

History as Death and Living Ghosts: The Mislaid Memories of Saint Katharine Drexel

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IN 1915, Saint Katharine Drexel and her *Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People* opened Xavier University for the higher education of Black Catholics in New Orleans, Louisiana. Xavier University remains the only Black Catholic university in the United States and for years has been recognized as graduating the highest number of Black medical students (Xavier University, 2012). Xavier has been regarded as unique, and its founder, Katharine Drexel as exceptional, hence her veneration as a Saint. Drexel and subsequently Xavier's narratives have been consistently presented in the following manner—Drexel, a millionaire heiress turned Catholic nun was contacted by New Orleans Archbishop James H. Blenk to fund a college for the city's Black Catholics (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 1995; Lovett, 2001). These composed and succinct images of Drexel and Xavier's founding are consistently presented in limited and fragmented historical accounts across disciplinary genres – Drexel's biographies (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998), histories of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Anderson, 1988; Lovett, 2001), histories of Catholic nuns in the United States (Coburn & Smith, 1999; Fialka, 2003), and critical histories of religion and race in New Orleans (Baudier, 1939; Bennett, 2005; Anderson, 2005). The problems with these accounts are that they glaze over the complexities of identity, religion, gender, race, and place and fail to acknowledge the ruptures in Drexel's experience as a cloistered White woman who sought social justice in New Orleans. When the Vatican calls Xavier University the “crown jewel” of Drexel's missionary work (The Vatican, 2012), this tends to evoke a romanticized image of a “do-gooder” nun bringing religion and education to Negroes in the Jim Crow South. However, this essay rejects this romantic image and instead tells the story of a woman whose narrative has been co-opted and colonized to perpetuate the image of a non-racist Catholic Church during a time when the education and civil rights of Black Americans were neither the concern of the larger American populace nor the U.S. Catholic Church.

Historical accounts continually have favored one-dimensional monolithic stories of Drexel and Xavier which arbitrarily situate the two within a White/Black binary. These monolithic stories prevent us from analyzing a moment with the possibilities of revealing the specific strategies people of different races, genders, and places used to negotiate difference to promote educational social justice. I argue these grand narratives are the result of traditional historical methods which produced historical accounts that in turn create rigid definitions of

being and identity. For example, according to the dominant and most widely consumed historical record, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have been defined as the benevolently intended products of Anglo-Protestant missionary societies or government supported land-grant institutions (Gasman, 2007). Catholicism, on the other hand, has been situated as the antithesis of the Black American university experience, and Blacks are not associated with having a strong theological and historical tradition in the Catholic Church (Miller, 1983). University Builders are not White nuns; they are White male philanthropists who were captains of industry and erudition (Thelin, 2004). In addition, the normative tradition states that Catholic nuns were completely obedient to Church doctrine and essentially valued charity and evangelism over social justice and activism (Baldwin, 2000; Holt, 2002). According to these accounts, Katharine Drexel and Xavier University should not exist.

Drexel's vision of social justice was rooted in an educational philosophy of inclusion that does not fit within the White male philanthropic or benevolent society narrative of Black education. This is evidenced by the fact that Xavier University's identity was rooted in the Catholic principles of universalism and therefore accepted students of all races and religious creeds (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). Hence, a nuanced exploration shows how Drexel worked with the Franco-Afro-Creole Catholic¹ community to circumvent racist ideologies present in American society and the U.S. Catholic Church. I argue that if we look beyond the constraints of traditional modernist historical methods which seek to define, confine, and restrain, we can then see past imposed limitations of identity, religion, and place. Rather, microhistorical analysis allows us to look at the particularities of the Drexel's involvement in the founding of Xavier University which removes Drexel from categorized binaries and situates her as a multi-dimensional figure. In utilizing microhistorical analysis, it becomes possible to challenge dominant historical discourses which create binaries such as nun/philanthropist, Black/White, and race /religion. Thusly, this study will analyze archived materials to explore how Drexel confronted racism in her personal correspondences with members of the Church and lay communities. This research will push the normative boundaries of how race, gender and religion have shaped our understanding of the history of higher education.

History as Death and Living Ghosts: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In 2009, Baker asked, "Does one *really*, then, *need* to know History in order to Know Thyself? And is Knowing Thyself always and everywhere the common goal?" (p. xiii). She continued to question "whether that the love of or significance attributed to History or to history is a line "moderns" have been implicitly sold, so that some forms of subjectivity and belonging could be forged and others blocked or forgone" (p. xiii). This questioning of the unseen but ever present guardians of History who determine what should be known and unknown is also present in Davis's (1990) observation of the lack of accounts of the other in Catholic history. He wrote:

In the rich background of church history, there are images we have chosen not to see, figures that have been allowed to blur, characters passing through center stage for a brief moment with no supporting cast. Still they have been there, and the church has been marked with their blackness...It has been the historian's task to make the past speak, to highlight what has been hidden, and to retrieve a mislaid memory. (p. x)

In light of Baker's questioning of what it means to "Know Thyself" and Davis's challenge for historians to retrieve a "mislaid memory," this methodological discussion begins with my

experiences as a Black Catholic woman who had to reconsider what I thought I knew to be true of myself, my education, and my religion in order to consider a methodology for this study.

This project began during a trip to the Xavier University archives with a colleague in September 2010. Our goal was to collect the academic catalogues from Xavier's early years for a project on the foundational curricula of two Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Louisiana. My sister, who is eight years my senior, attended and graduated from Xavier; so I was very excited to return to the university I had visited as a child. My sister was the first of three siblings to attend college, so her entrance into university life was accompanied by much fanfare that remains vivid to me as an adult. A very precocious ten year old, I was curious about this place called college where my sister was going to be living for next few years. I also wanted to know about Katharine Drexel, the woman who my sister's dormitory was named after. So after reading informational placards around the school and thoroughly reading my sister's college handbook, I found out that Katharine Drexel was a nun, and that she founded Xavier. In my ten year old mind, I thought my sister was extra special because she was selected to live in the dormitory named after the woman that founded the university and that feeling was something that always remained with me.

As my colleague and I stepped off an elevator to enter Xavier's archives which are located in the university's library, representations of Drexel's image dominated our entry into the archives and the walls of the archives. As we began our research, I could not help but to notice the images of the stoic yet kind looking woman in the large portraits surrounding our workspace. I immediately felt at home in the archive because it evoked the images and feelings I was exposed to as a child. I was abruptly disrupted from my comfort zone when the archivist brought out the first Xavier University catalogue. My colleague and I were stunned when the catalogue read "Old Southern" and not Xavier University. As a graduate of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I knew the university was originally located in New Orleans and moved to Baton Rouge in 1914. But with Southern University being an 1890 land grant institution and Xavier University being a private Catholic university, we did not see any possible connection. Sensing our shock and confusion, the archivist informed us that Xavier originally occupied the old Southern University buildings which were purchased by Drexel and her Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, hence the reason why the school was referred to as Old Southern during the schools foundational years. As we continued to look through and document our materials, Drexel's image loomed over me, and I began to recall all the information I had been told about Drexel and Xavier over the years. It was then I realized that I had been "told a story," but I did not really know this woman or this university and there was much more to know. Sitting in the archive, I also could not seem to neatly resolve where my experiences with Catholicism began, ended, and collided with Drexel's experiences in Catholicism. Although we lived a century apart and were of different classes and races, could our experiences as women in the "universal" Church bind us? Was it possible for a Black Catholic woman to capture the experiences of a White nun and the experiences of the Afro-Catholic Creole community in New Orleans? Because, according to traditional historical discourse, none of us should exist? Was I engaging in a sound, relevant inquiry or did I have a preoccupation with a dead saint? I was haunted by the woman in the habit that kept gazing back at me on the covers of the many biographies scattered around my home and office. I was haunted by the guilt I felt when a person of color asked me if Drexel was White or Black, and I had to answer White. I was haunted by the fragmented research methods scattered like puzzle pieces that I had to use to tell a story I was

unsure could be told. I was haunted by the many other plots, sub-plots, tones, and characters that would remain mislaid memories if I could not resolve these questions.

My preoccupation with a dead research subject suddenly became realized as a preoccupation with hidden histories manifested as living ghosts. If it becomes possible for a Black Catholic female to tell the story of a wealthy White nun and a Black Catholic university—people and places that should not exist according to the traditional historical narrative—it becomes possible to tell the stories of other people, places, and things that also should not exist but do. For example, when writing about the aftermath of the 1993 Los Angeles Riots, Hayes (1993) spoke of these ghosts:

The ghosts that exist, because their experiences cannot truly be called living, haunt our streets and our minds, flashing into focus for a few minutes in lurid newspaper headlines or bloody scenes on the evening news but quickly fading back into obscurity—leaving ghostly images of anger, seemingly mindless hatred and violence, a humanity gone wild—if it seen as human at all. (p. 15)

How we can write the history of living ghosts? de Certeau (trans. 1988) interpreted history as a preoccupation with death and explains that Western civilization's obsession with death is based on a fear of death and hence, there is always a conscious effort to conquer death in spite of the fact that it is unconquerable. Therefore, the West privileges "progress" and is uncomfortable with returning to the past. He offered that historiography should not shy away from the opportunity to embrace the past as a valid site of knowledge production:

Historiography tends to prove that the site of its production can encompass the past: it is a procedure that posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death and a labor against death. This paradoxical procedure is symbolized and performed in a gesture which has once the value of myth and of ritual: *writing*. (de Certeau, trans. 1998. p. 5)

The act or performance of historiography is a dance that twirls within the spaces of life and death. However, before this dance can begin, the researcher must be comfortable with the separation that death will bring. It is a dance of separation and joining together, and de Certeau posited the fruit of this performance is writing. It is here that microhistorical analysis as an alternative to traditional historical methods becomes critical to this study. Because it avails itself of interpretive anthropology in an attempt to uncover hidden histories, microhistory is an important methodology for a re-appreciation of Drexel's life and her writing.

Entering the discipline of history in the 1970s and 1980s, microhistory disassociates itself from its modernist roots and structuralist leanings in an attempt to uncover hidden histories (Burke, 2004). Levi (2001) presented microhistory as a process for studying the contradictions in normative structures at local levels by using "experimental observation" to reduce the scale of inquiries to find hidden incoherence in meta-histories (pp. 99-100). He defined the importance of experimental observation in microhistorical analysis when he wrote, "For microhistory the reduction of scale is an analytical procedure, which may be applied anywhere independently of the object analysed [*sic*]" (pp. 99-100). Therefore, in microhistory, the emphasis is not on the scale of analysis but on the process of reducing the scale. Levi further explained when he writes:

Phenomena previously considered to be described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within narrow dimensions and as experiments rather than examples. (p. 102)

As a qualitative inquirer, I did not shy away from microhistory's emphasis on process and experimentation. Microhistory presents a method and rationale for using Drexel's written documents, particularly her letters, as a medium for analyzing the complexity of crossing secular and spiritual narratives. Reducing the scale of analysis presents an opportunity to expose the binaries traditional historical methods create—Drexel the saint and missionary versus Drexel the engaged educational activist. Other microhistorians such as Davis (1987) and Ginsburg (trans. 2012) explore narrative discourse as it relates to historical representations. These historians argue that there is a discursive space, open for interpretation, between how individuals construct the stories which narrate their lives and the histories that, subsequently, are written about them. Essentially, the agenda of these historians is to disrupt and challenge dominant historical narratives by studying the lives of so-called insignificant people on the margins of history and deconstructing discourses of reality, fact and fiction (Davis, 1987; Ginzburg, trans. 2012). Microhistorical analysis provides a method for me to peek into the world of complex moments and perform rigorous inquiry to uncover how race, gender, class, and religion can intersect to create physical spaces in the form of educational facilities for social justice. In doing so, I am attempting to answer Baker's (2009) call to question what it means to "Know Thyself" and Davis's (1990) challenge to retrieve mislaid memories. In seeking out the writings of Drexel to peek into complex moments, I was able to posthumously meet my research subject. However, before I relay the details of that meeting and its mislaid memories, I must first give some additional background on Drexel's life in order to question why she felt that within the "universal" church there was a need for a specialized ministry dedicated to serve Indians and Colored people?

Historical Context

Duffy (1966) and Lynch (1988) provided windows into Drexel's privileged and idyllic upbringing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in their respective biographies. Katharine (baptized Catherine) Mary Drexel was born in 1858 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to a very wealthy and prominent family. Her father, Francis Anthony Drexel, a banker and financier, remained a very devout Catholic in spite of his wealth and influence. Drexel's mother died from complications from childbirth and when Drexel was still an infant, Francis remarried Emma Marie Bouvier of the ancestral family of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, former First Lady of the United States. Besides ensuring that their daughters (Elizabeth, born of his first marriage, and Louise from his union with Emma) were well educated, the Drexels also ensured that they were well-traveled. Yearly trips to Europe and train rides across the United States in a private car with servants and private instructors were common place for the Drexels (Lynch, 1988).

Of Drexel's upbringing, Blatt (1987) wrote, "From both parents she inherited a sense of thrift, personal responsibility, moral stamina, filial fear of God, and love of neighbor" (p. 182). Regarding her mother's commitment to the poor, Drexel recalls how Emma Drexel employed someone to go visit the poor and if there were needs, she would make sure they were met. From her

house three times a week, Emma Drexel would supervise the crowds that gathered for assistance by distributing groceries, rent money, coal, or shoes. All was given according to need and Emma Drexel kept very detailed records to ensure proper use of what was given. Of her mother and her piety, Drexel wrote, “she took a personal interest in them and they knew it. She got to know them and their needs and was able to direct them. Her sympathy was unwearying” (Blatt, 1987, p. 182).

Upon Emma Drexel’s death in 1883, Drexel began seriously to contemplate giving her life over to God in “some religious form.” Francis Drexel died two years later, in 1885, leaving his daughters a trust estate of about \$15,000,000. Fearful that his daughters would be targets of fortune hunters, Francis Drexel drafted a strong will that ensured that after a set amount reached his targeted charities, the rest of his estate would be left in a trust for daughters who were to have exclusive control of the income thereafter (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). Drexel and her sisters continued their parents’ philanthropic efforts. Some of their early efforts included contributing to the Josephite fathers for their ministries in the South, giving \$50,000 to Catholic University to establish a Francis A. Drexel Chair of Moral Theology and providing funds to the Bureau for Catholic Indian Missions (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). The sisters also continued their travels, and it is during a trip to Europe in 1887 that Katharine had her fabled private audience with Pope Leo XII. Multiple accounts from those in the audience detail that when Katherine pleaded for missionaries to work with Native Americans, the Pope asked, “Why not, my child, yourself becoming a missionary?” (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). Drexel’s decision to enter religious life is often traced back to this meeting, but Drexel’s reasons for requesting this assistance from the Pope have not been fully analyzed within the larger socio-political context of an America struggling to define its citizenry in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Drexel was aware of the shortcomings of the Church in the evangelization and education of its minority membership. As a deeply spiritual and devout Catholic, she clearly understood the connection between education and evangelization, but also understood the link to be a tool necessary for survival. In her youth, Drexel was aware of the plight of Indians and Blacks in America, and provided financial aid to these communities when she received her share of the inheritance. For example, Lynch (1998) documents the correspondence between Drexel and her spiritual advisor, Bishop James O’Connor, when the former was a young woman. O’Connor frequently provided details of his work with Indians in the Nebraska territory and Drexel kept the bishop abreast of the activities of a school for Blacks taught by the Sisters of Notre Dame in Philadelphia. Therefore, it should not be seen as a coincidence that one of Drexel’s first major contributions, along with her sister Elizabeth, was to support the work of the Sisters of Notre Dame by purchasing a house in Philadelphia in order to provide larger quarters for the school (Lynch, 1998).

Lynch (1988) also recounts Drexel’s ruminations in regard to her status as an heiress versus her desire to live a life of service. After a week-long social visit to Washington D.C., Lynch recounts Drexel’s observations that she feared she was esteemed in Washington “...only because I am rich or for the sake of my parents” (p. 27). She found that all the small talk of society left her very uncomfortable. But even though she saw herself as “a child of Providence, one singularly blessed by God,” she admitted that waiting on her sisters was too simple and that she preferred “visiting hospitals, waiting on Indian Missions, waiting on Colored School[s], ...anything large” (p. 27). While I do not have the space to explore all of the nuances of Drexel’s decision to enter religious life and subsequently dedicate her life to working with minority groups, I do want to observe that Drexel had some understanding of the nuanced connections between race, religion, and education. However, this understanding was enhanced

and deepened when she began her work in New Orleans in 1893. It was then that she discovered that in New Orleans, being Creole and Catholic was not as simple as Black and White.

Drexel's dedication to work in Black communities, particularly with the Franco-Afro-Creole-Catholic Community in New Orleans, was a complex affair due to the colonizing or paternalistic aspects of Catholic educational traditions. The New Orleans post-Reconstruction educational milieu was unique from other southern cities because of its roots in a Franco-Catholic tradition—a tradition which emphasized evangelization through education. It is important to emphasize that Louisiana was a Franco-Catholic colony and it was required that all inhabitants—whether free and enslaved—be baptized in the Catholic faith (Porche-Frilot & Hendry, 2010). And within the Catholic faith, there cannot be evangelization without education. Young (1944) explained this phenomenon when she wrote, “It is and always has been the policy of the Church to establish, at the earliest possible moment, schools in connection with any of her missionary endeavors” (p. 1). Nolan (1993) continued in this vein when he wrote, “Evangelization and Education are two basic, recurring, intertwining wellsprings and expression of the Christian experience...At the heart of Catholic education is the handing down of faith by example, love, support, and instruction” (p. 194). Therefore within Louisiana's history as a Franco-Catholic colony and throughout its pre-antebellum history, there is evidence of the development of the Catholic parochial system as a “public” education system for all citizens including the enslaved and free Blacks alike. However, the intersection of the problematics of colonial hegemony and the Church hierarchy would create a perfect storm for nuns—Black and White—to take up the task of educating the colonized. These women would develop curricula, staff the schools, and provide pastoral care. In the 1830s and 1840s, free woman of color and religious Henriette Delille continued the tradition of Catholic women religious educators by educating enslaved girls and free women of color through her founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family. As the second order of Black nuns established in the United States, these women “[C]laimed French Catholic tradition in order to defy the social and racial conventions of antebellum New Orleans. By promoting education they contested the racist ideology that denied basic humanity to enslaved Africans” (Hendry, 2011, p. 128).

Initially, Drexel's presence and funding was met with resistance from the Franco-Afro-Creole-Catholic community. It is important to understand that for Franco-Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, being Catholic was not a feature of their identity; it was the foundation of their identity. For Creoles in New Orleans, the concern was how America's new edict of separate but equal (*Plessy v. Ferguson*) would encroach on their Afro-Franco-Catholic Culture (Hall, 1992). For this community, Americanization had meant the enforcement of segregation based on a rigid two-tiered racial structure reliant on skin color—White and non-White—rather than the established three tiered structure based on identities: White American, Franco or Latin Creole, and Black American (Hall, 1992).

Drexel encountered the complexities of the Franco-Afro-Creole-Catholic community in 1895 when New Orleans Archbishop Francis A. Janssens invited Drexel to fund St. Katharine's, the first “negro only” parish in New Orleans (Bennett, 2005). Whether or not Janssens's solution to his “negro problem” was intentionally racist or, rather, a sincere attempt to aid the Blacks in his diocese, the church met with staunch opposition from the Creole community. These Creoles did not view themselves as a problem to be solved in the church, and Drexel was seen as Janssens' co-conspirator in his efforts to segregate the church (Bennett, 2005). Duffy (1966) relayed a reflection from Drexel's personal notebook on the progress of St. Katharine's in 1904 where she wrote, “It seems that on Sundays, the Colored prefer to go to Church with the Whites” (p. 314).

This is often the sentence that scholars select to present Drexel's position on the situation; however, Drexel's next written lines are also essential: "Before Archbishop Janssens purchased St. Katharine's, the Colored asked for a separate Church. They retracted but he held them to this first demand" (p. 314). Duffy deconstructs this last statement in the following manner:

We do not have any other evidence of this request made by some of the Colored people themselves for a separate church, but a woman as exact and painstaking as Mother M. Katharine would never have written this unless she had definite facts to justify it. (p. 314)

While Duffy's bias as a member of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament may prejudice her interpretation of Drexel's correspondence, Duffy's interpretation is not implausible. Indeed, there is evidence to support the claim that some colored Creole Catholics did support separate parishes. For example, Ochs (1990) noted that "On January 23, 1866, colored Creole Catholics in New Orleans petitioned Archbishop Odin for their own separate parish church and for a 'priest of the African race.' Odin failed to respond to their petition" (p. 38).

Although her presence in New Orleans was contested, Drexel carried on the mission of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, funding churches and schools in the South Louisiana area as requested. As New Orleans sunk deeper into segregation, Bennett (2005) suggested that Black Catholics began to recognize "the material as well as spiritual advantages of belonging to separate churches" (p. 222). He continued:

A clergy and sisterhood dedicated to service among the African-American community provided a refreshing contrast to a diocesan clergy who admitted 'we do not know how to treat' black Catholics and a white laity that refused to support black mission. Black Catholics also recognized the advantages of not having to depend on the local hierarchy, given its past unwillingness to provide funds or clergy to aid black catholic interests. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, endowed with the resources of its wealthy founder, Katharine Drexel, provided a particularly promising source of support for future needs. (p. 222)

Regardless of the problematic and paternalistic nature of the Church's educational approach in New Orleans, the consistent *handing off* of the Church's business with minorities to women like Drexel inadvertently allowed the Creole community to retain its Afro-Franco-Catholic identity. This pattern of *handing off* the Church's business to religious women would continue with regard to higher education.

From 1880 – 1914, the segregated, yet nondenominational, Southern University became an option for Creole post-secondary education (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). Although it was segregated and located on the outskirts of the city, the university was still not safe from racist attempts to undermine the education of Blacks. By 1912, the city population had expanded and middle-class Whites began to settle in the area around Southern University. These new residents successfully petitioned to have the University removed, and by act of the Louisiana State Legislature, Southern University was eventually relocated to its current location in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The removal of Southern University from the city in 1914 left Black Creoles in New Orleans with a void in Catholic secondary and post-secondary education (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). To fill this void, once more the Church called upon a religious woman to perform the

work of the “universal” Church – in this instance the higher education of Black Catholics in New Orleans.

Reducing the Scale: Microhistorical Analysis and Mislaidd Memories

We went to see the Southern University as soon as we had received Holy Communion and breakfasted...The member of the board who was in an office to the right, to our inquiry as to whether we could look around, said, “Yes” in an indifferent kind of way, and he let us go around by ourselves and apparently forgot all about us.

(Drexel, M. K., Correspondence to Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, April, 1915).

On that Friday morning in April 1915 in New Orleans, Louisiana, the above-mentioned board member evidently did not realize that of the two nuns in the heavy dark habits who requested to see the building, one was the wealthiest heiress in the United States. And he could not have guessed that this nun and heiress had in her possession the \$18,000 needed to purchase the old Southern University Buildings. Nor could he have known that upon stepping out of the building, Drexel had already begun to calculate the additional funding needed to turn the space into a school for the higher education of Colored Catholics in New Orleans (Drexel, M. K., Correspondence to Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, April, 1915). Even if this board member learned the very next Tuesday that Drexel and her Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People had secured the property, he might have never imagined that Drexel was already making plans to visit the “Baptist and Straight Institute and Public schools to see what we must compete with” because “It is necessary to offset the protestant schools to have higher education” (Drexel, M. K., Correspondence to Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, April, 1915).

Similar to Drexel in an uncanny alignment, I also found myself in New Orleans in April of 2012, yet it was during one of New Orleans’s notorious thunderstorms where streets and parking lots resemble miniature lakes. Also similar to Drexel, when I walked into the Archdiocese of New Orleans Archives with drenched clothing, I was also ushered to what appeared to be the employee break room and left alone to sift through dozens of papers to find a moment that I could peek into. As I put on the hat of the microhistorian, I came across a neglected folder of private, incoming and outgoing correspondence between Drexel and Archbishop James Blenk where she is concerned with the presence of White protestors to the opening of Xavier University, dated May 16, 1915, and June 10, 1915 respectively. Employing the methods of microanalysis, I will now conduct inquiry to specifics to challenge narrative constructions of reality, fact, and fictions to explore moments where Drexel negotiated identity, religion, and place.

The following passage is from a letter Drexel wrote to New Orleans Archbishop James Blenk on May 16, 1915:

Mrs. Blackmore has sent me a clipping from the Times-Picayune of May fifth which has caused me just a little anxiety. It stated that a protest from many signers had been transmitted by the Mayor to the City Council asking that an ordinance be passed to prevent the Southern University building from being used as a convent, or school for Negro’s educational purposes. Perhaps the petition will not be regarded seriously, yet I feel some anxiety, as I know the devil sometimes can stir up an account of opposition, in

order to frustrate a work for souls. On the other hand, if it come from God, a manifestation of His will, it would certainly free us from no [easy] task. But I want to be sure, and for this reason refer the matter to you as God's representation. I know your great zeal for souls, and for everything, that in any way can further God's interests, so I leave the matter to your watchful care. [I am] however, sending a little note to Mr. McEnery asking his opinion too. (Drexel, M.K. to J.H. Blenk, May 16, 1915)

In spite of her persuasive language, Drexel never makes a direct reference to the bigotry expressed by the white protesters. Instead, she makes constant reference to the important work of saving souls. I argue, however, that her constant reference to God and the saving of souls, was part of a strategy used by Drexel to validate her strong appeal to the archbishop, and to validate her cause by deferring to the 'man' to whom the archbishop could not say no, namely God himself. Therefore, as 'God's representative,' it was Blenk's responsibility to fulfill her request without question. Other aspects of this letter only make sense if we go beyond a surface level reading and revisit the larger socio-economic, political, and religious landscape of the New Orleans and the South in post-Reconstruction America.

In the midst of the Jim Crow South, attempts to educate Blacks and Black Catholics were often met with extreme resistance and in some cases violence. For example, in 1872 the Redemptorist Fathers, a Catholic order of priests, opened a school for Black children in connection with their white parochial school in New Orleans. The Black school was burned down twice and rebuilt twice; but on the third burning, the school was not rebuilt² (Young, 1944, pp. 61-62). Drexel's efforts were not immune from this bigotry. However, Drexel's education and influence, both direct results of her wealth, placed her at an advantage when the Catholic principals of education and evangelization collided with the South's race problem. For example, by the time Drexel began the process of acquiring Xavier University, she had been purchasing properties to build schools in minority communities for almost fifteen years. Xavier University was not the first time she had employed the method of using an inconspicuous third party to purchase the properties in White areas for Black schools. Xavier University was also not the first time that she received staunch opposition from Whites when her intentions for the property were made public. Duffy (1966) gave the details of one notable incident occurred in 1905 in Nashville, Tennessee, when the bishop of the diocese, Bishop Byrne, asked Drexel to purchase and staff a school for Blacks. Bishop Byrne had selected a potential property for the school and he informed Drexel that it was owned by a wealthy Southern banker "who was not particularly known either for an interest in, or love for the Negro. If his property were to be purchased, great caution would have to be used" (Duffy, 1966, p. 253). Although it was customary for Drexel to painstakingly inspect any property she purchased, especially if it was to be used for a school or convent, the potential for hostility in Nashville was so strong that she could only view the building from a closed carriage. The banker who owned the property thought he was negotiating the sale of his property with Nashville attorney, Thomas J. Tyne. But when the banker "executed and delivered the deed to Attorney Thomas Tyne," on the same day he "conveyed the property to the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament" (p. 256). The owner became incensed when he discovered his family birth home would be used for a school for young Black women (p. 256). The owner then began a series of appeals to Drexel and the Church to rescind the sale. In an attempt to calm this opposition, Drexel provided the following response to his appeal:

...I think there is some misapprehension on the part of you and your neighbors which I should like to remove. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who have purchased the property, are religious, of the same race as yourself. We will always endeavor in every way to be neighborly to any white neighbors in the vicinity: we have every reason to hope we may receive from our white neighbors the cordial courtesy for which the Southern people are so justly noted.

It is true we intend to open an industrial school and Academy for Colored girls, but the girls who will come there will be only day scholars. In coming to the academy and returning to their homes, I am confident they will be orderly and cause no annoyance.

I observed very carefully when in Nashville, that the property which we purchased, was within very few blocks of numerous houses occupied by Colored families, and therefore, even were the property to be the residence of Colored teachers, which it is not, I think no just exception could be taken to the locality selected. (Duffy, 1966, p. 257)

In the next section of the letter, Drexel made an interesting transition. It seemed as if she was attempting to make a connection with the owner as a person of privilege, but then decided to evoke the spiritual nature of her work:

I can fully realize, I think, how you feel about your old and revered home...I acknowledge I feel the same with regard to mine, and confess that some time ago, and confess that some time ago, when passing it in the trolley cars, when I saw a bill of sale on it, a whole crowd of fond recollections of father and mother and sisters, etc., came vividly to my imagination. Then I more than ever realized how all things temporal pass away, and that there is but one home, strictly speaking, that eternal home where we all hope to meet our own, and where there will be no separation any more. And so temporal things, after all, are only to be valued, inasmuch as they bring us, and many others—as many as possible—to the same eternal joys for which we were all created. (Duffy, 1966, p. 257)

Drexel's letter did not quiet the discontent, and if anything, further enraged the former owner. As Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament continued to prepare the school for opening, the owner and other Whites in Nashville engaged in a full campaign to prevent this from happening. The owner's final and failed attempt was to block the opening by petitioning to incorporate an old Reconstruction city plan to have a main city street run through the property and the home. As a last resort, the owner had the letter, which Drexel intended to be private, published in the local newspaper as a paid advertisement. According to Duffy, Drexel expressed her sentiment on the matter in a letter to Bishop Byrne:

I cannot tell you how I regret that any letter of mine on the subject should appear in print. The very best thing to do is to let the whole affair die out—at least in the press if it won't die out before the Mayor and the City Council. If the Apostles were sent as sheep in the midst of wolves, they were told, therefore, to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. To have this matter stirred up in the press is only to fan the flame. I have resolved not to answer another letter sent me by any of these parties, since they come out in the press. It seems but prudence to protect our cause by being very quiet, since there seems to be a

certain prejudice which I hope will blow over by quietly minding our preservation of the good we have taken without any aggressiveness ..." (Duffy, 1966, p. 259)

Although Duffy noted that the letter did not have any "rancor, no indignation, no desire to make her position clear to the public" (p. 259), Drexel's use of metaphor in regards to race, religion, and education are very intriguing as she conjures images of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the "inn" and having to go to the outskirts of Bethlehem for the birth Jesus Christ:

It is certainly encouraging to meet some opposition in *your* work and ours. It is so appropriate for a Convent of the Blessed Sacrament—Christ dwelling with us—and the School of the Immaculate Mother, to have people of the city have no room for our precious Charge. They say "There is another place on this city's outskirts" for our educational work. How truly was the cave of Bethlehem *the* great educator of the World! This was indeed the School of the Immaculate Mother.

May the Holy Family teach us how to look out for the interests of the Father according to the Pattern given. My God! How much light can be wasted when the darkness does not comprehend it..."³ (Duffy, 1966, p. 259)

In this passage, Drexel used biblical motifs and metaphors to make the case for continuing on with the plan to open the Immaculate Heart of Mary School at its current location. First, it is important to note that Drexel named her order *Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People* because her *Sisters* would receive the Blessed Sacrament, or Holy Communion, every day of the week and not just on Sunday or Holy Days of Obligation (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). This alludes to Drexel's struggle in her decision in whether to enter religious life as a contemplative nun in an order which focused on a quiet life of daily prayer versus a more active order with a missionary focus. In insisting that her order be sanctioned to receive Holy Communion daily while performing missionary work, Drexel pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be a devout spiritualist and worker for Christ. Therefore, when she wrote, "It is so appropriate for a Convent of the Blessed Sacrament—Christ dwelling with us—and the School of the Immaculate Mother, to have people of the city have no room for our precious Charge" (Duffy, 1966, p. 259), she literally argued that Christ is spiritually and physically residing within the persons of the *Sisters* of the Blessed working in Nashville. Hence in turning away the nuns and the girls of the Immaculate Heart of Mary School, the protestors are turning away Jesus Christ.

Second, she compared Joseph and Mary's shunning to the "cave of Bethlehem" to the protestor's call that the Immaculate Heart of Mary School be placed at the "city's outskirts." However near the end this passage she triumphantly proclaimed "How truly was the cave of Bethlehem *the* great educator of the World!" (Duffy, 1966, p. 259). Therefore, just as Jesus Christ was born in a dark cave and became the light of the world, so too can the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and these children be a light for the darkness of bigotry and racism. Drexel alluded to idea in her initial letter to the home owner when she wrote that her Sisters would "endeavor in every way to be neighborly to any white neighbors in the vicinity" and that the girls attending the school would be "will be orderly and cause no annoyance" (Duffy, 1966, p. 257). In referencing Christ's humble beginnings to become the "Pattern" for believers, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and the girls of the Immaculate of Mary School had the possibility to be a

pattern for schools and communities in the South when encountering bigotry and racial prejudice.

Finally, it should be noted that Drexel emphasized her direction of “*your*” at the beginning of the letter to Bishop Byrne when she wrote “It is certainly encouraging to meet some opposition in *your* work and ours” (Duffy, 1966, p. 259). I must re-emphasize that Drexel was functioning within a patriarchal hierarchy. So in spite of the fact that Bishop Byrne is reliant upon her financial assistance for the Immaculate Heart of Mary School, she must show deference to the Bishop while advocating for the location and very existence of the school. When considering the historical context of the Drexel’s letter to Bishop Byrne, it becomes possible to return to Drexel’s 1915 letter to Archbishop Blenk at the beginning of this section and deconstruct her statement that, “I know the devil sometimes can stir up an account of opposition, in order to frustrate a work for souls” (Drexel, M.K. to J.H. Blenk, May 16, 1915). This closely echoes the themes in her letter to Bishop Byrne and when taken out of the abstract good vs. evil context, it can be argued that she is making a direct reference to the similar opposition fueled by racism she received in Nashville, Tennessee. When viewed in this context, she is making such a passionate appeal to Blenk to investigate the petition because she had experienced this opposition before.

Again, aware of her position in a patriarchal Church and America, Drexel understood she would need assistance from all primary stakeholders to fight the Xavier University petition if necessary; hence her statement, “[I am] however, sending a little note to Mr. McEnery[sic] asking his opinion too” (Drexel, M.K. to J.H. Blenk, May 16, 1915). Harry McEnery, an elusive figure, was the ‘real’ purchaser of the Southern University buildings (Duffy, 1966; Lynch, 1998). By 1915, Drexel was a well-known financier of Black schools and her presence at the auction would have alerted Whites to her intentions to open a Black school at the site. According to Duffy (1966), Blenk introduced Drexel to several men he thought would be able to assist them in the sale. McEnery, the advertising manager of the *Picayune* and an Irish-American Catholic, agreed to make the sale (Duffy, 1966; Mount, 1896). Drexel’s opinion of McEnery was that he “influences the whole state, beginning with the Governor and the Archbishop” (Lynch, 1998, p. 204). It can be argued that Drexel included the reference to McEnery out of obedience to the archbishop, to inform him of her activities. But it can also be argued that this was a deliberate action to let the archbishop know that she was involving other parties, just in case he became lax in his “zeal for souls.” In his reply on June 10, 1915, Blenk informed Drexel that he had delayed his answer because he, “[W]anted to be quite certain of the attitude of the Commission Council towards this protest” (Blenk, J.H. to M.K. Drexel, June 10, 1915). He also acknowledged Drexel’s contact with McEnery, and he also informed Drexel that he was aware of “the substance of his reply to you” (Blenk, J.H. to M.K. Drexel, June 10, 1915). Blenk went on to inform Drexel that the protest lacked substance, and subsequently, the preparations to open Xavier University in the fall of that same year went on as scheduled.

Xavier University opened on September 27, 1915 under the management of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament with instruction at a level below full university status to ensure the instructional integrity of the university (Blatt, 1987). Although it began with instruction at the high school level, Drexel had always intended for Xavier to become a university, as evidenced by the school’s rapid advancement from instruction at the high school level to the ability to confer degrees in 1925. In June 1916, the first class of twenty-six graduated. In September 1917, a Normal Department was added to prepare students for the teaching profession. On June 18, 1918, Louisiana Governor R.G. Pleasant signed an Act of General Assembly empowering Xavier

University to confer degrees and grant diplomas. In 1925, the normal department expanded into Teacher's College, the College of Liberal Arts opened, and a Pre-Medical course was added to the curriculum and in 1927, the College of Pharmacy opened. Lynch (1998) offered that it was always Drexel's vision to work in collaboration with the communities she assisted and to educate their students for leadership in the Church and society (pp. 619-620). Future administrations of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament would fulfill this vision on April 4, 1968, (the day Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated), when they ceded control of Xavier University to lay leadership and appointed Norman Francis, a Black Catholic and graduate of Xavier University, as president (Alberts, 1994). Francis has been credited with shaping the policies that have allowed Xavier to have long term success in preparing its Black graduates for medical school and its graduate programs in science, specifically its School of Pharmacy. Francis has also been credited with leading the university to a resilient comeback in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and with his service to the university totaling forty-five years; he is currently the longest tenured college president in the United States (Mangan, 2013).

In 1935, Drexel began to suffer a series of heart attacks which forced her to retire permanently to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. In 1941, Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament celebrated their Jubilee—50 years of service in the Church and society. To celebrate this occasion, new and former students from the schools Drexel founded traveled to the Motherhouse for a program filled with performances celebrating their respective cultures. One of these groups was Xavier University's music department who performed a scene from the opera *Carmen* (Holt, 2002). On March 3, 1955, Drexel passed away "peacefully without struggle" (Holt, 2002, p. 107). Drexel was beatified by Pope John Paul II on November 20, 1988 and canonized a Saint in the Catholic Church on October 1, 2000 also by Pope John Paul II.

Conclusion: Modern Haunting and Ghostly Sightings

Drexel's privilege has often masked the complexities of the multiple discourses she had to negotiate while managing her multiple identities and confronting racism through the education of minority communities. Whereas her wealth provided influence over the Church hierarchy, she consciously used compliance and deference as tactful strategies to navigate the Church hierarchy. As foundress of her own religious order, Drexel provided marginalized communities opportunities for education and advancement in a changing America. But these opportunities took place within the context of a vexed and paternalistic Church hierarchy. Given the complicated racial politics in New Orleans at the time, it is crucial for us to recognize that while Drexel's wealth provided her with influence within the Church hierarchy, as a woman, she still had to negotiate its patriarchal tendencies.

In line with the principles of microhistory which encourage interrogation of the particular to comment on the general, I will now discuss the implications of the complexity of Drexel's narrative on the intersections of identity, religion, and place for education and more specifically, higher education. While some scholars (Fossey & Morris, 2010) have begun to interrogate Drexel's encounters with racism in the communities she worked in, traditional historical methods allow the discourses associated with Drexel's experience to remain untouched. In other words, Drexel's leadership in higher education and as educational activist has not been studied in *relation* to the more dominant narratives of her philanthropy and religious work. This in turn prevents an

exploration of Drexel's methods, strategies, and techniques for navigating the "isms" of society and the Catholic Church: racism, sexism, and paternalism. When Drexel is not even considered in conversations about university building or educational activism for social justice, it becomes difficult to question how, or if, Drexel's expectations for Xavier differed from the other "White architects of Black Education" –White males philanthropists who rigidly defined Black education as industrial and agricultural in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Watkins, 2001). I argue traditional historical methods have cloistered Drexel's narrative and have prevented a rich dialogue with implications for discovering how religion, race, gender, region, and class can intersect to create nuanced understandings of educational activism. Her focus on "higher education" in which Blacks were to be active agents in their own education suggests that Drexel's expectations pushed the boundaries of traditional historiography of higher education. This work is critical because as the futures of Louisiana's institutions of higher education remain uncertain, it is important that policy makers and educators be haunted by Louisiana's rich educational history. We should welcome the presence of the ghosts of those who persevered through social, racial, and economic unrest.

Notes

1 The Franco-Afro-Creole-Catholic community in New Orleans was born from free people of color and enslaved Africans who adopted and appropriated the French language and Catholic religion and were guided by the French and Haitian revolutionary cry for "justice, equality, and fraternity." For more information see Donna Porche-Frilot and Petra Munro Hendry, "Whatever Diversity of Shade May Appear": Catholic Women Religious Educators in Louisiana, 1727-1862" *Catholic Southwest* 27 (2010) and Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cosse Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 1850-1900," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

2 For more information on Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament's encounters with racist terrorism, see Richard Fossey and Stephanie Morris, "Courage Under Fire: St. Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Confront the Ku Klux Klan," *Catholic Southwest* 27 (2010).

3 Drexel's approach would prove fruitful. The Immaculate Mother Academy and Industrial School with instruction for "from the fourth through the third year high school" and at the end of the first year due an increase in attendance, a new building had to be added.

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