets out non-American black voices from around the world. American blacks can’t understand, or encounter, themselves in isolation from their cousins, however connected or disconnected the various groups remain. We hope they’ll be intrigued to learn how modern-day slavery works in a Ghanian-American’s family (“A Slow Emancipation” by Kwame Anthony Appiah), or how one African American encounters Israel (“Searching for Zion” by Emily Raboteau).

I’ll leave you with a final quote, the one that drove the selection of essays to include throughout this process, the one with which Albert Murray opened *The Omni-Americans*:

The individual stands in opposition to society, but he is nourished by it. And it is far less important to know what differen-

\*Ibid., p. 5.

†Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Africa World Press, Inc., 1990, The Associated Publishers, 1933, p. 139.