

## Introduction

In 1897 twenty-seven-year-old Violet Johnson moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Summit, New Jersey, a place in the process of transforming from a country village into a New York City suburb. Within a year, the domestic servant had organized a Baptist church. Others would later extol her “genius for organization, religious, civic, social and industrial[:] institutions flourish at her touch.”<sup>1</sup> The decision to create a sacred space for African American domestic workers thrust Johnson into public space and onto the path of Christian activism. For as the North Carolina native discovered, religious choices are rarely just about religion.

This book tells the story of the complicated intersections of politics and religion, race and gender, and place, space, and black women’s quest for social justice in the early twentieth century. Black women like Violet Johnson, living and working in the northern suburbs, entered public spaces, shaped religious practices, and influenced the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights. Their faith and willingness to assume responsibility mattered in the churches they established, the institutions they built, and the communities they sustained. Their organizing made a difference.

This book interweaves the narratives of American religious space, women’s space, and white middle-class space from the end of the nineteenth century to World War II, roughly 1898 to 1945. In examining the public presence of black women and making them visible in spaces generally considered masculine and white, this volume documents the contingent strategies and organizational models church women employed in the fight for social justice while also revising the chronology and trajectory of northern racial oppression and civil rights protest. Both religion and the suburbs emerge as discursive sites for the negotiation of meaning and power. By locating women’s Christian activism in this historic moment, a departure from traditional emphases on race relations in the South or the post-World War II North, this book privileges

the agency of ordinary, non-elite black women who were integral to the process of American suburbanization and the expansion of American Protestantism. It traces the development of their institutions and documents their struggle for social justice and civil rights, locally and nationally, over nearly five decades. It reperiodizes the history of the civil rights movement by showing how racial segregation worked in the North in the first half of the twentieth century.

This volume also documents the trajectory of Christian influence in an increasingly secular society. Missionary and temperance women turned to the woman suffrage movement and partisan politics to address housing, health, and employment in northern communities. However, they wielded less power in these secular institutions than in their autonomous religious organizations or the interracial church women's movement.

The book tells a story of national significance and amplifies the strategies Christian women used in their struggle for social justice. It offers a broad history anchored in the religious narratives of two women who emerged as leaders in New Jersey and the nation, one a domestic servant and Baptist lay leader, the other a seamstress and ordained Methodist minister. Violet Johnson (1870–1939) arrived in suburban New Jersey in 1897 with her white employers; in 1925 Reverend Florence Spearing Randolph (1866–1951) accepted an interim appointment to a fledgling African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion congregation in the same suburb and during the Great Depression built an institutional church that served the entire community. Among the first generation of free-born citizens of color, they came of age in the optimism of the post-Civil War era and shaped their worldview in the egalitarian message of Protestant evangelicalism and the Reconstruction Amendments. They expected to assume their place in a multiracial, Christian nation. However, confronted with increasing evidence of political and social retrenchment on the question of equality, these ordinary working women entered public space and challenged hegemonic assumptions of gender and race.

As women of the Victorian era, Johnson and Randolph participated in the discourse of true womanhood and separate spheres, a discourse often at odds with the gendered and color-coded society in which black women confronted both the *Woman Question* and the *Race Problem*, as Anna Julia Cooper eloquently phrased it in 1892.<sup>2</sup> Discriminated

against because of their gender and race and having to wage discursive and material battles for physical and moral space, they experimented with various organizational models, yet retained “a vision of the potential strength and influence of a union of Christian women and faith in their willingness to assume responsibility.”<sup>3</sup> This vision impelled them to transgress boundaries in their quest for just laws and an ethical transformation of the religious and political order—at times in concert with, but often in opposition to, black and white men and middle-class white women. Sometimes that meant simply standing up for the right to speak in church or to build a church on a street demarcated as *white* space. Other times it meant engaging in direct political action through the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the woman suffrage movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), or the Republican Party. Often it meant sustaining autonomous organizations with meager earnings, while supporting male-led denominations and interracial women’s organizations.

Initially, Johnson and Randolph translated their missionary and temperance activism into an instrument for reform. They gained national stature and achieved modest local improvements. In the 1920s, with the ballot in hand, they changed their language and their tactics and entered the political arena, adding politics to their Christian service. In contrast to women in the South, they were heard by Republican politicians. However, the religious and social conservatism of the interwar years and the devastation of the Great Depression brought a halt to their progress. The New Deal compounded their problems as relief proved illusory and elusive for black women and children.

This book develops several key themes. First, religion made a difference in women’s organizational order. Viewing religion as an institution and a system of meaning, African American women advocated a *politics of civic righteousness*; that is, reforming civic institutions by placing morality and justice in the realm of public policy, laws, and institutions. They organized missionary societies and temperance unions to extend the work of the church in society. Later they turned to the women’s club movement, the Republican Party, and the state to address deteriorating housing, health, and economic conditions in their northern communities. Second, black women’s organizing in the North differed from that in the South. They made repeated attempts at interracial alliances as

suffragists, ecumenical Protestants, and partisan Republicans. Third, the course of segregation differed in the North. Unlike the South, which forcefully settled the question of race relations in the 1890s, the northern pattern of segregation moved incrementally but steadily during the early decades of the twentieth century through the New Deal, tightening the color line and expanding demarcated white space. Fourth, the arc of justice bent differently in the North compared to the South. New Deal policies and practices spurred a suburban land grab and hardened a hierarchical and color-coded economic structure that compounded problems of housing, health, and employment for already beleaguered black communities.

Finally, suburban segregation in the twentieth century was no accident. The institutionalization of race and class differences was as much a part of the suburbs as the single-family detached home and lush lawn. Elite white suburbanites demarcated “white” space and attempted to remove black citizens whose presence, they feared, would lower the value of real estate—and undermine the status of an anxious white middle class. New Deal funds subsidized the recovery of the housing sector and fueled racial cleansing as a suburban strategy. The dilemma for suburban segregationists, however, was that they required a black presence to confirm their valorization of white space. As white northerners resorted to violence, intimidation, and legally sanctioned tactics to reify an imagined community and expand the color line, black church women maintained their vision of social justice based upon Christian principles and just laws. Eventually their vision found voice in the civil rights movement. Ultimately, this book argues that religion made a difference in the lives of ordinary black women who lived, worked, and worshiped on the margins. Their way of being religious inflected race and gender discourses and influenced economic and social issues in the first half of the twentieth century.

This analysis complicates our understanding of African American leadership and class status. While not the professional elite who are traditionally the subject of historical studies, these ordinary working women were unquestionably leaders in their communities and institutions. They took pride in their work as cooks, laundresses, and housekeepers and sought respect for themselves and their work. Yet, these women who earned their living as domestic servants and providers of domestic ser-

vice were far more than their work. They created a forum in which they could be heard, a redoubt that contrasted with the increasingly oppressive local sites that sought to silence and erase the presence of working-class black and white citizens. E. P. Thompson would have recognized them as actors in an economic and social matrix whose experiences need to be understood in both cultural and economic terms.<sup>4</sup> Capturing the intersecting subjectivities in their *being* and *becoming* over decades adds to our understanding of gendered agency across class and racial boundaries.

### The “Ideal Suburb” and Working Women

Between 1870 and 1910 developers and speculators transformed pasture land along railroad tracks in northern New Jersey into residential space, beginning the process of suburbanization in the quintessential suburban state. In the last years of the nineteenth century Summit, New Jersey, transformed itself from a bucolic village and summer retreat into the “ideal suburb.”<sup>5</sup> Sitting more than five hundred feet atop the third Orange Mountain, and only twenty-five miles west of New York City, the six-square-mile town was an attractive stop on the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad. As technology changed business interactions and southern European immigrants changed urban geography, white middle-class entrepreneurs and corporate managers moved their families from the teeming city to the suburbs. Thus middle-class men could participate in the nation’s industrial growth while ensconcing the family hearth in a homogeneous space, safely removed from urban heterogeneity.

Among the amenities awaiting prospective residents to the “ideal suburb” were a ladies’ literary club, men’s field club, several bustling retail businesses, a bank, weekly newspaper, and New York City entertainment. A public school, a private boarding and day school for boys, and a “French and English School for Young Girls and Ladies” added to the suburb’s appeal. Residents also had their choice of religious institutions, including five local churches, a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and the WCTU.<sup>6</sup> The suburb seemed ideal indeed.

Although the local newspaper editor and resident booster boasted, “We have no noisy, dirty manufactories that fill the town with a class of people, who, in themselves, are not very much desired in a strictly

home village, such as ours,” Summit was not the homogeneous suburb of middle-class imaginings.<sup>7</sup> East of the train station stood tenements that were home to the Polish, Italian, and German immigrants hired to construct the suburb’s infrastructure. On the northern edge of town, beyond the macadamized roads, were more tenements that housed the families of the Assyrian and Armenian silk factory workers in an area mockingly dubbed “Weavers Court.”<sup>8</sup>

Adding to the suburban diversity were African Americans who found seasonal employment at one of the three resort hotels. Primarily single men and women without familial or social ties, few remained in Summit beyond the summer season. Those who did most often worked as housekeepers, gardeners, or coachmen in the country homes of the Newark and New York business and managerial class who sought refuge in an area noted for its salubrious air and artesian wells. In the 1890s, Summit’s African American population barely exceeded one hundred in a total population of nearly six thousand. Only three nuclear families could be counted among the suburb’s black residents, and none owned real property.<sup>9</sup>

Yet in the interconnected web of race, gender, and class, white middle-class migration to the suburbs also expanded the geography of black women’s presence. In June 1904 Leslie Pinckney Hill, an African American student at Harvard University and future NAACP executive, wrote to Booker T. Washington, principal of Tuskegee (Alabama) Institute, seeking about thirty persons to fill domestic positions in New Jersey’s expanding suburbs. Opposed to the idea, Washington responded, “I rather feel that we should do everything we can to persuade our people to keep out of the large cities of the North, and in every way, it seems more satisfactory to suggest that the wisest thing would seem to be the training of the colored people who may be in the Oranges, rather than to import large numbers of others.”<sup>10</sup>

Washington’s disapproval notwithstanding, by the end of World War I southern-born African Americans constituted the majority of domestic service employees in the New York City suburbs. The demand for maids, cooks, gardeners, and chauffeurs continued through the interwar years, the golden age of suburbanization. From 1920 to 1930, Summit, New Jersey’s population increased from 10,174 to 14,457. The black population remained relatively stable, though the rate of increase outpaced that of white

residents, nearly doubling from 4.8 percent to 8.7 percent. By the mid-1930s, Summit's white population increased to over fifteen thousand and the black population peaked at about fifteen hundred, nearly 10 percent.<sup>11</sup>

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Though often invisible in contemporary accounts and silenced by historians, black women were integral to the suburbanization process. In many respects, they made the suburban lifestyle possible. Swedish and Irish immigrants could not satisfy the demand for domestic servants, a perquisite of white middle-class status. As suburban historian Andrew Wiese notes, premier suburbs "often housed bustling communities of shopkeepers, mechanics, industrial workers and servants," including black women and men.<sup>12</sup>

At its root, the white, middle-class suburban ethos was contradictory and contingent. The maintenance of suburban space necessitated continual surveillance and patrolling of borders, for the race, class, and gender assumptions of the "ideal suburb" did not go uncontested. By the end of World War II, white suburbanites had had decades to work out strategies and to devise means to discriminate against African Americans in housing and labor and to decree areas as white spaces. The determination of black women in Summit to claim moral, civic, and physical space alerts us to the need to examine more closely these sites of contestation and race relations in a northern context.

### Working Women and Religion in the Suburbs

Black working women played a crucial role in the Protestant missionary campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following the Civil War, African American Baptists in the North organized separate congregations initiated and led by black ministers with the support of white clergy. Educated and trained in American Baptist Home Missionary Schools and seminaries like their white northern counterparts, black Baptists saw themselves as part of a reconstructed and multiracial Christian America.

Before long, black ministers began to chafe under the proscription of Northern Baptists and to resent being treated as "wards." Desiring more control over their ecclesiastical affairs, especially the ordination

of ministers, in 1874 black Baptists in the Northeast organized the New England Baptist Missionary Convention (NEBMC) as an independent association with a territorial reach from Maine to Virginia.<sup>13</sup> By ordaining ministers and establishing churches, NEBMC created a religious space in which African Americans could control their ecclesial institutions and practices removed from the oversight and gaze of white Protestants. Black congregations led by trained men were envisioned as schools for teaching the principles of Christian citizenship suitable for a multiracial Christian nation.

Following Southern disenfranchisement in the 1890s, northern black Baptists adopted an explicitly political program that positioned their churches as a bulwark against the southern forces of white supremacy and Jim Crow. Cognizant of the public revisioning of the meaning of citizenship and the reformulations of race theory that informed that discourse, black Baptists sought to break the linkage between citizenship and whiteness. They challenged assumptions on race, critiqued government policies, and worked to create a shared racial and political consciousness among black men and women.<sup>14</sup>

While Northern Baptists shared an evangelical worldview and believed that theirs was the age of missions, black Baptists viewed the suburbs as a fertile mission field and another site for realizing the denomination's religious and political mission. Further, the predominance of African American working women made the suburbs important in the struggle for racial and political equality. For African Americans in the Northeast, the black church was the embodiment of an oppositional discourse; for middle-class white suburbanites it was, quite often, merely the source of a reliable workforce.

### Working Women and “Woman’s Work”

The world in which black women lived, worked, and worshiped at the turn of the twentieth century was gendered and highly sexualized. Even as urbanization and industrialization increased the demand for women in the workforce, working women suffered economically and socially in a sex-segregated labor market that relegated them to the lowest paying jobs and in a class-based society that regarded as morally suspect any woman who worked for wages. Single working women bore the brunt of

the attacks from those who policed the boundaries of respectable behavior, especially middle-class reformers who disseminated and reinforced the image of “women adrift,” who, as historian Joanne Meyerowitz notes, “became a symbol of the threats that industrialization and urbanization posed to womanhood and the family.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1898 white sociologist Frances Kellor characterized single women as more immoral than their married sisters due to their less developed maternal sentiment, “the crowning honor of womanhood.” Unlike the married woman who had the “protection” of a man to bridle her innate criminality, the single woman’s “low morality” remained unchecked. The problem was compounded for black women, who, like black men, Kellor added parenthetically, were ruled by sexual passion.<sup>16</sup> Commenting further on the black working woman, married or single, Kellor attributed problems of labor exploitation to “her increasing inefficiency and desire to avoid hard work.”<sup>17</sup> Ironically, Kellor, who helped found the National Urban League, advocated for better employment conditions for black women and worked closely with Sarah Willie Layten, future president of the black Baptist Woman’s Convention and Kellor’s successor as general secretary of the National League for the Protection of Colored Women.

Practitioners of the new social sciences were not the only ones who promoted images of black working women as “pathological.” Mary White Ovington, a white founding member of the NAACP, wrote disparagingly in 1911 that “numbers” of them were “slow to recognize the sanctity of home and the importance of feminine virtue.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the centrality of working women to the growth of the denomination, black ministers were ambivalent about their presence in the church as well as their position in society, both of which mattered in the creation of a denomination and construction of a race. The numerical predominance of single working women raised questions of ecclesiastical viability and threatened to subvert the church’s patriarchal agenda. Black working women continuously had to negotiate space and place across boundaries of gender, race, and class, whether earning a living or constructing a Christian womanhood consistent with their understanding of the role of religion in society. Through their “woman’s work,” they presented their own view of the church, womanhood, and citizenship.

No one articulated more clearly the perspective of black working women than the young, energetic, and often controversial correspond-

ing secretary of the National Baptist Woman's Convention, Nannie Helen Burroughs, whose parsing of the problems confronting domestic servants stood in radical opposition to the pervasive conflation of class and morality that dominated late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century discourses.<sup>19</sup> Burroughs consistently called for proper respect for working women "whose salvation must be attained before the so-called race problem can be solved." In an inversion of masculine and middle-class formulations of morality and respectability, Burroughs stated that working women deserved respect *because* they worked outside the home and frequently traversed public space. Those guilty of "pulling aside of our silken skirts at the approach of the servant woman," Burroughs charged, had a more detrimental effect on the morals of black women than servants with character and honesty enough to work.<sup>20</sup> Careful to separate black women's morality from structural and economic problems, Burroughs asserted that the conditions, not the women, needed reforming. Burroughs explicated the woman question and the race problem in a voice that reflected the experiences and Christian ethics of domestic workers in suburban New Jersey, women who began their organized woman's work in this sexually and racially charged milieu.

Concerned about the effects of industrialization and urbanization on the sanctity of the home and the impact of the economic depression of the 1890s on the dislocation of women and children, white and black women undertook rescue work. Historian Sarah Deutsch argues that rescue work for elite white women was a prescriptive for controlling moral disorder by imposing their superior moral vision on the sexual and material lives of working-class women. Black women, she added, acted out of the impulse of mutual protection. With an understanding of the class differences among African Americans, historian Wanda Hendricks concludes that middle-class black women were activated by their commitment to Victorian mores and to elevating the image of African American women.<sup>21</sup>

As this book argues, for non-elite black women, the reasons were less complicated but more urgent. Northern black working women drew upon shared experiences to provide for the moral and material conditions of their migrating sisters in a society that had little regard for working women and their children. In founding street missions and organizing churches, these women responded to the Christian mandate to

save souls; they also formulated their own understanding of the church and its mission. In the process, they created a discursive space for constructing their own image of black womanhood.<sup>22</sup> Later, they would seek a place in the biracial temperance and interracial church women's movements, the secular women's club movement, and electoral politics.

This book offers a narrative of ordinary, non-elite, working women's leadership and public activism told from the margins; women of little status and even less power who resisted and cooperated, subverted and partnered with more powerful black men and white women. It tells of a vision and faith that sustained Christian women's activism. At its core, it argues that black women's Christian activism made a difference over the first half of the twentieth century. Their understanding of the intertwining of race and gender, religion and politics can be found in the bedrock of the civil rights struggle.

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Summit, New Jersey, was a typical New York City suburb. From similar sites, working women like Violet Johnson and Florence Randolph moved into public space, mobilized communities, and influenced the development of black womanhood and public discourse in the state and the region. Locating this study in that site allows us to hear the voices of ordinary women, trace the development of their organized activism, and witness their day-to-day struggle for just laws and moral institutions. This book adds another dimension to understanding African American women's role in the long civil rights movement.<sup>23</sup>

This book traces the Christian activism of black working women in a northern suburb over a fifty-year period. Chapter 1 locates the emerging suburbs and American Protestantism as sites of contestation for the meaning of race, gender, and class in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century North. American industrialization and urban decentralization stimulated the movement of middle-class whites to the suburbs. African American working women were at the center of that movement. They founded churches, sustained communities, and formed a network of Christian women throughout the Northeast. Although they constituted the public presence of the independent black Baptist denomination and the race, their religious activities often conflicted with the ecclesial institutions black clergymen were constructing.

When faith and gender conflicted, church women had to negotiate space within the church for their model of Christian womanhood. When race and space collided in pre-World War I Summit over the location of the church, Violet Johnson had to defend her church against a hardening color line and a northern version of Jim Crow. Black church women lived at the intersection of religion and society.

The number of black women in New York City suburbs increased with the increase in the number of white middle-class families. However, their presence remained problematic. For black ministers, their predominance raised questions of institutional viability and racial leadership. For white middle-class men and women, their proximity generated anxieties over black women's pathology in intimate spaces of the Anglo-Saxon preserve. Their inclusion in the black church and the white WCTU was as much an attempt at social control as of sincere Christian outreach, since black women were often viewed as the ones in need of reform. Chapter 2 examines the arguments church women advanced as they fought for a place for *woman's work* in the church and for their race work within the major woman's reform movement. Throughout the 1890s and into the 1910s, they advanced intertwined gender and race arguments as they mobilized to form missionary societies, WCTU units, and the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Their activities add a heretofore unexamined dimension to women's interracial coalitions. As black Protestant churches struggled with the question of gender and biracial sisterhoods foundered on issues of race and class, black women erected an organizational framework that created discursive and public space for both their racial and gender identities. They offered an alternative understanding of the intersection of religion and society.

Chapter 3 analyzes black women's activism in the World War I period. Having been schooled in the science of organizational management and the art of political negotiation in their denominations, Johnson and Randolph entered New Jersey's suffrage battle and expanded their Christian activism amid war, migration, and increasing segregation. Their public presence disrupted elite white women's hegemonic discourse. After 1920, armed with the ballot and a vision of an ethical community based upon *civic righteousness*, the practice of morality and justice in civic institutions and laws, they claimed full-fledged citizenship in the midst of

invidious—and at times violent—opposition. They concatenated personal behavior, mutual responsibility, and state intervention, and placed moral behavior within the purview of civic responsibility, thus expanding the politics of respectability. Throughout the 1920s they pursued the goal of a transformed society at the polls, in legislative halls, and across civic platforms.

Chapter 4 explores the contingent strategies these working women deployed in the post-World War I years. Based upon their experience in biracial suffrage coalitions, black church women expected to stand side by side with their white sisters in an expanded democracy. Their language changed and became more demanding as they sought to maintain social and political gains against the rising tide of white supremacy. Despite their best efforts, however, these Christian activists were unable to staunch the rise of the Ku Klux Klan or Jim Crow segregation in the North in the 1920s and 1930s. In Summit, class and color politics, a color-coded economic structure, increasing valuation of suburban property, and the devastation of the Great Depression eroded the gains they had made. Nonetheless, they remained committed to an activism based upon moral principles, just laws, and the intertwining of race, gender, and class. They worked for social justice and against an ever-widening color line through the NAACP's Anti-Lynching Crusade, the Federal Council of Churches Church Women's Committee, and the Republican Party.

Chapter 5 discusses working women's experiences with electoral politics. Viewing the ballot as a sacred instrument, New Jersey's black church women added politics to their service. They saw themselves as agents of moral redemption and as leaders of a modern Christian citizenship. Cooperating with white and black Republican politicians, they took to the hustings, explained the electoral process to new voters, critiqued candidates' platforms, and encouraged black women and men to vote. Meeting in churches and homes, the New Jersey State Colored Women's Republican Club coordinated successful get-out-the-vote campaigns and helped to change the political landscape. Considered political partisans because of their fervor, Randolph and Johnson had few illusions about the American political process. Their relationship with the Republican Party was complex and, as the Great Depression deepened, they would revisit their allegiance.

The Great Depression and the New Deal profoundly affected African American women's Christian activism. The Great Depression eroded the economic position of Summit's black residents and concomitantly increased race and class tensions. New Deal recovery programs disproportionately benefited a growing white middle class and increased the economic marginalization of African Americans. As middle-class whites used federal funds to solidify the suburb as a white preserve, African American women's bodies and homes came under increased assault. Black women had to combat the studied indifference of the Republican-Protestant elite and to defend themselves against an aggressive white middle class anxious to consolidate its hold on the American dream reified as the single-family detached home. Fueled with taxpayer dollars and stripped of its complexity and morality, suburban housing became a new battle site and the instrument of erasure of both the black middle class and the white and black working class. Chapter 6 analyzes the Christian women's fight against the structural and economic inequality exacerbated by New Deal policies, especially the attempt at *racial cleansing*, the removal of Summit's black citizens under the New Deal *slum clearance* program.

The Conclusion extends the arc of Johnson's and Randolph's activism and vision of a just society into the 1940s. The language of resistance changed from civic righteousness to civil rights. After a lifetime of work, Randolph and other church women found themselves in a new world. In sum, Christian activism had been their vehicle for social change for more than half a century; yet, by some measures, they had made little progress. Mainline Protestant denominations had done little to forestall racial discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Over the next three decades, federal action pushed by a southern-led civil rights movement would seek to fill the void—to take the action that religious men and women of mainline Protestant denominations had failed to take.

The issues Johnson and Randolph raised—the relationship between social justice and government, the efficacy of large institutional response and community action, the intersection of religion and society, and the empowerment of marginalized citizens—continue to reverberate into the twenty-first century.

While there is a rich literature on southern African American women's Christian activism, along with less geographically focused national work, this book is one of the first to take a long view in a localized northern venue. It provides one of the few close looks at how segregation and oppression worked in the North. The book revises the timeline of northern segregation and civil rights. In the process, it contributes to the ongoing documentation of the diversity of voices and leadership styles in the civil rights movement. Further, by asking what difference black women's Christian activism made over the first half of the twentieth century in a northern suburb and on the state level, this work complicates our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics, women's private and public spaces, and women's changing roles within religious communities and the public sphere.

Chronologically, the book follows Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's *Gender and Jim Crow* and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent*, works that problematized women's public presence and agency. By foregrounding the Christian activism of ordinary African American women living and working within a white, middle-class suburb, this book approaches American Christianity and women in ecumenical settings from a different perspective. It complements Judith Weisenfeld's *African American Women and Christian Activism*, Nancy Marie Robertson's *Christian Sisterhood*, and Bettye Collier-Thomas's *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* as it illustrates the contingent nature of religious women's leadership.<sup>24</sup> A microcosm of the history of a region and nation, this local story extends our knowledge of women's Christian activism.

At its core, this volume tells a complex story of American religion and politics. Although the working women fell short of injecting civic righteousness into the public sphere, they expanded the religious discourse beyond personal salvation and offered an alternative model of religious and political interaction. The women's religious faith, mediated through race, gender, and class, shaped their political activism and sustained their commitment to social justice. By locating women's Christian activism in this historic moment, this book examines the religious thought and practices that sustained their community-based activism. It also makes a contribution to the historical understanding of the intertwining of religion, gender, and politics in an increasingly secular society.

This book addresses the constellation of race, class, and gender in the suburbs and, like Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, extends the study to the grassroots activism that coalesced in opposition to racial injustice in the urban North. The suburbanization experience of African Americans prior to World War II was as much a part of urban decentralization as the movement of middle-class whites out of urban centers. Classic works on the suburbs, like Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias*, John R. Stilgoe's *Borderland*, and Margaret Marsh's *Suburban Lives*, have linked the historical and cultural meaning of suburbia to industrialization and urban decentralization. More recent studies, for example, Andrew Wiese in *Places of Their Own* and Becky M. Nicolaides in *My Blue Heaven*, have expanded the discussion beyond the trope of the white, middle-class suburb to include questions of race and class.<sup>25</sup> As this volume demonstrates, the economic inequality that surfaced *within* the spatial and cultural setting of the suburban enclave prior to World War II is historically significant. Reclaiming the voice and public presence of working-class African American women alerts us to the complexities and diverse geographies of the long civil rights struggle and reminds us that the conditions that give rise to injustice and oppression and the ordinary people who struggle against them cannot be reduced to myths, representations, or tropes.