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Claire Oxford Reflection 2

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SPAN 380 — Cultural Productions of the Borderlands

2 November 2017

Reflection 2: Applying Concepts to CEL

Throughout my Community Engaged Learning (CEL) experience volunteering at Columbia Elementary with a small group of fifth graders, I have been keeping in mind concepts and theory from our course readings and seeking out connections between the two settings of a Kenyon and Columbia classroom. Ideas on the nature of borders and social division resurfaced from Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Border* in short stories and poems like "Tomás and the Library Lady" by Pat Mora that we read with our fifth grade class. Moreover, over and over again during these CEL readings I noticed how themes of marginalization, destructive binaries, and borders were represented not only in the texts but how they were negotiated by the students we were working with on an interpersonal level. More specifically, many of Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts and imagery from *Borderlands/La Frontera*, such as "mita y mita," (41), "Los *atravesados*" in border culture (25), and "una cultura mestiza" (44) were prevalent in texts like "All Summer in a Day" by Ray Bradbury, "Legal Alien/Extranjera Legal" by Pat Mora and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," and our students picked up on those themes and applied them to other contexts, culminating in their final project that they will present here at Kenyon.

While reading a number of the aforementioned CEL texts, our students often went beyond plot and setting comprehension to noticing important themes and relating stories to their own lives. For instance, when Eric and I introduced the phrases "bicultural" and "bilingual" during our reading of "Legal Alien/Extranjera Legal" and asked students where in the text they

noticed evidence of these ideas, they talked at some length about the phrase “An American to Mexicans / A Mexican to Americans” and how the narrator oftentimes doesn’t feel at home in either cultures, but has been influenced by both. Some similar concept from Anzaldúa’s reading — like “*mita y mita*” and “*cultura mestiza*” — was relevant to this poem, as our students talked about how, even though the author often didn’t feel accepted culturally, that she could write this poem in two different languages and move between them with ease. Furthermore, none of them were native Spanish-speakers, and they were all curious about learning snippets of Spanish phrases, both from this poem and from other CEL readings, and they seemed engaged and energized by the idea of expanding their own linguistic borders in the future (some of them, like Tyler and Hayley, mentioned how they were excited to take Spanish in middle or high school.) Finally, as we read “Tomás and the Library Lady” — a text that includes a narrative of personal inclusion in an exclusionary context — the students were able to relate to the story of a young Mexican-American boy who moved between states often with his family, who were seasonal agricultural workers, to some of their own life experiences — whether they were personal experiences of moving homes or times that they had read a book and felt able to imagine themselves in a better situation. In this way, they considered ways to defy or dismantle borders through empathy and curiosity and cause “border leakage” — a Thomas Naill term.

In the CEL readings, however, we focused not just on the ways in which people traverse linguistic or cultural borders, but also how borders are often mechanisms for exclusion and discrimination. Two of the main examples of CEL readings that covered these themes from our course were “All Summer in a Day” and “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.” In the former, the children focused on the character Margot — an “*atravesada*” in Ray Bradbury’s short story who gets bullied and maligned for her different background and vulnerable

appearance. Our students noticed not only that Margot was singled out to be attacked, but also that it was partially because she came from another planet (Earth) and was very physically frail and weak — an easy target for bullying. This story and our students' comments relate back to Anzaldúa's concept of the "*atravesados*" in the U.S. who have come from many backgrounds, "those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (25) and are punished and excluded from the majority society for it. Furthermore, the "*atravesado*" concept intersected with "*mita y mita*" very clearly in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," as this man with wings was mistaken for a fallen angel in a small town, beaten, imprisoned, and converted into a public spectacle because of his appearance that differed from the majority and represented a split identity similar to the "*mita y mita*" that defied gender norms and constraints in Anzaldúa's text.

Through these two stories and through the CEL experience more broadly, I was able to apply concepts from the course to children's literature, and craft lesson plans that engaged our students with these ideas of borders, exclusion, and belonging in a way that they could both understand and relate to on a personal level. For their final projects, each student has chosen a favorite story or poem and imagined themselves in a scene from that text, thus blurring the border between fiction and personal reality in a way that has hopefully helped them to relate better to the text and its characters. As we approach our final project presentation, I feel optimistic that our students have been able not only to better their reading comprehension through our CEL lessons, but that they have also been able to connect with the stories and with Eric and I as Kenyon tutors and members of a neighboring community.