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Nate Novak Reflection 2

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Professor Román-Odio

Spanish 380: Cultural Productions of the Borderlands

6 November 2017

Reflection 2

The children who we work with at Columbia Elementary are part of yet another example of an endangered culture in the United States. As expressed in *Endangered Cultures* by Miguel León-Portilla, an endangered culture is one where the very ethos of the culture is under crisis. Such crises affect the way the culture develops internally and how it interacts with other societies and cultures. Such threats to a culture manifest themselves in a variety of ways, be it military conquest, economic disenfranchisement, and lack of political representation. **As a result of this cultural crisis the society may experience trauma, marginalization, and the fragmenting of the culture's existence itself, thus dissolving the cultural identity of the group.**

The children of Columbia Elementary are products of an endangered culture, that culture being the working class of the United States. The notion that the children's culture is endangered emerged before entering the school. Knowing beforehand that the children are on a free lunch program at the school, they are obviously from low-income families. These children and their families are unfortunately part of the group who has 'lost' from globalization. As I mentioned in my first reflection, Columbia's location in the middle of a decaying industrial part of town displays how their cohort has been left behind as mining and industrial jobs have left the United States. **Similar to many minorities in the United States, these children are the innocent victims who the United States has ignored.** This notion that working class of the United States has been left behind in the wake of globalization is described in detail in *Hillbilly*

Elegy, a memoir by JD Vance. Vance describes how the “hillbilly” culture is in decay, stating that many Scottish and Irish people whose ancestors settled in Kentucky, West Virginia, and other southern states migrated north to Ohio and Michigan in the middle of the 20th century for industrial jobs. **However, as those jobs left the United States in the 1980s, the United States as a whole failed to prepare them for a changing economy, thus leaving the working class with a massive opioid crisis, the largest rates of drug overdose deaths, and jobless local economies.**

Being an economics major, I tend to view situations such as the children’s through an economic lens, attempting to understand what economic factors led to their current condition and what potential solutions may be feasible. Through this economic lens, I can grasp how these children are affected by a number of economic factors that are out of their control and how an entire nation has failed them. **Economics has a bad reputation for being cold, calculating and impersonal. However, I assert that it is a powerful tool to empathize with marginalized populations and to find empowering solutions for an endangered culture.** Through this economic perspective, I understood how these children struggle in school while their entire culture is in decay through being economically marginalized. I understand how they have trouble focusing because they are hungry due to their parents being ill-equipped for a post-industrial United States, unable to find a well-paying job. Through this perspective, I understand why many are distracted by the fact that one of their parents may not be present at home because they are in prison or have simply left the family. **It has helped me understand how the United States’ institutions have failed these children, leaving them with a fractured identity and few material resources to rise above their situation.** Ultimately, however, it has given me

perspective in how all of these aforementioned factors have left the working class in a crisis state, endangering them and their culture with no tangible hope of becoming whole again.

My experience mirrored my preconceptions in that I observed that these children were not up to the academic standard for a fifth grader in the United States. Many of the children's penmanship was very poor (to be fair, mine is illegible too), and their spelling and reading abilities are less than desirable. However, this is to be expected, knowing beforehand that these children struggle greatly academically. **I am an outsider in Columbia as someone who has benefitted from the U.S. school system, and it is difficult being an outsider observing the innocent youth who it has failed.** I always understood I was part of a privileged few who found success in the U.S. public school system, and, as expected, those who are not as lucky suffer greatly from the material determinism of United States society.

The differences between my expectations and the experience itself are uncountable. **The most tangible, easy to articulate difference is that despite these children's difficulties at home and at school, they were able to express themselves creatively, emotionally, and academically.** They were able to wonderfully articulate their thoughts and consider multiple complex thoughts for a fifth grader, juggling different themes inside their head. They greatly exceeded my expectations with their immense capacity for empathy and care for the subjects of the literature. What contributed most to this gap between my preconceptions and the lived reality lies in the assumptions I made beforehand. Understanding these children come from an endangered culture, I expected them to be emotionally mute, too exhausted and traumatized from their experiences to empathize with the characters. I made the dubious, but reasonable, assumption that these children would be much too hungry and distracted to focus during our time with them, and I cannot think of an experience when I was happier to be wrong. **Despite the**

horrific home lives these children experience and their material situation, they are exemplary models of victims of an endangered culture who have the powerful potential to escape their deterministic situation.