

Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle

Shannen Dee Williams

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Shannen Dee Williams's *Subversive Habits* is an awe-inspiring history book about Black nuns who fought for freedom and equality.

The first comprehensive history of Black Catholic sisters in the United States, this book reveals the powerful roles that these determined women played in the Catholic Church and in American history. Far from withdrawing from the world into the cloister, they engaged in the world in powerful ways, taking a radical stance against white supremacy, segregation, and sexual violence, all from within religious orders that didn't always understand or support their aims. Still, their visions for the future—including for education, the right to vote, and women leading in the Church—were brought to fruition, little by little.

Variouly delicate and bold in its treatment of how the Catholic Church worked for and against Black sisters, the book also shows how the nuns themselves wrestled with their allegiance to the Church while aiming to seek justice for all people. A rich narrative emerges from oral histories and Church records, as with the lively story of Sister Mary Antona Ebo's presence and activism: she marched in Selma, Alabama, in 1965 and in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, never ceasing in her activism between these periods.

Beautiful epigraphs open each chapter, from sources including Zora Neale Hurston and the nuns themselves; quotes throughout bring the women's voices into the work. Their voices hit every register: Sister Mary Roger Thibodeaux asserts "I am a Black nun / Singing, talking, laughing, / crying and dying." And photographs showcase the faces of these humble, powerful women.

Subversive Habits is a stirring history text about the remarkable faith and conviction of Black nuns in America.

MELISSA WUSKE (March / April 2022)

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