
INTRODUCTION: CROSSING BORDERS

BY ISABEL BACA

I am a product of the U.S.-México border. I am a living example of one who has crossed—and continues to cross—borders. I was born in El Paso, Texas but lived the first years of my life in Juárez, Chihuahua, México. My parents, both born in México, taught me my mother tongue—Spanish. But early in my education, my father, seeking better job venues and better educational and professional opportunities for our family, moved us across the border to El Paso. I was placed in a grade school classroom knowing little to no English. My teacher knew no Spanish; my best friends became an African-American boy and a German girl, neither of whom knew any Spanish. We communicated through signs and facial expressions, especially when they looked at me with sadness and anger when our teacher would hit my hand with a ruler whenever she heard me speaking Spanish with Mexican-American classmates. What was I doing wrong? This was particularly confusing to me since she never gave me a reason for doing this, for penalizing me. To make this situation even more difficult to comprehend, I would go home and be ordered to only speak Spanish, since my mother knew little English and hated for us to forget our home language, Spanish. What was wrong with English if I was to use it at school? These clashing messages about my language paved the way to a self-discovery, a reflective, and critical journey. Who was I? Where did I belong? How and would I fit in? And so my journey began—a journey surrounded by borders which I had to cross and which pushed me to build bridges.

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As I began working on this book, I debated on whether to focus on geographical borders or to give you, the reader, the opportunity to explore those physical, cultural, and emotional borders that you may see and experience in your daily life. Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary defines "border" as "the extreme part or surrounding line; the confine or exterior limit of a country, or any region or track of land." Other dictionaries are more specific, defining "border" more narrowly, and two such definitions apply to this text: "Border" is "the line that separates one country, state, province, etc., from another; frontier line." It is also "the border between the U.S. and México, especially along the Rio Grande." Though *Borders* examines this geographical and physical area of the Southwest, of what is also known as *the borderland*, *la frontera*—a region that spans both the United States and México, it also explores borders dealing with much more than simply geography. *Borders* describes linguistic, cultural, and emotional borders, showing how crossing such borders may lead to opportunity and benefits and/or confusion, problems, and marginalization. Thus, *Borders* also addresses immigration issues on the U.S.-México border.

Clearly, then, *Borders* goes beyond the physical line or river that separates these two countries. It explores what Heewon Chang identifies as a "cultural border." Chang explains how a border is more than a demarcation line; it can denote power. Chang says, "[A border] is a symbol of power that imposes inclusion and exclusion. A cultural border connotes a barrier that a more powerful side constructs to guard its own political power, cultural knowledge and privileges."¹ In other words, a border can exist culturally, linguistically, politically, and can involve religion, gender, age, and other issues. For example, as someone who was born and lives on a border, I have experience living in this physical space, but my experience crosses several other borders that make me who I am—a true product of the U.S.-México border. Culture, language, politics, religion, and gender, among many other factors, build borders in communities, societies, nations, and the world.

Because I was born and live on the El Paso-Juárez border, I was fortunately exposed to both English and Spanish. I consider myself bilingual and bicultural. I have been exposed and brought up with both cultures existing on the border, which together comprise what has come to be known as "the border culture." People on the border can relate to both the 4th of July and 16

1 Change, Heewon. "Re-examining the Rhetoric of the 'Cultural Border'." <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/heewon.html>

de Septiembre (September 16th)—independence days for the United States and México. People on the border can have fun playing Bingo and la loteria and hitting a piñata. People on the border hear different languages and dialects on a daily basis. They can communicate with more diverse people, celebrate more occasions, hold more festive days, and cherish an array of different customs, histories, and traditions. But this experience can cause conflicts for individuals, too, involving their identity, their literacy skills, their position in society, their “belonging” to one, or the other, or both sides of the border. The question then becomes: Do you want to cross borders? In crossing borders, what happens to your language, culture, beliefs, and life? What happens if you choose to build more bridges to connect these borders? Or what if you choose to not build bridges but more walls and fences to stop crossing borders?

Borders opens doors by having you reflect and analyze the different borders individuals can, want, or are forced to cross. *Borders* includes an array of reading selections focusing on different borders existing in daily life, particularly borders that individuals living in the Southwest may encounter. But you will quickly see how these borders can apply to any physical area connecting two parts, whether it is two nations, two cities, two neighborhoods, two workplaces, two institutions, or two entities of different sorts. Borders, remember, can also exist between languages, cultures, races, age groups, political and religious affiliations, and genders.

To help you better understand and think critically through the different issues surrounding borders and immigration, *Borders* includes diverse genres: poems, narratives, interviews, debates, cartoons, articles, reviews and letters. It presents both written and visual texts. *Borders* includes research, invention, and composing prompts and activities. As you read through these selections and complete the various exercises, projects, and assignments, you will be exposed to different views on borders and immigration. You will write essays, conduct interviews, give presentations, work collaboratively with classmates, participate in class and small group discussions, complete prewriting techniques such as researching and brainstorming, and even practice service-learning within your community.

My wish for you, the reader, is to not only practice writing, create documents, and critically analyze different literary genres, but to go beyond the learning that happens in a classroom. These readings will encourage you to think and reflect on the different borders existing in your life. They will push you to

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take a critical view of the borders, the crossing of borders that humans do to survive, to be heard, to be welcomed, to be noticed and recognized, or to change their lives. Ask yourself if you want to cross borders. How do you view those crossing borders? Why do you feel this way? How and when should you cross borders? Are you building bridges or fences and walls? When are bridges necessary? When are walls a must? Who should decide if you are allowed to cross specific borders? In answering these questions, you will need to examine the time, place, context, purpose, audience, and subject for each situation you are addressing. You will practice rhetorical techniques which will assist you in conveying your ideas and purpose.

To get you started, the following exercises introduce you to the concept of borders.