

CARTHAGINENSIA

Revista de Estudios e Investigación
Instituto Teológico de Murcia O.F.M.
ISSN: 0213-4381 e-ISSN: 2605-3012

Volumen XXXIX
Enero-Junio 2023
Número 75

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CARTHAGINENSIA fue fundada en 1985 como órgano de expresión cultural y científica del Instituto Teológico de Murcia O.F.M., Centro Agregado a la Facultad de Teología de la Universidad Pontificia Antonianum (Roma). El contenido de la Revista abarca las diversas áreas de conocimiento que se imparten en este Centro: Teología, Filosofía, Historia eclesiástica y franciscana de España y América, Franciscanismo, humanismo y pensamiento cristiano, y cuestiones actuales en el campo del ecumenismo, ética, moral, derecho, antropología, etc.

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Any manuscripts and papers intended for publication in the magazine should be addressed to the Editor at the following address: Cl. Dr. Fleming, 1. E-30003 MURCIA. Single or back issues: 20 € or \$ 30. Single article in PDF 3 € or \$ 5.

Antiguos directores

Fr. Francisco Víctor Sánchez Gil (+2019) 1985-1989. Fr. Francisco Martínez Fresneda, 1990-2016.

D.L.: MU-17/1986

Impresión: Compobell, S.L.

**REDEEMING THE HORRORS OF RACIAL SUFFERING:
THE POLITICAL CHRISTOLOGY OF M. SHAWN COPELAND**

REDIMIENDO LOS HORRORES DEL SUFRIMIENTO RACIAL:
LA CRISTOLOGÍA POLÍTICA DE M. SHAWN COPELAND

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Recibido 28 de enero de 2022 / Aceptado 22 de febrero de 2022

Abstract: Marilyn McCord Adams argues that the coherence of Christology in the 21st century requires that Christological works address “the horrors,” the horrendous evils that defy coherence and leave us with deep sentiments of disgust and revulsion. It is not enough to provide justifications to excuse God or rationalize God’s intentions. Christology must show how Christ defeats the horrors. This article explores the political Christology of African-American womanist theologian, M. Shawn Copeland for evidence of how Christ redeems us from the horrors of racial suffering. The article provides a pedagogy for horror recognition.

Keywords: Christology; Embodiment; Horrendous evils; Pedagogy; Racism.

Resumen: Marilyn McCord Adams argumenta que la coherencia de la cristología en el siglo XXI requiere que las obras cristológicas aborden “los horrores”, los horrendos males que desafían la coherencia y nos dejan con profundos sentimientos de disgusto y repulsión. No es suficiente proporcionar justificaciones para excusar a Dios o racionalizar las intenciones de Dios. La cristología debe mostrar cómo Cristo vence los horrores. Este artículo explora la cristología política de la teóloga mujer afroamericana M. Shawn Copeland en busca de evidencia de cómo Cristo nos redime de los horrores del sufrimiento racial. El artículo proporciona una pedagogía para el reconocimiento del horror.

Palabras clave: Cristología; Encarnación; Males horrores; Pedagogía; Racismo.

Introduction

In one of her last books, the late American philosopher and Episcopal priest Marilyn McCord Adams argues that the coherence of Christology in the 21st century lies in its ability to address the redemption of horrendous evils.¹ It is not enough that we be saved from wrong-doing or moral trespasses (like lying, greed, stealing). These are the evils that have a mixture of good and evil intentions, reasoned and unreasonable justifications, miserable or just barely understandable motivations. While these mixtures are usually the substance of most moral analysis, Adams instead focuses on a special experience of evil, one that defies the logic of order, congruity, or meaning. This evil is so devoid of coherence that in the “grammar of evil,” as Rowan Williams discusses it,² they are considered ‘horrendous evils,’ the paradigm horrors of modern life, and they leave us with the most profound human experiences of disgust and revulsion.

In her book, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Adams defines horrendous evils as “evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) have positive meaning for him or her on the whole.”³ Adams cites examples of what she means by horrendous evils or “paradigm horrors.” They are “the rape of a woman and the axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, schizophrenia, or severe clinical depression, cannibalizing one’s own offspring, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, parental incest, participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent in the disfigurement or death of those one loves best.”⁴

¹ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in Robert R. Dodaro and George Lawless, *Augustine and His Critics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 18.

³ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), 26; see also, *Christ and Horrors*, 32 Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Rowan Williams, “Insubstantial Evil,” in Robert R. Dodaro and George Lawless, *Augustine and His Critics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 18.

Marilyn McCord.

⁴ *Christ and Horrors*, 33.

Adams suggests that horrendous evils are those that seek not simply to injure another human being but, more reprehensibly, to *dehumanize* victims, as in the case of Nazi death camps “by treating them as worse than cattle to break down their personalities and to reduce their social instincts to raw animal aggression and self-preservation.”⁵

What makes horrors so malicious is that they strike humans at our greatest strength as “thinking, conscious beings with a great capacity for interpretation of events.”⁶ Adams argues that what makes these horrors so egregious is not that they emerge from a depraved mind or are forms of extreme malice (though they do and are). They are horrendous because of the profound devaluation and deprivation that they inflict on those who suffer them. “What makes evils horrendous is their power to *degrade* by being *prima facie* ruinous of personal meaning.”⁷ These are acts, therefore, that are meant to *degrade*, *deprive*, and *divest* individuals and groups of purpose and the power of their own meaning-making. They are acts intended to devalue an individual or group at their most basic level of identity. Horrors erode meaning at the core of our most basic identifications: as children, as wives and husbands, as citizens, and as children of God. As Tallon reminds us:

Using the examples given by Adams, we can see how incest would cut away at our identification with family; how rape and mutilation would cut away at a woman’s sense of femininity; how deep betrayal would cut away at our connection to all human relationships; and how the explosion of nuclear devices would cut away at our connection to the entire human race.⁸

Humans seek meaning and order. They search for coherence and congruity in order to see their lives as meaningful and purposeful. Horrendous evils are trespasses against human self-understanding of such magnitude and range that they seek to obliterate the very capacity to make meaning, establish identity, and secure one’s relatability in the world. Without these clear experiences of meaningfulness, an individual is left to severe

⁵ *Christ and Horrors*, 33.

⁶ Philip Tallon, “The Poetics of Evil: A Study of the Aesthetic Theme in Theodicy,” A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of St. Andrews,” (2009), 299, at: <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>.

⁷ *Horrendous Evils*, 27.

⁸ Tallon, 300.

psychological distress, pathology, and incoherence at the deepest levels of human functioning.⁹

Horrendous evils such as rape, incest, sexual abuse of minors, genocide, and the Holocaust leave us with deep levels of disgust and revulsion. Their assaults on basic coherence and justice threaten our capacity to believe in a good, loving, just and effective God.¹⁰ The pious invocation of the theme that “all will be well” contradicts the depth, range and power of these particular forms of evil because these horrors are meant to erase the very capacity to make sense and get well. It is Adams’ task, then, to “explore what shape Christology takes if the Savior’s job is to rescue us, not fundamentally from sin, but from horrors.”¹¹ Her Christological agenda is to demonstrate how Christ *defeats* horror itself and every iteration of it in the world. It is not enough for Christology to find philosophical or theological justification by which to excuse God or rationalize God’s intentions in the midst of horrendous evils. Adams seeks to show how the actions of Christ, especially his death on the Cross, deliver up these horrors in a way that re-establishes meaning after meaninglessness and identity after obliteration.

Adams provides a challenge to all Christologians who take up the work of calling on Christ as Savior of the world’s most profound evils. The task of this paper is to look at the political Christology of African-American systematic theologian, M. Shawn Copeland. Her life’s work has been to meet the horrendous evil and “the soul-killing effects” of slavery head on and to describe how Christ defeats every attempt by racists, dictators and empires to have women and men surrender their humanity.

Copeland and the Horrendous Evil of Racism

Shawn Copeland is professor-emerita of systematic theology at Boston College and an expert in the fields of theological and philosophical anthropology, embodiment, political theology, theological methods; African and African-derived religious and cultural experience and African-American

⁹ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 138.

¹⁰ Peter S. Fosl, “The Moral Imperative to Rebel Against God,” *Cogito* 11:3 (November 1997), 159-168.

¹¹ *Christ and Horrors*, 32.

intellectual history. She is the author of seven books¹² and more than 120 articles, chapters or book reviews.¹³ It is her work on Christology that interests us here, as it is one of the few works in American Catholic theological literature that provides an expressed Christological foundation for the social ethical discussion of racism and its consequences.

In her work, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African-American Religious Experience*, Copeland describes her ethical awakening as a seventh-grade girl, an awareness that would shape the contours of her life's theological explorations and mark the beginning of the gift and call of her theological vocation. Her awakening begins in horror:

In the summer before beginning seventh grade, I resisted my mother's idea that I attend camp and, instead, registered for two high school courses – elementary French and a survey of model world history. That history course confronted me with modernity's most recent horror – the attempt to destroy the Jewish people. Genocide was incomprehensible to my not-quite-twelve-year-old mind. But at some moment during that summer, something clicked. I vividly recall standing in our kitchen daydreaming, surely thinking about something quite ordinary, when one of my grandmother's admonitions swam up to consciousness. She would say to me, "Remember everyone can't like you." On that summer afternoon, my grandmother's words crystallized as a bitter and fragile insight into the meaning and reach untrammelled power. I formulated the hypothesis: *If those who do not like you should hold power over you, they can kill you.* Genocide mocked the lessons I learned first at home and then at school: that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, that all human beings are invested with great dignity and

¹² *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience.* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2018); *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); *The Subversive Power of Love: The Vision of Henriette Delille: The Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality.* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009); *Grace and Friendship: Theological Essays in Honor of Fred Lawrence.* With Jeremy D. Wilkins. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016); *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience.* With LaReine-Marie Mosely and Albert Raboteau. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009); *Concilium: Feminist Theologies in Different Contexts.* With Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. (London: SCM Press; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996); *Concilium: Violence Against Women.* With Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994).

¹³ A full bibliography of Copeland's work can be found at Roberto J. Rivera and Michele Saracino, *Enfleshing Theology: Embodiment, Discipleship, and Politics in the Work of M. Shawn Copeland* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 271-275.

worth, and that all human beings are of enormous value – because they are human. That summer course awakened me to anti-Semitism, to the deadly consequences of xenophobia, to the outright murder of human beings *simply because of their human existence*.¹⁴

As an eleven-year old, Copeland comes face to face with the “casual cruelty” and degrading madness that “defames and demeans, chokes and assaults, shoots and destroys, criminalizes and incarcerates, deports and demonizes children, women and men simply because of their existence.”¹⁵ It is horrendous suffering that pre-occupies Copeland throughout her work, a meditation on the “massive public suffering” that encompasses torture, genocide, extermination, ethnic cleansing, disappearance, cultural decimation and enslavement of the black community in America. She quotes Rebecca Chopp’s description of this distinctive form of human suffering, which

cannot be fully explained, understood, or represented...[nor can such suffering] be forgotten or ignored in history’s interpretation or construction; once progress has shoved the masses of humanity onto life’s margins, history is broken, its end forever in question, and its purpose lost in suspension.¹⁶

Copeland relates the beginning of chattel slavery with its forced kidnaping of African men, women and children and their translation to America through a slave trade that “forced disruption, fragmentation, even the collapse of meanings; it involved loss and conservation, adaptation and rejection, transposition and translation... interiorized cosmologies [that] shattered under the weight of water and trauma.”¹⁷ Slave traders took control of black men, women and children and stripped them of dignity to obliterate any form of personal desire, except that of pleasing their new masters.

After the terror of the Middle Passage, the kidnapped youth or adult was sold into the terror of the plantation and its system of chattel slavery, where life became a paradoxical tension of “*death in life*.”¹⁸

¹⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, xiv.

¹⁵ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, xxvi.

¹⁶ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986, 2) found in Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, xix.

¹⁷ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 8.

¹⁸ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 13.

Chattel slavery was the ultimate form of human degradation. By the law of the land that received and held slaves, one's black status as human beings was demoted to that of being nothing more than the personal property of the slave owner. "Chattel slavery relegated a living human person to being nothing more than an article of personal property to be used or disposed of at the whim of the owner."¹⁹ This new designation obliterated any prior or future personal identity, connection, obligation, social, cultural or spiritual positioning. Slavery alienated and withdrew children, women and men from all that meant being human in the world, from "history, heritage, memory, family and kin, individualities, idiosyncrasies, anxieties and desires."²⁰ Slavery plunged the slave into an incoherent individual and intergenerational contradiction, to be a "thing" that holds simultaneously the "*freedom of person*" and "*the freedom of property*."²¹ For more than two hundred and fifty years, the slave was assigned and conditioned to be nothing more than a legal commodity, "living" at the whim and by the desires of the slave owner. Enslaved black women, children and men existed as commodities with nothing more than commercial value. They were "things" to be used and abused, defined and desecrated by the deformed desires of the slave master. Why? Because the white master said so! The white master wanted it so!

The effects of slavery were "soul killing" for black men. The daily degradations, the wrenching humiliations, the constant whippings and flogging, the at whim selling of wives and children, all of these were not simply meant as mechanisms of control. These repeatable humiliations were the vehicle for establishing and aggravating debilitating degradation and devaluation. This was the insupportable construction of the humanity of black women and men manufactured by the fractured ideology of white supremacy. The specific intent of this horror-making was to disable and disintegrate the personality and refashion it into compliant subservience and subordination of the black man in the face of his white owner.

Slavery was soul-killing for black women in a distinctive way. Copeland is powerfully eloquent in her understanding and in her rendering of the specific damage done to black women who were doubly-enslaved by the institutions of slavery and of patriarchy in the so-called "New World." Without dismissing or diminishing the suffering that black men experienced at the hands of their white owners and later by Jim Crow segregationists, Copeland

¹⁹ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 13-14.

²⁰ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 14.

²¹ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 86.

displays the distinctive assaults against black women's bodies. They are transgressions that continue to affect modern descriptions and attitudes towards the black feminine body. They are transgressions that are repeated in contemporary assaults against vulnerable black women even today.²²

Copeland speaks of the objectification of the slave body:

The reduction and objectification of black women began with the seizure and binding of the body; the violent severing of the captive from community and personhood; imprisonment in dark and dank places below ground; packing and confinement in the slave ship; the psychic disorientation and trauma of the Middle Passage – suspended out of time and in “no place.”²³

This is the primary objectification that black women shared with black men in the conduct of the slave trade. However, Copeland argues that there is a particularity to the objectification of black women's bodies that is gender-specific. Copeland recounts how slavery reduced the bodies of black women to objects of property, production, reproduction and sexual violence.

As *objects of property*, slavery delivered a social death-in-life sentence to women: slaves served their whole lives as property at the service and whim of their owner(s). This meant that they could not testify in civil or criminal cases against their masters; they were forbidden access to education, whether secular or religious; they were required to submit to any and all white persons and they had no recourse to violence (on pain of their own mutilation or death) against the punishments inflicted on them by any white person, not just their own slave owner.²⁴ Black women often suffered the loss of their own children, when the slave owner sold them off and drove the children away without notice or final sentiments of love and loss.

As *objects of production*, slaves worked for the master on the plantation. They worked six days a week from sunrise to sunset. Hard labor found no distinction between women and men. Both assumed the same levels of diffi-

²² Eboni Marshall Turman, “Today a Black [Wo]man was Lynched: A Womanist Christology of Sandra Bland,” in Roberto J. Rivera and Michele Saracino, *Enfleshing Theology*, 15-34.

²³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race and being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 29.

²⁴ This discussion of women as objects of property, production, reproduction and sexual violence is found in *Enfleshing Freedom*, 30-38.

culty in the field. No distinction was made because of age, gender or even pregnancy. Pregnant black women worked until minutes before they were ready to give birth.

As *objects of reproduction*, black women were forced to reproduce for the economic interests of the slave owner.

Slavery thrived on the body of black woman, which became the site on which the planter's economic desire intersected with black female sex, sexuality and reproductive capability. Planters wanted to make sure that enslaved women were prolific. When importation of Africans became illegal, the increase in plantation capital, its laborers or slaves, depended on internal breeding... Black women were forced to sacrifice love, to yield their children to commercial objectification, the "very capitalization of life." Black children were severed from their sacred humanity and deprived of person-identity, their bodies and spirits endangered and traumatized.²⁵

As *objects of sexual violence*, black women's bodies were sexually vulnerable and available to slave owners, their sons and indeed anyone to whom the owner wished to make them available. Because black women's sexuality was framed by the depraved desires of their white owners, black women suffered the humiliation and degradation of a script written for them by their slave masters. On the one hand, they were considered "lascivious whores," good only for breeding. And, on the other hand, this constructed image of good breeding was used to frame black women as "promiscuous," incapable of the sexual purity that was associated with white womanhood. The "libidinous economics" that undergirded the slave commerce degraded, dehumanized, de-gendered and, we might say, "dissected" black women, reducing black women to body parts. As Copeland describes, black women's bodies were...

.... parts that white men used for pleasure; parts that white men manipulated and sold for economic profit; parts that literally were coerced to nurse the heirs of white racist supremacy. Slavery laid the foundations for the bodily humiliations that black women have been exposed for centuries...²⁶

²⁵ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 33-34.

²⁶ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 38.

Our analysis of chattel slavery in America provides a more than adequate case for its inclusion as one of the world's most horrendous evils. Slavery was a horrifying example of the attempt to cancel the human rights of blacks, to disintegrate their personalities with the goal of white supremacy. The tactics that followed slavery during the periods of Jim Crow and segregation were meant to make any presumptive human rights defective, dysfunctional and inoperative. As Copeland rightly indicates, "The enslaved Africans and their descendants in America have encountered the monstrous evil of chattel slavery and its legacy of virulent institutionalized racism and have been subjected to unspeakable protracted physical, psychological, social (i.e. political, economic, technological), moral, and religious suffering."²⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that this system of dehumanization, deprivation, and degradation is not limited to or walled off in some by-gone era that one can forswear with a pitiful and remorseful glance backwards. Its reality and its devastating consequences continue to this day. He describes racial suffering in years up to the present: "250 years of slavery, 90 years of Jim Crow, 60 years of separate but equal, 35 years of state-sanctioned redlining."²⁸

To be black in America is to come from a history and experience both remote and recent of lives that have been degraded, disrupted, devalued, debilitated and disoriented by scripts of other's making. It is to inherit a history of disgust and disability, revulsion and reduction *simply because of one's existence*. To be black in America is to be ever threatened by the devaluation and degradation of one's basic humanity, with its fundamental rights and obligations diminished, simply because the power to make and effect such judgements belongs to a system, mentality and outlook outside of one's control and foreign to the community to which one belongs.

This devaluation and degradation now come in the form of state-sanctioned or state-ignored violence against black men who can be stopped by the side of the road for a minor infraction and, within minutes, find themselves with a knee on their neck or a bullet in their back, without the privilege of basic decency or adjudication by a court of law. These events have been neither sporadic nor ambiguous in America. To the contrary, they show a stunning consistency and pattern of dismissal and degradation of victims who can muster little time to respond, no power to resist, and no capacity to reverse the inevitability of disregard for their *human* desire for communication, dialogue, decency, or mercy.

²⁷ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 130.

²⁸ Quoted in *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 130.

This is the template of racial suffering that can also predict with stunning accuracy higher rates of infant mortality, higher incidences of disease and early death regardless of age. Recent studies on the link between race and health in America find a disturbing trend:

The health disparities between blacks and whites run deep, no matter the age or ailment. Adult obesity rates for African-Americans are higher than those for whites in nearly every state. They have higher rates of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease than other groups. Black children have a 500 percent higher death rate from asthma compared to white children. And African-American adults with cancer are much less likely to survive prostate, breast and lung cancer than white adults.²⁹

Our point here is that racism in America remains a monstrous problem, a horrendous evil, a social horror for which redemption is required. The question erupts from the ground beneath our feet, Copeland laments— *where is God* when His children are so violently devalued and degraded? *Where is God* when black bodies are bound and dragged, beaten and tortured, stripped and starved, mutilated and raped, whipped and flogged, de-sexed, de-gendered, deprived, degraded, stalked, lynched and shot, for no other reason than that the color of their skin produces disgust, revulsion, desire and hatred in the white mind and heart? *Where is God* when generations of black women are raped, deprived of their own husbands and children and forced to nurse the children of those who have raped them? *Where is God* when black blood falls from the flogging stock and beneath the lynching tree from which hundreds of young black men and women have swung? *Where is God* when generations of black women, men and children continue to suffer discrimination, inequalities, unfair treatment, inadequate education, greater poverty, and higher rates of violent assaults than any other population group in America?

How is God redeeming the history and the moment of racial suffering that afflicts America? This is the question we pose to Copeland as we turn to look for her understanding of the power of the cross of Christ. How does Christ redeem the horror of racial suffering?

²⁹ Risa Lavizzo-Mourey and David Williams, “Being Black is Bad for your Health,” *US News and World Report* (April 16, 2016), accessed at: <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/policy-dose/articles/2016-04-14/theres-a-huge-health-equity-gap-between-whites-and-minorities>.

Redeeming the Horror of Racial Suffering

Using the terminology of Johann-Baptist Metz,³⁰ Shawn Copeland reminds us that the memory of chattel slavery is for us a “dangerous memory” that obliges us to mourn and remember. She argues that the memory cannot be erased and should not be erased “for the very bodies of the descendants of those who remained and survived continue to provoke the memory of an unapproached and unresolved past that reaches into the present and must be engaged.”³¹ The memory of poor, dark and despised black bodies throughout the American experience “protest(s) our forgetfulness of what it means to en flesh freedom in our time and place.”³² It is the central conviction of Copeland’s work that there is one, indeed only one, who does not forget and that is Jesus of Nazareth. “He does not forget poor, dark and despised bodies,” because it is for these and indeed for all bodies that He gave up his own body in gift, solidarity and fidelity to the reign of God. In Copeland’s Christology, Jesus is “enfleshing freedom” and “freedom enfleshed.”³³

Copeland focuses her attention on the body of Christ as a body marked by race, gender, sexuality, and culture. He is the eternal Word, the Logos, become flesh as a “bodily, concrete, marked historical being, Jesus of Nazareth.” He is the one who died for the sake of the mission of universal inclusion given Him by God and resisted by the political and religious leaders of His day. His fidelity led to the rejection and “breaking of His body” for us on the Cross but His fidelity and love were vindicated and His crucified body was raised on the third day.³⁴

Copeland cannot abstract Jesus from the conditions of His culture, time and place. She states bluntly and forcefully that “Jesus of Nazareth was born and died in subjugation to the Roman Empire.”³⁵ He is a man steeped in the culture, laws, psalms and prayers, hopes and convictions of a practicing Jew that believed that God would reign again as king in Jerusalem. And Yahweh would destroy every empire that tried to annul the covenant love that bonded Israel to the one true God. Justice would then be restored, along with

³⁰ Johann-Baptist Metz, ‘The Dangerous Memory of the Freedom of Jesus Christ: The Presence of the Church in Society’, in *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, edited by John K. Downey (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999), 95.

³¹ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 102.

³² *Enfleshing Freedom*, 53.

³³ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 53.

³⁴ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 55.

³⁵ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 53.

prosperity and peace. With this conviction Jesus inserted his body into the history of the nation and marked it by resistance and desire: the desire that God's reign would be done "on earth as it is in heaven" and the resistance to every constriction or minimization of Yahweh's covenantal love. Jesus symbolized and enacted this resistance and fulfillment of desire in His "welcoming table" and invited the despised and diseased, the tax collector and the leper, the adulterous and prostituted women, the blind and the lame, the rejected and the rebellious in order to demonstrate the unrestricted nature of God's invitational mercy-love. As Copeland reminds us:

Jesus acted out just how unrestricted neighbor love must be, just how much "other" bodies matter. The open table embodied egalitarianism, disrupted the "pleasures of hierarchy" and domination, and abolished the etiquette of empire. The open table embodied the desire for and the design of the reign of God. *All* are welcome. God sets the table for the "little ones," for those denied access to restorative moments of celebration, to the material benefits of class and society.³⁶

Christ identifies Himself and His Father in heaven with all those made vulnerable and despised in empires of anxiety and domination. In His parables and teaching, in His miracles and preaching, Jesus identifies with all those who have no hope, choice, or future in empires characterized by violence, division, greed and subjugation. And, it is in His crucified death that Jesus becomes the one "cursed," rejected, despised and cast out, when Jesus identifies Himself with all the victims of history, identifying God with all the victims of violence and all the victims of violence with God. God's recognition of and identification with the victims of history invites their own recognition of reciprocal identification with God's humble and, one might say, humiliated covenant love. It is the Cross of Christ that suspends the ultimate effectiveness of all power and domination games. It is the Cross that replaces them with the efficacy of *agape* love that invites and forgives, even the trespasses of enemies.

Herein lies the task and the tale of Christianity's new subject, according to Copeland. The crucifixion of Jesus, which was meant by the empire to seal Jesus' fate as the forlorn and forgotten one, became Yahweh's vindication of a generous, compassionate, inclusive love that invites everyone

³⁶ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 62.

and rejects no one who is willing to come by means of the “narrow gate” of neighborly justice.

Copeland’s Christology takes this insight and represents it in stark and visceral terms, always in accordance with her core insights about embodiment and enfleshment. She reminds us that our intellectual systems today have been coded by the principles of the *Enlightenment* that proposed a “turn toward the subject.” That turn promised a *novus ordo saeculorum*, a secular redemption based on nothing more than emancipated reason and the rejection or, at the least, the marginalization of revealed truth. The Enlightenment was to be a new age of freedom, beginning with the freedoms to doubt, to explore and to discover, with an autonomy that is no longer shackled by ancient dogmas or heavenly revelations.

Copeland reveals, however, that the Enlightenment’s new subject was never going to be a woman and certainly not the poor, dark and despised black women of history. The Enlightenment’s subject of history, the one behind the intellectual curtain, turned out to be white, European men devoted to conquest and the dynamics of domination over creation, as evidenced by their propagation of slavery and colonialism, the suppression of cultures and their new inventions of intolerance. This so-called “new subject” plied new terrors with their marginalization and exclusion of the poor from the “welcoming table of creation,” now reduced and commodified for commercial and profit purposes alone.

And thus, Copeland rejects the reign of the Enlightenment subject and argues for a new anthropological subject, which she defines as exploited, despised, poor women of color.³⁷ This is not some clever theological sleight of hand that arbitrarily lifts up a “minority” group and substitutes its so-called private interests for the tired and cranky presumptions of an old caste. The turn to a new anthropological subject is not meant to displace and exchange one power group for another. The turn is to remember, to live by a new and energized *anamnesis*, that recognizes that because Jesus of Nazareth became an accursed, despised and subjugated body on the Cross, it is He who identifies with the bodies of those who are the poorest and most vulnerable in our age. It is He who has identified Himself with the mutilated, violated and raped bodies of women in previous times and in our own. It is He, the one scourged by the empire, who makes His own the blood and

³⁷ Robert S. Goizueta, “A Body of Broken Bones: Shaun Copeland and the New Anthropological Subject,” in Roberto J. Rivera and Michele Saracino, *Enfleshing Theology*, 5-10.

tears shed by black women who have been devalued and degraded, desired and despised generation after generation, along with the husbands, sons and daughters they have loved and often lost. It is He who resisted the totalizing subjugation and depriving domination of the empire with a love poured out to the end. It is He who comes to women in “the clearing” where they can pray and witness to a deeper truth about themselves and their world and experience a more abiding love in union with the Nazorean who offers hope against hope and a way where there was no way.

It is this mutual identification between slave and Jesus that becomes the basis of a sensed freedom that transcends and becomes the foundation that rejects and overcomes the control of slave masters of any era.

Educating for the Horrors

Shawn Copeland is not simply an elegant writer, a truth-teller par excellence, she is and has been a master teacher for generations of students and others who have heard her lectures or read her books. The final question we wish to address is about pedagogy: how does Copeland recommend that we educate in a way that exposes the horrendous evil of racism for what it has been in the days of chattel slavery and for what it continues to be in the depressing racial sufferings of our own day? How do we educate for horror recognition? We remember that Jesus was a crucified teacher, a despised, vulnerable and cursed rabbi-educator.

What is the pedagogy that will expose us to the horrors of our day in such a way that we can transform them by grace and thereby neutralize or even reverse their intended consequences? Space requires that we provide only a brief outline of the pedagogical steps we have found in Copeland’s mystic-political pedagogy. Copeland doesn’t manufacture a political or theological agenda for her students to rehearse and repeat. On the contrary, she attends to the dynamics of “enfleshing freedom,” which first requires a full commitment to embodiment. This is so because the incarnation is central to Copeland’s political theology in that the Logos, the Word of God, comes to this world in the body of Jesus of Nazareth, a body that is marked by time, culture, sex, and gender.

However, Christ’s body is never just His own. First, He belongs to the Father. Jesus does nothing and says nothing other than what the Father wishes Him to say and do (John 5:19). And, as the Eucharist and Christ’s death on the Cross verify, His body is forever *pro nobis*. His body is broken for us and His blood is shed for us and for our salvation.

What, then, are the steps or elements of Copeland's recognition and redemption of the horrors of racism and racial suffering? There are I believe eight elements: interruption, investigation, inspiration, insight, identification, induction, intention and invitation. Together they form a kind of pedagogy that can transform communities for the reduction and elimination of racial suffering.

1. Interruption

At the beginning of this essay, we introduced readers to the moment when Copeland began her ethical quest. Remarkably it was the moment when, as an eleven-year old girl, she interrupts her normal day dreaming, recalls her grandmother's poignant advice about not always being liked, and connects that advice to the realized conviction that when someone doesn't like you and has power over you, they have the means and motivations to kill you. This is the lesson she learns about the Holocaust at a young age. In that moment, she interrupts the normal logic of empires whose salutary proverb remains as dangerous today as it was in the time of the Romans: *fortes Fortuna adiuvat*, that "fortune favors the strong," the bold, dominating, depriving, ruthless, conniving and courageous. With the thought of the Holocaust on her mind, she finds herself on the other side, the underside, of history where the despised and devalued bodies of the Holocaust Jews are buried. Copeland reminds us that she was unprepared for such a turn. Her childhood lessons had not taught her this conclusion. This is true of most of us: in our youth, we seem to memorize only the logic of our empires. But, Copeland is a precocious and inquisitive child. She sees with an early prophetic eye how to interrupt her own history. Once she learns the art of interruption, she can begin her life's work of understanding and responding to all the despised and devalued bodies in the world.

2. Investigation

Interruption leads to investigation. Interruption on its own and by itself can only lead to paralyzing fear and incapacitating anxiety. However, Copeland finds and follows a different path that ultimately leads her to an application of Bernard Lonergan's intellectual method with its four levels and stages of investigation: experience, understanding, judgement, and decision. In his book *Insight*, Lonergan laid the groundwork for transformational learning and clarified what human knowledge is in its basic structure.

He demonstrated what virtuous choice and thus authentic human life consist in.³⁸ Lonergan's epistemological method fascinated Copeland as a young student and offered her a sure pedagogical framework on how to begin, sustain and ascend the ladder of wisdom and reach her goal of transformative learning. Lonergan taught Copeland how to *pay attention/be aware continuously, understand intelligently, judge responsibly and decide/ act lovingly*. Knowledge was no longer random.

Copeland discusses the importance of Lonergan's cognitional theory for her work as a womanist theologian:

Framing womanist work in light of Lonergan's notion of cognitional theory advances an understanding of womanist work as a critical cognitive praxis. Thus, womanists form a serious 'thinking margin' and their critical cognitive praxis exposes and explains the various forms of breakdown and bias (e.g., dramatic, individual, group, or common sense), analyzes the concrete impact of bias on human living, and scours the Scriptures for a saving word.³⁹

3. *Inspiration*

Copeland documents the death-in-life struggle that faced black women in slavery. Attempts to educate oneself or even to pray were often met with lashings and terrifying acts of sexual violence. Copeland reminds us of the courageous art of resistance performed by black women in their "grotesque pantomime of survival," by which they were forced into "smiling when they wanted to weep, laughing when they felt rage and anger."⁴⁰ Sustaining basic forms of civility, decency and humanity in the midst of the ugliest forms of degradation and devaluation lodged against them, women sought solace and refuge in "secret places in woods and gullies to commune with the Supreme Author of Freedom."⁴¹ There in "The Clearing," deep in the forest and far

³⁸ Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding*. (London-New York, Longman, Green, and Co. 1957 and 1958), Republished in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, (University of Toronto Press, 1992).

³⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, "Panel Discussion: Lonergan on Black Theology," 2012 *Lonergan on The Edge Conference* (Marquette University, 2012), 4. accessed at: https://lonerganresource.com/pdf/contributors/LOE-2012-12c_Shawn_Copeland.pdf

⁴⁰ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 78.

⁴¹ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 78.

from the master's house, black women resisted physical and psychic domination, and expressed themselves in the Spirit, in the memory of their dead sisters and brothers. With naked feet firmly planted on the naked earth, black women joined together in a vigorous and exuberant testimony and witness of their loves, a ritual denied in the master's house. Laurie Cassidy reminds us:

Drawing upon Toni Morrison's literary vision, Copeland enables us to witness the Spirit-filled ritual of re-creating love. In the "Clearing" black women named the wounds of slavery with no shame, loved their broken black bodies, expressed the depth and breadth of denied human emotion, celebrated their beauty, and prized the treasure of their hearts.⁴²

Entering into the Clearing, as a place of prayer in the woods, was an exercise of spirit and resistance. It remains that place that each of us must go to find refuge from those who would have us sacrifice and surrender our humanity for the crass endeavors of the empire. It is a place of urgency where, as Cassidy describes it, we go to "decolonize our person – to reclaim and resist being solely objects of other's desires."⁴³ It is the place we go to love our bodies, to love again the body of creation, to express the wonder of being in the image and likeness of God, celebrating the beauty of bodily being in a community of persons. The Clearing is the place we go beyond the dynamics of domination, subordination and privilege to reflect God's desire for us and God's enjoyment of our flourishing.

4. *Insight*

The Clearing, as noted above, is not simply a place of refuge. It is a temple of insight that allows one to practice, express, celebrate and enact one's alternative identity, the one we cannot or dare not show in the master's house. An insight begins to form and will soon find its true connecting point that we are embodied creatures, a site of divine revelation, worthy to be seen and known, loved and embraced as the subjects of freedom. This insight matures in faith, in song, in prayer and in rituals of dance deep in the woods far from the intrusion of the master's enslaving disposition. There is freedom in

⁴² Laurie Cassidy, "Learning to Enflesh Freedom: Returning to the Clearing," in Roberto J. Rivera and Michele Saracino, *Enfleshng Theology: Embodiment, Discipleship, and Politics in the Work of M. Shawn Copeland* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 52.

⁴³ "Learning to Enflesh Freedom," 54.

these ritual-born insights, where enslaved communities sing the wisdom of the Lord Jesus out of sight and sound of the master's 'explanations.'

5. *Identification*

At the center of Copeland's pedagogy of enfleshing freedom is a powerful and enduring identification with Jesus of Nazareth. It is essentially a mutual identification. It begins with the recognition that Jesus of Nazareth identifies Himself in His poverty and humility, in His passion and death, with all those made vulnerable and victims of history. In Jesus, slaves knew and understood God's solidarity with suffering humanity. As Copeland describes:

... many enslaved people fell in love with Jesus of Nazareth... they recognized and understood that Jesus was for them... They sang in the spirituals of a powerful man. Jesus was the one who could fix them... he was not afraid to defy social and religious conventions to show his love: 'Did you ever see the like before/ King Jesus preaching to the poor?/My Lord's done just what he said/He's heal the sick and raised the dead.'⁴⁴

The slave narratives that Copeland has studied indicate how strongly enslaved women and men identified with Jesus of Nazareth in his teaching and preaching, in his healings and in his miracles. His words and deeds resonated with their needs and hopes. They found solace in his promises. His preaching neutralized the horrors they were experiencing, because black women and men found a power greater in Him than that demonstrated by their masters. They found the power of Jesus deep within and among them, whose authority and designation of infinite love for each transcended any diabolic trope that the master could devise. The Lord Jesus offered slaves a freedom beyond the master's reach, one that the slaves knew invalidated the master's curse. Jesus' love was a validation that the slave community knew would "soon and very soon" be revealed to all.

It was the *memoria passionis* that black men and women understood, accepted and allowed to console and strengthen. Looking at the cross and the man/god hanging on it, they saw one who took their part, voluntarily becoming a slave like them, to demonstrate His solidarity with them, to

⁴⁴ M Shawn Copeland, "To Follow Jesus," *America* (February 26, 2007), <http://222.americamagazine.org/print/148065>.

identify their concerns, anxieties, fears and problems as His own. This stage of identification means “standing at the foot of the cross,” taking in the horror of the Roman exercise of raw, brutal and absolute power against the innocent one. It is the paradigm of the world’s passion, its summation and salvation, as it demonstrates how fragile and vulnerable we are in a world of empires, dictators and thugs.

Copeland demonstrates the significance of this identification in her 2017 Marianist Award lecture:

The Jewish Jesus of Nazareth forever changes our perception and reception of “the human other,” of humanity. Humanity is the concern of Jesus... His Cross is the concrete example of self-transcending love. And it is before his cross that the praxis of the Christian community must always be judged... The cross of the Jewish Jesus calls us to conversion, to radical transformation of life. It teaches us that conversion of life is not something about which we speak; rather it is ... that for which we struggle daily to live. It is not what someone else must do, but who we must become... When theology comes face to face with social oppression and the enormous suffering inflicted upon God’s human creatures, it must name explicitly ... the oppression... must work out the relation between the murderous crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and the murderous crucifixion of countless poor, excluded and despised children and men.⁴⁵

6. *Induction*

Identification leads to induction, in that the cross of Jesus does exactly the opposite of what the Romans’ brutal form of execution intended as assurance – the scattering, disbanding and dissection of the disciples of Jesus. Crucifixion was a curse laid upon an individual that separated him from the Jewish people and from God and made him an outcast, a criminal nobody in the nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 21: 22-23). And yet, Jesus’ death on the Cross was *pro nobis*, for us, for “the many,” and it is at the Cross that new relationships are formed and community is strengthened and not dissolved. As John’s Gospel proclaims,

⁴⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, “Traces of the Cross: Theology and Social Suffering,” (Marianist Award Lecture, University of Dayton, November 1, 2017).

“When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then He said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” So from that hour, this disciple took her into his home....” (John 19: 26-27).

In chapter four of her book, *Enfleshing Freedom*, Copeland outlines the three aspects of her theological anthropology:

- i. That human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, thus giving them a distinct capacity for communion with God;
- ii. That they have a unique place in the cosmos that God created;
- iii. That they are made for communion with other living beings.⁴⁶

Communion is the Spirit-filled call and gift of the *memoria passionis* of Jesus of Nazareth. This induction into the Body of Christ, this inclusion, is the antithesis of the anti-bodies formed by the dictations of domination and subjugation announced by the empire. It is the radical subversion of the allegiance owed to Caesar, to the slave master, to dictators and thugs of every age. The dynamism of communion in the socio-political sphere of action today involves the enacted discipleship of compassion, conversion and solidarity. Solidarity, according to Copeland, is located in the “most resonant, inexhaustible, gratuitous act of love – the Father’s donation of the Son for the world and the Son’s embrace of the Father and the world.”⁴⁷

These three virtues firmly repel and reject the dynamics of domination. They provoke and invite into motion the twin dynamics of perfect generosity and perfect receptivity as “new life” in Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God now among us. They reveal how we are to give our bodies for “the other,” as Christ did and how we are to be open to the bodies of all “others,” in the struggle on the side of the poor, exploited, despised, deprived and degraded victims of history.

7. Intention

Identification and induction lead to a new and deeper intention about the aim, direction, quality and transcendence of our lives. Our study of Copeland’s

⁴⁶ Mary Ann Hinsdale, HIS, “Enacted Discipleship as Christian Anthropology,” Roberto J. Rivera and Michele Saracino, *Enfleshng Theology: Embodiment, Discipleship, and Politics in the Work of M. Shawn Copeland* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 108; M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 85-106..

⁴⁷ *Enfleshing Love*, 94

political Christology has not been in the service of dogma-defining nor has it been simply a theological construction project. In her commitment to solidarity, Copeland proves herself to be a prophetic voice for action on behalf of the poor, vulnerable and despised. Her thoughts on “Eucharistic solidarity” relate how active participation in the gathering of the Beloved Community at Christ’s welcoming table translates into a responsive and engaged solidarity in politics that lifts up the poor and forgotten, the marginalized and exploited.

Copeland reminds us that “(e)ucharistic celebration forms our social imagination, transvalues our values, and transforms the meaning of our being human, of embodying Christ.” This is so because Eucharistic solidarity “opposes all intentionally divisive segregation of bodies on the specious grounds of preference for race or gender or sexual orientation or culture.”⁴⁸

Eucharistic solidarity is the enactment and strengthening of the intention to live with and for Jesus, the incarnate compassion of the Triune God. It is the commitment to reject any and all attempts to wound the bodies of vulnerable, exploited and suffering others. It is the promise to be there for “the other.” The Eucharist is Christ’s intention to be forever the last and ultimate one wounded for our offenses, interceding on our behalf night and day before the Throne of God as the crucified and risen one. At the Eucharist, Jesus presents His Body, the Church, back to the Father as the gift first given to Him, now purified but still on pilgrimage back to the fullness of truth and love of God. The Church is presented not in perfection, but as the wounded one. She is not wounded like Christ because of her innocence, though she can and will be wounded simply for calling on His name (Matt. 10:22). She is wounded often enough because of her sins, the ones on account of which she begs in unison, *Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.*

This Eucharistic intention can have no commerce with racism, segregation, apartheid, tribalism or the paralysis of polarization. This Eucharistic intention implies a commitment to forswear the fatalism of our post-Enlightenment world and every form of “necropower” unleashed on an already vulnerable planet.

8. *Invitation*

The pedagogy of the horrors begins with a moment of interruption that questions what is stable, socially secure, politically aligned, and embedded in the social imagination as inviolable truth. The steps that follow engage

⁴⁸ *Enfleshing Freedom*, 127.

the horrors with the power of graced interruption. Copeland's pedagogy of the horrors of racial suffering then investigates the group and systemic biases that have given currency to the anthropological lies against the despised and degraded. Inspiration gives strength and solace in the clearing. The initial insight about the potential for freedom even when no way is apparent breaks open during the moment of identification, when Jesus of Nazareth is recognized as one with us, as the one for us. This powerful mutual identification leads to a new induction into the community of the Beloved and this calls forth a new intentionality that imitates the work of the Christ in our time and place. Here we learn to enact our discipleship, to be "at the disposal of the Cross," to act with the same generous and receptive love that we have received in Christ and with one another, the Body of Christ.

The pedagogy of the horrors is a path that the disciples of Jesus can follow to avoid ever again being a participant in or the enactor of the kind of horrendous evils that the world has seen, even among peoples who claim to be Christian. If not a guarantee against the eruption of horrors into the future, Copeland offers a plan by which Christians can mitigate against the horrendous evils that afflict the world. With grace, we have the capacity to interrupt and intervene in various educative ways.

The final moment in Copeland's pedagogy of the horrors is invitation. Though we are invited by our Christian faith to stand at the foot of the Cross and behold our salvation, Copeland reminds us that the ground beneath Jesus' cross is a place of paradox, "an ambiguous, even contested, place."⁴⁹ She is correct in asserting that the cross of Jesus has been used and abused for blasphemous ends. She reminds us of all those who have been tortured, murdered, colonized and oppressed, abused, raped and lynched, in the name of the Cross. The collusion of Christendom with the world's powers of domination and deprivation, in its attacks on blacks and on Jews, has stained the Church's reputation and called into question its connection to and confidence in the crucified Jewish Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁰

And yet, Copeland invites her readers to a renewed focus and attention on the cries, moans and the tears of "the brutalized and burned, raped and mutilated, enslaved and captives across the centuries," so that we can arrive again at the place of the Skull, where the Jewish Jesus was crucified.⁵¹ To

⁴⁹ *Traces of the Cross*, 41.

⁵⁰ David B. Couturier, *The Voice of Victims. The Voice of the Crucified* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2020).

⁵¹ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 135.

know and love Christ Crucified, she reminds us, is to know and love the crucified world that He has come to rescue.⁵² It is an invitation to loyalty and fidelity to the One who was faithful unto death for us.

Conclusion

There are unimaginable horrors that continue to afflict the world – the sexual abuse of minors, the rape and mutilation of women, acts of genocide, human slavery and trafficking – acts without coherence or meaning that they leave us with the most profound experiences of disgust and revulsion. These acts, as Marilyn McCord Adams demonstrates, have always burdened the Christian notion of an all good, all knowing, all loving, just and capable God. Adams argues that it is not enough to rationalize God’s inaction or passive allowance. She claims that Christology in the 21st century must come to a point of philosophical and theological coherence by which these horrendous evils are not simply passively accommodated and allowed to stand as inevitable and impenetrable occurrences. She requires that Christologies show exactly how Jesus of Nazareth defeats and overcomes these horrendous evils, not just in a long hereafter, but even now and even here.

We took up Adam’s challenge and studied Shawn Copeland’s penetrating analysis of the horror of racial suffering in America, from slavery to segregation and beyond. We followed Copeland’s exposition of the context of racism in its various American forms. We located the particularities of slavery and its legacy’s horrors, especially in the lives of poor, exploited, and abused black women.

We then surfaced the question as to what the redemption of enslaved bodies might look like. Specifically, we asked in what ways does Jesus of Nazareth heal his crucified people of these horrifying realities of bodily violation to the point of senseless violence and murder. We explained how Jesus took up the radical dimensions of neighbor love, even to the point of forgiving his enemies, and thus demonstrated how transcendent love works even in the specificities of social suffering.

We concluded with a discussion of a “pedagogy of the horrors.” By carefully reading through the work of Shawn Copeland, the master-teacher, we discerned the steps one might take to come to the compassion, conversion and solidarity required of Christians in a time of extraordinary and even horrendous social suffering.

⁵² *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 135.

Throughout her work, Copeland reminds us that the key to our salvation and our work for the alleviation of social suffering is to risk remembering what has happened to our black brothers and sisters – what happened to them, what we have done and what we have failed to do. This *anamnesis* is a risk because chattel slavery, segregation and every trace of its awful legacy are “dangerous memories” that will implicate each of us. Remembering this long and torturous instance of human devaluation will make us recall more instances when we have despised, disowned, disrespected “others.” But, *anamnesis* is our religious call and our hope. As Copeland reminds us:

In risking memory, in overcoming forgetfulness, collectively taking responsibility, commemorating, we lovingly embody ethical responsibility for the past in the present for the future. The love of an unreservedly loving God will hold us in our risk, will not allow us to forget, will hold us in hope.⁵³

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⁵³ *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 102.

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