

Title:

“Girls Attack”:

A Lesson in Resistance and Truth-Telling from El Paso’s 1917 Bath Riots



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Subject Areas: History/Humanities

Key Words: counter-narratives, historical thinking skills, sourcing, corroborating, DBQ, document-based question, eugenics, racism, Nativism, border policing, border security, media bias, media literacy, word choice, diction, resistance, resilience, feminism

Grade Levels: 9-11

Time Required:

- One 60-minute class period (with homework before the lesson)

- Paired with a first lesson, “Festering Plague,” about the racist history behind the “disinfecting” stations. Please click here [\[insert link\]](#) to see Lesson 1.

Lesson Questions:

- Overarching “essential”/guiding questions: To what extent is American history a story of embracing the “melting pot”?
 - What does the story of “disinfecting” stations and the 1917 Bath Riots teach us about America’s immigration story? About resistance and resilience?
- Today’s investigation: How can we read media critically to determine the truth? How can we analyze word choice to identify bias and uncover the truth?

Objectives: Through a study of the **1917 Bath Riots** on the bridge between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, USA, students will understand...

- that the United States’ immigration/border patrol policies have been dehumanizing, racist, and pathologizing—and thus in contradiction with the dominant narrative about the so-called “melting pot.”
- that people can and do resist military forces, and that in this case, young working-class Mexican women actively protested dehumanizing border patrol practices from both US and Mexican authorities.
- that close reading skills, including the analysis of word choice, are necessary in deconstructing news sources.

Standards:

[*Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks for History and Social Studies*](#)

USI.T4(1) [US History I; Topic 4; Element 1] Describe important religious and social trends that shaped America in the 18th and 19th centuries (e.g., the First and Second Great Awakenings; the increase in the number of Protestant denominations; the concept of “Republican Motherhood;” hostility to Catholic immigration and the rise of the Native American Party, also known as the “Know-Nothing” Party).

USI.T6(5) [US History I; Topic 6; Element 5] Analyze the consequences of the continuing westward expansion of the American people after the Civil War.

USII.T2(1f) [US History II; Topic 2; Element 1(f)] 1. Analyze the impact of the eugenics movement on segregation, immigration, and the legalization of involuntary sterilization in some states.

RCA-H(1) [Reading Standards for Literacy in the Content Areas; Element 1] Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

RCA-H(2) [Reading Standards for Literacy in the Content Areas; Element 2] Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

RCA-H(3) [Reading Standards for Literacy in the Content Areas; Element 3] Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where a text leaves matters uncertain.

RCA-H(7) [Reading Standards for Literacy in the Content Areas; Element 7] Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

RCA-H(1) [Reading Standards for Literacy in the Content Areas; Element 8] Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

RCA-H(1) [Reading Standards for Literacy in the Content Areas; Element 9] Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Common Core State Standards

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4](#): Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6](#): Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#): Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2](#): Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4](#): Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6](#): Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

Materials:

- Copies of lightly redacted excerpt from *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* [\[insert link to redacted excerpt\]](#) (homework reading to be completed before the lesson)
- Copies of student worksheet for each student [\[insert link to student worksheet with teacher comments\]](#)

Additional Resources:

- Chapter from *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* by David Dorado Romo: <http://borderlandsnarratives.utep.edu/images/Readings/Ringside-to-a-Revolution.pdf>
- National Public Radio story on the Bath Riots: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5176177>
- *The Line Between Us: Teaching About the Border and Mexican Immigration*: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/line-between-us/>
- "Analyzing How Words Communicate Bias" – Lesson from *Teaching Tolerance*: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/analyzing-how-words-communicate-bias>
- All Sides (resource for news sources across the political spectrum): www.allsides.com

Works Cited:

Romo, David Dorado. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*. El Paso, Texas, Cinco Puntos Press, 2005.

“The Bath Riots: Indignity Along the Mexican Border.” *Weekend Edition Saturday*. National Public Radio, Washington, DC, 28 Jan. 2006.

Introduction:

The colorful tapestry that is my school -- a diverse school in Boston, MA -- is a testament to the failure of White supremacist eugenicists of the 19th and 20th centuries (and today) who were deeply committed to creating and maintaining the Anglo-Saxon America of their imagination. Of course, a racially-pure America never was, and never will be. Resilient resisters from the earliest days of the American project have worked to make sure the eugenicist’s dream never fully came true. While the endeavor of White supremacy was successful in the sense that the institutions built to reinforce White people’s dominance have stood the test of time, it has failed to eliminate the spirit of those who envision a diverse, equal America. The story of El Paso’s policy of “disinfecting” Mexicans and the riots it galvanized teach us about the “dirty” truth of America’s resistance to pluralism—but the story also inspires us to resist the racist structures and mechanisms (and people behind them) that continue to threaten the possibility of peace.

Reflection:

As a student and teacher of history, I am always thrilled to learn stories that had previously been unknown to me. I am indebted to my colleague, Becky Villagrán, and our professor, Dr. Ignacio Martínez, who told me the story of the fiery Carmelita Torres and her inspirational fight against the dehumanizing practice of “disinfecting” stations at the El Paso-Juárez border. I found myself sucked into the seductive depths of research: poring over early 20th-century newspaper clippings, pulling my hair out over historical analysis, and enthusiastically reporting my findings to anyone who would (or wouldn’t) listen. This lesson has reinvigorated my own love of the exploration of history—a love that I hope I will pass on to my students.

Please see the following pages for a lesson guide, including lesson activities, assessments, and possible accommodations/modifications.

WARM UP

Provide students with a short excerpt in which there is charged/loaded language that reveals bias. This can be an excerpt from a topical, contemporary news source; a timey article about immigration would work well. Alternatively, if you predict that your students would not connect with or understand that article, you can use any article or made-up passage, as long as it includes charged/loaded language. I have included an example of a made-up passage for this purpose:

Some teachers at our school were fed up with students' phone use. They decide to write a new policy: If a student is caught using their phone at an inappropriate time in class, the teacher can take the student's phone and hold it for a whole 24 hours, until the next day's class period. They presented their plan at the most recent Professional Development session. Opponents of the plan had created a different plan, one that was very flexible on student phone use. Both groups created a flyer with information about their suggested policy. When _____ [insert your name here as the teacher!] came into PD, she picked up the flyers. At the top of one of them the authors had written a title: "Students' phone use is a cancer! This new phone ban is the chemotherapy."

1. What words stand out to you in the title of this flyer? List them below.
2. Why did those words stand out to you?
3. Who created the flyer? What's their opinion on phone policy? Circle one:
 - a. the teachers in support of very strict rules regarding student phone use
 - b. the teachers in support of flexible/relaxed rules regarding student phone use
4. How did you know the answer to Question 3 above? *Hint: Use your answers to Questions 1 and 2!*
5. Bonus: If you had a cell phone policy for the school, how would you title the flyer? Why would you title it that way?

SKILL LAUNCH (Decoding Bias)

Guide the students through their answers to the Warm Up. Use the Warm Up to surface key ideas on charged language, without naming those terms.

Then transition to the key terms: What we're talking about is bias, and how it can be communicated through charged or loaded language. You're all talking about these key terms without even knowing them yet! You get the idea already. Let's just name it:

bias: favoring one person, group, or point of view more than another

loaded language / charged language: words that are meant to create a feeling in the reader/listener; emotional or very descriptive language that carries connotations and may play into or against assumptions or views the reader/listener already has

explicit: direct and obvious

implicit: subtle and hard to detect—but still there!

point of view: the way someone sees something; a person or group’s opinion on an issue

You can provide students with the terms above or have them fill in the blanks/take notes as you teach the concepts.

TRANSITION

Today, we’re going to be analyzing source bias through this lens of word choice. This kind of thing is all around us—and we can use historical sources to help us not only understand history better but also to practice this skill of critically reading media. Yesterday, you learned about the “disinfecting” stations [\[link to Lesson 1\]](#) on the Santa Fe Bridge between Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, a city in Texas in the United States. At the end of class yesterday, many of you wrote that you were wondering how people responded to this inhumane policy. Today, we’re going to find out how they reacted—and how to figure that out.

CONTENT LAUNCH (The “Bath Riots”)

Read through the text below (excerpted and lightly redacted for the purpose of this lesson from *Ringside Seat to a Revolution*) with students. Alternatively, assign this text as part of the previous night’s homework [\[link to the chapter excerpt homework assignment\]](#). Another option is to provide the information contained below as bullet-pointed notes.

Carmelita Torres was a 17-year-old Juárez maid who crossed the Santa Fe International Bridge into El Paso every morning to clean American homes. At 7:30 am on January 28, 1917, when Carmelita was asked by the customs officials at the bridge to get off the trolley, take a bath, and be disinfected with gasoline, she refused. Instead, Carmelita got off the electric streetcar and convinced 30 other female passengers to get off with her and demonstrate their opposition to this humiliating process. By 8:30 am, more than 200 Mexican women had joined her and blocked all traffic in El Paso. By noon, the press estimated their number to be as “several thousand.” The demonstrators marched as a group toward the disinfection camp to call out those who were submitting themselves to the humiliation of the delousing process. When immigration and public health service officers tried to disperse the crowd, the protesters hurled bottles, rocks, and insults at the Americans. A customs inspector was hit in the head. Fort Bliss commander General Bell ordered his soldiers to the scene, but the women jeered at them and continued their street battle. The newspapers reported American Sergeant J.M. Peck was struck in the face with a rock that cut his cheek.

The protesters laid down on the tracks in front of the trolley cars to prevent them from moving. When the street cars were immobilized, the women wrestled the motor controllers from the hands of the motormen. One of the motormen tried to run back to the American side

of the bridge. Three or four female rioters clung to him while he tried to escape. They gave him a black eye. Another motorman ran into a Chinese restaurant on Avenida Juárez to hide.

Mexican General Francisco Murguía showed up with his death troops to quell the female riot. Murguía's calvary, known as "el escuadrón de la muerte," was rather intimidating. They wore insignia bearing a skull and crossbones and were known for taking no prisoners. General Murguía's nickname was "Pancho Mecates" for his habit of hanging hundreds of prisoners from mecate ropes along the telephone lines leading to Juárez. The calvarymen drew their sabers and pointed them at the crowd. But the women did not run away. They jeered, hooted, and attacked the soldiers.

SOURCE ANALYSIS

As you can imagine, this was an event that got a lot of coverage in the press. Local El Paso papers covered the event, and so did papers from across the country, in Ohio, Michigan, Massachusetts, Nevada, and elsewhere. It was national news. In today's world, this would have "gone viral"!

So, let's imagine you live in El Paso -- or even rural Ohio or Boston -- at this time, and you read about this event in the news paper. Let's take a look at some of the headlines and text you would have read. We're going to see if we can identify an author's point of view on the riots from their use of loaded or charged language.

For **each** of the news clippings provided have students answer the following questions (they mirror the Warm Up questions):

1. What words stand out to you **as charged/loaded language**? List them below.
2. How does that language qualify as **charged/loaded**? In other words, what emotions do they bring up for you (or do you think the author hopes they bring up in readers)? What are the connotations and why do they matter?
3. What's the author's **point of view** on the riot and the rioters? **How** does the language lead you to that conclusion about their bias?

Some examples of provided news sources are pasted below. Please also visit the folder with newspaper clippings to find additional options [\[link to folder with newspaper clippings\]](#).

There are different ways to approach this activity. Some options include:

- *Using one article (either the El Paso Morning Times article or the El Paso Herald article) in FULL. The articles have many examples of loaded language, all useful for this exercise. Students can work together, in pairs, or in small groups to deconstruct the article after the teacher models an example.*
- *Divide students into pairs. Assign each pair a headline/excerpt of an article. Together, they should complete the analysis questions above. Then, students can "mingle" in the room to meet others who have a different article/excerpt. Students can share their findings with each other. A variation on this is to have students "quiz" each other on finding the loaded language in each other's assigned pieces. (This helps to give students a sense of responsibility and ownership.)*



From the [El Paso Morning Times](#)

El Paso, Texas

January 29, 1919

Word choice to notice in headline:

- auburn-haired
- Amazon
- feminine
- outbreak
- rumor
- wild

This article is included in its entirety in both as the “original” document and in transcribed form. The article includes passages that are useful for this exercise. Some are reproduced below. See the linked documents for the complete article [\[insert link to the El Paso Times article\]](#).

“Juarez women, **incensed** at the American quarantine regulations, led a **riot** yesterday morning at the Santa Fe bridge. From the time the street cars began to run until the middle of the afternoon thousands of Mexicans **thronged** the Juarez side of the river and pushed out to the tailgate on the bridge. Women **ringleaders** of the **mob hurled stones** at **American civilians**, both on the bridge and on the streets of Juarez. Four street cars which crossed into Juarez early in the morning were seized, and the eight members of the crew sent, afoot, back to El Paso, one of them **bringing a black eye and bruised face** as a memento.”

“...the Mexicans having previously pushed as far as the tollgate, where they hung over the railing to **jeer** their compatriots who entered the bathhouse to comply with the regulations.”

“**False Reports** Responsible for Trouble” *[Note to teacher: This is not word choice; this is missing context/inaccurate representation of facts. The reports were not false.]*

“...The greater part of them refused to go to the bath and became **indignant** when they were ordered off the street cars, after having paid their fares, and could not have their nickel refunded.”

“By 8 o’clock the **throng**, consisting in large part of servant girls employed in El Paso, had grown until it packed the bridge half way across. Led by Carmelita Torres, an **auburn-haired young woman of 17**, they kept up a **continuous volley of language** aimed at the immigration and health officers, civilians, sentries and any other visible American. Small stones were thrown, but the **missiles were little more dangerous than the language**. Some few automobiles which **braved their fury** and pushed through to the other side were **showered with mud and stones**.

“Motorman’s **Grotesque** Escape”

“American sentries **had** to be placed under the bridge to prevent Mexicans from jumping off upon the sand and reaching the American side in that manner. These sentries were **exposed to the marksmanship** of a gang of small Mexican boys, who threw sticks and mud.”

“At the American end of the bridge **quiet efficiency** prevailed. The handful of American soldiers who patrolled the grounds around the customs house continued to walk their beats just as though a **seething Latin mob scene** was not being enacted a few feet away.”

“**Girls Attack** Automobiles”

“Those who witnessed the actions of the **Mexican mob** at the end of the bridge will never forget it. Composed largely of young **girls**, the mob seemed **bent on destroying** anything that came from the American side. As soon as an automobile would cross the line the girls would absolutely cover it. The scene reminded one of **bees swarming**. **The hands of the feminine mob would claw and tear at the tops of the cars**. The glass rear windows of the autos were torn out, the tops torn to pieces and parts of the fittings, such as lamps and horns, were torn away.”

“Mexicans **Survive** Bath”

“Early in the afternoon, as Mexicans continued to come out of the bathhouse **without appreciable injury**, the crowd began to break up.”

“Bad Day for Americans”

“In spite of protest made by so many there were enough Mexicans who submitted to the orders of the immigration officers to keep the bathhouse and disinfection equipment busy. Each individual who crossed the bridge was questioned and inspected, and the greater part of them ordered to the cleansing house. They came out with clothes wrinkled from the steam sterilizer, hair wet and faces shining, generally laughing and in good humor. The immigration men predict that as soon as the Mexicans become familiar with the bathing process they will not only submit to it, but **welcome it**.”

MEXICANS RESENT ORDERS TO BATHE

Misunderstanding Over Quarantine Regulations Leads to Riot on International Bridge.

WOMEN START WILD STORIES

Conference Between Immigration Officials Brings About Satisfactory Arrangement.

(By Associated Press.)
EL PASO, TEXAS, January 28.—A misunderstanding over quarantine regulations led to a riot to-day at the Juarez end of the main international bridge, which threatened for a time to assume dangerous proportions. Energetic measures taken by the Carranza garrison and a conference between the American and Mexican immigration officials later brought about an arrangement satisfactory to the Mexican officials and quiet was restored.

The rioters were mostly Mexican women, employed as servants in El Paso, who resented the American quarantine order that all persons of unclean appearance seeking to cross the bridge be given a shower bath and their clothing be disinfected to kill typhus germs.

Women stopped by the authorities returned to Juarez and circulated stories that all were to receive a bath in a gasoline mixture similar to that which resulted in a fire in the El Paso jail last March, in which more than a score of persons were burned to death. Stories were also circulated that American soldiers were photographing the women while bathing, and making the pictures public.

EXCITED WOMEN THROUGH MEXICAN SIDE OF BRIDGE

Excited women thronged the Mexican side of the bridge, held up street cars and completely blocked traffic for several hours.

They shouted, defiantly waved controller bars at the helpless manager of the street-car system, scurried against the shade of bridge walls when a moving-picture man tried to take them, and had a good time generally.

Some of the car men were roughly handled and several car windows were broken. Andreas Garcia, inspector-general of Carranza consulates, and So-niata Bravo, the consul-general, advanced in a motor car that was shoved back by the women, some of whom later shouted, "Viva, Villa! Viva, Villa!" when they tried to address the mob. But the garrison soldiers appeared and pressed the women back from the bridge.

Several shots were heard in succession at this time, but Carranza officers and government investigators say no one was hurt, despite a detailed story that spread through El Paso that a peon had been killed for shouting, "Long live Villa! Death to Carranza!"

RECOGNIZE CERTIFICATES ISSUED BY MEXICANS

At an international conference held at noon, it was arranged that the American authorities would recognize bath and sterilization certificates issued by the Mexicans, who have an effective quarantine plant.

Because of the riot, the races on the Juarez track were called off, and the gambling halls closed.

SERVANT GIRL PROBLEM IN EL PASO

Bath Riots Keep 200 Mexican Women Away from Work in Households of Border City in Texas

Smelter Crippled for Hands And Carries on Business With Only Half Force It Usually Employs

From the *Reno Evening Gazette* (can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#))
Reno, Nevada
January 30, 1917

Word choice to notice:

- servant girl
- problem
- crippled

From *The Times Dispatch*
Richmond, VA
January 29, 1917

This source can be used in its entirety or cropped to the headlines (below).

Word choice to notice:

- misunderstanding
- wild
- throng
- defiantly

MEXICANS RESENT ORDERS TO BATHE

Misunderstanding Over Quarantine Regulations Leads to Riot on International Bridge.

WOMEN START WILD STORIES

Conference Between Immigration Officials Brings About Satisfactory Arrangement.

WOMEN FORCE ANTI-AMERICAN RIOT IN JUAREZ

Resisting Bath Disinfection at El Paso, They Head Mob, Killing One, Injuring Many; Seven Arrested for Safety.

SOLDIERS GUARD EACH END OF BRIDGE WHILE STREET FIGHTS ENSUE

Red-haired Girl, Armed With Car Controller, Proves Joan of Arc in Protest Against Vinegar and Gasoline Plunge.

Special to The Free Press.
El Paso, Tex., Jan. 28.—To bathe and disinfect a group of Mexican women, entering El Paso to work today, put one American in a Juarez hospital, caused the arrest of seven, brought death to one Mexican and severed commercial relations between El Paso and Juarez. Such was the extent of anti-American riots in Juarez streets when the women rebelled at bathing in vinegar and gasoline.

Four hundred Mexican women, led by a red-haired girl, started to cross the international bridge but were barred by health officers, acting under a new quarantine rule, which provides that all persons without military passes must take a disinfectant bath of vinegar and gasoline before entering El Paso.

Women Charge Indignities.

The women protested vigorously. They attempted to push their way past the health officers and bridge guards, but were driven back. Before they were allowed to proceed several were compelled to bathe at the immigration offices. They returned to Juarez and claimed to officials they had been forced to submit to indignities. As soon as these allegations became known, crowds assembled in the streets shouting imprecations on Americans. About 400 men led the mob.

About that time a street car from El Paso turned into Calle Comercio. The only Americans on board were the conductor and motorman. The latter was taken from his car and so badly beaten with his controller that it became necessary to remove him to a hospital. The conductor was taken to jail. It is alleged, by Carranza officials for safekeeping, while windows in the car were demolished by the mobs. Crews of three speeding cars were also placed in jail. This afternoon Juarez officials declared they had been released.

Mass at Bridge Ends.

A United States mail wagon, which was crossing the bridge, was also wrecked by the mob. The driver was beaten.

In the midst of the rioting the Mexican authorities issued orders directing that no Americans should be permitted to enter or leave Juarez.

Thousands of Mexicans gathered at the Juarez end of the international bridge shouting maledictions at the Americans.

During the rioting, the impression became general that Villa had taken the city. While the crowds were cursing the gringos, the cry of "Viva Villa" was started. Even the Carranza soldiers joined in the cheering. Jose Maria Sanchez, a prominent Mexican, sleeping late

Continued on Page Two, Column Three.

From the [Detroit Free Press](#) (second portion of article can be accessed [here](#))
Detroit, MI
January 29, 1917

Word choice to notice:

- anti-American
- riot
- mob
- street fight
- armed
- Joan of Arc
- red-haired girl

ASSESSMENT

Content Assessment

Choose one of the news sources you read today. Write a Letter to the Editor in response to the news source. You can choose one of the following roles:

- One of the rioting women, like Carmelita Torres
- One of the women who was willing to go through the “disinfecting” station
- A spectator from the El Paso side
- A spectator from the Juárez side

Be sure to explain who you are in more detail. Let the newspaper know: Do you like their use of language? Why or why not? What about it do you like/dislike? How do you think Carmelita Torres should be presented in the media?

Creative Assessment

How do you think we should remember Carmelita Torres today? Create an artistic representation to honor her resistance. In a short written response, explain your artistic choices: First, explain any symbolism in your work. Then explain: Why did you portray her that way?

Language Skills Assessment

Provide students with another example of charged/loading language. Ask them to identify the language, explain how it is charged/loading, and how it reveals the bias and point of view of the author.