Culture



Billie Holiday, circa June 1946; Claude McKay in a 1920 portrait photograph; and Toni Morrison in 2010 (William P. Gottlieb/Library of Congress; Wikimedia Commons; CNS/Reuters/Philippe Wojazer)



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February 28, 2023
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February is Black History Month and marks the annual observance in the U.S. to honor the history and contributions of Black Americans to our country's cultural, social and political spheres. It is a time to not only reflect on the impacts of slavery and its shaping of America, but also a time to celebrate the triumphs and rich cultural heritage of Black people spanning centuries. To honor others' lived experiences requires one to listen to their stories and perspectives. As Catholics, this also means engaging in intentional *anamnesis* — solidaristic remembering — where we recall the hard-fought struggles which made such cultural productions possible.

Ironically, the church and larger community of Black Americans have forgotten the distinctly Catholic faith of many of the Black cultural artists and activists who have contributed to the shaping of this unique history. For many, their Catholic imagination was responsible for shaping and honing their art, a fact that is often overlooked when reflecting on their individual legacies.

Billie Holiday

Billie Holiday, born Elenora Fagan on April 7, 1915, in Philadelphia, was an American jazz singer famously nicknamed "Lady Day" by her friend and music partner, Lester Young — a name traditionally used to refer to the feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Holiday spent most of her formative years in Baltimore at the House of the Good Shepherd for Colored Girls, a Catholic convent and reformatory where her mother had also been sent as a girl. Founded in 1892 with a bequest from Mother Katherine Drexel, the reformatory served as an alternative for girls who were either wards of the state or had been caught up in a life of delinquency because of poverty.



"Portrait of Billie Holiday," a 1949 photo by Carl Van Vechten (Library of Congress)

Before being sent to the convent, Billie had been an on-again, off-again pupil at Baltimore's St. Frances Academy for Colored Girls, a private Catholic school run by the Oblate Sisters of Providence, one of two African American orders of Catholic nuns in the United States. During her 11-month stay at the House of the Good Shepherd, she would attend Catholic Mass every day, singing from the forms set forth in the *Liber Usualis* — the common book of Gregorian chants used in the Mass, in daily and seasonal devotions, and in all feasts and celebrations throughout the liturgical year. Fr. Charles Borromeo Carroll of the Josephites served as the chaplain at the convent, also acting as the choir director where Holiday sang with her peers during her tenure.

Billie received a conditional baptism in August of 1925 — conditional because it was unknown if she had been previously baptized and baptism was required for admission to the other sacraments. Tracy Fessenden remarks in *Religion Around Billie Holiday* that her godmother, Christine Scott, an older inmate of Good Shepherd, recalled that day with joy. "Everyone in the place knowed how much she wanted to be baptized. … [She] was so happy … in there with the rest of the girls, all of them in white dresses and veils; she was grinning from ear to ear, you could almost see her back teeth. She was just as light as a feather." Along with choral performances at daily Mass and special liturgical celebrations during the year, including Marian devotions during the month of May, Billie fondly remembers drawing the name of St. Theresa — perhaps a confirmation name during her stay at Good Shepherd.

When not at the convent, she lived along the rough edges of a jazz-loving city, getting her start in the Prohibition-era good-time houses on Baltimore's waterfront where she made money singing for tips. She would eventually take the last name of her biological father (Clarence Holiday) and the first name of her favorite film actress, Billie Dove.

One of Holiday's most famous contributions to the American songbook includes her hit, "God Bless the Child (That’s Got His Own)," a beloved and slyly subversive spiritual. Fessenden notes that while it is not possible to know whether Holiday

remained a practicing or believing Catholic, she was indisputably a *trained* one, and this training moves within a horizon of possibilities that were hers to navigate throughout the course of her life. A primary example of this involves jazz singer Thelma Carpenter, who recalls that after the women were kept safe when the brakes went out on the car they were traveling in, Holiday replied that St. Therese (of Lisieux) must've "let some of those rosebuds fall down on us."

Claude McKay

Born Festus Claudius McKay in Nairne Castle near James Hill in upper Clarendon Parish, Jamaica (colloquially Sunny Ville) in 1889, Claude McKay was a key figure during the Harlem Renaissance, a prominent literary movement in the 1920s. As The Poetry Foundation explains, McKay's work ranged from the vernacular verse celebrating peasant life in Jamaica to poems that protested economic and racial inequities. His fiction further addressed instinctual/intellectual duality which he found central to the Black individual's efforts to cope in a racist society. Selected works include *Songs of Jamaica* (1912); *Harlem Shadows* (1922); *Selected Poems* (1953); and *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Poetry and Prose* (1973).

After receiving an award and stipend from the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences for his work *Songs of Jamaica*, he used this money to finance a trip to America, arriving in South Carolina in 1912. He then traveled to Alabama and enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute, where he studied for two months before transferring to Kansas State College. In 1914, he left school for New York City and his experience with American racism further inspired him to continue writing poetry.

As Jonathan McGregor writes in *Communion of Radicals: The Literary Christian Left in Twentieth-Century America*, McKay's journey to the Catholic faith began in 1942 after falling gravely ill with a bad case of the flu, complicated by his long-standing high blood pressure and congestive heart failure. After a dear friend, Ellen Tarry, found McKay alone in his Harlem apartment, the devout Black Catholic journalist and children's book author "called on her fellow volunteers at [Catherine] de Hueck's

Harlem Friendship House to help nurse McKay back to health."

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According to McGregor, who quotes Wayne F. Cooper's biography on McKay, McKay was impressed by volunteers who would offer him aid without asking him to accept Catholicism:

> By June 1943, McKay wrote to Mary Jerdo Keating, a white Catholic intellectual friend he had met at Friendship House, that he was considering joining the Church. ... On June 25, 1943, just ten days after writing to Keating, McKay "suffered a disabling stroke while on the job" as a riveter at the federal shipyard in Port Newark. ... After his hospitalization, Keating and her husband put McKay up in their Connecticut cottage to recover.

There McKay continued to discern conversion. "Through the Keatings," McGregor writes, "McKay secured a research position with the activist Bishop Bernard Sheil in Chicago, where he moved in April 1944." While in Chicago, McKay became involved with another Friendship House, along with a Catholic Worker house, finding in these communities persons "devoted to interracial, anticapitalist Catholic action" in the social and religious spheres.

McGregor comments that sometime later, McKay began to undergo instruction from local priests in the diocese, receiving the sacraments of Christian initiation on Oct. 11, 1944, the feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Upon joining his voice to a chorus of Catholic leftists from many nations who expressed their criticisms of modern society — in its capitalist and fascist as well as Communist forms — he continued to work for a Catholic youth organization until his death in 1948.



Toni Morrison (CNS/Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures/Timothy Greenfield-Sanders)

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison, born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in 1931, was an African American novelist known for such works as *The Bluest Eye* (1970); *Sula* (1973); *Song of Solomon* (1977); *Beloved* (1987); and *Paradise* (1998). Having graduated from Howard University in 1953 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and later a master's degree in American Literature from Cornell in 1955, Morrison's works were well-known for centering the experiences of Black women and creating what she characterized as "village literature" or "fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe."

Unfortunately, many literary scholars and critics have ignored the prominent role that Catholicism and her subsequent Catholic faith played in her life and literature.

Though her mother belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Morrison grew fascinated with Catholic rituals as a child, being exposed to the faith through several Catholic family members.

Ultimately, Morrison's interest in these rituals and her relationship with a devout Catholic cousin would inspire her conversion at age 12. Morrison recalled in a 2015 interview with NPR that the baptismal name she chose was St. Anthony of Padua, the name for which she would later come to be known as "Toni." Morrison remained devoted to her faith, choosing to raise her children Catholic and including in her literary works specific themes and motifs unique to Catholicism.

Such notable themes include Morrison's framing of Black women as divine in her fiction, employing both the persecution of Jesus Christ and the suffering of Mary to explore this experience of embodiment. Mary especially is a recurrent figure in Morrison’s works, routinely appearing in paintings found in her characters' homes, in the powerful women characters capable of working miracles on behalf of marginalized persons, and in the Black mother characters who grieve the death of their children. For Morrison, the image of the Black Madonna was intentionally used to communicate and emphasize the strength and suffering of Black women, suggesting that while Morrison was engaged with the movement of womanism and subsequently womanist theology, hers was a uniquely Catholic womanist vision.

As Black History Month draws to a close, let us be intentional in our celebrations to remember the Black Catholic Americans who contributed to that history, utilizing their Catholic faith to inspire art designed to subvert, encourage survival, and ultimately resist oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and the like.

Editor's note: *The author used the following sources for this piece:*

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