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Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert  
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As has been noted several times during this NEH Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert Institute, teaching is inherently a political act. No longer do we as teachers stand at the front and remain neutral - it is almost impossible to do that and live in our incredibly politicized nation and world. We are a part of this society, and we are teaching the next generation what it means to think and read critically, listen and observe, and question what appears to be true.

Thus, we cannot teach the history and story of the border without also teaching and reading the stories of all sides of the border, and, indeed, all sides of the story in our official "political" history. We are our stories, as my unit plan "Somos nuestros cuentos" suggests; we are what has come before us, our stories make up not only our personal narrative, or our family's narrative, but the collective, historical narrative, and they should be a central part of the "official" history as well.

James Baldwin said, "I am a witness." The people who have lived these stories of the border are witnesses to history, and not just that, they are participants, victims, oppressors, agents in that history. As our community speaker Yolanda Levya showed us as part of her Institute of Oral History at UTEP, these stories are worth listening to, recording, and studying for years to come as part of the complete picture, the complete story, to present alternative views and perspectives, ones oftentimes marginalized or forgotten in the textbooks.

I was moved by all the stories I heard from the border: the Braceros, the story of the last original resident of the barrio Duranguito, the Border Patrol agents, the people of Smelertown, the workers of El Paso today, and even the stories and poetry of the desert, which frames and positions this border and these stories. As a teacher, it is my duty to show these stories to my students, and help them see the contradictory nature of our history. That others decide who tells the official history by othering different others. It is my job when teaching the people and culture of the border to point out these contradictory narratives, and to show the multi-faceted and complex life and stories that surround this living breathing river of life that has been turned into a divisional line/border/fence/wall that makes up the frontera region.

I developed my project based on these ideas mentioned above, and that oftentimes we forget the stories and the people that are affected by the lines and divisions drawn on the maps

made by our politicians and policies. As humans we need to look at maps and see not regions or mountains or rivers or borders, but people (Levy, lecture).

My interactive maps from the study allow students to experience the stories behind each point, line and space on that map, to explore people's lives and their homes that have been constantly affected by the ever-changing policies of the border. I hope in the final map study, when we look at child migrants, read their stories, read and perform selections of Lisa Loomer's play "Bocón", students will see stories of children, maybe just like them, and begin to empathize and humanize the statistics and news stories we hear about children migrants.

I hope students will not forget these lessons as they explore their own place in this world, and question how their own family came to Detroit, and its border, and hopefully see the necessary economic movement that occurs when people look for a better life, an education, safety and stability, and see that the answer to the border is not more division. That in fact the more we draw these divisions on the maps, the more they psychologically tear us apart, separate, and damage us as a nation. I hope they realize that these policies and these new sections of the wall are not new. People of the border region have been living with this wall, this division, and the scars that come with it their whole lives. They have been crossing over each day, for work, school, to care for an ill family member.....And they will continue to do so.

If this unique and multifaceted space has taught me anything, it is that it is complex, and that there is no right answer to the "problem" of immigration. You can build as many walls/fences/borders or divert and damage the border that was once the living, breathing, vibrant Grande/Bravo River, but it will not make a difference. You can funnel humans like cattle into the driest, barren, and most hostile areas of the desert, and leave them to die...and yet people will still come, because what they face in their home countries is already killing them.

I am thankful for this opportunity to live on the border for these past two weeks, and study with such a phenomenal group of scholars and professors. Mostly, though, I am thankful for the stories. The ones from class, our speakers, our professors, our excursions and visits, and mostly the strong, complex and resilient people of El Paso. The people that remind me of the strong, resilient and complex people of Detroit, and in fact anywhere. These stories will come back with me to Detroit, and they will stay with me as I teach my students to view the world with a humanistic point of view, and to listen to the story that people have to tell. In a time in which we are so quick to dismiss anyone that is different than us, I hope that they will listen to these stories and realize that we are more than just laws, maps, policies, borders...we are our stories and we have a voice. I hope that, above all, they will choose empathy.

