

# Border Thinking Reflexivity in City Schools Possibilities for Teaching in Historically Red States

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## *Border Thinking Reflexivity in City Schools Possibilities for Teaching in Historically Red States*

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### **Abstract**

*Historically “Red States” in the United States offer an example of the complex intersections of public education, race, conservative politics, language, and power/resistance which teachers live and work amongst. This article considers these intersections by focusing on the experiences and reflections of a former red state teacher and organizer. Following this, the article situates these reflections within border thinking and borderlands work, attempting to theorize the work of red state teachers. In doing so, the theoretical framework of Border Thinking Reflexivity is offered as a potential way of approaching such experiences and developing deeper understandings of the work of teaching in historically red states.*



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## Introduction

There is a dearth of education scholarship that examines the experiences and reflections of teachers in historically “red states” (i.e., see Carrillo, 2021). While not all “red states” (states in the U.S. where the majority of voters and elected officials are of the more conservative Republican party) are the same, these spaces often implement policies that attempt to undermine public education and teacher agency. Further, these states often have large numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in its K-12 schools and the panopticon of silencing, racism, and reactionary politics provide additional stressors. In fact, speaking out against the “dogma” can be dangerous, ridiculed, and elicit various personal attacks. As an example, the recent push to ban the teaching of critical race theory in Arizona (HB 2906) and noted battles over teaching ethnic studies all point to this duress. Further, Tom Horne, who once was a key figure in the anti-ethnic studies backlash in Arizona, was re-elected in 2022 for Superintendent of Public Instruction following a campaign centered upon a desire to “stop” critical race theory, ongoing attacks on dual language programs, and a highly contentious approach to “empowering parents.”

Working within this context, this article focuses on the teaching experiences and reflections of a former Arizona #RedforEd lead organizer. Further, the lead author of this piece, a former social studies teacher in the same region, offers commentary on these reflections. Drawing from the use of *platicas* (Flores & Morales, 2022) and elements of *autoethnography* (Behar, 1997; Hughes & Pennington, 2017), we work through this reflection and commentary approach.

Finally, we situate this paper within scholarship in borderlands and border thinking (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2000, Mignolo, 2013), reflexivity research with links to city schools (Gay & Kirkland, 2003), and critical pedagogy (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1968/1996; Giroux, 1998). We conclude this article by outlining what we refer to as *Border Thinking Reflexivity* (BTR). BTR consists of: (1) *Strategic epistemic disobedience* and 2.) *Curricular and Pedagogical De-Linking* (drawing from Mignolo, 2000). We posit that BTR can potentially be one tool that may be of use for those that teach within historically red states.

In the next section, we provide some additional context related to being an educator in a historically red state.

### **States of Convergence: Contextualizing Teaching in Historically Red States**

The state of convergence where teaching took place for two of the authors in this paper is Arizona. As previously stated, Arizona is a space that has long been known for anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies like Senate Bill 1070, the banning of ethnic studies, subtractive language education policies, and the stripping down of funding for its community colleges. Recently, #RedForEd Arizona elicited a pushback and mobilization against dire working conditions for teachers. Following over a decade of cuts to education and a funding deficit of over one billion dollars compared to 2008 levels, teachers in collaboration with both the union and the grassroots organization, Arizona Educators United, took direct action against the state to demand increased funding for public education. This context of push and pull, attacks on public education, and active

mobilization by activist educators and organizations are all part of the current context in the state of Arizona.

Entangled with these struggles and these processes of change are the shifting demographics of many parts of Arizona. For instance, Phoenix has experienced tremendous population growth and is the fastest-growing city in the nation (Healy, 2021). Further, much of this growth has come from the relocation of residents of historically “blue states” and areas. For example, Phoenix is the preferred out-of-state destination for Los Angeles, CA residents (Katz, 2021). Hence, there are ongoing demographic shifts that have altered some of its politics and have also impacted ongoing shifts within some “red suburbs.” Yet, there is still a deliberate push to defund public education and privatize education, with a strong school choice movement and there are often heated, violent, racialized attacks throughout the state, and conservative policymakers still have large control over policy decisions in the state legislature.

So, it is in this polarized Arizona, a historically, a deeply conservative state seemingly in a moment of transformation, where we both taught and lived. Our reflections and commentary are situated within this context. We offer these reflections and theorizations within this urbanized landscape in order to suggest that increased attention to red states and cities are needed to understand the complexities of these shifting relations of power and possibility for educators and communities.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

We ground our work within the following three strands: (1) Borderlands and Border Thinking and (2) Reflexivity and City Schools, and (3) Critical Pedagogy.

### *Borderlands and Border Thinking*

We draw from borderlands theories, with specific influence from Gloria Anzaldúa (1986) and border thinking (Mignolo, 2000; 2013) to ground our work. We identify salient themes of liminality, colonization, in-between identity states (*nepantla*), contradictions, and ambiguity as tools for thinking through our experiences as teachers in a border state. Further, our experiences related to this article are, as previously stated, centered on a state that has a long legacy of violence against minoritized communities and is located in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Anzaldúa’s work is particularly salient to Juan, who as a Chicano and son of Mexican born parents, traverses various layers of border-crossing reflexivity as an educator. We also draw from *Border Thinking* (Mignolo, 2000) to capture the epistemic resistance and the decolonization of being and knowing within spaces like historically “red states” that often push for hegemonic notions of education, teaching, and demonize resistance.

Specifically, through our reflections and commentary, we push for the development of various ideas about what it means to teach, organize, and navigate personal notions of wellbeing. Within this context, we negotiate borders and global designs through “interior” work and epistemic resistance. Similarly, relevant education scholarship on border thinking (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016) and border pedagogies (Powell & Carrillo, 2019) as it pertains to minoritized students provides guidance for critically examining approaches to teaching, identity, and reflexivity. As such, drawing from subaltern knowledge and varying orientations of borderlands work, we seek to develop critical teacher reflexivity as a key part of the process of teacher development.

Further, these theories help to work through our memories and the contradictions embedded in teaching in a state like Arizona. Borderlands perspectives serve as a site of resistance, multiple consciousness, and varying forms of struggle and clarity. As previously stated, drawing from Mignolo (2013), we recognize that being a teacher in historically red states offers opportunities to draw from a form of border thinking that is centered in part on local histories as we interrogate global arrangements (i.e., Neoliberalism, physis, spiritual, and cultural violence). This process entails a challenge to Western rhetoric of disposability, competition, and movement “forward” without reflection, vulnerability, and “standing-still” to pause and reorient and question and change. Further, this theoretical orientation situates our notions of resistance to dehumanization. Mignolo (2013) makes a relevant point to this: “And to assimilate means that you accepted your inferiority and resigned to playing the game that is not yours, but that has been imposed upon you – or the third option is border thinking and border epistemology.” (p. 134). The third option is the journey, it is a process of architecture, that is, we build it as we go.

### *Reflexivity and City Schools*

In this section, we contextualize our aims within relevant work on teacher reflexivity and links to urban education scholarship. While we acknowledge that reflexivity can cover a wide continuum of scholarship and debates across various fields, we focus on some key work that has connections with the objectives of this paper. According to Rodgers (2002), some early work on reflection and education can be linked to John Dewey. Further, Paulo Freire’s (1968/1996) work on praxis and critical reflexive pedagogy informs this piece as we situated our critical reflections in varying dimensions of dialogue, action, and unpacking unequal power relations. Gay & Kirkland’s (2003) piece on this issue is also quite salient to our work. In particular, we concur that there is a need to develop cultural critical consciousness amongst educators and that “this practice should involve concrete situations, guided assistance, and specific contexts and catalysts” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 186). Other scholars have discussed varying aspects of educational praxis that can be linked to reflexivity including Gramsci (1971) as it relates to notions of hegemony and common sense, Cammarota’s (2015) links to critical consciousness as it pertains to ethnic studies, and Freire and Macedo (1987) center literacies where reading the word and world offer critical options for intervening in the world.

Further, we acknowledge how reflexivity can be a space of transformative action (Feucht, Brownlee, & Shraw, 2017). In spaces like Arizona where language, race, immigration status, and battles over curriculum have long taken place, the prospects of reflexivity and action can play a central and crucial role. Similarly, some scholars contend that reflexivity is an “epistemic virtue” which should be cultivated in all teachers (Hofer, 2017). Reflection and reflexivity also engage layers of emotion, power, and contradiction (Fendler 2003; Zembylas, 2014) and we believe that this is also useful for making sense of strategy and action.

Drawing from the social sciences we can also infer some connections. Bourdieu (2004), for instance, addressed issues of reflexivity. Most salient to this work are his ideas germane to observation and the politics of knowledge creation and analysis from the vantage point of the observer. We see this scholarship as salient to thinking through how educators interrogate what they see (from classrooms, to communities, to local, state, and national level politics) and how they act and potentially grow in critical ways over time. Further, from Behar (1997, 2003) and her reflections on vulnerability, loss, rescue, and power relations related to ethnography, there are also connections to this work.

For educators, teacher reflexivity may encompass many of these tensions as positionality and levels of privilege and power can all affect how vulnerability is addressed and how working in minoritized communities is imagined and enacted. Further, Behar (2003) contends: “I knew that I wanted to keep searching for ways to evoke how intersubjectivity unfolds as a fundamental part of the representation of social reality” (p. 23). As such, we infer from this the process the potential of ongoing work where teachers and subjectivity continue to take shape.

Other relevant scholarship also highlights the importance of *caring reflexivity* and its links to centering the relational (Rallis & Rossman, 2010), the importance of continuous reflexivity especially across linguistic, cultural, and international borders (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2013), an ethno-theater approach to preservice teacher reflection (Schneider, King, Kozdras, Minick, & Welsh, 2012), and a centering of the uncomfortable in reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). This scholarship further informs our work on teacher reflexivity and Pillow’s (2003) call for centering the uncomfortable is particularly salient as we engage contradictions and reflections that are layered with irresolution.

In terms of links to urban education work, Milner (2012) contends that the term “urban” is often layered with deficit lenses. In this work, we aim to address the role of agency while also acknowledging the complexities and contradictions in terms of experiences with teaching in “urban” schools. Further, we ground our work in research that illustrates that urbanized spaces are embedded with many layers related to opportunity gaps (Howard, 2010) and teacher attrition issues (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Also, these issues have even been exacerbated under Covid when it comes to the schooling outcomes for English learners in the Phoenix, Arizona area (Gonzalez, 2010). In our experiences as teachers in urbanized spaces, we also have had to navigate the carceral logics that criminalize minoritized youth (Beneke, et al., 2022). Considering this overall context, some scholars have pushed for changes in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 1995, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1999) and for the development of leadership by encouraging youth sociopolitical efficacy and action (Hipolito, et al., 2021).

### *Critical Pedagogy*

This piece also draws from relevant work in critical pedagogy (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1968/1996; Giroux, 1998). Within this area of scholarship, analyses of power, social justice, and addressing hegemonic concerns in teaching, curriculum, and public education and discourse are all salient issues. Our reflections within this piece engage with similar concerns while simultaneously positioning these reflections as part of an ongoing critical, dialogic process. Within each reflection, we prioritize lived experience as a mode of knowledge to be engaged with critically and through which alternative conceptions of teaching, curriculum, and change may be developed. Alongside those such as Gibbs (2019), we view these stories and reflections as ways of developing such understandings and the possibilities they may develop. Responding to the idea that while there is a well-developed body of literature on critical pedagogy and the need for its practice, we need “more stories and more strategies of how it is being done” (Gibbs, 2019, p. 15), we offer these reflections upon our attempts to materialize a critical praxis in historically red states.

Following an approach indebted to critical pedagogy and theory, we position these reflections not as universal truths, “right” or “wrong” ways of doing/knowing, or experiences meant to be understood and read in only one singular way. Rather, we understand them as messy, often contradictory encounters with the material work of teaching and attempting to create change. In each of these reflections, moments, and modes of thought through which they are given life as

words on a page here, we see the potential for a multiplicity of critical understandings that are grounded in the work and life of teaching in historically red states. In doing so, we attempt to extend our critical praxis beyond solely the experiences detailed here and, instead, continue this work by critically reflecting upon it in the hope of contributing to understandings of resistance, change, and possibility in education.

## Methods

We primarily draw from elements of *platicas* (Flores & Morales, 2022) to examine our experiences and reflections while also pushing back against objectivity tropes related to research. Further, we position *platicas* as a process by which to humanize memory and teaching while also working towards healing. Situating ourselves in this manner, we acknowledge the messiness in our reflections and ongoing meaning-making as we navigate our current professions and as we look back on teaching in historically red states. Also, Juan draws from his cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2016) to map out a move away from traditional research methods and develop the conceptual and analytic approaches to this article. The reflections in this paper came about over more than two years where we have had various meetings to discuss our stories/reflections related to teaching in Arizona. Over this time and via this process, Noah developed his themes which are unpacked in the next section. This approach for organically developing themes and reflexive strands also draws from the work of Carrillo (2016) which allots conceptual space for critical scaffolding of our experiences in collaborative ways.

Our process/methods also embraced the use of Zoom or we would text or get on the phone to debrief and share ideas. During the writing process, we discussed our stories in terms of the various intersections that raised us and continue to inform us as we think back to our time in being teachers in K-12 schools in Arizona. Elements of autoethnography (Adams, 2017; Behar, 1997; De Vries, 2012; Ellis, 2004; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Ohito, 2019; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Sanchez-Martin, 2021) also informed our methods as we centered critical forms of reflexive investigation, subjectivity, and we moved away from notions of objective knowledge construction and neutrality in our work. Further, our approach, in part, engages autoethnography as "...autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2).

Additionally, Noah's reflections germane to teaching in historically red states draws methodological guidance from Villenas (2019) when she states: "I qualify 'social movement' with the term 'everyday' to refer to the daily, (extra)ordinary, and intentional pedagogical work of creating spaces and conditions for critical witnessing and social change" (p. 153). As such, the everyday and power of pedagogical knowledge that we draw from writing, reflecting, talking, and supporting each other, as well as remembering/dismembering provides an anchoring to this work. While we now both work with preservice teachers in higher education, we were moved by the pause and process of going back and reflecting on our teaching days in K-12 schools.

As outlined in the next section, Noah's thematic strands consist of: in-between spaces/erasures, race/agency/empowerment, bounded transformations, and against practical hope. First, we share our brief bios.

### *Brief Bios*

*Noah Karvelis* is a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Originally from Pecatonica, Illinois, he previously taught K-8 music in Phoenix, Arizona where he also

worked as a union president, campaign manager, and community organizer with the #RedForEd teacher movement in Arizona. His current research examines the histories and epistemologies of teacher activism and music education.

*Juan F. Carrillo* is a former high school social studies teacher in the barrios of south Phoenix, Arizona and east Austin, Texas. He is a Chicano from Los Angeles, California and currently teaches at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College where part of his work entails working with preservice teachers. As a cultural studies in education scholar, his research examines areas such as men of color and their educational/schooling trajectories, Latinx education, the politics and pedagogies of informal play, and teacher activism. As previously stated, Juan will provide commentary to Noah's reflections.

### **In-between Spaces/Erasures**

My time teaching in Arizona was defined by moments of tension and contradiction. It was to live and work within an institution seemingly imbued with the hope and desire for possibility and change, yet deprived of the funding, textbooks, and teachers it needed to simply survive. It was to work with students who were, as we teachers were often told, no longer "at risk". Instead, they were now, at least within the school, "at hope". Yet, beyond the word choice, nothing else seemed to change.

These tensions surrounding ideas of both hope and change, pessimism and regression produced much of my experiences teaching in a red state. Teaching in this space was to teach and to live in the paradoxical in-between spaces of possibility and impossibility, past and future, existence and erasure, hope and defeat.

Reflecting now, some 2,000 miles away, on my years teaching elementary and middle school music in Phoenix, I still struggle to understand it. My thoughts and memories are dominated by contradictory moments of triumph and defeat, hopelessness and optimism. And as I write this, I realize only through trying to bring these memories and emotions forward, to place them as words on a page, that they are still guarded by the politics, the sensible and actionable, surrounding schooling and governing in historically red states like Arizona. These politics have trained me to think hard about the repercussions of any attempts at resistance in historically red states and their schools.

Returning to try to make sense of it all, I continually feel their presence. As I write, the themes I create keep falling in on themselves. Considerations of race, gender, and even my own sense of self within the schools of red states seem to evade me. These identities and realities were constantly felt, produced, and maintained in every Arizona classroom I was ever in. Yet, somehow, I struggle to think of a moment when they were mentioned in my memories of the school I taught in. Forcing myself to try to make sense of this and confront it through this writing brought with it the realization that the production and paradoxical scrubbing away of any vestige of difference, these acts of erasure, seem to in many ways order the project of Arizona's red state schooling and dominated my experience in its classrooms.

It is not simply that teaching in a historically red state came with a set of politics that taught me to think hard before enacting resistance. Rather, it was this same set of politics that also served to both produce and silence difference while closely guarding the boundaries of what is considered possible.



## **Race/Agency/Empowerment**

It was July 24th, 2016. I had been in Arizona for only a month and the first day of school had come. I remember the excitement of the moment. It was hot, especially for someone from the Midwest. And it was that day that my four years of studying to be a teacher were about to be actualized. I stood waiting in the doorway of my classroom. I had visions of literacy circles, conscientization, and how profoundly transformative this class would be. I was self-assured and overly confident that my theories and readings of Freire and the critical pedagogues I held in high esteem would give me the knowledge and actions I needed in order to create ground-breaking ripples throughout the halls of the school.

And yet, it did not happen. That year was a struggle. In many ways, each year was a struggle. My ideas on teaching, despite notions of criticality, were unable to deal with the unspoken realities of teaching in a red state school. I had no real understanding of the construction of race and difference which undergirded the school. My pedagogy and thinking were bounded and contradicted by these processes, yet I struggled to find a way into thinking about and responding to them.

At the same time, my notions of agency, that the students could simply be empowered and, more specifically, empowered by me, their teacher, crumbled. I was brought to confront the ways in which the construction of difference, processes of racialization, and forms of control and observation within the school fundamentally challenged such ideas. I was made to recognize that the students were not simply empty vessels, waiting to become agential. Rather, their forms of agency, power and action were far more complicated. And I was brought to confront the racialized past of the space I was teaching within as well as its forms of power and difference. As I did so, I felt disarmed, unable to understand, let alone react to, the realities which were all around me.

Now, removed from the classrooms of Arizona, I still struggle to understand it all. To piece together the different elements of red state school is a monumental task. It points me back toward my continual wondering about the possibilities for transformation in red state schools.

## **Bounded Transformations**

The idea of possibility and transformation haunts me whenever I think of education in historically red states. When I look back upon the landscape of education in places like Arizona, I see erasure, coloniality, and white supremacy and what feels like a system immune to change. At the same time though, it is impossible for me to not recognize that there is also the present and historic presence of resistance to each of these realities. This presence and actualization of forms of progress gives me hope for the possibility of transformation. But even this idea of transformation is one bound by contradiction as countless hopeful developments rise from the constantly churning, often invisible political underbelly of Arizona only to silently crash to the ground, seemingly able to defy gravity only for the briefest moment.

This sense of confusion and contradiction, the haunting of a notion of transformation, comes from not only being a red state teacher but also as a red state organizer. I spent my second year in Arizona teaching and also managing the campaign of a fellow teacher and political newcomer. Ultimately, while we in Arizona wondered what a Trump presidency would mean, she (Kathy Hoffman) won her election to become the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction. Now, I have watched as she pushes education in Arizona in alternative, politically progressive

directions, dismantling some of the restrictive policies that defined my time teaching. Yet, she simultaneously struggles with the reactionary politics of a conservative state and what is politically possible in Arizona.

And now, following her term, she has lost her second election. As many celebrate Arizona turning “purple”, the head of Arizona’s schools is once again Tom Horne. The same Tom Horne who spearheaded the campaign against Tucson’s ethnic studies program. He ran on a campaign which centered fighting what he termed critical race theory, bilingual education, and the disempowerment of parents. Now, just days after his election he has vowed to put a police officer in every school, eliminate bilingual education, end social and emotional learning, and institute *No Child Left Behind*-esque state takeovers of “low performing” schools (Horne, 2022).

So how does one think about change and hope in such a space? As one hopeful development arises, it often feels that it is chased by a contradiction or a reminder that notions of progress are difficult, often contradictory, and nuanced in red states.

When I think of change in red states, I also reflect on the work of the 2018 teacher strike in Arizona. We built a political organization that ended up winning several battles and organizing a statewide walkout. Yet, we came short of the fundamental transformation of education that we originally envisioned. After multiple days with schools closed as teachers mobilized at the Capitol, we returned to our classrooms. Yet, many of us felt that we had to continue to pursue our demands. In response, we began focusing upon a ballot initiative (Prop 208 Invest in Ed.) for public education funding in Arizona.

I remember the hopefulness that we had at that time. And, yet I also remember the sense of betrayal that some teacher-activists felt. They felt that we had given in too early. Others said that we had drifted from our ideals of truly centering the voice of teachers and that the return to classrooms should have been held to a vote. And some felt that the ballot initiative was simply the wrong option.

There seemed to be a fracturing and a sense of doubt that crept in. And it crept in rapidly, only hours or days after the movement seemed perhaps its most unified and powerful. Despite these tensions, many of us would spend the summer of 2018 collecting signatures. After several months, we had successfully qualified for the ballot. Yet, our momentum had seemed to slowly and continually diminish.

As our movement’s momentum began to slow, our ballot initiative to generate education funding was thrown out by the Arizona Supreme Court, knocking our activist work back on its heels. Yet, as I revisit and edit this writing, I am forced to include the reality that just days ago this very same ballot initiative was passed in Arizona. However, only for the initiative to eventually be challenged once again and potentially dismantled by the state legislature.

Our time as teacher-activists was consequently not simply a victory. It had moments of incredible victory and hope. But at the same time, it had moments of devastating defeat and pessimism. I remember standing in front of the state capitol with hundreds of thousands of teachers who were fighting for a change in Arizona. I feel certain that many of us, myself included, may never feel more powerful than we did in those moments. Yet I also remember the feeling of it never being quite enough. And I also remember the counter-protesters, the guns they brought to our events, and the threats that were made upon our lives in response to our activism. And I am not sure how many of us will ever feel more confused or lost than in those moments. I can remember

the feeling of returning to our schools after the work stoppage and wondering how we could create long-term change-- something more than raises and more funding. And the way that, in time, things started to slide back into what felt like “normal”.

It’s unsettling how change, regression, normality, and the “new” all seem to collapse inward. It feels as though everything changed and, yet, what really did change? It’s often a difficult question for me to truly answer. It takes understanding more than just the financial figures or quantifying exactly how many teachers participated in #RedForEd. It requires something beyond that, something more akin to feeling than calculating, thinking, or simply remembering. It is hard to capture with words what those moments of hope, defeat, possibility, and regression that we all ventured through together truly *mean*. They seem to sprawl across and impact all of our lives and thinking in unique and ever-shifting ways that are hard to ever capture, let alone bring to words.

So how does one make sense of the relations of power, resistance, and change that occur within spaces like Arizona? They seem to move beyond the dialectic so often ascribed. It is not, at least for me, a back-and-forth which meets eventually somewhere in the middle. Instead, moments of possibility seem to burst open suddenly as dramatic changes occur. And, just as quickly, the space for action recedes. All the while, the vestiges of past struggles can be felt as the future is, again, reimagined. For me, to try to grasp these intricacies and flows of hope and transformation, to pull them close and hold them, this all perhaps defeats the purpose. Pausing in their midst in the hope of predicting their direction seems all but impossible.

So, I return to the questions I have no answers for: What is change in red state schools? Fundamentally, what is possible?

### **Against Practical Hope**

This not knowing of what is possible, the constant grasping for and, through doing so, redefining possibility, it must be said, is not easy to live amongst. At least, it was not for me. To live amid such a process is anything but a stable position. It is, in truth, what made living and working in a red state so difficult for me. Difficult enough that I eventually felt I simply had to leave. And I did. And I still try to make sense of what that leaving means exactly.

Yet, I am still able to locate a form of hope about the possibility for change. It is a hope which transcends all forms of hoping rooted in practicality. It is to hope for something that I can never imagine, or even know is possible. There were moments in Arizona where I felt like things would never change. That it would always be Joe Arpaio’s Arizona, at least in some form. Or, that there would never be a teachers’ movement. I feared that the realities I saw were set and protected for years to come. But I was wrong. There were people who were still hoping. It was a form of hope that was not concerned simply with being “pragmatic” or “reasonable”. Rather, it was about pursuing what seemed impossible, or unlikely but necessary. In turn, change, at least in some ways, did in fact come. These changes were and still are chased by contradiction and often they disappear as quickly as they arise, but for me they prove that a hope and struggle for transformation is not futile.

### **Commentary/Analysis**

In this section, the lead author provides his commentary and theoretical analysis of Noah’s reflections.

Drawing from Mignolo (2002, 2011), border thinking came through Noah's reflections via the epistemic and geographic distance and reallocation of thoughts to make sense of a teaching process that is often mandating exhaustion of self as we imagine and act on resistance and change. As an organizer with the RedForEd movement, he was deeply involved in teacher strikes and various other everyday activities aimed at enacting changes within schools in the state of Arizona. From this type of leadership from the "bottom up" we can see how it connects to altering global designs using local histories. Also, this connects to Freire's (1996) concepts of dialogue and moving away from a top-down approach to knowledge creation and solidarity. As an organizer, Noah engages in decolonial delinking as he engages modernity, its arrangements and elements of coloniality, and its silencing of teacher voice. He spoke up and mobilized educators in a historically red state, and as he mentions, the results are mixed. For every agentic effort and positive move as he sees it, the reactionary context often stripped many of these changes away.

Noah eventually left the state recognizing how change comes and goes and keeping in mind the struggle and its ambivalences as a former teacher in Arizona. His epistemic disobedience in terms of organizing a large teacher movement triggered support and much backlash. All in all, Noah mentions the prospects of possibility and defeat, erasures in terms of race issues in the classroom, and the contradictory and open-ended questions around social change within the system as it is. For Noah, teaching in a historically red state meant mobilizing and engaging in resistance efforts to issues germane to underfunded public schools, low teacher pay, dated textbooks, and an overall lack of dignity in the profession. Noted here too are his efforts to not be a teacher technocrat but to also pursue the notion of teacher as intellectual (drawing from Giroux, 1988), thereby providing space for further tension within a state where voice, teacher agency, and speaking truth to power is a highly contested domain. His reflections, point to the search for answers and forms of action on the ground, as well as the irresolution that taints much of the journey.

As this reflection and commentary demonstrate, teaching in historically red states engages how we navigate local histories, embedded in the chambers of dissonance and struggle. There is curiosity and uncertainty and in an Anzaldúa (1987) sense, battles over everyday contradictions and unresolved, fluid and dynamic "ending points." Further, Anzaldúa helps me, as a Chicano and former high school teacher in Arizona, to come to terms with my own positionality as a creative shifter within borderlands spaces of healing and pain as I try make sense of Noah's experiences in the context of my own subaltern notions of agency and place-making in a state I once again call home (and where I now get to teach again, but in the capacity of a college professor). Finally, Western constructs of rationality via the state often injure but also lead to reflexive projects aimed at imagining new teaching and societal worlds.

### **Discussion/Implications**

In sum, teaching in historically red states positions many educators within "messy" and toxic mainstream politics and dynamic and often painful scenarios of ambiguity and rapidly shifting power relations. Considering these dynamics, we conclude this paper by offering our perspective and ideas germane to our development of what we refer to as *Border Thinking Reflexivity* (BTR). We believe that BTR can be a tool by which teachers in these spaces can make sense of their identities, actions, and every day practices as theory and on the ground realities come to the fore.

## *Towards a Border Thinking Reflexivity*

As outlined in this paper, teaching within historically red states often provides many challenges germane to teacher voice, agency, and layers of toxic stress and alienation. Drawing from this context, our on the ground teaching experiences and reflections germane to working in historically red states, and scholarship on border thinking (Mignolo, 2002, 2007, 2011), we developed a teacher reflexivity framework that we refer to as *Border Thinking Reflexivity* (BTR). We imagine this process as a resource for reflection, teaching, action, community building, and as a tool for navigating the borders of frustration that often arise from being overwhelmed via various dead ends and policies that often seem counter to potentially empowering aims within teaching and in terms of building student community. We also recognize the role of intersectionality and how BTR plays out differently as in the case of the Chicano former teacher (lead author) versus a white male educator (co-author). Educators from subaltern communities have their own epistemic spaces and violence realities that offer varying contexts of challenge, resistance, and coalition building.

Further, we acknowledge the importance of vulnerability that may lead to “answers” or alternatives. As rubric technologies make this process seem like a “waste of time,” we counter this argument in this piece as we experiment, reflect, and work through our own memories and hopes. Behar (2003) makes a relevant point: “I knew that I wanted to keep searching for ways to evoke how intersubjectivity unfolds as a fundamental part of the representation of social reality” (p. 23). We believe that this intersubjectivity can lead to coding “reality” as well as movement, imagination, and place-making in the context of the disappearance of “innocence” and idealism, a pendulum, an artistic, maybe, a dialectical re-entry into self as new obstacles and surprises arise.

Also, there is very limited work on teachers engaging teacher reflexivity in historically red states and not much is documented in terms of how that “looks like” in these spaces. As ongoing budget constraints and the push for the banning of Critical Race Theory across various states comes to the fore (and other factors come to play), teacher reflexivity is a crucial piece for a toolkit aimed at every day “sanity,” solidarity, and transformation.

Our concept of *Border Thinking Reflexivity* (BTR) consists of: (1) *Strategic epistemic disobedience* and 2.) *Curricular and Pedagogical De-Linking*. From context to context, classroom to classroom, region to region, and one preservice teacher education program to the next, we imagine that this may look differently. Below, we unpack each strand.

### *Strategic Epistemic Disobedience*

In what ways can “moves” or “movidas” (Urrieta Jr., 2009) be made to challenge epistemic domination? These moves can be part of a reflexivity process that engages various opportunities to shift and change and alter realities related to constraining and hegemonic forces in the teaching profession. Further, through this process, epistemic disobedience may entail finding ways to move away from the isolation metrics of assessment and work hours and find context-specific ways to build together with community and colleagues. Also, Hadeer’s (2021) notion of “slow photography” gets at this in terms of interrogating linear demands, speed, and oversimplification. A professional development process from the bottom-up, with others, can be part of this process of invention and intervention. This may evoke finding space to be spent on confession, witnessing,

healing, and change. Also, as Mignolo (2017) points out, borders are a place of dwelling, and, in this dwelling, strategies may come to the fore.

### *Curricular and Pedagogical De-Linking*

Similarly, curricular and pedagogical de-linking entails creative ways by which to make learning and teaching a process of ongoing investigation and distancing from monolithic, bounded, imaginings of domination within curriculum and teaching. This work of reflexivity is grounded in how “Undoing is doing something; delinking presupposes relinking for something else. Consequently, decoloniality is undoing and redoing, it is praxis” (Mignolo, 2018, p. 12). Some of this work can reflect the stories of the actual students in the classroom. This form of border pedagogy, as an example, was utilized in high school located in a working-class community in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, where teaching was connected to students’ stories and this elicited tools for engaging in critique while also building spaces for empowerment and solidarity (see Cervantes-Soon, 2017).

Also, we see the aforementioned strands (among others that may be relevant in each context) playing out via journaling, dialogue circles and other processes. This may lead to pedagogies of border thinking (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016), border pedagogies (Powell & Carrillo, 2019) and similar approaches to teaching where subaltern voices and ways of knowing are central to learning and classroom culture. Similarly, there are broader implications for agency and resistance amongst minoritized students (Carrillo, 2016) and examinations connected to pre-service Bilingual teachers (Espinoza, Nuñez, Delgado, 2021). We situate this as a process of reflection and action as well as community as educators in historically red states find ways to reflect and reimagine their situations and those of their students. This process is also intended to be multifaceted. For instance, for Noah a lot of this work manifested itself not via just writing, but via direct action and dialogue related to his activism in #RedforEd Arizona.

Finally, this reflexivity work is one mechanism by which to navigate spaces in historically red states that often have reactionary politics that can lead to personal and career threats and significant volatility in terms of well-being. This negotiation reminds us of Bourdieu (2004) and how we turn the gaze back on ourselves as we deconstruct our epistemic standing and beliefs and how a process like the use of pláticas (Flores & Morales, 2022) can bring up a “messy clarity” of sorts as the dynamic process of activism and teaching come into play. Also, as former teachers in these spaces, we are transparent about the attacks and frustration that come with teaching in often hostile conditions. Yet, at the same time, we hope that this article provides space to consider the possibilities and hope which are present and enacted daily in such conditions. It is our intent to push back against deficit perspectives and construct new ways of understanding and enacting the work of red state teaching in the face of what are often damaging realities. In this way, BTR becomes a way of acknowledging, living amongst, and attempting to shift the conditions of red state schools. We hope that this work is useful and malleable to the context-specific realities of educators everywhere.

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