

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

National Endowment for the Humanities and The University of Texas at El Paso  
2017 Summer Institute for Secondary School Teachers (Grades 6 –12 )

**Somos nuestros cuentos: Leyendas, historias orales, e  
historias personales que forman nuestra identidad en el  
mundo**

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**1. Background**

Kate Hoin is from Troy, Michigan, and teaches Spanish at various levels in high school as well as community college and for adult learners. After attending the University of Michigan, she studied in Sevilla, Spain, for one year, lived in Texas for seven years, received her MA in Spanish Language and Linguistics from the University of Houston/University of Salamanca, and travels as often as possible to Spanish-speaking countries. Katie is an avid reader, aspiring writer, chef-in-training, and sometimes-actress.

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

Spanish 2, Spanish 3, Spanish 4, AP Spanish, History, historia, Oral History, historias orales, Braceros, Detroit, Spanish Language, El **español**, Advanced Spanish, Intermediate Spanish, Texas History (Spanish), la historia de Tejas, Preterite/Imperfect tense, Past Tense, el pasado

**3. Grade Levels and Time Required**

Unit plan for Spanish II or higher (with modification), 6 weeks (or 4 weeks if not including the Extended Learning/Community aspect)

**4. Instructional Objectives and Student Learning**

By the end of the study, students will be able to read, listen to, interpret, and analyze a variety of historical texts in the target language, as well as personal stories and narratives. Students will study legends, stories, and histories from the border region in a variety of time periods. In addition, students will study the border today as it relates to child migrants through an interactive wall that contains the stories and experiences of child migrants.

Students will read selections from the children's book *Caminos de luces y sombras: Historias de niños, niñas y adolescentes migrantes*. From their readings and presentations, students will write short memory vignettes from the perspective of a child migrant, to later be turned into a class play to be performed in Spanish for the school community.

If time allows, students will interview a native or heritage language Spanish speaker in the local area, and then as a class create an oral history map that synthesizes these stories and a collective history together of the region. Finally, students will interview a family member/family friend on his/her experience on moving to his/her current city (in this case, Detroit, MI), and then write this story in the target language using the past tense. Students will read their story aloud, or create a multimedia presentation of the story, of their family's arrival to Detroit. Students will be able to conjugate and use appropriately the past tense in the target language.

In addition to following the [ACTFL World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages](#), the objectives for the study are as follows:

- I can read, annotate, summarize, interpret and analyze a variety of Mexican legends and folktales in the target language
- I can describe people, places and things in the stories I read
- I can compare legends and stories that I read
- I can summarize and narrate events, activities, and stories in the past
- I can describe early civilizations and their activities
- I can read, annotate, interpret and analyze historical texts in the past in the target language
- I can read, annotate, interpret, and analyze stories from the border between Mexico and the United States
- I can read, analyze and interpret maps in the target language
- I can describe the layout of a city from both the present day and the past
- I can describe continuing actions in the past
- I can use the past tense in the target language
- I can compare movements and borders at various points in history
- I can compare a variety of oral histories from various moments throughout the history of the US/Mexico border
- I can analyze the borders or border-like spaces that exist in my own community
- I can interview a person from the local community with a connection to the history of that community in the target language
- I can analyze how personal stories are shaped by government policy and legislation
- I can write and present a story from my community in the past tense of the target language

## 5. Guiding Questions and Enduring Understandings

### Guiding Questions

1. How do stories make us who we are?
2. How does history shape our stories?
3. How do maps, movements, borders, and places shape our stories?

4. How do official laws and policies affect our personal stories?
5. How do our stories shape history?
6. How does immigration affect children and families?
7. What are the motivations for crossing borders and migrating?
8. How are children migrants affected by the U.S.-Mexico border? How is their experience different than that of adults?
9. What borders exist in our own communities?
10. How have my family's stories shaped history?

#### Enduring Understandings

1. Behind history, policies and laws are people and stories that should be considered in all of their complexity.
2. Borders, places, movements, and spaces shape our personal stories.
3. Our collective stories are a part of official history, and they matter.
4. My personal story and the story of my family has shaped history, places, and left its mark on the world.

#### 6. Materials and Resources

For this unit, students will need the following:

- Notebook/paper/writing utensil
- Access to a device - laptop or tablet preferred

Teachers should provide access to the following links:

- <https://www.thinglink.com/scene/945534646525886467>
- <https://www.thinglink.com/scene/945790077399728131>
- <https://www.thinglink.com/scene/945918388650115075>
- [http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces\\_y\\_sombras.pdf](http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces_y_sombras.pdf)

Teachers will need to purchase the following literature:

- "La Llorona" - 2-3 versions of the legend
- "Bocón" (Lisa Loomer) - <https://www.dramaticpublishing.com/bocon>
- "Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatépetl Legend" (*Avancmos II* textbook)

#### 7. Introduction

In Lisa Loomer's play "Bocón", the title character Miguel, a child migrant from Central America, is told on page 25 by the Voice Keeper when his voice is taken away that "No, no hermano! You don't want your voice. They're nothing but trouble!" And it seems in this play, Miguel's voice is in fact trouble - questioning, crying out, demanding a space to be heard in this world. And in fact, that is what our entire NEH institute on "Tales of the Chihuahuan Desert" has been about - that our

voices make up the stories which make up the histories of this borderland, and they deserve to be heard.

In the course of this institute we have heard from Border Patrol Agents to residents from the oldest barrio in El Paso to scholars and community activists of the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso Metroplex and we have learned that everyone has a story to tell, and that in the long run these stories will define the course of our history as a nation, or as binational, bilingual neighboring nations.

This unit, “Somos nuestros cuentos: Leyendas, historias orales, e historias personales que forman nuestra identidad en el mundo” speaks to this purpose. In studying the voices and the stories of the border, we can come closer to understanding this fluid, blended, intertwined region, and hopefully come to understand that its story, its history is a complex one, not so easily explained away in legislature, or defined by Washington rhetoric.

In Yolanda Levya’s testimony regarding her recent fight to save to the Duranguito neighborhood of El Paso, she states that a protestor commented “When you see maps, I see people” and indeed, in this lesson I invite you and your students to see the people behind the maps. In each of the digital “ThingLink” maps, you are connected to stories, histories, places, songs, videos, photographs that I hope will make you question these arbitrary borders that surround our country.

I hope that you will study these stories, and that you and your students will read and empathize with the children migrants in the final part of the lesson to think about what it means to come to this country with no one to help you, and with a voice that is silenced at every turn. These voices and stories deserve to be heard, for more than our standardized political history, they make up our collective personal history. And that it is a history that is more than black and white, right or wrong; it is one that deserves to be preserved and remembered and *told*.

## 8. Unit Plan Outline

### **Part One: Leyendas mexicanas**

**Time: One week**

**Resources:**

<http://www.padresenlaescuela.com/5-leyendas-aztecas-para-ninos-de-primaria/>

### **Actividad 1: Una leyenda mazateca: El fuego y el tlacuache (1-2 days)**

Have students read, annotate, and summarize as a class the Mazateca legend of the origin of fire. Have students create a timeline of events using the past tense as a class. Point out the use of past tenses, and have students notice which verbs are in the past tense.

**Actividad 2 (1-2 days):** Using the interactive “[Pueblos Map](#)”, have students in groups of three choose an indigenous group in Mexico, and read/listen to their legend. While reading students should annotate and create a timeline of events. Students should listen/watch the legend 2-3 times. Find another group of three, and retell what

happened in the legend using the created timeline. Have students create a brief poster with their annotations, summary, and timeline to present briefly to the class. Have students make note of the verbs in the past tense. Students present and share their stories.

<https://www.thinglink.com/media/945534646525886467>

**Actividad 3 (1-2 days):** As a class read the legend of the Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatepetl. Have students individually annotate, retell, and create a timeline of events in the story. Individually have students pick out the verbs in the past tense, and then share out as a class. As the teacher, model the two types of past tenses, and sort them accordingly.

Additional lessons should cover the two types of past tenses and their conjugations, using the story as a mentor text. Finally, ask students “What do these stories tell us about Mexico and Mexico’s history? What do these stories reveal about the Mexican culture? What are their values and beliefs? What do these stories teach us about the border, and the relationship between Mexico and the US today?”

**Actividad 4 (1-2 days):** As a class, read la leyenda “La Llorona”. Assign different versions of the story to groups of two/three students. Have students read, annotate, retell and create a timeline of events in the story. As an assessment, have students individually identify the verbs in the preterite and the imperfect, and write a summary of the text. Have students meet with a partner that read a different version of the legend, and create a Venn Diagram with the similarities and differences between the retellings of the story. Have students share out/present. Ask students to respond individually (and then as a whole class) to the questions: “What do these stories tell us about Mexico and Mexico’s history? Why are there different versions of the same legend? What does this reveal about Mexican culture, or stories in general? What are the values and beliefs present in these stories? What do these stories teach us about the border, and the relationship between Mexico and the US today?”

## **Part Two: Las historias de la frontera de hoy y de ayer**

**Time: One week**

**Resources:**

- <https://www.thinglink.com/scene/945790077399728131>
- <http://braceroarchive.org/USAmap.jpg>
- <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175>

### **Actividad 1 (Day 1): Diversas historias fronterizas**

Have students navigate to the [“Diversas historias fronterizas map” on Thinglink](#). Have students first look at the map itself, and have them complete a See/Think/Wonder as a class, asking them in the target language:

- What do you see on this map?

- What does it make you think?
- What do you wonder or ask yourselves?

Have students turn and talk to a partner and share what they see/think/wonder in regard to the map (using “changing perspectives” technique)<sup>1</sup>. Have students share out with the class.

Ask students: what don’t you see on the map? What parts are missing? Who/what else is present here that is not seen? (Stories, people, animals, images of human life, the human element, answers will vary). Share out responses.

**Actividad 2 (1-2 days, begin on Day 1):** Invite students to explore the [“Diversas historias fronterizas”](#) map with a partner. Using the Ver/Pensar/Preguntarse worksheet (Appendix A), have students work with a partner and choose five different points on the map to explore (a mixture of photos, historical vignettes, videos, songs from various time periods in the border). Students should select one of the points on the border, and then write/describe what they see/read, think, and what they wonder. Students may concentrate on one area of the map (alike items are clustered together), or choose from a variety of the items. As students interact with the readings/audios/videos/images, they should write on their chart the items that they found interesting, important, or insightful.

After students have researched, each group of two should join with another group of two and share one of their findings, two minutes each group. Ask students to share out what they learned about the history of the border as a whole class.

Extension: Have students write a reflection about how the policies of the border have affected individual stories/lives.

**Actividad 3 (1 day):** After sharing out, ask students to work individually to create a visual of their idea of the border. Have students do the Visible Thinking Routine (Appendix B) “Color/Symbol/Image”. They should: choose a color, a symbol, and an image that they feel best represents or captures the essence of the US/Mexico border.

Have students share with a partner their color, symbol and image and explain what part of the border/which stories it represents. Put up their Color/Symbol/Image poster around the room, and have all the students do a gallery walk of the posters. Share out as a whole class, using the following questions as a guide:

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<sup>1</sup> Student A and Student B each have a styrofoam cup. Student A talks first for two minutes, and Student B just listens. Each time Student B hears something interesting, Student B pokes a hole in the cup. Then switch.

- What kinds of stories, histories, laws, policies, situations, songs and other artifacts have come out of the border?
- What effect has the border had on people and their lives and/or stories?
- What words, images, colors and symbols reflect this variety of history on the border and why?

\*\*\*Optional: Model with students one of the items on the map and complete a See/Think/Wonder, and Color/Symbol/Image worksheet for this item.

\*\*\*Optional (if time allows; good for students that have not grasped the past tense as well): Complete the process with [Juan Loza's interview](#) as a bracero. Help students read, listen to, take notes, and create a timeline. Have students listen again to the interview, and read the transcript along with it, as they annotate and add to their timeline. Have students write a brief summary (3-5 sentences) of Loza's journey in the target language in the past tense. Students may do this in a group of three as well. Consider using a map of the United States and Mexico to trace his travels as a Bracero, and sharing it through a short presentation.

<http://braceroarchive.org/USAmmap.jpg>  
<http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175>

### **Part 3: El muro hoy**

**Time: 1.5 weeks**

**Resources:**

<https://www.thinking.com/scene/945918388650115075>

[http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces\\_y\\_sombras.pdf](http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces_y_sombras.pdf)

**Actividad 1 (1 day):** As a class, read the introduction to the "[Caminos de luces y sombras: Historias de niños, niñas y adolescentes migrantes](#)", a children's book on underage minors and immigration. As a class, read/annotate the text. Have students (as one of their annotations) write questions they might have while reading. After reading, ask students to share their "wonderings" with a partner, and then their table. Share out as a whole group. If further questioning is needed, ask some of the following questions. Ask students:

- What information do we have about child migrants today? What have you heard/seen/read in the news?
- Why do we have so many child migrants? What might be the diverse reasons child migrants cross?
- What might it feel like to be a child migrant crossing the border?
- Why might there be an increase in unaccompanied minor migration?
- Why is there a difference in the number of girls and boys that cross the border?

Have students take one of their questions, or one of the teacher-provided questions and write a short reflection in the target language (paragraph or so).

[http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces\\_y\\_sombras.pdf](http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces_y_sombras.pdf)

**Actividad 2 (3-4 days):** Next, have students explore the [“El muro y sus historias de hoy”](#) interactive ThingLink Map with a partner, using the See/Think/Wonder (Appendix A). First, have students look at the digital image of the wall. Ask students to complete a See/Think/Wonder using the image of the wall. Have students share out with a partner, their group and then the whole class.

Ask students: What might this wall look like to a child crossing? What might it feel like? How would a child migrant feel looking at this wall and knowing he/she had to cross it? What walls have you had to cross in your life? How did you feel?

Then, ask students to use the See/Think/Wonder worksheet with a partner to explore what it is like for child migrants crossing the border today. Students should choose three elements/links/images/videos/points on the map (or one video in full), and analyze and interpret them using the See/Think/Wonder worksheet. After exploring the map, have students choose one element/image/video/story that seems especially important, insightful or interesting. Have each group create a short mini-poster/presentation on that element to share with the class. The poster should include: their see/think/wonder, a sentence/word/phrase from that source, or the color/symbol/image activity, as well as answer one of the key questions generated at the beginning of the study on child migrants. Students present and share out.

As an intro to the next activity, have the students read “Migra” by José Antonio Rodríguez. In addition, teachers might have English teachers study the same poem with students.

**Actividad 3 (Three days):** Turn back to the “Caminos de luces y sombras” book. Teacher will choose one story that connects to the whole class. Model for the students reading, annotating and timeline. Pull out the key words, and summarize, and then analyze and connect the story in relationship to the sources from the interactive map. Then, assign (or let students choose) groups of three/four students to one of the individual child migrant stories. In groups, students should read, annotate and create a timeline of events for their story. Students should pull out key words (palabras clave) and make a summary of the story. Have students include a key word/sentence/phrase, and two images that are important to the story in their interaction with the text. Then, have each group of students join with another group of students (who studied a different story), and create a Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting the two migrant children’s stories. Using this work, collaboratively

the two groups will create a poster and presentation with this diagram and the similarities/differences between the two stories, as well as two images that represent the children's stories. Students present their work, and then return to the questions, keeping the stories and their interactions with the interactive map in mind:

- What are some common themes in the stories of migration? What are the similarities and differences in the stories? What are some commonalities in the childhood migrant experience?
- What might it feel like to be a child migrant crossing the border?
- Why might there be an increase in unaccompanied minor migration?
- What are the different challenges that unaccompanied minors face crossing? How is it different to cross as a girl than a boy?

\*\*\*Optional: If students need more guidance, or practice in the past tense in the target language, choose a story from the "Caminos de luces y sombras" and read/annotate and summarize as a whole class. Model this with them as you read the story, or split into groups to take various parts to complete the practice. Then, assign groups to read the individual stories.

#### **Actividad 4 (2 days): Obra de teatro "Bocón"**

Have students read through the play as a whole class, assigning various parts and reading aloud. After, have students break out into groups of three/four and assign various sections of the play to each group. Have students read and analyze what the main characters might be thinking/feeling during that section of the play. The next day, have each group prepare their short scene to share with the class. After the performance, ask students to write a short response in the target language to one of the following questions:

Questions to pose to the class before, during and after the play:

- What are the challenges that face Miguel and his village? Why does he migrate?
- What is the importance of stories in the play? What stories are told? How do they impact Miguel's journey?
- How does Miguel regain his voice? What does it mean for him that he has his voice back? What does it mean for migrant children?

Have students share with a partner, their table, and as a whole class.

#### **Actividad 5 (1-2 days): Write a memory of one of the child migrants we read about/watched/studied.**

Have students choose one of the children migrants we read about/studied from either the stories, presentations, play, or the interactive map. Have students imagine what a memory of this child migrant might be - perhaps something from home, from crossing

over, or from their new home. Students should write a short memory narrative from the first person perspective of this student in the target language using the past tense appropriately, about what happened in this memory for the child migrant. Students should use their imaginations, and their empathy to really put themselves in the shoes of the child migrant.

Have students write these in class, and then share out with their partner. Have students then share as a whole group.

### **Actividad 6 (3 days)**

As a final assessment, have students prepare the memory they wrote to be included in a class play about the child migrant experience. Each group should have 3-4 people in it, and they should choose one of the original written memories to enact as a group. Each sketch should be 2-5 minutes in length, and be based on an experience they had learning about children migrants (from the stories, their memories, or any of the images/documents we interacted with). Have students write out their scene in the target language. Students should then practice/rehearse, and stage the performance in class. Hold a performance of the vignettes in class on the third day, and invite other Spanish classes (or any classes). Later, compile the sketches and scenes into a book/play, and put online/publish in a public context.

## **9. EXTEND/ELABORATE: Additional Learning**

Additional activities that work nicely with this project would be working in the community to gather oral narratives on the Latino community and their stories (or any immigrant community), in order to create a virtual map of their stories. Students should interview locals in the Latino community about their immigration experience (with permission of course), and then write these stories in the past tense. Students could also do this project with their own relatives and family members, and prepare questions on how their own family members came to the area/U.S.A., and then write out their story in the past tense, or create a video that demonstrates how their family came to the community.

## **10. EVALUATE: Assessment**

- Written summary and/or oral retelling of a legend or folktale using the past tense
- Oral presentation/interpretation of a legend or folktale using the past tense
- Written summary and/or oral retelling of a border story using the preterite/imperfect/past tense appropriately
- (Optional) Create a written/performed legend of your own following the format of legends studied, using the past tense
- Presentation on an important historical event on the US/Mexico border

- Written summary and/or oral retelling of an oral history relating to the US/Mexico border
- Written creative writing “memory” piece of a child migrant
- Class play based on written memories of child migrants to present to other Spanish classes in a multimedia play production
- Interview with a native/heritage speaker of the target language in the local community
- Living Map Project - Placing oral histories from the interviews on a map of the community interviewed
- Interview with a family member/friend in the language most comfortable for the interviewee
- Written family story on arrival to Detroit (or local community)

### 11. Accommodations and Modifications

We will be doing a lot of reading and listening to stories in this unit; as such, students may need extra time or repeated readings of the story, small group/partner group while reading, or individual assistance with the teacher. In order to accommodate these students, repeated readings of the stories, chunking of the text, and picking out keywords from the story would be helpful. Do this as a class, and as many times as necessary with the stories presented.

In addition, it is helpful to model as much as possible reading and annotating the text. Modify the plan by having students spend more time on a story, read multiple stories in groups, or do more as a whole class. For the final writing piece, have students draw out/sketch their memory, and present this to the class with short sentences of writing in the past tense, instead of a fully written piece.

For advanced classes, add on the community and telling our family’s own story of arrival to the community, and give students freedom in choosing how they want to present their final oral history narrative.

### 12. Additional Resources

- [http://umich.edu/~ac213/student\\_projects07/repatriados/](http://umich.edu/~ac213/student_projects07/repatriados/)
- [http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/oral\\_history/](http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/oral_history/)
- <http://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/publications/texas-hispano-espanol-gui de.pdf>
- <http://howlround.com/the-legacy-of-luis-valdez-and-el-teatro-campesino-the-fir st-fifty-years>

#### 14. References (or Works Cited)

Brenes Herrera, Ani. Caminos De Luces y Sombras: Historias De Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Migrantes. San José, C.R. , Organización Internacional Para Las Migraciones (OIM),  
[www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces\\_y\\_sombras.pdf](http://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/sites/default/files/Luces_y_sombras.pdf).

Loomer, Lisa. Bocón!: a Full-Length Play. Woodstock, IL, Dramatic Pub., 1998.

Texas Hispano. Texas Hispano, 2015,  
[www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/publications/texas-hispano-espanol-guide.pdf](http://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/publications/texas-hispano-espanol-guide.pdf).

#### 15. Reflection

I will start off by saying that this an ambitious unit. To even get through the first two or three parts of this unit, would be more than enough. I think we owe it to our students today - surrounded by so many outside influences, news sources, social media platforms, and disingenuous representations of life - to teach them about the power of stories. To help them see the human side to every statistic or news story that they browse past on their Twitter feed. To teach them that their voice and the voices of others matter, and that we deserve to hear these stories. That these stories make up our collective history.

I hope that my students and students everywhere that embark on this challenging task of listening to and interpreting these migrant stories from the border take away with them a newfound understanding of empathy for the human experience - one in which we all share when we look for better opportunities, education, or safety in this world we call home. I am inspired by the variety of resources that students have at their disposal in this lesson and online, and I hope that they will be inspired to tell their own stories, or at least listen to others as they build a bridge that unites us, as opposed to more walls that divide us. Happy learning!