

Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert: Construction of Ethnic Identities and Recovering Cultural Memory through Muralism in the Borderlands

The National Endowment for the Humanities and The University of Texas at El Paso
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Unit: Construction of Ethnic Identities and Recovering Cultural Memory through Muralism in the Borderlands

Prepared by:

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Mary Aebischer is a native of Mexico City and has been a naturalized U.S. citizen since 1975. She teaches High School Spanish, and Spanish Language Arts, in Los Lunas, New Mexico. Mary earned a PhD in Transformative Learning and Change, an interdisciplinary degree in the Humanities. Her dissertation entitled, *An Organic Inquiry into the Sacred Stories of the Virgin of Guadalupe: Narratives of Transformation in the Latina/Chicana Borderland Consciousness*, explores the lives of twelve women from New Mexico. Mary enjoys traveling, learning cultural mythologies, and teaching culinary arts. Mary is interested in the intersection of class, ethnicity, gender, and race processes in how students construct their Borderlands identities; the uses of language; and the restoration of their cultural/historical memories. She plans to apply knowledge gained from this Summer Institute, by producing short plays based on students' *testimonios* and presenting them to diverse student groups and communities in various school districts in New Mexico. She can be reached at maebis355@gmail.com.

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Francisco Becerra-Hernandez lives in San Mateo, California. He is a teacher of Spanish high school level. Francisco has been teaching for eight years in the United States. He has taught in Spain and México. His favorite authors are Ernest Hemingway and Mario Vargas Llosa. Francisco's favorite hobbies are playing sports and reading. Also, he enjoys playing tennis and soccer, attends cultural activities such as theater and concerts, and visits museums. Being part of NEH Tales of Chihuahuan Desert Summer Institute, I have acquired innovating teaching techniques and will provide resources

about the narratives of bicultural, binational, and bilingual people in the Borderlands. Through this process, students will be able to express the richness of their personal identity and appreciate the diversity of identities in their community.

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Subject Areas: Spanish Language Arts, AP Spanish Language and Culture, Social Studies

Keywords: Muralismo, mural, identidad, historia, frontera, Nepantla, bilingüe, bicultural, binacional, conflicto cultural, insolación, segregación, marginación.

Grade Levels: High School students 9-12 grades; AP Spanish and Spanish Language Arts, Spanish 4 &5.

Time Required: 5 blocks of class instruction, 90 minutes each.

Introduction

The ability for students of the Borderlands to construct ethnic identities and recover historical/cultural memory through their study of Spanish Language and Culture are beneficial capacities to develop within the classroom. Students improve their self-esteem when the multiplicity and fluidity of Borderlands identities are explored and validated. Reflecting on binationalism and biculturalism while engaging in bilingualism, students will feel validation and pride of their historical and cultural heritage that have been forgotten, marginalized or never learned. We find that many of our students who are either first or second generation Mexican, know very little of their historical roots, in the form of legends, historical narratives, or historical periods that have impacted them culturally. Students who attend AP Spanish classes or in Native Spanish classes in geographical spaces considered the Borderlands or the Greater Borderlands are prime candidates to learn about Mexican history and be mirrored within their cultural heritage with Mexican or Latin American history and narratives as they are rarely taught at the High School level.

The medium of art and muralism in particular, is the primary means used in this unit of study to explore constructed Borderlands identities and recover historical memory. As we have selected 35 mural slides from the sister cities of El Paso, and Juarez, as well as the home cities of our particular students (in Albuquerque, NM and San Francisco, CA), we encourage students to explore murals from their home cities besides those cited here. We hope the murals evoke further inquiry about historical periods and further reflection of how ethnic identities are portrayed and reflected. We have listed historical periods that are portrayed in the selected murals, and realize that this list will be

expanded as students select their own murals. We have included some sites for further inquiry and investigation of the historical period represented

We further note the importance for advanced students of the Spanish language to develop their reading and writing skills in academic Spanish, as they tend to have excellent speaking skills. Increasing literacy skills will be encouraged as an extended learning activity along with several narrative resources, primarily poems about the experience of being binational, bicultural immigrants. Lastly, writing skills will be the focus in a culminating activity of writing a descriptive essay (see Rubric below). Students are to use a wide variety of grammatical tenses in the present, future, and subjunctive as well as using the various past tenses: the present tense, the subjunctive, preterite, imperfect, present perfect and past perfect.

Guiding Questions

- What historical connections can students of the Borderlands make that are depicted in a variety of murals?
- How do students explore and validate their ethnic identity through the reflection of murals?
- How is ethnic identity learned and transmitted from previous generations through images, narratives (poems, short stories), and media?
- How can our students engage and develop reflexivity, or the conscious ability to ground the everyday with the retrieval of memory of their cultural heritage?

Instructional Objectives and Student Learning

The following ACTFL 5 goal areas evolve into the 11 standards that are aligned with Common Core and College Readiness Standards, which will be used for the unit:

- Communication: 1. Interpersonal; 2. Interpretative; 3. Presentational
- Cultures: 4. Relating Culture to perspectives 5. Relating practices to perspectives.
- Connections: 6. Making connections; 7. Acquiring information from different perspectives
- Comparison: 8. Language comparisons; 9. Cultural comparisons.
- Communities: 10. School and Global Communities; 11. Lifelong Learning

For more details go to ACTFL site:

<https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/publications/standards/World-ReadinessStandardsforLearningLanguages.pdf>

Outcomes:

- Students will be able to compare and contrast murals from their home cities and El Paso-Ciudad Juárez
- Students will be able to describe orally, the Muralism movement in Mexico and its influence in the United States Borderlands

- Students will write using different grammatical tenses to describe their reflections of self through the viewing of murals
- Students will be able to make connections with their borderland identities by reviewing poems and short narratives of the immigrant and/or Borderland experience

Student learning outcomes will be demonstrated by the following:

1. By making an oral presentation in small groups describing to classmates the Mexican muralism movement
2. By creating a personal mural through collage, drawing, or through graphic design.
3. By doing a descriptive essay on their borderland identities
4. After reading about borderline identities, through narratives-poems, they will be making connections with their personal murals. Students will write a descriptive essay incorporating the vocabulary learned in this unit.

Materials and Resources

- El muralismo mexicano: <https://www.culturagenial.com/es/muralismo-mexicano-importancia/>
- Diego Rivera: <https://masdemx.com/2016/05/el-muralismo-de-diego-rivera-y-su-importancia-en-el-pueblo-mexicano/>
- José Clemente Orozco: https://elpais.com/cultura/2017/11/23/actualidad/1511421197_754865.html
- David Alfaro Siqueiros: <https://trianarts.com/david-alfaro-siqueiros-muralismo-mexicano/>
- El muralismo en la actualidad: <https://www.muralismomexicanocontemporaneo.com.mx/acerca-de.php>
- Power Point con los murales ([Make a hyperlink to the doc. Murales en la frontera.pdf](#))
- Revistas para hacer el collage

Instructional and Lesson Activities

This Unit of study is divided into three different parts: Antes-Before entails 2 blocks of time; Durante-During entails 1 block; and Después-After entails 2 blocks. The following are the blocks being described by the sequence of activities.

Antes- Before

- Teacher will present a mural of Rafael Lopez.com, a contemporary Chicano muralist. Students will be analyzing it by using the following questions:
 - a. ¿Qué es lo que ves en el mural?
 - b. Describe las imágenes que hay en el mural
 - c. ¿Qué emociones te transmite el mural?
 - d. ¿Cuál es tu interpretación del mural?
- Students will be working with the new vocabulary that will appear in an online Quizlet site (https://quizlet.com/_6vtnce). Some of the new vocabulary are: *Identidad, frontera, muralismo, Nepantla, bilingüe, bicultural, binacional, conflicto cultural, insolación, segregación, marginación.*
- Students will search murals from their home city, and note how this mural reflects their ethnic and cultural identity.
- In groups of 3 people, students will prepare a 7 minutes long oral presentation in one of the following topics:
 - a. El muralismo
 - b. Diego Rivera
 - c. Jose Clemente Orozco
 - d. David Alfaro Siqueiros
- In different groups, students will reflect on the following questions. Then, they will share it with the class:
 - a. ¿Qué semejanzas hay en los murales de los 3 muralistas mexicanos?
 - b. ¿Qué diferencias encuentras?
 - c. ¿Cuál es la temática que se trata en los murales de los tres artistas?
 - d. ¿De qué manera un mural cuenta su historia?
 - e. ¿Con qué representación de los murales te identificas?

Durante-During

- Students will be given two sets of murals; one set from their home city, and another set from the Sister cities of El Paso, TX/Ciudad Juárez, México.
- Students are encouraged to look for murals in their home cities
- Students will refer to historical references section (see below) and do a search in depth the links provided to each historical period that may be included in their mural.

Guiding questions:

1. ¿Qué emociones te transmite el mural?
2. ¿Cual es tu interpretación del mural?
3. ¿Cuáles hechos históricos de tu cultura te hace recordar el mural?

4. ¿Hay aspectos religiosos o ceremonias que son importantes para tu cultura que están representados en un mural, o murales?
 5. ¿Cómo comunica el mural tu identidad étnica?
- Change the groups in such a way that there is representation of the three cities in each new group. Students will be acting as ambassadors of the city they are representing and share their information to new groups about their own interpretations.
 - Once they have finished, students will write two paragraphs about the importance of how murals reflect the history, identity and culture of their respective cities.

Después- After

- The students will now be creating their own mural/collage reflecting about their ethnic identity, culture or the collective identity of their city and culture.
- For this activity, students have the choice to do drawings of their own mural; get magazine cut outs to create their own collage, or do an online mural/collage by using the following site: *Befunky.com*
- Students will engage in a reading-discussion of two sets of readings: one a poem of Gloria Anzaldúa, and the other narratives of young people who live in the Borderlands (materials are provided under the resources section).
- Taking into consideration their own personal mural/collage, and the analyzed readings, students will be writing a 5 paragraph descriptive essay with details provided below:

A. Para escribir el ensayo, incorpora estos puntos descriptivos sobre ti mismo:

1. ¿Cuáles idiomas usas a diario en casa y en el colegio?
2. ¿Cuál idioma te es más cómodo comunicarte?
3. ¿Cuál es tu identidad étnica? ¿Tienes varias identidades para describirte plenamente?
4. ¿Te sientes en alguna manera marginado o aislado por la cultura dominante en la que vives?
5. ¿Qué sabes sobre el país de dónde vienen tus padres o abuelos?
6. ¿Cuáles son los valores más importantes que tu cultura te ofrece?

B. Incorpora cómo los murales seleccionados ayudan a describirte en estos puntos:

1. ¿Cuál es tu identidad étnica o cultural?
2. ¿Cuáles hechos históricos de tu cultura te hace recordar el mural?

3. ¿Hay aspectos religiosos o ceremonias que son importantes para tu cultura que están representados en un mural, o murales?
4. ¿Cómo te hacen recordar tu estado de Nepantla? (lee el párrafo sobre la *definición de NEPANTLA y la *descripción de unas de las escrituras de Gloria Anzaldúa).
 - a. ¿Cuáles son los puentes o fronteras que cruzas en tu vida diaria-entre lenguas, culturas, identidades?
 - b. ¿Cómo es tu “tierra de en medio”, o tu “tierra desconocida”?
5. ¿Qué emociones o sensaciones tienes al contemplar los murales?
6. ¿Los murales te ofrecen algún consejo o esperanza para tu futuro?

C. Escribe tu ensayo usando las siguientes conjugaciones gramáticas:

- a. El presente, el presente progresivo
- b. El imperfecto, y el pretérito
- c. Los tiempos compuestos del pasado ejemplos-
- d. presente perfecto (he estado); el pasado perfecto (había estado)
- e. El futuro
- f. El subjuntivo

**El significado de la palabra NEPANTLA- Es una palabra Náhuatl que significa “estar en medio de algo” o “en medio.” Nepantla fue una palabra usada por primera vez por la gente del habla Náhuatl-en México (los Aztecas) durante el siglo 16. Nepantla es una palabra que también se refiere el vivir en las fronteras reales o metafóricas (Wikipedia)*

**Gloria Anzaldúa, fue una escritora Chicana del Valle Rio Grande de Texas, qué uso la palabra Nepantla para describir profundamente la experiencia de vivir en varios lugares con varias perspectivas a la misma vez.*

“Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. Nepantla es tierra desconocida, and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement-an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling.” From This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by radical women of color. Edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga

- Gallery walk presentation in class. Students will showcase their created mural, and their written essay to students from other Spanish classes, who will be visiting our classroom. In the Gallery walk technique, there is a display with their work, and the students are describing their work, and their learning process to students visitors.

Additional Learning

Students can expand on the concept of how ethnic identities are constructed by exploring and reflecting on reading narratives, and poems from immigrants living in the Borderlands. Students can also expand on their cultural memory by exploring more their Mexican historical roots by watching DVD's, and reading on Border culture narratives. (See additional resources). Students can create their own poems, create a graphic novel, or record a personal video about themselves. Teachers can create another unit using the additional resources provided through writing and reading Borderland narratives and poems.

Assessment

Student will be assessed through the following assessments:

- 7 minutes oral presentation in groups-they demonstrate a general understanding of the Muralism movement from Mexico (summative assessment)
- Writing the 5 paragraph descriptive essay incorporating their descriptions of murals, their ethnic personal and community identities, appropriate use of grammar tenses, state Nepantla, cultural and historical references (summative assessment)
- Gallery walk presentation where the students will be showcasing their murals and their collage, drawing of a mural, or graphic design (formative assessment).

Accommodations and Modifications

1. Adjust the method of presentation or content and develop supplemental material as needed.
2. Outline the material for the student before reading a selection.
3. Provide additional practice to ensure mastery.
4. Develop simple study guides.
5. Create a word wall that is accompanied by an image or photograph for each new vocabulary terms.

Additional Resources:

- Anaya, Rodolfo, *Bendiceme Ultima*. Mass Market.1994
- Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherie Moraga, Editors *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. San Francisco: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press 2nd. Edition 1983
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands, La Frontera*. The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Gonzalez, Rodolfo. *Yo soy Joaquín*.1967

- Hurtado, Aída, and Gurin, Patricia. *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing US Society: ¿Quién Soy? ¿Quiénes Somos?*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2004
- Mora, Pat. *Extranjera legal*. Rinehart and Winston. Pp. 242-244
- Mora, Pat. *Los inmigrantes*. Arte Público Press, 1986.
- Rodríguez, Jeannette, and Fortier, Ted. *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.
- Carrasco, Salvador. *La Otra Conquista*. DVD 1998
- Parra, Santiago. *Guadalupe*. DVD 2006
- Alosa, Ernesto. *La Senda de Gloria Series: Recreación de eventos históricos de México entre 1916-1939*. Videos y DVD 1987
- Barlow, Genevieve and Silvers, William. *Bilingual stories from Mexico-Historias de México*. Chicago: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc. 1995.
- ¡Qué Chola! Exposition at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM, March 8-August 4, 2019

Referencias Históricas:

- Día de los Muertos- La Catrina
- 15 de septiembre y la celebración de Independencia
- “El grito” from Father Miguel Hidalgo
- Presidente Benito Juárez
- Emiliano Zapata- Revolutionary from the South of Mexico
- Pancho Villa- Revolutionary from the North of Mexico
- The ideals of the Mexican Revolution
- The Muralist movement started by Diego de Rivera in México
- The legend of the Plumed Serpent- Quetzalcoatl
- The legend of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl
- The story of la Virgen de Guadalupe
- Mexica (Aztec), and Mayan Gods and Goddesses

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- Gonzalez, Roberto. *Yo soy Joaquín*. 1967.

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- Rodríguez, R. Joseph. *In the Antropoetas and Muses We Trust: Reading and Teaching the Poetics about the Borderlands and Chihuahuan Desert.* Selection from *Latino Poetics*. Ruben Quezada (editor). University of New Mexico Press 2018.

Reflection

What brought us together initially to collaborate in this project was our mutual interest in Murals as a means to teach Mexican main historical points in our Spanish Language and Culture classes. Additionally, through Muralism we see ourselves reflected on our own ethnic identities by spending two afternoons in the sister cities of El Paso TX-and Juarez, Mexico; taking pictures of the murals, and becoming aware of the history and culture of these sister Border cities.

Additionally, this process allowed us to highlight the historical and cultural memories that the murals referenced, and in turn wanted to have our students experience the same discovery and reflexivity of the following connections: muralism, identity, and history of their own city in the Borderlands.