



# The African-American Century : How Black Americans Have Shaped Our Country

By Henry Louis Jr. Gates, Cornel West

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One hundred original profiles of the most influential African-Americans of the twentieth century.

Without Louis Armstrong or Miles Davis, we would not have jazz. Without Toni Morrison or Ralph Ellison, we would miss some of our greatest novels. Without Dr. King or Thurgood Marshall, we would be deprived of political breakthroughs that affirm and strengthen our democracy. Here, two of the leading African-American scholars of our day, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West, show us why the twentieth century was the African-American century, as they offer their personal picks of the African-American figures who did the most to shape our world.

This colorful collection of personalities includes much-loved figures such as scientist George Washington Carver, contemporary favorites such as comedian Richard Pryor and novelist Alice Walker, and even less-well-known people such as aviator Bessie Coleman. Gates and West also recognize the achievements of controversial figures such as Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and rap artist Tupac Shakur. Lively, accessible, and illustrated throughout, *The African-American Century* is a celebration of black achievement and a tribute to the black struggle for freedom in America that will inspire readers for years to come.

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- Sales Rank: #338891 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Free Press
- Published on: 2002-02-05
- Released on: 2002-02-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 1.00" w x 7.37" l, 1.83 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 432 pages



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## **Editorial Review**

### **Amazon.com Review**

The African American century was the one "in which African American life was transformed--and the century in which African Americans changed America." When it began, only 35 years after the end of slavery, few could envision what the 20th century would hold for black Americans. The 100 men and women described in this compendium, written by two of the most prominent black scholars and social commentators in America, represent important moments in the struggle to deepen America's democratic roots against the overwhelming forces of racism and bigotry. By choosing 100 (10 per decade), Gates and West ensured that they would have to omit important black figures. Nevertheless, the profiles achieve their purpose: to demonstrate and celebrate the multifaceted and profound achievements of African Americans in fields as diverse as science, politics, the military, literature, entertainment, and academia.

From W.E.B. Du Bois, probably the greatest African American intellectual of the 20th century, to Tiger Woods, golf's first black superstar, the well-written, fact-filled profiles present those who have lived extraordinary lives and shown tremendous courage. The roster includes the well-known, such as Louis Armstrong, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, and Oprah Winfrey, as well as the more obscure but no less important. These include Carter G. Woodson, who pioneered the historical study of black America; Charles Richard Drew, who founded two of the world's largest blood banks and in so doing prevented millions of deaths; and Barbara Harris, the first woman bishop. Gates and West also embrace controversial figures such as Louis Farrakhan, Tupac Shakur, and Angela Davis, emphasizing their positive imprints while acknowledging their complexity. With this valuable addition to black history collections, the authors (both controversial in their own rights) continue their quest to fill the aching gaps in public awareness about African Americans and remind us that self-confidence, dignity, and excellence are the essential virtues in the great historical drama of American democracy. --*Lesley Reed*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

"At the dawn of the 21st century... we cannot imagine a truly American culture that has not, in profound ways, been shaped by the contributions of African Americans," write scholars and popular social commentators West and Gates in the introduction to this elegant, fact-filled compendium of nearly 100 short biographies of distinguished thinkers, artists, politicians, entrepreneurs and athletes (one quarter of them women). While many of the figures highlighted here are obvious choices as such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Jackie Robinson, Jessye Norman and Spike Lee, there are numerous others who are more obscure, including Bessie Colman, the first black woman aviator; Dorothy Height, who organized black women through the YWCA; and sculptor Martin Puryear. Maintaining an upbeat tone, the authors, Harvard professors both, attempt to address the complexity of their subjects' lives (e.g., Tupac Shakur's indictment on charges of sexual abuse), although they occasionally play down such thorny issues as Louis Farrakhan's anti-Semitic statements or Josephine Baker's support of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. The concept behind this book is not new (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's *Profiles in Black Courage*, among others, has covered similar territory), but the authors' strong reputations and clear prose make this not only an ideal gift book for younger readers but a good educational resource. 100 b&w photos. (Nov.)

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### **From Booklist**

Choosing a set number of significant figures to characterize a century is difficult enough, doing it in the context of also representing black Americans and the attendant controversy of race in America compounds

the task. But Gates and West bring their own able scholarly backgrounds and political sensibilities to the task. Readers might argue about the inclusion or omission of particular profiles, but the result is a captivating look at the last century and the fact that "American life is inconceivable without its black presence." The 100 figures chosen for this book are "part of a grand tradition that deepened democratic roots in an insufficiently democratic America." The list, which includes Father Divine and Oprah Winfrey, represents individuals who have shown courage and commitment in confronting the racial politics of the U.S. Athletes and entertainers are included, although Gates and West acknowledge drawing a line between racist stereotypes that overemphasize these fields and the admitted contributions of black people in those arenas. The authors submit that the figures chosen for their contributions to American culture "embody the core of democratic faith." The book is organized by decade and begins with a profile of W. E. B. DuBois, who prophetically declared at the start of the 1900s that "the problem with the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." The collection ends with Tiger Woods, who ironically claims biracial status, projecting the issue of the complexity of the definition of race into the current century. Gates and West wisely include a comment by Earl Woods, Tiger's father, that despite his son's remarks, "his race can't be ignored." That points out another criteria for inclusion, looking at the past century with an eye toward the racial challenges that are carried into the current century. This is an important addition to black-history collections. *Vanessa Bush*

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