

Book review: Family Affair: What It Means to Be African-American Today

Written by Kam Williams

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“Who am I? It’s a fundamental question for everyone, of course, but for African Americans, it has particular resonance. Since our history in America is filled with grand contradictions, marginalization, and grotesque lies, African Americans have largely been left alone in the dark to grapple with the issue of who we are.

Our shared experiences as people of African American descent have been marked by an endless wave of mixed messages, leaving questions that lack finite answers. How do we declare our humanity? How do we begin to construct healthy environments for our lives, families, and communities in the face of chaos and confusion?

Compiling this book was important to me because the black community is clearly in need of healing... Family Affair is intended to facilitate conversations, spark dialogue, revive dreams, and free our individual minds. The African American community has been mentally and spiritually fractured for much too long, and it’s in need of revival and honest reflection. The voices included in this book take some steps in that direction.”

- Excerpted from the Preface (pages xiii-xv)

Attorney General Eric Holder took a lot of flak recently when he referred to America as a “nation of cowards” because we “simply do not talk enough with each other about race.” The backlash emanated from the feeling of many that the election of Obama proves that we have finally achieved that post-racial society envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King where people would be judged solely by the content of their character. The dilemma reminds me of the old joke where, finding themselves surrounded by hostile Indians, the Lone Ranger asks his trusted, native scout “What do you think we should do?” and Tonto responds, “What do you mean ‘we’ white man?”

Gil Robertson, author of Family Affair, recognized that, although Obama has generated considerable “hope for change,” the fact remains that most African American communities still exist “in a state of almost perpetual crisis... in terms of a health disparities, political injustices,

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crime statistics, and a plethora of social ills.” So, he naturally started wondering how could the country have its first African American President while the masses of Blacks continue to struggle with so many of the same issues the Civil Rights Movement had attempted to address a half-century ago?

Rather than attempt to answer that question himself, the veteran journalist opted to pose it to a host of prominent African American leaders from all walks of life. And their revealing responses, in the form of 76 enlightening, introspective essays, provide the sum and substance of Family Affair: What It Means to Be African-American Today.

Among the individuals contributing to the diversity of perspectives shared in this literary equivalent of a Black group therapy session are TV-One’s Cathy Hughes, Actress Tasha Smith, NAACP Hollywood Bureau Chief Vicangelo Bullock; Oscar-nominee actress Ruby Dee; Hollywood publicist/film director Ava DuVernay; actor Laz Alonso; the first Black supermodel Beverly Johnson; Congresswoman Carolyn Kilpatrick; Hip-Hop Doc Rani Whitfield, MD; lesbian activist Jasmyne Cannick; Prof. Anthony Asadullah Samad and the late Isaac Hayes.

The touching reflections range from Bullock’s heartfelt recounting of the angst involved in growing up biracial to Leslie Bardo’s equally-evocative memoir of a four-year stint in Japan where her family found itself subjected to discrimination because of fear generated by stereotypical images of Blacks disseminated by movies and rap videos.

Congrats to Gil Robertson for not only figuring a way to take the collective pulse of African Americana but for distilling the essence of his research into an informative and eloquent cultural tapestry destined to stand the test of time.

Family Affair: What It Means to Be African-American Today

Edited by Gil L. Robertson, IV

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To order a copy of Family Affair, visit: www.familyaffairbook.com