Introduction

“We, the 10 Black bishops of the United States, chosen from among you to serve the People of God, are a significant sign among many other signs that the Black Catholic community in the American Church has now come of age.”

The bishops issued their first pastoral letter, “What We Have Seen and Heard,” in which this statement appeared, in 1984 on the Feast of St. Peter Claver, a patron saint of African Americans. They cited Pope Paul VI, who, speaking to African bishops at a 1969 symposium in Uganda, had declared “you must now give your gifts of Blackness to the whole Church.” The bishops extended that declaration, saying, “[W]e believe that these solemn words of our Holy Father Paul VI were addressed not only to Africans today but also to us, the children of the Africans of yesterday.”

The bishops wrote, “There is a richness in our Black experience that we must share with the entire People of God. . . . These are gifts that are part of an African past. For we have heard with Black ears and we have seen with Black eyes and we have understood with an African heart.” They laid claim to a distinctively Black way of experiencing the world and thus to a distinctively Black way of being Catholic. Black Catholics, they asserted, were distinguished from their coreligionists by Black Spirituality, which the bishops identified as “in keeping with our African heritage” and in contrast “with much of the Western tradition.” The bishops also named Black Catholics as inheritors of the Black Church. While Black Catholics “insist upon total loyalty to all that is Catholic,” they were united with Black Baptists and Methodists and Pentecostals by a bond forged in “common experience and history.”

In extolling their views on the rise of Black Catholicism, the most elegant articulation of the gifts of Blackness came in the bishops’ discussion of the liturgy. It would be “through the liturgy,” they argued, that “Black people will come to realize that the Catholic Church is a homeland for
Black believers just as she is for people of other cultural and ethnic traditions.” The bishops then proclaimed that, for Black Catholics, liturgy “should be authentically Black. It should be truly Catholic.”

Authentically Black, truly Catholic. Reflecting on the pastoral letter mere months after its release, the Black Catholic priest and theologian Edward Braxton used these four words to refer, not to the liturgy, but to the experience of being Black and Catholic in America writ large. This powerful turn of phrase became a synecdoche of sorts for Black Catholicism in the decades that followed. But while the bishops had spoken of it in timeless terms, the idea that Black Catholicism should be “authentically Black” was a relatively recent one. It would have been foreign to Black Catholics not thirty years earlier.

Take Mary Dolores Gadpaille, for example. Born in 1905, Gadpaille (née Mae Arlene Johnson) became Catholic in 1949 on the Feast of the Seven Dolors, the holy day dedicated to the “seven sufferings” of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mae Arlene took the name Mary Dolores at baptism, which could be translated as “Mary, Mother of Sorrows.” She was one among tens of thousands of African Americans who became Catholic in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Gadpaille’s Catholicism was quite different from what the ten Black bishops described. Upon conversion Gadpaille altered her day-to-day routine to include “Daily Holy Mass, Daily Communion, the Rosary, the Way of the Cross, weekly confession, constant direction of a priest, and the practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.” She wrote in letters about how “beautiful” the Latin liturgy was, how “even though one does not understand it wholly, it has a rhythm, harmony and mystery that lifts one out of this world.” This was not the “authentically Black, truly Catholic” Catholicism the bishops had in mind. Instead, for Gadpaille, Catholicism “lifts us up above the color line, above the natural vicissitudes of every day life.” Gadpaille thanked priests for “restoring to us [Negroes] by just being Catholic a vanished dignity that all the interracial organizations together have not achieved by conference of [sic] legislation. . . . [I]n the place of second class citizenship that America allots, you have given us a passport to citizenship in Heaven, for this earth is ‘no abiding city.’”

Only twenty-six years separated Mary Dolores Gadpaille’s letters from that of the ten Black bishops. What happened in those interven-
ing decades? How could such a profound transformation in ideas about what being a Black Catholic meant occur in such a short span of time? The answer will take us from conversion amidst the Great Migrations to revolution in the Black Power era.

The middle third of the twentieth century, from the 1930s through the 1970s, was a period of unparalleled growth for Black Catholics in
the United States. There were approximately 300,000 Black Catholics in 1940. By 1975 there were almost 1 million, a 208 percent increase, and the Black Catholic center of gravity had shifted from the coastal South to the industrial North. Most remarkable about this fact is that the Catholic world African Americans entered in the first half of the twentieth century did not exist by century’s end. Gadpaille and the bishops together witnessed the rise of a Black Catholicism, a Catholicism remade in the image of Black Spirituality and the Black Church.

* * *

Today most people are surprised to discover that there are 3 million African American Catholics, or that there are more Black Catholics than members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The sheer presence of Black Catholics unsettles some of the most deeply held assumptions about religion in the United States: that Catholics are white and that Black people are Protestant. Those assumptions seem to settle, though, if Black Catholics are situated in the context of the Black Church. People might be stunned to learn that there are Black Catholics but, once informed, they are not so surprised to hear gospel choirs or extemporaneous shouts of “Amen!” in the middle of a Mass. It is, of course, true that most Catholics in the twentieth-century United States were the children and grandchildren of European immigrants, and that the majority of African Americans who are religious are Protestant. And it is true that many Black Catholic churches (many, but by no means all) today share aesthetics and worship styles with other Black Christian communities. But these generalities mask more complicated lives. When African Americans became Catholic in large numbers in the first half of the twentieth century, they joined a Church that juxtaposed itself quite explicitly with evangelical Protestantism. The rise of an “authentically Black” Catholicism was neither inevitable nor uncontroversial. The ten Black bishops who published their letter in 1984 were, literally and figuratively, the result of a revolution that was started on the streets of cities like Chicago by Black laypeople, sisters, and priests in the 1960s. And that revolution began as a struggle between Black Catholics themselves over what it would mean to be both Black and Catholic.

To appreciate the magnitude of this revolution we must understand what came before it. Until the turn of the twentieth century, most Cath-
olic traders lived in the urban North and most African Americans lived in the rural South. The Great Migrations, which witnessed a mass movement of Black people from the rural South to the urban North and West, initiated the first large-scale encounters between African Americans and Catholics of European descent, especially as Black migrants met white Catholic missionaries in the industrial North and Midwest. When Black families enrolled in Catholic schools parents and children alike were introduced to the rituals, prayers, and habits that defined Catholic culture at the time. They learned new ways of imagining, experiencing, and moving in the world around them. Tens of thousands became Catholic in the process. When they did so, their newfound religious life presented itself in sharp contrast to that in the Black evangelical churches surrounding them. The Great Migrations changed religious life and culture across the country as Black and southern ways of being Christian were remade amidst the “exigencies of the city.” Black converts to Catholicism stood apart from this increasingly normative Black evangelical culture. In the place of gospel music and altar calls, Black Catholics celebrated the beauty of Latin and what they took to be the “quiet dignity” of the Catholic Mass that had the power to lift them “up above the color line,” as Mary Dolores Gadpaille put it.

The very “quiet” and “dignified” rituals that so many Black families embraced in the first half of the twentieth century came under increasing scrutiny in the 1960s and 1970s, however, as a growing group of Black Catholics sparked a revolution in Black Catholic identity and practice. Black Catholic activists drew inspiration from both Black Power, which championed political and cultural self-determination as the keys to Black liberation, and from the Second Vatican Council, which opened the doors to sweeping changes not just in Catholic worship but also in the ways in which Catholics engaged the modern world. Activists attempted to transform what it meant to be both Black and Catholic. Some even allied themselves with the Black Panther Party, an organization founded in 1966 to provide self-defense against police brutality, and adopted the rhetoric and tactics of the Black Power era.

But the Black Catholicism they fought to bring to life faced opposition from fellow Black Catholics. Bitter debates broke out about how Black people should be Catholic and whether Catholics could be “authentically Black.” Activists worked to introduce and educate their coreligionists
about a particular way of being Black and Catholic. Ironically, the very people who criticized Catholic missionaries for convincing Black people to convert to a “white religion” became missionaries themselves, inculcating new ways of being religious. In tracing this revolution from the growing numbers of Black Catholics earlier in the twentieth century to the rise of Black Catholicism beginning in the 1960s, this book explores the inseparability of race and religion. Rather than presume the unanimity of Black identity, the ubiquity of Black activism, or the uniformity of Black religion, it brings to light the lived complexities of debates about what it means to be Black and religious.

The choice to focus on the rise of Black Catholicism in Chicago was not arbitrary. Chicago became one of the most significant Black Catholic communities in the country in this period. The Midwestern metropolis served as the destination for hundreds of thousands of Black migrants from the South. It came to symbolize the Great Migrations writ large. But before Chicago became “the Black Metropolis,” it was a Catholic Metropolis. Its landscape was defined as much by parish spires as by smokestacks and skyscrapers. Chicago serves as a microcosm of what happened in cities throughout the United States as Black migrants met Catholic missionaries on the streets of New York, Cleveland, St. Louis, Toledo, Milwaukee, and Detroit. At the turn of the twentieth century Chicago’s Black Catholic population, such as it was, numbered in the hundreds and met in the basement of a single church. By 1975 they had surpassed Baltimore and New Orleans in size. Chicago’s eighty thousand Black Catholics made the city the second largest Black Catholic population in the country. And importantly, they were at the forefront of the Black Power revolution sweeping through Black Catholic communities in the late sixties, a revolution that left U.S. Catholicism changed in its wake.

* * *

Two clarifications are crucial before we move on. First, this book does not suggest that Black Catholics are solely the product of twentieth-century conversions. It should be stated at the start that there have been Catholics of African descent in the Americas for as long as there have been Catholics in the Americas. The ten Black bishops put it plainly in 1984: “Blacks—whether Spanish-speaking, French-speaking or
English-speaking—built the churches, tilled Church lands, and labored with those who labored in spreading the Gospel. Cyprian Davis, the pioneering historian of Black Catholics in the United States, identifies a Moroccan slave with a Christian name, Esteban or Estevanico (Stephen), among the four survivors of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's ill-fated odyssey across the southern coast of North America in 1536. Historian John K. Thornton argues that it was Kongolese Catholic slaves who rose up against their masters in the South Carolina colony in 1739. They launched what we now know as the Stono Rebellion, the largest slave uprising in the British colonies before the Revolutionary War, on the feast day honoring the nativity of the Virgin Mary. As Linda Heywood and John Thornton have shown, “a year before Columbus set sail for America, an African king was baptized and converted his kingdom into a Catholic nation that lasted nearly 370 years.” It is possible that the Kongolese rebels planned to fight their way south to Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose in Spanish Florida. Better known simply as Fort Mose, religious studies scholar Sylvester Johnson describes it as “an African military-religious settlement” just north of St. Augustine, one that “was built by Africans in 1738, was assigned a Catholic priest, and was governed by the African (Mandinga) military commander Francisco Menéndez.” The settlement’s numbers swelled with escaped slaves, freed and armed by the Spanish crown upon conversion to Catholicism.

Black Catholics in the United States are not the anomaly many imagine them to be. Not all Catholics who crossed the Atlantic were white. Nor were Africans and African Americans somehow naturally inclined to be Christian in evangelical and Protestant ways. It is helpful to remember that, from a hemispheric perspective, Black Christianity in the Americas has been and continues to be majority Catholic, just as Catholicism in the Americas has been and continues to be majority non-white. The populations of Brazil, Haiti, Mexico, and other Latin American nations testify to this fact.

The second clarification is even more important than the first. This book does not argue that twentieth-century converts were not really Black, that they somehow “became white” when they became Catholic. Their contemporaries sometimes did make this claim, ridiculing the Catholic Church as a “white man’s religion.” Some Black Catholics even adopted this rhetoric themselves in the Black Power era, none more
famously than Father Lawrence Lucas in his memoir-manifesto *Black Priest/White Church: Catholics and Racism* (1970). But becoming Catholic did not magically protect Black people from the daily degradations of racism in America. Mary Dolores Gadpaille may have hoped that her Church could lift her up above the color line, but this aspiration did not blind her to what white Catholics were capable of. She recalled in that same letter how, when she first visited a Chicago parish in 1950, “fingers were pointed at me. I was called a ‘nigger,’ and the drug store on the corner would not serve me.” Black Catholics bore the brunt of racism in their own Church, as more and more scholars are beginning to show. To quote Malcolm X, “we’re not brutalized because we’re Baptist, we’re not brutalized because we’re Methodist, we’re not brutalized because we’re Muslim, we’re not brutalized because we’re Catholic, we’re brutalized because we are Black people in America.”

Conversion did not hermetically seal Black Catholics off from other African Americans either. (Though, as we will see, becoming Catholic did have its costs.) Such a separation would have been impossible considering the racial landscape of American cities. Chicago was then (and remains now) a segregated city. Historian Beryl Satter has shown that Chicago served as the model of a modern segregated city, one replicated nationwide. White Chicagoans enforced boundaries between Black and white neighborhoods with real estate covenants, neighborhood associations, police surveillance, home bombings, and street warfare. Even the accidental crossing of a racial line could set off a race riot, as it did when a Black boy floated into the white section of a South Side beach in 1919. Segregation did have its unintended consequences, though. The creativity of Black Chicagoans and migrants who took ownership of Black segregated spaces birthed Bronzeville (the famed Chicago neighborhood) and the Black Metropolis (Chicago’s city within a city).

Black Catholics shared in the experience of being Black in Chicago, in modern America.

This book *does* argue, however, that what it has meant to be both Black and Catholic in the lands that became the United States has changed significantly through the centuries. One could make the case that no period witnessed more rapid change than the middle decades
of the twentieth century. This specific period witnessed both the exponential rise of Black Catholics as a population and the rise of a new and enduring understanding of Black Catholicism. Mary Dolores Gadpaille and most of the thousands of African Americans who became Catholic before Black Power did not understand themselves to be Catholic in a distinctively Black way. They did not identify themselves with “the Black Church,” nor did they trace their lineage to a “Black Spirituality” sprung from the African continent. They may have celebrated “colored saints,” the term used by Father Augustus Tolton, the man known nationwide in the late nineteenth century as the first Black priest in the United States, to refer to St. Augustine, St. Benedict, and St. Monica. But they did so not to signal that they were different from their white coreligionists, but as a sign that they too belonged to the universal Church. From Tolton’s perspective, this made the Catholic Church the only “true liberator of the race.”

It is not that Gadpaille was not actually Black while the ten bishops were. Instead, what it meant to be Black and Catholic shifted in crucial ways in the decades between them. Converts became Catholic on the verge of a revolution.

We must be wary of flattening the complexity and diversity of Black Catholic lives in our attempt to restore them to the histories from which they have been so systematically erased. Cyprian Davis is right that the Americas have been home to Catholics from the African continent since the sixteenth century and that the Church could claim African saints well before any Atlantic crossings. But something is lost, historically speaking, when we refer to all those unnamed millions singularly as “black Catholics.” Something is certainly gained. Davis used the term “black Catholic” in part for simplicity’s sake. It is much less cumbersome than talking about a sixteenth-century Moroccan convert, eighteenth-century African slaves, and participants in the late nineteenth-century Colored Catholic Congresses. Beyond its usefulness as a neutral descriptor, “black Catholic” also serves an ideological purpose. It connects those varied subjects to a broader tradition and roots them in a shared past. This is what historians do, after all.

But when activists in the 1960s and 1970s took to calling themselves Black Catholics (emphasis on the capital B) while quoting Malcolm X and referencing Franz Fanon, they meant something specific and quite different from what had come before them. This book speaks of “African
American Catholics” and “Black Catholics” interchangeably throughout, similarly for simplicity’s sake. Yet taken as a whole, it aims to historicize the very Black Catholicism Davis takes for granted. As we will find, Davis himself was an active participant in the movement that forever changed what those two words meant when linked together—indeed, he served on the subcommittee that oversaw the preliminary drafts of the bishop’s letter, “What We Have Seen and Heard.”

* * *

Any study of Black Catholics, this “minority within a minority” as Albert Raboteau put it, is interdisciplinary by its very nature. This book stands at the intersection of a few different fields: it engages scholarship in religious studies, African American studies, Catholic studies, and history. Black Catholics tend to be hidden in the blind spots of each respective discipline. For example, consider twentieth-century U.S. historiography. Migrations and freedom struggles come to mind with regard to African American history. A particular notion of the Black Church takes hold as well. Black Catholics do not fit neatly into these narratives. They were members of a largely white institution at a time when gospel choirs and the cadence of Black preachers reigned in the American imagination, and largely absent from the frontlines of civil rights struggles at a time when Black churches became synonymous with protest. The “American century” figures prominently in the stories told about Catholics too. Waves of southern and eastern European immigrants altered the country’s social and religious makeup. By midcentury Catholics managed to make themselves “American” by means ranging from the establishment of school systems to military service and Cold War cultural production. Here too, Black Catholics do not quite fit. The century marked the entrance of immigrants and their children into “mainstream” white America at the expense of Black people.25

Black Catholic lives do not adhere to the carefully patrolled borders of the academy. While disciplinary boundaries are necessary inasmuch as they narrow our field of inquiry, they remain the creation of scholars. As religious studies scholar J. Z. Smith reminds us, “the map is not the territory.”26 We must not mistake our categories for our subjects themselves. Studying Black Catholics brings all-too-often isolated disciplines into conversation with one another. It forces us to cross the lines on
those maps. Black Catholics have been left on the margins of inquiry because they are not easily incorporated into our comfortable narratives. But if we move Black Catholics from the margins to the center, new narratives emerge. When we listen to what Black Catholics have to say about their own lives, allowing for all the contradictions and complexities that characterize human life, we find that they complicate the categories that define our fields of study. Just as Women’s Studies challenges us not just to add women to existing scholarship but to change the terms of scholarship itself, so too the study of Black Catholics shifts the way we think about Catholics, African Americans, and religion in the United States.

The decision to focus on Black Catholics—rather than white Catholic encounters with Black people, or interactions between Black and white Catholics—leads to different insights. Nowhere is this more evident than with regard to the study of Catholics and race. John McGreevy’s *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (1996) influenced and inspired a generation of scholarship on Catholics and racial justice, including my own. McGreevy explores how white Catholics experienced Black migrations through the lens of a distinctive Catholic culture and institutional landscape, captured in the titular term “parish boundaries.” At the heart of his story are “Catholic liberals,” often referred to as “interracialists,” who set the terms of engagement on “public discussions of racial issues” by the end of the 1950s. Catholic liberals shared the presuppositions of racial liberalism writ large. They argued that the best way to improve “race relations” and eliminate “discrimination” would be to erase race altogether. There is no white race or Black race but one human race, so the saying goes. Or, as a Catholic liberal would have put it, we are all members of the one Mystical Body of Christ. Interracialists fought hard, in para-parish organizations like the Catholic Interracial Council, against so-called “racial” parishes that separated Black and Irish and Italian and Mexican Catholics from one another. And they fought for the civil rights championed in what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall called the “classical chronology” of the civil rights movement, the period between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Since *Parish Boundaries*, most scholarship on Catholics and race has been devoted to interracial encounters and interracialism as an ideol-
ogy. This is one reason why this book avoids substantive discussion of this topic. There are already a number of great books on the subject. But there are also problems with the interracialist approach—people and events it obscures even as it illuminates others. Foremost among the obscured are Black Catholics. Despite the desires of Catholic liberals, Black Catholics in segregated cities tended to be members of majority-Black parishes and tended not to participate in interracial activism. This should not surprise us. Most people did not actively participate in civil rights activism. Part of what makes activists activists, after all, is the fact that they are exceptional in the fullest sense of the word. Most Catholic Chicagoans worshipped with people who shared their own ethnic and cultural heritage. One thinks of Martin Luther King’s truism that “the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” Most scholarship on “the Catholic encounter with race,” as McGreevy’s subtitle implies, is more concerned with white Catholic encounters with Black people than with Black Catholics themselves. When Black Catholics do appear, they tend to be considered in relation to white Catholics. Black Catholic scholars are notable exceptions to this general rule, though their prolific work remains marginal in the history of religion in the United States. I am indebted to their trailblazing—to Jamie Phelps, Bryan Massingale, Maurice Nutt, and M. Shawn Copeland in particular.

This book sets out to consider Black Catholic communities on their own terms. When we do so a few things become clear. White missionaries had a far wider impact on Black Catholic communities than white interracialists. As uncomfortable as it might make us, missionaries who prioritized saving eternal souls over solving pressing social problems were precisely the people who encouraged tens of thousands of African Americans to become Catholic. Highlighting a Catholic liberal elite—the hundreds involved in interracialist efforts—misses the lives of most Black Catholics. It elucidates the intersection of religion and politics for some, but at the expense of the everyday lives of most. This is not to say that this book ignores Catholic relationships across the color line. We will spend considerable time examining the relationships white missionaries and Black Catholics forged with one another during the Great Migrations. This did not make them “interracial” in the sense meant by Catholic liberals, though. Instead, the parishes tended to be popu-
lated by Black Catholics and controlled by white Catholics. If they could be described as interracial, they certainly were not interracialist. While white-controlled majority-Black parishes did not keep African Americans from becoming or remaining Catholic, their control would serve as a significant factor that compelled some Black Catholics to embrace Black Power.

Which leads us to a second point. An emphasis on Black Catholic communities allows us to see beyond the limits of the classical civil rights chronology. Timothy Neary and Karen Johnson rightly extend Catholic interracial activism into the decades preceding the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, situating Catholics on the front end of the “long civil rights era.” Yet when we focus attention on interracialists, Catholic freedom struggles inevitably end in the late 1960s. McGreevy notes how Catholic liberals lamented that most “African-American Catholics remained culturally conservative.” “To the disappointment of liberals,” he continues, “few African-American Catholics—clergy or laity—took leadership positions in the civil rights movement. (One white priest publicly wished for a ‘Catholic version of Martin Luther King.’)” Black Power ended the endeavors of liberals. It contributed to the “collapse of interracialism.” As McGreevy put it, “the hope of the interracialists, that racial and ethnic differences would give way to an overarching religious identity, faded amidst the fear that the Church would become wholly irrelevant to African-American concerns.” But if Black Power ended the hopes of Catholic liberals, it ignited the Black Catholic freedom struggles. Black Power galvanized some Black Catholics (even as it unnerved others). It provided a generation of activists with the tools to transform their Church. 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.

If this book calls upon scholars of Catholics and race to pay attention to Black Power, it calls upon scholars of Black Power in turn to pay attention to religion. Recent years have been transformative for Black freedom struggles historiography. Scholars have challenged the classical narrative of the civil rights movement that centered almost exclusively on a male minister led movement that fought segregation in the Jim Crow South through respectable nonviolent Christian protest between...
1955 and 1965. This “civic myth of civil rights,” as Nikhil Pal Singh calls it, is the story rehearsed every year in celebration of America’s progress toward Martin Luther King’s dream of the day when children “will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”37 We now know that Black activists fought for fair housing and equal employment in the urban North ten years before Rosa Parks sat down in that Montgomery bus.38 We know that nonviolence always co-existed, albeit in tension, with long-standing Black traditions of armed self-defense.39 We know that Black women were instrumental organizers without whom there would have been no movement at all.40 And we know that Black Power represented not the death but the rebirth of Black freedom struggles.41

One myth persists, though: that of a secular Black Power movement. Black Catholic history seriously challenges this myth. Scholars rightly criticize the Black Christian exceptionalism of civil rights scholarship that polices the parameters of “proper” protest by comparing all activism to King’s Christian nonviolence. Yet we should not overstate the case in our attempt to reinstate Black Power in our histories. There is a way in which “militancy” and “radicalism” come to serve as code words for “secular” and “nonreligious.” Scholars and popular audiences alike share the perception that Black freedom struggles moved in a more radical direction once freed from the restraints of religion. It is true that Black Power represented a significant critique of racial liberalism as an ideology, interracialism as an objective, and Christian nonviolence as a tactic. But it is also true that some Black religious communities, especially those in urban settings, embraced this critique. By the end of the 1960s a small but growing number of Black Catholics did so. This book features Black Panthers joining Black Catholics in the struggle for self-determination in the Archdiocese of Chicago, priests performing “Black Unity Masses” that incorporated the language and aesthetics of Black Power protest, and parishes adorning their walls with murals to “Black martyrs” like Malcolm X and Fred Hampton. Black Power transformed Black Catholics and Black Catholics in turn engaged the political and cultural nationalisms that defined the Black Power era. And they were not alone. This book joins the work of Angela Dillard and Kerry Pimblott, insisting that scholars of Black Power pay attention to the ways in which religious communities participated in Black
Power as well as the ways in which Black Power forever changed Black religious life in America.\textsuperscript{42}

This book likewise enters into ongoing conceptual conversations about “Black religion” and “the Black Church.” The study of African American religion has taken a self-critical turn over the past decade, sharing a disciplinary impulse of religious studies writ large. Much work has been done to demonstrate the constructedness of constitutive terms that define the field. “Black religion” and “the Black Church” have been identified as categories produced by people with particular motives in particular moments, not descriptions of essential or singular things. Scholars have encouraged us to observe the variety of African American religions, to move beyond the Black Church in order to see the churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues (not to mention the nonreligious) that make up the fullness of African American life. This book builds on this literature.\textsuperscript{43} In the first half of the twentieth century Black Catholics exemplified an African American religious community outside the evangelical Christian tradition, beyond the Black Church. When this book explores the life of Black Catholic schools or devotions popular in Black Catholic parishes, it illuminates ways of being Black and religious that do not conform to popular expectations of Black church life. Black converts embraced practices that distinguished them from other Black Christian communities.

And yet, if their difference signaled Black religious diversity, Black Catholics also reinforced the normative power of “Black religion” and “the Black Church.” There is no Black Church, so scholars have said, only Black churches. But, as they crafted an “authentically Black” way of being Catholic, Black Catholics in the Black Power era embraced what they took to be an essential Black Spirituality and learned how to incorporate the traditions of the Black Church (which they took to be singular) into the liturgy. Activists criticized coreligionists who resisted this transformation of Catholic worship as self-hating and escapist, as Black people brainwashed into thinking that “white was right.” Black Catholics thus embodied the dilemma Curtis Evans describes as “the peculiar burden of black religion.” Black people have been burdened, he argues, to the extent “that a repudiation of those religious and cultural practices deemed singularly ‘Negro’ provoked criticism for being a betrayal of blackness. To embrace such ideas, on the other hand, was viewed by
others as an affirmation of the ‘natural’ expression of the primitive and emotional passions of an essential blackness.” Black Catholics found themselves in this double bind in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Thousands of converts joined the Catholic Church at a time when to be Black and Catholic meant to reject the ritual life of Black evangelical Christianity. They rejected the notion that there was only one way to be Black and religious. This very rejection, though, opened them up to severe criticism as the rise of Black Catholicism recast their distinct devotional life not as Catholic, but as white.

* * *

This book is organized in two parts. The first three chapters describe the rise of Black Catholic Chicago, the growth of a sizable Black Catholic population in the Black Metropolis from roughly the 1930s through the 1950s. Though the chronologies of these chapters overlap, each should be understood as a sequential step in an argument that stretches over the first half of the book, that the Great Migrations initiated mass conversions of African Americans to Catholicism by inculcating new religious practices that set converts apart from other Black Christians in the city. Chapter 1 contends that the convergence of the Great Migrations with Catholic missionary efforts set the conditions for Black Catholic conversion. It reveals how missionaries reimagined Chicago neighborhoods as “foreign mission territories” full of “heathens” in need of conversion and it examines the fraught relationships white missionaries forged with Black migrants as a result. Chapter 2 takes readers into Catholic schools where families rehearsed new rituals, learned new prayers, and developed new relationships. Parochial schools effected a transformation of the religious sensorium and led many Black women, men, and children to become Catholic. Chapter 3 situates Black Catholic converts in the African American religious landscape of migrations-era Chicago. It centers on a nationally renowned performance of the passion of Christ in order to illustrate how devotionalism set Black Catholics apart from the evangelical Christian communities proliferating around them. Chapter 3 argues that Black Catholics shared in the impulse of Black Muslims, Black Hebrews, and others who fashioned ways of being Black and religious beyond the Black Church.
The second half of the book charts the rise of Black Catholicism in Chicago and across the country, a distinctive understanding of how Black people should be Catholic that emerged in the 1960s and came to fruition in the 1980s. Chapter 4 argues that Black Power fundamentally shaped the Black Catholic experience of the Second Vatican Council and birthed a revolution in Black Catholic life in the process. The story begins with a protest movement in the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1968 and 1969. When the archbishop refused to promote Father George Clements, a popular Black priest, Black Catholics joined forces with Black Panthers and other allies to fight for self-determination. Chapter 5 follows the Black Catholic activists who fought to incorporate African and African American traditions into Catholic life. The chapter expands the scope of the book to explore the Black Catholic Movement on the national level at the same time that it examines how this revolution played out in the idiosyncrasies of a particular Chicago community: Holy Angels parish under the leadership of Father Clements. It argues that in their effort to make the Church “authentically Black,” activists were forced to become missionaries, working to convert their Black Catholic coreligionists to Black Catholicism. If the first part of this book is about African Americans becoming Catholic, the second witnesses what it meant to become Black Catholics.

* * *

Four converts were among the ten Black bishops who announced the arrival of an “authentically Black” Catholicism in their famous letter, and two of them hailed from Chicago. Decades before they championed Black Catholicism, before they were ordained to the priesthood, James Lyke and Wilton Gregory were sons of the South Side who came of age amidst the rise of Black Catholic Chicago. Lyke grew up in the Wentworth Gardens housing project. His Baptist mother enrolled him in Catholic school and paid his tuition in part by cleaning the church’s laundry. He and his mother became Catholic, along with a number of his siblings. Wilton Gregory lived with his mother and grandmother in Englewood when Adrian Dominican sisters invited him to enroll at St. Carthage grammar school. There he decided to become a priest before he even converted to Catholicism. Separated by about a decade, Lyke and Gregory were students in parochial schools filled with African
Americans who were not Catholic. Thousands of Black Chicagoans, the daughters and sons of southern migrants, joined them in their journey into the Catholic Church. This was what Archbishop Gregory later called one of the Catholic Church’s “moments of glory,” when a handful of priests and sisters looked at the neighborhood changing around them and said “this is the community that’s here, let’s welcome them.” It is to those missionaries and migrants that we now turn.