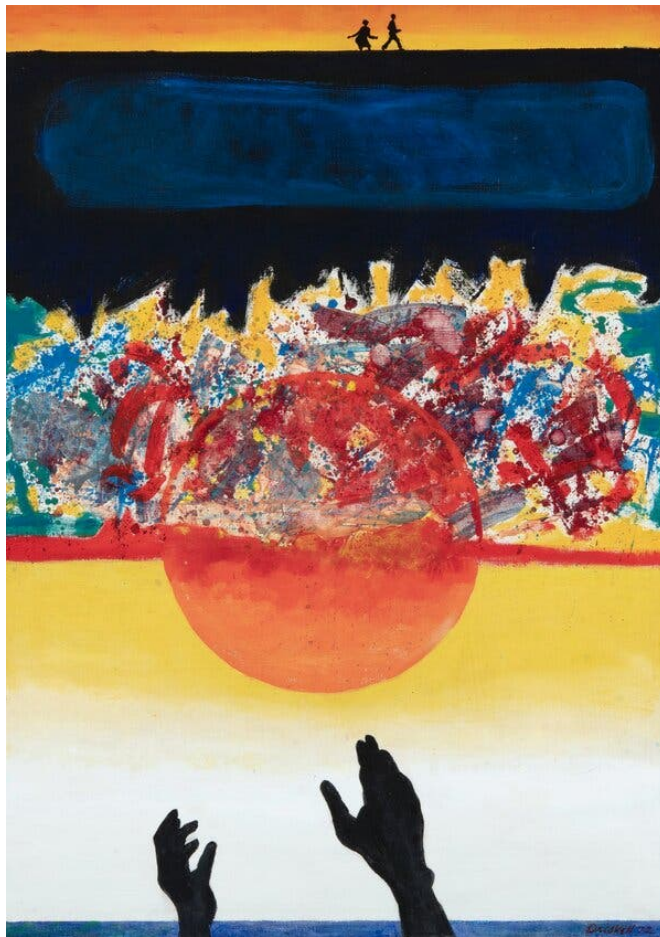


The New York Times

Black History Month Is a Good Excuse for Delving Into Our Art

An African-American studies professor suggests ways to mark the month, from David Driskell's paintings and Dance Theater of Harlem's streamed performances to the rollicking return of "Queen Sugar."



David Driskell's "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," (1972), acrylic on canvas. Estate of David C. Driskell and DC Moore Gallery

By **Salamishah Tillet**

- Feb. 18, 2021

Black History Month feels more urgent this year. Its roots go back to 1926, when the historian Carter G. Woodson developed Negro History Week, near the February birthdays of both President Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, in the belief that new stories of Black life could counter old racist stereotypes. Now in this

age of racial reckoning and social distancing, our need to connect with each other has never been greater.

As a professor of African-American studies, I am increasingly animated by the work of teachers who have updated Woodson's goal for the 21st century. Just this week, my 8-year-old daughter showed me a letter written by her entire 3rd-grade art class to [Faith Ringgold, the 90-year-old African-American artist](#). And my son told me about a recent pre-K lesson on Ruby Bridges, the first African-American student who, at 6, integrated an elementary school in the South. Suddenly, the conversations my kids have at home with my husband and me are the ones they're having in their classrooms. It's not just their history that belongs in all these spaces, but their knowledge, too.

Our stake in having a shared understanding of the past is as crucial today as it was in Woodson's time. And because of greater efforts to integrate Black history across so many industries and institutions, I remain hopeful that what was once a week, and now a month, will soon become our way of life.

'David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History'

Through May 9 at High Museum of Art in Atlanta; high.org.

If you saw Sam Pollard's recent documentary, "[Black Art: In the Absence of Light](#)" on HBO, you'd be reminded of David Driskell's exceptional role as a champion, curator and creator of African-American art over the last half century. Inspired by Driskell's landmark exhibition "[Two Centuries of Black American Art](#)," which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, the film surveys African-American contributions to art, while also making the case for its central role in American culture today.

"[David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History](#)" is another type of tribute, the first major survey of his work since [he died of the coronavirus](#), at 88, last year. Pulling from his personal estate and private and museum collections, the exhibition features over 60 works, including his 1956 painting "Behold Thy Son," a visual elegy to Emmett Till, and homages to Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, two giants in the pantheon of American art to which Driskell now firmly belongs.

'The Black Church'

Available to stream; pbs.org.

Hosted and produced by Henry Louis Gates Jr., this four-hour, two-part docu-series is a sweeping yet intimate portrait of a collective, the Black Church. Though the term might suggest this is a single religion or institution, the documentary quickly dispels such myths by exploring the varied beliefs the first African-American Christians, many of whom were forced to convert during slavery, had while retaining Yoruba or Muslim spiritual practices, brought with them from West Africa.

By 1794, when Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent Black denomination in the United States, these institutions not only became leaders in the antislavery movement but also safe spaces where African-Americans could gather and worship beyond the white gaze. Gates, who also wrote the accompanying book "[The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song.](#)" guides us through that history, but he also gets personal. The series opens with him singing "I Believe I'll Go Back Home," a gospel song he grew up with.



Image



Kip Sturm and Tai Jimenez in a 2003 performance of “NEW BACH” for the Dance Theatre of Harlem Credit...Joseph Rodman

Dance Theater of Harlem

On demand; dancetheatreofharlem.org.

One of my favorite virtual experiences this month has been watching the Dance Theater of Harlem’s most iconic performances, such as the founder Arthur Mitchell’s 1988 “[John Henry](#),” a ballet tribute in honor of the artist-activist Paul Robeson and [Robert Garland](#)’s “[New Bach](#),” a 2001 tribute to both George Balanchine and African-American social dances like the Harlem Shake.

In 1982, PBS aired “Stravinsky’s ‘Firebird’ by Dance Theatre of Harlem,” a thrilling behind-the-scenes documentary of the premiere of this “Firebird,” choreographed by John Taras and costumed by Geoffrey Holder. Set to the original Stravinsky score, the magical, glowing Firebird of the Russian folk tale is transported to a mythical Caribbean island here, and this geographical swap turns the dance into a vibrant, mesmerizing and unforgettable performance.



Daniel Kaluuya, center above, and Lakeith Stanfield in “Judas and the Black Messiah.” Credit...Glen Wilson/Warner Bros

‘Judas and the Black Messiah’

In theaters; available to stream on HBO Max

Partly inspired by the life of Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya), the prodigious 21-year-old Black Panther leader who was killed by the Chicago police in 1969, this film is also a biopic of the Black Power movement itself.

Through a deft depiction of Hampton’s Marxist convictions, an ideology that led him to reach out to the Puerto Rican nationalists, turf gangs and white anti-poverty activists, “Judas and Black Messiah” reveals the radical potential of such coalitions, and the great threat the F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover believed they posed to national security. The movie also follows the bureau’s 17-year-old African-American informant William O’Neal (Lakeith Stanfield) as he infiltrates the Panthers.

Directed by Shaka King, the film suggests that it is hard to kill a movement, especially one rooted in African-American demands for equality and justice that remain unrealized today.



Members of the collective Castle of Our Skins, from left: Gabriela Díaz, Mina Lavcheva, Ashleigh Gordon and Francesca McNeeley. Credit...Robert Torres

Castle of Our Skins: Remembering King

Streaming on [YouTube](#) as part of [the Celebrity Series of Boston](#).

This concert series from the Boston-based collective [Castle of Our Skins](#) — taking its name from Nikki Giovanni’s “[Poem \(for Nina\)](#),” i.e. Nina Simone — will feature works by two renowned African-American composers: Daniel Bernard Roumain (“[We Shall Not Be Moved](#)”); and George Walker, who in 1996 became the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize in music.

Much like [Sam Pollard](#)’s other recent documentary, “[MLK/FBI](#),” Roumain’s String Quartet No. 2 (“King”) explores the F.B.I.’s phone surveillance of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s extramarital relationships, examining what Roumain sees as one of the many complicated roles that Black women played in the civil rights movement. George Walker’s “[Lyric for Strings](#),” now his most often performed work, was dedicated to his grandmother, who lost one husband, sold at a slave auction, and another who died on the plantation. She herself eventually escaped slavery.

‘Fannie: The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer’

Outdoor performance at [Asolo Repertory Theatre](#); Feb. 20-March 3.

On Aug. 22, 1964, right before Fannie Lou Hamer spoke at the Democratic National Convention, President Lyndon B. Johnson interrupted her televised testimony with an impromptu news conference. Johnson knew that not only was Hamer, the sharecropper turned civil rights activist, a charismatic speaker, but also that her story of racial violence and sexual abuse by white police officers in Mississippi could elicit compassion that might hasten his slow-moving Civil Rights agenda. His effort to upstage her performance failed miserably and further catapulted Hamer to the center of American politics.

Hamer has been the subject of other plays, and is one of the most vibrant secondary characters in Robert Schenkkan's Tony Award-winning "All the Way." But the playwright Cheryl L. West portrays Hamer here in her full range as a singer, protester and patriot, reminding us of her singular voice and her voice for racial justice.

'Queen Sugar'

Through April 20; oprah.com.

Ava DuVernay's television series for OWN is back for its fifth season, and with it, the triumphs and travails of Louisiana's Bordelon siblings: the activist-writer Nova (Rutina Wesley); the steely-eyed businesswoman and mother Charley (brilliantly played by Dawn-Lyen Gardner); and the youngest, Ralph Angel (Kofi Siriboe), in a battle to save his land.

By Episode 3, their worlds collide with our reality, and the season pivots in tone and topic, taking on the dual crises of Covid-19 and the police killings of African-Americans. One of the strengths of "Queen Sugar" has been its ability to zoom in on the hyperlocal and use the Bordelon clan's experiences with police brutality, domestic violence, substance abuse and land ownership as stand-ins for the larger struggles of African Americans in the South.

Given that backdrop, along with its tender family portraits of multiple generations, this season promises to be even more sensitive in its depiction of Black grief on one hand, and more searing in its indictment of American racism on the other hand.