

## Salsa Dancing with Blount

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### Abstract

Using the dance floor as a metaphor, Blount calls for the coming together of equals willing to learn from each other. Unfortunately - as this article argues - whites drunk with the supremacy of their scholarship make bad dance partners and should be ejected until they learn the steps of the marginalized. What is called for is a rejection of white hermeneutics because of its conscious or unconscious complicity with white supremacy and colonialization. How do scholars of color dance to the tunes indigenous to their own culture; and why is such a dance crucial to our very well-being? The article also explores the second metaphor employed by Blount – border crossing. While Blount calls for border crossings in the classroom, I suggest this is a dangerous act which places scholars of color (especially those who were once “illegal”) in harm’s way, mainly because whites do not wish to build coalitions with those they deem as not belonging.

### Key Words

otherness, white/Black dichotomy, border crosser, *nepantla*, (class)room

Surviving the academy can indeed be a deadly dance. To dance with one claiming to be a partner, an ally, places you in close proximity; so close you can feel the warmth of their breath upon your neck as the sweat of their brow comeslingles with yours. Swaying in simple triple time, hips synced to the slow tempo of a bolero, the temptation exists to get lost within your dance partner’s shadow. To the unaware spectator, this sensual movement may appear as a moment of intimacy; but as many forced to dance with abusers know, it can rapidly digress into a tango of terror. [Dr. Brian Blount’s 2018 presidential address](#) provided an outline on how to dance within the academy. But before I judge his dance-off competition, it is important to first clarify my utmost respect for his scholarship, and that of previous SBL presidents like [Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza](#), [Vincent L. Wimbush](#) and [Fernando F. Segovia](#) who have always sought to make a space for historically ignored and minoritized voices. Biblical scholars, such as these four, upon whose shoulders so many stand, have influenced, shaped, and informed how I prescriptively engage scripture when conducting ethical analysis.

To be clear, I am not a biblical scholar, nor do I claim to be. I am a social ethicist who focuses on praxis, specifically praxis which might contribute to the dismantlement of oppressive social and cultural structures. This is why Blount’s words resonate so much with my very being:

In biblical studies, power has long resided in the alleged impartially and objectivity of historical and literary methods whose positivism inoculates its practitioners from the viral infections of the space from which they conduct their biblical research. . . . Less Others learn and execute the “objective” methodologies and how biblical scholars arrive at text meaning through such methodologies . . . (Blount 2019, 8).

While I can spend hours celebrating and discussing the important contributions made to the discipline through Blount’s academic leadership, his overall scholarship, and his influence upon the discourse, I have instead chosen to respectfully raise some questions and concerns with his 2018 presidential address for the sake and purpose of furthering an important conversation he began.

Relying on the wisdom of W.E.B. DuBois, Blount maintains that “to survive in this bifurcated world of imposed Otherness, African Americans . . . had to become bicultural” (2019, 7). Of course this rings true during most of the past century when America was predominately a Black and white country. But as the twentieth century came to a close, we witnessed a society which no longer fits the clear dichotomy DuBois experienced and expressed. We find ourselves in a multifurcated country where bifurcated understandings are antiquated and inadequate, doing more harm than good. Stuck in a bifurcated world silences what is currently the largest U.S. minoritized Other. From this space, clinging to Latinx Otherness as a means of survival, allow me to “become a problem,” by crossing a “meaning line” where I ascertain, as Blount notes, “text meaning . . . through an engagement between the reader, reading out of [their] space, and the text as it is engaged in that space” (Blount 2019, 9). The text, and I as reader, is specifically read out of my Latinx space, engaging the text beyond the white/Black dichotomy by contextualizing the interpretations of the text.

I begin my analysis from this new space by agreeing with Blount’s assessment, based on DuBois writings, that “white Americans had also, ironically, Othered themselves” (Blount 2019, 7). Arguing all are Othered from each other by their very existence, Blount calls all of us, including those accustomed to being at the center of the discourse, to embrace their Otherness and engage in an interculturality dance. But I wonder, are white Americans Othered by their existence or by their experience. The Othering of communities of color is experienced when white Americans seek to rob those falling short of the white ideal of their humanity. Consequently, white’s experience of imposing inhumanity upon their Others robbed them of their own humanity, the root cause of their Otherness.

If true, do we really then want oppressors to embrace their Otherness, their alienation with their humanity, an inhumanity imposed and the inhumanity experienced? Or should they, in an act of self-liberation, reject their Otherness like those on their margins? The wounds inflicted on my Latinx community run deep, and for our own self-healing, we might need to first focus on the injuries perpetrated through the denial of our humanity before we can even begin to recognize the self-

inflicted Otherness wound of our abusers. Seeking the multiplicity of text readings which push beyond the multicultural, as Blount suggests, is when interculturality recognizes how equally positioned and empowered Othered cultures relate to each other. He believes this approach is more liberating than historically Othered cultures reading over and against the dominant culture (Blount 2019, 15). But again I wonder if our best option might be to instead move beyond simply providing a hermeneutical privilege to the oppressed by segregating from those unwilling to denounce their unearned power, profit, and privilege.

Blount's model seeks to eradicate any center, thus making a dominate interpretive privilege unsustainable and empowering all groups as Other to participate from their particular social location. Blount referred to this exchange among equal Others as a "holy chaos of an ensemble dance troupe endeavoring to share the same chorographical construct by deploying different, equally significant movements of it. No one single movement is or could ever convey the entire choreographed meaning. No single dancer can ever be the only dancer who can interpret that entire meaning" (Blount 2019, 15).

Allow me to continue Blount's dancing analogy. As an award-winning disco dancer during my youth during the late 1970s, I spent many nights at bars and discotheques honing my moves. As much as I wish to embrace the ideal bar where all come as equal, to dance, to enjoy, to create a holy chaos of moving sweaty bodies that often changes dancing partners to learn new steps to improve one's repertory, there is always that one obnoxious person who insists on their rights to step on your toes. Their moves on the dance floor are designed to exclude other dancers, pushing them off the dance floor. They are unbearable, loud, drunk with privilege, and cruising for an altercation. I came to dance, but instead found myself in the midst of a fistfight, what during my youth we would call a rumble. What is needed is for such rude dancers who insist on their superiority to be expelled from the dance hall by biblical scholars who serve as bouncers. For Blount's dance hall to truly be mutually engaging, those breaking bad must be excluded until they learn that the only way they can stay is if they reject their supposed Otherness and cease attempting to impose square dancing on everyone else who insist on leaning salsa.

History provides little evidence of those privileged by society wishing to dance with the Others whom they have historically systematically excluded. I wonder if they can even comprehend or appreciate the opportunity of an invitation to the dance. More importantly, I question why is it the responsibility of the excluded to do the inviting in the first place? Imagine a dance partner trapped in a violent and physically abusive relationship. Does one approach the battered dancer and suggest they remain at the beck and call of their abuser? My concern of dancing with those who have a history of domestic abuse, who are privileged in their supremacism of whiteness, is for the one forced to follow the lead of the abuser to become vulnerable in such close proximity. To dance salsa at the margins of the dancefloor is to grasp the divine in the midst of struggle and oppression, an attempt to understand why the

dispossessed struggle to survive within a society designed to maintain the spotlight on one privileged group at the expense of all the Others. But you might be thinking, not all Eurocentric biblical interpreters today embrace a white supremacist lens by which to read the Bible. Surely, I am using a very broad brush to paint all white American biblical scholars. Not necessarily.

White biblical scholars, like the rest of us, unconsciously read their biases and presuppositions into the text. As we know, no one reads the biblical text objectively. We all read it subjectively, bringing our presuppositions and unexamined assumptions to the text, reading into the words our theology, our worldview, in short – our prejudices. To claim objectivity is to mask the power of making the subjective readings of some normative for all. Hence the importance of recognizing what we bring to the reading, suspicious of how our social location influences how we legitimize the text's interpretations. This is why I cannot dance with Eurocentric biblical scholars. What they call scholarship has always existed – consciously or unconsciously – to textually justify the colonization of darker bodies, and worse, their minds. Eurocentric hermeneutics has historically been, and continues to be, an apologist for white American Christian nationalism. Insisting to dance on the margins of Eurocentric academic hermeneutics is a subversive and bold dance move which challenges how the dominant culture has historically been taught to interpret the text. If we insist on dancing to a liberative tune, then we literally dance to two different songs, a rumba and a polka – not a pretty sight.

The racialization of biblical scholarship goes beyond ignorant feelings of superiority due to skin pigmentation. Complicity with the academic institutionalization of unexamined biases legitimizes and normalizes a worldview where the vast majority of whites benefitting from racist social structures can honestly believe they are not racist; even expressing outrage and indignation if ever accused. If complicity with racist academic structures encompasses more than simply a belief, then annihilating how Eurocentric academicians conduct scholarship requires more than being nice or more decent to people of color, more than learning political correctness. What is required is the dismantling the academic hubris which fails to consider the subjective racialization of the discipline advocated as universal by nice, politically-correct white people. What is required are new dance steps.

To maintain the institutional violence which furthers the occupation of our minds, a Eurocentric way of doing biblical interpretation is required which was never intended to liberate the colonized even while employing lofty liberative words. I am keenly aware that the French Revolution's battle cry for *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* was never meant for her colonies in Vietnam, Haiti, or Algiers. Eurocentric thought has always been designed to exclude non-whites; thus, Eurocentric biblical interpretations have normatively failed, I believe, to seriously consider their unexamined racism and ethnic biases. Regardless as to how liberal or progressive they may insist on being, I maintain white biblical, theological, and

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ethical scholarship is beyond reform or redemption, being too complicit with white supremacy.

If biblical interpretations are a construct of a particular type of culture, then those born to and/or raised within a Eurocentric culture are a product of a society where white supremacy and class privilege have historically – and continue today – to be interwoven with how whites see and organize the world around them. This racist and classist underpinning contributes to the metanarrative of how those within the Eurocentric culture developed their way of thinking. A world view is constructed in which complicity with Eurocentrism is deemed normal and where those who benefit from white supremacy usually accept the present order of things, failing to consider the racialization of how they see and organize their world. Regardless as to how alluring Eurocentric biblical scholarship might appear to the colonized, most of it remains embedded within white supremacy and thus potentially incongruent with any dance signifying the Gospel message of liberation.

White biblical scholars, as a new Other dancing as equals with Others who have historically been disenfranchised is diametrically incongruent with the universalizing steps with which whites have been so accustomed. Blount seems to hold more hope than I do that the center will not hold, giving way to multiplicity. He believes the dominant Western perspective can no longer credibly sustain its interpretive privilege (Blount 2019, 15). But I have to ask, since when has the dominant Western perspective cared about being credible in sustaining any type of privilege? As recent events make all too clear, the interpretative perspective as to what occurred at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 per the dominant white supremacist who stormed democracy lacked credibility; yet it was enough to acquit the instigator a month later. Interpretative credibility has nothing to do with sustaining the Eurocentric power to misinterpret reality, whether it be current events or texts. I clearly hear Blount echoing de Wit and Dyk's call to "read with the other" (cited in Blount 2019, 15) but again I must ask why? For some six decades I have tried, and honestly, I'm weary and tired. Seeking to read with the other who instead insists on reading to me has proven to be too detrimental to my health. Selfcare demands I cease putting myself in harm's way.

The concern I am raising goes beyond just seizing the agency of refusing to dance with those insisting on stepping on our toes. It is they who historically refused to dance with us, who legally prohibited us from even patronizing their dance halls. So why is it expected that now, just because of their desires to be woke, that I must dance with them? It is not so much that I am rejecting Eurocentrism; but rather my refusal to sway to their music is a consequence of centuries of them rejecting their Others. It may take just as long to ever trust them enough to hold them tight during a slow dance. The only way white people can ever join me in any type of dance is for them to crucify their whiteness and be resurrected as new creatures who are now willing to learn mambo. I hold little hope they are willing to forsake their power, profit, and privilege just to dance with me. But if they do, I stand ready to save the

next dance for them. Meanwhile, the only adequate response from those historically Othered is the full and total rejection of dancers from the dominant culture insisting on the validity of their steps, no matter how decentered they might believe they are. They are barred from the discotheque because they dance the steps of their racist culture.

About 125 years ago, my intellectual mentor, José Martí, wrote: “El vino de plátano, y si sale agrio ¡es nuestro vino!” (2001). Allow me to translate for those who have yet mastered the language of the angels: “We will make our wine out of plantain, and even if it turns out sour, it is our wine.” We will interpret the biblical text through our own cultural symbols, and even if such interpretations taste sour, they are better than those of the dominant culture, for the sole reason that they are ours. To insist on dancing with Eurocentric biblical interpreters who historically segregated us from their dance halls, who have passed laws prohibiting interracial and interethnic dancing will, I believe, disrespect if not dismiss the wisdom emanating from our own cultures and contexts. Martí called upon the oppressed of the world to create a new way of thinking, a new way of being, a new way of dancing, a new way of contemplating the metaphysical based on our own indigeneity by making our own wine out of our own indigenous crops – plantains.

For our survival, for our sanity, for our liberation, Martí calls us to become winemakers who harvest liberative grapes from our own vineyards, rejecting the master’s gardening tools. We are called for more than simply understanding the Eurocentric world. We are called to seek its rejection. Quoting Abraham Smith’s “spaces are intricately tied to dynamics of power” Blount concludes that “access of text meaning potential *from* space is inevitably a political endeavor” (Blount 2019, 15). From my space on the dance floor, I claim the power of deciding whom I will and whom I will not dance with. I choose to only dance with Others who have experienced disenfranchisement, dispossession, and disinheritance. I will only dance with those of the dominant culture who has learned the dance moves of those historically prevented from entering their whites-only dance halls. As for those of the dominant culture relying on the dance moves rooted in their context – simply stated – my dance card is full: ¡muchas gracias!

Following these contemplations, I now wish to turn what Blount calls “border crossing in the classroom, as pedagogical strategy” (Blount 2019, 17). The call for crossing borders resonates with my soul, being that I too literally crossed international borders. For my troubles, I received a deportation order from the U.S. government in 1961. Choosing to remain I became undocumented, what racists today like to call “illegal,” until I received residency and then citizenship about a decade later. For those of us who literally crossed physical borders, we are well acquainted with the hatred expressed due to our very presence as immigrants. I am all for coalition building, as called for by Blount, but desire to engage in such coalition building must exist among all, specifically white Americans who thus far have demonstrated little interest or inclination.

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Crossing borders, for those of us who experienced it, is violent death-dealing terror. The text of crossing borders holds painful cultural meaning for Latinxs. For some of us the life-long consequences of crossing borders consist of being cast to the shadows where we suffer Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome whenever we find ourselves occupying that in-between space of *nepantla*. We recognize our current immigration crisis exists because white Europeans, the latest immigrants to this land, created the crises. They have rewritten themselves into the national narratives so as to appear as the victims of those who occupied the land before they ever invaded. Hazardous border crossings are not undertaken as a desirable option, but as the consequences of twentieth century U.S. foreign policies and trade deals.

We who cross borders did so because of the economic conditions imposed on our lands of origin, pushing us out while the hunger for cheap labor pulls us into the U.S. A century of U.S. military intervention existed to support the “right” of U.S. corporations (i.e., the United Fruit Company) to build roads into developing Latin American countries to extract, by brute force if necessary, our natural resources and cheap labor. Why then are we surprised when the inhabitants of these same countries, this author included, traverse these same roads, crossing borders, to follow everything stolen from us? The reason I am an immigrant in this country is because I am following all that has been stolen from the land which witnessed my birth – my sugar, my tobacco, my rum (the three necessities of life). The immigration crisis was created by the U.S. who still, to this day, refuses to recognize their culpability. We cross borders to escape the poverty, violence, and terror unleashed upon us through Gunboat Diplomacy and regime changes, efforts to protect *paxamericana*.

At this time, in the aftermath of the era of Trump when the storming of the Capitol by white supremacy still causes nightmares, I am not convinced that whites wish to build coalitions. I simply cannot dance with or engage in coalition building with people wishing to deport me, who refuse to see me as belonging. When it comes to physically crossing the southwestern borders of this nation, overall, I have found indigenous population, the original inhabitants of the land, to be welcoming allies. When I walk the migrant trails to leave water, food, and medical supplies, I have yet (although I’m sure they exist) met an anti-immigrant African-American. Those shouting “Build that Wall” or insisting on ripping our children from their parents’ arms and placing them in cages to sleep on dirt floors are the ones fearful of being decentered by my physical presence. Screaming against erase culture, they are scared of becoming one among many Others.

I understand the strategy to cross borders in the classroom is to learn from each other. But as the chair of my dissertation, John Raines, would often remind me, “the (class)room is appropriately named, for it is indeed a room of class.” Borders within these rooms of class are thicker and as impregnable as the walls on our southern border. In these rooms of class, students are taught the class to which they belong. They are taught which side of the border wall they are relegated to occupy. I propose

that seeking to cross these borders is more difficult than Blount imagines. Far from teaching at objective neutral educational system – regardless as to how progressive they may claim to be – students who attend (class)rooms are usually conditioned for domestication. Few are the spaces where the focus is liberation from existing social structures. And in those places where liberation is the goal, the strategy is not to work with or better understand whites as Others. I have no interest to “travel between cultural perspectives and confront cultural difference” (Blount 2019, 17). Been there, done that. I already know the cultural perspectives of the dominant culture. As my mentor José Martí wrote in 1895, “I have lived in the belly of the beast and know its entrails; and my only weapon is the slingshot of David” (2001, 4:168). Liberation requires, as already stated, the rejection of the perspectives of those building walls to literally keep me out. Failure to totally reject runs the risk of normalizing and legitimizing the current power structures. My task as an educator, specifically as one who calls himself a liberationist, is never to again cross borders, but to instead cultivate the student’s ability to find their own voice over and against the dominant voice by creating an environment in which individual and collective consciousness-raising occurs.

The problem with border crossing as a strategy is its assumption of equality and an intent to do no harm. Unfortunately, indigenous populations and those of us who hail from south of the border have always experienced a chill run up our collective spines whenever Euroamericans crossed borders. They have historically only crossed borders and entered the lands of Latinxs’ origins to steal our cheap labor and natural resources. But when we are the ones crossing borders seeking survival from the devastation wrought upon our lands, following our stolen resources and cheap labor, we are confronted with a sadistic culture of cruelty designed – as official public policy – to deter us from migrating. If we are going to talk about a strategy where Euroamerican are called to cross borders, we will need to provide trigger warnings for those of us with the stigmata of gunboat diplomacy and the establishments of banana republics upon our lands of origin.

Again, so as not to be misunderstood, I want to dance in Blount’s dance hall and cross borders in his classroom. I really am down with this! I just fear that Euroamerican Others will fight tooth and nail not to be decentered. May I humbly suggest we begin constructing our own dance halls and not invite them, at least not yet. You see, we can never have an honest dance-off as long as Eurocentric biblical interpreters are in the room, for they have a way of always becoming the center of any conversation; regardless if we insist that they sit at the margins.

We from historically marginalized communities first need to learn how to dance among ourselves, to relate to each other, to work together in scholarship and justice projects before inviting the cause of our disenfranchisement to the party. There exists so many dance moves I still need to learn from African-American, Asian-American, Native people. Can we just first meet and learn from each other, finding those points of where we find harmony in the music? Some of us have begun to hold these dances



every two years since 2012 when we created the *Society of Race Ethnicity and Religion* for the purpose of cross-pollination, or as Blount calls it: coalition building. I do look forward to the day all come to a decentered discotheque where all are Others, including my white brothers, sisters, and siblings. Unfortunately, we are not there yet, and too much groundwork first needs to be laid down. To rush it, without first seeking self-healing can prove to be devastating.

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