

**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)

**Instructional Lesson Plan Framework with 5E Model
for E-Portfolio with Artifacts and Readings**

1. Title and Author of Lesson Plan

“Nothing is gone”: Claiming Space Along, Within, and Amid Borders

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2. Content or Subject Areas with Keywords

Subject Area: English Literature and Language Arts

Keywords: *Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony, borders, borderlands, identity, binationalism, liminality, nepantla, storytelling, narratology*

3. Grade Levels and Time Required

Grade Levels: 11 – 12

Time Required: 4 – 6 weeks

4. Instructional Objectives and Student Learning

Reading – Literature

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

Reading – Informational Texts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats.

Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10

Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Speaking and Listening

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media in order to make informed decisions and solve problems.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective.

Language

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.3

Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

5. Guiding Questions

Include 1 to 3 fundamental questions that will guide the lesson for students to then answer with conceptual knowledge. Consider those we have studied in our Institute.

1. What is identity? What is culture? How and by whom have these traditionally been defined, and how do they intersect with one another, as well as other realms such as language, history, and politics?
2. How can storytelling be used as a tool of oppression and/or of liberation? How has it been used this way historically?
3. How are borders established, and what does it mean to cross, straddle, or be contained by boundaries, both literal and figurative?

6. Materials and Resources

See Instructional and Lesson Activities for suggested readings and sources.

Students will need writing materials, such as pen and paper. In some cases students will benefit from access to artistic materials such as blank or construction paper, markers, colored pencils, pastels, etc.

Students will also benefit from access to a personal laptop or tablet and internet access.

7. Introduction

This unit is inspired by a reverence for the power of revolutionary, counter-hegemonic storytelling to reclaim and reinvigorate spaces of marginalization, oppression, and neglect. In particular, this unit draws from the rich and complex well of experiences and identities converging on our southern border. In guiding students toward a close study of Leslie Marmon Silko's defiant and lyrical novel *Ceremony*, this unit offers space to explore how the broad range of hegemonic historical narratives as well as social, cultural – even physical – structures come together to construct a dominant vision of society that is neatly coded into bifurcated, hierarchical categories enforced with all the staunch rigidity and impenetrability of the iron wall which now, increasingly, severs the United States from México. Or, so it would seem.

Through a multidisciplinary sequence of investigations and discussions which travel across the themes and fields of identity, culture, map-making, poetry, prose, journalism, photography, and literary criticism, students will gain an increased awareness of the strands of history which, in trying to silence works such as Silko's, merely create a more urgent thirst and more revolutionary space for their success and relevance, even forty years later.

The desert: an entire landscape left desolate, discounted for its apparent hostility and barrenness. It is also the epicenter upon which so much of this violent social oppression is enacted. But, just as the desert throbs with vibrant life, triumphantly defying the sun's oppressive heat, thriving because of it, so too do these binational, hybrid, liminal identities – marginalized, neglected – burst forth with their infinite complexity to transcend, shatter, and elude their borders.

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

Identity, Culture, and Borders

Introduction to Identity and Culture: Start by asking students to describe or depict the identity and culture of the USA. Then of Washington State. Then of their family. Finally, of themselves. These layers can be visually or in writing. Then, extend the discussion: what *is* identity? What *is* culture? As in, how are they formed and composed? How are they similar and different?

Introduction to Borders: Have students create several different types of “borders” between and among themselves in the classroom – could be by birth date, by height, by Chipotle versus Qdoba fans, etc. Ask how they will demonstrate their borders – is it just empty space between them? Do they need to move desks? A piece of string? Etc. Show the scene from [Mean Girls](#) in which Cady's new friends, Janis and Damian, draw a map of the school and the lunchroom – where everyone sits, their territories. Then, discuss:

what is a border? What is its purpose? What different kinds of borders do we know of – between countries, between states, between cities...any others?

Encourage students to use actual thesauruses or internet sources to look up the synonyms to “border.” Open a discussion about the patterns students may see there – many synonyms imply something unknown, ominous, treacherous, or Other: “frontier,” “outskirt,” “brink,” “end,” “extremity,” “fringe,” “limit,” “perimeter,” “periphery,” “skirt,” “verge.” Ask students to choose one synonym which compels them and complete a free-write: they can create a visual image, write poetry, write a story, write reflective prose, etc. Consider: who is there? What does it look like, sound like, feel like, smell like? Students should develop and refine these at home, to be shared in a future class period via gallery walk or short presentations. After these projects are shared, discuss: if someone or something is at, on, or near a border, what does this imply about their significance?

Introduction to Maps: Pull up a map of the U.S. on Google Maps. Ask students to define: what is this? Then ask them to define what a map really *is*. Discuss: is it fact? Does it depict *literally* what we see? Pull up Google Earth for a comparison.

On a blank piece of paper, have students draw a map of Washington, just the outline. Ask them to add details – as many features as they can. Now, turn the paper over, and get bigger: draw map of the U.S., then add México and Canada. What about the islands of the Caribbean? Then add in the features of the U.S., if they weren’t there already. Add features to the Canadian and Mexican parts of their maps. Finally, on an entirely new piece of paper ask students to map their world, whatever that means to them. It does not have to be “accurate” or “precise,” it can be conceptual, but should be as detailed as possible.

Lead students in a discussion about their three different maps. How precise were they able to be with the state and continental maps? On their Washington state map, how many features did they include which could be considered borders, barriers, or boundaries? How do their maps of their world differ from these other maps? Lead students in a discussion about how their mapping intersects with their identities – what do they know, and what is unfamiliar?

Unfamiliar Maps: Present students with various maps which denote both familiar and present-day lines overlaid or less/unfamiliar and historical border lines, those which include territories of indigenous people, other colonial powers, etc. Show detailed maps of the Seattle area, and of the contemporary U.S.-Canada border and PNW, as well as those of the current U.S.-México border. Lead students in a discussion: What does it mean to show a map with our contemporary boundaries? What does it mean to show a map with our contemporary boundaries overlaid with “historical” boundaries? What about maps without our current borders, or any borders at all? Who decides which

maps we see? What impact does a map have on our understanding of our identities? The identities of others? Reality?

Borders Around the World: Read Leslie Marmon Silko’s essay [“The Border Patrol State.”](#) Discuss. Then, begin the research project: Borders Around the World. Students will choose from one of the following border walls and prepare a 4—7-minute research presentation on the scenario: the reasons for the border, who is being divided from whom, sentiments when the border was established, sentiments now, and any other information they find relevant. Options include but are not limited to the following: North and South Korea; the partition of India and Pakistan; the partition of Israel and Palestine (this could also split into one project on Egypt/Gaza and one on the West Bank/Israel); the Peace Wall in Belfast; the Berlin Wall; Ceuta and Melilla: Spain and Morocco; Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; Frontier Closed Area: China and Hong Kong; Cyprus; Botswana and Zimbabwe; *or propose another.*

Geography, Storytelling, and Narratology

Maps as Storytelling: Collect non-political maps of various kinds, such as decorative maps (of stars, city neighborhoods, etc.) images of maps in which “undiscovered” areas are filled in with dragons or mermaids, and maps from fantasy fiction or entertainment, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Narnia*. (In the case of *Game of Thrones*, showing the opening credits of the HBO series, which explore the map, would also be effective.) Allow students to handle or explore these maps. Then lead students in a discussion: what do you notice about these various maps? How are they similar to or different from maps we’re accustomed to seeing – political or geographical maps? Are maps art? Why would a fantasy author create such a detailed map of a fictional, fantasy world? How does this help them tell the story? What about the maps of neighborhoods, or your location in the stars – why are these popular?

Bring the discussion to the U.S.-México border. How does our political map tell a certain story? What kinds of stories do the maps we’re used to seeing tell us? Turn a political map of the world upside down. Why is this “wrong?” Have students examine a map of the U.S.-México borders before and after the Treaty of Hidalgo Guadalupe – what story does a person tell who lives in Texas today? What story might they have told about themselves, their identity, if that treaty had never happened? Have students choose a town which sits in an area previously México, now the U.S. and write from the perspective of a person living in that town as if they are living in the U.S., then as if they are living in México. How do this person’s identity and concerns change?

Ask students to ask their parents, guardians, grandparents, or other trusted adult to tell them a story. Students should map this story artistically, then provide a written explanation of their visual piece.

Language, Colonialism, and Mapping: Have students read Gloria Anzaldúa’s [“How to Tame a Wild Tongue.”](#) Provide maps of the Seattle region, or entire PNW, and try to identify the origins of the various place names: Everett, Newport, Bellevue, Coeur d’Alene, versus Tacoma, Snohomish, Sequim, Spokane, Walla Walla. Which names are English? French? Indigenous? Why are there names in French? Look at a map of the southwestern U.S. and California – how do those place names reflect the colonization that took place there? Ask students to discuss one well-known renaming that has since been reversed: Mt. McKinley is now, once again, Denali. Why was this change made? What difference does it make? What story are we telling with these names? What would it mean for us to call Puget Sound the Salish Sea instead? What story are we telling with these names? How is language important to identity, or power?

Then, read extracts from Gauri Viswanathan’s [“The Beginnings of English Literary Study in India.”](#) Ask students to reflect in writing on when they have witnessed differences in languages between people – whether this is themselves, their parents or family members, people they’ve witnessed in public, online, or in media elsewhere – what is the power of language? What is it like, for example, to be called the wrong name, or a cruel nickname, on purpose? Wittgenstein says “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” – how does changing a place name, or using a different language, or enforcing a particular language, limit or permit?

Language, Power, and Social Pressures: [Read](#) and [watch](#) Fatimah Asghar’s poem “Pluto Shits on the Universe,” which plays with and responds to Pluto’s re-designation as a moon, rather than a planet. Lead students in a discussion about what commentary Asghar is making on the idea of categorization and others’ definitions of us.

Then, read Jamaica Kincaid’s 1978 short story [“Girl”](#) and Bret Anthony Johnston’s 2010 response, [“Boy”](#). Lead students in a discussion about the intersection between social pressures and storytelling: these two stories each tackle the messages and stories we are told about gender identities. What other stories do we hear – about any element of our identities – through social norms and messaging? Students should then write their own “microstory” following in Johnston’s and Kincaid’s footsteps, but inspired by whatever element of their identity they feel is most pressured, or about which the most stories are externally told or enforced.

Photography as Storytelling: Introduce students to Ansel Adams, highlighting the impact of his photographs of Yosemite on the creation of national parks, and Dorothea Lange, highlighting the impact of her photographs of Hoovervilles, particularly “Migrant Mother,” on popular opinion and federal policy around the crisis of the Dust Bowl. Then, engage in a [comparative study](#) of these two photographers’ respective work documenting and depicting the WWII Japanese concentration camps. Lead students in a discussion about the differences between the respective portrayals. How did each photographer depict the conditions and spirit in these camps? How do these photos tell

a story? How does this compare to what we have learned in history classes about the “internment” of Japanese Americans?

Have students create a photo essay in which they submit two (or more) photographs of similar or the same subject, but with unique or disparate messages, *or* submit two images from popular media or advertising which accomplish the same thing. Their work should be accompanied by a written reflection of their choices and the impact each unique image would have on an audience, and the significance of the overall story being told about the subject matter.

The Freedom to Tell Your Own Story: Provide students background on *The Scarlet Letter*, giving students time to create a wearable letter indicating the “sin” for which they’d be ostracized within our classroom or school setting – this can be silly or serious. Then, read José Antonio Rodríguez’s vignette “scarlet” from *house built on ashes*. Lead students in a discussion of the vignette, including discussions about when they feel they can tell their story, and when they feel others tell their story for them. Ask students to write their own vignette about one such moment.

“The Danger of a Single Story”: Have students complete a writing in exercise in which they begin by writing, in the first person, about a moment in which someone judged them or said something that wasn’t true about them. In essence, told their story for them. Then, have students write about the same moment from the perspective of another person – this could be the person who made the comment, or someone else who was present. Students should still write in first person, and strive to embody that person’s unique voice. Ask students to re-read both, then reflect in writing on what changed from the first exercise to the second: what did they realize about that moment, and how they’ve been perceiving it? Was it a more or less personally significant or impactful moment than they realized? What about its impact on the other person or people present? What reasons or motives did they imagine for the person whose perspective they adopted?

Then, watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche’s TED Talk, [“The Danger of a Single Story.”](#) Lead students in a discussion of the video – what is Adichie’s main point? What is she referring to when she talks about a “single story?” Ask students to reflect on the parts of their own lives where they may lack insight other than their own. Ask students to tie this to current events they may be following – are there elements of the news or culture they may be seeing from one, unadulterated, unchallenged perspective? Give students time to explore alternative viewpoints on a selected topic, event, or issue. Student should then submit a polished written reflection which illustrates the two sides and reflects on how seeking out alternative viewpoints impacted their ideas and beliefs.

Nepantla

Nepantla Across the World: Provide a lecture introducing students to the concept of [nepantla](#), crucial to our anchor text, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. This lecture could include, but is not limited to, imaginings of liminality (see Victor Turner and van Gennep,) double consciousness (see [Du Bois](#),) the split psyche or trifurcation of the self (see [Fanon](#),) The Black Outdoors (see [Moten and Saidiya](#),) and/or leveraged marginality and splitting (see bell hooks.)

Nepantla, Binationalism: A Straddled Identity: Read Gloria Anzaldúa's "[To live in the borderlands means you](#)" and Cherríe Moraga's "[La Güera](#)." Lead students in a discussion of both, and their intersections: what does it mean to be binational? What are the benefits and the drawbacks of inhabiting two "distinct" cultures or identities simultaneously? Push students to reflect on the relative reasonability behind and potentially sources of the instinct to assign clear-cut identities – either American *or* Mexican, either woman *or* man, either science kid *or* English kid. Ask students to write a response poem in Anzaldúa's style *or* to depict this idea of nepantla in visual art.

Ceremony

The reading and exploration of *Ceremony* should be accompanied by seminar discussions both at the reading-circle level and in whole-class settings, as well as some form of continued focus or record of the following topics:

- ceremony and ritual; storytelling and the power of stories; the perception of truth and reality; the relationship between humans, nature, and ownership; conceptions of time and space; narrative mode and structure; structural discrimination and oppression; nepantla and liminality

In addition to this, students' understanding of the novel should be supported by the following critical readings:

- Silko's essay "[Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective](#)" and "[Yellow Woman and A Beauty of the Spirit](#)"
- Paula Gunn Allan "[The Psychological Landscape of Ceremony](#)"

And supplemented by the following literary readings:

- Erika L. Sánchez "[Crossing](#)" from *Lessons on Expulsion*
- Sherman Alexie "[What You Pawn I Will Redeem](#)"

As well as potential research assignments on:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Laguna history and cultural beliefs

Finally, students' study of *Ceremony* and the entire unit should be completed with a capstone project in part of their own design, but which allows them to both produce an extended, polished piece of writing which combines analysis, research, and argumentation. This work should primarily be centered around their work with *Ceremony*, but should also draw in some way from the subjects studied prior to the novel: borders and borderlands, identity and culture, geography, storytelling, language, and conceptions of nepantla or liminality.

9. EXTEND/ELABORATE: Additional Learning

Discussions can obviously be held in myriad ways – beginning with students sharing their written reflections in pairs, to whole-class discussions, to jigsaws, to gallery walks or silent gallery walks, to Philosophical Chairs, and beyond. It is highly encouraged to vary these approaches, to offer access for multiple learning styles and preferences, and to maintain a sense of urgency, excitement, and engagement in the classroom.

In addition, students could explore the following for further enrichment:

[Tim Robinson](#), on decolonizing through deep mapping of Ireland

[This American Life](#) episode “The Wall,” on border walls around the world

Non-fiction sources on the topic of the U.S.-México border and immigration, including but not limited to *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario, *The Devil's Highway* by Luís Alberto Urrea, *Tell Me How It Ends* by Valeria Luiselli, and *The Death of Josseline* by Margaret Regan

10. EVALUATE: Assessment

Formative Assessments

This unit provides multiple opportunities for formative assessment in a variety of styles, timeframes, and skill sets providing students opportunities to communicate and build on their learning and to receive feedback from instructors. These include:

- verbal discussions and seminars;
- short informal writing activities, both informational/persuasive and narrative;
- in-class presentations, both individually and in groups

Summative Assessments

This unit will also include several opportunities for more polished, summative assignments in which students will be asked to both demonstrate understanding, analysis, and a mastery of skills. These include:

- polished analytical and creative projects, some of which combine visual and written productions;
- longer, more polished writing assignments, including a final critical analysis essay on the anchor text, *Ceremony*, which allows students the opportunity to delve further into the preceding areas of study on borders, geography, culture and identity, storytelling, language, and conceptions of nepantla or liminality

11. Accommodations and Modifications

In this context, many students may identify personally with the concepts of being binational or marginalized. Allow students to explore readings and undertake projects which may reflect their particular interests, if such works provide equal and appropriate challenge and enrichment.

For students who may struggle with language and the critical theory concepts included in this unit, provide pre-annotated copies of readings, or alternative versions with more accessible vocabulary, syntax, and length.

For students who struggle with writing, allow for adjustments of response style, length, complexity of prompts, and time frame.

For students who struggle to share verbally, provide space or options for extended written responses, small-group or teacher-to-student conversations, or previews of questions.

12. College and Career Readiness (optional)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.6

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of language.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6

Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

In addition to these designated standards, through this unit students will gain a broad-sweeping understanding of the deep interconnectedness of diverse fields of study, from history, to languages and literatures, to geography, to politics, to sociology.

13. Additional Resources

For more on Dorothea Lange, see [Hyperallergic](#).

For more on Ansel Adams, see the [Library of Congress](#) collection.

For more comparing Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams, see [Open Culture](#).

For more on liminality, see [The Chicago School of Media Theory](#) and [HuffPost](#).

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15. Reflection

My primary sentiment having left the Chihuahuan desert to return to my own, northern, borderlands is a resonant, abiding sense of humility. Many of the ideas, techniques, and concepts embedded within this unit plan were gleaned from my fellow NEH scholars, our visiting professors, and our two program directors. Despite stark and shocking differences in the particulars of the landscape, languages, and politics of the El Paso region as compared to my own, our underlying shared humanity imbued every discussion, every lesson, every site visit, every story with intense, personal relevance, and at every turn I was humbled by my colleagues' passion, expertise, resourcefulness, curiosity, scholarship, and commitment. More importantly, I was humbled by the overwhelming historical and cultural current in which El Paso is steeped, in which the forces of subversion move like the desert: quiet, but resolute.