

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

National Endowment for the Humanities and The University of Texas at El Paso  
2019 Summer Institute for Secondary School Teachers (Grades 6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>)

**Lesson Plan: Life in the Desert Borderlands**

**1. Life in the Desert Borderlands: Bonnie Stevens**

Bonnie Stevens is a middle school Spanish teacher in the Kansas City, Missouri area. She received her master's degree from University of Central Missouri in Teaching English as a Second Language. She enjoys being outside, gardening, reading, spending time with her family and friends, and traveling both in and out of the United States. In her time at the NEH Borderlands program, she has endeavored to create a sensory experience for students in Spanish I that teaches them to engage their senses in order to better understand what living in the desert borderlands is like as well as expose students to borderlands literature and topics. Bonnie can be reached at: [bonnie.stevens@lsr7.net](mailto:bonnie.stevens@lsr7.net)

**2. Content or Subject Areas with Keywords**

Spanish I (introductory Spanish), los sentidos, sensory, la frontera, el desierto, el español, the Chihuahuan Desert, Sonoran Desert, geography, borderlands, language arts

**3. Grade Levels and Time Required**

Spanish I (introductory Spanish) or geography, two 45 minute class periods

**4. Instructional Objectives and Student Learning**

- ❖ Gain a better understanding of the desert experience through a sensory lesson.
- ❖ Discuss and reflect on borderlands literature, photos, and life along the border.
- ❖ This unit connects to the [ACTFL standards](#) of communications, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities.

**5. Guiding Questions**

Where are the deserts located along the Mexico - U.S. border? What does it look like, smell like, feel like, sound like, taste like along the borderlands?  
Why are borders created? What is life like along the borderlands?

**6. Materials and Resources**

For this lesson, teachers will need to gather any or all of the following materials.

**Día 1:**

- a) a computer, paper and writing pen/pencil

- b) a map of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts (See Works Cited or [click here](#))

# US Geography

## Deserts

### Major Deserts

There are four major deserts in the United States. They are all located in the western portion of the country and are defined to be areas that receive less than ten inches of precipitation (rain, snow, etc.) a year.



- c) para mirar/ver: [pictures/items/videos](#) (such as [Chihuahuan Desert Plants](#) or the [thinglink: Explorando el Desierto](#)) to see, including pictures of the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts as well as pictures of the borderlands and border
- d) para escuchar: YouTube/video clips of sounds to listen to which may include any or all of the following: the [grackle](#) (a bird), the [mourning dove](#), insects such as [chicharras](#) or [cigarras](#) (cicadas), [wind](#), [coyotes](#), seeds, pods, or other things for kids to hear and pass around
- e) para oler: items to smell: [la gobernadora](#) (a plant common in the Chihuahuan Desert) or [Woolly Butterflybush](#) or chocolate flower (or also called [chocolate scented daisy](#) - this smells like chocolate in the morning)
- f) para tocar: cactus, sand (have the sand hot), rocks/stones, plants, pods
- g) para probar: hibiscus water (agua de jamaica), agua fresca, fruta con tajín, Valentina hot sauce (cups, a pitcher, or plates, if necessary), cactus or prickly pear jelly, nopales, pulparindo, tuna de nopal

### Día 2:

- a) a computer, paper, and writing pen/pencil
- b) a map of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts (See Works Cited or [click here](#))
- c) pictures, articles and literature about the border and borderlands (see below)

## 7. Introduction

The Chihuahuan and Sonoran Desert make up a large portion of the Mexico-U.S.

border. During these two lessons students will explore through their senses what borderland desert living is like and then also connect that with geography, borderlands' literature, life near the border, and a border's significance. Students will engage in discussion about the purpose of a border, what it looks like along the U.S.-Mexico border and how it affects people passing through the border.

## 8. Instructional and Lesson Activities (ENGAGE, EXPLORE, EXPLAIN)

### Día 1:

vocabulario: el desierto, amargo, fresco, rico, sabroso, dulce, (No) Me gusta, agrio,...

Anticipatory Set/Opening: When you think about a desert, what images come to mind? What sounds? What might you touch or taste?

Today you are going to experience the desert along the Mexico-U.S. border. By the end of class, you will be able to talk about the desert along the borderlands through your senses. ¡Disfruta!

### Actividades para la clase:

(Para mirar/ver): The class will look at a map as well as pictures and/or videos of landscape, plants/trees/shrubs (such as the Texas mountain laurel or barrel cactus, ocotillos, cholla, turpentine bush, Woolly Butterfly Bush, anacacho orchid tree, Red Yucca, wooly paperflower, soapbush, cherry skullcap, Cimarron Blue Ranger Rain Sage, or prickly pear cactus) animals (roadrunner, coyote, mule deer, lizards, golden eagles, prairie dogs, ...), insects, and more of the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts. Students will journal about what they see using adjectives, verbs, and nouns. They will share those thoughts with partners/small groups and then whole class.

(Para escuchar): As a class, either (a) play sounds for students and have them guess what each sound is, (b) play sounds and let students see what they are listening to, or (c) use a mixture of (a) and (b)

### Actividades en grupos:

(Have several items of each object, if possible. Have students share different items among groups. Have students first describe in writing each of the following senses and items, then discuss their adjectives and writing with their group members.)

(Para oler): Students will smell *la gobernadora* or *wooly butterflybush* and describe the plant and its smell on paper and in their groups.

(Para tocar): Students will touch cactus plants, sand (hot, if possible), rocks/stones and describe them in writing and to group. How might these things affect someone walking/going through the desert.

(Para escuchar): Students will listen to different plants from the desert such as bean pods from a Honey Mesquite tree or pods from other trees/plants.

After students have had time to 'explore' each of these objects, describe and journal about them, and discuss them in groups, **now** it's time to 'taste' the desert.

Actividad para la clase:

Para probar: Have any of the following foods/drinks for students to try as a class: agua de jamaica, agua fresca, fruta con tajín, dulces such as [dulces Vero](#), de la Rosa, [Duvalín](#), [Paleta Tomy](#), Pulparindo, cactus or prickly pear jelly, nopales, tuna de nopal  
\*Have students share adjectivos para describir: amargo, fresco, rico, jugoso, sabroso, dulce, (No) Me gusta, agrio,...

Para terminar **Día 1:**

End the class with any of these questions for students to reflect on and discuss with their groups. Today you have explored the desert. Which senses did you especially enjoy exploring? Why? If someone asked you about the Chihuahuan or Sonoran Desert, what would you tell them?

Closing activity: As a group, discuss how people living in the desert borderlands would live differently than you. How would all these things you experienced today affect your daily life?

**Día 2:**

**vocabulario:** la frontera    la valla    el muro    el desierto    la migra

(a) Anticipatory Set/Opening: Yesterday you explored and experienced the deserts along the Mexico-U.S. border. Today we are going to explore life along the desert borderlands more.

Journal: When you think about the word 'border', what comes to mind?

After giving students 4-5 minutes to journal, have them discuss their thoughts in partners. Then give time for several students to share with the class.

Ask: Why are borders created? Are they needed?

(b) Yesterday you looked at a map of the desert borderlands - both the Chihuahuan Desert and the Sonoran Desert.

What states/places are in these desert borderlands?

(c) Look at the following collection of Google Pictures about the border wall and life in the borderlands.

\*Journal about and be ready to discuss:

- 1) What adjectives and thoughts come to mind when looking at the border wall?
- 2) What is the purpose of a border?
- 3) What are your thoughts on this collection of pictures ([La frontera](#)) taken around the El Paso, Texas / Juárez, México area in the Chihuahuan Desert?

Give students about 10 minutes to look at and journal about the pictures of la frontera (border). Have them discuss their thoughts in partners/small groups. Then give time for several students to share with the class.

(d) Have students read and be ready to discuss the following NPR story: "[Apprehension](#)" by Steve Inskeep. (On the lower left, it says "All Stories". Click on that and go to "Story 9: Apprehension.")

(e) Read "*La Migra*" by Pat Mora as a class. Have students read along silently. Discuss.

(f) Have students look through the following NPR story: [Story 11: Palabras | Words](#) (On the lower left, it says "All Stories". Click on that and go to "Story 11: Palabras | Words." Have them look through and read about the images, words, and answer the following:

Which choices given do you think are and/or are not appropriate to call migrants who cross the border without permission?

Do you think of it more as a *valla* or *muro*? Do you think there is a difference?

Which picture stood out to you and why?

Is there a picture you wish to discuss?

Give students time to do this and then discuss in partners/small groups/whole class.

(g) Read and discuss a vignette from *House Built on Ashes: A Memoir* by José Antonio Rodríguez. Suggestions include: "*Beans*" (p. 30) and "*Cockroaches and diplomas*" (p. 121). This book is full of short vignettes about the author's life, both in Mexico and in the U.S.

## 9. EXTEND/ELABORATE: Additional Learning

The class can read, discuss, and/or do activities with "*Reading and Writing Lessons*" by Andrea Beltran and also read vignettes by José Antonio Rodríguez, including "*The Three Enemies*" (p. 11). Another poem is '*The Bribe*' by Pat Mora.

With more time, teachers could have students read and discuss more borderlands literature, including having students read a borderlands passage or poem in Spanish and English and see how language can change with translation.

## 10. EVALUATE: Assessment

After these lessons, have students a) write their thoughts and feelings about the following two questions OR b) create something to demonstrate their thoughts.

What kinds of borders (areas of separation) are in your life?  
Do you feel you can change any of the 'borders' in your life?

### **11. Accommodations and Modifications**

Give students directions orally and in writing and ask students to repeat the directions in their own words to check for understanding.

This lesson can be modified to fit whatever biome a teacher would like students to explore and experience, whether a desert, a rainforest, the prairie, etcetera. If a teacher can not find access to the plant 'la gobernadora', they can choose another smell from the desert or other biome.

### **12. College and Career Readiness (optional)**

### **13. Additional Resources (I highly recommend works by Cinco Puntos Press.)**

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Regan, Margaret. *The death of Josseline: Immigration stories from the Arizona-Mexico borderlands*. Boston, MA: Beacon, 2010.

Romo, David Dorado. *Ringside seat to a revolution: An underground cultural history of El Paso and Juárez, 1893-1923*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos P, 2005.

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### **14. Works Cited**

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Mora, Pat. "La Migra." *In Ms. Magazine*. Jan. 1993.

Mora, Pat. "The Bribe." *The Bribe by pat mora*. 26 July 2019 <<http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/poetry/bribe.html>>.

Relax, Classical and. "Sonido del Desierto - efecto de sonido." *YouTube*. 02 June 2015. YouTube. 25 July 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj1Psdw5eqM>>.

RishayanPorMexico. "CICADA SOUND El Canto De La Cigarra Chicharra.wmv." *YouTube*. 27 July 2012. YouTube. 25 July 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4flbrmTIWyc&t=5s>>.

Rodríguez, José Antonio. *House Built on Ashes: A Memoir*. Norman: University of Oklahoma P, 2017.

"Sierra Vista Growers." *Woolly Butterfly Bush | Sierra Vista Growers*. 26 July 2019 <<https://sierravistagrowers.net/shrubs/woolly-butterfly-bush>>.

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## 15. Reflection

The NEH Institute '*Tales From the Chihuahuan Desert*' gave me the opportunity to better understand the desert borderlands. I live in the Midwest and was very unfamiliar with what living in the borderland desert meant. I have been captivated by the beauty of the desert, yet also made more aware of the dangers of traveling through it (extreme heat or cold at times, plants that grab and tug at you, vast emptiness of people, shelter, and resources, etcetera). I have had the opportunity to read books, poems, short stories, vignettes, research, and more through this class that has better informed me personally and professionally. Our classes have involved thoughtful readings to ponder over, discuss, and write about and use in our classrooms. We have delved into issues about borders, history of people groups who have lived in the (current) borderlands' area pre-European settlement, and more.

I have been exposed to readings and authors that I was unfamiliar with and I want to do the same for my students. The Mexico-U.S. border area has a long history of people moving between both spaces, and it is important to know how borderland experiences influence and shape our country.

This lesson is an introductory unit on experiencing the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts as best as possible without being there. It also begins the reflection and conversation on borders and reasons why people travel in the borderlands.