

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.