

NEH Immigration Institute 2014
Ryan Magee
Cleveland High School, Rio Rancho, New Mexico
11th Grade American Literature and Advanced Placement Literature

Exploring Borders through Poetry

Background:

At the beginning of both my American Literature and Advanced Placement Literature and Composition courses, I tend to have students focus on annotation and specific literary or thematic elements as they work through a given piece of poetry. With this in mind, I want to introduce the theme of “border” as explored through the figurative language and poetic devices of poetry. This lesson will come at some point during the first half of the year, although most likely after we’ve discussed many of the different pieces and ideas that go into rhetorical/literary analysis. Books read during first quarter of my AP class include *Bless Me, Ultima* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, so while neither specifically involves borders, each certainly tackles the idea of alienation within culture and the difficulties of moving beyond stereotype and assumption while maintaining self. Conversely, *The Things They Carried* (a book I use with my regular American Lit juniors) has an excellent chapter about the main character O’Brien’s journey north toward Canada (as well as the more obvious Vietnamese episodes involving foreign and potentially unwanted presence on foreign soil), which dovetails well with the idea of how place affects character and vice versa.

Objective:

For students to begin both individually and collectively thoughtful reflection on how race and citizenship status affect an individual’s ability to integrate, feel welcome, adjust to, and reflect upon a new society or culture, as specifically depicted through poems involving borders. Students will subsequently demonstrate their findings through an exit slip that finishes the sentence: “When I think of borders, I think of...” as well as a physical tableau that incorporates the most vivid aspect/moment of their poem for the class to see.

Procedure:

1. Students enter the class and are asked to answer the prompt on the board: “When I think of borders, I think of...”. This prompt will bookend the lesson. After the students write (for no more than a minute) about this, a few students (voluntary or compulsory, depending on the whims of the class and myself) will share answers.
2. After this, I will put up a famous roadside image of undocumented migrants running and have students discuss what it is; then, I will switch images to the far more satirical picture attached below of illegal “Pilgrims” roadside. We will discuss the differences, as well as potentially look at a little more of the language

associated with immigration/migration and its historical context. (If this were a history lesson, I'd spend a lot more time here; as is, it may simply receive cursory notice and I'll have to judge based on time what amount is appropriate.)

3. Students will break up into groups of 3-4; each group receives one of the four poems selected, meaning that some poems will likely be utilized twice. (The poems selected are by no means the only ones possible, but simply the ones I thought of/found: Gary Soto's "Mexicans Begin Jogging;" Reza Mohammadi's "You Crossed the Border;" Naomi Shihab Nye's "Cross that Line;" and Eduardo C. Corral's "To a Mojado Who Died Crossing the Desert.") The texts need addendums about the author, context, and/or important terminology that students may need, although some specific terms/ideas will be left unclear so that they must explore them. I would also consider using some of the Angel Island poems for this assignment as well, particularly if the entire class has been exposed to the historical context.
4. Students collaboratively read through the poems and have 20 minutes to complete the following:
 - A) TPCASTT (a helpful poetry annotation activity: see <http://shorewiki.wikispaces.com/file/view/TP-CASTT.pdf> or other online versions of this methodology) analysis that helps students annotate the text (they can write on their papers for this, and will not need to do full paraphrases for some of the lengthier poems), specifically focusing the thematic aspect on "borders" within the poem
 - B) a tableau (using all of the people in the group, as well as others as necessary) that best depicts the most important line(s) or moment of the poem.
5. When students complete the activity in their groups, they will subsequently present their tableau for the class, with students from other groups looking over the text to ascertain which line(s) were selected to depict. After each performance and guessing, the performing group will subsequently explain (a) why they chose that particular line and (b) their thematic connection to borders and explained by their thematic statement.
6. Afterward, the class as a whole will discuss the story after the dramatic performances:
 - a. What about the poem/theme became clearer when you saw the tableau?
 - b. How were these texts all connected?
 - c. How were these texts different?
 - d. If someone had not read the poems, would the ideas of "border" still be clearly illustrated?
 - e. How does this idea of border coalesce/juxtapose with the early prompt that was given at the beginning of class?

7. Students re-answer the first prompt and submit their answer individually, as well as answering the question: “How did this activity help me think about borders differently? (Or why did it not?)”
8. For additional homework, students could go online to the Angel Island heritage website and select an “Angel Island” poem and create a rhetorical analysis and paragraph response that explores the use of borders thematically within the text.

Resources

“Mexicans Begin Jogging”:

<http://www2.southeastern.edu/Academics/Faculty/scraig/soto.html>

Information on Gary Soto:

<http://www.garysoto.com/bio.html>

“You Crossed the Border”:

http://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/346/You_Crossed_the_Border

Information on Reza Mohammadi:

http://www.poetrytranslation.org/poets/Reza_Mohammadi

“Cross that Line” and Information on Naomi Shihab Nye:

<http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa100201a.htm>

Information on Paul Robeson (from “Cross that Line”):

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Robeson

Information on Eduardo C. Corral and “To a Mojado Who Died Crossing the Desert”:

<http://webdelso.com/LITARTS/CORRAL/corralpoem4.htm>

<http://webdelso.com/LITARTS/CORRAL/corralinterview.htm>

Angel Island poetry can be found here:

<http://www.aiisf.org/education/station-history/poetry>

http://www.cetel.org/angel_poetry.html

Gary Soto *1981*
Mexicans Begin Jogging

At the factory I worked

In the fleck of rubber, under the press

Of an oven yellow with flame,

Until the border patrol opened

Their vans and my boss waved for us to
run.

5

"Over the fence, Soto," he shouted,

And I shouted that I was an American.

"No time for lies," he said, and passes

A dollar in my palm, hurrying me

Through the back
door.

10

Since I was on his time, I ran

And became the wag to a short tail of Mexicans--

Ran past the amazed crowds that lined

The street and blurred like photographs, in rain.

I ran from that industrial road to the
soft

15

Houses where people paled at the turn of an autumn sky.

What could I do but yell vivas

To baseball, milkshakes, and those sociologists

Who would clock me

As I jog into the next century

On the power of a great, silly
grin.

20

You Crossed the Border

by Reza Mohammadi

You crossed the border: your homeland had no language,
or maybe it had nothing to say.

You crossed the border: imagine it's your homeland.
What did your homeland have that the whole world lacked?
First, you were greeted by tears.
This kind friend with an unkind face,
Sorrow, embraced you out of dirt and dust,
a friend who clasped you closer than others.
The sick old man who welcomed you so tenderly
was exhausted by travelling from village to village.
You longed to buy happiness
but only smugglers offered it for sale.
You crossed the border: imagine it's your homeland.
What did you homeland have that the whole world lacked?
Oh poet! You have come to the kingdom of misery,
to a land with no sky,
a land where poets trade in humanity,
where the mouths of prophets are stopped,
where dogs are ministers and donkeys are imams.
No calls to prayer issue from its mosques free of bribes.
What on earth did you expect from your homeland?
That its banquet tables weren't piled high with bones?

Poet! Your homeland is a vanished past.
Now it offers nothing but insults, greed, boredom and grief.
Instead of poetry, would that you had gold and power -
that sacred talent does no good here.

Reza Mohammadi

Is a poet from [Afghanistan](#) who writes in [Dari](#).

The prize-winning poet, Reza Mohammadi - widely regarded as one of the most exciting young poets writing in Persian today - was born in Kandahar in 1979. He studied Islamic Law and then Philosophy in Iran before obtaining an MA in Globalisation from London Metropolitan University.

His three collections of poetry have gained him many awards, such as from the Afghan Ministry of Culture in 2004 and prizes for being Iran's best young poet in 1996 and 1997.

Reza Mohammadi is also a prolific journalist and cultural commentator. His articles have been published in journals in Afghanistan and Iran, as well as in English by *The Guardian*. He lives in London.

CROSS THAT LINE

Paul Robeson stood
on the northern border of the USA
and sang into Canada

where a vast audience
sat on folding chairs
waiting to hear him.

He sang into Canada.
His voice left the USA
when his body was not allowed
to cross that line.

Remind us again, brave friend!
What countries may we sing into?
What lines should we all be crossing?
What songs travel toward us
from far away
to deepen our days?

Naomi Shihab Nye

1952- , St. Louis , MO

Chancellor 2009-

Naomi Shihab Nye was born on March 12, 1952, in St. Louis, Missouri, to a Palestinian father and an American mother. During her high school years, she lived in Ramallah in Palestine, the Old City in Jerusalem, and San Antonio, Texas, where she later received her BA in English and world religions from Trinity University.

Nye is the author of numerous books of poems, including *Transfer* (BOA Editions, 2011); *You and Yours* (BOA Editions, 2005), which received the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award; *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (Greenwillow Books, 2002), a collection of new and selected poems about the Middle East; *Fuel* (BOA Editions, 1998); *Red Suitcase* (BOA Editions, 1994); and *Hugging the Jukebox* (Far Corner Books, 1982).

To a Mojado Who Died Crossing the Desert

After a storm saguaros glisten
 like mint trombones.
 Sometimes a coyote leaps
over creosote.
 Hush.
The sand calls out for more footprints.
 A crack in a boulder
can never be an entrance
 to a cathedral
but a mouse can be torn open

like an orange.
Hush.
The arroyo is the color of rust.
Sometimes a gust of snow
floats across the water
as gracefully as a bride.

<http://webdelsol.com/LITARTS/CORRAL/corralpoem4.htm>
<http://webdelsol.com/LITARTS/CORRAL/corralinterview.htm>

Let's talk about borders. Mexico being so close, what is its proximity to your literary imagination? Are there demarcation lines—is there a place where one ends and the other (U.S.) begins in your creative life as a Chicano writer?

Mexico, like the Western canon, must be voraciously consumed, and occasionally regurgitated.

*

When I come to the end of a line during the process of writing a poem my mind steps into the borderlands: a matrix where literary traditions mingle, a matrix where various linguistic approaches announce themselves.

*

Mexico, of course, holds a special place in my heart. I'm immensely proud of Octavio Paz's Noble Laureateship. I'm thrilled by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's wit and intellectual depth. I enjoy reading the work of contemporary Mexican poets like Ernesto Lumbreras, Heriberto Yépez, Alberto Blanco, and Gerardo Deniz. I'm following with interest el movimiento Crack, the latest literary movement in Mexico, that rejects the folk-centric, magic realist work common in Latin America.

*

I'm a coyote. But instead of smuggling people across the desert, I transport words across the white of the page.

Angel Island Immigration Station Poetry

1910 - 1940

These telling poems were written by overseas Chinese on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration station, located in the San Francisco bay. Between 1910 and 1940, as many as 175,000 Chinese immigrants were detained and processed at Angel Island. Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Angel Island served more as a detention and deportation center than an immigration processing center. Thousands of Chinese were detained and interrogated at the barracks in a prison-like atmosphere for weeks, months or years. Life

for the detainees was strange, stressful, demoralizing, and humiliating. Separated from family members, they were placed in crowded communal living quarters. One hundred persons would sleep in bunk beds, three high in columns, in a room about 1,000 square feet.

Also see our film: [Island of Secret Memories](#)

There are tens of thousands of poems on these walls
They are all cries of suffering and sadness
The day I am rid of this prison and become successful
I must remember that this chapter once existed
I must be frugal in my daily needs
Needless extravagance usually leads to ruin
All my compatriots should remember China
Once you have made some small gains,
you should return home early.

Written by one from Heungshan

The sea-scape resembles lichen twisting
and turning for a thousand li.
There is no shore to land and it is
difficult to walk.
With a gentle breeze I arrived at the city
thinking all would be so.
At ease, how was one to know he was to
live in a wooden building?

Because my house had bare walls, I began
rushing all about.
The waves are happy, laughing "Ha-ha!"
When I arrived on Island, I heard I was
forbidden to land.
I could do nothing but frown and feel angry at heaven.

In the quiet of night, I heard, faintly, the whistling of wind.
The forms and shadows saddened me; upon
seeing the landscape, I composed a poem.
The floating clouds, the fog, darken the sky.
The moon shines faintly as the insects chirp.
Grief and bitterness entwined are heaven sent.
The sad person sits alone, leaning by a window.

America has power, but not justice.
In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty.
Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal.
I bow my head in reflection but there is
nothing I can do.

I am distressed that we Chinese are
in this wooden building
It is actually racial barriers which cause
difficulties on Yingtai Island.
Even while they are tyrannical they still
claim to be humanitarian.
I should regret my taking the risks of
coming in the first place.

I thoroughly hate the barbarians because they
do not respect justice.
They continually promulgate harsh laws to
show off their prowess.
They oppress the overseas Chinese and also
violate treaties.
They examine for hookworms and practice
hundreds of despotic acts.

This is a message to those who live here not
to worry excessively.
Instead, you must cast your idle worries to
the flowing stream.
Experiencing a little ordeal is not hardship.
Napoleon was once a prisoner on an island.

Reference: Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung,
Island Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940, Seattle:
University of Washington Press, 1991.