

**Kelly Mullen**  
**Microessay on Chihuahuan Desert Borderlands**

Place remains a powerful force in the lives of all global citizens, especially those who live in the borderland. Binational peoples, and the spaces that they occupy along the border, have received minimal attention in textbooks, discussions, and policy making. Narratives from the borderlands are frequently pushed to the side and ignored, as they often run counter to those of “mainstream” America. Following my experiences in the NEH seminar “Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert,” I hope to share these perspectives that are left by the wayside with my community at home.

Although Pittsburgh, where I teach, does not sit on a politically defined border, it is imperative that students living in a globalized world to know about the issues facing those in the borderlands. In the past, I have educated students about the border in a myriad of ways. I took students to the Rio Grande Valley, where we learned the stories of people living in the colonias and visited La Posada Providencia, a shelter for asylum seekers. I also worked in a classroom of English Language Learners, and opened dialogues between ELLs and students who speak English as their first language. The stories told impacted my students more than anything else. They heard stories about being marginalized because of the color of their skin or their accent. The clients at La Posada told stories about how they came to the U.S. as well as the struggles they faced being away from their families. In dialogue with ELLs, my students realized that despite vast differences in language, culture, and upbringing, they could still closely identify with each other.

My purpose for attending this seminar was much the same as the reasons why I took students to the Rio Grande Valley and began a dialogue between English speaking students and ELL from different neighborhoods. I wanted to put a human face on the people who occupy the borderlands and to help my students understand what it means to be binational

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and have many identities. I hoped to gain a greater understanding of the people who inhabit the borderlands and to be able to make comparisons between the borders my students face and those faced by people living in the borderlands. The time that I have spent in El Paso has inspired me to meet the people who occupy these spaces and to learn their stories so that I might return home and share it with my students and community. There was ample opportunity to do this as we learned more and more about UTEP's connection to oral history. We had the opportunity to hear from Antonia Morales on her experiences as a longtime resident in El Segundo Barrio, a neighborhood that may be torn down in order to make way for a new arena. While listening to her story, I reflected on the teaching by Dr. Leyva, who noted that oral history has long been discounted in favor of written sources – leading us to consider who else's stories have not been heard. After this discussion, I am considering ways in which I can incorporate more oral histories in my classroom and give voice to narratives that are not typically accepted.

During my two-week stay, I was struck by the openness of the people of El Paso. While on a tour with the Border Patrol, Oscar Cervantes, the agent who was escorting us, spoke openly about his experiences patrolling the border and the factors that pushed him to join the Border Patrol despite having family members who entered the country illegally. A designer I met at the El Paso Art Museum talked about his desire to move back to El Paso and his hope that some day, we will move past having borders that divide people. Every inhabitant of El Paso spoke of the good and the bad, the factors that draw them closer together as a community, and those that pull them apart.

Ever present during my time in El Paso was the fence on the border. It stretches across the horizon, as far as you can see. It was always there: during my daily shuttle ride

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from my dorm to campus, on the freeway as we travelled to New Mexico, on the walks that I took between activities. After being here for 2 weeks, I was amazed by the realization that El Paso and Juárez are one giant city bisected by the fence, depending each on the other to keep their economies running. In Pennsylvania, there is not much discussion about the borderlands other than what is shown on the national news. I find myself wondering how I can possibly convey to my students, the majority of whom will never visit the borderlands, what this fence signifies for the people who live here and how their lives have been affected by it.

Attending this seminar and developing lesson plans built around themes of identity and belonging have helped me to understand a more complete story of the American experience, especially in relation to the borderlands. Thus empowered, my task when I return to Pittsburgh will be to share the stories of the people here and to help my students understand the borders in their own lives. We must learn to overcome our borders, be they visible or intangible, as they do not engender the necessary respect to develop positive relationships between cultures. I hope to share the stories that are not being told and create students and future leaders who have compassion and respect for others. Understanding and lowering the borders that exist in our own communities will lead to more empathy for others and the notion that all have an innate human dignity, and more similarities than differences.