ABOUT

CROWNS

By Regina Taylor adapted from the book Cunningham and Craig

by Michael Marber

CROWNS is a “moving and celebratory musical play” in which hats become a springboard for an exploration of black history and identity as seen through the eyes of a young black woman who has come down South to stay with her aunt after her brother is killed in Brooklyn. Hats are everywhere, in exquisite variety, and the characters use the hats to tell tales concerning everything from the etiquette of hats to their historical and contemporary social functioning. There is a hat for every occasion, from flirting to churchgoing to funerals to baptisms, and the tradition of hats is traced back to African rituals and slavery and forward to the New Testament and current fashion. Some rap but predominantly gospel music and dance underscore and support the narratives. The conclusion finds the standoffish young woman, whose cultural identity as a young black Brooklyn woman has been so at odds with the more traditional and older Southern blacks, embracing hats and their cultural significance as a part of her own fiercely independent identity.

“Taylor pulls off a Hat Trick: She scores thrice, turning CROWNS into an artful amalgamation of oral history, fashion show, and musical theater…Hats off to Regina Taylor for a considerable achievement.” —TheaterMania.com. “…wholly theatrical…Ms. Taylor has created a show that seems to arise out of spontaneous combustion, as if a bevy of department-store customers simultaneously decided to stage a revival meeting in the changing room.” —NY Times. “Warm, wise and wonderful.”

CROWNS is a coming of age story about a 17-year-old girl. Yolanda is on a self destructive path running the mean streets of Brooklyn, New York. Yolanda's mother sends her down south to live with her Grandma Shaw after Yolanda's brother is shot and killed. Grandma Shaw introduces Yolanda to her circle of "Hat Queens" (each woman owns at least one hundred hats).

Yolanda tells her story in a mix of hip-hop and spoken word. Yolanda's sound is mixed with gospel, jazz, blues, R&B and other idioms of the women who become a part of her life. At first, Yolanda thinks these women have nothing in common - but this community joins together to save Yolanda's life.

Each hat holds a story of a wedding, funeral, baptism as the women share their stories of how they moved through life's struggles. They baptize Yolanda in history/memory. Yolanda realizes she's not alone in her feelings. The hats aren't just a fashion statement - they are testimonies of sisterhood - they are hard earned Crowns.

Besides the 73-year-old salt of the earth Mother Shaw, there is Velma, a 27-year-old mortician who has buried too many classmates; Jeannette, 35 and accused of being too flirtatious with other women's husbands; Wanda, a 40-ish by the book school teacher and Mabel, the preacher's wife, who is bigger than life and bodacious.

Yolanda returns to Brooklyn, NY with new eyes. She can better see where she's from, who she is and where she's going.

CROWNS has been one of the most produced musicals in the country and has played at the top regional theaters. Its first run was at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey and transferred to a very successful run at Second Stage in New York City.

This musical won Helen Hayes Awards (for Best Production, Best Musical and Best Director for Ms. Taylor). CROWNS is enjoying critical acclaim and great audiences for its current production at Open Stage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REGINA TAYLOR

Regina Annette Taylor (born August 22, 1960) is an American actress and playwright. She has won several awards throughout her career, including a Golden Globe Award and NAACP Image Award. In July 2017, Taylor was announced as the new Denzel Washington Endowed Chair in Theater at Fordham University.

Taylor was born in Dallas, Texas. Her mother, Nell Taylor, is a social worker and poet. At the age of 12, she moved to Muskogee, Oklahoma. The family later returned to Dallas, where she graduated from the newly-integrated L. G. Pinkston High School in 1977. She became acutely aware of racial discrimination there.

She went on to study at Southern Methodist University and graduated in 1981, subsequently moving to New York. She made her professional acting debut in the CBS made-for-TV movie *Crisis at Central High* (1981).

On Broadway Taylor became the first Black woman to play William Shakespeare's Juliet thanks to the non-traditional casting efforts of Joseph Papp. She also played Cecilia in *As You Like It* and the First Witch in *Macbeth* during the same season. Other on- and off-Broadway work included *Machinal, A Map of the World*, *The Illusion* and *Jar the Floor.*

Taylor is a Distinguished Artistic Associate of Chicago's Goodman Theatre. In 1991 Taylor co-wrote two one act plays adapted from Franz Xaver Kroetz's *Sty Farm* and *Ghost Train* with her husband, Mario Emes. It was produced by Joseph Papp at the Public Theater, New York City, was directed by Melia Bensussen and starred Mary Alice, Paul Benjamin, Paul Butler and Kenya Scott.

She wrote *Escape From Paradise*, a one-woman show which was produced at the Goodman Theatre Studio, Chicago, in October 1995. Her short plays *Watermelon Rinds* and *Inside the Belly of the Beast* were incorporated into a program at the Goodman Theatre Studio in 1994. Her other plays include *Mudtracks*, *Love Poem #97* and *Love Poem #98.*

She wrote and appeared in the play *Millennium Mambo*, a one-woman work, presented at the Goodman Theatre in February 2000. The work also included short pieces by playwrights Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Suzan-Lori Parks and Kia Corthron. She wrote the play *A Night in Tunisia*, which premiered during the 2000 Alabama Shakespeare Festival. In 2000, Taylor won a best new play award from the American Critics' Association for *Oo-Bla-Dee*, a play about 1940s female jazz musicians. The Goodman Theatre produced the play in 1999.

She wrote and directed *Crowns*, which is a co-production of the McCarter Theatre, where it premiered in October 2002 and the Second Stage Theatre, produced in December 2002. *Crowns* is described by *Playbill* as a "play-with-gospel-music", and is based on the book of the same name of photographs by Michael Cunningham and journalist Craig Marberry. *Crowns* has been produced in various locations, including the Meroney Theater in Salisbury, North Carolina with The Piedmont Players in May 2009; the Zach Theatre in Austin, Texas in September 2004, the Pasadena Playhouse in co-production with Ebony Repertory Theatre in July 2009; Syracuse Stage in Syracuse, New York; at the Connecticut Repertory Theatre in Storrs, Connecticut in May 2009 and at the Electric City Playhouse in Anderson, SC in May 2011. *Crowns* was the most performed musical in the country in 2006. It won four Helen Hayes Awards (for Washington, D.C. productions), including Taylor's win for Best Direction as well as Best Regional Musical.

Extraordinary Crowns:

The History of the Black Woman's Church Hat

Go into any African-American church on Sunday, and you'll see women wearing them. Those big, bold church hats. The hats became popular after slavery. Black women wanted to look their best when worshiping and the hats were considered a way to honor God. But wearing them isn't just about fashion. It's a deeply rooted African tradition that has both spiritual and cultural significance. The hats are considered a woman's crown and they symbolize triumph over hardship.

The sound of praise fills the heavens outside of Pilgrim Baptist Church. As the 150th psalm says: “Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.”

So when the choir starts to rock and the congregation is on its feet, for the women inside the temple, faith and fashion become one. “Women felt when they came into the House of the Lord they wanted to give their best, look their best. So they put on their best outfit which included that hat,” said Connie Steele of Pilgrim Baptist Church.

From the simple, to the big, women worshiping in hats is a tradition that’s been passed down through the years in the Black church. “My grandmother wore hats so I came up in the year where ladies wore hats all the time,” said Steele.

The hat tops off the Sunday outfit and brings dignity to the women who wear them. Hats are a statement of what it means to be a black church-going woman in America. “It makes us feel independent. It makes us feel fabulous,” said Steele.

Because of the Bible the hats are more than just a fashion statement. 1st Corinthians, Chapter 11, Verse 5 says: “Every woman that prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, dishonors her head, as if she were shaven.”

The glowing sequence, feathers, diamonds and pearls: church hats go from the usual to the outrageous and the women who wear them don’t just one one or two. “It’s an art; it’s a wearable art,” said Guy Smith. Smith’s mother, Erma Jean Smith, owned more than 150 hats.

She died in 2016. Now her hats are on display at Roanoke’s Harrison Museum of African-American History and Culture.

The display is not just about fashion but a look back at history. “It’s more than about one individual. It’s like a significant part of the African-American female culture. It gives people an opportunity to get a little better insight of some of the struggles that women of different time periods had,” said Smith.

Hats tell a story about the woman of God underneath. They are an expression of the Black women's belief and themselves even when the messages from society told her otherwise. Slave owners shaved black women's heads as a way to strip them of their individuality and to show dominance over the slave. Even while on the plantation, Black women used headdresses to distinguish themselves. "They would do different things with wraps they would wear in the field, different straw hats so they could express themselves," said Smith.

Wearing hats to worship is a tradition rooted in African culture. Many of the hats are designed after west African hair dressings, filled with braids and beads. After slavery as the black middle class began to emerge, the hat symbolized status and God's blessings in the woman's life. "It was a coming of age for African-American women. They had worked during the week cleaning people's homes or in the factory and Sunday was a day they could celebrate," said Smith.

But if you take a look around the sanctuary, the Sunday hat sorority has a vintage appeal. Many of the women 50 and older still wear the hats but very few of the younger women embrace the tradition. "A lot of girls that are growing up didn't have grandmothers who wore the hats in the church so I think because they didn't grow up in that atmosphere they really don't realize the importance of the significance of a hat," said Steele.

Now it's up to the mothers of the church to carry on the bold and bright tradition of women worshiping in hats: traditions rooted in faith, love, and hope, that the younger women will top their heads, giving glory to God.

African American Music

From the lyrical cries of black street vendors in eighteenth-century Philadelphia to the infectious dance rhythms of the Motown sound, African American music has been heard at all times and in every corner of America. African American involvement in the nation's music. Reflecting both the hardships and triumphs black Americans have experienced in the United States, their music has also served to shape the national identity, profoundly influencing the lives of all Americans.

The origins of gospel music are during American slavery, when enslaved Africans were introduced to the Christian religion and converted in large numbers. Remnants of different African cultures were combined with Western Christianity, with one result being the emergence of the spiritual. Jubilee songs and sorrow songs were two types of spirituals that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Some spirituals were also used to pass on hidden messages; for example, when Harriet Tubman was nearby, slaves would sing "Go Down, Moses" to signify that a 'deliverer' was nearby. At this time, the term "gospel songs" referred to evangelical hymns sung by Protestant (Congregational and Methodist) Christians, especially those with a missionary theme. Hymns, Protestant gospel songs, and spirituals make up the basic source of black music.

Traditional black gospel is music that is written to express either personal or a communal belief regarding African American Christian life, as well as (in terms of the varying music styles) to give a Christian alternative to mainstream secular music. It is a form of Christian music and a subgenre of Black gospel music.

Like other forms of music, the creation, performance, significance, and even the

definition of gospel music varies according to culture and social context. It is composed and performed for many purposes, ranging from aesthetic pleasure, religious or ceremonial purposes, or as an entertainment product for the marketplace. However, a common theme as with most Christian music is praise, worship or thanks to God and Christ.

Traditional gospel music was popular in the mid-20th century. It is the primary source for urban contemporary gospel and Christian hip hop, which rose in popularity during the late 20th century and early 21st century.

"I AM A QUEEN- AND THIS HAT IS MY CROWN"

Adorned with an elegant hat and a head held high, African-American women are known to sport their crowns each Sunday. Wearing a hat, also called a "crown," to church on Sunday is a cherished tradition within the African-American community. This tradition can be traced back to Africa. In Africa, hair is symbolic. It symbolized one's family background, social status, spirituality and tribe. Decorating the head and hair was an essential part of the dress, especially in West Africa, where most black people in America have their origins. Women, depending on their tribe, would embellish their hair with braids, silver coins, cowrie shells and beads

When Africans were sold into slavery and brought to the Americas, many of the African women continued to style their hair. This became problematic for slave owners because they were afraid white men would be attracted to these women, so colonizers enacted laws to limit the Africans' cultural expression. Esteban Rodriguez Miro, the Spanish

governor of Louisiana, created the Tigon Laws of 1786, which forced women of color to cover their hair. This law was made to mark these women as inferior.

Teníadé Broughton paying homage to Jacques Aman's painting.

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governor of Louisiana, created the Tigon Laws of 1786, which forced women of color to cover their hair. This law was made to mark these women as inferior.

However, black women found a way to turn the tables by making the head wrap fashionable. They used unique colors and wrapping styles to enhance their skin tones and facial features. Hair wraps are still popular today. Although not all African women had access to stylish fabrics during slavery, this loophole helped pave the way for African-American women to take pride in their hair, head wraps and, eventually, hats.

By the Reconstruction Era, African Americans gained more rights and opportunities, which allowed them to express themselves more freely. Somewhat a combination of rebellion and a reverence for church, African Americans chose to dress their absolute best from head to toe each Sunday.

“I think for black people, especially if you were working in the cotton fields all day, you never got a chance to look good. You certainly don’t look good in the cotton fields,” Mamie Hixon, English professor at the University of West Florida, said. “Sharecroppers had on a sack dress, a sack on their back and a rag on their head. So, you have a crown— the crown you deserve.”

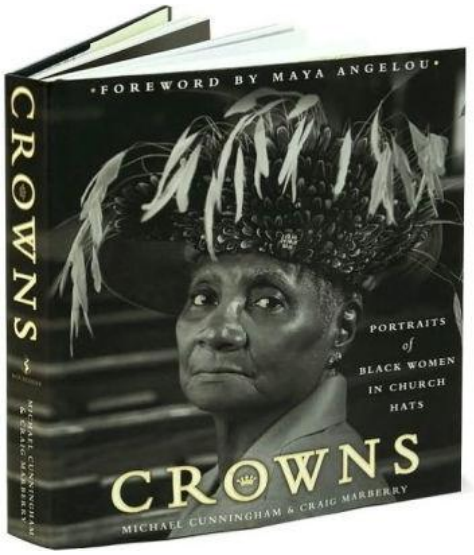
Today, most women follow this tradition simply because the women before them did. Lola Presley, charter member of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women Pensacola Chapter (NC100BW), recalled that every woman in her family carried on the tradition.

“My mother was born in the 20s. She always dressed up with a hat on Sunday. My mother, grandmother, aunts and cousins, they are all from that era. They all wore hats,” These hats are more than a basic head covering. The hat is an extension of blacks’ original crown: their hair.

Black women’s hair has been scrutinized since the dawn of slavery. It’s been stereotyped as “distracting,” “unkempt” and “unprofessional.” These women still

experience hair discrimination today. In 2019, Dove found that black women were 50 percent more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair. Just this year, California became the first state to enact a law prohibiting the discrimination of natural hair. That law was coined the Crown Act.

“One part of the coalition’s national mission statements is to empower women at various stages in their lives,” Hixon said. “About the time of the meeting, I had just finished reading this book called *Crowns*. So, I asked, ‘Why don’t we do a hat show?’”



Inspired by *Crowns*, a book featuring portraits of black women in Sunday church hats, Hixon launched what would be the first of many hat shows.

“Women worked hard and that’s how we knew that this show was going to be a hit and stayed a hit for several years,” Hixon said. “Women looked forward to designing a hat or buying a hat from a local shop. We always did that show on a Sunday at two o’clock, so women just came after church since many of them were in hats anyway. ”The hattitude category is the most popular. When these women were asked if they have hattitude, we were met with a resounding “Yes.” But what is “hattitude”?

“It’s a hat wearing attitude,” Hixon explained. “Not only are you wearing the hat with a certain kind of demeanor and personality, but the hat itself speaks. It has a personality. That’s hattitude.”

Although hat wearing is a beloved tradition, all traditions are bound to change. Each generation adds their own personal touch. Arnold explained that almost every time she leaves the house now, it's with a hat on. Pensacola historian Teníadé Broughton has practically trademarked headwraps in Pensacola. She is hardly ever seen without a beautiful fabric framing her face.

Dr. Hardeman explained that she is one of the few first ladies in the area who continues to wear a hat on Sundays, but even she doesn't wear a hat each Sunday like her mother did when she was a first lady.

"A lot of people have gotten into wearing fascinators, instead. A lot of ladies in the traditional churches have gotten out of wearing hats. There are still some that do. But as far as an every Sunday thing, we hardly wear them. We hardly wear them because they're heavy and change, traditions change." Even if hats' transition to fascinators or if hats somehow phase out, there is one thing for certain: a black woman's crown is always in style.

THE BLACK CHURCH

Excerpted from "The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song"
by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (PenguinPress)

Political activists — including Malcolm X, of course, but especially the Black Panther Party in the latter half of the 1960s — have debated whether the role of the Black embrace of Christianity under slavery was a positive or negative force. There were those who argued that the Black Church was an example of Karl Marx's famous indictment of religion as "the opium of the people" because it gave to the oppressed

false comfort and hope, obscuring the causes of their oppression and reducing their urge to overturn that oppression. But I do not believe that religion functioned in this simple fashion in the history of Black people in this country.

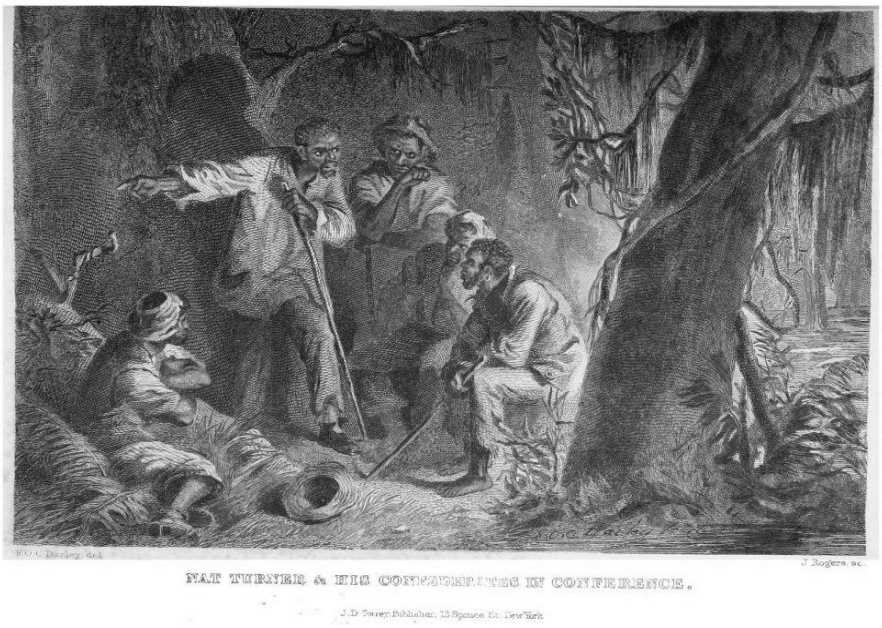
As a matter of fact, although Marx was no fan of religion, to put it mildly, this statement, which the Panthers loved to quote, was part of a more complicated assessment of the nature and function of religion. The full quote bears repeating: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” Marx could not imagine the complexity of the Black Church, even if the Black Church could imagine him — could imagine those who lacked the tools to see beyond its surface levels of meaning. James Weldon Johnson, in his lovely poem about the anonymous authors of the sacred vernacular tradition, “O Black and Unknown Bards,” put this failure of interpretive reciprocity in this memorable way:

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?

The role of Black Christianity in motivating our country’s largest slave rebellion, Nat Turner’s rebellion, Southampton County, Va., is only the most dramatic example of the text of the King James Bible being called upon to justify the violent revolutionary overthrow of the slave regime. But we need only look at the brilliant use of the church in all of its forms — from W. E. B. Du Bois’s triptych of “the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy” to the use of the building itself — to see the revolutionary potential and practice of Black Christianity in forging social change. What most intrigues me about Marx’s full quote is his realization that it is at once “the expression of real suffering and a protest

against real suffering," a crucial part of the quote that seems to have fallen away.

People, of course, pray and worship for all sorts of reasons. Despite what Marx and the Black Panthers thought, the importance of the role of the Black Church at its best cannot be gainsaid in the history of the African American people. Nor can it be

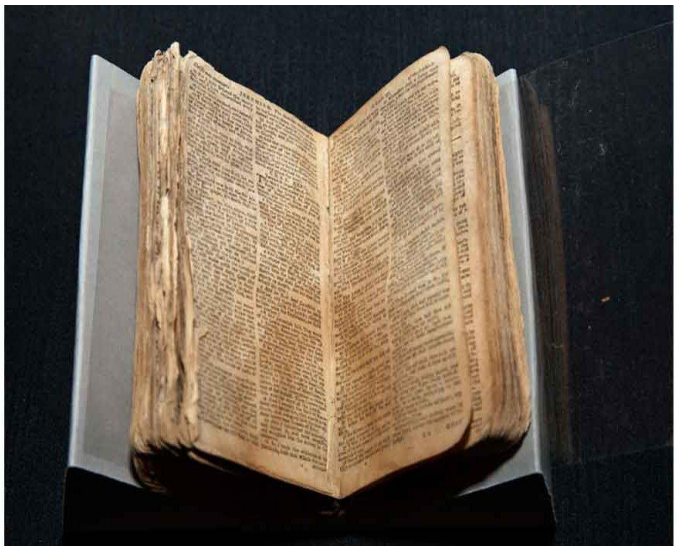


"Nat Turner and His Confederates in Conference," an engraving by John Rogers based on an illustration by Felix Darley.

underestimated. It isn't religion that keeps human beings enslaved; it is violence. Most normal human beings don't need an elaborate religious belief system to resist the temptation to sacrifice their lives in the face of overwhelming odds and the certainty that they will be brutally suppressed and killed. That would be unreasonable.

The "failure" of African Americans to overthrow their masters, as the enslaved men and women did on the island that became the Republic of Haiti, can't be traced to the role of the church per se, as Nat Turner's decision to act based on his interpretation of prophecy attests. Early on, the church and Christianity played a role both in Black rebellions and in the preparation of Black people for leadership roles. Following Denmark Vesey's alleged slave insurrection, Emanuel Church in Charleston, S.C., was

burned to the ground; at the end of the Civil War, the Rev. Richard Harvey Cain left his congregation in New York to go south, to resurrect Mother Emanuel, and then, during



A Bible belonging to Nat Turner from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Reconstruction was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. (Other churches would be the subject of deadly attacks and explosions carried out at the hands of white supremacists, most notably the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963, in which four little girls were killed, another was blinded, and more than a dozen people were injured.

Turner knew his Bible. Frederick Douglass, too, was thoroughly grounded in the church, having attended the Methodist church on Sharp Street in Baltimore while enslaved and then delivering his first public speeches — sermons — at the AME Zion Church ("Little Zion") on Second Street in the whaling city of New Bedford, Mass. It has long been assumed that Douglass miraculously "found his voice" at an abolition meeting on Nantucket Island in 1841, three years after he escaped from slavery in Maryland, spontaneously rising to his feet in front of a roomful of white strangers. Not so, and he was even "ordained" in a way at Little Zion when he was about 21 or 22 years old. Like his father, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., pastored at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist

Church; unlike his father, he ran for political office and served in the U.S. House of Representatives. Powell effectively led the civil rights movement in the North until Montgomery, Ala., emerged as the epicenter of the movement and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became its most recognizable face and voice.

Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at an interfaith civil rights rally
in San Francisco's Cow Palace on June 30, 1964.
Photo by George Conklin/Creative Commons

I could provide many other examples. The Black Church has a long and noble history in relation to Black political action, dating back at least to the late 18th century. The failure of enslaved African Americans to overthrow the institution of slavery, as their Haitian sisters and brothers would do, cannot be traced to the supposed passivity inbred by Christianity; rather, it can be traced to the simple fact that, unlike the Black people enslaved on Saint-Domingue, African Americans were vastly outnumbered and outgunned. Violent insurrection would have been a form of racial suicide.

What the church did do, in the meantime, as Black people collectively awaited freedom, was to provide a liminal space brimming with subversive features. To paraphrase one of

the standard phrases from the Christian tradition, one should never underestimate the power of prayer. Just ask Bull Connor or George Wallace. Without the role of the Black Church, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, with King by his side at both, and future congressman John Lewis, himself an ordained Baptist minister, present in 1965 — would never have been enacted when they were. There is no question that the Black Church is a parent of the civil rights movement, and today's Black Lives Matter movement is one of its heirs.

U.S. Rep. John Lewis at Harvard's 2018 Commencement, where he was principal speaker.

This is a truth made manifest in the mourning of Rep. Lewis. In a season of pain marked by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, Lewis's funeral included a service at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma and his final crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. For Lewis, voting was sacramental, and he shed his blood for us to exercise this most fundamental of rights. In revisiting these sites and reflecting on his many marches for justice, "we, the people" once again bore witness to the deeper historical reality that faith has long been the source of the courage of those toiling on the front lines of change. As Lewis once put it, "The civil rights movement was based on faith. Many of us who were participants in this movement saw our involvement as an

extension of our faith."

One of the greatest achievements in the long history of civilization, as far as I am concerned, is the extraordinary resilience of the African American community under slavery, through the sheer will and determination of these men and women to live to see another day, to thrive. The number of Africans dragged to North America between 1526 and 1808, when the slave trade ended, totaled approximately 388,000 shipped directly from continent to continent, plus another 52,430 through the intra-American trade. That initial population had grown to some 4.4 million free and enslaved people by 1860. How was this possible? What sustained our ancestors under the nightmare of enslavement to build families and survive their being ripped apart and sold off in the domestic trade; to carry on despite not being able to ward off the rapacious sexual advances of their masters (a verity exposed by DNA, which shows that the average African American is more than 24 percent European); to acquire skills; to create a variety of complex cultural forms; to withstand torture, debasement, and the suffocating denial of their right to learn to read and write; and to defer the gratification of freedom from bondage — all without ever giving up the hope of liberty, as one enslaved poet, George Moses Horton, put it, if not for themselves, then for their children or grandchildren, when slavery had no end in sight? What empowered them with "hope against hope"? The writer Darryl Pinckney in a recent essay notes that "if a person cannot imagine a future, then we would say that that person is depressed." To paraphrase Pinckney's next line, if a people cannot imagine a future, then its culture will die.

"The importance of the role of the Black Church at its best cannot be gainsaid in the history of the African American people. Nor can it be underestimated."

And Black culture didn't die. The signal aspects of African American culture were planted, watered, given light, and nurtured in the Black Church, out of the reach and away from the watchful eyes of those who would choke the life out of it. We have to give the church its due as a source of our ancestors' unfathomable resiliency and perhaps the first formalized site for the collective fashioning and development of so many African

American aesthetic forms. Although Black people made spaces for secular expression, only the church afforded room for all of it to be practiced at the same time. And only in the church could all of the arts emerge, be on display, practiced and perfected, and expressed at one time and in one place, including music, dance, and song; rhetoric and oratory; poetry and prose; textual exegesis and interpretation; memorization, reading, and writing; the dramatic arts and scripting; call-and-response, signifying, and indirection; philosophizing and theorizing; and, of course, mastering all of "the flowers of speech." We do the church a great disservice if we fail to recognize that it was the first formalized site within African American culture perhaps not exclusively for the fashioning of the Black aesthetic, but certainly for its performance, service to service, week by week, Sunday to Sunday.

The Black Church was the cultural cauldron that Black people created to combat a system designed to crush their spirit. Collectively and with enormous effort, they refused to allow that to happen. And the culture they created was sublime, awesome, majestic, lofty, glorious, and at all points subversive of the larger culture of enslavement that sought to destroy their humanity. The miracle of African American survival can be traced directly to the miraculous ways that our ancestors reinvented the religion that their "masters" thought would keep them subservient, Rather, that religion enabled them and their descendants to learn, to grow, to develop, to interpret and reinvent the world in which they were trapped; it enabled them to bide their time — ultimately, time for them to fight for their freedom, and for us to continue the fight for ours. It also gave them the moral authority to turn the mirror of religion back on their masters and to indict the nation for its original sin of allowing their enslavement to build up that "city upon a hill." In exposing that hypocrisy at the heart of their "Christian" country, they exhorted succeeding generations to close the yawning gap between America's founding ideals and the reality they had been forced to endure. Who were these people? As the late Rev. Joseph Lowery put it, "I don't know whether the faith produced them, or if they produced the faith. But they belonged to each other."

More About the Church

Most of the first black congregations and churches formed before 1800 were founded by freed blacks – for example, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Springfield Baptist Church (Augusta, Georgia); Petersburg, Virginia; and Savannah, Georgia. The oldest black Baptist church in Kentucky, and third oldest in the United States, was founded about 1790 by the slave Peter Durrett. The oldest black Catholic church, St Augustine in New Orleans, was founded by free blacks in 1841.

After slavery in the United States was abolished, segregationist attitudes towards blacks and whites worshiping together were not as predominant in the North as compared to the South, although this is a dubious assertion. Many white Protestant ministers moved to the South after the Civil War to establish churches where black and white people worshiped together. In Wesleyan Holiness denominations such as the Church of God, the belief that "interracial worship was a sign of the true Church" was taught, with both whites and blacks ministering regularly in Church of God congregations, which invited people of all races to worship there. In some parts of the country, such as New Orleans, black and white Catholics had worshiped together for almost 150 years before the Civil War—albeit without full equality and primarily under French and Spanish rule.

Attacks by the Ku Klux Klan or other whites opposed to such efforts thwarted those attempts and even prevented Blacks from worshiping in the same buildings as whites. In communities where black and white people worshiped together in the South shortly after the Civil War, the persecution of African Americans was less severe. Yet, freed blacks most often established congregations and church facilities separate from their white neighbors, who were often their former owners. In the Catholic Church, the rising tide of segregation eventually resulted in segregated parishes across the South, even in places where segregation had not previously been the norm.

These new black churches created communities and worship practices that were culturally distinct from other churches, including forms of Christian worship that derived from African spiritual traditions, such as call and response. These churches also

became the centers of communities, serving as school sites, taking up social welfare functions such as providing for the indigent, and going on to establish orphanages and prison ministries. As a result, black churches were particularly important during the Civil Rights Movement.

Slavery

African American Baptist Church, Silver Hill Plantation, Georgetown County, South Carolina

Evangelical Baptist and Methodist preachers traveled throughout the South in the Great Awakening of the late 18th century. They appealed directly to slaves, and a few thousand slaves converted. Black individuals found opportunities to have active roles in new congregations, especially in the Baptist Church, where slaves were appointed as leaders and preachers. (They were excluded from such roles in the Anglican or Episcopal Church.) As they listened to readings, slaves developed their own interpretations of the Scriptures and found inspiration in stories of deliverance, such as the Exodus out of Egypt. Nat Turner, an enslaved Baptist preacher, was inspired to armed rebellion against slavery, in an uprising that killed about 50 white people in Virginia.

Both free blacks and the more numerous slaves participated in the earliest black Baptist congregations founded near Petersburg, The **black church** (sometimes termed **Black Christianity** or **African-American Christianity**) is the faith and body of Christian congregations and denominations in the United States that minister predominantly to African Americans, as well as their collective traditions and members. The term "black church" can also refer to individual congregations.

While most black congregations belong to predominantly African-American Protestant denominations, such as the National Baptist Convention or African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) or Church of God in Christ (COGIC), many others are in predominantly

white Protestant denominations such as the United Church of Christ (which developed from the Congregational Church of New England), or in integrated denominations such as the Church of God. There are also many Black Catholic churches.

Several churches were founded in Virginia, Savannah, Georgia, and Lexington, Kentucky, before 1800. The slaves Peter Durrett and his wife founded the First African Church (now known as First African Baptist Church) in Lexington, Kentucky about 1790. The church's trustees purchased its first property in 1815. The congregation numbered about 290 by the time of Durrett's death in 1823.

The Fir African Baptist Church had its beginnings in 1817 when John Mason Peck and the formerly enslaved John Berry Meachum began holding church services for African Americans in St. Louis. Meachum founded the First African Baptist Church in 1827. It was the first African-American church west of the Mississippi River. Although there were ordinances preventing blacks from assembling, the congregation grew from 14 people at its founding to 220 people by 1829. Two hundred of the parishioners were slaves, who could only travel to the church and attend services with the permission of their owners.

Following slave revolts in the early 19th century, including Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, Virginia passed a law requiring black congregations to meet only in the presence of a white minister. Other states similarly restricted exclusively black churches or the assembly of blacks in large groups unsupervised by whites. Nevertheless, the black Baptist congregations in the cities grew rapidly and their members numbered several hundred each before the Civil War. While mostly led by free blacks, most of their members were slaves.

In plantation areas, slaves organized underground churches and hidden religious meetings, the "invisible church", where slaves were free to mix evangelical Christianity with African beliefs and African rhythms. With the time, many incorporated Wesleyan Methodist hymns, gospel songs, and spirituals. The underground churches provided psychological refuge from the white world. The spirituals gave the church members a secret way to communicate and, in some cases, to plan a rebellion.

Slaves also learned about Christianity by attending services led by a white preacher or supervised by a white person. Slaveholders often held prayer meetings at their plantations. In the South until the Great Awakening, most slaveholders were Anglican if they practiced any Christianity. Although in the early years of the First Great Awakening, Methodist and Baptist preachers argued for manumission of slaves and abolition, by the early decades of the 19th century, they often had found ways to support the institution. In settings where whites supervised worship and prayer, they used Bible stories that reinforced people's keeping to their places in society, urging slaves to be loyal and to obey their masters. In the 19th century, Methodist and Baptist chapels were founded among many of the smaller communities and common planters.

During the early decades of the 19th century, they used stories such as the Curse of Ham to justify slavery to themselves. They promoted the idea that loyal and hard-working slaves would be rewarded in the afterlife. Sometimes slaves established their own Sabbath schools to talk about the Scriptures. Slaves who were literate tried to teach others to read, as Frederick Douglass did while still enslaved as a young man in Maryland.

Free Blacks

Free blacks in both northern and southern cities formed their own congregations and churches before the end of the 18th century. They organized independent black congregations and churches to practice religion apart from white oversight. Along with white churches opposed to slavery, free blacks in Philadelphia provided aid and comfort to slaves who escaped and helped all new arrivals adjust to city life.

"Wade in the water." A postcard of a river baptism in New Bern, North Carolina, around 1900.

In 1787 in Philadelphia, the black church was born out of protest and

revolutionary reaction to racism. Resenting being relegated to a segregated gallery at St. George's Methodist Church, Methodist preachers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, and other black members, left the church and formed the Free African Society. It was at first non-denominational and provided mutual aid to the free black community. Over time, Jones began to lead Episcopal services there. He led most of its members to create the African Church, in the Episcopal tradition. (Butler 2000, DuBois 1866).

In the fall of 1792, several black leaders attended services at St. George's Methodist Church and had recently helped to expand the church. The black churchgoers were told to sit upstairs in the new gallery. When they mistakenly sat in an area not designated for blacks, they were forcibly removed from the seats they had helped build. According to Allen, "...we all went out of the church in one body, and they were no longer plagued by us." While he and Jones led different denominations, they continued to work closely together and with the black community in Philadelphia.... It was accepted as a parish and on July 17, 1794 became the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. In 1804 Jones was the first black priest ordained in the Episcopal Church. (Butler 2000, DuBois 1866).

Richard Allen, a Methodist preacher, wanted to continue with the Methodist tradition. He built a congregation and founded the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). By July 29, 1794, they also had a building ready for their worship. The church adopted the slogan: "To Seek for Ourselves." In recognition of his leadership and preaching, in 1799 Bishop Francis Asbury ordained Allen as a Methodist minister. Allen and the AME Church were active in antislavery campaigns, fought racism in the North, and promoted education, starting schools for black children.

Petersburg, Virginia had two of the oldest black congregations in the country, both organized before 1800 as a result of the Great Awakening: First Baptist Church (1774) and Gillfield Baptist Church (1797). Each congregation moved from rural areas into their own buildings in the early 19th century. Their two black Baptist congregations were the first of that denomination in the city and they grew rapidly.

In Savannah, Georgia, a black Baptist congregation was organized in 1777 by George Liele. A former slave, he had been converted by ordained Baptist minister Matthew Moore. His early preaching was encouraged by his master, Henry Sharp. Sharp, a Baptist deacon and

Loyalist, freed Liele before the American Revolutionary War began. Liele had been preaching to slaves on plantations, but made his way to Savannah, where he organized a congregation. After 1782, when Liele left the city with the British, Andrew Bryan led what became known as the First African Baptist Church. By 1800 the church had 700 members, and by 1830 it had grown to more than 2400 members. Soon it generated two new black congregations in the city.

Before 1850, First African Baptist in Lexington, Kentucky grew to 1,820 members, making it the largest congregation in that state. This was under its second pastor, Rev. London Ferrill, a free black, and occurred as Lexington was expanding rapidly as a city. First African Baptist was admitted to the Elkhorn Baptist Association in 1824, where it came somewhat under oversight of white congregations. In 1841, Saint Augustine Catholic Church was established by the Creole community of New Orleans. This church is the oldest black Catholic parish in the United States. In 1856, First African Baptist built a large Italianate church, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. By 1861 the congregation numbered 2,223 members.

First African Baptist Church in Savannah, GA is believed to be the oldest black church in North America.

Reconstruction

After emancipation, Northern churches founded by free blacks, as well as those of predominantly white denominations, sent missions to the South to minister to newly freed slaves, including to teach them to read and write. For instance, Bishop

Daniel Payne of the AME Church returned to Charleston, South Carolina in April 1865 with nine missionaries. He organized committees, associations and teachers to reach freedmen throughout the countryside. In the first year after the war, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church gained 50,000 congregants.

By the end of Reconstruction, AME congregations existed from Florida to Texas. Their missionaries and preachers had brought more than 250,000 new adherents into the church. While it had a northern base, the church was heavily influenced by this growth in the South and incorporation of many members who had different practices and traditions. Similarly, within the first decade, the independent AME Zion church, founded in New York, also gained tens of thousands of Southern members. These two independent black denominations attracted the most new members in the South.

Established in 1816, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church is the oldest AME church in the Deep South and a historic symbol of faith, community building, and resistance to slavery and racism.

In 1870 in Jackson, Tennessee, with support from white colleagues of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, more than 40 black Southern ministers, all freedmen and former slaves, met to establish the Southern-based Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church (now Christian Methodist Episcopal Church), founded as an independent branch of Methodism. They took their mostly black congregations with them. They adopted the Methodist Doctrine and elected their first two bishops, William H. Miles of Kentucky and Richard H. Vanderhorst of South Carolina. Within three years, from a base of about 40,000, they had grown to 67,000 members, and more than ten times that many in 50 years.

The Church of God, with its beginnings in 1881, held that "interracial worship was a sign of the true Church", with both whites and blacks ministering regularly in Church of God congregations, which invited people of all races to worship there. Those who were entirely sanctified testified that they were "saved, sanctified, and prejudice removed." When Church of God ministers, such as Lena Shoffner, visited the camp meetings of other denominations, the rope in the congregation that separated whites and blacks was untied "and worshipers of both races approached the altar to pray." Though outsiders would sometimes attack Church of God services and camp meetings for their stand for racial equality, Church of God members were "undeterred even by violence" and "maintained their strong interracial position as the core of their message of the unity of all believers."

Baptismal ceremony at the First African Baptist Church in Richmond. (Harper's Weekly, July 27, 1874)

At the same time, black Baptist churches, well-established before the Civil War, continued to grow and add new congregations. With the rapid growth of black Baptist churches in the South, in 1895 church officials organized a new Baptist association, the National Baptist Convention. This was the unification of three national black conventions, organized in 1880 and the 1890s. It brought together the areas of mission, education and overall cooperation. Despite the founding of new black conventions in the early and later 20th century, this is still the largest black religious organization in the United States. These churches blended elements from underground churches with elements from freely established black churches.

The postwar years were marked by a separatist impulse as blacks exercised the right to move and gather beyond white supervision or control. They developed black churches, benevolent societies, fraternal orders and fire companies. In some areas they moved from farms into towns, as in middle Tennessee, or to cities that needed rebuilding, such as Atlanta. Black churches were the focal points of black communities, and their members' quickly seceding from white churches demonstrated their desire to manage their own affairs independently of white supervision. It also showed the prior strength of the "invisible church" hidden from white eyes.

Black preachers provided leadership, encouraged education and economic growth, and were often the primary link between the black and white communities. The black church established and/or maintained the first black schools and encouraged community members to fund these schools and other public services. For most black leaders, the churches always were connected to political goals of advancing the race. There grew to be a tension between black leaders from the North and people in the South who wanted to run their churches and worship in their own way.

Since the male hierarchy denied them opportunities for ordination, middle-class women in the black church asserted themselves in other ways: they organized missionary societies to address social issues. These societies provided job training and reading education, worked for better living conditions, raised money for African missions, wrote religious periodicals, and promoted Victorian ideals of womanhood, respectability, and racial uplift.

Politics and Social Issues

The black church continues to be a source of support for members of the African-American community. When compared to American churches as a whole, black churches tend to focus more on social issues such as poverty, gang violence, drug use, prison ministries and racism. A study in 1996 found that black Christians were more likely to have heard about health care reform from their pastors than were white Christians.

Most surveys indicate that while blacks tend to vote Democratic in elections, members of

traditionally African-American churches are generally more socially conservative than white Protestants as a whole. Same-sex marriage and other LGBT issues have been among the leading causes for activism in some black churches,though a majority of black Protestants

remain opposed to this stance. Nevertheless, some denominations have been discussing this issue. For example, the African Methodist Episcopal Church prohibits its ministers from officiating same-sex weddings, but it does not have a clear policy on ordination.

Some members of the black clergy have not accepted same-sex marriage. A group known as the Coalition of African American Pastors (CAAP), maintains their disdain for gay marriage. The CAAP president, Reverend William Owens, claims that the marriage equality act will cause corruption within the United States. The organization insists that a real union is between a man and a woman. They also believe that the law prohibiting gay marriage should have been upheld. The CAAP members agree that the Supreme Court had no right to overturn the constitutional ruling.

Neighborhood institutions

Although black urban neighborhoods in cities that have deindustrialized may have suffered from civic disinvestment, with lower quality schools, less effective policing and fire protection, there are institutions that help to improve the physical and social capital of black neighborhoods. In black neighborhoods the churches may be important sources of social cohesion. For some African Americans the kind of spirituality learned through these churches works as a protective factor against the corrosive forces of poverty and racism.

Churches may also do work to improve the physical infrastructure of the neighborhood. Churches in Harlem have undertaken real estate ventures and renovated burnt-out and abandoned brownstones to create new housing for residents. Churches have fought for the right to operate their own schools in place of the often inadequate public schools found in many black neighborhoods.

Traditions

African American Watch Night rings in the New Year, 1935

Like many Christians, African-American Christians sometimes participate in or attend a Christmas play. *Black Nativity* by Langston Hughes is a re-telling of the classic Nativity story with gospel music. Productions can be found at black theaters and churches all over the country. The Three Wise Men are typically played by prominent members of the black community. The watchnight service held on New Year's Eve in many Christian denominations, especially those of the Methodist and Moravian traditions, is widely attended by African American Christians.

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