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Borders in Play

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Eduardo Vargas Reflection 2

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Reflection 2: Examine

The experience of teaching literature to Columbia Elementary students was a way to see borders in action, as well as an opportunity to subvert them at a personal local level. Thomas Nail's theoretical concept of the border being "in between" gives us a way to think about how these borders come to be everywhere, not only in the divisions of geography and of people but also the less visible divisions of class and of difference. To the students in the school we explained that borders can be material, like a wall or a fence, but also invisible lines we cannot see or touch. In some ways this is a condensed and simplified version of Nail's theory, but they were able to quickly understand it. The invisible borders affecting the students became more obvious to me when we received the student's cultural quilts. Although we had some idea about the demographics of students we were teaching, we were not aware of each student's personal life and perspectives. I observed how the different borders affected these students' behaviors in the class, particularly in their participation and how they would relate to the stories we read.

One border that was especially prominent during our sessions was the gender divide between the students, which I spoke about in the last reflection. Something about us being college students made it so that they all wanted to participate, because we were cool older kids they wanted to show what they could do, but it meant the boys were always talking first. I could tell that Ellie would notice when we let the others speak first. To deal with this problem I felt it was necessary to take Anzaldua's theory of a Mestiza consciousness — an intersectional,

liminal, and feminist framework to inform our teaching praxis. Physically, it came down to making the decision to allow the girls in the class to speak when otherwise the boys' voices would take over the conversation. Encouraging them to speak was also important, especially since I am sure there were other borders at play that we couldn't see that were affecting everyone, the kind of borders that were keeping Reece from speaking as well. To ensure that everyone had the opportunity to develop their ideas, Samuel and I would split up and dedicate individualized attention to all the students to make sure they were going through the activities, as well as suggesting alternative activities that involved writing. This seemed to work, since by the end of the lessons we could see noticeable differences in the retention of the information from all the students.

One of the more prominent borders that I observed with all the students was the border caused by class. I went to a public school in a mixed income area as a child, where the public school's quality varies depending on the neighborhood where it's located. Not a fifteen minute walk away from the elementary schools in my city are the prestigious Claremont Colleges. It has become clear that there are thousands of schools like Columbia that are so close to an institution like Kenyon and yet remain underfunded at the same time. This border around institutions of higher learning is the first border I felt we as a class needed to destabilize. As college students and activists we might see the CEL opportunity as a way of putting ideas or planting seeds in the minds of younger students who will inherit our spaces after us. This is an oversimplified idea: we shouldn't see the opportunity as us giving our ideas to them, but rather us giving them the tools they may not have access to, giving them the opportunity to develop their own thoughts with someone who isn't a teacher but a peer. They may also have encountered things they are not used to in terms of culture and language — our reading selection made sure they were encountering

new things — so this was a way of breaking down a division that would otherwise persist. For our class as college students, and for me specifically as Mexican American, these stories gave us opportunities to bring back perspectives that would otherwise be redirected away from them in the “bifurcation” that Nail describes.

The CEL project has placed us at a very specific intersection where we are able to create an impression on very young students in a way that subverts the space in between us. More than closing the gap for a few weeks, our goal from the beginning was to make them come into contact with ideas about difference that would enable to recognize how difference is marginalized in their lives as they grow up. We can never be 100% certain that our educational activism will have these kinds of lasting impacts on the students. We can make specific decisions involving our pedagogy that works towards reducing the bifurcating motion of borders at play. If we consider that borders are in motion, we can see that the CEL experience makes it possible for us to examine how they has affected the students we are working with and how we can give them the opportunities for them to develop their thinking skills. Nail talks about how the border manifests itself on the body and on behavior, and we have observed that now first hand. We take this idea and notice how we can move around those just by giving the kids stories they can relate to, skills they can use and build upon when analyzing literature, and an academic experience that is distinct to what they are used to. If reading the stories of children who are othered has a similar impact on them as the one I had when reading these kinds of stories as a child, then hopefully they will gain a better appreciation for literature as well as the skills needed to think about these kinds of stories and poems that will be useful to them in the future.