

Border crossings: Exploring the U.S.- Mexico Borderland Experience
*Cruzando Fronteras: Una exploración de la experiencia migratoria entre México y EE.UU.*¹

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Subject Areas: Spanish language arts/Humanities

Keywords: border, borderlands, frontera, migration, immigration, migración, inmigración, crossing, cruce, resistance, resistencia, desierto, desert

Grade Levels: 8th grade (in a FLES program) or a High School Spanish 1 or 2 class, depending on the time of year and level of students.

Time Required: This unit could last approximately 6-8 lessons depending on length of classes and level of students

Instructional Objectives and Student Learning:

Goals:

- Gain a better understanding of what the desert experience.
- Use active listening strategies, oral comprehension strategies and previous knowledge to comprehend and discuss oral histories of borderland natives.
- Connect and compare their setting (urban environment) to the desert.
- Connect and compare different sorts of migratory experience

¹ This unit is available on an open google site here:
<https://sites.google.com/theschool.columbia.edu/borderlandsunititalia/home>

- Discuss the experience of undocumented minors crossing the U.S.-México border.
- Read and analyze texts around the border experience.
- Discuss how the border(land) experience can affect one's identity.
- Review interrogatives through reading and answering complex questions.
- Review and apply the simple past in Spanish (both preterite and imperfect) through reading and writing activities.
- Review and comprehend positive informal commands with and without object pronouns.
- In addition, this unit connects to the [ACTFL standards](#) of communications, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities.

Guiding Questions:

- ¿What is the desert like? ¿What does it look like, smell like, feel like, sound like?
- ¿Who crosses the desert? ¿Why might people cross the desert?
- ¿What are the stories of people who live in the borderlands?
- ¿What happens when children cross the U.S.-México frontera unaccompanied?

Big ideas: Resistance, crossing, change

Materials used in lesson

- [Oye al desierto](#) by Pat Mora
- [La Isla](#) (Spanish edition) by Arthur Dorros
- [Venn Diagram](#) activity
- [El desierto es mi madre poem + activities](#)
- [Thinglink of desert](#)
- Poem and activities: [Soy de Aquí by Gina Valdés](#)
- [Vocaroo](#) for recording
- Image of the [amaranth plant](#)
- [Webquest on border geography and history](#)
- [Photo album with images of the border "fence"](#)
- [Official text rendering protocol](#) and [text rendering instructions](#)
- [Radio Ambulante's episode The Void](#)
- Passages of Luís Alberto Urrea's book [The Devil's Highway](#) from chapter 10.
- [Jesús Zamora's Oral History](#)
- [Jesus Zamora's Oral History discussion guide](#)
- [Annunciation House Photo Album](#)
- Spanish copy of book [Tell me how it ends](#)

Introduction

The México-U.S. border has long been a space of contradictions and transformation. This is evidenced by the fact that, through political and economic maneuvering of the U.S., the border has shifted over the years to “cross over” thousands of people who shifted from living in Mexico to the U.S. without their consent, leading to conflicting narratives of belonging and statehood. Additionally, the current anti-immigrant sentiment espoused by some in the U.S. fails to take into consideration the fact that many of those who cross, or attempt to cross the border into the U.S., are doing so because of economic realities created by U.S. economic and foreign policies. As stated by Dr. Ngai “We resist examining the role that American world power has played in the global structures of migration. We like to believe that our immigration policy is generous, but we also resent the demands made upon us by others and we think we owe outsiders nothing” (Ngai, 2014, p. 11). The border, and the borderlands that surround it, make up an integral piece of the social, historical and economic fabric of the United States.

Pre-work

This unit can be done on its own or within a larger unit of study. In my 8th grade classroom this would be done in the fall as part of a larger unit entitled *El sueño americano, ¿realidad o fantasía?* Students will have already explored a general timeline of immigration to the U.S. (see the NYT map under supplementary resources), discussed reasons why people chose, or are forced to, migrate, analyzed the challenges and benefits to migration, explored the challenges of belonging (documentation) within a nation-state, and discussed the public use of language around belonging and the state.

Instructional and Lesson Activities

Module 1: Explorando el desierto (2-3 days)

Activity 1:

Materials: multiple copies of *Oye al desierto*, *Isla*, photocopies of [the Venn diagram](#).

Instructions: Working in groups of 2-3 people, pick up a copy of the book *Oye al desierto* by Pat Mora and a copy of *Isla* by Arthur Dorros.

Pre-reading:

Look at the covers of the book together. Out loud, discuss the following questions (en español):

- ¿Qué observas de cada libro? ¿Qué ves? ¿Dónde crees que tienen lugar las historias? Compara las tapas: ¿Cómo son diferentes? ¿Cómo son similares? ¿Qué preguntas tienes sobre los libros?

Reading:

- Read aloud *Isla* to each other. Make sure to take turns reading out loud. Read slowly and clearly. Have fun! Stop every few pages to discuss the following questions: ¿Quiénes son los personajes principales en la historia? ¿Cómo es el paisaje? ¿Qué crees tú que va a pasar?
- Read aloud *Oye al desierto* to each other. Make sure to take turns reading out loud. Read slowly and clearly. Have fun! Stop every few pages to discuss the following questions: ¿Quiénes son los personajes principales en la historia? ¿Cómo es el paisaje? ¿Qué observas de las ilustraciones?

Post-reading:

- Work together to complete [the venn diagram](#) comparing the two texts. ¿Cómo son similares? ¿diferentes?
- Include new words you learned from the text in the “glosario” section of the sheet.

Activity 2:

Materials: [Thinglink with linked videos](#) and photos, [worksheet for poem](#), computers or devices for students (with access to vocaroo), baggie with desert items, bin of instruments

Instructions:

Open the thinglink with image of the desert. View the videos linked to the image, listen to the sounds of the desert and read the poem by Pat Mora. Pass around baggies with items from desert to feel the items in the baggie.

Complete activities A-E described on the ficha de trabajo and summarized below.

- A. Re-read the poem for sensorial language. Which senses does Mora evoke through the poem? What specific words? Fill out the chart in activity A of ficha.
- B. Choose two verses from Mora’s poem that stand out to you and sketch a corresponding image for each one. Write the corresponding verse(s) underneath.
- C. Record yourself reading Mora using vocaroo. You may work with a partner. You may also use an instrument from the music bin to accompany your reading. Be creative! Post your recording to your Spanish blog.
- D. Glosario: Write 5-7 words you learned from the poem and their definition.
- E. ¿Quién es tu madre?- What space(s) or place(s) would you consider your “madre”? Write a poem, in Spanish, based on Mora’s poem. Post it to your Spanish blog.

Activity 3: La resistencia del amaranto.

Materials: Devices to call in to hear the story, paper and pencils or pens, [amaranth plant image \(to project on board\)](#).

Independently:

- Listen to the story of the amaranth plant in English. You will need to call in by dialing 505.312.5267 and then press 16#.
- While you are listening, sketch what you think the plant looks like. After you have finished listening to the story re-write the story of the amaranth, en español, in 10 steps or under.

In partners:

- After you finish, share your work with a partner. Read aloud your work to each other. ¿Cómo es diferente lo que escribisteis? ¿Te falta algún paso importante?

Whole group:

- Finally, we will look at [the picture of the actual amaranth plant together](#). ¿Es diferente o parecido a lo que te esperabas? ¿Cómo?

Un poquito más: Historias de resistencia

- Think about a time someone, maybe you, maybe someone you know or someone in the news, persevered and resisted, like the amaranto plant. ¿Qué pasó? Write about it *en español*.

Module 2: Cruce de caminos/cruzando el desierto (2 days)

Activity 1: Webquest about border experience.

Materials: [Google form with questions](#), computers

Whole Group Recall + Introduce:

Look at a map of the U.S together. ¿Dónde se encuentra el desierto que estudiamos ayer? ¿Qué recuerdas de lo que aprendiste del desierto ayer y anteayer? ¿Cómo es este desierto? ¿Cómo se llama ese desierto? Explain goals + procedure of the partner activity.

Partner work:

- Open [this google form](#).
- Work with a partner to research the answers to the questions in the form about the borderlands. There are research sites in the instructions. Write in complete sentences. You need only submit one form per partner. You may want to use two computers: one for research and one to submit your responses.

Whole group closing: Share back your learnings and observations.

Actividad 2: ¿Qué nos divide? Visualizing the border.

Materials: paper, pencils, chart paper or smartboard for brainstorming, [photos of the border from this album](#)

Whole group:

- Word association/lluvia de ideas: ¿En que palabras piensas cuando oyes la palabra frontera?
- ¿Cómo te imaginas que es la frontera física? ¿De qué material está hecho? ¿Es alto? ¿Bajo? ¿Grueso? ¿De qué color?

Independent work:

- Give students paper and colored pencils. Play some music (preferably desert-themed music). Give students time to sketch what they think the border looks like.

Whole group (or small first then share back):

- Show photos of the actual border on the smartboard.
- ¿Qué diferencias hay entre tu dibujo y la frontera actual? ¿Por qué? En tu opinión, ¿es un muro o es una valla? ¿Por qué?

Actividad 3: The Devil's Highway by Luís Alberto Urrea

Whole group (recall + pre-work):

- ¿Qué recuerdan de lo que aprendimos ayer? ¿La frontera entre México y EE.UU. es estática o no? ¿Cómo lo sabes? ¿De qué países vienen las personas que cruzan la frontera? ¿Por qué?
- ¿Quién es Luís Alberto Urrea? Read the description of his book whole group. Explain the [text rendering protocol](#).

Small group text rendering activity:

- Divide the class up into small groups.
- Give each group a short (2-3 paragraph) section of Urrea's book from chapter 10, *The Long Walk* (page 133).
- Have students use the [text rendering protocol from National School Reform Faculty](#). It is helpful to have the instructions on slides on the smartboard such as [I have done here](#).

Actividad 4 Extensión

Un poquito más: El Vacío

Listen to the episode [El Vacío on Radio Ambulante](#) about the experience of two transgender teenage girls traveling from Guatemala to the U.S.-México border. While you are listening, read along with the Spanish transcript. After listening write (en español) the following:

- Tres cosas que aprendiste
- Dos preguntas que tienes
- Una cosa que te gustaría que fuera diferente de la historia de las jóvenes

Module 3: Cultura fronteriza

Activity 1: Historia de Jesús Zamora

Materials: Oral history of [Mr. Jesús Zamora](#), [viewing guide sheet](#)

Whole group:

- Show a map of the border with El Paso. Explain that today you will be hearing the story of someone who grew up on the border. ¿Cómo creen que la experiencia de vivir en la frontera influye tu cultura? ¿lenguaje? ¿tu día a día?

While viewing:

- Pause the video to take notes on content and new words (under glosario of the sheet)
- Check in with your partner to make sure you are understanding the content.

Post viewing:

- Discuss with your partner: ¿A qué dificultades se enfrenta el señor Zamora durante su vida? ¿Cuál es la causa de sus dificultades? ¿Resuelva o sobrepasa estas dificultades? ¿Cómo? ¿Qué estrategias utiliza?
- Fill in the second part of the discussion sheet together

Activity 2: Poem

Materials: Where you from?/[Soy de aquí poem](#) cut up in verses, questions about poem on accompanying sheet

Whole group:

- Read the poem Where you from? by Gina Valdés to the class
- ¿Qué palabras sobresalen, para ti? ¿Cuáles son los temas principales del poema?
- Divide the class in two groups and have them do a choral read aloud alternating verses. It helps to have the teacher snap/clap or keep time somehow.

Small groups:

- Give each group a cut up version of the poem. Have the group rearrange. They can modify the order of the verses. Do not allow them to look at the original.

Independently or in partners.

- Re-read the poem and answer the questions on the sheet linked above.
- Record yourself reading the poem and post it on your Spanish blog.

Closing: Share back observations and connections to Gina Valdes' work.

Extensión: Have students write identity poems based on Gina Valdes' poem.

Module 4: Jóvenes indocumentados

Activity 1: Acogida

Materials: Computers, [Annunciation House Site](#), [Annunciation house photos](#)

Whole Group:

Discuss whole group: ¿Qué pasa cuando un niño o una niña cruza la frontera sólo/a? ¿Por qué deciden cruzar solos? (At this point if the students have seen the movie *Bajo la misma luna* use that as a point of reference).

In Partners: Have students work in partners to look up the organization *Annunciation House* in El Paso. Ask them to research the answers to the following questions:

- ¿Cuál es la historia de Annunciation House?
- ¿Cuál es la misión de la organización?
- ¿Qué hacen? ¿Podéis dar unos ejemplos?

Whole group: Share back. Show [photos of Annunciation House visit](#) and describe the experience.

Activity 2: Tell me how it ends

Materials: Spanish copy of book [Tell me how it ends](#)

- Remind/review with students of the process of gaining asylum in the U.S. (in my school this is done in the fall as part of a series of speakers and explorations of the global refugee crisis).

- Describe to students the premise of the book “This is how it ends”. Give each student a list of the 40 questions (en español) that children are asked when going through the asylum screening process.
- Post a “profile” on the smartboard of a child migrant. As a group, go through the questions and, using the posted profile, decide together how you would answer each one.
- Discuss: Would this child be granted asylum? Why or why not? Do you think it is fair? How would you change the process?

EXTEND/ELABORATE: Additional Learning

After completing this unit students are asked to conduct their own oral history projects. They are charged with finding someone from our community such as a family member, friend, neighbor, or school staff or faculty member, who has migrated to or from a Spanish-speaking country. The students research the country of their interviewee and come up with questions for this person. The focus of the interview is the experience of migration. Finally, students create digital narratives about their interviewee using a digital platform of their choice. We have a community share in which we invite all of our storytellers in to participate and commune with us.

EVALUATE: Assessment

As a follow up to this unit students will be asked to research an organization in our local community that supports immigrants such as [The Young Center for Immigrant Rights](#) or the [IRC](#). Research what the organization does (this could be online, in person or over the phone). They will need to write up a short article, in Spanish, about the organization that includes the following:

- Contact information (webpage and phone number)
- Mission and goals
- How does this organization help migrants? What sort of social action does this organization take? Are there volunteer opportunities? Give concrete examples of what they do.
- Include the logo and/or other visuals.

Students will post their write ups on a separate page of the Spanish website and share with the larger school community.

Accommodations and Modifications

For each module I have included extensi’õn/un poquito más activities that can be used as a way of challenging learners. Additionally, most independent activities can be modified to be partner activities to support students who work best collaboratively (and vice-versa).

Additional Resources

- [Dulce Pinzón's photography on Latino Superheroes](#)
- [Ramiro Gómez's artwork](#)
- [Santa Cecilia Song- Ice/ El Hielo](#)
- [Superman es ilegal/ Los tigres del norte](#)
- [NYT interactive immigration map](#)
- [Princeton Mexican Migration Project](#) with more written stories in Spanish of migratin.
- Poem: [La Migra](#) by José Antonio Rodríguez
- [iNation Media](#)
- [Caminos de Luces y Sombras](#): Historias de niñas, niños y adolescentes migrantes

References

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Reflection

My work on this unit plan came about as a result of our work during the two week program *Tales of the Chihuahuan Desert: An NEH Summer Institute*. While many students have an understanding of a borderland as a conceptual space (Anzaldúa, 1999), either through family stories or lived experience, the U.S.-México borderland is like no other. Students who are not exposed to the area have little understanding of the physical spaces encompassing this space, the experience of crossing this border, or the narratives of the inhabitants of this borderland. My hope is that this unit will give students a snapshot of the U.S.-México borderland experience.