

# FRONTIERA

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS  
AND STUDENTS

**A Re-Imagining Migration Resource**

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# CONTENTS



## Introduction

|                                                             |   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| About <i>Frontera</i>                                       | 4 |
| About Re-Imagining Migration                                | 5 |
| <i>Frontera</i> and the Re-Imagining Migration Learning Arc | 5 |
| How to Use This Guide                                       | 6 |

## A Note from the Author

### Pre-Reading

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| Reflecting on Home     | 8  |
| Reading Graphic Novels | 8  |
| Magical Realism        | 9  |
| Reflecting on Identity | 9  |
| Proximity and Empathy  | 9  |
| Language and Power     | 10 |

### Reading *Frontera*

|                                            |    |
|--------------------------------------------|----|
| Opportunities for Reflection and Inquiry   | 11 |
| In the Kitchen                             | 11 |
| The Bus to Sásabe and Sásabe Plaza         | 12 |
| Mateo's Expression                         | 12 |
| Meeting the Coyote and Crossing the Border | 12 |
| Talking about Borders                      | 12 |
| Who is Guillermo?                          | 13 |
| In the Desert                              | 13 |
| El Jefe                                    | 16 |
| Darcie and the Tohono O'odham Nation       | 18 |
| Guillermo's Story                          | 18 |
| Mateo and Guillermo                        | 20 |
| El Jefe Returns                            | 20 |
| Returning Home                             | 21 |
| Suggested Paired Texts                     | 22 |

### After the Book: Taking Action

|                                  |    |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Guiding Questions for Reflection | 23 |
|----------------------------------|----|

# INTRODUCTION

I

## About *Frontera*

*Frontera* is a graphic novel written by Julio Anta and illustrated by Jacoby Salcedo. Editors at Harper Collins describe the book this way:

*Mateo makes the dangerous journey back home to the United States through the Sonoran Desert with the help of a new friend, a ghost named Guillermo in a supernatural borderland odyssey by debut graphic novelists Julio Anta and Jacoby Salcedo.*

*As long as he remembers to stay smart and keep his eyes open, Mateo knows that he can survive the trek across the Sonoran Desert that will take him from Mexico to the United States. That is until he's caught by the Border Patrol only moments after sneaking across the fence in the dead of night.*

*Escaping their clutches comes at a price and lost in the desert without a guide or water, Mateo is ill-prepared for the unforgiving heat that is sure to arrive come sunrise. With the odds stacked against him, his one chance at survival may be putting his trust in something, or rather someone, that he isn't even sure exists.*

*If you'd asked him if ghosts were real before he found himself face-to-face with one, Mateo wouldn't have even considered it. But now, confronted with the nearly undeniable presence of Guillermo, he's having second thoughts. Having spent his afterlife guiding migrants to safety, Guillermo knows things about the Sonoran Desert far beyond what could be explained by a mere hallucination. But even as Mateo forms an uneasy partnership with Guillermo, survival is still uncertain.*

*The Sonoran Desert, with its hostile temperatures and inhabitants, is teeming with danger as the Border Patrol and rogue militias prowl its deadly terrain. As his journey stretches on, Mateo will have to decide exactly what and who he's willing to sacrifice to find home.*

While the book contains elements of magical realism, it is also a powerful window into a world that many readers will not know and one that others will know quite intimately. In

a recent conversation with the author, Julio Anta, and illustrator Jacoby Salcedo, they revealed that many aspects of the story are based on true events.

*Frontera* explores the experiences of young people who have been deported and their longing for their home in the United States. It also highlights the dangers that migrants face when crossing the border, including armed self-styled militias seeking to take border enforcement into their own hands.

At the same time, there are also individuals on both sides of the border who work tirelessly to help migrants cross safely, including those who set up water stations to prevent dehydration in the desert. While the character of Darcie is fictional, her portrayal of the range of responses to immigrants crossing through the Tohono O'odham Nations' reservation is accurate. The book also sheds light on self-appointed militias like the one Mateo encounters, who break the law by attacking and kidnapping people on the move. Even the jaguar, El Jefe, is based on a real-life animal whose story represents the impact of border enforcement on the environment and animal migrations.

While we can't confirm the existence of Guillermo the ghost, the experiences of Braceros and centuries of migration are very real. As educators, we encourage readers to explore the history of migration and its relationship to contemporary migration stories.

# About Re-Imagining Migration

Re-Imagining Migration prepares educators to build belonging in a world on the move.

We believe that communities thrive when schools build belonging among all their students. The inverse is also true. Communities suffer when schools don't meet the needs of their changing populations.

Our solution addresses this challenge at the root. Re-Imagining Migration provides

high-quality learning opportunities and resources to help educators create inclusive learning communities where all students develop the knowledge, skills, and understanding they need to navigate a world on the move.

Learn more at [www.reimaginingmigration.org](http://www.reimaginingmigration.org)

## Frontera and the Re-Imagining Migration Learning Arc

This guide is informed by the Re-Imagining Migration learning arc in the next page. A full version of the question-based arc is available [here](#). *Frontera* explores several key themes from the Re-Imagining Migration learning arc. As readers follow Mateo's journey across the Mexican-American border, they might consider the following essential questions:

**How do stories of migration help us understand who we are as individuals and members of communities?**

**What do stories of migration reveal about our communities? What do they reveal about human nature?**

**How do borders impact people's lives? What moral, ethical, and legal questions do stories of migration raise?**

**How do stories about migration impact how people think and act? How can you tell if those stories are real and reliable?**

The Re-imagining Migration Framework, developed [by Veronica Boix-Mansilla from Project Zero at Harvard Graduation School of Education](#) in partnership with Re-Imagining Migration teachers and staff, as well as Carola Suárez-Orozco, the Director of the Immigration Initiative at Harvard, highlights five key dispositions that we seek to develop among learners for navigating a world on the move. They include the disposition to:

**Inquire about particular and universal aspects of migration, past, present, and future, with nuance and care**

**Recognize power and inequities across systems and experiences of migration,**

**Take perspective, understanding -ourselves and others- empathically**

**Take action toward constructing equitable and antiracist societies of belonging and inclusion**

**Communicate and relate across differences, linguistic, cultural, ideological, and regional**

## Our Learning Arc



## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to support culturally responsive approaches to teaching with the graphic novel *Frontera*. We offer questions, resources, and strategies with the understanding that educators know best how to adapt them for their classrooms. While we offer suggestions to guide reflection, often the most powerful literary analysis is driven by student observations and the questions that arise from deep engagement with text. Before introducing any of the questions we suggest, listen to your students and note the ways in which they respond to the text.

Sara reminds teachers how important it is to “get proximate” to our selves before getting proximate to the characters in the text. We need to understand our own identities, biases, and dispositions before we encourage and ask our students for their empathy. Without encouraging empathy, it is hard to understand the characters the choices they make, and obstacles they encounter.

Unlike a traditional novel, the narrative in *Frontera* is not marketed by page numbers or chapters. The story unfolds in one, unbroken narrative marked by interactions with different characters or in response to different physical settings.

We have grouped the text, teaching, suggestions, and resources according to our own interpretation of the events in the book. You might use your own schema. In addition, we have added a pre-reading section to the guide that offers an opportunity to reflect on key themes as well as, what we believe to be useful resources for analyzing graphic narrative text.

# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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## II

Jacoby Salcedo and I began telling stories together in 2019. Over the course of a year, we created comics about various topics—most of all, the things that made us angry. We told stories about police violence, racism and prejudice, and of course, immigration. Each story featured Latinx characters in the lead role—particularly young men—because as Latino men ourselves, Jacoby and I grew up rarely ever seeing ourselves reflected in the media we consumed, especially not in comics or graphic novels and certainly not in a positive or empathetic light.

So, when Jacoby and I started talking about doing a larger project, a full-length graphic novel, our conversation went back to our younger selves and our shared family history. Jacoby and I are both the children of immigrants. His family from Mexico, mine from Cuba and Colombia. Our lives are inextricably linked to immigration and the invention of borders.

In 2019 and 2020, when we first began talking about the book that would eventually become *Frontera*, the southern border was constantly in the news. Jacoby and I began having conversations about the many ways his family's story intersected with that particular border and then of my family's history with other American borders—the waters between Cuba and the United States, and the air between Colombia and here.

It's in those stories and our shared history that we found this project, *Frontera*. While *Frontera* is in fact an amalgamation of, and inspired by, both Jacoby and my family's history, it is a work of fiction. But it's a fiction that takes elements of this country's past and present and melds them together to tell the story of two young men named Mateo and Guillermo. From the WW2-era "Bracero Program" and subsequent "Operation Wetback" deportations; to the Ku Klux Klan's 1977 border patrol initiative; the current wave of hyper-militarization along the U.S./Mexico border and sabotaging of humanitarian efforts; and of course, the various militias and paramilitary groups who have made headlines for rounding up migrants—the story of *Frontera* is one that is grounded in a history of violence and a spirit of resiliency.

Our hope is that Mateo and Guillermo's journey inspires reverence for both the migrants who have crossed the Sonoran Desert and the communities that call it their home. A place where invisible border lines have shifted throughout history, but community and resiliency has remained.

Julio Anta

# PRE-READING

## III

Below are a series of ideas as activities you might consider adapting for your classroom before having students read *Frontera*.

### Reflecting on Home

One theme in this book is about what home means. Before getting into the text, you might want to reflect on the importance of home. What is home? What is the difference between the place you live and a home? What makes something home? Who makes something home? What does it sound like? Smell like? Feel like? Why would someone leave their home?

### Reading Graphic Novels

*"...when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another.*

*But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself."*

**Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics***

According to Literacy Today, graphic novels lend themselves to being used:

- to launch a genre study
- as mentor texts for the author's craft
- as writing prompts
- to introduce complex themes and issues
- as a prompt for expository writing
- for engaging students in critical literacy
- to encourage authentic discussions in literature circles or inquiry groups

Here are some resources to help you build a foundation for teaching *Frontera* or any other graphic novel.

- [Graphic Novels/Comics and Terms and Concepts](#) From Read-Write-Think, this text introduces key terms and concepts to use when analyzing graphic novels and comic art.
- [Comic vocabulary definitions and examples](#) From Read Write Think, this short article introduces text containers and provides examples of how to read comic panels using the different designs used in graphic novels and comics.
- [Comic Book Grammar and Tradition](#) From Blambot, a website that explains the aesthetic nature of comic book lettering.

## Magical Realism

*Frontera* is told using elements of Magical Realism. Magical realism first became popular in Latin American fiction during the late 1940s and 1950s. It combines the real and the fantastic, creating a new reality that includes magical or fantastical elements in seemingly realistic fiction.

In simpler terms, magical realism is a genre where magical or supernatural events occur in a realistic setting. It is a type of storytelling that blends details of the real world with elements of fantasy. For example, a character might have the ability to talk to animals or see ghosts in an otherwise ordinary world.

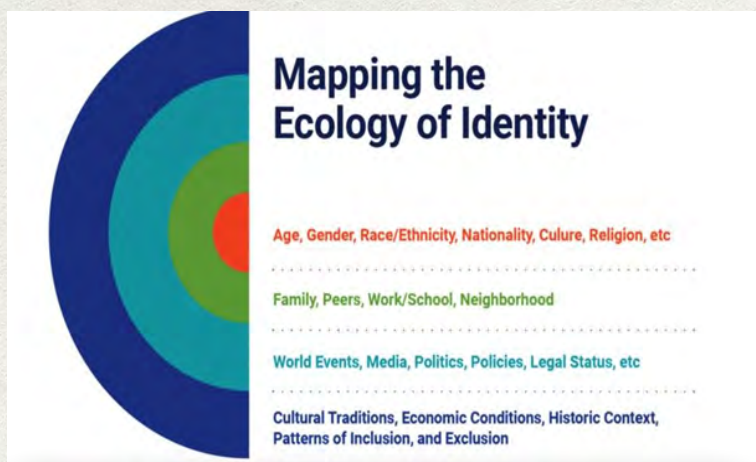
You might ask students to identify books, films, or stories they've encountered that include magical realism. Why might an author choose to blend real life with magical elements? How might it enhance the narrative?

## Reflecting on Identity

All of us develop our identities within a social and cultural context. To a certain extent, that context influences the opportunities we have in life and our ability to express ourselves as we wish. Psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner tried to capture the influence of the environment on people's identities in what he called the Ecological Theory of Identity. In it, he tried to identify the various forces that shape the way we develop our sense of self.

Identifying the way each layer of the ecological model relates to our identity is particularly helpful for exploring the ways that newcomers develop their identities in a new land because they, or their family members, have recently transitioned from one social and cultural context to another. Therefore, the relationship between their identities and their environment has changed. Helping to isolate those changes can help to clarify the way people navigate their lives in a new land.

Before beginning a discussion of the book, create an [ecological identity map](#) for yourself. Throughout the guide, we encourage students to create a similar map for the characters they encounter in the book.



## Proximity and Empathy

When we read, we are introduced to some stories that may feel familiar and other stories that may feel less familiar. Research suggests that reading helps to build empathy. What is empathy? Why is it important to develop empathy? How is empathy similar to and different from compassion?

Whether we share identity markers or someone's identity markers that are different than our own, we may or may not share in their lived experiences or personal truths. This means in any story we read we will have some gaps in understanding the actions, feelings, and thoughts of the characters. We may be unfamiliar with the setting and, therefore, the way it takes on its own character in a story. So, we need to make a plan to build proximity to a story, a character, or a setting in order to get as close to understanding as we can, to see their humanity—ultimately to develop empathy.

The word “proximate” means very near or close in space or time, immediately preceding or following something in order, place, occurrence, or degree of cause and effect. In other words, “proximate” refers to something that is closest in time, place, relationship, or degree to another thing. For example, if we say that the proximate cause of an event is something, we mean that it is the immediate cause that directly led to the event. Proximate is related to the word proximity, which means being near or close to something or someone.

What can you do to get “proximate” or get in “proximity” to a character in a book? Below are a few suggestions:

### *Paired Reading: Identity Web and Book/Summary/Blurb*

- Read the Blurb from the back of the book or the website together or on your own: place your ecological identity map next to the text of the blurb.
- What are your identity connections (where do you share identity markers with the characters introduced?) and differences/gaps (what identity markers are different/not shared?)
- Finish this frame: « I am entering this story as (a few identity markers...a student, a first-generation American, a grandchild of immigrants, etc.)

### *Create a plan to get more proximate.*

- After reading the blurb and before you read the story, what questions do you already have?
- What might you do to become a more informed reader before getting started (ex: Explore maps to locate the places named, research the author/creators)
- How can you “get proximate” to someone whose identity and experiences are different from your own?

## Language and Power

There is a strong connection between language and power in this book. One way to build proximity to a story is to become familiar with the language/vocabulary the author has intentionally chosen to include. We’ve begun a list of words that might feel unfamiliar to readers or deserve discussion below. Ask students to keep their own list along with working definitions.

|                 |              |                 |              |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| American        | Coyotes      | Magical Realism | Supernatural |
| Americans       | Sonora       | Undocumented    | Militia      |
| Bias            | Stigmatized  | Deportation     | El Jefe      |
| Deported        | Subconscious | Reservation/Rez |              |
| Frontera/border | Conjuring    | Distress        |              |

The book not only includes some words in Spanish, it also uses translated English words to make dialogue in Spanish accessible to readers who do not use Spanish. Why do you think he made that choice? As you read the text, consider how your experience would be different if the author chose not to translate the dialogue. If you don’t speak Spanish, what context clues might you use to understand what is going on in the story?

Imagine the book was a movie. Would you have the characters speaking in English or Spanish? Would you include subtitles? How do those choices impact the way you experience and relate to the story?

# READING FRONTERA

## IV

### Opportunities for Reflection and Inquiry

Using the model from the pre-reading section, create an identity map for Mateo. As you read on, keep adding to it to help you better understand him and the choices he makes.

Look closely at the images and text on the first four pages of the book and consider what questions they raise for readers. You might use [Project Zero's See-Feel-Think-Wonder Thinking Routine](#) to structure reflection.

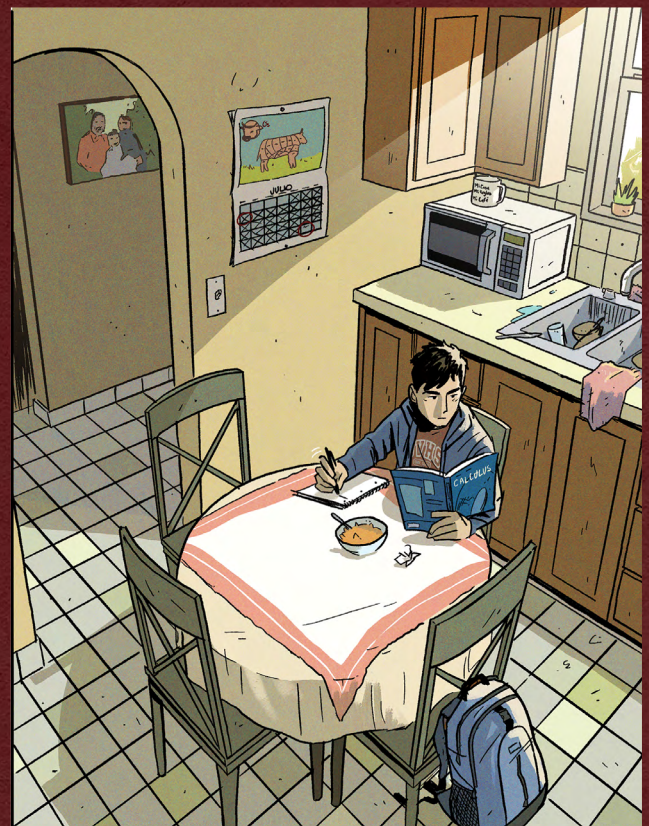
### In the Kitchen

The first place we see in the story is the kitchen of Mateo's family. When you study the page, what feels like a mirror or familiar to you, your life, or your experience? What feels like a window into something unfamiliar?

Based on what you see, where do you think the story begins? Or, what do you think the author wants us to know about the characters and the story right away? Note the details, the book he is reading, the items in the kitchen.

At what point did you realize that Mateo had to cross the U.S. border to go to school? Why do you think he, and his parents would be willing to take that risk? What does it say about their belief in the importance of education?

What do Mateo's parents want him to know before getting on the bus? What do they want him to understand?



### Connecting to the Text

You might ask students to reflect on and discuss the following questions:

- How is Mateo's journey to school similar to your journey to school? How is it different?
- What do you think is in his backpack? What is in yours?
- What real and "imagined" borders do you cross on the way to school? Are they physical? Psychological?
- If you could speak to Mateo and his parents before Mateo gets on the bus, what would you say? What questions might you ask them?

## The Bus to Sásabe and Sásabe Plaza

What are your predictions on why Mateo is going? In the pre-reading section of the guide, we asked, why do people leave their homes? This is a question we will return to throughout the guide. Record your thinking about that question as you read one.

- Make a list.
- Interrogate your list for bias. What are you assuming? What do you know for sure?
- Use the images to prove or disprove your theories.
- What do we know about how Mateo is thinking and feeling? How do we know that?
- Is the question, why do people leave their homes appropriate for this story? Is Mateo leaving his home? Returning home?

There are two real towns, one on each side of the border, with the same letters. S A S A B E. Sasabe, the town where Mateo arrives, is on the Mexican side of the border. Sásabe is in the state of Arizona in the United States. What do you know about Sasabe from the text? Make a list of questions you have about the town. You might use Google Maps street view to explore the town to answer these questions and raise new ones.

## Mateo's Expression

You might want to ask what do students notice about Mateo's expression in the novel, which can become a jumping point to discuss the idea of culture shock with them. Often when we find ourselves in a new place that feels different to us, we experience a bit of culture shock. Culture shock refers to the feelings of disorientation, confusion, and anxiety that people may experience when they encounter a new culture that is significantly different from their own. It can be caused by differences in language, customs, values, behaviors, and other cultural factors. It is a common experience for people who travel or move to a new country or region. Over time, people may adapt to the new culture and learn to appreciate its unique qualities.

## Meeting the Coyote and Crossing the Border

Suggested discussion questions for students:

- What images does the word coyote evoke? Where do those images come from? How would you know if those images are reliable? How would you know if they are stereotypes?
- What changes did we begin to see in Mateo as he enters the market and waited for the coyote?
- What is cognitive dissonance? How did Mateo experience cognitive dissonance when he met the coyote?
- What did Mateo's line of questioning to the coyote reveal about his feelings?
- How do you explain Mateo's response to the coyote? As your student's read on, encourage them to reflect on the consequences of his decision?
- How might their closeness in age play a part in Mateo's attitude towards the coyote?
- How do you explain Mateo's decision to leave the coyote behind? What do you think about his decision to cross the border on his own?
- What might you add to Mateo's identity map thus far in the story?

As you add to his web, consider his response to this situation and your own reaction to times in your life when things feel unplanned, unknown, or you can't control the outcomes.

## Talking about Borders

The questions below can be used in a think-pair-share or in a journal response. The last question, "How do borders impact our lives?" is a good essential question to use before, during, and after reading *Frontera*. Consider returning to it again and again.

List all the different kinds of borders around you and your community. What do they have in common? What are the differences between them? After comparing them, consider what is the purpose of borders. How do borders impact our lives?

As Mateo tries to navigate his way to Phoenix, consider what we learn about ourselves and our communities when we cross borders.

Almost immediately after crossing the border, Mateo is stopped by the U.S. Border Patrol. For much of the history of the United States, there was very little enforcement along the U.S. border with Mexico. In recent years, there has been an increase in enforcement at the border, including building barriers or walls, an increase in the number of law enforcement personnel, and surveillance, including drones.

- How do you explain the increased emphasis on enforcing the border?
- How does and how should the social, environmental, legal and political context impact the way the border is policed? What ethical, moral, and legal principles would you use to shape border policy?
- What is the Border Patrol's role at the border?

## Why did the Border Patrol Stop Mateo?

For a historical perspective on the U.S.-Mexican Border, share this [short radio podcast](#) from Retropod. In addition, [Talking and Teaching about Borders and Walls](#) offers additional suggestions for guiding a conversation about borders and border walls.

According to the American Immigration Council,

*Physical presence in the United States without proper authorization is a civil violation, rather than a criminal offense. This means that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) can place a person in removal (deportation) proceedings and can require payment of a fine, but the federal government cannot charge the person with a criminal offense unless they have previously been ordered deported and reentered in violation of that deportation order. Likewise, a person who enters the United States on a valid visa and stays longer than permitted may be put in removal proceedings but cannot face federal criminal charges based solely on this civil infraction. Those who enter or reenter the United States without permission, however, can face criminal charges.*

Yet, some of those who enter without authorization are eligible for and are seeking asylum. Asylum is a type of protection given to people who can prove that they cannot or do not want to go back to their home country due to persecution or a strong fear of persecution based on factors like race, religion, nationality, social group, or political beliefs. The right to seek asylum was established after World War II, and the U.S. incorporated it into immigration law in 1980.

In 1951, the United States signed on to the [Refugee Convention](#), which includes the right to asylum. That right was expanded in 1967. Despite the right to asylum, some asylum seekers

are charged with violating the law before they get a hearing. David Bier, from the Cato Institute, asks, ["Why is lining up in a single file line to wait to be checked and evaluated by the U.S. government illegal?"](#) He writes:

*This sounds like any day at [Ellis Island](#) before Congress closed legal immigration to most of the world. So what's the problem?*

*Under [8 U.S.C. § 1182\(a\)\(6\)\(A\)\(i\)](#), immigrants are "inadmissible" to the United States, and they are criminally liable under [8 U.S.C. § 1325\(a\)](#) if they enter the United States at a "place other than as designated" by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).*

Bier argues that if the head of the Department of Homeland Security "designate[d] the entire border as a valid place to cross, ...these violations of the law would immediately disappear (so long as the people crossing did not try also to evade detection). More narrowly, he could just designate many of the usual places that immigrants are already crossing to turn themselves in as places that are legal to cross so long as they wait to be processed."

Consider using the [Project Zero Connect-Extend-Challenge Thinking Routine](#) to lead a discussion of the text.

- Connect to the book and what you already know about migration.
- Extend your understanding of the book.
- Challenge your thinking about migration, law, and the border.

## Who is Guillermo?

You might ask students to create an identity map for him similar to the one they created for Mateo. Encourage them to keep adding to it as they learn more about him.

How does the appearance of Guillermo in the story impact the broader narrative? As a reader, does it matter to you whether Guillermo is real or a figment of Mateo's imagination? As a literary device, what function does he play?

Guillermo feels obligated to help Mateo navigate the unfamiliar desert. What do you use to help you navigate unfamiliar situations?

Why do you think Mateo doesn't tell Guillermo the truth about his identity?

Ask students to keep a list of their own questions as they read on. Have them use the text to try to answer the questions. There may be times when additional inquiry might be necessary. We will suggest sources in the guide that may be helpful.

## In the Desert

What do we learn about Mateo and Guillermo as they wander through the desert?

Some people along the border set up water stations like the one Mateo and Guillermo encounter. Other people have destroyed those very same water stations. In 2018, the *Daily Beat* reported:

*Two humanitarian groups claim in a new report that U.S. Border Patrol agents are repeatedly destroying or otherwise vandalizing water, food, and other supplies left for migrants in the Arizona desert in what they describe as a*

*“systemic feature of enforcement practices in the borderlands.” Volunteers with the Tucson-based No More Deaths and La Coalición de Derechos Humanos say such vandalism essentially condemns migrants in the area to die of thirst. “Through statistical analysis, video evidence, and personal experience, our team has uncovered a disturbing reality,” said the report. “The practice of destruction of and interference with aid is not the deviant behavior of a few rogue Border Patrol agents, it is a systemic feature of enforcement practices in the borderlands.*

In response to the charges, “Steve Passament, a border patrol spokesman in the Tucson sector, said the agency did not condone the destruction of or tampering with water or food caches. ‘We don’t want to see anyone out there die. We have to do our enforcement job and we do it as humanely as possible. We want to save lives.’”

Read more about the story in this report from the *Arizona Republic*:

**Border Patrol accused of vandalizing water aid stations in the desert**

How do you explain the choices made by volunteers and human rights organizations to leave water and food for migrants crossing the border? How do you explain the choices, including those by members of the border patrol, to dump that water?

In 2018, four humanitarian aid volunteers were found guilty on charges related to them leaving food and water in a protected wilderness for migrants crossing the border near Arizona. Learn about their story [here](#). As you read about their conviction, what questions does it raise? Do their convictions feel justified?

When Mateo passes out, the authors share scenes from his memory. What do we learn about his identity and his experiences? Students might return to the identity maps they started and add those details. What insights do those details offer into Mateo’s motivation for wanting to go to Phoenix for school?

In a few panels, we see a jaguar named El Jefe. El Jefe is based on a real jaguar that was separated from the rest of his pack as fencing along the U.S.-Mexican border was built. The name El Jefe means “the boss” in English.

We will see more of him later in the story. For now, share your thoughts on why you think the author included El Jefe in the story. What might he want readers to know, do, and understand?

El Jefe

LEAVE  
ME ALONE!

JUST TAKE  
IT EASY. I'M TRYING  
TO HELP YOU.

The jaguar known as “El Jefe” was given its name by Middle School students in Tucson, Arizona in 2015.

You can read more about El Jefe in the articles below:

[Tucson Students Announce ‘El Jefe’ as New Name for America’s Only Jaguar](#)

[‘El Jefe’ the jaguar, famed in US, photographed in Mexico](#)

[Return of ‘the boss’: El Jefe, a jaguar that roamed Arizona, has turned up alive in Mexico](#)

Look closely at the image on the previous page. In the book it takes up an entire page. You might encourage students to interpret the meaning the artist is trying to convey. Try this three step process to structure the activity.

1. Describe the image as objectively as possible. Encourage students to look for details.
2. Analyze the image. Explore the artists’ choices and begin to speculate about why they made those choices.
3. Interpret the image. Working for details, combine the description and the analysis into an overall interpretation of the image.

In one scene, Mateo learns that his parents brought him to the United States as a very young child. Ask students to try to step into his shoes and imagine how learning that might impact the way he saw himself, his parents, and his relationship with the community.

1. Why do you think the parents waited so long to tell Mateo about his immigration status and their family’s migration story? Were they protecting him? Could they have been protecting themselves from having to talk about their own migration experience?
2. Do you think Mateo’s reaction towards his parents is justified?
3. What role did he have in his family’s decision to migrate to the United States? Based on what you have read, what role did he have in his decision to make the migration journey we are following in the narrative?

**To help readers understand Mateo’s perspective, consider having them read Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas description of how he learned he was undocumented as a teenager. You can read his story in [this](#) New York Times column.**

Mateo’s parents are upset when he calls the family “illegals,” and asks, “Why couldn’t you just do things the right way?” What do you think he meant by the right way? How do his parents respond? What do you think of their response?

One of the most prominent movements for civic change in the last 20 years has been the dreamer movement. The actions of young undocumented activists influenced President Obama to create the DACA program in 2012. To introduce the stories of the DREAMers and the Dream 9, consider sharing this [digital interactive resource](#) from Google Arts and Culture and Latino USA. You might encourage students to research the impact of the DACA program as well as the legal challenges the program has faced.



What do you think a fair immigration policy would look like? What would you need to know to answer that question? Who should be involved in making immigration policy?

## Darcie and the Tohono O'odham Nation

How representative is Darcie's story? In 2013, Andrea Filzen wrote an article for the Pulitzer Center about responses to migration and stepped-up border enforcement among members of the Tohono O'odham Nation. You can access it [here](#).

In the Spring of 2023, a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation was accidentally shot by a member of the border patrol. His death has raised new questions about the tribe's relationship to migration, the border, and law enforcement. Learn more [here](#) in this short article from the *Native News Online* and [here](#) in this article from the *New York Times*.

As you read more about his experiences, consider what Mateo's story reveals about human nature. What insights into human behavior might we draw from his journey?

## Guillermo's Story

We learn that Guillermo and his father came to the United States as part of the Bracero Program. Bracero in Spanish means "manual laborer" or "one who works using his arms." Encourage students to research the program to help understand why Julio Anta included a Bracero in this 21st-century graphic novel. You might want to ask students to compare the stories of the Braceros to those of immigrants crossing the border from Latin America today using the Same-Different-Gain Project Zero thinking routine. How are the stories the same? How are they different? What might we gain by comparing them.

### *Resources on the Braceros*

The National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution organized an exhibition on the Bracero Program called "[Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964](#)"

### [Bracero History Archive](#)

[Los Braceros: Strong Arms to Aid the USA from PBS](#)

[Remembering Grandfather 'Papu,' A Former Bracero Worker With 'A Twinkle In His Eye'](#)

Guillermo explains to Mateo that he and his father were part of a large number of Mexican farm workers who were deported during the Truman administration and after World War II. In the 20th century, cycles of recruitment of Mexican workers alongside the deportation, and threats of deportation, of people of Mexican descent, including both U.S. citizens as well as people without documentation, have helped shape American, and, U.S. identity. Below is a partial timeline outlining the history of the U.S. Mexican Border.

# US Mexican Border Timeline

**1848:** [The Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty](#) established the division between Mexico and the United States, ceding 55% of Mexico's northern territories to the US and relinquishing its claims to Texas.

**1849:** The Mexican-United States Boundary Commission was established to survey and mark the border between the two countries.

**1855:** [The Chamizal Dispute and the Gadsden Purchase](#) led to the establishment of obelisk monuments separating the two countries.

**1882:** [The Chinese Exclusion Act](#) led to Chinese immigrants entering the US through Mexico, marking the first time that a type of US immigration was considered "illegal."

**1891-1894:** The International Boundary Commission resurveyed and remarked the border with new obelisks.

**1911:** The first-ever border fence was completed to prevent cattle from Mexico from entering the US due to widespread cattle tick disease.

**1917:** [The Immigration Act of 1917](#) imposed restrictions on immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

**1924:** [The Border Patrol](#) was created, leading to stricter enforcement of regulations along the border.

**1930s:** Hostility towards immigrants increased during the Depression, leading to laws imposing restrictions and penalties for hiring immigrants. [Over 1 million people were deported to Mexico](#), with an estimated 60% being US citizens of Mexican origin.

**1942:** The Bracero Program invited Mexican guest workers to the US to work on U.S. farms during World War II. The program continued until the early 1960s.

**1954:** [Operation "Wetback"](#) led to mass deportations of Mexicans who were accused of entering the US illegally. The term wetback is a derogatory slur with a history of being used against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Sources suggest the term originated in the 1920s.

**1965:** [The Hart-Celler Act](#) changed how immigration quotas were allocated in the US, bringing numerical limits to immigration

from Mexico and Latin America for the first time. The bill was priority of the President Johnson's administration.

**1982:** Mexico's economic crisis led to high unemployment, pushing more migrants to find work in the US. In the case of [Plyler v. Doe](#), the Supreme Court ruled that children who were undocumented had the right to public school education.

**1986:** With the support of President Reagan, [the Immigration Reform and Control Act](#) aimed to increase border security and establish penalties for employers who hired unauthorized immigrants while promising legal status and eventual citizenship to millions of unauthorized immigrants.

**1990s:** Operations Hold-the-Line, Gatekeeper, and Safeguard marked a shift in immigration policies towards preventing migrants from crossing the border. A border fence was constructed between San Diego and Tijuana. Many of these policies were initiated under the administration of President Clinton. As border enforcement grew, media reports featuring human smugglers and coyotes came to represent growing numbers of undocumented migrants. These images contributed in [stereotypes of all immigrants](#).

**2006:** The Secure Fence Act authorized the construction of additional fencing along the border.

**2015:** The US government completed a 652-mile-long border fence.

**2016:** [More Mexican immigrants returned to Mexico](#) than migrated to the US, and apprehensions of Mexicans at the US border were at a 40-year low. Despite declining numbers, Donald Trump's presidential campaign rallies often featured chants of "Build the Wall."

**2017-2020:** President Trump's administration built between 438 and 458 miles of what it called "border wall system" before President Biden stopped new construction on the wall. Of those, about [52 miles were new primary border barriers](#).

# Mateo and Guillermo

Invite students to consider the ways in which Mateo's story is the same as Guillermo's story, how it is different, and what might be gained from comparing them.

Guillermo remarks that he had never spoken about his relationship with Felipe until Mateo. You might ask students to discuss his silence. Why do they think he kept it a secret?

Mateo shares a secret as well. He explains that he had lied to Guillermo. He wasn't crossing the border for the first time. He was crossing the border in an attempt to return home. Ask students to consider why he didn't tell Mateo the truth at first.

When Re-Imagining Migration works with educators on study storytelling activities, we encourage students to reflect on the question, “How much should I share?” What are the reasons we don’t tell people the whole truth about our lives? Are there people in our lives who might be living a truth they cannot tell? Are there times when not sharing your whole truth is justified? What might be the consequences of sharing “immigration secrets”?

## El Jefe Returns

El Jefe, the jaguar returns, charging towards Mateo, who runs for safety. Mateo finds himself cornered, with nowhere else to go. Guillermo warns Mateo not to move, and then something happens. Work with students to describe, analyze, and interpret the images below to understand what transpires.



Engage students in a discussion: What does this moment add to the narrative? What might it symbolize? Ask students to reflect on the connections between El Jefe's experiences and Mateo's? How are their stories linked? What might be their bond?

Mateo and Guillermo spot an unauthorized militia that has rounded up migrants that they are holding at gunpoint. This scene is inspired by real-life events in which everyday people have taken it upon themselves to patrol the border and detain people hoping to cross into the United States. Members of these self-styled border militias have been charged with a range of crimes, from gun violations, impersonating police officers, kidnapping, and conspiracy to murder members of the border patrol as well as migrants.

Working from the text, how do you explain the actions of the militia members in Frontera? What would motivate them to round up people at gunpoint? How do the words and language they use help you answer what question?

The Department of Customs and Border Patrol “does not endorse or condone private groups or organizations taking enforcement measures into their own hands...Interference by civilians in law enforcement matters could have public safety and legal consequences for all parties involved.”

What do you think those consequences should be? What factors should be taken into account?

What could be alternative ways to secure the border without being inhumane? Is it necessary to “guard” our borders? From who exactly? What would an ethical border policy look like?

### *Militias and Citizen Patrols at the Border*

To learn more about armed groups on the border, you might share the following sources with students.

[Leader of U.S. border militia group pleads guilty to weapons charge](#)

[Are US border militia groups breaking the law?](#)

[Anti-immigrant militia member charged with impersonating US border patrol](#)

[History of vigilantes on the border](#)

Consider using the [Project Zero Connect-Extend-Challenge Thinking Routine](#) to lead a discussion on the sources. How do the sources above:

- Connect to the book and what you already know?
- Extend your understanding of the book?
- Challenge your thinking about migration, law, and the border?

## Returning Home

After helping Mateo cross the border, Guillermo begins to dissolve. Ask students what they think happened to him. Where did he go?

The last image in the book isn't of Mateo. It's of El Jefe. Encourage students to look closely at the image. How do they interpret the author and illustrator's choice to end the book that way? Consider using the [What Makes You Say That Project Zero Thinking Routine](#) to facilitate the discussion.

After reading this book, where is “Home” for Mateo? Is he home? In Spanish, there is an expression, “Ni de aquí, ni de allá.” Work with students to translate it and consider what it might mean and why people might use it. Have students who have not immigrated across a border feel that way?

Students can revisit their reflection on home from the beginning of this guide and challenge themselves to think about if their thinking has shifted. After reading this text and getting more proximate to Mateo's story, how might you revise your original thinking? (Or, how has your original definition of "home" changed or grown?)

If a place feels like "home" to us, how can we co-create a feeling of home for newcomers/new students/neighbors? Challenge students to think about what they can do to help students feel at home at their school and people feel at home in their community.

## Suggested Paired Texts

Consider pairing *Frontera* with other texts about the concept of home.

**"Home,"** a poem by Warsan Shire

**Home,** a comic book by Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk

**The House on Mango Street** by Sandra Cisneros

**The Grapes of Wrath** by John Steinbeck

**The Migration Series** by Jacob Lawrence

**If You Only Knew: Letters from an Immigrant Teacher** by Emily Frances

**Solito** by Javier Zamora (Excerpts or full text)

**Dreamers** by Yuyi Morales

**The Arrival** by Shawn Tan

**The Sound of One Immigrant Clapping** by Adrian Castro

**The Unwritten Letter from my Immigrant Parent** by Muna Abdulahi

# AFTER THE BOOK: TAKING ACTION

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## Guiding Questions for Reflection

How can we take action toward more inclusive and sustainable societies?

- What issues related to migration do we care about and why?
- What can we learn from individuals and groups who have addressed migration in the past?
- How might we use our voices and spheres of influence to create and sustain inclusive and welcoming communities?

Thinking about where to begin taking action on an issue as large as migration can be intimidating. Help students break the experience of migration down. You might use an iceberg diagram to make the different experiences, themes, and issues underneath Mateo's migration story visible.

As a class, spend some time with the chart and ask students to identify an issue that speaks to them and how it relates to life before migration, issues related to their journey, or life in the United States.

To guide that process, you might share the Mapping Opportunities for Action graphic below:



Once students have identified an area of interest. You might share this story of a creative civic action led by [15 Latina teenagers in Texas](#) as a model or you might inspire them to take inspiration from two short videos of people who are working to [welcome refugees in Europe](#) or from Joe Maddon, former World Series-winning Manager of the Chicago Cubs, and the [Hazelton Integration Project](#).

If you would prefer to move straight to having students design their own civic action projects, consider using these [Project Zero thinking routines](#) to structure their planning.

1. Start with [People, Systems, and Wedges](#) to identify the elements within the system they are seeking to change.
2. Help students consider their spheres of influence with [Circles of Action](#).
3. Moving from big goals to tactics can be hard. The [What Else Can I Do? And, Why?](#) thinking routine can be helpful when students seek to identify concrete tactics and actions they can take.
4. Before moving to action, encourage students to reflect on their plans with [Compass Points](#).