

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – CONSULTATION

Convener: Rev. Emmanuel Osigwe, St. John Vianney Seminary
Moderator: Chanelle Robinson, Boston College
Presenters: Kayla August, Boston College
John Barnes, Fordham University

In her presentation, “Preaching as a Path to Freedom: Narrative Homiletics as a Tool of Healing the Black Community and Reclaiming Our Story,” Kayla August argued that preaching is one of the vehicles by which the African-American community breaks out from the grips of dehumanizing narratives and traumatic experiences in order to bear witness to new possibilities for employing freedom. Drawing parallels between narrative therapy and narrative preaching, August, building on the work of Timone Davis, Maurice Nutt, and others, argues not only that storytelling can be a key ingredient in confronting the false narratives that internalize oppression among Black persons, but also that storytelling can assist in reauthoring those false narratives and remembering other narratives that allow for new possible futures. Such a narrative style opens space for the power of God to move through the preacher in the act of “*kairos* preaching,” preaching that addresses the needs of a specific people at just the right time via a conversation between God, the preacher, the gathered community. Embodying the spirit of the *griot*, the oral storyteller in some African communities, the preacher draws on the historical wisdom of the Black community in order to urge the community forward. The result is the unleashing of a creative freedom—not only for the purpose of finding new ways for dismantling the forces associated with white supremacy but also for effecting the healing necessary because of the various lacerations that white supremacy inflicts. Ms. August’s presentation was not only *about* preaching, it also was self-consciously given in a preaching style, drawing together form and content in an impactful way.

John Barnes gave the second presentation, “The Sound of Sweet Repose: The Black Musical Tradition as a Theological Response to Black Violence and Death.” Also responding to the presence of trauma in the Black community, Barnes builds principally on the work of James Cone and upon the observations of luminaries like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B Du Bois, and Sr. Thea Bowman, in order to argue that, in the midst of Black suffering, the Black music tradition mediates the divine promise of freedom present eschatologically as both already and not yet realized. Such was the function of the various freedom songs sung by enslaved Africans, especially in the form of the spirituals. Barnes stressed that this freedom was not fundamentally contradictory like the freedom proclaimed in the American national anthem—the land of the free, yet the land cultivated by the labor of the enslaved—but is instead a freedom that aspires for the full realization of Black humanity. Quoting M. Shawn Copeland, Barnes recognizes this freedom as freedom for healing, for growth, and for self-love. Importantly, this spirit is not simply confined to the songs of the enslaved Africans. Alongside the descendants of the enslaved, this spirit of/for freedom lives on in subsequent Black musical expressions, like the blues, R&B, and jazz, as tangible expressions of Black freedom in the land that their enslaved African ancestors helped to build.

This year's consultation was well-attended, with an approximate total attendance of thirty-two people. The conversation that ensued also greatly deepened our engagement with the presentations.

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