

## **They Call Me Güero: A Border Kid's Poems** by: **David Bowles** (Cinco Puntos Press, 2018)



### **Who?**

**Güero:** is a 12-year old border kid, who has earned the nickname of “güero” because of his pale complexion, freckles and red hair. Although some of his relatives say that they are jealous of his güero appearance, he receives unwanted attention from some of his classmates in school who judge and ridicule his paleness. Güero regularly crosses back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico with his family just as their ancestors did, according to his dad.

**At home,** Güero lives with his dad and his mom and has two siblings: **Arturo**, who is Güero’s 7-year old, little brother, and **Teresa**, Güero’s older sister. Growing up, Güero and his family had a dog named **Puchi**, who is remembered as the protector of the house and family. Throughout the text, Güero demonstrates the close bond that his family has through his close relationships with his siblings, cousins, parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. In fact, Güero admires his **abuela Mimi** because she taught Güero how to read. In addition, Güero shares the stories and wisdom that he gains from his abuela and also from his **uncle Joe**, who is known as the “family chronicler” because of his storytelling skills and his knowledge of Mexican American history. Another key component is religion; Güero shares his family’s religious beliefs and traditions and the presence of their priest, **Father Garcia** further solidifies this.

**In school,** Güero is known for being a nerd and an avid reader. Güero refers to his closest friends as **los Bobbys**, and together their friend group is called Güero y los Bobbys. Güero explains that Bobby Handy is half-white Chicano; Bobby Lee’s parents are from Seoul; and Bobby Delgado is dark-skinned and Dominican. **Andrés Palomares** is another classmate of Güero. He is a new student in Güero’s class that arrived from Honduras. Güero volunteers to help Andrés in class, and their developing friendship leads to Andrés confiding in Güero about the scary, risky, and traumatic journey he experienced in route to the U.S. Another important person that Güero goes to school with is **Joanna Padilla**, who becomes Güero’s crush and then girlfriend. Joanna stands out to Güero because she is smart and strong. She takes Judo classes after school and uses her fighting skills to defend Güero from a bully. In addition to his peers, Güero’s teachers, like **Ms. Wong** and **Mr. Gil**, also help Güero by providing him with space to foster his creativity.

### **Where? When?**

*They Call Me Güero* is a very contemporary read that is based along the border between Mexico and the U.S. The text primarily takes place in the U.S.; however, Mexico is very present through Güero’s family members’ traditions.

### **Key Themes:**

In *They Call Me Güero*, Bowles incorporates many themes relevant to Latinx youth in the U.S. Here are some of the key themes that can lend themselves to class discussions and connect with school curriculum.

- 1. Migration:** is a key theme that is a crucial part of Güero and his family’s identity. For Güero and his family, transnational migration between the U.S. and Mexico is key to their heritage and cultural identity. Migration also appears in the text through Andrés Palomares, who shares his scary story of migrating from Honduras.
- 2. Diversity:** is also very integral to Bowles’s book. While the majority of the book revolves around Latinx culture, the book is also inclusive of other cultures through Güero’s classmates and friends in addition to his teachers who Güero describes as “woke” with respect to their cultural awareness and assignments that promote diversity.
- 3. Cultural traditions:** In addition to promoting representation and diversity, Bowles also includes cultural traditions throughout Güero’s poems that make the text relevant to Latinxs. Cultural traditions include: tightknit familial structure, teaching and learning through oral traditions, religious beliefs, holiday traditions and celebrations, and more.

### **Other resources to facilitate the use of *They Call Me Güero*:**

Migration can be a tricky topic for teachers to approach in the classroom. The following is a list of resources that can help teachers prepare their students for the ideas and themes presented in *They Call Me Güero* and resources that can further extend these ideas related to identity and migration.

**Before planning lessons about migration**, read through this *Washington Post* article that features Dr. Jennifer Rich, an assistant professor at Rowan University's College of Education, who uses her research and teaching experience to guide teachers in how to approach "hard" conversation topics. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/06/25/how-to-have-the-hard-conversation-with-kids-about-migration-at-the-u-s-border/>

**Why do the people migrate?** Here are some videos that can help explain migration:

**"What is Migration?"—Oober Kids.** Here is a short (4 min!), animated video designed for young kids to explain migration. This video provides a nice, clear definition for migration and refers to animal migrations to discuss different motives for migrating. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmZfstQKa-U>

**"Migration Video for Primary School"—Caitlin Wallace.** This is another short video (under 6 min.) and it is very engaging as it features animated drawings as it walks viewers through what migration is and reasons for which people may want to migrate. It also addresses some of the effects and challenges of migration. This video would work well in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade and up classroom. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayBBYVpyUDI>

**"Human Migration: Definition, Reasons & Theories"—Christopher Muscato.** Muscato is a history teacher at the University of Northern Colorado and has created this lesson plan focused on human migration. It features a video and quiz. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/human-migration-definition-reasons-theories.html>

**"Immigration Song - Justin Bieber 'Sorry' Parody"—Ben Leddy.** This song uses the catchy Bieber rhythm to tell us about the reasons for human migration to the United States; it is a good way to teach the reasons and the different causes of the migrations to this country. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il24pCDGLog>



**To incorporate other forms of expressing the dual identity that Güero presents,** consider the following poems, song and art to provide your students with other ways to express their identities.

Here are **seven poems** about having a torn *ni de aquí, ni de allí* identity that could provide other perspectives to complement the perspectives presented in *They Call Me Güero*. These poems and the text could serve as examples for students to reference as they write poems about their identities: <https://mrnittle.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/latino-poems.pdf>

To accompany *They Call Me Güero* and the poems listed above, here is **a song** called "Soy México Americano" by Los Cenzontles, a Mexican American group based in California that sings about border identities. This song is in Spanish; however, the video features the lyrics translated to English. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WP14JNr7gqg>

**Frida Kahlo's** "Self Portrait Along the Border Between Mexico and the U.S." provides a nice visual representation of the different components to the Mexican identity and the U.S. American identity. There are many ways to incorporate this piece into the classroom. Refer to this question and answer page from Arizona State University's Chicano/a Space to learn more about Kahlo and her techniques used in this piece:

[http://mati.eas.asu.edu:8421/ChicanArte/html\\_pages/KahloIssOutl.html](http://mati.eas.asu.edu:8421/ChicanArte/html_pages/KahloIssOutl.html)

To

incorporate an in-depth analysis of Kahlo and her work, refer to this handy guide provided by the LAII that addresses many of Kahlo's iconic paintings and an extended annotated bibliography. The guide discusses this piece on page 14: <https://laili.unm.edu/info/k-12-educators/assets/documents/frida-kahlo/complete-guide.pdf> If you are interested in the books listed in the bibliography, submit your book set request to the LAII through this link: <https://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.wordpress.com/thematic-book-set-requests/>

Here is **a lesson plan** that was created by Cheryl Smith, a high school Spanish teacher in Des Moines, Iowa. Smith's plan explores the role borders have in our lives and includes links to relevant resources that are in English, Spanish and Spanglish, which makes this lesson plan adaptable to all classrooms.

[http://borderlandsnarratives.utep.edu/images/C\\_Smith\\_EPortfolio\\_NEH\\_UTEP.pdf](http://borderlandsnarratives.utep.edu/images/C_Smith_EPortfolio_NEH_UTEP.pdf)

