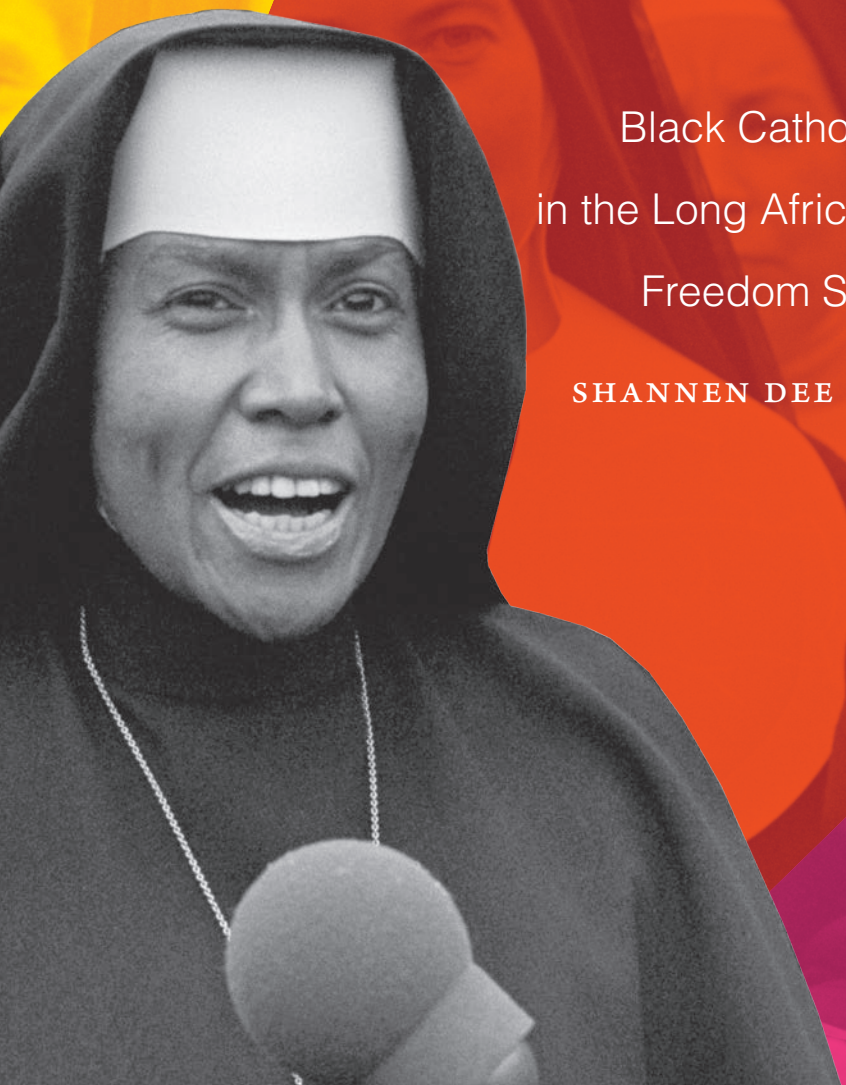
# Subversive Habits



## Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle

SHANNEN DEE WILLIAMS

# Subversive Habits

BUY

# Subversive Habits

## Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle

SHANNEN DEE WILLIAMS



Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2022

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Typeset in Helvetica and Arno Pro.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Williams, Shannen Dee, [date] author.
Title: Subversive habits : Black Catholic nuns in the long African American freedom struggle / Shannen Dee Williams.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021032231 (print)
LCCN 2021032232 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478015574 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478018209 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478022817 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: African American nuns—History—20th century. | African American Catholics—History—20th century. | Women in the Catholic Church—United States—History—20th century. | Segregation—Religious aspects—Catholic Church—History—20th century. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Black Studies (Global) | RELIGION / Christianity / Catholic
Classification: LCC BX1407.B63 W55 2022 (print) | LCC BX1407.B63 (ebook) |
DDC 277.30089/96073—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032231
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032232

Cover art: Sister Mary Antona Ebo, FSM, addresses the crowd in Selma, Alabama, March 10, 1965. Courtesy Bettmann/Getty Images.

For my mother,
Vidonia Williams,

and
Dr. Patricia Grey

In loving memory of my father,
U. D. Williams Jr.

CONTENTS

# NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this study, I use the terms *sister* and *nun* interchangeably. However, there are important differences between the two. A Roman Catholic nun is a woman who has professed the vows and lives in a cloistered setting with minimal contact with the secular world. A sister, in contrast, is a woman who has professed the vows but engages in public works such as teaching, nursing, and other social service ministries. Because sisters and nuns participate in the religious life of the Church, they are both women religious. The overwhelming majority of the women discussed in this study are sisters. However, nuns and sisters both use the title Sister, and many sisters engaged in public ministries refer to themselves as nuns. So I have followed their lead. At the end of this book, there is a glossary from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious with a few additional terms for those unfamiliar with religious life and the Catholic Church more broadly.[1]

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, most women and girls who entered communities and professed vows took religious names to signify their consecrated status and stopped using their baptismal and family names. Most sisters' religious names included "Mary" or "Marie" in some fashion to honor Mary, Jesus's mother. After the reforms of Vatican II, many congregations granted their members the option of reverting back to their baptismal names, and many sisters did so. Some, though, legally assumed their religious names.

This book includes the names of scores of women religious. When available, I have included a sister's religious, baptismal, and family name. Baptismal names are provided in parentheses. For example, in the case of Mother Mary Lange, the chief foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, her name will appear as Mother Mary (Elizabeth Clarisse) Lange at first mention. Elizabeth Clarisse is her baptismal name; Lange is her family name. Because sisters identified themselves, and/or were referred to by others, using varying versions of their names at different points in religious life, I have followed the lead of the sister or the source in which she is identified and cross-referenced her name for clarity in the endnotes. Finally, in several instances, I have included the stories of ex-sisters and laywomen who later married and changed their surnames. In a few of those cases, I have used only the women's maiden names to avoid confusion.

# PREFACE. BEARING WITNESS TO A SILENCED PAST

I regard my responsibilities as a Black writer as someone who must bear witness, someone who must record the way it used to be. —TONI MORRISON, 1977 interview on WTTW's *Chicago Tonight*

This book began as an attempt to make sense of an extraordinary news story and photograph that I stumbled on in early 2007. At the time, I was perusing microfilmed editions of Black-owned newspapers in search of a little-known dimension of the American past. While scanning through a roll of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, I finally encountered a 1968 article announcing the formation of a Black power federation of Catholic nuns called the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC). The article's title alone, "Black Sisters Weigh Contradictions in Christian and Secular Community: 200 Negro Nuns Attend First Nat'l Meet," immediately piqued my interest. However, it was the accompanying photograph of four smiling Black Catholic sisters that steadied my hand on the microfilm reader that day.[2] Until that moment, I, a lifelong Catholic, had never seen a Black nun except in a Hollywood film. In fact, the only Black sister that I knew of at the time was Sister Mary Clarence, the fictional character played by Whoopi Goldberg in the critically acclaimed *Sister Act* film franchise. Deeply ashamed of my ignorance, I soon learned that I was not alone. Even my mother—who attended Catholic schools for the entirety of her formal education and who

in 1974 became one of the first three Black women to graduate from the University of Notre Dame—was unaware of the existence of Black nuns in our church. "No, only white nuns taught us in our schools," my mother relayed to me on the telephone later that evening. "But I wish I had known. I wish we'd had Black nuns in Savannah[, Georgia,] when I was growing up."

Stunned by my mother's revelation, I set out to learn as much as I could about the NBSC and understand the roots of the invisibility of Black Catholic sisters in our lives. From Cyprian Davis's landmark study of the US Black Catholic community, I discovered that there had been Black nuns in my mother's hometown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before anti-Black prejudice and violent threats pushed these consecrated women out, members of two all-Black sisterhoods helped to lay the foundation for and ensure the survival of the city's Black Catholic educational system. Their heroic efforts made my mother's—and by extension my own—journey into Catholicism possible.[3] Yet the white nuns and priests who taught my mother and hundreds of other Black children in Savannah during America's civil rights and Black power years never once alluded to Black sisters in their lessons. According to my mother, her white instructors did not teach any Black history or art either. After calling and writing a host of Catholic institutions to track down some of the sisters and ex-sisters who established the NBSC, I finally began to understand why.

"The saga of America's black women who have dared to be poor, chaste, and obedient is largely untold," wrote Sister Mary Shawn Copeland in 1975. "It is an uneasy story, not only because it is rooted in the American dilemma—racism—but also because the position of [a] woman in an oppressed group is traditionally delicate and strategic."[4] By the time I interviewed her, Copeland was a distinguished professor at Boston College and the first Black president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. She had also been out of religious life for thirteen years. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, Copeland—the first African American Felician Sister in Detroit, Michigan, and later an Adrian Dominican Sister—had been one of the NBSC's most visible leaders.[5] She had also done more than anyone to preserve the organization's memory in the face of marginalization and erasure.[6] In addition to publishing the first scholarly article on the NBSC, Copeland in the early 2000s arranged for the deposit of the organization's papers at Marquette University.[7] "I am so glad that you are interested in the Black Sisters' Conference," Copeland expressed during our first conversation. "We've been waiting on someone to tell this story."[8]

While Copeland's willingness to share her experiences with me proved pivotal, it was Dr. Patricia Grey, the NBSC's founding president and one of the four nuns featured in the *Pittsburgh Courier* photograph, who radically changed this book's focus. Routinely described by her female and male peers as one of the most intellectually talented and charismatic Catholic sisters of her generation, Grey, known in religion as Sister M. Martin de Porres, had been the NBSC's heart and soul in its formative years.[9] As Pittsburgh's first Black Religious Sister of Mercy and the conference's leading public voice, Grey was also the face and force of the "new Black nun." However, in 1974, Grey abruptly departed religious life and stopped giving interviews related to the NBSC.[10]

"I don't like to look back," Grey frequently repeated during the first of our many conversations over the years.[11] However, after I presented Grey with a recently published book on Catholic sisters' activism in the Black freedom struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, she quickly changed her mind. Visibly frustrated by the book's erasure of Black sisters' vanguard activism in the Catholic fight for racial justice, its cursory mention of white sisters' long-standing practices of white supremacy and exclusion, and its glaring omissions about the one Black nun briefly discussed in its pages, the sixty-five-year-old ex-nun quietly stood and departed the room.[12] Several minutes later, Grey returned with a treasure trove: her personal archive from her tenure in religious life. In handing over the materials, Grey revealed that in the 1970s, the NBSC executive board had desired to publish a book documenting Black sisters' history in the United States. She also lamented the enduring invisibility of Black sisters' lives and labors in church and wider American history. Then, in her great wisdom, Grey gently encouraged me to consider expanding my attention to the mostly unsung and underresearched history of the nation's Black sisterhoods. "We [the NBSC] were not the first Black sisters to revolt in the Church," she quietly declared. "If you can, try to tell all of our stories."[13]

In the pages ahead, I recover the voices of a group of Black American churchwomen whose lives, labors, and struggles have been systematically ignored, routinely dismissed as insignificant, and too often reduced to myth. For thirteen years, I sought the untold stories of the nation's Black Catholic sisters, and I found no accounts bearing any resemblance to the fabled Hollywood tale of Sister Mary Clarence. I also failed to encounter Black sisters whose lived experiences confirmed many of the existing narratives of American Catholicism or the master story of Catholic sisters in the United States. Instead—from a host of widely ignored archival sources,

previously sealed Church records, out-of-print books, periodicals, and over a hundred oral interviews—I bore witness to a profoundly unfamiliar history that disrupts and revises much of what has been said and written about the US Catholic Church and the place of Black people within it. Because it is impossible to narrate Black sisters' journey in the United States—accurately and honestly—without confronting the Church's largely unacknowledged and unreconciled histories of colonialism, slavery, and segregation, I address these violent systems of power and their perpetrators—male and female—directly. In so doing, this book also recovers an overlooked chapter in the history of the long African American freedom struggle—a tradition of sustained Black Catholic resistance to white supremacy and exclusion that most scholars argue does not exist.

When confronted with a silenced past, the greatest responsibility of the historian—and the most radical thing any person can do—is to tell the story that was never meant to be told. *Subversive Habits*, then, marks a new starting point in historical truth telling in the Catholic Church and wider American society. For far too long, scholars of the American, Catholic, and Black pasts have unconsciously or consciously declared—by virtue of misrepresentation, marginalization, and outright erasure—that the history of Black Catholic nuns does not matter. In offering the first full survey of Black sisters' lives and struggles in the United States, this book unequivocally demonstrates that their history does matter—and has always mattered.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Subversive Habits* would not have come to fruition without the generosity and support of many people and institutions. I would be remiss, however, if I did not begin by acknowledging and praising the sure and ever-present hand of God, which guided me to this project. I never intended to pursue research in Black Catholic history, yet telling stories of the Church's Black faithful has become my life's work. I thank Sisters Mary Aloysius Becraft, Mary Ursula Wallace, and Thea Bowman and Mothers Mary Lange, Henriette Delille, Josephine Charles, Mathilda Beasley, M. Theresa Jacques, and Mary Theodore Williams for lighting the way.

I owe a tremendous debt to the many individuals who shared their stories with me over the years. They include a host of sisters, former sisters, priests, lay Catholics, and others whose lives intersected with African American sisters in some way. Without their contributions, it would have been impossible to write this book. I am grateful for every interview given, every photo and document shared, and every friendship cultivated. To those who were unable to discuss their tenures in religious life on the record but still sent their prayers for this book's success, thank you also. *Subversive Habits* is first and foremost a labor of love written for the nation's Black Catholic sisters and all those who have witnessed and benefited from their efforts.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) also deserves special mention. In my early research, I encountered a host of restrictive archival policies limiting access to documents essential to reconstructing the

history of racial segregation and exclusion in female religious life. During an invited keynote address at the annual LCWR meeting in 2016, I outlined these challenges and asked the nation's women congregational leaders for assistance. In response, several pledged their support. I received a research grant from Region IV of the LCWR to continue my research, and several leaders invited me to deliver talks to their communities and the regional LCWR meetings. Conversations following these presentations and expanded archival access proved invaluable. A special thanks to Sisters Mary Greta Jupiter, Mary Pellegrino, Sally Witt, and Anita Baird. My gratitude also extends to all the congregations that invited me to speak and/or welcomed me into their archives over the years, especially the Sisters of Mercy of America, the Sisters of Charity of New York, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross, the Dominican Sisters of Peace, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

Subventions for research, travel, and writing from several foundations also aided in this book's completion. The Postdoctoral Fellowship in African-American Studies at Case Western Reserve University, the Scholar-in-Residence Fellowship at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, and a research leave from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, provided critical time and space to conduct additional research and work on this manuscript. Other institutional support includes the Albert K. LePage Endowed Assistant Professorship, Villanova University; Catholicism and the Common Good Research Grant, Henry Luce Foundation; Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Fellowship for Religion and Ethics, Woodrow Wilson National Foundation; Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change Visiting Fellowship, University of Memphis; Huggins-Quarles Award, Organization of American Historians; John Tracy Ellis Dissertation Award, American Catholic Historical Association; Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism Research Travel Grant, University of Notre Dame; Dorothy Mohler Research Grant, Catholic University of America; Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis Graduate Research Fellowship, Rutgers University; and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Grant, Rutgers Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Without the labor and efficiency of an army of archivists and librarians, conducting the research for this book would have been much more difficult. Tremendous thanks are due to the staffs of the libraries and archives consulted for this project, especially Sharon Knecht, Elizabeth S. Johnson, and Sisters Carolyn Leslie, Louise Grundish, and Celia Struck. Special thanks are also due to the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of

the Holy Family for providing me extensive access to their congregational archives. In the case of the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary, I am indebted to former congregational leader Sister Loretta Theresa Richards for granting me access to her personal archive. Critical research assistance was also provided at various stages by Kevin Fox, Tessa Evans, Ermithe Maurancy, Naomi Lorrain, and Nicholas Kovach.

The formal intellectual journey that culminated in this book began in the former Memphis City School System and reached important new plateaus at Agnes Scott College. For being models of excellence and putting me on the path to earning a PhD, I especially thank Sandra Jowers, Lala Ball Cooper, Nalini Ayer, Ollie J. Allen, Violet Showers Johnson, Mary Cain, and Willie Tolliver Jr. In graduate school, I was also taught and mentored by the best of the best. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, special thanks are due to Christina Greene, Brenda Gayle Plummer, and the late Nellie Y. McKay. At Rutgers, I especially thank the incomparable Deborah Gray White, Nancy A. Hewitt, Donna Y. Murch, Carolyn Brown, Ann Gordon, David Foglesong, and James Livingston.

While writing this book, I benefited greatly from debates and discussions with colleagues at a host of scholarly conferences and seminars. For their meaningful questions and suggestions, I especially thank the late Rev. Cyprian Davis, OSB, Diane Batts Morrow, and Tia Noelle Pratt. For reading and providing crucial feedback on various sections of the manuscript over the years, I thank Barbara D. Savage, Bettye Collier-Thomas, Tiffany Gill, Rhonda Y. Williams, Laura Ann Twagira, Brent Edwards, Timothy Giffiths, Mela Araya, Candacy Taylor, Kim Hall, Mignon Moore, Philip Misevich, Anthony Di Lorenzo, Darlene Weaver, Michael Moreland, Jeremy Cruz, Bryan Massingale, Kristin Heyer, Linh Hoang, Jennifer Beste, and Tricia Bruce.

Having supportive colleagues is a gift when writing a book. For their kindness and generosity at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I especially thank Brandon K. Winford, Cynthia Griggs Fleming, Rickey Hall, Dawn Duke, Kristen Block, Julie Reed, Tore Olsson, Luke Harlow, Monica Black, Margaret Andersen, Sara Ritchey, Denise Phillips, Chad Black, Charles Sanft, Viejas Liulevicius, and Ernest Freeberg. For warmly welcoming me into the fold and making Villanova University a special place to work, I thank all my former colleagues in the history department. I especially thank Marc Gallicchio, Maghan Keita, Elizabeth Kolsky, Paul Steege, Whitney Martinko, Hibba Abugideiri, Paul Rosier, Catherine Kerrison, Judy Giesberg, Craig Bailey, Andrew Liu, Cristina Soriano, and Eliza Gettel for their feedback on various sections of this book. In the greater

Villanova community, I also thank Camille Burge, Crystal Lucky, Adele Lidenmeyr, Terry Nance, Chiji Akoma, Barbara Wall, Vincent Lloyd, Patricia Hampson-Eget, and the Rev. Peter M. Donohue, OSA.

The editorial staff at Duke University Press are the best in the business. Gisela Fosado's enthusiastic support of this project and her steady assurance as we brought *Subversive Habits* to print was a godsend. I am also grateful to the readers and editors who provided feedback on earlier drafts of the manuscript. Their insightful comments, hard questions, and meaningful suggestions made this book so much better.

I am fortunate to have a community of friends who have encouraged and cheered me on over the years. For making Agnes Scott a transformative experience, I thank Jakil Hill-Turner, Anya Wallace, Shawnte and Monique Rogers, Jameda Hugh, Whitney Peoples, Nicole Pace, Shayla Thomas, Brandi Collins-Dexter, Shakeh Grady, Shikina Reid, Rosemary Lokko, and Linda Githiora. For making graduate school at the University of Wisconsin and Rutgers enjoyable and intellectually stimulating, I especially thank Eric Pritchard, Matthew Blanton, Tanisha C. Ford, Crystal Moten, William Sturkey, Marsha E. Barrett, Melissa L. Cooper, Laura Ann Twagira, and Stephanie Jones-Rogers. For their longtime friendship and support, I thank Kendra Bell, Gadson William Perry, Marshetta Brazley, and Larmarques Smith.

Family members of scholars make tremendous sacrifices of time and togetherness to support the research and writing process. Without the loving support and patience of my immediate and extended families, I would never have finished this book. Over the years, my sister, Cantrice, and nephew, Cameron, made trips to wherever I was living to keep me company and when necessary pull me away from my office to go on sightseeing adventures. I am grateful for their unwavering support and reminders to never forget life's most important treasures. This book is dedicated to my parents, U. D. (Jr.) and Vidonia Williams. Their unyielding love, support, and sacrifices provided me a life filled with choices. My father was the first historian I ever knew. I like to think I inherited his knack for recalling obscure facts and dramatic storytelling. Although he did not live to see me earn my PhD, my father never doubted that I would succeed. I thank him every day for instilling in me the pride of our history and the joy of life. In many ways, this book's origins lie in the 1950s when my seven-year-old mother asked her Protestant parents for permission to convert to Catholicism and they said yes. Without my mother's self-determination and my grandparents' support, I doubt I would have become the person to write

this book. My mother's fearlessness and faithfulness have sustained me through life's great challenges. I thank her with all my heart.

Many years into this project, I became the member of another family. I thank my in-laws for their loving support and generosity. Whenever my husband and I needed to move or simply come home to restore ourselves, Derrick and Shirley were there with wide smiles, kind encouragement, and helping hands. My husband, Kenon, is my biggest champion and best friend. During the inevitable bouts with writer's block or when I felt overwhelmed by the weight of the stories I was entrusted to tell, he always knew what to say and do to bring me down from the metaphorical ledge. Thank you, Love, for all that you are. We did it!

# Introduction

## AMERICA'S FORGOTTEN BLACK FREEDOM FIGHTERS

There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.
—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

In June 1968, Sister Mary Antona Ebo had every reason to be fed up. One month earlier, a twenty-five-year-old Black nun in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, backed by her local bishop and the leader of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women, had called for a weeklong gathering of the nation's Black Catholic sisters to discuss their role in solving America's "racial problem."[1] The invitation—made in the wake of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the historic organization of the nation's Black Catholic priests soon thereafter—had been extended to Black sisters through their female congregational leaders (then called superiors). Yet Ebo—pronounced Ēbo like the West African ethnic group to which her enslaved ancestors belonged—learned about the meeting only by chance from a white priest.[2] One year earlier, the leaders of Ebo's nearly all-white order of nursing sisters had run similar interference. In 1967, Ebo, then forty-three years old, had been unable to accept an assignment with the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, the nation's most prominent Catholic civil rights organization, because her congregational superiors had refused to grant her a short-term release from her regular duties.[3] When she wrote Sister Mary Peter (Margaret) Traxler, the highest-ranking

nun in the conference, in May 1967, Ebo bluntly criticized how the long-standing culture and practices of white supremacy in US female religious life had circumscribed the opportunities of Black sisters seeking to become more active in the secular fight for Black freedom. "Perhaps you can use this as a reply to some of the people who criticize you for not having Negro sisters on the team," Ebo wrote, "not only the lack of generosity of those orders who may have a sister to contribute . . . but also the orders who have for so long taken a 'lily white' attitude toward God-given vocations. Perhaps, some of the rest would have Negro sisters to contribute if the attitude would have been different."[4] In an act of protest, Ebo also sent a copy of her response to Traxler to her superior general to make known her willingness to expose the congregation's hypocrisy on racial issues and their desire to silence *her* voice. Thus, Ebo did not hesitate to confront her congregational leaders again in 1968. Nor did the forty-four-year-old African American nun fail to secure a place as a speaker at the inaugural meeting of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC) that August.[5]

In 1965, Ebo shocked the world when she arrived in Selma, Alabama, with five other nuns from St. Louis, Missouri, to protest the police violence of Bloody Sunday and rally national support for Black voting rights. As the only African American member in the inaugural delegation of Catholic sisters to join the Selma protests, Ebo not only garnered the lion's share of attention from civil rights leaders but also explained to reporters why she took the risk to join the march. "I am here today because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness," Ebo proclaimed. She also declared that she had voted in the previous day's election in St. Louis and that she believed every person should have the right to vote.[6] On the following morning, images of Ebo, whom local leaders strategically placed on the front lines of an interracial group of marchers, graced the front pages of newspapers across the country (figure Intro.1).[7] In the days and weeks that followed, that image and the participation of hundreds of additional nuns in the Selma protests helped to awaken hundreds of white Catholic sisters to the moral righteousness of the African American fight for racial justice. As National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice leader Sister Mary Peter Traxler (who traveled to Selma after Ebo) wrote in an editorial in June 1965, "Like the faithful women of the Gospel, Sisters must follow Christ into the world ministering to His needs in the person of the poor, the sick, the persecuted. When people are in crisis, they are particularly disposed to look inward to evaluate themselves in relation to God. This is one reason why Sisters have a place at the other Selmas."[8] Yet many

FIGURE INTRO.1. Sister Mary Antona (Elizabeth Louise) Ebo led voting rights marchers in Selma, Alabama, on March 10, 1965. Courtesy of the Associated Press.

of the white sisters who publicly marched for civil rights on the streets were not as committed to principles of racial justice and desegregation as they proclaimed they were, especially when it came to confronting anti-Black racism in the Church. And no one knew this better than African American Catholic sisters.

Indeed, in the decades before Selma, the battles that Sister Ebo had waged to gain access to a Catholic education and enter religious life had revealed that her church and its most visible labor force—white Catholic nuns—were among the most dedicated practitioners of racial segregation and exclusion. For example, in 1942, shortly after her conversion to Catholicism, eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Louise Ebo had to desegregate Holy Trinity High School in her hometown of Bloomington, Illinois, in order to secure a Catholic education.[9] In 1944, after being denied admission to Catholic nursing schools in Illinois, which were led by white sisters, solely on the basis of race, Ebo moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to enroll as a US nurse cadet in St. Mary's Infirmary School, the nation's only Black Catholic nursing school.[10] Two years later, she made headlines when she became one of the first three Black women admitted into the historically German

Sisters of St. Mary (SSM), the order of her nursing educators, later known as the Franciscan Sisters of Mary.[11] Two more Black candidates were admitted later in the year. While Catholic proponents of racial equality heralded the SSM's admission of five Black women as a monumental step against racial segregation and exclusion in the Church, Ebo and her Black counterparts quickly learned that their congregational leaders' commitment to racial equality literally stopped at the doors of their motherhouse.[12] White SSM leaders not only initially barred the first five Black postulants from entering the order's administrative headquarters but also enforced strict segregation in dining, training, and social interactions. In 1947, white SSM leaders even forced the new Black members to profess their first vows in a segregated ceremony.[13]

While Ebo opted to remain in religious life and push back against the order's most egregious mandates of segregation, the depths of the SSM's commitment to white supremacy forever changed her. Shortly after Ebo took her first vows, a white member of her order denied her father admission to the community's all-white St. Mary's Hospital in the St. Louis suburbs. Although the order allowed the immediate family members of any sister to be treated at their hospitals, a white nun invoked segregation to refuse the ambulance carrying Ebo's father, Daniel. Ebo later learned that her dying father even pleaded with the nun, proclaiming that his daughter was also a Sister of St. Mary. The death of her father shortly thereafter and her superiors' unwillingness to rebuke the offending white sister almost proved too much for Ebo to bear.[14] As she later explained, "I made up my mind at that time that nobody is ever going to forget I'm a black woman . . . my father's daughter."[15]

Ebo's example of "uncommon faithfulness" and unyielding resistance to anti-Black racism is not exceptional in the history of the US Catholic Church.[16] Neither are instances in which white Catholics proved willing to put race before faith in order to maintain white supremacy and exclusion in American society and a church that considered itself universal. The Catholic Church not only inaugurated African slavery in the sixteenth century in the land area that became the United States but also served as the nation's largest Christian practitioner of racial segregation through the Jim Crow era. Minimal attention, however, has been paid to the leading roles that white Catholics played in the sociocultural, political, and spiritual propagation of white supremacy.[17] Histories of Black Catholic resistance to white racism are also rare. This is especially true of battles waged in women's religious life.

In recent decades, scholars have brought the lives and labors of white Catholic sisters from the margins to the center of both US and Catholic history. As a result, few would deny the visible and often essential roles that white nuns played in expanding and sustaining the Church from the colonial era through its greatest decades of growth.[18] Yet few have considered what it meant that most of the sisters to minister in the United States before 1850, including the nation's earliest female saints and sainthood candidates, were slaveholders or people who relied on the labor, sale, and brutal mistreatment of enslaved people—and the economic benefits of whiteness and racial segregation—to establish and secure the financial futures of their orders and celebrated social service institutions.[19] Historians have paid even less attention to the fact that most white sisterhoods—including those led by saints and others under consideration for canonization—enforced racial exclusion and institutionalized ideas of white superiority and Black and Brown inferiority in their ranks and social service ministries for most of their histories in the United States.[20]

The few narratives that acknowledge sisters' slaveholding and/or segregated pasts have usually presented these realities as inconsequential to white sisters' ministries and as footnotes in their assessments of white sisters' moral leadership. Stories about white sisterhoods that nobly ministered to African Americans free of concern for color during slavery—some, if not all, of which may be fictional—have regularly been offered to counter documentation of these sisters' discriminatory practices.[21] Many scholars also routinely cite select white sisterhoods' willingness to teach African American children during the Jim Crow era and the relatively small number of white sisters who marched for racial justice in the 1960s as evidence of their pioneering racial justice activism in the Church.[22] These contentions, however, are possible only because the history of US Black Catholic sisters remains largely untold and misrepresented. This is true of the first generations of Black sisters, who ministered amid the nation's and Church's slaveholding elite in the nineteenth century, as well as those who waged pivotal battles to break down segregation in the Church and wider society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That most white US sisterhoods steadfastly refused to admit African-descended people—on equal terms or otherwise—for most of their histories remains one of the Church's best-kept secrets.[23] Moreover, as Black sisters' testimonies reveal, when white sisterhoods did admit African Americans into their novitiates and convents, this rarely translated into integration—let alone sincere inclusion—without intense Black struggle and suffering.[24]

*Subversive Habits* takes white Catholic racism and the brutal histories of Catholic colonialism, slavery, and segregation seriously. Using race and gender as essential categories of historical analysis, this book not only tells the stories of African American Catholic sisters and their diverse struggles against discrimination but also demonstrates how their history fundamentally reshapes and revises narratives of the US Church and its relationship to the African American community. It also turns critical attention to women's religious life in the Roman Catholic Church as one of the fiercest strongholds of white supremacy and one of the most consequential battlegrounds of the African American freedom struggle.

This book contends that the photograph of Sister Mary Antona Ebo marching with her Black counterparts to a segregated altar in a segregated profession ceremony in a segregated church in 1947 (figure Intro.2) offers a far more honest representation of the story of Catholic nuns in the Black freedom struggle than any of the now-iconic and widely accessible images of her or mostly white sisters marching for racial justice in the 1960s. The 1947 image captures the extraordinary efforts that white sisters—even those considered racially progressive—engaged in to enforce Black subjugation in their communities. It also illustrates that the earliest and most committed proponents of racial equality in women's religious life—those who were willing to suffer greatly in the face of unrelenting discrimination in order to lay bare and contest the evil of white supremacy—were Black Catholic sisters. Beyond the five pioneer Black Sisters of St. Mary, whose complaints about their racist mistreatment eventually forced SSM leaders to agree to fuller integration in 1950, the photograph documents the presence of two members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP), the modern world's first successful Black Roman Catholic sisterhood.[25]

Long before the legal and legislative victories achieved by the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, members of the nation's African American Catholic sisterhoods initiated and served as foot soldiers in some of the earliest campaigns aimed at dismantling racial segregation and exclusion within Catholic boundaries. Decades before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, for example, the leadership councils of the Black sisterhoods pried open the doors of Catholic higher education to secure the accreditation of the Black-administered Catholic educational system.[26] Since the early nineteenth century, the Black orders had also preserved the vocations of scores of devout Black Catholic women and girls denied admission into white sisterhoods in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean solely on the basis of race. Even Ebo had been preparing to enter

FIGURE INTRO.2. On June 9, 1947, Elizabeth Louise Ebo of Bloomington, Illinois; Hilda Rita Brickus of Brooklyn, New York; Pauline Catherine Townsend of Washington, DC; Mary Antonette Gale of Pine Bluff, Arkansas; and Bessie Lee Hardy of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, professed their first vows as members of the Sisters of Saint Mary (now the Franciscan Sisters of Mary) in St. Louis, Missouri. Two members of the historically Black Oblate Sisters of Providence, whose order had served in St. Louis since 1881 and had broken some of the earliest racial barriers in the archdiocese can be seen seated on the right. Members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence regularly attended the investiture and profession ceremonies of pioneering Black sisters in white congregations in a show of solidarity and support. Courtesy of the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives at Catholic University of America.

the historically Black OSP upon her graduation from nursing school before white SSM leaders finally lifted their ban on Black members in 1946.[27]

In narrating the history of racial segregation and exclusion in female religious life and the wider Church, this book recovers the story of Black Catholic sisters as vanguard antiracist educators, desegregation pioneers, and champions of Black women's leadership. Without knowledge of this largely suppressed history, one cannot begin to understand why Ebo and scores of Black nuns like her began appearing in civil rights marches and clamoring

to participate in the Church's white-led racial justice initiatives both before and after Bloody Sunday.[28] Nor can one fully appreciate why many of these same Black sisters (who like Ebo had desegregated their white orders and/or a host of other Catholic and secular institutions in the decades before Selma) finally came together in Pittsburgh to form the NBSC in 1968 and fought so hard to tell the stories of their lived experiences in public venues afterward.[29] Rather than being politically neutral or significantly late to the fight for racial justice, as many have argued, these Black sisters were already veterans of a long and tenuous freedom struggle within the Church. One need only shift the focus to the boundaries of Roman Catholicism, the nation's oldest, largest, and arguably most influential Christian denomination, to bear witness to this history. *Subversive Habits* finally offers the lens. In so doing, this book makes visible a long and sustained tradition of Black Catholic women's resistance to white supremacy. It also reveals an equally long and strident history of white Catholic resistance to racial equality, one that has gone unexamined—and in far too many cases has been explicitly denied.

## Recasting the History of the African American Freedom Struggle

*Subversive Habits* broadens understandings of the long fight for African American freedom by turning attention to the social, educational, and political struggles waged by Black Roman Catholic sisters from their fiercely contested beginnings in the nineteenth-century slave South to the present day. Charting these battles upends one of the most enduring myths about African American Catholics, religious and lay, namely, that they were largely absent from or indifferent to the campaigns against institutionalized white supremacy. Despite copious evidence to the contrary, a seminal monograph on the early US Church inexplicably argued that "Catholicism rarely touched Black slaves" in the United States, "left no legacy of resistance" among enslaved Black people, and "built no solid foundation for future Black social and political activity."[30] Influential studies by historians John T. McGreevy and Father Cyprian Davis also contributed to the myth of Black Catholic political conservatism and complacency about white racism. Citing a white Jesuit priest who in 1961 "publicly wished for a Catholic version of Martin Luther King, Jr.," McGreevy wrote, "To the disappointment of liberals, few African American Catholics—clergy or laity—took leadership positions in the civil rights movement." He also

characterized Black Catholics as "culturally conservative" during the 1950s and 1960s.[31] A decade before, Davis had concurred. While Davis pointed to the near exclusion of Black men from the priesthood from the period of slavery through the 1950s to explain why there were no Catholic Kings in the 1960s, he still wrote, "By and large Catholics, either black or white, were not in the forefront of the civil rights movement [of the 1950s and 1960s] or among the leadership of protest organizations."[32] However, Davis initially missed that many Black lay Catholics had initiated, spearheaded, and sustained formal and informal assaults on legal segregation from the earliest appearance of Jim Crow laws through to America's civil rights years. Davis and McGreevy also overlooked a more extensive history of Black Catholic activism against racism within Church boundaries spearheaded by Black women, religious and lay.[33]

In the past two decades, new scholarship has brought greater attention to the role of Catholicism in early American slave resistance and demonstrated how free Black Catholics, especially women and girls, used their faithfulness and membership in the Church to challenge anti-Blackness and carve out greater autonomy and mobility in their lives before the federal abolition of slavery.[34] Sustained attention to the brutal conditions of Catholic slavery and the abolitionism of individuals like Lydia Hamilton Smith, the longtime partner of radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens, has revealed how enslaved and free Black Catholic women and girls also fought to dismantle slavery.[35] Recent studies on the Catholic interracial and long civil rights movements have retrieved from the margins the stories of scores of Black lay Catholics who were local and national leaders in postemancipation freedom struggles. Their names include early South Carolina civil rights activists and suffragists, the famed Rollin sisters; early public transportation boycott leaders Aristide Mary and Homer Plessy; Chicago Catholic Worker founder Dr. Arthur Falls; A. P. Tureaud, Sr., an influential attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Montgomery bus boycott plaintiff Mary Louise Smith; Freedom Summer martyr James Chaney; and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leaders Lawrence Guyot and Diane Nash.[36] Attention has also been paid to the long fight to develop a substantial African American Catholic clergy and to the story of Black priests and Black Power.[37] Nevertheless, scholarly analyses of Black Catholic activism are still hindered by a desire to address the lack of a Catholic King. As one scholar of the Black Catholic movement in the 1960s and 1970s concluded in 2018, "Although there may not have been any Black Catholic equivalent

of Martin Luther King, soon enough there were Black Catholic Malcolm Xs, Stokely Carmichaels, and Angela Davises."[38]

Because King—a minister born and shaped in the independent Black Baptist tradition—was not the only civil rights leader of significance, *Subversive Habits* moves beyond the futile search for his equivalent in the white-dominated Catholic Church. Instead, it builds on scholarship that has recovered the activism of African American women and girls who initiated, led, and sustained many local and national struggles for Black freedom and equal rights. Long before there were Black priests in the United States, there were Black sisters, who waged many of the first successful struggles against white supremacy and racial segregation in the Church, struggles that preceded and enabled the Black Catholic revolt of the late 1960s and early 1970s.[39] Indeed, this book reveals that before there were Catholic Angela Davises, there were plenty of Catholic Elizabeth Eckfords, Ruby Bridgeses, and Vivian Malones—Black Catholic women and girls who desegregated all-white Catholic parochial schools and academies, colleges, hospitals, and convents. In fact, many of the Black sisters who came of age politically in the 1960s and 1970s had desegregated their public and Catholic elementary and high schools and colleges as well as participated in the secular fight for civil rights before entering religious life.[40]

In recovering Black sisters' educational and political activism, *Subversive Habits* offers important new insights into the history of Black Catholic protest and the role of Black women's traditions of Catholicism in Black resistance to white supremacy. Since the late 1960s, scholars have generally identified three waves of Black Catholic activism: the rise and fall of the Colored Catholic Congresses, which layman Daniel Arthur Rudd led from 1889 to 1894; the rise and fall of the Federated Colored Catholics of the United States, which early NAACP leader and layman Dr. Thomas Wyatt Turner led from 1924 to 1933; and the Black Catholic revolt of the late 1960s, which led to the separate organization of the nation's Black priests, sisters, and laity and the establishment of the National Office for Black Catholics in 1970.[41] Scholarship on these movements reveals that African Americans have always desired to participate fully and equally in Church life, especially in the areas of worship, education, hospital care, and the clergy. But scholarly works have usually considered only the fight to develop an African American clergy to be synonymous with the Black Catholic fight for equality and justice in the Church.[42] Unlike their Protestant, Muslim, and non-Western counterparts, African American Catholics were long denied formal male religious leaders from their own communities.[43] Historians

have argued that the racist exclusion of African American men from the Catholic priesthood and the US episcopacy into the twentieth century robbed Black Catholics of legitimate spokesmen and effective racial justice advocates within the Church.[44] This assertion, however, recognizes only men as agents of historical change and fails to acknowledge that Black sisters had important roles as Black Catholic spiritual leaders and as some of the earliest champions and educators of Black priests.

To expand understandings of Black Catholic resistance and illuminate how often it intersected with secular Black freedom campaigns, this book also turns critical attention to the leadership of Black sisters in the long struggle for Black Catholic education. The fight for literacy and quality education has long been a cornerstone of the African American struggle for freedom and justice. Yet the African American pursuit of Catholic education (and white resistance to it) remains largely neglected in histories of the civil rights movement and the broader struggle for Black liberation. While the Black Catholic population remained relatively low, hundreds of thousands of Black parents, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, regularly sought out Catholic schools as potential safe havens for their children to escape nonexistent, underfunded, and/or overcrowded public schools, from slavery through the Jim Crow era. During the desegregation era and even today, Catholic schools, especially those led by Black nuns and other Catholics committed to quality Black education, remained attractive to African Americans in large part because of their relative affordability and the hostile receptions that many Black youth received in white-led integrated schools, both public and private. Indeed, Black sisters' vanguard struggles for educational equality and dignity, combined with their pioneering commitments to teaching Black history and training "race leaders," demonstrate that they were formidable prophets of American Catholicism and democracy long before they began marching for racial justice in the 1960s and 1970s.

*Subversive Habits* also illuminates the emancipatory dimensions of Black female celibacy within religious life. Scholars of race and sex have long documented how white denial of Black female virtue was central to the social construction, maintenance, and defense of white supremacy in secular and religious realms.[45] Unrelenting and systematic attacks on the moral character of Black women and girls not only helped to justify centuries of unprosecuted racial and sexual violence visited on Black bodies and communities but also profoundly shaped the protest strategies that Black women and girls developed to survive.[46] However, the entries of Black women and girls

into the consecrated ranks of religious life in the Roman Catholic Church have been widely overlooked as political and arguably feminist acts of bodily liberation and respectability.[47] While records offering insights into the inner thoughts of Black sisters from the nineteenth century are rare, the vehemence with which white Catholics opposed the very idea of Black sisters and characterized them as morally suspect is abundantly documented. Indeed, in a white-dominated and patriarchal society and Church that often opposed interracial marriage in law and custom, the very idea of a Black bride of a Christ imagined as white was nothing short of insurrectionary. In the early 1970s, NBSC members also wrote and spoke extensively about the radical dimensions of their vows of chastity. Many went so far as to link their celibacy to Black liberation and explicitly challenge the masculinist ethos of many Black Power advocates, who sought to allow Black women to contribute to the movement only through motherhood.[48] Black sisters' oral testimonies also underscore the liberatory and "radical," as one sister put it, dimensions of rejecting the traditional confines of motherhood and marriage through embracing the celibate religious state.[49] While those I asked why they had entered religious life always replied they had felt the call and desire to serve God, the women interviewed for this study also often noted the limited employment opportunities available to them before the civil rights movement. "I could only have been a teacher, a nurse, or a maid" was a common remark. Moreover, the current and former Black sisters interviewed often alluded (without prompting) to the "perils" they faced as Black women in the secular world. One former sister mentioned the frequent rape of Black domestic workers in white households.[50] This book, then, encourages historians of the Black freedom struggle to take seriously the spiritual, intellectual, and political activism of Black nuns as they navigated and challenged the racist and sexist contours of their church and wider society.

### Rethinking the US Catholic Experience and the "Black Church"

Surveying the lives and struggles of African American nuns reveals that Black Catholics have never been footnotes in the history of the US Church or the wider nation. As such, *Subversive Habits* calls on scholars to expand their understandings of the US Catholic experience and turn more attention to the great diversity of the Black religious experience. Like in Latin America and the Caribbean, Catholicism was the first Black articulation of

Christianity in the land area that became the United States. In fact, much of early African American history (which includes the first recorded Christian marriage in what became the United States) and Black resistance to slavery and white supremacy took place within Catholic boundaries.[51] That hundreds of thousands of African American parents, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, seeking to overcome racial inequalities in the public school system, consistently turned to the US Catholic Church to educate their children over the centuries is also significant. Yet the story of Black religion and Black protest, like US Black religious history, is primarily narrated as a Protestant story, while US Catholic history is still overwhelmingly framed as a story of European immigrants, beginning in the antebellum urban North.[52] This book specifically builds on a new wave of scholarship seeking to foreground the African foundations of American Catholicism, center Black Catholic experiences, and move beyond the limited framing of the US Black Catholic community as "a minority within a minority."[53] It also takes a direct cue from a 2014 roundtable discussion published in the *Journal of Africana Religions*, which reminded scholars that "most of the people who have lived their lives under the sign of Catholicism [in the Americas, including the Caribbean] have been Native American and African descended, not European."[54]

Black women's religious life in the United States dates back only to the early nineteenth century. However, African American sisters were among the nation's pioneering nuns and led some of earliest US congregations of women, Black and white. Moreover, scores of the over 2,500 African American women and girls known to have entered religious life can trace their lineage to earliest days of the North American Church and the free and enslaved Black Catholics whose labor, suffering, and faithfulness built it.[55] Some Black sisters also have direct and even biological connections to the earliest European Catholic families in North America, including the famed Carrolls and Spaldings, who supplied the US Church with three of its earliest bishops and a pioneering white female congregational leader.[56]

The stories of Black sisters who converted to the faith also offer invaluable insights into the leading roles that African American women and girls often played in the making of US Catholicism. This is especially true of those who participated in the great migrations of Black southerners and Caribbean natives to the industrial North, Midwest, and West in the twentieth century. Many of these women's lives also intersect with the larger story of African American political and cultural protest in notable ways. Sister Francesca (Edeve) Thompson, the second African American Sister

of St. Francis of Oldenburg in Indiana, for example, was the child of pioneer African American stage and screen actors Edward and Evelyn (née Preer) Thompson.[57] Sister Mary Reginalda (Barbara) Polk, an Alabama native who entered the Sinsinawa Dominicans in Wisconsin in 1948, was the daughter of famed Black photographer and Tuskegee Institute professor Prentice Herman Polk.[58] Boston native and early Black Sister of Notre Dame de Namur William Virginia (Dolores) Harrall was a maternal cousin of civil rights leader and National Council of Negro Women founder Mary McLeod Bethune.[59]

Much of the scholarship on the growth of the African American Catholic population outside of the South in the twentieth century has centered the efforts of the relatively small number of white priests and sisters who expanded their ministries to the Black migrant and immigrant arrivals. However, this study reminds scholars that Black sisterhoods, Black laywomen, and, later, individual Black sisters in white congregations were also leading participants in this great missionary and evangelization endeavor. The general councils of Black sisterhoods regularly received and, when able, answered requests from sympathetic white priests and often desperate Black laywomen ministering in communities that had endured decades of neglect and racist mistreatment in their respective dioceses. In one remarkable example from the 1940s, the archdiocese of Detroit invited the OSP to staff a storefront Catholic mission called Our Lady of Victory, which had been established by a Black laywoman named Anna Bates in 1943. In the previous decades, Bates had walked five miles to and from St. James Catholic Church, the only white parish in her community that would not violently turn away the Black faithful. For more than ten years, Bates had repeatedly petitioned the archdiocese to create a parish open to Black Catholics in the northwest area of the city, to no avail, but eventually persuaded the white Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to offer instruction to the Black youth in her community. However, it took the Detroit Massacre of 1943 and the much-celebrated arrival of the OSP from Baltimore, Maryland, in 1948 before Bates's dreams of a safe and welcoming Catholic Church and school for Black Detroiters would be fully realized.[60]

Also, the plethora of written and oral history sources consulted for this study rarely credited the missionary labors of white sisters and priests with Black conversions to Catholicism in the twentieth century. Instead, the vast majority of Black converts in these sources noted that they followed the leads of family members, Black neighborhood friends who were cradle Catholics, or devout Black laywomen ministering in their communities.

When asked who modeled the life of prayer and service to which they had been called, almost all my interviewees cited the faithfulness, selflessness, and deep spirituality of family members, male and female, not white religious. Several Black nuns or their family members also championed pious Black laywomen who recognized and nurtured Black vocations to religious life.[61] For example, Washington, DC, native Angela White, who in 1956 desegregated the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in Ohio, fondly recalled how a devout Black laywoman and teacher at her public elementary school named Dr. Armeta Leach took her to daily Mass during the lunch hour and regularly wrote her letters of encouragement after White entered religious life.[62] In another poignant example from the historically Black Hill District of Pittsburgh, a Black laywoman and day care operator named Sarah Degree singlehandedly brought scores of Black people to the faith after World War II. Among them was Freda Kittel, who in 1958 became the first African American known to be admitted into a white sisterhood in Pittsburgh.[63] Shortly after Degree's death in the 1980s, Kittel's brother, Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright August Wilson, lambasted the diocese of Pittsburgh for failing to honor Degree's legacy of service and evangelization. "Every Catholic I knew that lived in the Hill District was a Catholic because of Miss Sarah," Wilson recalled. "If there was ever a saint, it was Miss Sarah. . . . If she was white, they'd have a Miss Sarah Degree Child Care Center or something." Such recollections underscore the vital roles that Black laywomen always played as evangelizers and spiritual and educational leaders in Black communities, roles too often overlooked, misrepresented, or altogether omitted from histories of US Catholicism.[64]

At its core, then, this book is a work of historical recovery and correction. So many forces have willfully conspired to silence the history of nation's Black sisters and their many struggles within and outside of the Catholic Church. Several documented examples show white sisters and others individually and collectively working to erase Black sisters' lives and labors from the historical record in the name of white supremacy.[65] The best-known cases involve white sisters, including members of leadership councils, blocking access to and even destroying archival materials documenting the Black heritage of their order's earliest members. Leaders of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, for example, colluded for nearly a century to suppress knowledge about the order's two African American foundresses, former OSP members who passed for white.[66] In 1928, one Immaculate Heart of Mary leader in Michigan wrote, "We are convinced that silence is the fairest, wisest, and most agreeable way of

committing to oblivion this subject."[67] In the 1930s, the order's leaders even undermined an attempt launched by Father Leonard DiFalco, a Brooklyn priest, to have their chief foundress canonized, out of fear that her racial heritage would be rediscovered.[68]

White sisters and others have also grossly misrepresented the origins and (in some cases) the continued existence of formal and informal anti-Black admissions policies in white sisterhoods, usually in favor of narratives of white Catholic saviorism.[69] One illustration of this deliberate erasure involves the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS), established by Saint Katharine Drexel, ironically the Catholic patron saint of racial justice. For much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the SBS—organized after the nation's first five self-identified African American sisterhoods—operated the nation's largest network of Catholic elementary and high schools designated for African Americans and Native Americans. The well-resourced order, which relied heavily on Drexel's trust left to her by her financier father, also established Xavier University of Louisiana, the nation's first historically Black and Catholic institution of higher education.[70] However, from the order's founding in 1891 to 1950, the SBS systematically excluded African American and Native Americans from its ranks, with the exception of one Native American woman admitted to a lesser rank in 1893.[71] For decades, white SBS members tracked their Native American pupils with vocations to other white orders, and they told their Black American pupils, whom they tracked to the Black sisterhoods, that they could not admit them to the SBS, at the request of the leaders of the Black orders and/or because of the racial segregation laws of the South.[72] During Drexel's canonization process, SBS members and their supporters publicly maintained that the community's exclusionary admission policies were not rooted in racism but rather in a sincere desire not to draw from the ranks of the Black sisterhoods.[73] However, the record is clear. There is no archival or other credible documentation that the Black superiors ever made such a request to Drexel. Instead, in 1893, the racially derogatory views of the SBS's founding white members and their unwillingness to live with Black women on equal terms were central factors in the order's vote to exclude Black and Native American candidates.[74] Moreover, when the order finally voted to accept Black members in 1949, pressure from white priests, not from the SBS's white members, forced their governing council to take the historic vote. Even then, the council initially voted to accept only two or three Black candidates at a time, seemingly to ensure that a Black majority did not develop.[75] Such realities underscore just how much white suprem-

acy and the color of Christ's brides mattered to white sisters, even those professing a commitment to racial and educational justice.

Ultimately, *Subversive Habits* is an intentional exercise in African American women's historical truth telling. Most of my subjects and the struggles they waged are unknown outside of small Catholic circles. As such, I have opted to present this history in narrative form, using Black sisters' stories to frame my analysis of their lives and struggles for justice, equality, and democracy. Because so many people have never seen an African American nun, I have also included several photographs. Many of these images have been hidden away in Church archives or preserved in the private collections of the sisters and their families. Like the written and oral evidence, the visual record of Black sisters has been essential in documenting their lives and the history of racial segregation and exclusion in female religious life. In a few cases, photographs are the only surviving documentation of a Black sister's existence accessible to researchers, especially when a congregation has not maintained a formal archive or has blocked research access to the archive or a specific sister's file.

### America's Real Sister Act

Despite Black sisters' nearly two-hundred-year history in the United States, Whoopi Goldberg's performance as Dolores Van Cartier/Sister Mary Clarence in the *Sister Act* film franchise remains the dominant interpretation of an African American Catholic sister and the desegregation of a white congregation in the nation. That the morally ambiguous fictional character of Mary Clarence is very loosely based on an actual African American nun and sainthood candidate who desegregated her order is perhaps the best testament to how Black sisters' history has been disfigured and erased in national memory.[76] In the pages ahead, I provide an essential counternarrative, what the historical record reveals to be the real sister act: the story of how generations of Black women and girls called to the sacred life of poverty, chastity, and obedience navigated and fought against racism, sexism, and exclusion to become and minister as consecrated women of God. In the face of often unrelenting discrimination, Black sisters overcame unimaginable obstacles and broke some of the nation's most difficult racial and gender barriers. At various points in their history, many also made gut-wrenching compromises and accommodations to white racism that contemporary readers may find unacceptable. One must understand that Black sisters—like other Black Catholics who refuse to abandon the faith—never

wanted to surrender *their* church to racists and others who could not fully affirm Black humanity and dignity. Like other African American activists fighting for justice, Black sisters who stayed in hostile congregations and endured pernicious discrimination in their church understood their sufferings as a necessary sacrifice in the fight to serve their communities and ultimately defeat the sin of white supremacy. African American sisters also took their sacred vows, especially obedience, seriously. However, as Sister Rose Martin (Kathryn) Glenn, the only African American woman to enter and remain in the Missionary Sisters, Servants of the Holy Spirit in Techny, Illinois, explained in 2011, "My vow was to God, not them. They were going to have to put me out" and seemingly disgrace God in the process.[77]

Because it is impossible to narrate this history without confronting the centrality of white racism in the American Catholic experience, white Catholics are also an integral part of this study. During and after slavery, white Catholics, religious and lay, were some of the bitterest and most violent opponents of racial equality and Black self-determination. Others served as some of the sincerest and most important allies that Black sisters and the larger Black Catholic community had in their fight for freedom, justice, and equity. Depending on the time, region, and circumstance, white Catholics were often an uneasy and complicated mixture of both.

*Subversive Habits* unfolds chronologically in seven chapters. More than two and a half centuries after the Roman Catholic Church introduced African slavery and ninety-seven years after the first European nuns arrived to minister in what became the United States, European and white American ecclesiastical authorities finally permitted African-descended women and girls called to religious life to profess vows as nuns. For these pioneering Black sisters, embracing the consecrated celibate state constituted a radical act of resistance to white supremacy and the sexual terrorism built into the nation's systems of chattel slavery and segregation. Chapter 1 chronicles their fiercely contested entries into the nation's pioneering Black sisterhoods and a small handful of white congregations during slavery and the early years of Jim Crow. This chapter not only foregrounds the white supremacist commitments of the nation's earliest European and white American bishops, priests, and sisters but also demonstrates how Black sisters and their supporters navigated this opposition to establish many of the nation's earliest Catholic schools, orphanages, and nursing homes open to Black people. In seeking to embrace the celibate religious state, devout Black Catholic women and girls dared white Catholics to live up to a core teaching of the Church: that all lives mattered and were equal in the eyes of God. They

also seeded antiracist sentiments in the Church, formalized Black Catholic women's resistance to white domination, and challenged one of the most insidious tenets of white (Catholic) supremacy: the idea that Black people, and women and girls especially, were inherently evil, immoral, and sexually promiscuous.

Chapter 2 examines Black sisters' first explicit and successful challenges to racial segregation and exclusion. As in the secular domain, the struggle for Black education within Catholic boundaries was never politically neutral or divorced from the larger struggle for Black freedom and rights. In 1916, for example, the nation's seventh Black Catholic sisterhood formed, prompted by impending state legislation that sought to ban white teachers from instructing African American children, and vice versa, in Georgia. After World War I, laws across the country began mandating state accreditation of private schools. Like their white counterparts, the leadership councils of the Black sisterhoods were faced with the monumental task of obtaining higher education for their members to secure the certification of their schools and ensure that Black Catholic parents could uphold their canonical duties to provide a Christian education for their children. Yet most of the nation's Catholic colleges and universities explicitly barred US-born Black people, even Black religious, from admission, solely based on race. This chapter examines the hidden struggles waged by the African American teaching sisterhoods to desegregate Catholic colleges and universities to secure the accreditation of the Black-administered Catholic educational system and to preserve African American access to quality Catholic education in the decades before the *Brown* decision.

The struggle for Black Catholic education was deeply connected to the Black Catholic fight to enjoy all the rights and privileges of their church, including entering religious life. Catholic schools not only served as the primary vehicles of evangelization in the African American community but also constituted some of the most important spaces in which priests, sisters, and members of the laity identified and nurtured prospective Black candidates for religious life. Because white nuns made up the majority of sisters ministering in Black Catholic schools by the turn of the twentieth century and outnumbered white priests by significant margins in most locales, they exerted enormous influence on the growth of the national Black sister population and the culture of the larger Church. Many white sisters and priests teaching Black youth not only regularly enforced ideas of white superiority and Black inferiority in their interactions with their Black pupils and their parents but also actively discouraged Black vocations. However,

after World War II, the formal and unwritten anti-Black admissions policies of white sisterhoods increasingly came under attack as changing racial attitudes and the explosive growth of the Black Catholic population outside of the South led to a marked increase in applications to white orders. Chapter 3 examines the often behind-the-scenes battles waged to desegregate the historically white and white ethnic Catholic sisterhoods. Drawing on previously sealed Church records as well as the oral and written testimonies of pioneering Black sisters in white orders, this chapter documents the measures white leadership councils and individual white sisters took to keep African Americans out of their congregations or prevent them from staying after admission. It also documents the extraordinary measures that Black candidates and a growing number of white Catholics committed to the principles of social equality took to break these barriers down.

As the nation entered the classical era of the civil rights movement (1954–68), not only did African American entries into white orders increase, but the secular Black freedom struggle greatly influenced many who entered. Many early Black sisters in white congregations understood their admissions and ministries to white Catholic communities as inherently connected to the broader freedom struggle. Unlike their secular counterparts, though, Black sisters who desegregated previously white congregations usually did so away from the protection of news cameras, their families, and the faith communities that had nurtured their vocations. They were usually also required to desegregate the faculties or staffs of their orders' schools and hospitals as well as the all-white neighborhoods, parishes, and sundown towns where their orders' convents and ministries were often located. Chapter 4 recovers the history of this hidden activism, charts Black sisters' overlooked participation in local and national marches for civil rights, and explores how some Black sisters brought some of the ideas, methods, strategies, and idealism of the movement into the Church before and after the reforms and activist-oriented mandates of the Second Vatican Council. It also documents the challenges that many African American sisters encountered as they tried to move into secular and Church-sponsored campaigns for the racial justice.

Chapter 5 examines the watershed formation of the NBSC in 1968 and the early story of Black nuns and Black Power. The inaugural NBSC meeting marked the first time that members of Black and white US sisterhoods gathered on a national stage to discuss racism in the Church and wider society. The NBSC's creation not only gave Black sisters an independent platform to initiate a national campaign of racial justice reform but also facilitated

an outpouring of public testimonies from Black sisters documenting their experiences of racism and sexism in the Church. This chapter pays special attention to the NBSC's efforts to confront long-standing anti-Black racism in women's religious life and stop the increasing numbers of Black sisters departing religious life as a result. It also charts Black sisters' entries into secular campaigns aimed at dismantling institutional racism during America's Black Power years.

Chapter 6 chronicles the diverse ways Black sisters responded to the crises of Black Catholic education and vocational losses in the 1970s. As in secular society, white-directed desegregation in the Church often resulted in the closing of long-standing high-performing Black and Black-majority Catholic schools. Those led by the Black sisterhoods and located in inner-city and historically Black communities were especially vulnerable to closure despite ever-increasing Black demands for Catholic schools. By 1970, halting the mass closings of Black Catholic schools and the Black vocational losses that partially contributed to this crisis became the chief priority of Black sisters and the larger African American Catholic community. This chapter pays particular attention to Black sisters' involvement in the struggle for community-controlled schools, their efforts to radically transform Black Catholic educational curricula to reflect the changing times, and the efforts to keep Black sisters—most of whom were educators—in religious life.

Despite the NBSC's many achievements, the steady departures of Black sisters from their orders and the increasing successes of massive white resistance to equal rights legislation in the 1970s signaled an important new turning point. For the first time, the African American sister population, like the wider populations of priests and sisters, was clearly declining, with no immediate solutions to reverse the trend. Chapter 7 takes Black sisters through the crucible of the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the first decades of the twenty-first. It focuses on their continued efforts to preserve African American female religious life and Black Catholic education as well as their efforts to support the development of Black women's religious life in sub-Saharan Africa, outside the cultural domination of European and white American sisterhoods. This chapter also briefly examines the revolutionary ministry of Sister Thea Bowman, the first and only Black Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration of La Crosse, Wisconsin, who in the 1980s emerged as one of the Church's most visible and beloved critics of enduring racism and sexism; the overlooked activism of Black sisters in the struggle for women's ordination; and the implications of the growing numbers of African sisters in the nation.

Charting African American sisters' freedom struggles reminds us that there has always been an articulation of US Catholicism that understood that the lives and souls of Black people mattered. For most of their history in the nation, Black sisters never made up more than 1 percent of the national population of Catholic sisters.[78] Yet they have been more than consequential figures in the story of American Catholicism and the fight against racism, sexism, and exclusion in the Church and wider society. Indeed, when one considers the kinds of barriers that African American sisters routinely broke over the years, many of the women whose stories fill the pages ahead deserve to be not only known but also championed as we champion the nation's most famous Black freedom fighters. Black sisters' epic journey in the United States is a remarkable story of Black resilience, faithfulness, and possibility. It also serves as another cautionary tale about ignoring and underestimating the prevalence of anti-Black racism in religious communities. It is my greatest hope that I have done justice to African American sisters' stories. Any mistakes are my own.

# NOTES

### Note on Terminology and Preface

1. This glossary supplemented the LCWR's *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America* exhibition, which toured the United States from 2009 to 2012, in a brochure titled "Nun 101." The author added definitions for *apostolate*, *aspirant*, *bride of Christ*, *canonization*, *convert*, and *cradle Catholic*.

2. "Black Sisters Weigh Contradictions in Christian and Secular Community: 200 Negro Nuns Attend First Nat'l Meet," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 7, 1968.

3. C. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 98–155, 240–42. The entries on Black Catholic women in Darlene Clark Hine's *Black Women in America* were also invaluable at the start of the author's research.

4. Sister Mary Shawn Copeland, "Black Nuns: An Uneasy Story," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 7, 1975, 9.

5. Copeland, "Black Nuns"; Helen May, "Sister Shawn: Black Nun in the News," *Detroit Free Press*, December 13, 1970; and Dr. Shawn Copeland (formerly Sister M. Shawn Copeland, Congregation of Sisters of Saint Felix of Cantalice [CSSF] and Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Michigan [OP]), interview by author, March 5, 2007, telephone.

6. Copeland, interview.

7. Copeland, interview. See also Copeland, "Cadre."

8. Copeland, interview.

9. Copeland, "Cadre," 128. This was also a common theme in my archival, periodical, and oral history research.

10. Dr. Patricia Grey (formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres, Religious Sister of Mercy [RSM]), interview by author, Sewickley, PA, August 12, 2007. See also chapters 5 and 6.

11. Grey, interview, August 12, 2007.

12. The book I presented to Grey even misidentified the historically white Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament as a Black order.

13. Grey, interview, August 12, 2007.

#### Introduction

1. "Black Nuns Schedule Pittsburgh Caucus," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 3, 1968, 2; and Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey, "Follow-Up Letter for Upcoming First NBSC," ca. July 1968, in Ebo's personal collection.

2. Sister Mary Antona Ebo, Franciscan Sister of Mary (FSM), interview by author, March 26, 2007, telephone. Ebo recounted that her paternal grandfather, who had been born into slavery, adopted the surname Ebo upon emancipation. Ebo's father, Daniel, told her it was the only thing his father could remember about his African past. Decades later, a Black physician intrigued by the pronunciation of Ebo's surname explained to her that the Ibos, or Igbos, were a distinct West African ethnic group.

3. Ebo, interview.

4. Quoted and cited in Koehlinger, *New Nuns*, 13, 244n117.

5. Ebo, interview.

6. The film *Sisters of Selma* is one of the best accounts of the experiences of the sisters who traveled to Selma in 1965.

7. For two national examples, see John Herbers, "Mayor and Police Block 3 New Marches in Selma," *New York Times*, March 11, 1965; and Paul Good, "Selma's Mayor Blocks Another Attempt," *Washington Post*, March 11, 1965. For a local example, see "Nuns Join in Selma Protest Demonstrations," *Pittsburgh Catholic*, March 18, 1965.

8. Mary Peter Traxler, School Sister of Notre Dame (SSND), "After Selma Sister, You Can't Stay Home Again!," *Extension*, June 1965, 17.

9. Ebo, interview. See also Elaine Graybill, "From Orphanage to the History Books: Bloomington's Betty Ebo Has Made Her Place," *Pantagraph* (Bloomington, IL), February 15, 1990, 19.

10. Ebo, interview.

11. "Here and There," *Our Colored Missions*, December 1946, 179. See also "Colored Girl Accepted by Nursing Order," *Pantagraph* (Bloomington, IL), October 2, 1946, 3.

12. "Negro Nursing Sisters," *Colored Harvest*, December 1946–January 1947, 2–3.

13. Ebo, interview. See also Reverend William M. Drumm to the Most Reverend Joseph E. Ritter, November 23, 1946, Sisters of St. Mary/Franciscan Sisters of Mary File, Archdiocese of St. Louis Archives (ASL Archives), St. Louis, MO. Sister Joseph Marie Schuemann, novice mistress for the first Black Sisters of St. Mary, recalled in a 1977 interview that "the white Populants never did come out to the black Novitiate, and the black Postulants never came out to the Motherhouse." Quoted in Schadewald, "Remapping Race," 232.

14. During our interview, Ebo noted that the offending white sister had recently received a local award for her commitment to social justice but had yet to apologize for mistreating Ebo's father. Ebo also recounted the story of her father's mistreatment in an August 1983 joint interview of Ebo and Sister of St. Mary Thelma M. Mitchell con-

ducted by Sister Jean Derer, contained in Ebo's congregational file in the Archives of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary (FSM Archives), St. Louis, MO, and quoted in Schadewald, "Remapping Race," 229.

15. Quoted in Schadewald, "Remapping Race," 230.

16. The quoted characterization originates in Copeland, *Uncommon Faithfulness*.

17. Blum et al., "American Religion," 1.

18. For historiographical overviews of US female religious life, see McCauley, "Nuns' Stories"; and Coburn, "Historiography of Women Religious." Margaret McGuinness has noted that except for administering the sacraments and celebrating Mass, sisters for most of their history were "more actively involved in the everyday lives of Catholics than priests." McGuinness, *Called to Serve*, 8.

19. On slaveholding among US nuns, see Miller and Wakelyn, *Catholics*; Misner, *"Highly Respectable,"* 75–88; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*; Doyle, *Pioneer Spirit*; and Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*. In her seven-hundred-plus-page study of Catholic sisters in the West, Jo Ann Kay McNamara devotes less than two pages to slaveholding by European and white American sisterhoods. She also presents slavery as an institution forced on white sisters and erases their documented brutality. See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 533, 579–80. For more on US sister saints and sainthood candidates involved in slavery, see O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton*; S. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits*; and "Report on the Commission." Despite copious materials documenting the life of Elizabeth Seton, the first US-born saint, evidence of her and her congregation's ties to slavery is curiously scarce. Seton scholar Marilyn Thei, for example, wrote that there is "no hard evidence establishing that Elizabeth and William [her husband] owned slaves, neither is there evidence to the contrary." See Thei, "The Woman," 252n94. In *Elizabeth Seton*, historian Catherine O'Donnell documents that Seton hailed from a slaveholding family and that her grandfather bequeathed an enslaved "boy, formerly named Brennus," to her in his will (22–23). O'Donnell also documents that enslaved people labored at Seton's first school in Emmitsburg, Maryland (263–64); that the early Sisters of Charity (SC) supervised the enslaved women of Mount St. Mary in Emmitsburg, where the order was established (385); and that Seton never embraced racial equality and abolitionism (385–86). Because the fate of the enslaved person willed to Seton is unknown (23), Seton's status as a slaveholder, if only briefly, seems clear. Seton's acceptance of the labor of enslaved people as tuition at her school (as noted by O'Donnell in Uva and Gotham Center, "The Life of Elizabeth Seton") also constitutes slaveholding, if only temporarily. Although O'Donnell maintains that the enslaved people who labored at Seton's school and Mount St. Mary were owned by the Sulpicians and members of the laity (*Elizabeth Seton*, 263, 290–92; and O'Donnell in Uva and Gotham Center, "The Life of Elizabeth Seton"), there is documented evidence that the SC in Emmitsburg owned and trafficked in enslaved people in the 1830s and that those who expanded the order's ministries into New Orleans in 1834 exploited enslaved labor until the Civil War. See Misner, *"Highly Respectable,"* 78–79; and Salvaggio, *New Orleans' Charity Hospital*, 68. Such realities necessitate deeper investigations into Seton's and her congregation's ties to slaveholding, especially in Emmitsburg, using the research methodologies outlined in Schmidt, "'Regulations.'" This is especially true since O'Donnell acknowledges that one of two boxes titled "Slavery at

the Mount" contained in the Archives at Mount St. Mary University was missing when she conducted her research in 2017 (*Elizabeth Seton*, 464n22).

20. Historians of Native American residential schools are notable exceptions. See Adams, *Education for Extinction*; and Churchill, *Kill the Indian*. See also chapter 2.

21. See Hannah Natanson, "An Elite D.C. Girls' School Thought Its Founding Nuns Taught Slaves to Read. Instead, They Sold Them Off for as Much as They Could," *Washington Post*, August 2, 2019; and Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, "Descendants of Enslaved People Find Their Roots in Sacred Heart Records," *Global Sisters Report*, September 12, 2019.

22. For classic and recent examples, see McGuinness, *Called to Serve*; Koehlinger, *New Nuns*; Hoy, *Good Hearts*; Cummings, *New Women*; Cressler, *Authentically Black*; Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*; and Carol K. Coburn, "The Selma Effect," *Global Sisters Report*, March 9, 2015.

23. This book examines the culture and practices of white supremacy in white and white ethnic sisterhoods. On the anti-Black and discriminatory policies of Catholic hospitals that white sisterhoods administered, see Wall, *American Catholic Hospitals*, 73–102. For a small sampling on the widespread mistreatment Black youth experienced in white-administered schools, parishes, and convents, see chapters 2 and 3.

24. Subsequent chapters examine these struggles and sufferings in detail.

25. Ebo, interview; and *FSM Chronicles Book #3-B: 1944–1953*, 481–82, FSM Archives.

26. Chapter 2 discusses these feats.

27. Ebo, interview. Because Ebo desired to become a nurse and serve the public, she preferred to enter the SSM. The OSP are a teaching order. See also "Pro Memoria," 1, SSM/FSM File, ASL Archives.

28. Chapters 4 through 6 discuss this history.

29. Chapters 3 through 5 cover sisters' specific stories.

30. Miller, "Failed Mission," 149.

31. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 62.

32. C. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 256.

33. Davis, a founding member of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, also failed to document Sister M. Martin de Porres Grey's presence at the Black priests' inaugural meeting and relegated the NBSC to a single mention on a timeline. See C. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 257–59, 262.

34. For two classic examples, see Landers, *Black Society*; and Clark and Gould, "Feminine Face."

35. Delle and Levine, "Excavations"; Wingert, *Slavery*; Schmidt, "Peter Hawkins"; Doyle, *Pioneer Spirit*, 168–70; and Thomas, *Question of Freedom*.

36. See Gatewood, "'Remarkable Misses Rollin'"; C. Davis, "Black Catholics"; Kelley, *Right to Ride*, 51–116; Wynn, "Diane Judith Nash"; "Interview of Lawrence Guyot," *History Makers*, November 9 and 17, 2004, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/lawrence-guyot-40; Olivia B. Waxman, "'I Was Not Going to Stand': Rosa Parks' Predecessors Recall Their History-Making Acts of Resistance," *Time*, March 2, 2020; Davidson and Putnam, *Legendary Locals*, 94; K. Johnson, *One in Christ*; Neary, *Crossing Parish Boundaries*; and Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*.

37. See Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*; and Cressler, *Authentically Black*.

38. Cressler, *Authentically Black*, 13.

39. For an introduction to Black women in the African American freedom struggle, see D. White, *Too Heavy a Load*; Shaw, *What a Woman*; Ransby, *Ella Baker*; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*; Crawford, Rouse, and Woods, *Women*; Collier-Thomas and Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle*; Giddings, *Ida*; Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*; and Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*.

40. See chapters 3 and 4 for a few specific examples of those who desegregated Catholic schools. Sister of the Blessed Sacrament Gilda Marie Bell is one of a few Black sisters who desegregated public schools. Bell integrated New Iberia High School in New Iberia, Louisiana, in 1969 and noted that she still bears the scars from the beatings that she received from the white men who attacked her classmates and her with chains as they departed their bus on the first day of school. Sister Gilda Marie Bell, SBS, interview by author, New Orleans, August 22, 2009.

41. On the two earliest Black lay protest movements, see Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest*; and Agee, *Cry for Justice*.

42. See Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*; C. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*; R. Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic*; Bennett, *Religion*; Southern, *John LaFarge*; Nickels, *Black Catholic Protest*; Copeland, "Cadre"; J. Davis and Rowe, "National Office"; Agee, *Cry for Justice*; and MacGregor, *Emergence*.

43. White prelates steadfastly refused to ordain most of the earliest generations of self-identified African American seminarians as priests. The few who were ordained were mostly denied leadership roles in US Black parishes until the late 1960s. Many were sent to the Caribbean or West Africa as missionaries. Others remained deliberately hidden as instructors or assistants in seminaries and predominantly white northern parishes. See Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 2–5, 357–63; and Foley, *God's Men of Color*.

44. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*; and C. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 146–62, 203, 218–19, 233–34.

45. On white attitudes toward African Americans during and after slavery, see Kendi, *Stamped*; Jordan, *White over Black*; Frederickson, *Black Image*; Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow*; Morton, *Disfigured Images*; and Murphy, *Attitudes of American Catholics.*

46. On Black women's resistance to sexual, political, and economic exploitation during and after slavery, see D. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*; Hine, "Rape"; Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*; McGuire, *At the Dark End*; Feimster, *Southern Horrors*; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Giddings, *When and Where*; Lindsey, *Colored No More*; B. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*; and Blain, *Set the World*.

47. Two significant exceptions are found in Morrow, *Persons of Color*; and Detiege, *Henriette Delille*, but a more thorough historical examination of the radical and politically transformative dimensions of Black female religious life is needed. See also Estes-Hicks, "Henriette Delille."

48. See National Black Sisters' Conference, *Celibate Black Commitment*.

49. Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, Sister of the Holy Family (SSF), interview by author, New Orleans, August 19, 2009. Her name in religion was Rita Francis.

50. Grey, interview, March 22, 2010.

51. For an introduction, see Landers, *Black Society*. Catholic records document that a free Black domestic servant from Spain married a Spanish soldier in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565, inaugurating Christian marriage in what became the United States. See Sheldon Gardner, "Website Provides Details on Early St. Augustine Residents," *St. Augustine Record*, March 27, 2018.

52. For a few examples, see Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*; Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*; and McGuinness, *Called to Serve*.

53. The phrase "minority within a minority" comes from Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones*, 117–40.

54. E. Curtis and S. Johnson, "Black Catholicism," 245.

55. This number was tallied from the available membership lists of the US Black sisterhoods and the NBSC as well as the obituaries of the women who persevered as Franciscan Handmaids of Mary. The exact number of Black women to enter white orders is unknown, and the congregational lists of the Black orders are missing the names of several early members. So the number of Black women who entered US religious orders is likely higher than 2,500.

56. See chapters 1 and 2 for these examples.

57. Greg Schaber, "Profile: Francesca Thompson, O.S.F.," *Xavier Magazine*, October 1, 2005.

58. "Mass Offered in Chicago for Sr. Mary Reginalda Polk, 58," *Jet*, February 5, 1990, 58.

59. A biography of Harrall was provided to the author by the Sister of Notre Dame de Namur archivist Sister Mary Ellen O'Keefe, email message to author, July 31, 2013.

60. See N. Davis, "Finding Voice," 45–46; Harris-Slaughter, *Our Lady of Victory*; and Missions Record Group (RG), box 39, folder 1, Archives of the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP Archives), Baltimore, MD.

61. Sister Gilda Marie Bell specifically cited the members of her parish's unit of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Knights of St. Peter Claver. Bell, interview.

62. Angela White (formerly Sister Mary Angela de Porres, Sister of Charity of Cincinnati [SC]), interview by author, Cincinnati, OH, October 23, 2013. White later married and took her husband's surname.

63. Adrian McCoy, "Obituary: Freda Ellis/August Wilson's Sister Served in Many Roles," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 1, 2015. The author obtained the details on Ellis's entry into the Sisters of Divine Providence from Sister Bernie Duman, archivist of the Congregation of Divine Providence, email message to author, August 10, 2016. Ellis, who was Sister Edana in religion, departed the congregation in 1962. Thanks to Dr. Laurence Glasco for alerting me to Ellis's tenure in religious life.

64. Quoted in Dinah Livingston, "Cool August: Mr. Wilson's Red-Hot Blues" reprinted in Bryer and Hartig, *Conversations with August Wilson*, 45–46. Livingston interviewed Wilson and first published this article in the October 1987 edition of the *Minnesota Monthly*.

65. For another prominent example of the suppression and whitewashing of Black Catholic history, see Foley, "Adventures."

66. See Supan, "Dangerous Memory."

67. Supan, "Dangerous Memory," 65.

68. Supan, "Dangerous Memory," 65.

69. Historian Jay P. Dolan's 1992 supposition that by the 1950s, African American women and girls called to religious life were no longer tracked into Black congregations but instead welcomed in most white orders remains the standard narrative despite glaring contradictory evidence. See Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 370–71.

70. For the most extensive historical treatment of the SBS, see Lynch, *Sharing the Bread*, specifically the single-volume hardcover version published in 1998. The two-volume paperback edition published in 2001 under the same title is an abbreviated and significantly edited version.

71. Lynch, *Sharing the Bread* (1998), 407. See also Baldwin, *Call to Sanctity*, 94. Chapter 1 examines this story in detail.

72. The SBS's long-standing practice of attributing their anti-Black admissions policy to a request from Black female congregational leaders is documented in many Black sisters' oral testimonies and the 1998 hardcover edition of *Sharing the Bread* (407, 691n121). Sister Patricia Lynch specifically attributes this request to Mother M. Elizabeth Bowie, a leader of the Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF), and cites only an April 8, 1970, statement by Sister of the Blessed Sacrament Consuela Marie Duffy, an early Drexel hagiographer. Lynch also wrote, "No trace of a similar request from the Oblate Sisters of Providence has been found, but as many of their major superiors had been taught by the SBS, Mother Katharine probably believed they should have the benefit of the practice." Mother Bowie led the SSF order from 1909 to 1918 and from 1930 to 1946; the SBS vote to exclude African Americans and Native Americans was taken in 1893. See chapter 1 for this story. Interestingly, the 2001 paperback reprint of *Sharing the Bread* makes no mention of these alleged requests from the Black superiors to Drexel and erases the SBS's anti–Native American admissions policy on pp. 68–69. African American Catholics who supported Drexel's sainthood were seemingly unaware of the order's 1893 segregationist vote, and SBS leaders seemingly did not inform them. For documentation of Black Catholic support of Drexel's canonization, see Cummings, *Saint of Our Own*, 188–89, 208. Bowie's dates of leadership were obtained from New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture, and History (NOAAMACH), *Celebration of Faith*, 27. Finally, knowledge of the SBS's segregationist practices may not have disqualified Drexel for sainthood. White female congregational leaders Elizabeth Seton and Rose Philippine Duchesne, who exploited enslaved labor and practiced segregation, were canonized in 1975 and 1988 respectively. Cornelia Connelly, another enslaver and the US-born foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Child of Jesus (SHCJ), was declared venerable in 1992. See note 19 in this introduction and see chapters 1 and 5 for more on Seton's and Duschesne's ties to slavery and their respective congregations' segregationist practices in the US. Although the SHCJ began their ministries in Africa in 1930 and assisted in the formation of two separate African congregations—including the Handmaids of the Holy Child of Jesus in Nigeria (established in 1931)—the order did not admit its first African candidate until 1962. She did not remain, nor did the next two African-descended women admitted into the order. See "Report on the Commission," 5–6.

73. See Cummings, *Saint of Our Own*, 188–91, 208; Hughes, *Katharine Drexel*, 106–7; Baldwin, *Call to Sanctity*, 94; Bell, interview; and Sister Donna Banfield, SBS, interview by author, Memphis, TN, October 27, 2009.

74. See introduction, note 72; and chapter 1.

75. A member of the SBS leadership council who chose to remain anonymous read the minutes of the 1949 decision to the author over the telephone on October 17, 2016, and confirmed the details by email correspondence, October 19–24, 2016.

76. Sister Mary Clarence is believed to be loosely based on the life of Sister Thea Bowman, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, whom Goldberg visited shortly before her death in 1990. See Smith and Feister, *Thea's Song*, 207–9, 269.

77. Sister Rose Martin (Kathryn) Glenn, Missionary Sister Servant of the Holy Spirit (SSpS), interview by author, Memphis, TN, November 20, 2009; and Glenn, public statement after a talk the author delivered on March 21, 2012, National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, TN.

78. At the height of the US sister population in 1966, African American sisters barely numbered one thousand, or roughly 0.55 percent, of the approximately 181,451 Catholic nuns ministering in the country. See Berrelleza, Gautier, and Gray, *Population Trends*, 2; and "983 Negro Nuns in U.S., Catholic Magazine Reveals after Survey," *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 8, 1962, 10.

#### 1. "Our Sole Wish Is to Do the Will of God"

1. On this apologist literature, see, for example, Miller, "Church in Cultural Captivity"; McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 49–56; Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 85–125; Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, 9; and Zanca, *American Catholics*, 111.

2. Misner, *"Highly Respectable,"* 75. On the slaveholding practices of the Ursulines, see Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 161–94.

3. See Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*. On the role of the Catholic Church in Latin American and Caribbean slavery, see Schwaller, *History*; Landers and Robinson, *Slaves*; and Klein and Vison, *African Slavery*. On Catholic slavery in Canada, see A. Cooper, *Hanging of Angélique*.

4. On the development of Spanish Catholic Florida, see Landers, *Black Society*.

5. On the development of Catholic Maryland, see J. Woods, *History*, 106–35, 141–74; and R. Hoffman, *Princes of Ireland*. On the role of the Catholic Calvert family in codifying race and legalizing slavery in Maryland, see Yentsch, *Chesapeake Family*; and Rodriguez, *Slavery*, 5. On the Calvert family's opposition to interracial marriage between free white women and enslaved Black men, but eventual role in overturning the 1664 anti-miscegenation statute, see Thomas, *Question of Freedom*, 24–25.

6. See, for example, C. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 35–37; J. Woods, *History*, 72–105, 175–214, 334–75; Ochs, *Black Patriot*, 22; Pasquier, *Fathers on the Frontier*; Janet, *In Missouri's Wilds*; Poole and Slawson, *Church and Slave*; Gollar, "Catholic Slaves and Slaveholders," 42; Agee, *Cry for Justice*, 7–9; and Curran, *Shaping American Catholicism*, 95–97. Catholic religious orders were often the largest and most influential slavers in Latin America as well. See Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations*, 96, 149; Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 1–4, 114–15; and R. O'Toole, "(Un)Making Christianity."

7. In his opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), Roger B. Taney, the nation's first Catholic Supreme Court justice and a member of one of Maryland's most prominent slaveholding