

Responses to SBL Presidents Brian K. Blount (2018) and Gale A. Yee (2019)

Editor's Introduction

Jione Havea, Trinity Methodist Theological College (Aotearoa) and Charles Sturt University (Australia)

One of the traditions of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) requires its President to deliver a presidential address at the Annual Meeting (AM) of the society. The President speaks, but no feedback or questions are invited from the SBL members on the floor, in the crowd, and the address is updated and published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature (JBL)* the following year.¹

This special issue of *B&CT* brings together some of the public responses to two recent SBL presidential addresses by Brian K. Blount (2018) and Gale A. Yee (2019). The articles took shape as presentations at two “Talk with the President” sessions during SBL AMs (2019 for Blount, 2020 for Yee), then updated for this online and open-access platform.

Due to the already high demands on living—in which Covid-19 infected our bodies, minds, and hearts—some of the responses at those two “Talk with the President” sessions could not be touched up and submitted to this special issue. The ones included are offered to invite further engagement with Blount and Yee, and to shout out their challenges and directions for SBL.² (The links to the published versions of the addresses by Blount and Yee are provided for readers who are not members of SBL, with gratitude to the SBL Press and *JBL* teams).

Borders

The articles by Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, Karri L. Whipple, and Miguel A. De La Torre are in response to the presidential address by Brian K. Blount, “[The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning](#).” The abstract for Blount’s published address in *JBL* (138.1) reads:

What is available to text interpreters is never meaning but meaning potential.
That potential is accessed culturally. A culturally responsive engagement

¹ These aspects of this SBL tradition trouble me, for they discourage conversation (one of the events in *talanoa*, which has “potential for meaning”) and privilege written texts (one of the obsessions of SBL members).

² This special issue meets the critical invitation in the [home page of B&CT](#): “We particularly welcome article submissions (or special issue ideas) that consider biblical studies from perspectives that are often marginalized, silenced, or elided within traditional biblical scholarship. Creative approaches are also welcome.”

with text meaning potential has profound implications for the shaping of a more just biblical society, classroom, and profession. There is a connection between how one exegetes in the classroom and the study and how one operates, justly or unjustly, in the world.

Borders—textual, ideological, physical, etcetera—need to be crossed to bring the text, as meaning potential, into actual meanings. Even if the Bible knew how to talk (to echo Allen D. Callahan), readers still need to cross borders—from text into society, and back, from classroom into the world, and back, and etcetera—in order to hear the potentials in the text. Put another way: the Bible provides ingredients and readers still need to prep, cook, and dish them out, with spices and supplements from their backyards and neighborhoods.

Along with the celebration of the directions, challenges, and invitations that Blount delivered, Hidalgo, Whipple and De La Torre raised concerns for further consideration. Among those are the following: Borders are real, and some borders cross and crush real people (see esp. Hidalgo). Real folx build and benefit from borders, in society and in the academy, and the privileges due to their whiteness, maleness, and straightness need to be crossed (see esp. Whipple). Real people cross real borders because real border-builders stole their real wealth ... so why not let the robbed and crossed come, let them be a part of our societies, including the SBL, and let them decide who to invite to their dance (read: meaning-making event; see esp. De La Torre).

Bodies

The articles by Mary Foskett, Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, and Gregory L. Cuéllar engage with the presidential address by Gale A. Yee, "[Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline](#)." The abstract that accompanies the *JBL* (139.1) version reads:

Intersectional analyses make the fundamental point that we who study and interpret the biblical text have many important facets to our identities that are impacted differently by multiple interacting systems of oppression and privilege. As a method of interpretation, intersectionality presumes that our own unique social locations, our own distinctive fusions of gender, race, class, et cetera, influence our readings of texts and our interpretations of them. It encourages us to think beyond the familiar boundaries of biblical studies to expose the diverse power relations of inequality in the text and uncover subjugated voices that were previously invisible or unheard.

Interestingly, the title of Yee's address in the 2019 SBL program ended with "the Discipline" and became "Our Discipline" in the revised and updated version published in *JBL*. To my native ears, this revision is a call for responsibility. The borders that we build and cross as interpreters of the Bible are (not "the" but) OURS, and they reveal and shape who we are. And who we are include our always already

intersectional bodies, so one of our challenges (as carriers and cooks of meaning potentials) is to translate intersectionality from our bodies to our thinking – this is the dance to which Yee invites folx.

The respondents to Yee’s address / article add more ingredients, including: SBL has been blind and deaf for so long, to realize the potential for leadership and meaning making in intersectional and colourful bodies and minds (see esp. Cuéllar). SBL has much to learn from venturing into public spaces and engaging public struggles (see esp. Foskett) and foreign bodies (see esp. Melanchthon). Yee engages her interlocutors in her own contribution to this issue, and thus keeps the intersectional dance hall open.

Mix’g dings up

Out of respect to the deep commitments of both Blount and Yee to Our discipline, the articles are not ordered to reflect sequence, panels, or camps. Rather, the articles are mixed up to echo the vibes of these two SBL Presidents, which i pose directly to the leaders and members of Our society. There are tasks/things/dings that we need to work on, especially with respect to:

- the structures of SBL (Cuéllar)
- the whiteness, maleness, and straightness of SBL (Whipple)
- the sins of SBL (De La Torre)
- the crossed under SBL (Hidalgo)
- the public space (another etcetera) that traditional biblical scholars (see n.2) tend to avoid (Foskett)
- the etceteras who are outside of the US of A (Melanchthon)
- the tradition that prevents SBL presidents from publically engaging SBL members (Yee)
- and the natives, who are everywhere, including the SBL (Havea)³

This *B&CT* special issue invites readers to join the conversations that Blount and Yee have initiated, and to push back at traditions that do not encourage interchange, interaction, interplay, inter...



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

³ I was not a respondent to Blount or Yee, but i joined the talanoa at both “Talk with the President” sessions.