

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

## Response

Jonathan Ebel

Department of Religion, University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA  
Email: [jebel@illinois.edu](mailto:jebel@illinois.edu)

I am grateful to receive such thoughtful responses to my book and to have it placed in conversation with Lloyd Barba's powerful work. The questions raised by the responses and the points they make about pedagogical usefulness, terminology, sources, and methods are all so important. It is hard to know where to begin. But it is mid-November as I write, and my mind is on our current moment. It is clear to me that we continue to blame the displaced for their displacement, and the migrants for migration. Migration is indisputably essential to the functioning of the American economy, yet migrants continue to endure suspicion, fear, anger, and hatred.

Government officials and citizens can choose among three responses when migrant workers arrive and settle in their community. They can work with migrant populations and help them get established; they can look away and pretend that migrants do not exist; or they can work to further marginalize migrants, deepen divisions, and create space for suspicion and hostility to pour in.

My book includes many stories of migrations, and many migrant voices. It also centers the work of women and men who chose to engage with those who were suffering and to try to assist them. These reformers were interested in the long-term well-being of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the Depression and also in the long-term health of the republic. These were good and important concerns in that moment and remain so in ours. There were too many people then, and there are too many now, who are content to let the suffering suffer, or who are intent on deepening that suffering, more or less because they can.

Think of Andrea Johnson's students at California State University, Dominguez Hills. They are there to learn and improve their prospects. They are following the educational paths set before them. And, as Johnson points out, they are subjects of individual and institutional "overwatch," which, like all kinds of monitoring, has a weight to it. If these students have a sense of shared position and experience in their academic lives with the camp residents I wrote about, I would be interested to know where else in their lives they feel this connection, and how the boundaries of the government camps have, in a sense, expanded. Do they see the work of catechesis and evaluation flowing out into their communities, homes, and lives?

I would also want to ask those students (though I do not know how I would phrase this) whether the benevolent intent of government programs writ large or of some of the people

who work in them, is noticeable and whether it matters. I am curious about this because I have been wrestling with this book's complicated story of well-intentioned reformers who created a program that was at once benevolent and coercive. I could use some help thinking about how to assess those who try to alleviate suffering and who do so with their own limits and prejudices on at least partial display. Camp manager Tom Collins, in many ways the animating spirit of the camp program, often wrote in condescending tones in the bureaucratic record but was renowned for his human touch and the dignity with which he treated migrants. Should it matter to us that he interacted with migrants first as vulnerable fellow human beings while he also saw them and their religious thoughts and practices as problems to be solved?

The camps were sites committed to solving "the migrant problem" in its many-sidedness. They were created to clean up at least some of the impromptu roadside and ditch-bank camps created by migrants and lamented by local residents. They were created as interventions into a potential public health crisis tied to the migrants' grossly unsanitary living conditions. They were created to protect migrants from vigilante violence designed to keep them off balance on the margins of society and from vengeful or capricious evictions from grower-run camps designed to remind migrants of who was ultimately in charge.

They were created, also, to help migrants find their footing in a new landscape and to teach them how to understand and interact properly with and in modern society. For some migrants, this was a matter of reminding and restoring. For others, it involved something closer to a complete reorientation in the way that they saw and thought about the world and their place in it. Migrants took different paths to life in a government camp. Some had fallen far from their pre-Depression lives to migratory farm labor. Others had not ever known much that was different and were living and working in familiar ways but on an unfamiliar landscape. All arrived at the camp gate in different physical, mental, and religious states. The migrant problem at an embodied level was complicated.

So, I think words like rehabilitation and restoration, conversion and redemption – though importantly different – all have their place in describing the processes and the goals of the camp program. I have preferred to apply the more religiously charged of these: conversion, redemption, and even salvation, because they encourage us both to see these migratory farm labor camps in Depression-era California as part of a long history of missionary spaces in North America, and also, as Laurie Maffly-Kipp points out, to think again about missions and missionary spaces, how they work, what their goals are, and why.

These particular spaces – though not always inhabited exclusively by white migrants – were built and run by the federal government because the migratory farm labor force in California had become noticeably more white. The camp spaces gave structure to the reformers' modern white norms of differentiated space and delimited time and asked, quietly but clearly, that residents configure their lives within those spaces and schedules. The catechesis to which the camp spaces contributed, and the ritual sensibilities they cultivated, were intended for white migrants and expressed the reformers' beliefs as to what a proper white life consisted of. This vision included norms for the practice and the social reach of Protestantism, which reformers clearly wanted to limit. Some of this had to do with their own religious backgrounds, and some of it had to do with what they saw as the irrational, chaotic, antimodern faiths of the migrants.

I did not give extended attention in the book to the religious pasts of reformers, with the exception of Tom Collins's Catholic history and Harry Drobish's Congregationalist connections. It was not that I saw these different histories as unimportant. It was, rather, that similarities in their understandings of the proper time and space for religious practice seemed more important to this story. Above all things, the reformers believed in contained,

routinized, internally directed religion, and, as their relationships with camp residents and migrant ministries underscored, they did not much care what sorts of doctrine filled the limited spaces and time blocks, as long as it stayed where it belonged.

Belonging. Staying. Moving. Reform. These words and the actions they describe are not morally neutral. Neither are their moral valences simple or constant. In the history of the United States, well-resourced white citizens have, more often than not, set the moral terms of stasis and movement and determined the conditions of belonging. Some have done this hoping to expand the possibilities of belonging. Others have done so explicitly to restrict it. I hope that Barba's book and mine will help readers to see these truths and some of their consequences. I hope, too, that readers will think in new ways about those who sought, however imperfectly, to change life trajectories for the better, about the worlds they built for the displaced, and about the voices and actions of those for whom moving and staying, then moving again were an ever-present reality, and belonging was too often too elusive.