

Defying the Meaning Line: Reading Brian Blount’s Presidential Address alongside *Lxs Atravesadxs*

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Abstract

Responding to Brian Blount’s call to reimagine biblical studies as border-crossing, this essay converses with Gloria Anzaldúa’s notions of *lxs atravesadxs*, the border-crossed. What happens when we start from the stories of the border-crossed and their struggles with and around meaning instead of focusing on meaning-making through the exegesis of biblical texts?

Key Words

scriptures, Anzaldúa, borderlands, border-crossing, border-crossed, borders

Who Gets to Cross Borders?

In 2018, [Brian Blount](#) was only the second Black president of SBL in its history, with [Vincent Wimbush](#) having been the first in 2010. Wimbush and Blount’s presidencies signal a change in the possibilities for belonging in biblical studies. I write these words with gratitude that Blount’s presidential address confronted structures of minoritization and advocated for the expansion of minoritized critical approaches. Blount openly speaks to the challenge of how to make biblical studies a place for more and different sorts of scholars to work. Drawing on the words of W.E.B. Du Bois and speaking during an era of increased protest against anti-Black violence in the U.S.A., Blount challenged academic “brutality” and argued that it is quite impossible to be a “calm, cool, and detached” scholar so long as violence destroys life (Blount 2019, 21). Indeed, as Blount argued earlier in his address, when discussing the work of Fernando F. Segovia, “Silence has a message all its own” (Blount 2019, 10).

I share Blount’s alarm at the systemic violence that has significantly restricted the numbers of minoritized biblical critics holding doctorates in the U.S.A., a violence related to, but also quite distinct from, the sorts of violence that have shaped policing, detention, and incarceration in the U.S.A. The [SBL member profile](#) of 2018 estimates that members of African descent are only 4.12% of the U.S.A. population of SBL, with other minoritized communities registering even lower percentages. In doing research for an essay on Latinas in biblical studies, I learned from Nicole Tilford that, as of 2018, the SBL had registered a total of 18 U.S.A. Latinas, who identified as such. In a lecture (2021), Ahida Calderón Pilarski discussed that data in greater depth arguing that there may have only been five

Latinas with full-time faculty positions in the U.S.A. at that time. Although I like to imagine there are more of us in the Society, I cannot imagine there are many more. In diagnosing malevolent academic structures, and again referencing Du Bois's notion of the "color line," Blount spoke about the problem of the "meaning line," the way our field has too often policed meaning with a strict boundary "between the text, to be objectively interrogated on the one side, and the reader, who interrogates from her space, on the other" (Blount 2019, 16). Here, the meaning-making violence of metaphorical policing has consequences for who becomes an authorized critic and on what terms.

To counter this strict form of meaning control, Blount re-imagines biblical studies as willful border crossing that treats all readers as living in a borderlands space; he wishes there to be no more center and thus no neat meaning line. Blount demands something that will feel revolutionary for many scholars, though not likely for most of the respondents in this *Bible & Critical Theory* issue. Blount argues that "a break in perspective is required. Accessing meaning potential thus requires a violence of sorts, and perhaps this is why we pretend we can avoid it and go directly to meaning on our own terms, out of our own space" (Blount 2019, 16). In addressing a presumably majoritarian audience, given that the 2019 USA membership of SBL was almost 86% Euro-diasporic, Blount challenged the monocultural bias of those who have formed communities by setting boundaries on who can enter the space of biblical studies. Dominant monocultural enforcement of the meaning line pushes too many minoritized scholars out of the guild and hinders even more minoritized scholars from crossing the barriers of entry into biblical studies in the first place.

Since my classrooms are generally spaces where Euro-diasporic individuals are only a plurality and not a majority, and I listened to this address as I first did during the middle of the U.S.A. presidency of Donald J. Trump, the violence of border-crossing has had lasting impacts on the audiences of my daily life. My own personal history and pedagogical context teaching in a Latina/o/x Studies program in an undergraduate liberal arts environment meant that border-crossing as a metaphor both caught my attention and held my attention differently. I take a cue from Blount about the need to name directly the politics of our present, because silence is a message all its own. I offer these remarks as an opportunity to relate metaphorical crossing of the meaning line to the contexts of crossing at the U.S.A.-Mexico border so we can practice a biblical studies where we refuse to silence the present even as we converse across time.

The U.S.A.-Mexico Border and the Border-Crossed

I first presented my response to Blount in San Diego, about seventeen miles from the San Ysidro Point of Entry, one of the highest volume authorized loci for crossing the U.S.A.-Mexico border. About twenty-nine miles from there, is El Barretal, a particularly large refugee camp in Tijuana, composed of people from different parts

of the two-thirds world but particularly from Central America. El Barretal came into existence because of the Trump administration's refusal to accept asylum seekers. Some of the misery of those camp residents has been documented in U.S.A. media from the *New York Times* to *National Geographic*. I cannot name all the violence of the border, and we may never know all the names of the people murdered by border policies. El Barretal is but one example of the recent legal violence that the U.S.A. government enforces upon people seeking refuge from physical violence, poverty, and environmental disaster (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Not everyone has the privilege of crossing borders, and U.S.A. border policy legislates death for those who try to enter uninvited.

Perhaps in invoking the border-crossing metaphor in relationship to the meaning line, Blount was pointing us toward the highly uneven power dynamics that often structure the making of borders, including the borders of the meaning line, and the determination of who gets to cross those borders freely and willingly. As Cristina Beltrán explains, white democracy in the U.S.A. has often thrived on the ability to set the terms of border-crossing: "the frontier offered white citizens the freedom to claim territory, challenge borders, and engage in Herrenvolk practices of removal, settlement, and displacement while also acquiring wealth and participating in acts of political creation through founding communities, drawing boundaries, and regulating the movement of others" (Beltrán 2020, 28). The United States as a settler colonial state and global imperial power (even if that power is declining) has often made its nation by crossing the borders of others while restricting the mobility of those deemed "other" to white democracy. Following Gloria Anzaldúa, rather than think of migrant residents incarcerated in El Barretal as border-crossers, and rather than universally idealize border transgression, we may perhaps think about how the violence of border-crossing gets signified on by the border-crossed, by the people Anzaldúa calls *atravesadxs* (1987).

The land on which the city of San Diego, California sits is also home to the Kumeyaay peoples who, like most Native Californians, found themselves displaced through imperial and invasive border crossing, first Spanish, Mexican, and then U.S.A. rule. To follow Beltrán's point, white Spanish and U.S.A. as well as white and mestizx Mexican settlers partially crafted national citizenship through their ability to cross the borders of others, build communities, and then redefine the rules that govern the crossing of territories. The Spanish crossed the borders of the ocean to enter into Indigenous territories, they renamed those territories California, and they built missions through which they sought to control Indigenous movement and remake spatial belonging (Hidalgo 2017). San Diego takes its name from the first such mission built in what is now the state of California. Today, the Kumeyaay ancestral homeland crosses the unnatural border fence that the United States of America has built between San Diego and Tijuana, a fence that stretches into the Pacific Ocean. In this way, peoples are not the only life worlds that are border-crossed. I wonder, as Jione Havea has done, about the trauma of the boundaries

that are crossed (Havea 2018). How are the lands and the ocean, even the fence itself, also *atravesadxs*?

Kumeyaay survivance reflects a border-crossing experienced as violent imposition rather than liberative praxis. For instance, imperial and settler colonial violence forced Delfina Cuero, a Kumeyaay woman, to cross many borders. Having a relationship to land not grounded in scripted, contractual ownership as befitting the borders found on most maps, Cuero's parents were border-crossed. In the late nineteenth century, they were forced to make way for border-crossers, for settlers who moved into Mission Valley. Then, throughout Cuero's own childhood, she was forced to move constantly, sometimes as her parents looked for work, sometimes as they tried to live by hunting and gathering. But wherever they went, "white people kept moving into more and more of the places... We went farther and farther from San Diego looking for places where nobody chased us away... Pretty soon they would tell me we had to move again" (Cuero 1992, 177). San Diego today looks very different from Cuero's early twentieth century, but her story underscores how border-crossing is not always a choice. Often migration is a forced response to having been border-crossed; because some people have violently crossed and then redrawn borders, others are forced to cross borders.

To the extent that Blount draws our attention to the meaning line as a border violently created and enforced by a dominant culture, this metaphor may help us challenge the ways dominant biblical studies has over-invested in creating a community predicated on displacing some meaning-makers, creating a meaning line, and strictly controlling how meaning gets made. In this regard, Blount might help more of us to see ourselves as border-crossed, as interpreters created under signs of violence who are now forced to transgress boundaries we did not make. However, what does it mean to call scholars, especially majoritarian critics, to engage in border-crossing? And what of the violence that attends border-crossing?

In a 2019 presentation at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Neomi De Anda, a theologian who grew up in Texas near the U.S.A.-Mexico border, reminded scholars present of the histories of militarization, violence, and weaponization that have structured the region and that have had ongoing, lethal effects for too many of those who live in the borderlands and who try to cross borders. In calling people to cross borders, are we asking them to do so as imperial violators? Are we asking them to assume the risks of violence that face the border-crossed? Should we?

Because of the violent histories of border-crossing and border-drawing, I have become more concerned about metaphorical deployments of the "border" and notions of violence that are detached from the lived experiences within and under *fronteras*/borderlands. I also do not teach my students to cross borders because many of my students are themselves *atravesadxs*, and so they teach me about border-crossing and being border-crossed. I have seen how they react to discussions of the border, and I try to make sure that they read scholars such as Anzaldúa or Leticia

Guardiola-Sáenz, a New Testament scholar from Reynosa, Mexico who grew up in the borderlands just across from McAllen, Texas and who has written about border-crossing in the gospels (2002). I also want them to read a diverse set of scholars who reflect on the violent legacy that migration and forced border-crossing can entail, such as the “postcolonial melancholia” that Jin Young Choi reflects upon (2015 and 2019). I also hope they can question the borders that have been imagined as good, by reading with scholars such as Eric A. Thomas who interprets Revelation’s “epilogue” as “Africana queer prologue” and challenges the borders of the new Jerusalem by reading with those *atravesadxs* cast outside the gates (2018). I do not have to teach my students how to cross borders because too many of them have already done so, but I hope to work with them to question how borders and boundaries have been violently naturalized and patrolled, and how those borders might yet be resisted and refused.

Beyond the Meaning Line: Some Minoritized Hermeneutical Options

In a world where so many migrants face violence, what models can we turn to for making knowledge? What models defy unjust boundaries without reinscribing imperial violence upon borders or *atravesadxs*? How can I grapple with borders in a way that responds more relationally to my students and to other *atravesadxs*? How can we build a world with less violent borders?

I have more questions than suggestions on this front. From the vantage point of biblical studies, I have learned much from minoritized critics and interpretive strategies that refuse to center exegetical meaning in biblical texts. I offer up a few examples from those critics that help me as I teach. To refuse to control meaning, to be open to more diverse ranges of interpretation and interpretive approaches, requires what Mitzi J. Smith has called “hermeneutical humility” (Smith 2018, 58). Smith asks us to learn to be vulnerable with each other, and she provides examples of what I once called epistemic humility, but I now call epistemic realism, the recognition of the finitude of what any individual can know and how what we know changes over time.¹ Moreover, as Latinx theologies have so often taught me through the practice of *en conjunto* work, knowledge only really gets made with others. Perhaps this notion also shapes Fernando F. Segovia’s (2015) call for a “global systemic criticism” that beckons for collaborative, interdisciplinary scholarship undertaken across borders. I hope we can engage in more intentionally collaborative knowledge-making and learn to read with less arrogance.

We can also approach the reading of other texts with an openness to being called out and transformed by them. As Tat-siong Benny Liew (2008) has often underscored, who we are may impact how we read, but what we read also shapes

¹ I had only called it humility because the epistemic norm of too much scholarship is arrogant domination. As Willie James Jennings (2020) has outlined, the history of so many universities cannot be neatly disentangled from the histories of enslavement and colonization, from European colonizing quests to dominate, to master, and to subjugate.

who we are. In that vein, I wonder if we might take a cue from Du Bois again, and think further with the metaphor of the Veil of Color. Here, I have learned from Shanell T. Smith's multivalent readings of the Veil and the Book of Revelation through her hermeneutics of *ambiveilence* (2014).

In her terrific book on *The Woman Babylon*, Smith revisits the depictions of Babylon in Rev 17-18. In her reading, Babylon is demonstrably both an enslaved and colonized woman as well as an imperial and dominating figure. Smith's ambivalence towards Babylon becomes enmeshed with ambivalence towards herself as she examines the veil of her own positionality as a middle-class Black intellectual in the U.S.A., someone who is both subjugated by empire and a citizen of empire. Here Smith models a way of crossing the meaning line, reading Babylon thickly in relationship to depictions of the Roman empire, but at the same time Smith refuses to center the ancient text's meaning. Instead, she centers how meaning gets made in the interaction between herself as a reader and the text. Smith's approach to Revelation points to the multiple and conflicting ways that being border-crossed has shaped readers, and it also provides an optimistic vision of how we can be open to self-critical reformation in reading, how there are ways of reading that can challenge us to see ourselves from different angles and as multidimensional subjects.

A relational turn marks the work of minoritized critics, and, within the study of scriptures in a broader way, we can see a turn to "relating" (with multiple meanings), for instance, in Havea's work on *talanoa*, which as I understand it, is a form of contextually specific storytelling that points to how we always already tell stories in relation. There is no neat meaning line in the business of interpretation because we are always already relating with others as we read. We have to think about how we have been shaped not with neat borders between us but actually in messy relational ways. Biblical studies remains of interest to me to the extent that we can see how multiple peoples have read shared texts differently over time but also in relations. Sometimes those histories of biblical relating require us to engage in our own *talanoa* with others, to weave together interactive stories across space and time. I long to see more critical work like Lisa M. Bowens (2020) who traces the ways that African American interpreters have confronted and signified on Pauline letters from the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

I also think of the multitude of ways that border-crossed artists have signified on and disrupted the U.S.A.-Mexico border. For instance, in 1984, artists in San Diego and Tijuana began collaborating through the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) in order to create art that defied the U.S.A.-Mexico border and its escalating militarization by emphasizing the ongoing relational interaction between artists across borders. Their art not only worked to challenge the U.S.A.'s repressive border politics, but they also used the border to reflect on and express varying conceptions of Chicana/o/x subjectivity (Berelowitz 2005). They undertook this work in the same era in which Anzaldúa published her landmark text *Borderlands*, from which I take my own focus on *atravesadxs*.

Relational activism combined with a relational reading of biblical texts in the October 1986 work “End of the Line,” which the BAW/TAF described as “a site-specific performance/installation/event” in the Pacific Ocean where the border fence between Tijuana and San Diego (description found in Schnorr archives at the University of California, San Diego) ended. In the 1980s, though militarization was escalating, the fence actually stopped on the beach. Some surveillance existed, but visually – the beach still maintained a possibility of openness. Taking place in both the U.S.A. and Mexico at the same time, BAW/TAF created a costumed performance with twelve people representing stereotypes—and thus pointing to the messiness of our relations—and sitting down to a “Last Supper” at a table painted to look like a highway. Three items were included on the table, one of which, a heart with a cross, was intentionally imagined to be representing “syncretic Catholicism” (Sheren 2015, 42). The performers took up a practice of communion around shared corn, rotating the table so both the table and the performers all crossed the border multiple times. Members of the audience were likewise invited to participate in the Eucharistic dinner and to share in the corn.

BAW/TAF argued that their work was “a challenge to the media concept of the border as a ‘war zone,’ [and] the piece established the possibility of a space for creativity and peaceful interaction” (cited in Sheren 2015, 42). As art historian Ila Nicole Sheren has argued, “the group viewed the border itself as a performance, one between nations ... the BAW/TAF created the potential for *every* border crossing to become performance art” (Sheren 2015, 41). Here biblical traditions around the Last Supper aided actual border-crossing and remade both the location of the borderlands and the activity of crossing the border into a sacred performance. This site-specific installation was one example of enacting another form of subjectivity that recognized the violence of the borderlands but refused the meaning-control of borders and the totalization of the violence that has shaped border-making and border-crossing.

What happens to borders and the meaning line when we center the relational dynamics of meaning-making, even when we recognize those relational dynamics can also be violent and fraught? How can we work collaboratively with a focus that is perhaps less on interpretation, or even on border-crossing, and more on relating and relation? I wonder if these questions are some of what Blount had in mind when he discussed how “dialogue and coalition building recognizes differences, accepts differences, and promotes the kind of confrontation between those differences that can perpetually lead to new textual vision and understanding” (Blount 2019, 19). Perhaps here is a model for centering relational disruption of the meaning line.

In seeking a disruption of the meaning line, I return to the work of Vincent L. Wimbush. If we see ourselves as interpreters more critically, and if we move our focus from interpretation to relating and relations, I cannot help but question the whole project of meaning itself, and especially how the meaning line Blount described in his address infects the structures of the biblical guild. I cannot help but

wonder about that massive and fraught world of scripturalization, the ways that the very focus on the authorizing power of written texts has shaped *atravesadxs* in modernity (Wimbush 2012).

Just as Delfina Cuero's parents were forced to cross borders because they had no documents validating their relationship to their homeland, young people who received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival under the Obama administration did not have the right "documents" to definitely ensure their belonging in the U.S.A. (Medina 2019). They could have, under the Trump administration, lost the documents that grant them a liminal status of authorization in the U.S.A., and only the judgment of nine scripturalizing interpreters of the Constitution maintained the status of their documents. I wonder here how thinking with the border-crossed rather than border crossing might transform the ways we constitute a nation in-and-around a constitution that sustains itself, as Beltrán argued, by demarcating status within a national imaginary. Instead of crossing scripturalized borders, might we build a world where more people, including those nine authorized constitutional interpreters, learn better how to live without the borders of meaning?

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