

**Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert:  
Borderlands Narratives about Identity and Binationalism**

National Endowment for the Humanities and The University of Texas at El Paso  
2017 Summer Institute for Secondary School Teachers (Grades 6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>)

**E-Portfolio Project**

**The Border's Alive!: An Essay**

**Ignacio Martínez**

The University of Texas at El Paso  
Department of History

and

**R. Joseph Rodríguez**

The University of Texas at El Paso  
Department of English

The Chihuahuan Desert's wide geographic space can serve as a useful metaphor in conceptualizing the historical and cultural evolution of border identities, which are the product of space adaptations and bi-national influences. In fact, borderlands narratives have routinely been ignored as central to the development of American history and identity. As a result, Native Americans, Mexicans, and Chicana/os who reside along the 2,000-mile long border have been negatively stereotyped and their histories sidelined as electives in American high schools. Nevertheless, the ethnohistorical work of Miguel León-Portilla advances the borderlands as living spaces that can tell the hidden histories and literatures of border people.

The binational spaces these people occupy, which have historically been portrayed as dangerous, illegitimate, and as part of a distinct counter-culture, have similarly remained outside the purview of mainstream American history and literature. Three key historical periods and accompanying themes of the borderlands regions are as follows: (1) The period of Spanish colonization and settlement (1600–1821), (2) the period of American expansion and early border industrialization (1848–1950), and (3) the period of migration, border enforcement, NAFTA, and the drug wars (1950–2010). One approach in the study of narratives can be to cover the span of over four centuries, but focusing largely on the twentieth century, educators and scholars can utilize historiography and narratology in an effort to humanize and make visible the

Chihuahuan borderlands and its inhabitants. Thus, marginal spaces can be present interpretations and translations to open more perspectives in conversation with traditional narratives about U.S. history and identity.

From the pre-Columbian Indigenous societies who lived, traded, and raided each other, to the Spanish and later American settlers who usurped Indigenous and Hispanic land and labor in an effort to fulfill imperialistic goals, the Chihuahuan Desert holds the textual key to understanding ourselves. For over three centuries, these three groups have perforce sought to find common ground in their mutual existence and survival, despite the presence of physical barriers, xenophobic rhetoric dividing *us* (United States of America) from *them* (United Mexican States), and politically driven media reports. While border people have unmistakably been shaped by centuries of violence, fear, and law enforcement, they have consistently turned toward one another to find answers to their common problems. Such binational cooperation is prominent in the literary narratives of the area and advance the conversations about bicultural, bilingual, and binational realities. Historians Vicki Ruiz and Felipe Fernández-Armesto have called for a reinterpretation of U.S. History in order to give proper weight to its Indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican past.

The investigation of narratives that tie together major historical concepts, events, moments, and themes reveals the process by which we learn, teach, and tell the multifaceted stories of border people. Historiography, the study of how scholars address and write about particular historical events, themes, and problems is significant for understanding the historical construction of border communities. Three essential, or guiding questions to consider, are as follows:

1. How can the study of the Chihuahuan Desert, of its history and its people, help us tell a more complete story of the American experience?
2. What can we learn about the histories and literatures of border people by examining their stories?
3. How does binationalism inform border people's cultures and literary production?

In addition, narratology, the study of narrative structure and the ways in which it affects our perception and interpretation of texts, can create an engaging interdisciplinary framework for providing content learning in history, English language arts, literature, and other related fields, thereby enhancing content knowledge and application in multiple subject areas.

More specifically, historiography and narratology encourage a deeper awareness of how history and stories are constructed by chroniclers for audiences and interests that change over time. Historians Cynthia Radding and Andrés Reséndez maintain that for much of their history border people have carefully performed their identities to coincide with shifts in the social, political, and economic conditions of the borderlands. These men and women have necessarily adopted a malleable conception of identity so as to better negotiate the complex identity politics of the U.S.–México border.

A mere 1,000 yards from the Interstate 10 in El Paso, Texas, stands a prodigious twenty-foot high, chain-linked border fence lined with powerful floodlights and high-resolution cameras that divides the United States from México. If landscapes can be read like texts, as William Cronan and Thomas K. Wessels have argued, then the border industrial complex represents the physical embodiment of a well-preserved primary source. At first glance, the driving narrative is one of enforcement, stability, and division. A deeper textual reading, however, exposes a much more nuanced and sophisticated history. As such, educators and their students be challenged to think beyond this auspiciously uncluttered account in history and explore the internal complexities of this and other bi-national communities.

As a place where two nation-states converge, the El Paso (Texas, USA)–Ciudad Juárez (Mexican State of Chihuahua) metroplex, among the largest border metroplexes, has long been a place of contested cultural knowledge. Together, the two cities, which are separated only by the Río Grande, have a population of more than 2 million. As such, the story of the borderlands as a cultural and literary history that is alive tells the story of human adaptability, of shifting national identities, and of order and disorder.