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

Podcast with Shannen Dee Williams (June 21, 2022).

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Allison Isidore [AI] 00:00
Hello everybody and welcome to New Books in Catholic Studies, a podcast channel on the New Books Network. This channel and episode were created in collaboration with the American Catholic Historical Association, a conference of scholars, archivists, and teachers of Catholic studies. My name is Allison Isidore, and I'm a host of the channel. Today we're talking with Dr. Shannen Dee Williams, Associate Professor at the University of Dayton. Shannen is the author of Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle, published by Duke University Press this past May. This book is the first full history of Black Catholic nuns in the United States, hailing them as the forgotten prophets of Catholicism and democracy. Drawing on oral histories and previously sealed church records. Shannen demonstrates how master narratives of women's religious life and Catholic commitments to racial and gender justice, fundamentally change when the lives and experiences of African American nuns are taken seriously. She calls attention to Catholic women's religious life as a stronghold of White supremacy and racial segregation, and thus, an important battleground in the long African American freedom struggle. Shannen, welcome to the podcast.

Shannen Dee Williams [SDW] 01:25
Thank you so much for having me.
AI 01:27
Yeah, I was wondering if you could begin the interview by telling us a bit about yourself.

SDW 01:31
Beyond my academic position, I am a historian of the African American experience with research and teaching specialization in women’s religious and Black freedom movement history. I am a historian of the Black Catholic experience. I’m very interested in the lives, labors, and struggles of Black Catholic women religious and lay. I would also like to say that I am a cradle Catholic, I was born into the Catholic Church, and I am still a practicing Catholic. So, if there’s one line about me, I’m a Black Catholic woman who studies Black Catholic women’s history.

AI 02:01
Yeah. And before we dive into Subversive Habits, tell us about how you came into this particular project. Why did you want to look at Black Catholic nuns in the African American freedom struggle?

SDW 02:12
One would think since I am a Black Catholic woman that that sort of drove my interest into this history. And nothing could be further from the truth. I knew very little Black Catholic history coming out of high school and really going into my graduate program first at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where I earned an MA in African American Studies. And then I earned my PhD from Rutgers University. I knew nothing about Black Catholic women outside of my mother’s own story. My mother was one of the first three Black women to graduate from the University of Notre Dame in 1974. My mother was educated in Black Catholic schools in Savannah, Georgia, educated in Catholic schools all of her life, and then attended St. Mary’s College, which is right down the street from Notre Dame for two years. And then in 1972, Notre Dame began admitting women. My mother and two of her friends met with Father Hesburgh and they went to Notre Dame and graduated two years later. So that was the only sort of history that I knew. And I didn’t know much about it because my mother didn’t talk about our experiences at Notre Dame. I came to this project really through my interest in Black women’s history and Black women’s activism in the Black Power movement. My first year at Rutgers, I took a seminar in African American history taught by the great Deborah Gray White was a pioneer of Black women’s history. And I just took to going through microfilm editions of Black owned newspaper and searching for a paper topic for that seminar. And it was during that time that I stumbled upon a newspaper article from the Pittsburgh Courier announcing what was my Black Power Federation of Catholic nuns called the National Black Sisters Conference. And I experienced what I can only call metanoia. I didn’t know Black Catholic history; I certainly didn’t know much Black Catholic women’s history. And I certainly didn’t know that Black nuns existed in my church. And I wanted to know why. So really,
that evening, I called my mom and said, mom, hey, did you know they're Black nuns? And she was like, no, didn't know. And so really, I wanted to know more about this organization. And I wanted to also know how my mother and I who are Catholics could not know that there were Black nuns in the history.

SDW 04:12
I googled the National Black Sisters Conference, I knew that their papers had been recently processed at Marquette, I went through every database looking for anything that I could find on Black Catholics obviously came across Father Cyprian Davis’s landmark study of the Black Catholic community and learn from that text among many things, that there had been two Black sisterhoods founded in my mother’s hometown of Savannah, Georgia. And so that sort of launched me into this topic. Initially, I thought I would write just simply a dissertation in a book on Black nuns and Black Power focusing on the National Black Sisters Conference. But when I started tracking down many of these women, some of whom were still in religious life, others who were not but who were professors or retired professors, I realized that I needed to do something more. First through my conversations with Dr. M. Shawn Copeland, who was one of the leaders of the National Black Sisters Conference who has now retired distinguished theologian from Boston College, and then really tracking down and getting interviews with Dr. Patricia Gray, who was formerly Sr. M. Martin de Porres Gray, who was the chief architect of the National Black Sisters Conference. And it was in my conversations with Dr. Grey, that she revealed to me that one of the many things that the National Black Sisters Conference wanted to do was to write a history of Black nuns in the United States. They understood with so many Black Catholics and so many Black people have always understood that one of the greatest weapons of White supremacy is its ability to erase the history of its violence and its victims. And so, you have to tell these stories.

SDW 05:34
And so, in agreeing to sort of speak with me, it was conditional, one, I had to agree that I would not write a book about her or just about her or the National Black Sisters Conference, but to really turn my attention to the largely unsung and under research history of the nation's Black sisterhoods. She was very adamant that I tell all the stories and she really asked me to do that. So that's a very long way of saying, I came to this project by chance, although I think it is providential serendipity, I should have encountered it in my master’s program, because I wrote a master’s thesis on Joan Victoria Bird, who was one of the two female defendants in the Panther 21 trial in New York City. And I was writing that story come to find out later, right through interviewing the sisters that she was one of their students, one of the students of the Franciscan handmaids of Mary. But when I was writing about resurrection, I just sort of said, oh, yeah, she, she attended resurrection in Harlem. And then she went on to cathedral where she had experienced racism from the White nuns. And I just didn’t look at resurrection and so I didn’t realize it was a
handmade school. So, on the one hand, its chance, although I do believe at some point, I was called to this history, because at every moment, I should have encountered it, and I didn't, but I finally did so in 2007.

**AI 06:42**

And, you know, that kind of leads me perfectly into my next question. You've talked a bit there about it, that being interviews with former sisters or current sisters still. And so, you use a mix of oral history and archival documents to tell this history. You know, what were some challenges you ran into when researching this book? And why did you take this approach using the oral histories and archival records instead of just say, archival history?

**SDW 07:11**

Right. It's a great question. And thanks so much for asking it. I relied on every source that I could get to just because its history had been so suppressed. The nation's two oldest Black sister has maintained formal archives. And in the case of [Franciscan] Handmaids at one point they had an archive no one knows where it is. We do believe some of [Mother Mary] Theodores [Williams], papers are with the Society for of African Missions. I did not have any luck sort of getting access to those materials, but I did have access to The Handmaid's who were still alive and former handmaid's who are still alive. And especially that of the former Superior Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, who was maintaining her own archive. And so, she sent me all of her material and I took it and then, you know, got everything back. So, obituaries, anything that I could find periodical records on top of archival sources, and the oral histories, to say a little bit more about the oral histories. I never intended to interview as many Blacks’ issues that I did. I actually started doing oral histories because I was in graduate school and in the middle of the semester when I came to the project, and so I literally just didn’t have time or the money to go to Marquette to go through the National Black Sisters Conference papers. What I could find, you know, I got through interlibrary loan, I went through the periodicals any of the press records related to the National Black Sisters Conference that I can pull together, but primarily through the interviews and sisters would send me their information, I would copy it and send it back. And then we would do the oral history interviews as well. Sisters maintain their own archives on top of that the papers that are at Marquette.

**SDW 08:37**

So initially, for the dissertation, I only did about 45 interviews I did (laughs) over 100 More over the past 14 years. And it became very clear to me very quickly that I had to do oral history interviews. I mean in cases of Black women who went into communities and didn’t remain oftentimes their records were closed. Sometimes you have to get access and permission from those women if they’re still alive or their family members. And sometimes communities just won’t
give you access to records of sisters who did not persevere. Sometimes you run into barriers, getting access to congregational minutes. And that was critical for me simply because a lot of the votes that were taking these congregational votes about whether or not they would accept the negro woman if they wanted to live with women in those votes — in those records, and so, at some point, I had to start getting special permission. It really changed for me really after 2016. When I did a talk at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and outlined some of the challenges that I was facing reconstructing this history. And several communities reached out to me offered their support gave me access to things that I did not get access to before. So, for me, there were great difficulties in terms of just sort of traditional barriers that you may have, but also that are just very specific to Catholic archives and church archives. In some archives, right some you can’t get access to a bishop’s papers until 20, sometimes 30, sometimes 40 years after that person has passed on.

SDW 09:53
But the oral histories were critical because they’re just simply things that are not in the archives, right? We are dealing with whatever reality as I outlined, there are instances in which communities and individuals, sisters, but also communities either stop access or block access but then we do know there are instances of archival erasure of destroying materials. But especially for Black women who went into religious life in the 20th century, almost immediately when I began interviewing the members of the historically Black sisterhoods. Again, I’m someone who didn’t know much history I just assumed that they have been educated by the Black orders and went into the communities of their educators almost immediate, like, "oh, no, I was educated by the SBS. I was educated by the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or another White order. They rejected me and I got lucky, somebody directed me to the Black orders." Huh okay. There’s information where one would find that, but the oral histories give you a different sense, you get the sense of fathers who are tipping the pullman porters extra because their daughters are going off to the convent that no one has ever seen and so they leave them behind. But also getting to the point of loss vocations, right? So many women told me when they were rejected those who were lost locations with those who went on to other communities, they said, "You know, I never even submitted a formal application. So, there is no written record of my request. I asked my teacher; I asked the visiting vocational director, and I was given an oral rejection." So, there is no written record of it. So of course, the oral histories matter.

SDW 11:14
The oral histories manner also because it is in those stories that one can recreate what the Black Catholic experience was, like, under Jim Crow at various points, why? Why families migrated from, you know, Texas to California, right? The experiences of that migration, they don’t even make it

into subversive habits. One story of a Black sister who was a pioneer Black sister in California and Los Angeles, she said, "You know my story is really different. Because, you know, Black folks didn’t take route 66 to California, because most of those places wouldn’t service Black people, but she said, we took route 66 Because my mother and stepfather could pass for White." And she said "My experiences, my siblings, and I wrote on the floor of the car because her father was darker. And so, she and her siblings were darker. And she said, “So we hit on the floor, so no one would see us. And so, when my parents would rent a motel or a hotel, they would wrap us in blankets and carry us into the hotel so that we did not, we were not seeing them, we did not expose them." That those kinds of stories are also in oral histories, stories of beautiful stories of Catholic grandfathers lining their children up in a circle — by lining them up in a circle — putting them in a circle at New Year’s (laughs) and praying over each child separately. These experiences that simply have not been recorded, and certainly not been incorporated into these dominant narratives of the US Catholic experience in the broader American Catholic experience. So, the oral histories were helpful to me in identifying sisters, who had left religious life who had married who I couldn’t track down, but also recreating stories and things that I would never get from the archival record, even in the case of the NBSC handshake, right? At the executive boards, they would say, you know, one sister would say, "Do you have the strength sister?" second sister, "I have the strength if I do if you do." and then together in unison, "then we’re strong," right? All of those things that you just can’t get from the archival record one that’s accessible to you and then not.

SDW 13:15
The Black press was also great. Anytime the Black press, both Black and Black Catholic press got news of a Black woman, desegregating a White community. They oftentimes did a story got a photo there. Sometimes that’s the only thing that we have documenting a woman that we have access to documenting the desegregation of a community. So, I used everything I could out of print books, obituaries. Oftentimes obituaries, women would document their experiences of racism in the obituaries to make sure that even though they were dying, it was not excluded. Even since the book has come out if you recall, there’s an episode in chapter three in which I discussed a Black Catholic sister in Chicago where the White mothers revolted against her. One sister had told me that that had happened to an afro Puerto Rican sister, but I wasn’t sure if that was the same case. After the book came out, I got an email from a White priest in Minnesota who said, "Hey, there are two former members of my church who passed on, they died a few years ago. But here’s their information, I can put you in contact with their family members." And he sent me one of the obituaries and there she was 1962 she was a certified of Mary put me in contact with her living sister and her nephew. And they sent me the photo. So again, anything that I could use outside of the archival record, I also used, and I did so also because I did — I was so conscious of how much resistance I had faced already, and how much resistance that I would encounter. And so, I wanted to make sure that I had all of my Ps and Qs checked. If there was an oral history record, I saw I
looked to see if I could find any sort of corroborating archival or periodical sources, just to sort of make sure that it was not denied. Because that’s one of the great challenges, right? How do you write a history I have a group of women who most people believe don’t even exist? And then for those who know that they exist, most people have said that their history doesn’t matter. And that’s not even up for debate, right? It is 2022 Black sisters have been in this country for almost 200 years, that it has taken too long for us to get this history is an indictment in itself isn’t a testament to the denial of the ways in which this history has been erased has been marginalized. And as I say, in my book, I hope that I’ve done them justice. And I hope that I have demonstrated why our understanding of Black sisters history is essential to our understanding of the American Catholic experience, I would even go so far as to say is that one cannot even be considered to be an expert in the Black Catholic experience, or the American Catholic experience if they have never stepped foot in the archives of the Oblates Sisters of Providence, or the Sisters of the Holy Family. And I will stand on that.

AI 15:48
I think that you do an incredible job, you know, demonstrating that they've been here for over 200 years, you know. And in part, you do that in your first chapter talking about the, you know, pioneering women religious — Black women religious entering orders, or founding Black sisterhood. And so, these women are challenging, you know, a central tenant of White supremacy, as you say. They're challenging the belief that Black people were innately immoral and sexually promiscuous. So, I was wondering if you could talk a bit about these pioneering women and how they work to resist White supremacy when entering religious life or in their religious life?

SDW 16:39
Absolutely. What was striking for me when I began doing this research is not simply that, you know, these women were there they are among the earliest sisters to minister in the United States. But their history intersects with all of these founding members of the Church, right like we’re talking about the Carol’s and Spalding means that in fact, the story of Sister Mary Aloysius Beechcraft, born Anne Marie Beechcraft, from what we understand from the historical record that she is a granddaughter of Charles Carroll of Carrollton was the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence and cousin to Bishop John Carroll was the nation's inaugural Bishop. That these are women who not only have sort of direct connections, but in some cases by logical connections to some of the nation's earliest European Catholic families. So, when I say Black history is Catholic history I that is not hyperbolic, right? I'm saying that these women are here. Their ancestors are here. They are present in church records they are encountering with so many of these individuals that we talk about, even if we're talking about sort of Black women in the church in a place like Louisiana, where they are a dominant face of the church and Louisiana, or even sort of talking about sort of the beginnings of Catholic history in Spanish, Florida, right? What

does it mean that the first Catholic — the first marriage that Christian marriage takes place in the land territory that becomes the United States is between a free Black Catholic woman from Spain and a Spanish soldier. Black Catholics are here and they’re not here in some marginal way that they are building the church, quite literally funding the church, they are contributing to the development of an American Catholic spirituality, not only as lay people, but also as women who are called to religious life.

**SDW 18:10**

And so, when we begin to actually include their stories, take them seriously see how they encounter with some of these leading church figures. It really forces us to sort of think about the church in a whole new light, but there’s no way to sort of do it without it. But even if we’re talking about these women and challenging the spiritual sort of foundations of White supremacy, sort of this idea that Black people are inherently immoral, and promiscuous, what does it mean then that we have these women who are having to contest this navigate these realities, navigate these ideologies. And we see it in the resistance to the formation of these Black orders. What I sort of draw on I’m building on the work of Cyprian Davis and Diane Batts Morrow and a few more who have come before me, right that the Black sisterhoods come about as a result of the anti-Black admissions policies of White communities. In the 19th century, we don’t have that much evidence sort of giving us insights into the interior lives of Black sisters, per se. We do have some records. What’s most important, though, is that we have sort of these documents from White Catholic Church officials, documenting how they believe Black women to be Black people in general to be morally suspect, at every turn. And so, what does it mean that these Black women living in the slave south are able to rest and win recognition for themselves and support for their desires to inter religious life and serve communities that are being neglected by the church? That’s something especially when we sort of think about the US today and the Black Catholic population that is relatively small, we would certainly think that those communities would have been founded first and Latin America, but we know that blood purity law so to prevent that from happening. We have exceptional cases of Black women allowed to go into religious life oftentimes, you know, in a relegated space, but it means something that’s the modern world’s first community for sisters really open to African descending women and girls are founded in the United States.

**SDW 20:04**

And we think about something like a Brazil which receives the largest numbers of enslaved people come into the Americas as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, and then becomes home to arguably the largest Black Catholic population in the Americas. They don’t get their first community freely open to Black women that’s church approved until 1928, almost a century after the Oblates Sisters of Providence. So, something specially miraculous happened in the United States. And we also know it because we have sort of the documentation of these women being

described by, they’re opponents, in the case of Oblates Sisters of Providence as a prophet nation of the habit. In the case of the Sisters of the Holy Family in Louisiana, they are denied the recognition and the ability to wear habits for several decades of their first existence. And yet, in the case of the Sisters of the Holy Family, we also know right, after the Civil War, they’re buying up properties to expiate the sins of slavery associated with those properties, as former slave traders pit becomes their first school or one of their earliest schools. And they buy up the form of a Quadroon ballroom, where women have their color and cast would have been sort of subjected to these really, really exploitative sort of this system of arrangement of known as massage. In the case of the abolition of Providence, we also know that they’re admitting women who were born into slavery into their ranks, even during slavery. So, there’s all this, you know, arguably feminist work that these women are doing. And yet it’s been overlooked, in part, because we don’t talk about Black sisters. But I think also because we have not been very honest about the church’s own foundational roles in the development of slavery, its commitments to slavery and White supremacy and I think one way to do it right, is to tell Black sister stories accurately and honestly, because when you do that, you have to confront the church’s largely unacknowledged and unreconciled histories of colonialism, slavery, and obviously, segregation.

AI 21:48
Yeah. And that kind of leads us right into my next question, you know, education of Black women and girls is such a central part of this history. You know, the Black sisterhood leadership understood that to fight things like Jim Crow segregation, the African American community’s best weapon was education. So, my question is, you know, what was the White Catholic response to Black demands for Catholic education? And how did the Catholic Church respond to attacks on Black Catholics who are making these demands for education by you know, non-Catholic segregationists?

SDW 22:30
Right, you know, the story of the Catholic Church’s relationship to Black education is complicated, right? Because we know that so many Catholic schools, were, in fact, some of the earliest, you know, educational institutions open to Black folks, both during slavery and then after slavery. And we know that the Catholic Church will come to play a very important role in Black Catholic education during the Jim Crow era. That being said, we know that the church’s commitment to Black Catholic education always pale in comparison to that, of the White immigrant population and the White population at large. But we do again, know we have examples of sisters, both Black and White, educating Black youth during slavery. We certainly know in the case of some communities, they sort of withdraw from the African American apostolate, sometimes for a few years, sometimes for decades, those lead institutions led by Black sisters, right, they are going to be the ones that maintain that commitment and demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the
education of Black of Black folks. So again, the church’s its commitments are minimal in comparison to its commitments to its White counterparts. That being said, we know the story of Black Catholic education is a critical one in the history of Black education in the United States. We know that African Americans educated in Catholic schools for a long time had a higher success rate than most of their counterparts in the Black community. So many Catholics have committed themselves — Black Catholics — have committed themselves to preserving Black Catholic education. And we know that literally hundreds of 1000s were probably in the millions now of African Americans who are not Catholic, entrusted the church with the education of their children, in part because so often Black Catholic schools were present, or were the viable options and accessible options to folks who were trying to either circumvent racial segregation deal with the issue of overcrowded public schools, underfunded public schools or not exist in public schools. And so that is a story worth preserving.

SDW 24:26
But we also know that the church even you know, non-Black Catholics who teach in Black Catholic schools, we’re not free from the racism of society or the racism of the church as well. And so, it’s a far more complicated story. We know that White Catholic leaders when confronted and asked to protect Black sisters who find themselves attacked for their ministries are at best ambivalent, right? We certainly will see cases in which individual White priests, some sisters, and some bishops will take steps to sort of protect sisters if they are in a in a bad situation. At worse, the church will uphold sort of society’s commitments to White supremacy like any other person. It depends on the region, the time, the place, etc. Obviously, in my book, I point out sort of clear examples of White bishops and sisters and priest, who support Black sisters when they are faced with challenges with the challenges of racial segregation when they need to get their schools accredited right after World War I. When state laws began to change, barring the higher education of private school teachers, the challenge, of course, one of the members of the Black sisterhoods, at the time that are which are teaching sisterhoods is that most Catholic institutions of higher education will not admit African Americans, Catholic or otherwise. And so, they have to find ways to build alliances with individual and willing sort of progressive White church officials who operate Catholic colleges to find ways to get sisters to desegregate these institutions. And so, one of the great stories of Black sisters right one of these hidden stories is that these women are also forgotten desegregation foot soldiers. These women who are desegregating these Catholic colleges and universities in the decades before the Brown [v. Board of Education] decision in order to secure the higher — the accreditation of their schools. And so, in that regard, that’s one of the great chapters right in the history of White Catholics, those who do come forward, they are a minority of White Catholics. But it’s one of the great chapters that I that I highlight. And it’s what I also underscore when we actually tell the truth about Black sisters’ stories, and we get all these
other examples that we didn't know existed, of real commitment to racial justice, through education.

AI 26:36
I want to talk a bit about the woman at the center of this book specifically, you know, you've mentioned it a little bit before but their experience with racism when entering religious life, or, as you've said, the outright rejection from religious life because of their Blackness. Can you tell our listeners about these women's struggles when entering these predominantly White sister hoods when successful?

SDW 27:03
Absolutely. One has to remember or at least what I what I argue, when we think of women's religious life, we have to think about it as a battleground of the African American freedom struggle. When Black women go into religious life, they desegregate begin to really decelerate why communities after World War II, they are not simply decelerating that community, right, if they are going to be active members of that community that oftentimes if they're members of apostolic communities that have public ministries, whether it's teaching, nursing, social work, that means that they go out into the communities that their order serves. And so not only are these women decelerating the communities they decelerate the divisions, the convent's that exists for their communities across the country, the institution's whether their schools, hospitals, and whatever sort of parishes where their orders serve, oftentimes, the universities or colleges that their orders operate. And so, these are women who are foot soldiers, but we don't think about them as foot soldiers, because they are doing this in isolation. They're doing this away from the protection of news camp, they're also decelerating many of the sundown towns and hostile towns, which many White Catholic institutions are located in. And so, they find themselves oftentimes face resistance. And again, many of them are going in as teenagers. Some of them are the first Black member of communities that number into the 1000s. And again, for many women, they are traveling hundreds and sometimes 1000s of miles away from their hometowns and the communities that have nurtured their vocations, to be able to enter our congregation willing to accept them. So, the challenges are immense.

SDW 28:38
And when we think about some of the barriers, right, some of them are just sort of cultural barriers not being allowed to sort of express yourself and sort of traditions from your African American community that are oftentimes denigrated in Black communities, right? We know many White Catholic institutions, promote and propagate White supremacy sort of, we know it's well documented. So, the prevalence of Blackface minstrelsy shows in White Catholic schools and White parishes, on top of all of these other ways in which people are mis educated about who

Black people are. And so, some of the things are just simply cultural, you know, people who have never had any experience with Black people. And so, you just sort of say things that are off colored because you are you've literally been educated by American popular culture and other instances, right is sort of very intentionally sort of races. You know, examples of in the case of Sister Dolores Harrow, who was a pioneer Sister Notre Dame de Namur having some of her community members you know, not use the same plates and cups as she did during dining. Oh, goodness, just the worst things burning bedsheets burning mattresses, during pool activities, they would get out of the pool just to show her that they would not be in the pool with her, really designed to sort of drive women out of religious life being subjected to verbal tyrants. The n-word terms such as pickaninny. One can’t even begin to imagine the kinds of things well, I talked about it but there are also things that I don’t say right things, things that were shared to me. But I was asked to keep private about the kinds of bullying that women faced, and girls faced when they desegregated these communities.

SDW 30:13
And I think what was so important for me after 2016, when I got access to a lot of these congregational minutes, it confirmed the oral history testimonies. So, you have sort of documentation of sisters and community leaders admitting right that young girls will not be admitted into their communities, that they are perceived as problems before they ever stepped foot in the community. So, the kinds of issues that they were going to encounter, regardless of who they were, even before you submit the application sort of requirements are based on color, background, etc., was already excluding women. So, I think ultimately, when we think about these women, we also have to understand whether they thought of themselves as desegregation, foot soldiers or not, they were being forced to do so. And so, when we talk about these women who come along, and will eventually found the National Black sisters conference, these are women who have broken some of the nation’s most difficult racial and gender barriers, those who formed the National Black Sisters Conference and those who don’t, right, you know, who never joined that organization. But we’re talking about pioneer Black professors, hospital leaders, people who are, you know, desegregating not only sort of their institution, their colleges, their orders, colleges, right as students, but then later go on back as faculty members as chairs of departments, all of these women who have broken all of these barriers, and yet so many of these accomplishments are not known outside of very small Catholic circles. And so, I try to open that up in my book. And because I say, there’s so many other stories that I just don’t simply get to tell. But at some point, very soon, I’ll be sort of sharing those stories, just so we have a sense of the kinds of barriers that they were breaking. I think one story that I do share in the book is that of Dr. Francis Douglas, who, I don’t say it in the book, but she’s the first African American earned a PhD in Psychology from Fordham is a is a barrier breaker at so many institutions. But we also believe in 1956, she becomes the first African American to head predominately White university in the United States in
DePaul. And so often, we've always focused on the story of Dr. John Hope Franklin, who was the pioneer Black historian, but we always thought that he was the first Black person to chair a department at an institution a historically White institution of higher education. But it seems that Dr. Douglass is right along the lines with him.

AI 32:30
I think that was such an interesting part of your book, reading that seeing these barrier breakers before, you know, the Brown decision was even thought of. But another really interesting aspect of your book that you point out is when we get to the civil rights movement, we see, you know, outspoken, you know, White superiors or White nuns speaking out in support of, you know, racial equality, but not necessarily doing that within their orders within the church, you know, and so, Black nuns were also a part of the civil rights movement, they were posted across the country, they are involved in protests, sometimes, but very small amount, you know...

SDW 33:15
Right.

AI 33:16
And, you know, Sister Mary Antona Ebo, was maybe one of the most recognized Black sisters involved in the Civil Rights Movement, her being at Selma, right? She she's on the cover of the book.

SDW 33:29
Right.

AI 33:29
But, you know, these women were doing so much work behind the scenes within the church, and I want to focus on that, you know, how do they fight or address the racism they found within their community? And, you know, what did they achieve in the end?

SDW 33:44
It's a wonderful question. You know, part of what I wanted to do in Chapter Four was to one sort of, correct that sort of myth that Black sisters were not involved or concerned with the civil rights movement, right, sort of identifying those who were in these protests, but also revealing right that many of them who wanted to protest didn't get a chance to protest because whether or not if they were members of White orders, or even the Black orders, right? Were prohibited from protesting and participating in public protests, is something that I encountered almost immediately when I

went through the National Black Sisters Conference papers. At the first meeting, many of those women were like, "Yeah, we wanted to go to Selma, but we weren't allowed to go." And then there were all these other cases. I only sort of highlight a few in the book, but it's there in the records, but also recognizing that even before Selma, even before the liberalizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council, these women by simply daring and desiring to go into religious life in the White dominated church, whether they entered the Black orders, or whether that they desegregated White communities. They were a part of a freedom struggle within Catholic boundaries that we have to recognize not only those who are disaggregating White orders, who then go on to desegregate other White Catholic institutions, but even through Black Catholic education, that is something that I think was absolutely critical for us to understand historically. As the Black Freedom Movement historians of the African American freedom struggle have always sort of reminded us that the fight for quality education was a cornerstone of the Black Freedom Movement, right. And so certainly, we have to sort of think about Black sisters as educators, as participating in the freedom struggle through their campaigns, whether and in particular, pioneering the teaching of Black and Black Catholic history within Catholic boundaries, calling upon White sisters who ministered in Black communities to teach Black history.

**SDW 35:25**
That’s something that the members of the Black orders are doing through various interracial programs that operate within the church. One in particular, one organization that has been, I feel like overlooked for too long is the Sisters Conference for Negro Welfare that was founded in St. Louis, that was at the heart of many of these early sort of desegregation battles within the Archdiocese of St. Louis. But then through other organizations within the church, but even in their own sort of fights as to be respected and for their expertise as educators of Black youth and Catholic educators in general, that we see in so many ways, but also again, in sort of maintaining their commitment to desegregate and Catholic institutions, certainly, in the case of the members of the Black orders, they will continue to sort of desegregate Catholic institutions as the Civil Rights Movement matures. But part of what I wanted to do particularly with that chapter, and looking at Black sisters’ engagement with the civil rights movement, is to remind us and to really sort of refute this enduring myth that Black Catholics were politically indifferent to the secular freedom struggle, which we know that they are not many of them were active in civil rights organizations before they even entered religious life. And so many of them will bring those commitments into the movement. They are members of the forgotten, you know, they're the forgotten Till generation, many of whom are radicalized as a result of sort of the lynching of Emmett Till, and the acquittal of his murderer. And then in one case that I that I highlight in the book, that of Sister Patricia Haley, who was the first African American Sister of Charity of Nazareth, who is educated in their school, their high school in Birmingham, and the summer before she enters religious life, she will be arrested for leading her high school’s delegation in the Birmingham youth marches for
civil rights. She was the president of the Student Council, she’ll be arrested, she actually thought that she would not be admitted into religious life because of her arrest record. But she goes into the community. And almost immediately, you know, she realizes that in the community there, lay workers are subjected to racial segregation, they’re separate water fountains, they eat separately, and she leads a one-woman campaign calling upon her community to in that practice. And she will fight against other sorts of really, really intolerable other really, really gut-wrenching experiences of racism in the community. But those are the kinds of things that Black sisters are doing once they get into communities, those who have been active before, but as members of civil rights organizations, as youth organizations committed to ending in eviscerating in the color line,

AI 37:49
I just want to move forward in history now, you know, to more current times. Many of us who are studying, you know, American Catholicism are well aware of the decline and young people joining religious life. And as you mentioned earlier, you know, the population of Black Catholics in the United States is still very small today. But you write that there’s a steady growth of Catholicism and sub-Saharan Africa, which is supplying a significant number of African sisters to Western ministries, you know, reversing the decline in the Black sister population in the United States. Can you tell our listeners about this resurgence of nuns in the United States?

SDW 38:36
Absolutely. So, what we know, based on population statistics that we get from the Vatican, in the next 50 to 60 years, the face of the dominant face of the Catholic sister in the global church will be Brown and in many areas of the world of African descent. And we’re certainly seeing that resurgence in the US Catholics sister population, like the populations of women religious in Europe, we know that they are in decline, the aging numbers, can people continue to leave religious life, many communities are being revitalized by vocations coming from the Global South, obviously, there’s still vocations coming in from Europe, and in the case of the United States, from the United States as well. But those leading that charge generally are from the Global South, and in many cases from West and eastern Africa, as well as southern Africa. So, what’s been interesting to me, sort of thinking about the declining African American sister population that began to decline, really after Vatican two like their White counterparts since 1990. We know that over 1000 African sisters have been mission, either mission into the United States or being educated in the United States, or who are joining White US congregations. And so, what’s been really interesting is to see the impact of that specifically on the nation’s historically Black ministries. And we know that in the case of St. Augustine, stands which is the oldest Catholic School in Washington DC, a members of a Nigerian community came and restored Black sisters’ leadership at that institution that had been for over a century led by the Oblates of Providence who were forced to withdraw as a result of declining personnel.
So, what’s been interesting, I think, for me, is to think about the connections that members of the National Black Sisters Conference tried to make with Africa in the late 1970s, as they recognize the Black vocational crisis, and wondering if the birthplace of women’s religious life could then be sort of a site for revitalization of Black religious life. The National Black Sisters Conference will receive an invitation by a Nigerian bishop in the late in the early 1970s, who comes into the United States seeking African American sisters to help form an indigenous community in the Diocese of Benin City. He was concerned about the failures of European and White American congregations in his country, to nurture not only nurture Black vocations, but also to celebrate and preserve Nigerian traditions within the culture of the Catholic Church. And so, he brings in, he meets with the members of the National Black Sisters Conference, and then they send Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, and another sister to go and to sort of meet with them. There are other attempts to build those transnational connections between African American sisters and African sisters in the 1970s that I talked about. And in the case of the community that is founded in Nigeria, it’s the only community in Nigeria, and perhaps even in Sub Saharan Africa, where African sisters were habits of Kente cloth, as opposed to the European robes, just sort of think about that link. And that community in particular, has then sort of established a reverse ministry in the United States in wake of Hurricane Katrina, to be able to support the Sisters of the Holy Family whose ministries in New Orleans were destroyed as a result of Hurricane Katrina. So, there are these many connections that are there. And I think that we actually need to begin to think about what this will mean not only for the US church, but for the Western Church and the global church, especially when we have not yet fully sort of understood the history of racial segregation and exclusion within the modern church, the impact of the denial of Black vocations and what it will mean now that it seems that Sub Saharan Africa will indeed be supplying significant numbers of African sisters to Western ministries, and what it will mean for those women who will have to contend with the historical legacies, legacies and enduring realities of anti-Blackness and racism in our church.

Yeah. And as I look at the time, I think we have time for one more question.

Sure.

So many congregations have begun to reckon with their past connections to slavery and racism, but others have yet to recognize their involvement. How do we preserve and discuss these
histories, if there are still those within the church hierarchy who won’t acknowledge the damage that has been caused?

**SDW 42:58**
Well, my initial response is, the truth cannot be buried forever. Much of this history is still preserved in archives, there is a question of access. But we’re at a point now, certainly, if we look at the examples of congregations of women religious in Kentucky, and in some other spaces, as well as the example of Georgetown, not suggesting that these are perfect models for reparation, but we are, I cannot conceive of us going to a point where we’re going to sort of go back to this idea of Catholic slaveholding is benign and more virtuous than other forms of slavery. So much of the attention now that has been turned to the violent realities of Catholic slave holding the realities of sexual abuse of enslaved women. If I can point to someone like William Thomas's work, sort of the great work of Kelly Schmidt that will be coming out and other younger scholars who are committed to disabusing the church of this notion of its place as an innocent bystander in the history of White supremacy. There are communities that are committed to reckoning with this history opening up their archives, I also would point to the example of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, establishing sort of anti-racist platforms and committing themselves, even if other communities don’t open their record and continue to resist. That in itself is an admission of guilt. And we recognize that, but for those communities who are ready to reckon with this, I think we're in a place where we have to do it.

**SDW 44:28**
I think if I’m concerned about anything, I just don’t know if we have enough scholars ready to do this work. Are we training enough scholars in this work? Are we training enough scholars in Black Catholic studies? Are we training enough scholars in US Catholic studies to sort of reckon with sort of the centrality of White supremacy within this history? Are we making the connections that we need to make with Latin Americanist and Caribbeanist whose history is so critical for us to understand this because they have been sort of doing this work for so much time. So, for me, I think it’s going to take courage. I think it’s going to take time and commitment to actually still go into the archives. Because in reconstructing sort of Black Catholic experiences, we have to go into the archives, we have to sit down with people and take their stories. That’s the tedious work, that’s the arduous work. And I’m just, if I’m concerned about anything, I just wonder if enough people are willing to do that hard work, we have to build new archives, we have to find ways to digitize this history and make it accessible to a wide variety of people. And the other thing that I would say is that we have to be very courageous in talking about issues of sexuality, of sexual abuse, during slavery, during segregation, but also within communities. And also, certainly from
my own research, recognizing sort of the links between misogyny and specifically misogynoir, and the sex abuse crisis that has taken place within the Black community that has been grossly under studied. And that which is perpetrated by White Catholics, but also by nonWhite Catholics. But if I’m hopeful of anything, I am hopeful for that next generation, those who are already doing the work. And I think what we will find is that we haven’t even begun to scratch the surface of what has constituted the US Catholic experience. And I think we can only sort of come better about understanding ourselves when we began to tell the stories of those who are, who are at the margins of this history.

AI 46:15
Yeah, that’s great. And well, actually, I was wrong. It looks like we have time for one more question. (Laughs) Might be a little difficult. But you know, what projects are you currently working on this book came out (Laughs). But, you know, are there any lingering questions that remain from your work on subversive habits that you’re planning on pursuing? You know, you just mentioned a little bit there? Or has your work taking a new direction?

SDW 46:42
No, I'll be doing work on Black Catholic women and Black Catholic faithful for the rest of my academic career. You know, part of what I said in the previous in my previous answers that we need to build new archives, right, you know, the next project that I’m working on are the oral histories, again, only a piece of the oral histories, and not all of them, not even half of them in depth in subversive habits. So, there's some stories that I can't tell, but there are others that I want to tell because I don't want to focus primarily on the racism and the White supremacy, right? I want to focus on who Black Catholics were, what their lives were, what their struggles were, but also what the beautiful, you know, realities of their faithfulness meant to them and what it looked like in various parts of the country. So, the next project is actually sort of a collection of the oral histories, interviews that I’ve collected over the years. I’m also working on a documentary history of Black Catholic women in the United States, religious and lay, really interested in sort of these parishes that were founded by Black lay women, but who didn't get credit for it because they're not priests. But, and yet, if we go to the archival record, everyone says that these parishes were founded by Black women, and then the funerals right where 1000s of people come to sort of pay homage to these women.

SDW 47:49
I'm also working on a piece, and I don't know if it'll be a book or just an article. But something that really sort of lays out this history of Catholic misogynoir. We’re living in a moment of crisis. And it seems like we don’t have the historical understanding and the frameworks for understanding sort of these contemporary crisis in which Catholics are, in certain instances playing leading roles, if
we’re talking about the Supreme Court, if we’re talking about what is happening on the ground. And I think part of this is because we have no understanding of Catholic misogynoir, and the ways in which White Catholics but also Black Catholic men have participated. And so I don’t know if it’s going to be article, I don’t know if it’s going to be a book, you know, there’s a part of me that says it should be Catholic Misogynoir A History, just so we sort of lay this lay this out very clearly. We can have at least some framework for understanding these contemporary crises. And certainly, what I see for subversive habits, what I hope I’ve done, most importantly, outside of just simply doing justice to Black sister stories, was laying a framework for understanding the Black Catholic experience in which Black Catholic women and girls are not unimportant, because that’s just simply not true. I hope I’ve laid a framework from which generations, new scholars will build upon challenge, but, if necessary, correct, right. We needed something to challenge this. And I think, for me, Subversive Habits is a testament to what can happen when we do not believe (laughs). I’ll just say when we do not believe the lies that have been told about us that suggests that Black Catholics are somehow anomalies within the US experience within the experience of the US church. And certainly, for those who believe that Black Catholic women have played no important roles in the making of American Catholicism, hopefully subversive habits and my future work will will up in that grotesque myth. As fast as I can get these get this workout.

AI 49:44
Yeah, and I think you’ve definitely put this on everybody’s radar, and I hope our listeners will go out and buy your book because I can’t recommend it enough. But thank you, Shannen for being on the show.

SDW 49:57
Thank you so much, Allison. It’s really been a pleasure.

AI 50:00
This has been New Books in Catholic Studies, a podcast channel on New Books Network.