

TOPIC AREAS

ANTHROPOLOGY

- Topic: “Saintly Stories and Black Embodied Being: A Roundtable Discussion of the Work of M. Shawn Copeland”
- Convener: Michele Saracino, Manhattan College
- Moderator: Karen Teel, University of San Diego
- Presenter: Susan Abraham, Harvard Divinity School
Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Mary Catherine Hilkert, University of Notre Dame
M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College

In this panel discussion, there were three thought-provoking presentations on M. Shawn Copeland’s contribution to the field of theological anthropology, particularly in regard to her following works, *The Subversive Power of Love: The Vision of Henriette Delille* and *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Susan Abraham opened with her paper, “Sacred Bodies, Holy People: Race in Shawn Copeland’s Theological Anthropology,” which was followed by Nancy Pineda-Madrid’s, “‘Turning the Subject,’ Black Women’s Bodies, and the Unsettling Contribution of M. Shawn Copeland.” Mary Catherine Hilkert presented last, with “Henriette Delille as Anthropological Subject: A Dialogue with M. Shawn Copeland.” Delille is a significant figure not only in Copeland’s work on race, body, and being, but also in keeping with the CTSA 2011 convention theme, “All the Saints,” as Delille, the foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans, a nineteenth century apostolic religious congregation of black women, was a free woman of color who was made venerable in 2010.

Abraham began by examining the manner in which “race” as a category incites and provokes Copeland’s anthropological questions for theology. Abraham was sure to point out however that in Copeland’s analysis in *The Subversive Power of Love* and *Enfleshing Freedom*, race in its dehumanizing and degrading reality is not the occasion for theological reflection, in that Copeland presents Delille as a woman at once subversive and sanctifying even as one whom is entangled with a slave-holding society. In being attentive to such nuance, Abraham distinguished between reflexivity and reflectivity in feminist standpoint theory, and introduced Judith Butler’s work as a resonant yet incomplete attempt to engage the implication of ethical subjects in ambivalent contexts such as a slave-holding culture. For Abraham, Copeland demonstrated an incarnation of hope in Delille and black, racialized bodies in a more constructive frame than tentative secular feminist academic proposals.

Pineda-Madrid began with the provocative claim that Copeland's work invites us to life on a fault line because it is unsettling to our theological geography. Focusing on *Enfleshing Freedom*, Pineda-Madrid emphasized Copeland's insight that "the Enlightenment era's 'turn to the subject' coincided with the dynamics of domination," giving rise to oppression, exploitation, colonization, and enslavement people of color throughout the world. She applied Copeland's analysis to the dark-mutilated female bodies at the U.S.-Mexican border. Copeland's affirmation of the new anthropological subject in terms of the black woman's body enabled Pineda-Madrid to cultivate new avenues toward solidarity and justice and question how Christians might begin to speak out against violence toward other bodies, not just idealized European bodies. Pineda-Madrid further elaborated on what this violence does to Christ's memory and Christian community, especially when the brown embodied women of Ciudad Juárez are considered disposable and murdered in femicide because of the Enlightenment mentality which privileges a certain type of subject.

Hilkert's presentation wove together both Copeland's *Enfleshing Freedom* and *The Subversive Power of Love*, powerfully claiming that "rather than dichotomizing holiness and bodiliness, Copeland insists that DeLille's choice of consecrated chastity is precisely one way of embodying an even deeper passion for God." For Hilkert, this is the crux of Copeland's theological project, an embrace of the despised bodies of history as a place of grace. Such an image along with Copeland's Eucharistic vision caused Hilkert to ask, "In an era when the religion often functions to the exclusion of 'the other' how does this vision avoid excluding (or an imperialist inclusion of) those who do not share Christian faith? Is this an intra-ecclesial anthropology or is it also viable in inter-religious dialogue and in the public arena?" These questions among others from Hilkert were addressed in Copeland's response.

After graciously thanking all of the presenters, Copeland lauded Delille's courage to follow a new path in the face of exploitative system of plaçage, where black women's bodies were understood as commodities. Copeland reiterated a claim she makes in *The Subversive Power of Love*, that Delille "reconceptualized and redefined black women as capable of chastity, as chaste." In her response to the panel, Copeland engaged Abraham's work on Butler; confirmed Pineda-Madrid's claim that some of the shocking accounts of suffering she weaves through *Enfleshing Freedom* are certainly "unsettling"; and agreed with Hilkert that Delille "expands our imagination of what it means to exercise sexuality as a form of holiness by including celibate persons as among those who enflesh not only a Christian, but precisely a *sexual and bodily* Christian." Following Copeland's response, there was a rich discussion of the panel among an audience comprised of roughly seventy members of the society.

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