

Drew Theological School's 6th Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium
Apophatic Bodies: Infinity, Ethics, & Incarnation

Student Session, October 2, 2006
Abstracts

Elaine Padilla-Tallman, Drew University
Latina Shekinah: Exile and the Hope of Homemaking

The Kabbalah is a form of Jewish mysticism. Part of the imagery in Kabbalism is a representation of their longing for the land, an undeniable mystery within Judaism. When banished from their land and forced to migrate from country to country, in their experience of absolute homelessness and Godlessness, Jews responded by seeking to unite with God. The Kabbalah thus became an answer to the banishment from God they were experiencing. The encounter of the soul with God, the *devekuth* (*unio mystica* or mystical union with God), meant the stripping of all self limitations in order to descend into “the depths of Nothingness” of God. Nothingness had to do with the shrinkage in God that had made the universe possible. God abandoned a region in the God self in order to make room for the world. This region is a space God withdrew from in order to return to it through creation and revelation. Thus the inward movement of God recoiling or withdrawing into Godself, God’s concentration of God in Godself (*Tsimtsum*), became the deepest symbol of exile. The union of the soul with God in this particular divine region was the perfected experience of *devekuth*. The beginning point for the student of Kabbalah is the contemplation of the *Sefiroth*, the ten most common names or faces of God (*Sefirah*). For those in exile, union with God was made possible because of the exiled presence of God, the Shekinah. Shekinah, a name derived from the Hebrew verb *shakan*, is the tenth *Sefirah*, God’s immanent presence within the world. Shekinah, who is both their dwelling and the One who dwells among them, is the highest development of God’s personality and the stage that is nearest to human experience, the basis for the beginning of the unfolding for the human into the realm of the divine.

In this paper I explore the Shekinah in order to find places of contact in particular with concerns that are shaped by my own Latina experience and identity. I explore Shekinah in connection to the Spirit as encounter of the divine presence of God, an encounter with one who makes one’s home in a place of exile. The Shekinah emerges first from the descriptions of the ancient Hebrew sages, and is explored through the lenses of kabbalistic and feminists writings. These in turn provide the foundation for sketching a pneumatological understanding of Shekinah from the perspective of a Latin American woman in the United States. Shekinah is divine presence

in the absence of God, whose exilic experience and accompaniment of those in exile grounds her in and on this-worldly contexts marked by suffering due to forced migrations. Of particular interest to me are the Latin American migrations to the United States of those who remain under severe inhumane conditions. The purpose of this paper is with the assistance of the Shekinah to raise the level of the understanding of the sacredness of all life, especially that which is in exile, in order to call us to responsible activity in a manner in which the world becomes home.

Rose Ellen Dunn, Drew University

Let it Be: Finding Grace with God through the Gelassenheit of the Annunciation

The narrative of the Annunciation suggests the possibility for an ecstatic union between the Divine and the human – a union where one life flows into another, where one subject reaches out to another subject through love. Filled with grace, Mary is invited by the Divine into possibility; responding in grace, she in turn invites the Divine into possibility. Grace, springing from the desire of the Divine as well as the responsive desire of Mary, draws both Mary and the Divine into the very space that it creates – a space that transgresses the boundary of distinction between the human and the Divine, allowing the human and the Divine to intermingle in an embrace of love.

This intermingling tends to transgress the limitations of language, slipping into an apophatic moment of releasement, a mutual ‘letting-be’ of the self and the Divine. Using the understanding of releasement that flows from Meister Eckhart to Angelus Silesius to Martin Heidegger, this paper proposes to create a theoretical framework for reading the speech of the Annunciation – both the hailing of Mary by the Divine, and the *fiat*, the “Let it be,” spoken by Mary in response to the Divine – as a *Gelassenheit*, a moment of releasement. In addition to the mystical tradition of releasement, Jacques Derrida’s understanding of prayer and confession, Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of the gift, and Luce Irigaray’s feminist reading of the Annunciation provide further philosophical insight for rereading the Annunciation as an ecstatic union of the human and the Divine through a mutual promise of love. Through their mutual promise, flowing from their mutual invitation, the Divine and Mary – the Lover and the Beloved – are transported into the *jouissance* – the joying – of a mystical union that is perfect love.

Through this perfect love and mutual promise, the ineffable becomes the incarnate *Logos*. And from this embrace of love, Mary turns to Elizabeth, where the ‘unsaying’ of Mary’s ‘Let it be’ becomes the ‘saying’ of the Magnificat. The ineffable moment of excessive love becomes radically articulated in the canticle of Mary, whose words, reminiscent of the song of Hannah, call for the

ethical transformation of the social order. The embrace of love with the Divine becomes the inspiration for a theological language that participates constructively in the world. The narrative of the Annunciation is itself a narrative of a sharing – a sharing of the self and of the Divine – that is ultimately a joying. Through the acceptance of the invitation of grace, and the sharing of the self through releasement, the Annunciation becomes a joying, a passion, a *Gelassenheit*, with and in the other.

Sigridur Gudmarsdottir, Drew University
Abbyss Matters: The Sensible Unsayings of Mysticism

Beverly J. Lanzetta has recently argued for the need of feminist mystical theology. She maintains that the transformative power of mystical thought is capable of healing the wounds of the heart, which are caused by patriarchy. Lanzetta explains the ancient ways of speaking of the transcendent in kataphatic ways (speaking with) and apophatic ways (unsaying). She stresses the importance of both ways of speaking about the divine, but adds another method, “a third way,” as it were, 'via feminina.' Lanzetta holds high the banner of the kataphatic as women’s right to carve the symbols and images of divinity out of their own experience and corporeality. She also argues for a radical “unsaying” of everything which keeps women down and makes both sexes suffer.

Feminists generally have an ambiguous relationship to mysticism. A passive, feminized, self-denying self which so often has characterized the theological discourse, not least the mystical, sits badly with those who want to support and protect the subjectivity of women. Feminists who are discovering the myriads of multiplicities and identities produced by such categories as gender, race and class have little interest in the type of mysticism which builds on the universal of mystical experience. If a feminist mystical theology is to be authentic for such an audience it needs to be capable of difference. It needs to be able to express concerns for the bodies and lives of women. To muse with Judith Butler’s well known phrase, a feminist mystical theology needs to matter, take materiality, corporeality and the erotic seriously. It needs to unsay old structures of dualism. Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have written extensively on Christian mystical theology and both keep an ambivalent attitude towards its abysses. On the one hand, mystical thought is one of the few discourses in the history of the Western philosophical and theological corpus where women have been able to emerge as speaking subjects. On the other mystical theology is also deeply inscribed in patriarchal structures. Kristeva and Irigaray both point to Plato’s chora, which Plato described as a third way and argue for the strength and shortcomings of the choric.

Is it possible or even necessary to create a third way, a *via feminina*? Lanzetta never indicates

what kind of a way 'via feminina' is, whether it is to be seen as a middle way between two opposites or something which radically disturbs the other categories of kataphasis and apophasis. Via feminina, with its stress on unsaying, seems to bear the traits of a radical apophatic gesture, with distinctive affective traits. I am arguing for an augmentation of Lanzetta's method by grounding the third way in the chora, for a sensible unsaying of mysticism. I argue that the method of unsaying with its unrest and destabilizing language, bears in itself a great potentiality for a feminist sensible 'via feminina.'

Wilson Dickinson, Syracuse University
Kenotic Subjectivity: Considering a Duplicious Kierkegaardian Declaration

In this paper I hope to argue for the formulation of a kenotic subjectivity (a kind of apophatic body) opened in Kierkegaard's Jutland pastor's declaration that before God we are wrong. Derrida, speaking in a different context, aptly notes that such a declaration can be a ploy "since you are going to know, starting at the end of the sentence," what you should know. (The Politics of Friendship, 31) It is my contention that the duplicious communication of the Jutland pastor evades the mystification of denial through both a direct and indirect activity. I hope to illustrate this by considering the pastor's claim not as an epistemological axiom but as a practice, emphasizing its relation to a notion of a chosen people, and the ironic performance of Kierkegaard's authorship.

The sermon's thrust is posed in opposition to the supposed righteousness of a chosen people whose claim to knowledge would create a totalizing and closed economy. The pastor's counter, however, is not an equally rigid assertion, as the logical consequence of such would be that God is right--reinstating the principle of reason and the closed economy. The declaration is, instead, a practice of love. In being wrong one does not stand over the other, or the divine, in possession of an empowering knowledge, but instead effaces the totalizing aspects of a self-empowered self. Accordingly, the declaration is not a withdrawal but a denial of our claims to control and is a practice of breaking these boundaries for the sake of relationship.

In contrast to a catholicity whose askesis allows for greater control (as Virginia Burrus and David Brakke have shown of Athanasius for example) the notion of a chosen people is challenged by a singular and embodied subject. The denial of calculation and its indexes issues from a place of finitude not disembodied abstraction. This body, however, does not form a more basic unit of dominion, but is characterized by a relationship that it cannot draw into itself or possess. Instead, in

its very tension with economies and indexes, it is opened again and again in a self-emptying, always inadequate, activity of love.

Though this may appear to be a repetition of the universalizing good conscience of "that stroke of genius called Christianity," the pseudonymous character of the work seems to suspend mystifying stasis with a kenotic dynamism. The duplicity of the authorship does not indicate an explicit lie guarding an implicit truth but rather it is the performative deferral of authority.

Accordingly, the pastor's sermon is not an "authorized" statement, but is caught up in the play of denial and affirmation. This changes the sermon from a content given to a self-possessed receiver to an invitation into a love that empties itself.

Charles M. Stang, Harvard Divinity School
Title T.B.A.

Recent interest in the negative or "apophatic" mystical tradition within Christianity has occasioned a resurgence of interest in its foremost late antique spokesman, Dionysius the Areopagite or, as he often called, "Pseudo-Dionysius." Modern scholarship on Dionysius has been largely devoted to assessing the nature and extent of his debt to post-Plotinian Neoplatonism. By reading him exclusively against this backdrop, modern scholars have argued that for Dionysius material creation and the human body are to be progressively transcended—or "unsaid"—in the mystical ascent to the "God beyond being." The Incarnation traditionally stands as an obstacle to such an instrumental view of the body. And yet scholars have consistently characterized Dionysian Christology as a "exceedingly thin veneer" (Nygren), a "cosmetic" (Rorem) disguising his true Neoplatonic commitments to the realm of the eternal at the expense of this world.

This paper argues vigorously against this prevailing view, and insists that for Dionysius apophasis does not negate the body, nor render the Incarnation superfluous, nor deny humans their ethics. This paper stands alone by reading Dionysius against a Pauline backdrop; after all, this late fifth century author chose to write under the name of the Athenian who was converted by Paul's speech to the Areopagus, as mentioned in Acts 17. In fact, the figure and the writings of Paul animate the entire *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Neither the author's imagined relationship to Paul nor the pseudonymous enterprise can be dismissed as a mere ploy; on the contrary, Paul and pseudonymity are deeply aligned with the "apophatic" aims of Dionysius' mystical theology.

This paper will proceed in three stages: (1) it begins by borrowing and developing the concept of "apophatic anthropology" from the recent work of Bernard McGinn on John Scottus

Eriugena and Meister Eckhart; (2) it then investigates how Dionysius draws on the figure and writings of Paul to develop his own “apophatic anthropology”; (3) finally, this paper argues that even the choice to write under the name of another is best understood as an ecstatic devotional practice in the service of an apophasis of the self, and a practice that finds its inspiration in the Pauline confession of ruptured subjectivity: “It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

Pseudonymity, therefore, is precisely what renders the self and the body “apophatic.” And yet neither self nor body are left behind. Rather, the stability of the self is undone by soliciting the interruption of another. Only a self that is rendered unknown to itself by the interruption of another can hope to know the unknown God. On this picture, the Incarnation is not a singular event, but the ever-present possibility that Christ will intrude on the affairs of the self, and render it open to God. The body, therefore, is not left behind, but rather caught up in this intrusion and ecstasy, as Paul himself gives ample testimony. And writing—more specifically pseudonymous writing—becomes the embodied practice of soliciting this intrusion.

Erika Murphy, Drew University
Death on the Margin: Writing Ourselves Off the Page

In *The Gospel of Truth*, God, Jesus, and the divine pleroma perform a salvation story in the context of a non-linear creation. The author of *The Gospel of Truth* removes themselves from the text, in effect “dying” in order to allow the text to move and expand on its own. Yet the author still maintains the trace of a presence, pointing to an inherently ambiguous and unstable text. Rather than acting as a unifying force, the divine creates fissures and cracks that open up bodies, time, and space, exposing us to a creation in flux. There is no attempt to *resolve* cosmological disunity; we are encouraged to explore the spaces that expand the text and divinity itself. In an attempt to secure salvation for the pleroma, Jesus’ body disappears and reappears in many different forms, which multiply possibilities for truth and salvation. Jesus, as the living book, embodies Nietzsche’s Eternal Return as a perpetual re/cycle. Yet the various returns of Jesus also generate novelty; as the living book, Jesus word and living body is never written the same way.

God the Father manifests as a powerful present-absence who desires the return of the totality. Filled with more space than substance, God’s body holds the wisdom and knowledge that lies in invisibility and ambiguity. In order to experience God, we must come forward with a light touch: understanding the divine and the text can only be accomplished in small touches between

letters, words, and pages. Unable to grasp truth or salvation, we must look for and experience divine traces; we must be willing to move intuitively toward an invisible salvation. The elusiveness of God's body provides a focal point for salvation: we see glimpses of the Father's mouth and tongue, feel his breath, and see flashes of his hands. God in effect attempts to lure the divine pleroma through the sense with promises of divine pleasure. Yet, while God and Jesus can tempt us with their words and bodies, we ultimately must have the faith to let ourselves be seduced and make a return to the divine.

In a text fraught with uncertainty, we never grasp the truth. We must read the text along with its gaps, touching without grasping, brushing the surface, feeling the landscape of the text. To experience the richness we must, in effect, join the author by dissolving – by writing ourselves off the page, truth can emerge on its own.

Luke Higgins, Drew University
Deep Listening in the Bodily Interstices: An Eco-Apophatics of the Sensuous

Perhaps the long and distinguished lineage of the “apophatic impulse” in Christian theology and spirituality can be attributed to the ways it has enabled the Christian heart and mind to open to dimensions of religious experience that go beyond the limitations of human thought categories. While this “apophatic impulse” was traditionally applied strictly to the contemplation of God, in recent times parallels have been drawn between religious apophysis and the gestures of other, more secular, theoretical discourses (for instance, the conversation in and around Jacques Derrida's work). Implicit in the intermeshing of these discourses is a recognition of how easily the boundaries begin to blur between an apophatic opening (that is, one that stretches beyond the human categories of language and meaning) to “God” in the strict sense, and an apophatic opening to any and all “others” – or to put it another way, to that which *arrives*. Though I enter this conversation as a Christian theologian, this “slippage” between the religious and secular implications of what I will call the “apophatic impulse” is something that will help to inform my own body / sense based interpretation of apophatic “experience”. What I want to suggest is that perhaps one of the most important implications or applications of this apophatic impulse – which might be tentatively defined as a becoming hyper-conscious (or mystically conscious) of the finitude and limitations of human meaning categories – is the way it may help open human beings to becoming “addressed” by that which exceeds the human without necessarily exceeding the concrete or the “sensuous”. I believe that the cultivation of an “apophatic bearing” in relation to the nonhuman might open

powerfully redemptive possibilities for the badly damaged relationship between humans and the “natural” ecology they are embedded within.

I will bring into dialogue two fields of scholarship – first, the recent work of David Abram around ecology, language and the senses in his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*; and secondly, Alfred North Whitehead’s theory of the “structured society” in *Process and Reality* along with his fascinating proposal that life can fundamentally be defined as that which “inhabits” the bodily interstices. Whitehead’s unique understanding of the “nested” layers of actual occasions that make up structured societies make possible a renewed appreciation for the role of the body in making possible a certain mystical or apophatic bearing on reality. I will show how the complex interstitial spaces made possible within the body’s uniquely prehensive “environment” give rise to a richly textured relationality unhinged to any single chain of causation. I will then transition into a more explicit discussion of human language informed by David’s Abram’s insights into ways language is rooted in the dynamic reciprocity between living beings and their ecology. Abram’s recontextualizing of language will open a new space for considering the significance of the apophatic in a way that doesn’t negate the immediacies of concrete, sense-based relationality. This discussion of both Abram and Whitehead will lead to my own proposal for a mode of “eco-apophatic deep listening” that may allow the non-human other to arrive *as* other – loosened (if not entirely freed) from the objectifying tendencies of human language categories, particularly as they function in our (post)modern cultural context. This particular application of the principles of apophasis then, will not pursue a total vacating of language’s possibilities so much as an exploring both of language’s limits and its unexpected openings at the living, sensuous edge between the human and the non-human.

Krista E. Hughes, Drew University
Beautiful Failure: Love’s Impossible Call to Portraiture

Like many of her Continental contemporaries, French theorist H el ene Cixous has explored the apophasis of the other, although in her case she speaks not of the ubiquitous *tout autre*, or of the Supreme Other, or of the stranger but instead of the beloved other whose mysteriousness grows precisely as understanding deepens. God(-with-a-capital-G), Cixous notes, exceeds comprehensibility because “the very being of God is to be unknowable, and everyone can think that God is the infinite whole of not-being-like-a-human-being-could-think-so by going to the extreme extremity of every thought until the point where it turns into its opposite.” Her beloved, in contrast, defies the “ease that divine mathematics provides.” It is the beloved’s infinite particularities and

dynamism across time, combined with her/his simultaneous proximity and transcendence, that engender the apophysis of love. Cixous's struggle is that she feels irresistibly compelled to "write (to) You" – to simultaneously address and describe her beloved in a written portrait – but also fears what she knows is an impossible task. To answer this irresistible, impossible call of love would be, she says, "the most beautiful of all failures." Although a failure, it could indeed be beautiful because Cixous's concern is not so much mastery as virtuosity: "I would like to write like a painter," she says, "I would like to write like painting."

The question I wish to explore in this paper is primarily hermeneutical: How might theological discourse on divine apophysis, both its contemporary articulations as well as current considerations of traditional mysticism, shift were it to take some cues from Cixous? My exploration is two-fold. First, I want to suggest that because certain contemporary relational theologies deconstruct the "divine mathematics" of theological orthodoxy invoked by Cixous, there are possibilities for deepening how we understand and articulate the roles of love and belovedness within apophatic experiences of the holy. Second, I want to propose that, in light of the inevitable failure of the apophatic project to "capture" (any) truth, we might consider theopoetics instead of theorizing as a more fruitful approach: a quest of virtuosity rather than one of (impossible) mastery. What might our theological reflections on apophysis yield if we conceived of them as love's impossible, yet irresistible, call to portraiture? Might we pursue with greater courage and deeper joy this most beautiful of all failures?
