

Session 3: Relation to our Roots

by Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Th.D.

When considering our moment in the struggle for racial justice, its essential to understand the structures of racism that have been established in U.S. history. SLIDE With a structural lens, we recognize that racism is not only an interpersonal reality but it is a legislated and systemic reality. In US history, an ideology of racial and religious supremacy formed the foundation for legislation that dispossessed indigenous peoples of the land, created legislation that allowed the enslavement of African people and women, men and children of African descent, denied citizenship to people from Asia, and allowed Christians to keep fellow-Christians from accessing the systems of human well-being in homeownership, education and wealth-building. In each era of US history, an ideology of White Christian supremacy created legislation that directed benefits to persons categorized in the racial project as “White” and withheld benefits from those had be categorized otherwise: people of color and persons of other faiths. SLIDE If we want to understand our current moment’s racial project as reflected in the racial wealth gap, knowing this history is essential.

SLIDE But to learn from history, we also want to extract like that Sankofa bird the seeds that we can use for our future – and the resistance to the dominant racial project that runs throughout this same history, SLIDE as Black, Indigenous, People of Color mobilized and created counter realities to the dominating US narrative and legislative project. Indigenous nations negotiated, navigated and resisted the encroachment at every era of US history. Enslaved peoples made a way out of no way, rooted not only in Christian scriptural interpretation but in the depths of their African and Islamic traditions

as well. Free people of color navigated systems, shared resources and strengthened solidarities to create lasting change. Asian Americans brought their cases to court in the era of exclusion; Latinx Americans created solidarities with Filipino Americans in the UFW; and Christian and Jewish, Black and White, marched for freedom and civil rights.

The US history in which our individual lives, our congregational lives and our institutional lives is embedded *is* a history of racial injustice, but it is also a US history of *struggle* for racial justice.

Following the histories of the congregations geographically have helped lay to backdrop of this shared US history. SLIDE In this session, we'll allow the two foundresses to open up further questions about positionality *within* racial projects, returning to the foundresses – Mother Mary Lange and Theresa Maxis -- think with their stories about *our* story of navigating racial projects.

We've started with the recognition of both of the foundresses in Baltimore, situated in that era's project as "Free Women of Color". And the wider scene of our institutional histories – as a nation and as a church – have helped us to trace some of the complexity of what that designation meant in that day's racial project.

But, the wider scene of their personal stories will give us even more texture to wrestle with as we think about what this history has to offer us today as a resource for thinking about our present.

Mother Mary Lange: Racial Project (page 4-6)

We might begin to think about what it meant for Mother Mary Lange to be a free woman of color. SLIDE She was situated in a US economy of enslavement in a

precarious position; but as free, as a “woman of some means”¹ and as a member of the Church she had access to various locations of power. Her history indicates that her parents were among the “refugees who fled to Cuba from the revolution taking place in their native Saint Domingue (present day Haiti).”² In the early 1800s her family left Cuba, and relocated in Baltimore, Maryland “where great influxes of French-speaking Catholic refugees from the Haitian Revolution were settling.”³

SLIDE These broad strokes of her history situates her life story in the trajectory of Catholicism that predates the arrival of the Jesuits and John Carroll in Baltimore, SLIDE in an earlier Church history and the arrival of Christendom with Columbus in the Caribbean in the 15th century. More particularly, these broad strokes of Mary Lange’s history also situate her family story in a volatile age of the late 18th century’s revolutions. SLIDE OF REVOLUTIONS.^{4 5}

SLIDE When the histories name the population of French-speaking Catholics in Baltimore as ‘refugees’ from Haiti, we might miss some of the complexity when we forget (or do not know) that the Haitian revolution was a unique episode in the global racial project as those who led the revolution were *enslaved* Haitians. SLIDE So when Lange’s family fled to Cuba, they were not among those who enlisted to help found a nation free of enslavement, they were fleeing from that singular nation of world history

¹ <https://www.motherlange.org/mother-lange>

² <https://blackandindianmission.org/servant-god-mother-mary-lange-osp>;
<https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/lange.html>

³ <https://www.motherlange.org/mother-lange>

⁴ <https://catholicreview.org/research-uncovers-new-information-about-mother-mary-lange/>

⁵ <https://www.motherlange.org/mother-lange>. “Because she was well educated we believe that she came from a family of some means and social standing. In the early 1800’s young Elizabeth left Cuba to seek peace and security in the United States. Providence directed her to Baltimore, Maryland where great influxes of French-speaking Catholic refugees from the Haitian Revolution were settling.”

that was embarking on an amazing human project of self-determination led by the formerly enslaved. Lange's family found refuge in Cuba where slavery still structured economies and interests. Emigrating to Baltimore, her family was among the many French-speaking Catholics of means who could begin a new life.⁶

When she establishes a school in her home for the education of Haitian immigrants her status as a Free Woman of Color, a woman from a family of some means, we have a complex racial project in view. When Lange could call on the resources of the institution of the Catholic Church to further her project, we have another layer of that complex racial project. Dwelling on her history as illuminative of the complexity of racial projects we might ask:

What does the home-school in Baltimore reflect about Mother Mary Lange in her era's racial project?

Where did she hold power?

Where was she denied power?

Who did she enlist to access power?

What were her strategies for doing God's work in the world?

What Mother Mary Lange chose to do with her resources, her creativity, ingenuity, compassion and connections is a crucial question in considering how *we* navigate the racial projects in which we are embedded.⁷ What commitments did she make to the African American population in Baltimore that would lead to change in that era's racial project? How does her legacy sustain the work of the Oblate Sisters of Providence across the many long years of America's racial project from her day to today?

⁶ Many other Catholics who fled the Haitian revolution brought with them strong feelings about the necessity of order and resistance to revolution among the enslaved

⁷ <https://www.archbalt.org/part-one-a-portrait-of-baltimores-black-catholic-history/>

Mother Mary Lange helps us to think complexly about the racial projects in which we are embedded – to recognize the histories of our own benefits and deficits, our privileges and connections, and to ask ourselves also – how are we leveraging our locations in our era’s racial project for the well-being of the world? The opening question we’ve been guided by in our discussions is the question *How do we live faithfully the Value of Respect for All People?* Mother Mary Lange becomes a witness to how one might leverage resources, connections and institutional affiliations to the concrete respect for all people in education, in the Church, in healthcare and more.

Mother Mary Lange does not just serve as a fascinating figure of the past. She lives among us in the communion of saints and in the cause for her canonization gives us new opportunities to think with her life about our own racial project. Racial projects function both invisibly within structures and visibly in the stories that we tell, which invites us to consider how her cause for canonization might be part of our eras racial project. How might disseminating her story more widely contribute to the way that our era considers the ingenuity, creativity and persistence of those who struggle for the well-being of persons through systems of education and healthcare? How does she invite a renewed commitment to changing healthcare systems and systems of education so that we no longer experience the racial gap in the application of these services? How does she provide a point of leverage for a multi-racial Catholic Church to recognize the need to dedicate its resources for the full-flourishing of people of color?

SLIDE “Our sole wish is to do the will of God.”⁸ Like the laments of Babylonian captivity captured in the Hebrew Bible, we might dwell deeply with the question: how

⁸ Mother Mary Lange, <http://oblatesisters.com/our-history>

do we do the will of God in the depths of a history whose racial project has been so contrary to the will of God? PAUSE

Mary and Theresa: Intersectionality (7-8)

We carry Mother Mary Lange / Mary Elizabeth Lange with us as we think for a moment about her partnership with Theresa Maxis. With the entrance of Theresa, we might once again ask what it meant for *her* to be a Free Woman of Color. SLIDE

Theresa's story too has roots in the revolution of enslaved people in Haiti, as Theresa's mother worked in the home of the Duchemins – a White family who had fled the uprisings in St. Domingo in 1793. Her histories describe her mother as a “biracial San Domingan (Haitian)”⁹ and her location of service within the Duchemin family indicates her dependent condition. Theresa's father was an English visitor to the Duchemin household, which historians posit may be further evidence of Theresa's mother's un-free condition. “Bright-skinned and blue-eyed [Theresa] was the illegitimate child of a white British father and a biracial San Domingan (Haitian) mother.”¹⁰ The way the history is told suggests that while she too was a Free Woman of Color, she was less ‘free’ than others given her dependent status on the Duchemin family: “Born of unwed parents and of mixed racial lineage into a society that held both conditions in contempt, she nevertheless received a rearing and education far superior to most women of her time, attributed to the kindness of her adoptive family, the Duchemins. Through them she was immersed in the French language, culture and heritage. These resources were pivotal in

⁹ “Dangerous Memory”, 34.

¹⁰ “Dangerous Memory” 34.

the development of her life and provided her with the key to open doors otherwise closed to her.”¹¹

When historians name Theresa as, “bright-skinned and blue-eyed” they indicate the symbolic capital of Whiteness: what she lacked in material resources perhaps she made up in the symbolic capital of Whiteness.

In the era of their companionship in Baltimore, Theresa Maxis and Mother Mary Lange give us so much to wrestle with in walking our way around that era’s racial project.¹² What did it mean for each of them to be Free Women of Color in their commitment to the African-American population in Baltimore? What did it mean for each of them to do this work navigating the systems that prioritized White well-being? Did Theresa’s Whiteness provide her opportunities to leverage the resources of a White Catholic Church or a White social system in a particular way? What might the conversation from heaven sound like if they illuminated for us what life is like under the conditions of a US racial project as very particular “Free Women of Color”? The ‘intersectionality’ in their location as very different “free women of color” help us to see the specificity of a racial project as it is experienced by individuals with the differentials not only of racial categorization, but colorism, religious affiliation, gender, class, educational status and more. The specificity of their stories complexifies our understanding of ‘racial projects’ and how persons navigate them, then and now. Can we discern patterns in the lives of Theresa and Mary in mobilizing institutions – like the Church – that was built within a racial project that served the interests of those

¹¹ <http://www.sistersofihm.org/who-we-are/ihm-history/>

¹² Shannen Dee Williams on Mary Anthony Duchemin
<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/23/what-forgotten-black-nun-can-teach-us-about-racism-and-covid-19>

categorized as “White” – but leveraging the resources of some institutions to fill gaps in the workings of the system as designed? Simultaneously, working to re-work the systems themselves?

Allowing their navigation of institutions in America’s racial project we might pause to ask:

What does the foundation of the Oblate Systems of Providence reflect about Mother Mary Lange and Theresa Maxis in the racial project of Baltimore in the 1830s?

What does this chapter of history reflect about the role of the Church in America’s racial project?

What does this chapter of history reflect about the role of education system in America’s racial project?

What do you think about this era’s partnership of shared history and the intersectional differences and solidarities that might be formed?

Theresa Maxis: Colorism and Accessing Resources (9-11)

In the next chapter that follows the extension of mission from Baltimore with Theresa Maxis, we are served in our analysis by recognizing the multiple ways this story can be told. As the Oblates describe on their website: “There was a sense of abandonment at the dwindling number of pupils and defections of her closest companions and co-workers. Yet through it all Mother Lange never lost faith in Providence.”¹³

“Adding to the order's troubles, one of the original founding members, Mother Theresa Duchemin, left the order. She traveled to Michigan where she helped found the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM), an order that would grow to become

¹³ <https://oblatesisters.com/founders>

one of the largest started in the United States. These were years that required the determination, faith and perseverance for the Oblate Sisters of Providence.”¹⁴

And from the IHM webistes:

Historical resources can situate this move in the era’s racial project with the conceptual naming of **colorism** (or anti-Blackness) that provided Theresa with opportunities that other Oblates were not afforded. In an 1859 letter from Bishop Lefevre (Detroit) to Bishop James Wood (Philadelphia), Lefevre describes the selection of those Oblates who would extend the mission: QUOTE “as they were much whiter than any other of the Sisters, Fr. Gillet thought he could avail himself of their services to commence a Convent in Monroe.”¹⁵

SLIDE In our broader history, we’ve already heard about Lefevre’s mission to indigenous peoples SLIDE (which carries with it its own weight of complicity in the devastation of indigenous cultures and religious practices), but the establishment in Monroe doesn’t seem to have had that mission, rather the Church was attending to White settlers with French Canadians among them. SLIDE

This historic map from 1866 helps us to envision what the Monroe Journal of 1845 describes of the educational institution where the Sisters would work: “This Institution...is situated in the most beautiful and healthy part of the city, opposite the Catholic Church.” “the diet is good, wholesome and abundant; spacious grounds afford

¹⁴ <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

¹⁵ Bishop Lefevre to Bishop Wood, <http://www.sistersofihm.org/what-we-do/publications-library/book-excerpts/detail-paths.html?id=287c7221-114a-4b74-906f-63b18bfe7cc0&pageTitle=IHM%20Book%20Excerpts:%20Theresa%20in%20Monroe:%20Crisis%20of%20Separation>

the pupils the facility of pleasant walks and bodily exercises” A materialist history requires that we ask where do the resources come from to establish this kind of an institution, which we see even more clearly when we narrate the parallel missions from the same era:

In this same era, back in Baltimore the Oblates struggled: “By 1846 there were only eight students in the school who paid tuition. The order asked permission from the Bishop to beg on the streets in order to help support the convent.”¹⁶

Historians recount a different kind of begging trip that Fr. Gillet was undertaking to raise funds for the school in Monroe: “A Mission given by Father Gillet in New Orleans during the Lent of 1847, proved providential, supplying the nucleus of the building fund (\$525.00 and thirteen large boxes of furniture): this was shortly afterwards increased very materially by the settlement of Sister M. Alphonsine’s estate (the Godfroy-Smyth estate.)”¹⁷ Historians would need to explore more fully the source of resources of the Godfroy-Smyth estate, but we know that New Orleans in 1847 is rooted firmly, deeply and expansively in an economy of enslavement. What difference does this historian’s reconstruction make in our thinking about how institutions are embedded in the racial projects of their era?

But, historians can also tell us that Michigan was a crucial location for a network that leveraged resources for the aid of formerly enslaved persons through the underground railroad. Would archival investigation yield an awareness of these efforts

¹⁶ <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

¹⁷ "A SKETCH OF THE WORK AND HISTORY OF THE SISTERS. SERVANTS OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY 1845-1920." Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia 31, no. 4 (1920): 276-338. Accessed May 20, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44254223>, page 286. Teresa Renauld (Celestine), Mary Teresa Maxis – from Baltimore, Charlotte Schaaf – from Baltimore, M. Godfroy Smith – Brother of the Mayor of Monroe (M. Alphonsine)

on the part of the Monroe congregation? Would the Monroe congregation be inspired or threatened by the solidaristic practice of the people of Marshall Michigan who protected the Crosswhite family from the men from Kentucky who came to return the Crosswhites under the legal guarantee of the fugitive slave law?

The gaps in our histories open new vistas for considering agents in each era's racial project. When Theresa spent time with the Grey Nuns of Ottawa (1867-1885) was the Catholic network there involved in the Canadian government's response to indigenous peoples in legislation and education?¹⁸¹⁹ ²⁰ ²¹

Our embeddedness in economies of enslavement and systems of White privilege ask us to dwell prayerfully in the complexity of hearing a God who calls us in history. What does it look like for us to recognize *both* the work of God's providence *and* our complicity in systems beyond us. How do we pursue the practices of our congregations "Prayerfulness, simplicity, forgetfulness of self, humility, and a deep love and respect for each individual soul."²² Embedded in broader systems. How do we also expand from beyond the foundresses to recognize the many and diverse agents who contributed to the

¹⁸ 1876 Canada passed the *Indian Act*. From Theresa's letters in exile: "Sr. Mary is in the same city, but not in the same Convent with me. She is in the boarding school and I am at the Motherhouse we often see one another." "The Superior of the Boarding School has the name of Theresa of Jesus, so it happened that letter to my address has been found in the box at her convent..." (<http://www.sistersofihm.org/what-we-do/publications-library/book-excerpts/detail-paths.html?id=e4cf0b47-9147-4e08-96f5-85eaedb1580d&pageTitle=IHM%20Book%20Excerpts:%20Theresa%27s%20Sojourn%20in%20Ottawa>). Grey Nuns ran *St. Anne's residential school 1902-1976*

¹⁹ <http://www.sistersofihm.org/what-we-do/publications-library/book-excerpts/detail-paths.html?id=e4cf0b47-9147-4e08-96f5-85eaedb1580d&pageTitle=IHM%20Book%20Excerpts:%20Theresa%27s%20Sojourn%20in%20Ottawa>

²⁰ Lesley Erickson, "At the cultural and religious crossroads: Sara Riel and the Grey Nuns in the Canadian Northwest" (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Calgary (1997). <file:///Users/jeanninehillfletcher/Downloads/24582Erickson.pdf>

²¹ Erikson, 49. "In 1851, Bishop Mazenod, superior and founder of the Oblate order, enjoined members of his congregation to establish educational facilities at all principle missions. The schools would provide Native children with the fundamentals of Christianity. Teachers would also prepare their students to live a sedentary and 'civilized' lifestyle." "The Grey Nuns...taught in Catholic residential and industrial schools throughout the West."

²² <https://ihmimmaculata.org/about-us/our-foundation/>

building of our institutions. What negotiations within the systems enabled the growth of the mission in Monroe, even in the absence of Theresa. Back in Baltimore, how did Mary and the other Oblates mobilize the relationships and resources that would help them maintain their mission as well: What does it mean when our histories describe: “The Redemptorists and especially Fr. Anwander had been their friends and helpers for thirteen years, helping bring them from the brink of extinction to a degree of financial security.”²³

With just this brief revisiting of the early eras of the congregations, we see many things about “racial projects” in the United States. They are social/interpersonal, material and economic. They entail categorization and access with benefits withheld or granted. They are undertaken by actors within institutions and situated in larger systems. The complexity of the ways our ancestors might have navigated their era’s racial projects in pursuit of opportunities to do their work of mission invites further consideration and questions about their day and our own.

Other eras:

Just as thinking with the specificity of Mary and Theresa’s stories invite us into the contours and textures of specific racial projects and individuals’ navigations through them, we might imaginatively consider what accommodations and resistance, what ways in which our ancestors were caught in the racial projects of their day and how they navigated/responded/resisted them. How does each era’s racial project impact our ancestors’ ability to live faithfully the value of respect for all persons?

What was the Racial Project of Philadelphia:

²³ <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

IHMs “Mother Theresa accepted Bishop John Neumann’s invitation to serve in the Diocese of Philadelphia.”²⁴

OSP’s opened a mission in Philadelphia in 1863²⁵

What was the Racial Project in New Orleans

When OSPs opened a mission in 1867²⁶

(1868 Mother Theresa denied the opportunity to establish a mission in New Orleans²⁷

*What do we do with the relationship with the Jesuits and the OSPs?*²⁸

Caught in Systems

What broader systems were at play, and how did your ancestors navigate them when in 1871, the Oblate sisters, vacated the motherhouse on Richmond St. because the city needed the property.²⁹ *What does it mean that the “city needed the property?” How does this fit in the 1871 racial project?*

“In 1871 a new foundation was established in the newly formed diocese of Scranton.”³⁰ Ministering to “farmers, miners, immigrants, orphans, the sick and homeless, women and children.”³¹

When in 1920s Immaculata was able to establish its college: what systems and structures were in place to support that?

US interests in Latin America

What were the broader systems and political structures in place that allowed/disallowed the OSPs to pursue their missions in Cuba?³²

And the IHMs to pursue their missions in Haiti?

Redlining and the Racial Project of Segregation

²⁴ Scranton website: <http://www.sistersofihm.org/who-we-are/ihm-history/>

²⁵ <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

²⁶ <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

²⁷ <http://www.sistersofihm.org/who-we-are/ihm-history/theresa-maxis.html>

²⁸ “Under the directorship of the Jesuits the OSPs for the first time began missions outside of Baltimore. They opened a mission in Philadelphia in 1863 and one in New Orleans in 1867. The order remained under the directorship of the Jesuits until 1871 when priests from the Josephite Fathers and Brothers became their directors.” <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

²⁹ <https://oblatesisters.com/history>

³⁰ <http://www.sistersofihm.org/who-we-are/ihm-history/>

³¹ <http://www.sistersofihm.org/who-we-are/ihm-history/>

³² <https://oblatesisters.com/history>: The OSPs established seven missions in Cuba, but left in 1961 when the regime of Fidel Castro made it impossible for them to continue their work.

What was the impact of the system of redlining on each of our congregations?

What role did our Catholic constituents play in America's racial project of segregation/integration of neighborhoods, parishes and schools?

Post-1965 patterns of immigration

Revisiting and meditating on the interactive infographic of immigration, who was served by our institutions in the past and who is served by them today?

As a place to wrap up this sessions investigation, we might ask where do *we* continue to feel the impact of history in our present?

Our segregated inheritance

The project of the racial dot map shows visibly our inheritance as a multi-racial nation that remains segregated – and you might access that map with a quick google of ‘racial dot map’. A structural history helps us to understand how this segregation was legislated and how the resources dedicated to the various communities have also been racialized. We come to see that our locations of separation are not arbitrary but the racial projects of our nation have separated us from one another. Our divisions have been legislated, and the disparity in our society the result not of individual failures or successes but structural factors. Our investigations have encouraged us to hold together two distinct perspectives on racism in our history: personally mediated **READ FROM SLIDE** and institutionalized **READ FROM SLIDE**.

Institutionalized racism helps us to see also the decisions made by our ancestors in navigating the systems of our racial project. And our investigation of the decisions made by our ancestors in relation to the racial projects of their day gives us the opportunity to be self-reflective about our positions in the racial projects of our day.

Where are we situated in relation to the differential inheritance from out of this history?

Where are we situated in relation to power within our era's racial project?

What choices will we make in the next chapter of our national, congregational and institutional histories?

What are the resources and relationships you can leverage to contribute to our moment's racial project?

In considering our vision for the future we might look around and ask, what can we do together that we can't do alone?