

NEH Summer Institute | Borderlands at UT El Paso
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Reflective Essay

I grew up in El Paso on and off, first born to two public school teachers, attending kindergarten here before this city became the place I would spend my divorce-child summers, living within the boundaries of my father's clearly defined area of the city. As a retired teacher, as a man who found himself an orphan in his fifties, and as a man who had lost two houses to fire and flood, he created his own borders within El Paso. These borders kept him safe, kept things normal, and out of compassion I lived within these borders until this summer, when I joined the National Endowment for the Humanities program at UTEP focusing on the Borderlands.

When I first applied to this program, my intention was to be able to provide for my students access to alternative narratives that would expand their understanding of US history. I had and have a deep desire to provide an understanding of history for students that reflects their own experiences and pushes them to see that in the pursuit of 'freedom,' certain identities have been marginalized for the concept of the greater good. I wanted also for my students to understand the humanity and the successes of the marginalized, for their stories are sometimes the greatest examples of the American dream.

However, throughout these two weeks of Borderlands studies, what I gained most was not knowledge of how to better teach and learn with my students, but rather I unexpectedly found an escape from the borders of my own definitions of El Paso. Without realizing it, I had become limited in my understanding of this city and these spaces that defy political and cultural definitions. Through our tours and explorations of historical and contemporary border spaces, El Paso became vibrant, became a real and present embodiment of the beauty and struggles of border communities.

How could I have not known that Annunciation House existed just down from the street the plaza that my father used to take me to in my childhood? How could I not have known that the Chamizal national memorial, with its green rolling lawns and powerful history, was a part of this town? What about the many neighborhood restaurants or artwork or beautifully talented local writers that exist in this space? All of these things have redefined and challenged my understanding of the borderlands that I myself had inadvertently built my own fences around.

As I write this, the image of the dense and formidable border fence comes to mind. When I stood next to it, I found myself feeling alien myself, as if my humanity paled in comparison to its resolute stoicism. What I failed to realize was that I had created my own fences around this town, this space. My own fences and their impenetrability faded as I listened to the stories of the people and this space; the borderlands became a space, not a definition. Now, when I return, I can live within the borders my father has created, but I can transcend them to the spaces that I see and feel now—more palpably than ever.