

**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 6th–12th)

**Constructing Environmental Racism at the US/Mexico Border
& Mapping Borders in Our Communities:
A Reflective Essay**

—
Holly Hardin
Durham, NC

“They had Christmas there, they had Christmas there alone.”
-Freddy, a 16 year old young person who had been held in Tornillo Detention Center

On January 28, 2016, a high school student named Wildin Acosta in Durham was snatched by ICE on his way to school, part of Operation Border Guardian, that targeted women in children from Central America in NC and Georgia. On June 8, 2016, when he was supposed to walk across the stage and graduate high school, ICE officers placed him into solitary confinement, seemingly in retaliation for the organizing happening on the outside. That winter, a small group of teachers, including myself, and students, in collaboration with his family and supported by local and national immigrant justice groups, jumped into action, as several youth in NC and GA, almost all on their way to school, had been targeted. We knew these ICE raids and the current policies on immigration were dramatically impacting the lives of many directly, but also were teaching the wrong lessons to all our students. In this intense organizing work to successfully get Wildin and other students free from Stewart Detention Center and prevent their deportation we rallied the community in order to hold DHS, Courts, and Congress accountable through many avenues: school and city-wide resolutions, creating curriculum, calls and letters and petitions, visits to DC and Stewart Detention Center in Georgia, marches and a week of action in our county organized by young people, interrupting and dialoguing with DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson and other elected officials, and continually having conversations in our classrooms and larger community around rethinking immigration and community. Though I had organized previously, I learned more than I could ever imagine around communication, messaging, community and student engagement, press work, coalition building, working with allies of varying

degrees and power, navigating community relationships, and what it means to work on such an intense life or death issue for young people where sometimes things fail.

“Schools are tracking students in every sense of the word...
We must re-adjust our lens about what violence is.”

-Cynthia Bejarano, NMSU

As a teacher I'm continually learning that my work goes well beyond the walls of our school, and not just because in our underfunded schools we must wear many hats from social worker to health care provider. It is a more conscious effort that I am undertaking; to disrupt a narrative that teaches us that some bodies are less worthy. Because when we hear that a student might be knowingly deported to his death, that's what we are being told. And when immigrant students, or Black students, or gay students, or students with disabilities again and again face public policies and practices and messages that label them and their families as problems or threats- from bills banning transgender students to bathrooms to KKK backlash after a confederate monument was toppled steps away from my school- our classrooms are in danger of becoming places that are fearful and closed off, full of tension. Likewise, if students don't see themselves reflected in books and curriculum, or if students are denied bathroom access or due process rights, if they are sorted or ranked or controlled through punishments and rewards, they are being taught another lesson altogether. Including the US/Mexico border in my science class in this moment is a necessity.

“If we don't understand Tornillo in context, we don't understand Tornillo”

- Yolanda Chávez Leyva, UTEP

Incorporating identity, history, and narrative are essential to my work as a teacher responsible for weaving all subjects and multiple standards into project work. Recently, I had the chance to work at an amazing school- Southwest Elementary School in Phoenix, AZ- whose focus is project based, and whose middle school students follow a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model, thus following the students interest and focusing on social justice issues in their lives. This curricular approach calls for placing our students and their lives at the center of our work. YPAR build's young people's sociopolitical development and encourages our students to understand the roots of problems facing their communities. By having a deeper knowledge of the intersection of borders and identity, I will better be able to support them as they research the issues that they are living. I believe it is

especially critical for white teachers to do the work to deepen their knowledge about the history and narratives of the students they teach, as part of furthering our anti-racist work.

“What borders and obstacles do students face in today’s landscape?
What is significant of local space, place, and history in our classes?”

-Jeffrey Shepherd, UTEP

The U.S.-México border region, like many imposed and enforced borders of control, is a politically contentious region, and the present moment is not an exception. As with any crisis connected to capitalism, a legacy of colonialism, and imperialism we see issues of environmental extraction and destruction arise. The border is no different. Similarly, the South, where I call home, has its own internal borders, many of which have been affected by issues of environmental racism as well. One of the first major examples of environmental justice organizing happened in 1982 in response to the building of a PCB contaminated landfill in a predominantly Black community in Warren County, NC.

In my research, I stumbled across the work of Dr. Carolina Prado- a queer Latinx women doing environmental justice work with communities on the border. To be able to bring my students the work of someone who not only looks like them, but someone who is partaking in a methodology that centers and puts the tools in the hands of those directly impacted is truly extraordinary. Using community-mapping methodologies in Tijuana and community air monitoring in San Diego, Prado explores how the material realities of the borderlands impact how community members in colonias or neighborhoods experience environmental justice.

For those of us in the rural south and Appalachia, the concept of “colonias” in the border region can be easily compared to the similar crisis here- where many communities have no access to clean drinking water or working sewer/sanitation services. These issues in both areas are exacerbated by climate change. For instance, rural communities already dealing with exposure to raw sewage in the US Black Belt now also face increasing temperatures and more frequent flooding, amplifying their public health crisis. Appalachia faces growing water issues, including the need for upgrades and contamination caused by byproducts of the fossil fuel industry- mining and waste product disposal. It’s likely there are parallels in other places too- I’d argue that almost any community can map their own spaces and

borders—of access, gender, class, ethnicity, race, economics- and see them align with issues around resource extraction and environmental pollution.

Additionally, in 2005, as part of the “War on Terror”, the REAL ID Act was created to allow the Department of Homeland Security total discretion in waiving any previous law/act in the name of national security. Rarely used previously, it has made a resurgence here in the borderlands since 2018, and has been brought back to life to expedite building more physical border wall. DHS can and has waived any US law that might otherwise prevent the construction of a wall of the southern border. It has already been used to construct walls in Hidalgo County, Texas, Cameron County, Texas, and Southeastern New Mexico, bypassing at least 25 laws in the process, ultimately turning the borderlands into an unprotected area, without civil and environmental rights.

“Homogeneity is comfort, the more comfortable we are with something the less we question it....

We must defamiliarize the familiar”

- José Antonio Rodríguez, *author of House Built on Ashes*

These lessons or unit looks at several questions and has students explore them through history, science experiments, case studies, interviews, and eventually their own participatory action research, thus redefining who has the expertise to produce knowledge in our world:

1. Does pollution recognize borders?
2. What does environmental racism mean?
3. Are there ever reasons for certain acts that provide protection to the environment, culture, and people be voided?
4. What is the connection between borders, walls, and environmental racism?
5. What environmental borders exist in the world? Exist in our town? What causes them?
6. What are the intersections between race, diversity, equity and environmental outcomes?
7. Why is it important for communities to be involved in their own environmental solutions?

I chose a science perspective as my medium in part to broaden the potential teachers reached by this NEH program, but also because I truly believe that all of our work as teachers is political and needs to connect to our students lives.

“Being queer saved my life”

- José Antonio Rodríguez, author of House Built on Ashes

I was born and spent most of my life in the South, a place full of red clay and hard contradictions, but also a place that holds so much courage, non-compliance, & resiliency in the face of historical oppression on people's bodies and the land around us. For me, as an organizer, a teacher, who grew up working class and queer in rural NC, it's been important for these lessons to not be lost- both from a historical standpoint, as well as when issues arise in our communities. So, to me, it is my duty to understand the lessons and narratives and history of all the students I am so privileged to learn with.

All of the quotes within my essay came from our numerous speakers and experiences during the 2019 NEH Borderlands Institute. Acknowledgements also to Ma. Eugenia Hernández Sánchez, UACJ, and Dr. Adriana Dominguez, UTEP, whose impact and teachings will definitely be felt in my classroom (even if I didn't get to fit your words into this essay), to so many of my fellow 2019 summer scholars, to our graduate assistants, and to the directors of our institute:

“I believe the student needs discomfort, to know me along the way, but I'm not the center”

-R. Joseph Rodríguez, CSU Fresno

“Storytelling is at the heart of teaching... I care less about what you learn in the class, but more about if you leave inspired, provoked, ready to learn more.”

-Ignacio Martínez, UTEP