

Introduction

There is arrogance in deciding to write a memoir or autobiography, to assume one's life is worth reading or writing about. I am not arrogant and never expected to write a memoir. As retirement approached after near fifty years of teaching, research, and writing, I told everyone who asked what I was going to do, "Nothing." That it was time to rest, to retire. Virtually everyone—family, friends, and colleagues—told me that was not possible, that satisfaction in retirement required doing something, maintenance of some kind of activity: something to do, something to keep one busy. My colleague Wilbur Rich, who retired from the faculty at Wesleyan after more than forty years of teaching and research, told me that he tried doing nothing for a year or so after retirement and could not do it. "It will drive you crazy," he said, and so to keep busy he undertook a major archival research project. Playing golf, watching reruns of *Gunsmoke* and *Rawhide* and the mindless drivel of cable television news, Wilbur insisted, would not suffice.

My wife Scottie and my daughters Scottus and Jessica also insisted that I should find something to do—fishing, bird-watching, or something; otherwise, I would get on their nerves. Jessica, who was temporarily moving back home, said, "Do something Daddy, otherwise you will be constantly bugging me." Scottie expressed similar concerns, which was odd since for the last five years I had been teaching only one late Monday afternoon class and thus was home virtually all the time. However, I was usually writing so I was doing something and leaving her alone to do what she was doing, mainly talking on the phone and going to meetings. Scottus suggested that I sell the house and move near her so I could babysit my grandson, which was something in my seventies I did not wish to do.

I assumed that family, friends, and colleagues' insistence that a satisfactory retirement required doing something was likely supported by geron-

tology research. To my surprise, in a quick look at *Wikipedia* I discovered there is no consensus on the keeping busy or “activity” theory of aging and retirement. Rather, some scholars of the aging process embrace what is called “disengagement theory,” suggesting it is natural and inevitable for older persons to disengage, to do nothing. Interesting, but I concluded that at least in the early years, why risk it? Why risk going crazy or constantly getting on Scottie and Jessica’s nerves? So, for a time at least I decided I would do something to keep busy.

But what? Not golf, fishing, or bird-watching, although we do live in a wonderful bird habitat. Not taking classes in Berkeley’s Olli program (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) for students over fifty, although it often offers classes of interests such as The Beatles, The Sixties, Consciousness, and The Philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr. Also not teaching an Olli class; thus I declined an offer to join the Berkeley Olli faculty to teach a course on conservatism and racism. The Olli offer was alluring; to teach a class one afternoon a week on a subject of interest and importance using two of my own books. But I was tired of teaching, finding it tiresome in my last couple of years of teaching my Monday afternoon seminar. Nor did I wish to undertake a major research project. Thus, I declined an invitation from Polity Press to write a textbook on African American Political Thought, and from Palgrave to edit a Handbook of African American Politics. I planned to continue my work as a general editor of the State University of New York Press’s African American Studies series, and to prepare every couple of years a new edition of my textbook *American Politics and the African American Quest for Universal Freedom*. But neither of these required major expenditures of time.

So, what might I do that did not require a lot of work of the kind I have been doing for nearly fifty years? A memoir or autobiography? Although I never anticipated doing one, doing so—writing about myself—would require little research—some but not a lot—and it would be on a subject I know and care about—me. Even if I am not worth reading about—except perhaps by my children and grandchildren—I decided I am worth writing about.

Probably another source of the idea of a memoir was that my last two books—published in the year of my retirement—were quasi-biographies of two of my closest friends and colleagues, *Ronald W. Walters and the Fight for Black Power, 1969–2010* and *Hanes Walton, Jr.: Architect of the Black Science of Politics*. Walters and Walton were preeminent black political scientists of my generation, whose prodigious scholarship and, in Walters’s case activism, shaped the parameters of the modern study of black politics.

I knew Ron Walters and Hanes Walton; they were friends of mine. I am no Ron Walters or Hanes Walton. But writing about them in books that combined history and biography helped me develop skills useful in writing about myself in work that is part memoir and part history that uses my experience, my memory, as part of the evidence in an account of the last fifty years of the African American freedom struggle. In a sense, I am going to have a conversation with myself, with my memory, about my experiences in one of the most crucial periods in the history of African people in the United States.

This leads to another rationale. I came of age in the 1960s—the best decade for black people in the history of the United States, and one of the most pivotal decades in the history of the nation. In his 1998 book Tom Brokaw, the *NBC News* correspondent, portrayed the Depression era, World War II generation of Americans as the Greatest Generation. I disagree. I believe my generation—postwar baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s—is the greatest generation. This is not mere generational vanity, as Leonard Steinhorn writes in *The Greater Generation*, “It is safe to say that the World War II era Americans, for all their virtues, wouldn’t be so honored today were it not for the fact that their children, Baby Boomers, have spent their lives righting the wrongs that the Greatest Generation condoned, accommodated, or never addressed.”

Righting wrongs was the rallying cry of the 1960s generation of protest and reform that brought about fundamental cultural and political transformations resulting in a more equalitarian and culturally inclusive America. The seminal civil rights movement, the campus revolts, the Black Power movement, the making of a counterculture, the ghetto rebellions, the movement against the war on the Vietnamese people, the sexual revolution, women’s liberation, gay liberation, the music, the drugs—all in all an exciting, liberating, radical time with heady talk of revolution. For African Americans this was the greatest generation because it broke the back of the centuries-old systems of legal racism and segregation and inaugurated some freedom. My generation was the last to come of age under legal, Jim Crow apartheid and the first to mature in an era where racism was not morally and legally a part of the American way.

The university was an epicenter of the 1960s revolution, and I have spent all of my adult life on the campus, beginning as student in 1965 and thereafter as a professor (my generation of blacks was the first in large numbers to attend, and become faculty at predominantly white universities). The Black Power movement had a profound, transformative effect on my

consciousness and understanding. The movement found its first institutional expression on the campuses of predominantly white universities while I was student. We formed Black Student Unions and fought to establish Black Studies programs. Black studies were a major achievement of my generation. Before the black studies “revolution” the curriculum of the humanities and social sciences at US universities was racist and Eurocentric, celebrating a triumphal narrative of Western civilization while ignoring its oppression of nonwhite peoples. Black studies and subsequently Chicano studies, Asian American studies, Indigenous Peoples studies, women’s studies, and gay and lesbian studies changed all of this, bringing the perspectives of the oppressed and marginalized into academic study. The results: the American university was irrevocably changed. Mainly because of the debate about black studies the faculties and curriculum became more diverse, universal, and multicultural, reflecting not only black perspectives in teaching and research but the perspectives of other groups marginalized by Western civilization. In telling my story, I tell in part this story of the transformation of the American university.

I have titled my story *From the Bayou to the Bay: The Autobiography of a Black Liberation Scholar*. I was born in 1947 in a small town in North-west Louisiana, the Bayou state. In 1969 I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to complete my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley. After completing the master’s in political science at UCLA, I moved to New York City to study urban policy at the New School for Social Research. Subsequently, I earned the doctorate in political science at Howard in 1975. After completing the PhD I wished to return to the Bay Area, but it took fourteen years before I was able to do so, securing an appointment at San Francisco State in 1989. I have lived here since and it is where I expect to spend my last years.

W. E. B. Du Bois described San Francisco as the most beautiful place of human habitation on earth. I have not traveled the world as Du Bois, so I do not know if San Francisco is the world’s most beautiful city, but Du Bois did not often exaggerate or engage in hyperbole. I have traveled widely in the US and I can safely say San Francisco is the nation’s most beautiful city. The city of Tony Bennett and the Four Tops’ (I like the Tops’ version better) hills, fog, the bay, the windy sea, the little cable cars, and the golden sunshine . . .

Aside from its natural beauty, distinctive architecture, and pleasant climate, the city is also beautiful to me because of its countercultural tendencies and its progressive, left political traditions. With Oakland and

Berkeley across the Bay, the Bay Area is the most self-consciously radical place in the US. *Left Coast City*, as my San Francisco State colleague Richard DeLeon titled his book about the city's politics. When I arrived in the late 1960s it was the acknowledged forward base camp of the "revolution" we saw coming to America.

John Kennedy was the first president I was conscious of. Born when Harry Truman was president, I had no consciousness of his or Dwight Eisenhower's presidency. Perhaps this was because Kennedy was the first television president and as I recall we got our first television around this time. I followed the 1960 campaign and Kennedy's brief presidency closely (he was murdered on the same day my daddy died). In a sense this book begins with the Kennedy presidency. As I began writing Donald Trump was president. Of the forty-four persons who have been president, Kennedy was one of the three or four most sympathetic to the African American freedom struggle. Trump is one of the three or four most hostile. Despite his many shortcomings and imperfections, the young, intelligent, literate, and rhetorically gifted Kennedy is my favorite president. The aging, boorish, buffoonish, neoracist, white supremacist Trump my least favorite, although Andrew Johnson is a close second. Bracketing my story between Kennedy and Trump is to anchor the beginning with inspiration and optimism and the end with despair and pessimism.

To write a memoir one should have a good memory. I do not. Scottie often reminds me of places, persons, and circumstances I have forgotten. I have not kept a diary and only began to keep files—sporadically—in my undergraduate years. Interviews are not possible because most of the persons I would like to refresh my memories are dead or unable to be located. Thus, this is a difficult undertaking, given the absence of a good record. What I shall attempt to do is to have a broad focus, interweaving my story with significant events of the last half century that I observed or was a part of, events of me in history. In doing this, I check my memory with relevant published sources.

It is almost certain that any person's memory of their life is selective and biased, with an inevitable tendency toward emphasizing the positive and favorable while downplaying the negative and unpleasant. Each for sure is necessary for a good story. I shall endeavor to recall and write about the good and the bad, the favorable and unfavorable. How successful I am no one—not even I—can ever know.

I suppose it's somewhat unfair to ask academic colleagues to evaluate an autobiography since there is much they cannot know. However, several

intrepid colleagues were willing to do this work for me, and I am grateful to David Covin, David Tabb, Sekou Franklin, John Howard, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard for helping me order my story chronologically and substantively, and assuring me it was worthy of sharing with others.

Michael Rinella, my longtime editor for SUNY Press's series in African American Studies, did his work with his usual consummate skill. I also appreciate the contributions of the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, and the efficient work of the production staff at SUNY Press.

My wife and daughter Jessica read the manuscript and made telling, often acerbic, but useful comments. Nothing I have done in the last half century, personally and professionally, could have been accomplished without the presence and love of my beautiful Bird. My greatest accomplishment was loving and marrying her.