

WORDS OF WITNESS

Black Women's Autobiography in the Post-*Brown* Era



ANGELA A. ARDS

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Words of Witness

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In memory of

Roslyn Denise Ards

We are the subjects of our own narrative,
witnesses to and participants in our own experience,
and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those
with whom we have come in contact.

TONI MORRISON

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Words of Witness

Introduction

The Ethics of Self-Fashioning

Before entering graduate studies in English, I was a journalist for more than a decade at the *Village Voice*, the *Nation*, and *Ms.* magazine, where, among other issues, I covered the ways black communities were creating new vocabularies and strategies to address the political and moral dilemmas of the contemporary era. Not coincidentally, many key concerns of my reporting are at stake in the autobiographies featured here: black feminist organizing to bring women's concerns and sensibilities into the public sphere, the meaning of blackness and agency in an age of immigration, the rise of hip-hop culture. With the structural changes in the political economy after the fall of Jim Crow, from the rightward ideological shift after the so-called Reagan revolution to the diversifying interests among black America, scholars have noted the need for "a shift in the political lexicon," a recalibration in vocabularies and strategies of struggle.¹ I witnessed and experienced that reality firsthand as the historian for Local Initiative Support Training and Education Network (LISTEN), a youth-development organization founded by the late Lisa Y. Sullivan, one of the most dynamic black activists of the 1990s. In the spirit of Ella Baker and Septima Clark, LISTEN developed youth leadership from the ground up, providing infrastructure support for varying models of community activism. Sullivan often noted that, across the political spectrum—whether engaged in "hip-hop activism," modes of black nationalism, or pragmatic, policy-oriented approaches—an emerging generation lacked the language and values, an ethical discourse, that might give their politics meaning and context. Her insight echoes Cornel West, who has argued that without an emotive, spiritual language that engenders *metanoia*, a radical change in how one perceives herself in the world and consequently responds to its challenges, it is impossible to revitalize black civil society.²

Thinking about this relationship between language and action prompted me to consider the role of narrative—sheer storytelling—in developing a progressive

politic. I imagined writing a memoir that documented the various activist strategies in relation to each other, thinking that, through the juxtaposed narratives, the evolving ethics embedded in each might be more evident by contrast and, thus, *useable* for fashioning a contemporary progressive politic. However, I found myself stalled. First, I needed distance, temporal and psychic, from the reporting. Second, I needed to work through some methodological questions: How to bring lived experience to bear on communal questions of identity and agency without falling into the navel-gazing trap of solipsism so characteristic of the “neoconfessional” trend in contemporary memoir? How to create a linked-fate narrative when black communities, never monolithic, reflect an even greater multiplicity of identities that complicate old paradigms based solely on race? I examined the works of contemporary black women autobiographers to see how they approached these questions. *Words of Witness* is the result.

The book’s critical approach of examining the intersection of personal narrative and political discourse builds on critical frameworks that bring scholarship on black autobiography into conversation with the broader field of autobiography studies.³ In the last generation, mainstream criticism has focused on the discursive nature of identity construction, the processes and strategies of life writing.⁴ Critics of African American autobiography have focused less on deconstructing narrative selves than on proving them capable of participating in the broader public sphere.⁵ In attending to language, its performance and structures, while also considering how those structures relate to the larger political economy, the autobiographies featured here seek to place black feminist thought in conversation with modern political theory. Autobiography is often called the founding motif of the black literary tradition, but it is arguably the foundation of black political thought as well.⁶ Since its eighteenth-century origins with the slave narratives, black American autobiography has been a platform for political argument and ideological commentary, from Olaudah Equiano’s genre-defining *Interesting Narrative* and Frederick Douglass’s three autobiographical volumes, to Angela Davis’s self-titled political autobiography and Barack Obama’s two presidential memoirs. *Words of Witness* situates itself within this longstanding literary and political history as it examines the ways contemporary black women autobiographers craft their life stories to engage modern political and social thought.

Interrogating the intersections of personal narrative and political discourse, or what I call here “the ethics of self-fashioning,” has increasingly been the focus of conferences, journals, and books as Obama’s historic presidency and memoirs have piqued academic and popular interest in the relationship between black subjectivity and politics.⁷ For instance, James Kloppenberg’s *Reading*

Obama examines the narrative technique and structure of both *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* for how they engage American democratic thought, from the Constitution to philosophical pragmatism, through characterization, scene reconstruction, and narrative. And Robert Gooding-Williams's *In the Shadow of Du Bois* uses Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* as a lens to reevaluate the history of black American political thought, building upon Eric Sundquist's seminal readings of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The current trend, however, reinforces the "great men" paradigm that has long characterized most accounts of black intellectual activity. In focusing on autobiographies of black women writers, *Words of Witness* is part of a renewed effort in African American studies to recover the history of black women as intellectual subjects.⁸ An earlier study, Margo Perkins's *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, examines how the Black Power memoirs of Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown chronicle the formation of "radical black female subjectivity" and the ways those texts seek to inspire readers to oppositional politics. Here, the focus is not on charting the process of political radicalization—even though that is central to some of the narratives discussed, as is the idea of how these texts engage readers in political discourse and practice—but on placing these writers within contemporary political thought.

Building the burgeoning field of black women's intellectual history requires that scholars consider not only geographies, that is, how place and history contextualize ideas, but also intellectual genealogies, the social discourses and various interlocutors subjects engage.⁹ The five texts featured here were published between 1994 and 2009, five decades after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark legislation that established the precedent for ending racial segregation in the United States. They reflect a range of feminist responses to the civil rights and Black Power movements, two and three generations removed, with each using terms and concepts that are in dialogue with particular legacies, such as the Little Rock Nine campaign (Melba Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry*) and the Free Angela campaign (Eisa Davis's *Angela's Mixtape*); microhistories, such as the 1960s welfare rights movement (Rosemary Bray's *Unafraid of the Dark: A Memoir*); and social issues, such as immigration (June Jordan's *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*). All are revisionist, alternate histories rooted in the familial and social experiences of these activist-writers whose narratives reflect, from different vantage points, their own relationships and conversations with the social movements of the 1960s and '70s.

Black women's autobiographies represent, to borrow a phrase from Joanne Braxton, "a tradition within a tradition" for the ways that they deconstruct male-centered notions of black identity, progress, and freedom, as first championed