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Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 138, No. 1 (2019), pp. 6-21

Published by: The Society of Biblical Literature

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15699/jbl.1381.2019.1382>

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The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning

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

In what has been called one the great books of the twentieth century, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois delineates the impact of otherness imposed upon African Americans.

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my own town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I seldom answer a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else.¹

A line was drawn. “The problem of the twentieth century,” Du Bois continued, “is the problem of the color-line.”² African Americans were and, in the twenty-first century, still are on the wrong side of that physical and existential demarcation.

¹W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1961), 15.

²Ibid., 23, 41.

To survive in this bifurcated world of imposed Otherness, African Americans, according to Du Bois, had to become bicultural. Because African Americans were not only Othered but dis-empowered and therefore dis-advantaged by their Otherness—for theirs was a societally sanctioned, ruthlessly enforced Other-hood—to survive, African Americans had to read and appropriately react from the space of those who had Othered them. “We who are dark can see America in a way that America cannot.”³ This prescience came with a cost. The necessity to acquire it threatened the very soul of black folks, who had to occupy and absorb the space of those who had Othered them without losing hold of the spiritual mooring of their own space.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴

In recognizing the struggle of his own people, Du Bois perceptively noticed that, by electrifying the color line with the charge of virulent racism, white Americans had also, ironically, Othered themselves. As a result, they limited the potential for the kind of societal evolution that would benefit all Americans. “The white man,” he wrote, “as well as the Negro, is bound and barred by the color-line.”⁵ The remedy? Even though Du Bois knew at the time that America was not ready for it, he prophetically perceived that just societal transformation required that white Americans be as willing to cross into and respect the culture of African Americans as African Americans were required to cross into and learn, even demonstrate respect for, theirs.

The future of the South depends on the ability of the representatives of these opposing views to see and appreciate and sympathize with each other’s position.... Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph.⁶

After 115 years, more than a century full of ethnic potential and promise, instead of fostering Du Bois’s boundary trespass, the nation’s color line has slithered into the shape and consequence of a racial line in the sand. Author Ta-Nehisi

³See W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” <http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>, originally printed in *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290–97.

⁴Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 16–17.

⁵Ibid., 137.

⁶Ibid., 139.

Coates reports, “In 2012, the Manhattan Institute cheerily noted that segregation had declined since the 1960s. And yet African Americans still remained—by far—the most segregated ethnic group in the country.”⁷ A vicious demagoguery about and violence against African Americans over the past several years requires no documentation from me.

Du Bois’s question in 1903 remains demonically pertinent in 2018: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”⁸ On the whole, African Americans remain radically Other in the American context. It is the context from which I have learned to approach, analyze, and teach biblical studies.

Othering exists in the world of biblical research. That recognition is, of course, today commonplace. While the black–white dyad remains of special import in the United States, in America and around the globe the current reality is less one Other in contrast with an Other than a legion of Others operating from and confronting each Other across multiple demarcations of space and thought. Yet Du Bois’s twentieth-century comments about the color line are immensely helpful for a study of global cultural hermeneutics in the twenty-first century. From his sociological study I recognize a biblical corollary. Those who hold interpretive power establish those outside their circle as Other and assign to them the status of Problem and subsequently the problematic task of working their way out of their Otherness by becoming less like themselves and more like those holding such power. In biblical studies, power has long resided in the alleged impartiality 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. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza put it in 2010, no matter how diversified the units are on display at SBL, “the discipline continues to socialize future scholars into methodological positivism and future ministers/theologians into theological positivism.”⁹ To accept the socialization, to become like such practitioners is to become less Other. Less Others learn and execute the “objective” methodologies and how biblical scholars arrive at text meaning through such methodologies while attempting simultaneously to remain fluent in the ways of reading and constructing meaning out of their own space, for their own communities. Therein, though, lies the soul-troubling dilemma.¹⁰

⁷Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case For Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

⁸Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 16.

⁹Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Rethinking the Educational Practices of Biblical Doctoral Studies,” in *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education: Ethos and Discipline*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Kent Harold Richards, GPBS 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 373–94, here 383.

¹⁰See Vincent Wimbush, “Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures,” in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000), 1–46, here 10: “No matter what may be the actual representations in the biblical texts, the

Instead of a color line, biblical operations proceed about a meaning line. Simplistically put, text meaning is determined through historical and literary engagement that uncovers text intent, or text meaning is ascertained through an engagement between the reader, reading out of her space, and the text as it is engaged in that space. There develops an interpretive veil behind which cultural interpreters are positioned and from which they must operate frequently in the shadows, as respect—and the way respect materializes in the form of promotion and publication—is to their operatives too often denied. The meaning line is destructive to readers on both sides of it. All are Othered from each Other by its very existence. It is because interpretive power rests on the historical, literary scientific side that cultural hermeneuts are required to become at the very least bicultural, knowing their own space and its influence on text meaning as well as they know the historical and literary principles that allegedly unearth static text meaning. But this prescience comes with a cost. The necessity to acquire it threatens the very soul of the cultural hermeneut, who must occupy and absorb the space of the objective Other without losing hold of the spiritual mooring of his own space. This bicultural, two-Other-ness has now expanded exponentially. Scores of readers vie for the opportunity to read rightly from their particular space and have the meaning derived from that cultural reading be received and engaged rather than Othered. Scores of souls are thereby troubled.

The troubling, though, can also be efficacious. Du Bois recognized that wherever Others operated with sincerity across the color line, particularly when whites engaged empathetically out of the black space, there dawned the potential for just societal transformation. *Reading from an Other's space transforms not only how one reads but how one lives.* Such cross-the-meaning-line reading in biblical studies may be of similar import. Indeed, when Schüssler Fiorenza argues that, as long as the discipline operates from a perspective of methodological positivism, “discourses and struggles for justice, radical equality, and the well-being of all will remain marginal to biblical scholarship,”¹¹ she, too, is implying a connection between how one exegetes in the classroom and the study and how one operates, justly or unjustly, in the world. It is a connection in need of further exploration.

gendered and/or racial-ethnic ‘Others’ that were constructed by modern dominants could not either read themselves into these texts or read themselves in affirmative ways as long as they had to begin not with themselves, with their places of enunciation, in their own times, but ‘with the texts,’ viz. with the dominants’ places of enunciation, with their constructed pasts and the hermeneutical spins that continue to give legitimacy and social and ideological power to a present that was secured and justified by those pasts.”

¹¹Schüssler Fiorenza, “Rethinking the Educational Practices,” 383.

I. CHARGING THE MEANING LINE: A QUICK SURVEY OF SELECTED SBL PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESSES

Selected SBL presidents have meaningfully engaged this exploration. In 1988, Schüssler Fiorenza chided biblical scholarship for its refusal “to relinquish its rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific modernism.”¹² She argues for a decentering, rhetorical-ethical paradigm that yields two key conclusions. First, context is critical to text interpretation. “What we see depends on where we stand.”¹³ Second, she recognizes that the manner in which we perform and, perhaps even more importantly, allow text interpretation has dramatic ramifications for how we structure, police, and/or liberate the academic environment in which that interpretation takes place. “Interpretive communities such as the SBL are not just scholarly investigative communities, but also authoritative communities. They possess the power to ostracize or to embrace, to foster or to restrict membership, to recognize and to define what ‘true scholarship’ entails.”¹⁴ The academy *can* cultivate interpretive endeavor on the Other’s side of the meaning line that not only recognizes but values contextual influence and, in so doing, can prompt scholarly work that portends not only scholarly but, indeed, cultural transformation.

Fernando F. Segovia explores the connection between cultural interpretation and cultural construction. He argues “for a fusion of the critical and the political, the biblical and the worldly.”¹⁵ He makes the intriguing point that, when biblical interpreters attempt to do their work exclusively on the side of the meaning line that alleges value and context-free scientific interpretation, they actually speak meaningfully, if not dangerously, to the social and political world in which their interpretive work is undertaken. Silence has a message all its own.¹⁶

Vincent Wimbush understands that, in its quest to avoid global politics, biblical scholarship, rather than helping shape *new* politics, reaffirms the old. “The cultivated obliviousness to or silence about—if not also the ideological reflection and validation of—the larger prevailing sociopolitical currents and dynamics marks the

¹²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 3–17, here 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267820>.

¹³*Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵Fernando F. Segovia, “Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task,” *JBL* 134 (2015): 6–29, here 6, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1341.2015.0002>.

¹⁶See *ibid.*, 16: “In largely pursuing pressing questions of the discipline while bypassing pressing questions of the world, as they overwhelmingly did in critical times, presidential addresses assumed a political stance of abstraction from the realm of global affairs into the realm of scholarship.”

beginning and ongoing history of this Society.”¹⁷ He posits a causal relationship between the Society’s objectivity-driven avoidance of sociopolitical currents and dynamics and its lethargy in developing and then drawing into its ranks scholars of color. “I suggest that the paucity of black membership is due ultimately not to the bad faith and manners of members of the Society in the past but to something more profound—the (unrecognized, unacknowledged) racialized discursive practices and politics that have defined it.”¹⁸ By refusing to address politics, because politics are allegedly addressed only on the Other, contextually sensitive side of the meaning line, biblical scholarship finds itself shaped by politics.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Segovia, and Wimbush recognize that either engaging in or refusing to engage in culturally sensitive readings will have an impact on not only text conclusions reached but the social and political context in which those readings are done. I would like to explore further their line of investigation. In so doing, I posit two primary thoughts. First, on either side of the meaning line—or on the proverbial fence trying to straddle both sides at once—what lies available to interpreters is *never* meaning but meaning potential. Second, a culturally responsive engagement of this meaning potential has profound implications for the shaping of a more just biblical society, classroom, and profession.

II. THE QUEST FOR MEANING POTENTIAL

For Paul Ricoeur, language is discourse. Every discourse has a surplus of meaning. In biblical studies, we tend to view language not as discourse but as system. This is one of the reasons the cultural dynamic is so often either underappreciated or dismissed outright.¹⁹ When discourse is marginalized, it is difficult to recognize the presence and power of surplus meaning. It is also difficult to recognize how language spills over into politics. As discourse, language intends to “do” as well as to “convey.” As discourse, language is, therefore, decidedly political.

Ricoeur recognizes that there is a signal difference between discourse as spoken conversation and discourse as text. Text is discourse fixed as writing. Hermeneutics is the process of engaging text as fixed discourse, not just trying “to define understanding as the recognition of an author’s intention from the point of view of

¹⁷Vincent Wimbush, “Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 5–24, here 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41304184>.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 2: “If discourse remains problematic for us today, it is because the main achievements of linguistics concern language as structure and system and not as used. Our task therefore will be to rescue discourse from its marginal and precarious exile.”

the primitive addressees in the original situation of discourse.”²⁰ This is especially the case since “with the written discourse . . . the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide.”²¹ The text develops “semantic autonomy.” “The text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.”²² This surplus of meaning is amplified when the reading audiences engaging the text are directly considered. In live discourse, the communication is generally limited to the speaker and the hearer. In the fixed discourse of a written text, the audience is universalized. The text addresses an indefinite number of readers and thereby opens itself up to an indefinite number of interpretive possibilities. “The opportunity for multiple readings is the dialectical counterpart of the semantic autonomy of the text.”²³ When one combines the text’s semantic autonomy with the access of that text by an indefinite number of readers, one opens up the possibility that multiple interpretations will occur not simply because some read rightly and most others read wrongly but because every reader approaches contextually and therefore sees contextually.²⁴

How does one attempt to understand the reading of someone differently positioned to the fixed discourse of the biblical text and therefore likely to have arrived at a different perspective on what the text means? Ricoeur suggests for interpreters what Du Bois suggested for black and white Americans: a crossing over into the Other’s frame of being and therefore reference. Ricoeur calls it empathy: “the transference of ourselves into another’s psychic life.”²⁵

Despite his allegiance to understanding text as linguistic system rather than discourse, Rudolf Bultmann, in his existentialist approach to biblical interpretation, anticipated some of Ricoeur’s conclusions about text as fixed discourse. I recognize that my mention of Bultmann is symptomatic of the troubling of my own academic soul, a troubling that demands not only a valuing of but also a constant attribution to the historicist, positivist world that Others me. And yet, as DuBois recognized, it is only by bi-culturally mastering that world that I have been allowed the opportunity to challenge and reposition myself alongside it. What I came to see is that Bultmann ironically laid the groundwork for an approach to biblical text as meaning potential that is engaged contextually.

The presupposition of every comprehending interpretation is *a previous living relationship to the subject*, which directly or indirectly finds expression in the text

²⁰Ibid., 22.

²¹Ibid., 29.

²²Ibid., 30.

²³Ibid., 32.

²⁴See *ibid.*, 77: “The text as a whole and as a singular whole may be compared to an object, which may be viewed from several sides, but never from all sides at once. Therefore the reconstruction of the whole has a perspectival aspect similar to that of a perceived object.”

²⁵Ibid., 73.

and which guides the direction of the enquiry. Without such a relationship to life in which text and interpreter are bound together, enquiry and comprehension are not possible, and an enquiry is not motivated at all.²⁶

Bultmann appeals to two categories: life relation and preunderstanding. Life relation is important in establishing the questions that readers bring to the biblical text. The primary questions in a reader's life, those that motivate searches of biblical and other texts, come from particular interests in that reader's life.²⁷ This life relation is the presupposition for inquiry and, therefore, exegesis. This life relation also predisposes the text reader to bring certain questions to the text and thus wrest particular meaning conclusions from it. This predisposition is preunderstanding. The problem is that the ancient reader's life relation to a biblical text is quite different from the life relation of a contemporary reader. Because of that difference, it is to be expected that the contemporary reader's preunderstanding will also be different.

This would suggest that, unless there is some hermeneutical means to adjudicate between this difference, contemporary text readers will not derive the same meaning from the texts as the ancients. This is precisely Bultmann's point. There will be an interpretive impasse unless contemporary readers develop an appropriate hermeneutical tool.

As the matter of personal and communal existence before God has always been and will always remain the central focus of the biblical material, and is simultaneously the driving focus behind contemporary text readers' engagement with biblical material, the existential question is the hermeneutical link that binds text and interpreter together and thus makes inquiry and comprehension possible. Bultmann's hermeneutic is therefore to interpret the biblical material by existentially demythologizing it. In this way, the contemporary reader can interpret the mythological language in a way that makes sense in her contemporary circumstance.

Though intentionally limited, Bultmann's process is, in essence, a cultural hermeneutic. To be sure, Bultmann does not believe that every facet of a person's context is applicable. He is not concerned about whether one is black or white, from the United States or Latin America. There is one single contextual factor that is important: human existence. The texts yield existential answers because the text readers bring existential questions to a text that is existentially preoccupied. Text meaning results from the encounter between the text as existential meaning potential and the interpreter's existential life relation and preunderstanding. The interpretive process is existentially, that is to say, contextually conditioned.

²⁶Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, LPTTh (London: SCM, 1955), 234–61, here 252.

²⁷See *ibid.*, 240: "The formulation of a question, however, arises from an interest which is based in the life of the inquirer, and it is the presupposition of all interpretations seeking an understanding of the text, that this interest, too, is in some way or other alive in the text which is to be interpreted, and forms the link between the text and its expositor."

Cultural Studies and Meaning Potential

A cultural-studies approach to biblical interpretation invests passionately in this contextual engagement with text meaning potential. Not just the existential, but every life relation and preunderstanding is a central part of the hermeneutical engagement with the text.

It is the role assigned to the reader that, without doubt, most sharply differentiates cultural studies from other competing paradigms in contemporary biblical criticism. For cultural studies the reader does not and cannot remain in the background, even if so wished and attempted, but is actively and inevitably involved in the production and meaning of “texts” and history; who does not and cannot make any claims to objectivity and universality, but is profoundly aware of the social location and agendas of all readers and readings, including his or her own.²⁸

The reader sees the meaning line and willfully transgresses it. Knowing and valuing her reading space, she pushes across the meaning line into the past, constructs the past from her space, and then interprets what has been constructed through the preunderstanding shaped by that space. In this encounter between “a socially and historically conditioned text and a historically conditioned reader,” meaning materializes.²⁹ Segovia, therefore, concludes, “There is never a text out there but many ‘texts.’”³⁰ I would say that there is never text meaning out there but text meaning potential. The key is determining how each access of text meaning potential might be potentially valid. Particularly if each such reading offers a different meaning conclusion. Differing conclusions may well be constructed from different parts of the text’s meaning potential, which readers are differently positioned to access because of their different contextual access points. The discussion, then, should never have been between what the text meant and what the text means. Rather, the discussion should be between what the text means and what the text means.

Socially, culturally, politically situated readers engaging text meaning potential from their situated spaces will have dramatic implications for the body politic that those readers inhabit. Even with its limited appreciation for only the existential context of the reader, Bultmann’s “cultural” hermeneutic had dramatic political implications. For Bultmann, one determines the meaning of a text not only by analyzing it as language but by responding to it as a crisis moment for decision. If one pushes Bultmann’s categories beyond the existential to the full flowering of contextual possibilities as meaningful access points on a text’s meaning potential

²⁸ Fernando F. Segovia, “Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse,” in *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, vol. 2 of *Reading from This Place*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1–17, here 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

to spur a contemporary crisis point for decision, then there are dramatic implications for thinking how many of those decisions will, of necessity, be political. This is undoubtedly why Dorothee Sölle can argue, “More and more, it appears to me that the move from existentialist theology to political theology is itself a consequence of the Bultmannian position.”³¹ If, as Abraham Smith correctly observes, “spaces are intricately tied to dynamics of power,” then the access of text meaning potential *from* space is inevitably a political endeavor.³²

III. INTERCULTURAL BIBLE READINGS: RECOGNIZING AND CROSSING BORDERS

The strategy of intercultural Bible readings demonstrates nicely the connection between the access of meaning potential from space and the political. Intercultural Bible reading presumes a multiplicity of text readings that pushes beyond the multicultural. Whereas multiculturalism refers to Othered cultures reading over against the dominant culture, interculturality refers to equally positioned and empowered “groups [Western and non-Western, Global South and Global North] relating together in mutual interdependence.”³³ The center no longer holds; multiplicity reigns. Bordered, Othered communities all seek access to text meaning potential. Bordered, Othered communities no longer fight to become “central.” Furthermore, the dominant Western perspective can no longer credibly sustain its interpretive privilege. What results is more like the holy chaos of an ensemble dance troupe endeavoring to share the same choreographical 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. Each dancer who has a role to play and is empowered to that role in order to convey it plays off the movement of the others in the mix. The stress is no longer on trying to get those in the center to read like those on the margins, but of pressing the case that every space, even that previously identified as the center, is a border space that is Other from every other border space. The reading strategy therefore becomes one of “intercultural encounters and transborder exchanges.”³⁴

³¹Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 2.

³²Abraham Smith, “Taking *Spaces* Seriously: The Politics of Space and the Future of Western Biblical Studies,” in Schüssler Fiorenza and Richards, *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education*, 59–92, here 65.

³³Laura E. Donaldson, “Are We All Multiculturalists Now? Biblical Reading As Cultural Contact,” *Semeia* 82 (1998): 79–97, here 81.

³⁴Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk, “Introduction,” in *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading*, *SemeiaSt* 81 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 1–16, here 7.

Participants in an intercultural Bible reading are pressed to “read with the other.”³⁵ Such reading is not expected to be easy; mutuality in this case is designed to trigger confrontation even as it spurs conversation. It is in the recognition and appreciation of such encounter that learning can occur.³⁶ In seeking such new “Othered” understanding, the intercultural interpreter is asking a particular question: “What happens when Bible readers from sometimes radically different contexts and cultures read the same Bible text and start dialoguing about its significance?”³⁷ In asking this question, he is implying an equally important subsequent one: “Can this way of shared Bible reading become a catalyst for more openness and transformation?”³⁸ This question harbors an important connection between the hermeneutical and the political: the presupposition that intercultural text readings can transfigure the reader who intentionally reads for diversity among a community of equally positioned Others.³⁹ “What intercultural Bible reading strives for is that, within a profoundly divided Christianity, the intercultural encounter becomes a *script* for transformation and leads to *shared* ownership and *shared* agency for justice and liberation.”⁴⁰

We are, then, examining the case for an ethics of interpretation focused on border access of text meaning potential that not only disrupts and thereby transforms how we read but also, as a liberating consequence, disrupts and thereby transforms the very contexts from which that reading occurs. It starts with a shattering of the meaning line that wants to distinguish between the text, to be objectively interrogated on the one side, and the reader, who interrogates from her space, on the other.

Instead, what is available is meaning potential that is best approached collaboratively, even combatively, through intercultural engagement, across border communities. Meaning, as approached proleptically through this border engagement, comes only when we are willing to move beyond our own boundaries and trespass the boundaries of others, and allow trespass of our own boundaries. The border-crossing engagement of meaning potential, as such, is both collaborative and intrusive; it requires a breaking and entering, even when the entrance is invited, because 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, without having to

³⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁶ Hans de Wit, “Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Background,” in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. Hans de Wit et al. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 3–53, here 29: “the *inter* represents the insight that confrontation with the difference may lead to a new, productive understanding of texts” (italics original).

³⁷ De Wit and Dyk, “Introduction,” 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cf. Donaldson, “Are We All Multiculturalists Now?,” 81.

⁴⁰ De Wit and Dyk, “Introduction,” 6.

trespass any Other contextual, communal borders. Indeed, perhaps this is exactly why Yak-hwee Tan refers to social location as dis-ease. “In using the hyphenated dis-ease, I am suggesting that social location can be an ailment, a disease that disrupts the ease of some.”⁴¹ Ultimately, it disrupts the ease of all. But this is an incredibly positive development. When engagement with meaning potential from border spaces is allowed to be invasive, to trespass boundaries we have carefully erected around our own social location, or the social location of the positivist, scientist, historicist understanding of biblical inquiry, then the dis-ease such engagement fosters becomes transformative. Here is where and how transformational reading fosters transformational praxis.

De Wit pointedly asks, “In which ways can an intercultural dialogue on the meaning of fundamental narratives—Holy Scripture—contribute to justice and liberation?” Such dialogue, such reading of sacred texts “through the eyes of another,” across cultural and sociopolitical contexts, can lead readers of sacred texts to develop a greater understanding for one another and thus to move toward “reconciliation, peace, and justice.”⁴²

It is difficult to create a circumstance, particularly within a scholarly academy, that not only acknowledges but values and encourages the cultural work of those who engage meaning potential from within their own border space while simultaneously transgressing and entertaining the trespass of interpreters from other border spaces. Here, I am not suggesting something new. I am, though, trying to give added weight. I endeavor to see intercultural border transit and the transformational potential it portends progress from the study, the library, and the published piece to a liberating manifestation in the entire academic biblical exegetical industrial complex. If the intercultural border proponents are correct, how we research can, perhaps even should, transform how we teach and how we staff, thereby creating a more just classroom and a more just professoriate.⁴³

Border Pedagogy

Border crossing in the classroom, as pedagogical strategy, follows naturally from border crossing as research method. The focal assumptions are the same. “The basic premise of border pedagogy is that the process of learning entails crossing

⁴¹Yak-hwee Tan, “Social Location: Dis-Ease and/or Dis-Cover(Y),” in Schüssler Fiorenza and Richards, *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education*, 47–58, here 50.

⁴²Fernando F. Segovia, “Intercultural Bible Reading as Transformation for Liberation: Intercultural Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies,” in de Wit and Dyk, *Bible and Transformation*, 19–51, here 33.

⁴³See Schüssler Fiorenza, “Rethinking the Educational Practices,” 392: “It insists on an ethical radical democratic imperative that compels biblical scholarship to contribute to the advent of a society and religion that are free from all forms of kyriarchal inequality and oppression.”

borders.”⁴⁴ Just as interpreters are better positioned to engage meaning potential when they learn the access points of Other and Othered interpreters, so learners are better positioned to operate more effectively in the classroom when they are taught to cross cultural borders and then engage meaning potential from those varying viewpoints. This is how methodological transformation fosters classroom transfiguration.⁴⁵

Border pedagogy is an insurgency that requires students to travel between cultural perspectives and confront cultural difference. It provides a theoretical road map for intercultural border crossings. In the classroom, not only must students be taught an awareness of their own contingency, the limitations of their own selves, and the narrative perspectives from which those selves operate; they must also be accorded the safety to engage other selves, to trespass the borders of fellow students and instructor alike in the engagement of text meaning potential. It is this border crossing, and the dialogue that takes place throughout, that enables a broader engagement with a text’s meaning potential.

But dialogue, as critics have argued, remains problematic because it is based in Enlightenment principles of rational discourse. As the foundation of such rationalism is decidedly Eurocentric, even a border pedagogical approach that utilizes it remains mired in the metanarrative world of historical and literary positivism. Here the power implications are compelling. As Elizabeth Ellsworth notes, even though pedagogical procedure based on dialogue presumes that all members have an equal right to speak from an equally valued borderland of perspective, “dialogue in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture [or classroom] at large, because at this historical moment, power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust.”⁴⁶

Given these power dynamics, Ellsworth advocates a pedagogical practice that moves through dialogue into coalition building. In this case, individuals who represent distinct cultural perspectives are encouraged to join educational forces, or, in Ellsworth’s words, formulate an “affinity grouping,” with Others whose cultural position, whose border skirts (that is, empathizes with) their own. She notes that in her own experimental classroom,

Once we acknowledged the existence, necessity, and value of these affinity groups, we began to see our task not as one of building democratic dialogue between free and equal individuals, but of building a coalition among the

⁴⁴D. N. Premnath, “Introduction,” in *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics*, ed. D. N. Premnath (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 1–13, here 6.

⁴⁵See *ibid.*, 8: “Border pedagogy results in reshaping and reconfiguring boundaries. In [Henry] Giroux’s words, ‘border pedagogy decenters as it remaps.’”

⁴⁶Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 90–119, here 108.

multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture and the classroom.⁴⁷

In such a case, the meaning acquired would not be the meaning prescribed from an instructor's metanarrative. But neither would it be a free-floating explosion of individual meanings in the kind of dialogue where some, by virtue of their proximity with the Eurocentric, historical metanarrative, retain power over Others. Instead, the truth(s) accessed from the text's surplus of meaning would be the result of a coalition-building process that developed directly from the crossing over and bridging together of diverse cultural borders. This operation of 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. The challenge is to teach students to cross each Other's borders and, in the process, *build* meaning. The very concept is, in the positivistic sense, irrational. But it is also precisely how the biblical classroom can have its most dramatic intercultural impact, and thereby become more politically just.⁴⁸

Border Staffing

Transborder cultural study allied with engaged border pedagogy would at the very least, in order to create faculties that could effectively accomplish both, attract culturally diverse doctoral students who would graduate into a more culturally rich pool of faculty and administrative hires. I am fascinated by this matter not only because so much of my research is focused on factoring culture, most particularly my own, into my research, writing, and teaching, but because my own location as a scholar has shifted from academics to administration. As an administrator from a historically Othered community, I am keenly aware of the data. Current practices, methodological and professional, have yielded sparse numbers of persons representing border communities apart from those of European or Caucasian descent. As an example, SBL's current U.S. membership figures indicate 3.4 percent African American; 3.3 percent Asian American; 2.9 percent Latin American; 1.5 percent Native American; 88.8 percent European or Caucasian.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁸ See Lawrence Grossberg, "Introduction: Bringin' It All Back Home—Pedagogy and Cultural Studies," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1–25, here 18. Grossberg calls this approach a pedagogy of articulation and risk. "Refusing to assume ahead of time that it knows the appropriate knowledge, language, or skills, it is a contextual practice which is willing to take the risk of making connections, drawing lines, mapping articulations, between different domains, discourses, and practices to see what will work."

⁴⁹ See Membership Report at <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2018.pdf>.

I want to know about the Other readers and the Other students, but I also want to know about the Other scholars and professors and how a more intentional cultural access into text meaning potential might encourage the building of a more culturally diverse professoriate and how the building of a more culturally diverse professoriate might widen access into the meaning potential of the biblical texts. I am suggesting that, by transforming the way we research and publish and encourage others to research and publish, we can begin the process of professionalizing a more democratized, border-crossing biblical approach, while simultaneously encouraging a more inclusive pool of professionals to teach that approach.

In looking at the way that learned societies developed, a historian recognizes the connection between the way research is done and the way the field is professionalized. “The feminist Bonnie G. Smith has argued that, for instance, the ethos of the American Historical Association cultivated a value-detached, ‘gender-neutral’ community of scholars and developed an ‘objective’ narrative in the course of professionalization as ‘a modern scientific profession.’”⁵⁰ A connection is rightly drawn between research and pedagogy and institutionalization (hiring, promotion, etc.). This current, regrettable connection suggests that current patterns of professionalization can be transfigured through research and pedagogy that value the cultural location and perspective of the Other.

Tan is correct when she notes that “social location has a contributory role to play in the standards of excellence and the transformation of graduate biblical education for the educator-cum-biblical scholar, as well as his or her graduate students.”⁵¹ Social location not only plays a role in how we interpret. Because it plays a role in how we interpret, it can and should play a role in how we educate and then institutionalize the educational process. The “standards of excellence” that determine teaching viability, readiness for promotion and tenure, etc., conform to the “ethos of the discipline.”⁵² The problem is that the ethos of the discipline remains positivist, scientist, and elite white male oriented. Thus, so do the standards of excellence that follow the ethos of the discipline. “In short, professional ethos determines disciplinary discourses by establishing what can be said and what is *a priori* ruled out of court.”⁵³ But if the disciplinary discourses shape professional ethos, then the transformational interruption starts with a border-Other oriented interpretive approach to accessing text meaning potential. A more just interpretive process fosters a more just cadre of interpreters to execute that process.

As Du Bois recognized, when social location is valued, the interpretive work of the investigator can claim neither scientific neutrality nor political disinterest.

⁵⁰Schüssler Fiorenza, “Rethinking the Educational Practices,” 388.

⁵¹Tan, “Social Location,” 47–48.

⁵²Ibid., 49.

⁵³Schüssler Fiorenza, “Rethinking the Educational Practices,” 389.

At the very time when my studies were most successful, there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored. I remember when it first, as it were, startled me to my feet: a poor Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord's wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution* office, carrying in my pocket a letter of introduction to Joel Chandler Harris. I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking. I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work. I did not meet Joel Chandler Harris nor the editor of the *Constitution*.

Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing.⁵⁴

Du Bois realizes that he cannot keep working the way he has always worked, given what he knows about the realities of the spaces he and those for whom he writes exist. The space of biblical scholars and students in contemporary, Western, First World contexts contains nothing as horrible as the physical brutality about which Du Bois speaks, to be sure. That is not to say, though, that there does not exist systemic psychological and professional brutality that occur literally as well as figuratively in academia. Part of that reality develops from a systemic bias embedded in the academic system itself, such that people of color remain Othered in ways that make progress difficult. Can one continue to do one's interpretive work, one's science of biblical interpretation as one has always done it in the face of such troubling information? Certainly, in his field of sociology, Du Bois would have answered in the negative. I follow from him with an interrogative. How might intentional boundary ingress and egress into the circumstances and situations of Other spaces as we do our interpretive work impact—in a transformational way for liberation—the spaces from which most of us do that work?

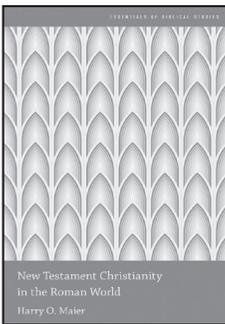
⁵⁴W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1968; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984), 67.

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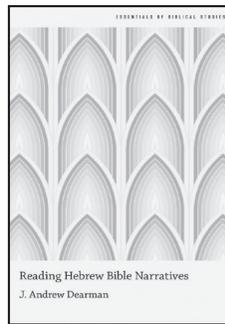
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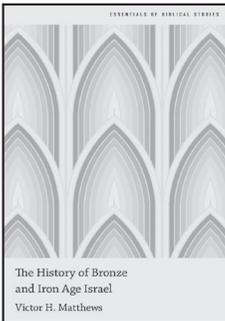
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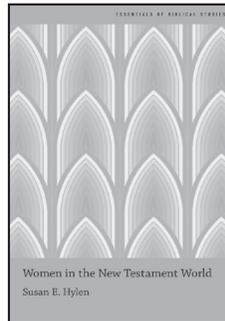
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