Tunnel Kids tells the story of "El Barrio Libre"—the free barrio—a ragtag gang of teenagers attempting to make a life for themselves on and under the streets of the US/Mexico border. The book provides students with an engaging narrative and moving photographic portraits of these young people as they—like all adolescents—attempt to find themselves and each other, to discover and invent identities, and to forge lasting relations. But the world in which all this transpires is the incredibly dangerous, fragile, and unpredictable one of colonia streets and alleys and the cavernous storm drainage tunnels that provide a subterranean passage between two towns, two countries, and two universes.

The story of the tunnel kids of Barrio Libre is a riveting one. Students will find themselves empathizing with age-mates, and through them finding a way to understand a host of critical political, economic, social, and cultural issues that so characterize life on the border and emerge with power and clarity through the real lives depicted in this book. In the course of their encounter with El Boston, La Flor, and their friends, students will confront some of the central issues of anthropology, sociology, geography, and border studies.

Below are some of these issues, and suggested ways to pursue them in class discussion or written assignments:

I. Methods/ The possibilities and limitations of ethnographic knowledge. Photography as process and product

In the first chapter, one of the kids, "El Boston", collaborates with the author by interviewing his friends for a video camera. "I'll be the reporter!" he offers, and proceeds to compose a list of fascinating questions that probe their lives on and under the streets and their identity as gang members. El Boston's questions also shape the relationship of the author with his subjects.

At the same time, the photographer begins her own "conversation" with the kids—teaching photography, taking their pictures, and providing photographs for home and shelter. Much is revealed through that continuing encounter as well.

1) What are the advantages and disadvantages of a loose ethnographic method as compared to more controlled contexts and structured interviews? Think about the information revealed at this point in the research process, but also about the relationship between the author and El Boston and how that will influence further discoveries. What sort of knowledge is involved in this sort of exchange and how does it compare to other kinds?

2) Photography as both process and product form a critical part of the book. What do you learn about the kids from their responses to both?
3) How can the Boston's questions be interpreted as a guide to the important cultural issues and categories of Barrio Libre? (For example, think about the question: "Have you always dressed as a 'cholo'?"

4) What do the questions reveal about the emotional state of El Boston? Which questions seem to indicate ambivalence? Think about the relation between psychology and anthropology/sociology in the interpretation of these questions.

5) How do you interpret the kids' responses to Boston's questions?

II. The Political Ecology of the Border-Barrio Libre in context

1) How do international power relations—political, economic, and cultural—create border niches?

2) How do market forces encourage both legal and illegal movements across the border and the uneven responses of states to these forces?

3) How might you pursue ethnographic studies of the various niches and groups created by and responding to these conditions?

III. Adaptation to marginal niches: the constructed/performed world of Barrio Libre

1) How did the political ecology of the border region create a niche for the tunnel kids?

2) The author suggests a comparison of Barrio Libre with hunter/gatherers. Think through the comparison by a detailed examination of the environmental conditions of their niche (resources, dangers, predictability, etc.) and the ways in which their social structure and cultural forms can be interpreted as responses to those conditions.

3) Read descriptions/analyses of gangs in very different contexts and compare with Barrio Libre. How many of the differences or similarities can be explained by theories of social/cultural ecology?

IV. Space, Place, and Identity

1) What roles do space and place play—both on the ground and in the imagination—in the lives of individual kids, and in the collective identity of Barrio Libre?

2) How are places used in the loose and shifting social structure of Barrio Libre?

3) What is the special status of the tunnel as a place, and as a space of movement?

V. The invention of culture in a globalized imagination
1) Where do the elements of Barrio Libre culture come from? How do the kids find out about these forms and appropriate them?

2) To what extent would you say that Barrio Libre has its own culture? What are the problems and possibilities inherent in that term, does it help us understand the kids' lives or is the notion of culture better abandoned? If so, with what would you replace it?

3) What role does performance play in Barrio Libre culture? Discuss the relation between the fragility of their world and the importance of performance.

VI. Representation: Words/Images

1) Discuss the choices the author has made in representing the kids. To what extent are the kids' voices heard?

2) Discuss the choices made by the photographer. What are the effects of including only portraits? What relation do the photos bear to the text?

3) Compare this book as "representation" to other ethnographies or other accounts/depictions of local lives.