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Moments in the History of Black Churches and Hip-Hop

History is a story—a story of a people, a story of ideas, of events. History is *a narrative about an individual or a group of people's ways of thinking and being in the world*. Who a person or a people think they are is their sense of identity. In essence, identity is a statement that says, “This is who I am!,” and it is expressed in any number of ways—through dress, language, body movements, and hair. Based on their identity, a people exercise their sense of **agency**.¹ That is, they take *actions to shape or construct their social, cultural, political, and economic world*. The intended and collective decisions that a group makes each day contribute to tomorrow's history. History is not merely a set of facts that occurred in the past to be forgotten, remembered, or celebrated. History serves many purposes. This book discusses some of the social issues that connect black churches with the hip-hop community, and these issues will take us in a variety of directions. What connects and grounds all of these issues are

1. Vivian L. Vignoles, Seth J. Schwartz, and Koen Luyckx, “Introduction: Toward an Integrative View of Identity,” in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, vol. 1, *Structures and Processes*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York: Springer Science Business Media, 2011), 2.

the shared historical circumstances that gave rise to churches and hip-hop. When we look at religion and hip-hop through the lens of history, we begin to see how these two cultural expressions are interrelated in spite of how different they appear on the surface. Both of these culturally based creative forms come from and continue to respond to themes such as limited economic conditions, failing educational systems, oppressive political power structures, and societal ideas premised upon African American inferiority. Throughout their history, African Americans have responded to these concerns by expressing their identity on their own terms. All humans have a need to answer the question “Who am I?” through words and deeds. In the face of any number of negative circumstances and negative stereotypes, African Americans have continuously declared, “I am *somebody!*”²

Religion in Identity Formation and Social Agency

The history of **black religion** begins nearly as soon as enslaved Africans arrived on the soil of the British colonies and Spanish territories. It was, and remains, *the responses to the horrors of separation, torture, enslavement, and the good and bad circumstances that shape people’s desire to ask the big questions of life—the who, what, when, where, and why of their and their community’s existence.*³ Entire books have been written on the various ways that black religion has been practiced

2. The phrase “I am somebody!” was popularized most recently by Rev. Jesse Jackson. Jackson had been present with Martin Luther King Jr. on the evening that King was murdered at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Jackson coordinated the Operation Breadbasket program within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) from 1966 until King’s death in 1968. Jackson organized People United to Save Humanity (PUSH) in Chicago. The effort has continued to be his primary base for social justice activity since 1971. Rainbow PUSH Coalition, “Brief History,” n.d., http://rainbowpush.org/pages/brief_history.
3. See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004; orig. pub. 1978). See also Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Vodun, and any number of other religious expressions. Today, many scholars agree that African American religion even includes nontraditional forms of life orientation, such as humanism and, for some, even hip-hop.

In the eyes of many, African American religion focuses on the **Black Church**, although it is not the only religious orientation in African American communities.⁴ To a certain extent, this assumption is based on the fact that black churches have more members than other religious organizations, as the majority of African Americans consider themselves some brand of Christian. Writing in the late twentieth century, scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya define the Black Church as *congregations in seven mainline denominations in which the leadership and membership is largely African American*.⁵ These specifically include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ. In these pages, we cannot cover the whole history of these denominations, much less the totality of African American religious expression; however, we do offer snapshots of the growth of black churches, the emergence of hip-hop, and certain moments where these stories collide. To do so requires that we discuss not simply the history of the Black Church or the history of hip-hop, but moments from within the history of African American religion, which is much more than any one church, tradition, or cultural expression.

4. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990). See also Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998; orig. pub. 1973).

5. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 1.

Civil Rights History

We want to focus on a few of the key moments that easily demonstrate that African Americans influenced their social, political, and economic worlds through a demand for self-defined identity expressed as often inside of churches as outside. We show that African Americans first moved out from the locations they associated with hindering their ability to fully express their humanity. Then we show that religious identity through individuals, beliefs, and communities played a role in improving social, political, and economic conditions for African Americans. Moreover, for the sake of focusing our attention on more recent history, we begin the religious-history portion of this chapter in the same century that birthed hip-hop: the twentieth century.

As we write these words, those who were most active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s are starting to leave us. That is to say, the natural lives of the people who developed the ideas, walked the streets, and fought the courtroom battles of the movement are coming to an end. With their losses, we all might do well to reflect on the importance of their struggles and the impact of their efforts on us today, but to begin this history there is to fail to understand the social, political, and economic climate that set the stage for the possibility of those victories.

Historians have documented the impact of what is called the **Great Migration**. This massive people movement is believed to be the greatest in-country migration in U.S. history, and it shaped national and local social, economic, and political policies for the remainder of the twentieth century. In two waves between 1910–1940 and 1940–1970, African Americans moved from the rural South to cities in northern, midwestern, and to a lesser degree, western states. Black rural southerners also moved to urban areas in southern states.⁶ Travel

routes often followed railroad lines from Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas to cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and New York. Manufacturers and railroad companies sometimes offered free or discounted rail fares as part of the inducement for these valuable workers to leave their homes and relatives to labor in high-demand locales.⁷ Scores of African American families left sharecropping, crop picking, ditch digging, and other manual-labor jobs to work in automobile assembly plants, steel mills, and slaughterhouses in the North.⁸ Although the work in the North was largely unskilled, as it had been in the South, men could earn as much as three times the wages paid in the South; black women frequently worked as domestics and earned as much as double what they would have been paid in the South.⁹

African Americans who migrated north, west, and to the cities saw themselves as moving to a life with the promise of better economic opportunity. They believed themselves to be worth more than the conditions to which they had been consigned. They viewed themselves as moving away from the overt oppression of segregation and Jim Crow laws, along with their terroristic social practices and legal segregation in public places such as restaurants, movie theaters, and other entertainment facilities as well as in access to housing, hospitals, education, and employment. Life in the North, however, did not meet all of the hype of recruitment agents. As the migrants came to find out, new struggles awaited them in the urban centers of the North.

6. Laurie Lanzen Harris, *The Great Migration North, 1910–1970* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 2012), 25.

7. *Ibid.*, 32.

8. *Ibid.*, 34.

9. *Ibid.*, 34.

The swelling black population caused housing shortages.¹⁰ Available housing was limited to the parts of town vacated by whites, leaving many African Americans to live in the crowded, run-down, older parts of town. In these housing patterns, segregation existed in the North, albeit not necessarily as reinforced in the legal codes as it had been in the South.¹¹ Rather, in the northern industrial cities, housing and school segregation was limited through social practices and people networks. For example, landlords might systematically rent only to people they knew, and if everyone they knew was of the same race (white), housing segregation formed and was reinforced along these sorts of racial patterns.¹² Schools were similarly segregated. Students might be assigned to attend schools near their homes in segregated neighborhoods. Whether black children were able to gain access to equal education hinged on facts such as the access to transportation (such as buses provided by school boards) and the quality and content of textbooks.¹³ Resources for black students were minimal. Funding disparities widened as school boards often spent far less for black children than for white children in the same district.¹⁴

One of the children affected by segregated schools was eight-year-old Linda Brown, who lived in Topeka, Kansas.¹⁵ Segregated housing

10. *Ibid.*, 34.

11. *Ibid.*, 34–36.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision* (New York: Viking, 2002), 54.

14. Examples of educational discrimination are well documented. One source is Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 163–65; orig. pub. Alfred A. Knopf, 1976). Charles Hamilton Houston, one of the attorneys and legal strategists for *Brown*, documents scenes he would want filmed if a documentary of school discrimination were being made. Houston's detailed notes describe no or minimal toilets and missing windows at a closed school where whites formerly had been taught. Still, use of the school was denied to black children whose school was in a worse condition. The black children attended a segregated school only one mile away, where there were cracks in the door, letting in cold air, and openings in the floorboards wide enough for dropped pencils to fall onto the ground. Source: Kluger, 163–65.

patterns did not cause Linda Brown's school to be segregated. Rather, the legal and social philosophy of "separate but equal" supported its existence. Linda's father was Rev. Oliver Leon Brown, a welder and part-time assistant pastor at St. John African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Reverend Brown had attempted to enroll his daughter at the elementary school within walking distance from their home instead of at the school for black children, more than a thirty-minute bus ride away.¹⁶

Linda's journey started with her having to cross the railroad yard to the bus route. The bus system was unreliable. The bus that Linda needed was sometimes late and sometimes did not arrive at all, so she arose in order to catch an earlier bus, in case the one scheduled nearest to the school starting time had one of its routine scheduling mishaps. When the bus arrived as scheduled, Linda would be so early to school that during winter she waited in the cold for the doors to open.¹⁷ Citing the dangers and inconvenience of the "separate but equal" doctrine causing Linda (and countless young people who looked like her) such problems, Brown allowed his grievance with the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education to become one of several test cases in an NAACP lawsuit that eventually made its way before the Supreme Court.

Central in the legal arguments of these cases was that maintaining racially separated schools made them inherently unequal and inferior to schools operated for white children; such practices, it was argued, were unconstitutional. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Reverend Brown in Topeka and plaintiffs in several other states

15. Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 409–11.

16. Irons, *Jim Crow's Children*, 118–19.

17. Douglas Linder, "Meet the Browns: Esther Brown and the Oliver Brown Family," *Famous Trials: Brown v Board of Education of Topeka Trial 1951*, University of Missouri–Kansas City School of Law 2011, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/brownvboard/meetthebrowns.html>.

in 1954. Because the ruling was based on a constitutional issue, it applied across the nation. Due to the efforts of a small group of people and the sufferings of the entire African American community, legal segregation ended as a result of African Americans choosing to create their own opportunities and identities.

In addition to being a story about African Americans' fight for justice under the law, this famous story points out the subtle or indirect as well as foundational ways that religion was often interwoven into the lives of African Americans, especially through the shared connections of religious communities. Such communities served as locations for discussing political options, addressing individual spiritual or religious concerns, and soothing the wounds of the unjust social system. Desegregating schools was not the only place where religious communities attempted to contribute to the welfare of African Americans.

While one can debate the merit of religious organizations' involvement in the public life of the nation, it is the case that religious communities were among the institutions working to ease the transition from South to North. Migration patterns that followed the railroad lines facilitated the re-creation of similar cultural patterns among blacks from geographically proximate communities in the South. They formed churches and other types of networks of **mutual-aid societies** in which members and new comers volunteered to assist each other to meet various types of needs including food and clothing and sometimes finances.¹⁸ Black churches did more than serve as culturally connected worship houses. They were also civic meeting centers that helped to anchor communities. In the cities of the North and the South, churches were places where African Americans could openly discuss ways to

18. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 242.

collectively confront their struggles against social, economic, and political injustice.

The Great Migration shifted much attention on black religious life to the North, where hip-hop would emerge in the 1970s, but the story of black religion in the South was still developing. It was there that many of the mid-century episodes that would become crucial to the civil rights movement would occur. The twenty-six-year-old Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. first came to prominence when he was a spokesperson for the Montgomery (Alabama) Improvement Association (MIA).¹⁹ The MIA launched a yearlong boycott against city buses, sparked by Rosa Parks's decision to disobey a local ordinance. Montgomery city law limited blacks to the back of city buses. In fact, if there were insufficient seats for whites, blacks were required to give up their seats for white riders.²⁰ Blacks in Montgomery refused to use the city bus system until the transportation line made concessions to blacks' demands. After that year, African Americans were no longer required to pay their fares in the front of buses, exit, and reenter through the back door for their ride, and to give up their seats to white patrons who had paid the same fare.²¹

The success of the Montgomery bus boycott demonstrated the power of blacks' collective economic activity. It also demonstrated that the activities of religious people could be defined in very broad terms, in that many of the logistic hurdles of the boycott (ride sharing, vehicle coordination, etc.) were responded to through Black Church and Christian involvement. Moreover, it shows that the social, political, and economic strivings of African American equality

19. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1988), 137.

20. Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 105–108.

21. *Ibid.*, 157–73.

have been shared by the religious and the nonreligious through activities that have been beyond traditionally religious undertakings.

Even so, the winds of social change through Christian organizations and other collective action were apparent, and a group of African American Baptist ministers wanted one of their prominent organizations to take a more significant and intentional role to break from its practice of promoting gradual change. Since 1895, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. (NBC USA) had been the largest black denomination in the nation. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was a member of the denomination and had attempted to persuade the denominational president, Rev. Joseph H. Jackson, that a more substantial role in the civil rights movement was part of demonstrating the relevance of the denomination and its care for improving daily life for African Americans.²² King's appeal was to no avail, and Jackson's approach to the movement was in fact representative of a large number of black churches and their leaders. However, many black Christians were like King, in that they responded to the emerging movement in positive, progressive ways.²³

Due to the failure of convention members to elect more progressive leadership, spurned members of the NBC USA began to discuss forming a new black denomination focused on a mission of social change. As a consequence of these meetings and conversations, the Progressive National Baptist Convention was formed in Cincinnati in 1961.²⁴ The mission of the PNBC embraced the social-justice aspects of ministry, and the leadership of this new convention lent support to such progressive efforts, in part, by encouraging their

22. Stephen Finley and Terri Laws, "Progressive National Baptist Convention," in *African American Religious Cultures*, vol. 1, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO), 333.

23. There are many sources that describe the history of the conflict between Martin Luther King Jr. and Joseph H. Jackson. Peter Paris offers a scholarly comparison of their political and theological positions in *Black Leaders in Conflict* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1978).

24. Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., "History of the PNBC," <http://www.pnbc.org/PNBC/History.html>, accessed September 15, 2013.

congregants to participate in the civil rights movement in local and national protests.²⁵

Increasingly, Christian clergy, interfaith leaders, and laity motivated by faith became involved in the social-change movements spreading across the nation. Septima Clark and Ella Baker are two of the most recognizable names from the civil rights movement. Ella Baker worked as the (unofficial) chief administrative officer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and as adviser-trainer to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Baker, a woman and not a preacher, like members of the official SCLC leadership, remained the acting executive director of SCLC for a number of years.²⁶ Septima Clark, a trained educator, taught in southern “citizenship schools,” where students in citizenship courses learned information that would be instrumental in their earning voter registration. When her activities became known, she was summarily refused an employment contract in South Carolina schools in which she had taught for over thirty years; in addition, her pension was denied to her. Eventually, the SCLC ran several of the schools, and Clark administered the citizenship programs. Historian Rosetta Ross documents the religious biography of both women and how their religiosity expanded to mean more than their individual salvation, but rather was a means by which to address the day-to-day concerns of others.²⁷

This sensibility of concern for others as religious obligation helped to create one of the most important episodes in black religious history: the Birmingham (Alabama) campaign of the civil rights movement. Freeman Hrabowski, now a mathematician and university president, recalled that as a twelve-year-old in

25. Ibid.

26. Rosetta E. Ross. *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

27. Ibid.

Birmingham in 1963, he argued with his parents to convince them that his turn to participate in history had arrived.²⁸ His parents knew the risk of both physical and social danger that such participation in protest involved. Young people left classrooms and filled jails when there were not enough adults able or willing to risk their employment. Yet the involvement of young people was crucial to the growing energy around civil rights—energy and determination with great impact in Birmingham.

By the time Martin Luther King was arrested on April 12, 1963 (incidentally, Good Friday of that year), the Birmingham campaign had already been under way for more than a week. King's arrest spurred him to pen a letter from the city jail that he specifically aimed at church leaders, mostly white, but some black as well. King's "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail" is one of his most famous and enduring writings.

King's letter was a response to a second open letter from white Birmingham clergy printed in local newspapers. In their first letter, the clergy had called on "their people," citizens and elected officials of Birmingham and Alabama, to comply with court rulings to desegregate collegiate admissions at public universities.²⁹ In that first letter, white Birmingham faith leaders were attempting to calm the potential for violence that white citizens might exact against blacks as the rhetoric heightened before the Birmingham campaign. After the campaign began, the white clergy wrote a second letter. This time they called on blacks to remain calm and to "refrain from involvement with 'outsiders' who, although they brought nonviolent

28. "Freeman Hrabowski Oral History Interview," Civil Rights History Project, *American History TV* (original air date May 4, 2013), 96 min., retrieved from C-SPAN at <http://series.c-span.org/History/Events/Oral-Histories-Freeman-Hrabowski/10737439398/>.

29. S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 233.

resistive measures, were ‘agitators’ and ‘extremists.’”³⁰ “They advised blacks to not ‘incite’ acts of violence.”³¹ King’s response to the second letter “cited [St. Augustine’s] conception of just and unjust laws and that, according to that formula, “an unjust law is no law at all.”³² Further, King argued against “structural sin [as the] societal sinfulness of injustice,” the very injustice their movement was seeking to break.³³ King wrote from jail, and the street protests continued.³⁴ The continuous stream of bodies filling the Birmingham streets and jails drew national media attention. Dramatic news footage of public beatings by law enforcement officers, water hoses and dogs aimed at nonviolent protestors, and the masterful use of the media began to sway national public opinion.³⁵

Now let us pause here to consider the history that has been recounted so far. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to overstate the importance of 1963 in general and the Birmingham campaign in particular. In fact, Birmingham is a pivotal moment in the shaping of a “new” national black identity through the public work of citizens—religious people along with their secular counterparts. Women such as Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, and Ella Baker held religious affiliations, but as we have seen, they were also vital to civic organizations such as the NAACP and to **parachurch organizations** such as the SCLC. Parachurch organizations refer to

30. Bass, *Peacemakers*, 235–36.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James Melvin Washington, 289–302 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986).

33. *Ibid.*

34. See Andrew Young’s detailed memoir, including details of the Birmingham campaign, in *Easy the Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

35. Sasha Torres provides an account of the symbiotic relationship between the burgeoning television network system and the Civil Rights Movement in *Black, White and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). She argues that each made use of the other for their own promotional purposes.

faith-based organizations, including businesses and nonprofits, unconnected to specific denominational governance but often grounded in Christian principles to achieve specified social aims. In the twenty-first century, these organizations are often linked to evangelicalism.³⁶ This point not only helps to tell this piece of the history, but also should leave the reader thinking that church membership and its influences often extend far beyond church walls. But it is important to understand the full range of beliefs and opinions that informed activism; both religious figures and “nonreligious” figures played a vital—and at times overlapping—role in the push for civil rights. In the civil rights movement, religious and secular leaders and ideas, artists and entertainers and (extra)ordinary people came together to paint a piece of the tapestry of American history.

The year 1963 was only half over when President John F. Kennedy gave his June speech calling for civil rights legislation. The August March on Washington had yet to take place. That march brought an estimated 250,000 blacks and whites to the National Mall in support of civil and workers rights. Come September of that year, Klansmen murdered four little girls by bombing Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. By November, the popular young president, John F. Kennedy, would also have been assassinated. But Birmingham and later Selma gave his successor, Lyndon Johnson, the political agenda that would become a large part of his own legacy. President Johnson would push for congressional passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This law made it illegal to discriminate based on race in the provision of public accommodations in places such restaurants, interstate travel, and libraries. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 provided access to the ballot box across the nation. It disrupted routine limitations placed on blacks’ right to vote through the use of literacy and citizenship

36. Jerry E. White, *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983).

tests and special fees known as poll taxes. It required that specified locations with an egregious history of voting discrimination get approval from the Department of Justice (a process called preclearance) before enacting changes that could affect voting. The convergence of events in 1963 and additional struggles in 1964 expanded the movement that had once been the efforts of a faithful few.³⁷

Birmingham and 1963 were also pivotal for another reason: network television cameras. They broadcasted the striking difference in the behavior between the nonviolent marchers and that of racist white officials for the entire world to see. White police aimed vicious dogs at young protestors peaceably walking toward their target locations such as Birmingham City Hall. The cameras showed the white firemen assaulting them with the full force of fire hoses intended for putting out fires, not pushing around humans. Where the local press sometimes provided no coverage or stories buried in the interior pages of local southern newspapers, the national networks sent their pictures over the airwaves for the entire nation (and world) to see. Although local network affiliates might choose to black out coverage of special shows, the network coverage guaranteed people in the rest of the United States the opportunity to judge for themselves the arguments of the moral vision laid out by King and other leaders of the civil rights movement. Birmingham leaders strategically scheduled activities early enough in the day to ensure that the networks could get footage edited in time to air on the three national networks.³⁸ Not only were the shapers of black

37. It is worth noting that as we write these words, the Supreme Court recently determined that the federal oversight provision of the Voting Rights Act is unconstitutional, meaning there are now fewer checks and balances in place to ensure that voting discrimination does not occur. Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Invalidates Key Provision of Voting Rights Act," *New York Times*, June 25, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.