

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 Infirmiry 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 Americans 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 Techy, 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.