

## Finding Inspiration from Pre-Columbian Past

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*Exempla iacerent in tenebris omnia, nisi litterarum lumen accederet.*  
Todos los ejemplos yacerían en las tinieblas, si la luz de la literatura no se les acercara.

~ CÍCERÓN

Y tomo la palabra:  
ésta, con la que  
tallaste los cerros de signos;  
ésta con la que enjaulaste  
los gorjeos en jícaras;  
ésta con la que amarraste a las piedras  
nuestra historia,  
Abuelo viejo.

~ GASPAR PEDRO GONZÁLEZ-(Mayan writer)

### INTRODUCTION

Since I was a child, I have always had a special admiration and deep respect for pre-Columbian cultures. At home, both of my parents made me aware of the importance and the value of our indigenous heritage, and the pride I should have of it. Vividly, I still remember how, during my first lesson in elementary school about myths and legends of the *Chibcha Nation* (Pre-Columbian people from the central region of Colombia), I was introduced to the wonderful world of mythical figures such as *Chiminigagua* (the creator), *Bachué* and her son (first human couple), *Fuzachogua* (mother earth), *Mohán* (god of rivers and creeks), *Bochica* (benevolent and wise god), *Chibchacum* (the “Atlas” for the Chibchas), among many others, and how my parents reinforced this new knowledge at home.

My mother, as a painter, showed me the colorful and fantastic world of pre-Columbian icons and helped me with the illustrations for my notebooks and stories. My father took the whole family to places cited in the legends I had learned about in school: el *Salto de Tequendama*, a beautiful waterfall created for *Bochica* to evacuate the waters of the flooded valley of Bacatá—today Bogotá, the Lake of *Tunza*, where *Bachué* and her son were seen for the last time before becoming snakes, or the beautiful Lake of *Guatavita*, where the ritual of gold offerings to the gods later was the origin of the famous “*El Dorado*” Legend.

Under this “spell,” the usual fantasy world of a seven-year old, instead of being full of far away kingdoms, princes, and princesses, was occupied by all these wonderful stories and characters. Later, during my teen years, the reading of the stories of indigenous heroic figures such as *La Cacica Gaitana*, *Calarcá*, *Nutibara*, and the trips to places such as the well-known *Gold Museum of Bogotá* and *San Agustín*, an astonishing archeological site, increased my

intellectual curiosity to know more about my pre-Columbian roots, and helped to define my national and ethnical identity.

Today, I still regard with surprise and nostalgia the wonders of the pre-Columbian cultures. Thanks to the seminar “Latin America before the Spanish: Pre-Columbian Art, History and Culture” led by Dr. Rex Koontz, I wanted to learn more now about Mesoamerican cultures, which has opened the doors to new and exciting directions. One of them has been the discovery of the pre-Columbian literature and the influenced of pre-Columbian languages and literature in the Spanish literature, the Spanish language, and other languages, and this is precisely the topic of my curriculum unit.

## **UNIT RELEVANCE FOR THE STUDENTS**

The Texas state curriculum standards classify Spanish as a foreign language class. This may reflect reality for many, but at Sharpstown Middle School, where four out of the six Spanish classes are for native speakers, mostly immigrants, and the other two have a significant percentage of heritage speakers, students of Hispanic descent, this is not the case.

Like most of my students, I am an immigrant from Latin America, and also like them, I came from a country where the pre-Columbian heritage strongly influences almost every aspect of life: from basic things like our food and our language to our deeper held beliefs and the way we experience and see the world. But even though these strong traces of our pre-Columbian ancestries form a part of our daily lives, are we really aware of all their contributions to the world? Do my students truly know their wonderful roots and heritage? Would it not be an unforgettable experience to provide them with the tools to rediscover this heritage from a primary source? Yes, it would be very exciting to expose students to the “writing” of two of the main pre-Columbian cultures and engage them intellectually and give them the opportunity to understand their heritage.

Native speaker students, the majority immigrants who are in the process of adapting to a new country and culture, will show interest in the subject because they will recognize important aspects of their own culture and the commonalties they share with others. This will not just give them a positive attitude about themselves, but it will also empower them as they both incorporate aspects of American culture into their own lives and learn how their own culture contributes to mainstream America. The main goal of my unit is to provide students with an experience that stimulates their creativity to create and write literary pieces inspired by pre-Columbian cultures.

Students learning Spanish as a foreign language will have the wonderful opportunity to discover that Spanish culture in Latin America is not completely different from their own because to some extent we also have a pre-Columbian heritage. The knowledge acquired through this unit will motivate them to keep looking ahead and moving forward in their learning process as they realize that this is also an aspect of their own history.

## **UNIT BACKGROUND AND TOPIC EXPLANATION**

The general topic of the unit is to show students the pre-Columbian roots of the Spanish language and pre-Columbian themes in its literature. The first lessons of the unit are designed to be taught in classes with regular Spanish students (students of Spanish as a Second Language) and for native speakers, and the last part of is an extension for the enrichment of literature and language arts skills in the native speaker’s class setting.

For this reason the unit shows literary pieces following a chronological progression. The first text is *The Codex Nuttall*, followed by the *Popol Vuh*. At this point, since only fragments of the works cited before will be used, the unit focuses on, along with the reading, the identification of some fundamental elements in the Mixteca and Mayan cultures such as the calendar, the cacao, the maize, and the ball game. Students will research them. I decided to select these elements

since they are, among many others, some of the most important aspects of the pre-Columbian cultures and some of the most recognizable legacies that have impacted the modern world in terms of science, linguistics, nutrition, etc.

After this point, the unit has the expansion lessons for native speakers. Following the initial readings, the unit ends with a contemporary piece written by a Latin American writer. These readings are selected according with the grade level. Students on 6<sup>th</sup> grade will read Miguel Ángel Asturias “Leyenda del Tesoro del Lugar Florido,” students on 7<sup>th</sup> grade will read Carlos Fuentes “Chac-Mool,” and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students will read Julio Cortázar, “La Noche Boca Arriba.”

### **The Pre-Columbia/Mesoamerican Writing and Literature up to Today**

The first manifestation of this literary legacy is found in the paintings and monuments where their authors gave the first recount of their cosmovision, beliefs, etc. Almost parallel to this the painters and scribes produced the first books using deerskin or paper made of *ficus* bark, the *amate*. Some of them survive and today; they are known as “*códices*” or “*codex*.” In these books were register important personalities, dates, events as well as the knowledge about religion, astronomy, traditions, and ceremonies.

By the time of the arrival of the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, many different languages were in Mesoamerica daily. Most of the Mesoamerican cultures had a system of writing: the Mayan speakers with a phonetic syllabary script, and Zoquean speakers, Zapotec speakers, Mixtec speakers, Nahuatl speakers whose writing systems have in common the use of logograms or signs that represent a whole word, concept or idea. These logograms may refer to a direct depiction (a picture of a jaguar for the day jaguar), a depiction of an associated concept (the face of Tlaloc—god of rain—to represent rain) or by abstract signs.

According to Louise M. Burkhart, associate professor in the University at Albany, State University of New York, “These principles may suffice to account for all Pre-Hispanic Aztec and Mixtec spellings. These spellings, which serve within complex systems of narrative pictographic iconography (picture writing), named gods, people, and places whose depictions they accompanied, as well as the dates in the ritual calendar of the events that were shown” (Carmack 397). She also adds, “It seems unlikely that the Aztec and Mixtec systems were ever meant to represent spoken utterances. What is referred to us as a ‘writing’ in these representational systems was a means to identify gods, peoples...Language was a resource for this task: The roots in place names, for example, were enough to identify a place for someone who knew these names...In other words, these people made effective *use* of language to help them convey important information; precise replication of the stream of speech was not their goal” (Carmack 398). In addition to this, this particular type of literature allowed them to transmit and pass from generation to generation, valuable information for their communities.

In spite of the massive destruction of pre-Columbian books and heritage during the conquest and colonial times, some of them were able to survive thanks to the work of friars working along with indigenous, often of noble origin, were able to recuperate some of the pre-Columbian literary tradition. These pieces kept the culture of the native people but most of them were translated and written in Spanish. During the following centuries before the independence of the Spanish colonies, there was a big literary production in vernacular languages and in Spanish, written by indigenous people or its descendants that were inspired by their pre-Hispanic origin.

During the decades after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, different types of ethnology and linguistic studies in some communities of the country help to bring back to the surface memories, chants, poetry and narrations. In the specific case of *Náhuatl*, Ángel M. Garibay wrote and published the very first compilation of literary pieces in this language: *Historia de la Literatura*

*Náhuatl*, in 1954. In reference to the Mayan from Yucatan, Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, published one of the most valuable pieces of pre-Columbian literature: *El Libro de los Libros de Chilam Balam*, in 1948. Adrián Recino prepared, in 1946, a new translation of the *Popol Vuh* and rescued some legends and stories of the Mayan-Quiché from Guatemala. In the Oaxaca region, in the south of Mexico, the detailed and extensive work of Alonso Caso helped to rediscover the value and meaning of some pre-Hispanic and colonial codex.

Recently the study of these and other texts has increased. In some elementary and high schools, the study of texts like the *Popol Vuh*, the *Náhuatl* poetry, and the legends inspire in pre-Columbian cultures are part of the curriculum in many Latin American countries. This reborn of the Indigenous literary tradition explains also why some of the most important contemporary Hispanic writers like Miguel Ángel Asturias from Guatemala; Juan Rulfo, Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Carlos Fuentes, and Octavio Paz from Mexico, among many others have found inspiration for many of his works in their pre-Columbian roots.

Today, at least, fifty of those linguistic families are still alive and are spoken by more than ten million people. These languages have been carrying through the last five centuries different ways of literary manifestations: songs, prayers, narrative, speeches, poetry, and history chronicles. *Náhuatl* that during the pre-Hispanic times was the dominant language (*lingua franca*) is currently the first language of more than a million of people living in sixteen different states of Mexico and some region of El Salvador. It is also the one that possesses the richest literary heritage.

Other languages equally important are those from the Mayan linguistic group that are currently spoken in the south of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and some regions in Honduras. Today the native speakers of any variety of the Mayan linguistic group can reach more than four million people. They are, as well, keepers and inspiration of remarkable literary creations and as consequence of the immigration flow to the United States, some of these speakers are now in our classrooms.

### **The Mixtecs**

The western and northern parts of Oaxaca, Mexico, were once the lands of “multiple kingdoms or polities” (Coe 176) of the Mixtec people. An independent lord led every single one of these kingdoms. Due to the geographic and weather conditions the land for cultivation was scarce “there was a fierce competition for it along the borders between kingdoms, and warfare was endemic” (Coe 176).

Most of the information known today about the Mixtecs was gathered from a first hand source: the pre-Columbian codices. Some of the most important of these historic and ritual books are the Codex Nuttall, the Codex Borgia, the Codex Vienna, the Codex Bodley, and the Codex Colombino. These codices relate the history and traditions of the Mixtecs, from its religion, calendar, rituals and origins to the establishment of its powerful dynasties and kingdoms through different type of military and political confrontations, or marriage agreements among royal houses or state marriage. “By approximately AD 1350 the Mixtecs began to infiltrate even the Valley of Oaxaca by the usual method of the state marriage, Mixtec royal brides insisting on bringing their own retinues to the Zapotec court. By the time the Spaniards arrived, practically all Zapotec sites were occupied by the Mixtecs” (Coe 179). They were never conquered by the Aztec Empire.

### **The Codex Nuttall**

One of the Mixtec codices, the Codex Nuttall, is a beautiful example of not just the pre-Columbian literature and writing but also, as is annotated by Arthur Miller in his introductory comment to the Dover Edition of *The Codex Nuttall*, “is the best-known and the most thoroughly

understood pre-conquest Mesoamerican manuscript in existence today” (xvii). Originally written in a screen fold format and on deerskin pages, the Codex Nuttall is read from right to left in “boustrophedon pattern”, (an ancient method of writing in which the lines are inscribed alternately from right to left and from left to right), and contains in its first part the genealogical history of some of the most important Mixteca rulers and nobility. Its second part narrates the story of the epic Mixtec hero and ruler Lord Eight Deer, who lived from 1011 A.D. to 1063 A.D. Its presentational mode allows its “readers” to identify and recognize people, animals, costumes, ornaments and architecture. Miller suggests, “Ideas and concepts rather than the natural world are given visual form” (xi).

According to the historian and curator of the Art Museum at Princeton University, John Pohl, these types of books or codices were created to be displayed like “storyboards.” “A poet recited the text from the codex to musical accompaniment, while actors performed parts of the saga in costume. The setting of these literary and theatrical presentations was the royal feast” (*Mesoamerica*). In ancient America, writing systems were not created to produce a word to word reproduction of a story but instead to give a guideline for their oral communication of the story. Louise M. Burkhart, associate professor in the University at Albany, State University of New York, explains that “the written form was intended to be the basis for an oral performance: There were no texts whose principal function was to be contemplated in silence and solitude” (Carmac 407)...”Speaking was a form of verbal art, and writing was a form of visual art” (Carmac 408).

The ancient history of the Codex Nuttall is unknown and for this reason its first appearance was in the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence in 1859. “It has been suggested that the Codex Nuttall may have formed part of the famous ‘Moctezuma Treasure’ which was sent by Cortés to Charles V in 1519” (Miller x). From Florence the manuscript was sent to Rome to be examined by Catholic authorities. They did not really appreciate the value of this literary piece and declare that “...the document was probably intended for the amusement of children but was so foolish that it could only bore them” (Nuttall 2; Miller x). Today the Codex Nuttall is kept in the Museum of Mankind in London.

Alonso Caso was the first one to provide clues of how to read the Codex Nuttall. He also placed its stories, events and narration into a real historic and geographic context. Places mentioned in the codex like Tilantongo, important center of the Mixtec power, still exist today in Oaxaca. *The Codex Nuttall*’s main character, Lord Eight Deer “Jaguar Claw,” “was the second ruler of the second dynasty of Tilantongo. He lived from 1011 A.D. to 1063 A.D.” (Miller xv) and his life is detailed in this codex from his birth date to the highest point as a ruler, priest and warrior. Specific dates are also given using the Mesoamerican calendar of 260 days that Caso was also able to equate with dates in the Gregorian calendar.

### **The Maya-Quiche**

The Maya-Quiche dominated the highlands of western Guatemala before the Spanish conquest in 1524. Their present population is over a half a million and spread in the agricultural villages in the modern Guatemalan states of Quiché, Totonicapán, and Quetzaltenango.

In the *Popol Vuh*, sacred book of the Maya-Quiché, these people came to be dominated by the Cavec-Quiché lineage between the years AD 900-1200. At the same time they claimed to be descendants of Toltecs from which they have a great cultural and religious influence. During this period, they experienced a rich exchange with other cultures outside their borders, mainly from Náhuatl speakers.

“Carmack suggests that the founders of the Quiché ruling lineages arrived in Guatemala about the time of Chichen Itza’s collapse, which Yucatec Maya histories date around AD 1221” (Christenson 29). It is for this reason that many of these groups established communities and

authorities based on the old Mexican influence symbols of power. “It is possible that elements of what would become the ruling Cavec-Quiché lineage and relates highland Maya progenitors were part of this human wave” (Christenson 29).

At the moment of their establishment, the Quiche people were a very complex and linguistically diverse group composed of native highland Maya, Mexicanized clans from the Pacific coast, and immigrants (the Cavec) from the Maya lowlands (Chichen Itza). The arrival of the Spanish conquest in the sixteen-century disrupted abruptly the Maya-Quiché rule. Pedro de Alvarado, who was sent by Hernan Cortés to conquer the lands in the south, entered without resistant on March 7, 1524, to the Quiché capital of Cumarcah or Utatlán.

During the early Colonial time the population of Guatemala declined 85% as consequence of war, forced labor, and disease. Later, in 1534, Christianity was formally established in Guatemala. Priests were sent to different areas of the country with the mission to destroy any traces of idolatry or paganism. “Because Cumarcah had been all but destroyed during the war, the remnants of its population were moved to a new settlement nearby in 1555, which the Spanish authorities called Santa Cruz del Quiché” (Christenson 32).

### **The Popol Vuh**

The *Popol Vuh* or “Book of Counsel” is considered the most important work in the pre-Columbian literature. Its preamble identifies the city of Tulan, located on the lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula, as the source of these writing, and the Quiché lords held this book with reverence and consulted it often in times of distress.

The literary tradition of the Maya lowlands date back “to at least AD200, centered on a sophisticated hieroglyphic script” (Christianson 32), and the authors of the *Popol Vuh* made clear that they based their writing in the writing of the lowlands. However this is difficult to prove since the pre-Columbian version of the *Popol Vuh* was lost, probably during the conquest and colonial periods.

The authors of the *Popol Vuh* are anonymous and they refer to themselves as “we,” which indicates that its recuperation was a work of compiling different stories from different sources in Colonial times and under commission:

The *Popol Vuh* was likely composed in its present form at Santa Cruz del Quiché, a new city founded by the Spanish conquerors near the ruins of Cumarcah/ Utatlán, the ancient capital of the Quichés. The majority of its inhabitants were members of the old ruling classes.... The authors of the text were most likely members of the Quiché nobility who may have retained some pre-Columbian manuscripts from the royal archives that survived the Conquest. (Christianson 36)

The work was finished between the years 1554 and 1558. Years later, between 1701 and 1704, it was translated into Spanish by Fray Francisco Ximénez, who had a great interest and admiration for the writing Maya systems, the Quiché history, religion, and its literary tradition.

The text tells the history of the creation of the world and the origin and history of the Maya-Quiché people. The book is divided in three parts. Part one is a description of the creation and origin of the human kind, which after many unsuccessful attempts was finally made of maize, the plant that forms the base of the diet and an important element in the Mesoamerican cultures. The second part narrates the adventures of the semi-gods twin brothers Huanhpú and Ixbalanqué that have to face under different circumstances the Lords of Xibalbay. Through these confrontations, the twins discover their divine origin and their skills playing the sacred rubber ball game. The third part gives details about the genealogy of the different kings and nobles in the Maya-Quiché nation.

This literary piece has an incalculable value, since it shows a very wide range of Maya knowledge related to diverse aspects of the culture: religion, mythology, culture, customs, politics, and social life.

## **LATIN AMERICAN WRITERS TODAY**

### **Miguel Ángel Asturias - *Leyenda del Tesoro del Lugar Florido* from *Leyendas de Guatemala***

Miguel Ángel Asturias (Guatemala 1899-1974) was the first contemporary writer who combined Mayan literature pieces with his modern narrative. In many of his works, especially his most famous novel: *Hombres de Maíz* (1949). There is not doubt of the strong influence of the *Popol Vuh* and the indigenous legacy of the Mayan culture had on the content of this novel.

However, *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930), written by Asturias when he was living in Paris and working on a translation of the *Popol Vuh* to French, was the first one of his works to reflected this Pre-Columbian influence, not just for the episodic structure of the book, but also for its topics. The tale “*Leyenda del Tesoro del Lugar Florido*” is one of the stories that are part of this book.

The story takes place around the Lake Atitlán in Guatemala which is surrounded by three volcanoes. A Mayan legend talks about a treasure buried under one of these volcanoes, and Asturias used this as the base plot for his story, and mixed these events with some historical facts about the conquest of Guatemala by Pedro de Alvarado on 1523.

At the same time, Asturias included some important anthropological and ethnographic aspects of the Mayan culture in his writing such as: the life of a Mayan village next to the lake; the floating markets where cacao beans were used as currency; and how the people exchange merchandise such as *huipiles* (piece of clothing used by Mayan women); coconuts; chilies; maize; warriors’ masks; and especially different types of exotic, colorful, and beautiful birds.

### **Carlos Fuentes - *Chac-Mool***

The Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes (b.1928), has focused some of his writing in the Hispanic roots and its complex Cosmvision, a result of the European and indigenous heritage that has mixed in this region of the world. That is why the topics inspired on the Pre-Columbian cultures are recurrent. Works such as *El Naranjo* and the short story “*Chac-Mool*” are a good example of this characteristic of his work.

The short story was written in 1952, and has its main inspiration in an article from a Mexican newspaper note that talked about a huge thunderstorm and severe weather that affected not just the Gulf of Mexico, but also the Canal de La Mancha. During those same days, a statue of Chac-Mool, god of the rain for the Mayas, was transported on ship to a Mexican Art exposition in Paris. Chac-Mool was one of the most important deities, because the rain was essential to the cultivation of maize, the main food source of the Mayan population.

The story takes place in different cities: Mexico D.F., Acapulco and Tlaxcala. It narrates the mysterious death of Filiberto, a collector of Pre-Columbian artifacts and how after his decease one of his friends through the reading of Filiberto’s diary found connections between his death and his last acquisition: a replica of Chac-Mool.

### **Julio Cortázar - *La Noche Boca Arriba***

The Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar, (1914-1984), used in his works an every day’s language to narrate actions and events difficult to believe. Usually his readers are always confused, and surprised by his unexpected endings and twists.

“*La Noche Boca Arriba*” has as one of its scenarios, the battle-field of a *Guerra Florida*, a ceremonial war practiced by some Mesoamerican groups (Aztecs, Mayans, etc) in which warriors

fought to capture one another for religious human sacrifice. The sacrifice, generally took place at the top of a pyramid where the victim was placed facing up, so priests could more easily remove the heart.

Cortázar developed the plot of this short story in two different planes: the modern world known by the reader in the big city with streets, motorcycles, hospital, ambulance, etc., and another unknown world during Pre-Columbian times in the middle of the *Guerra Florida*. Even though they seem to be two completely opposite worlds, Cortázar was able to establish a parallelism through different elements between these two worlds.

At the end of the story, the reader finds out a big surprise that calls into question his or her impression about what is the real world and what is a dream.

## TEACHING THE UNIT

### Texas Essential Knowledge Objectives (TEKS)/TAKS for Languages Other Than English (LOTE)

In the Spanish as Second Language class, the students' contact with different types of text, especially the Codex Nuttall written in a pictographic way will allow them to “understands, interprets, and analyzes the significance of visual images, messages and meanings” (TEA 7-12-D). Also, the fact that these text selections (*The Codex Nuttall* and the *Popol Vuh*) originated in cultures different to their own will be a good opportunity to “gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures”(8-14-A) and “to make connections with other subject areas (Social Studies) and to acquire information” (8-13-B). Finally the unit will provide the students with opportunities to perform critical thinking when comparing their own language and culture to another.

Through this unit students will “listen, speak, and read to gain and share knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of cultures” (8-14-A). The reading and interpretation of the different text selection will provide them with the opportunity to “use a variety of word recognition strategies” (8-6-A) and the acquisition of “an extensive vocabulary through reading and systematic word study” (8-9-E). Since the unit planned for native speakers will show a selection of texts in a chronological progression from the pre-Columbian period up to today, the students will require “using a variety of strategies to comprehend a wide range of texts of increasing levels of difficulty” (8-9-C). By the end of the unit, critical thinking will be required for the elaboration of their own texts, which implies the students' selection and use of writing processes for self-initiated writing, learning and research.

The seminar provided me with the tools necessary to decipher and read the epic story of Lord Eight Deer in the *Codex Nuttall* that reveals the Mixtec culture as a whole including their precise and amazing calendar, traditions, mythology, religious beliefs, daily life, etc. Even more importantly, I have been able to recognize in these story elements still alive and vibrant in modern Latin American culture.

Based on the linguistic principle that a language is the visualization of a particular community or culture, this curriculum unit will start with a presentation and guided teamwork oriented towards the decoding of Mixteca writing. For this purpose students will use a Manual of how to read the *Codex Nuttall* (see Appendix) created by a group of teachers. Concurrently, students will be exposed to cultural and historical information about the Mixteca from materials from the MFA (Houston Museum of Fine Arts), Internet sources, videos, and power point presentations.

By decoding ancient writings and discovering the origin of words still used in their language, students will move to the reading of contemporary versions of pre-Columbian literature, such as the *Popol Vuh* and other legends and myths. With the previous knowledge acquired at the end of



the first stage of the unit, it will be easier for them to understand the real value of these texts and the important role they played in the lives of Mesoamerican people and their descendants alive today. These pre-Columbian works influenced the production of modern writers and personalities like Rigoberta Menchú, Carlos Fuentes, Miguel Angel Asturias, Julio Cortázar, and Octavio Paz.

This unit will provide a wonderful opportunity for students to learn, read, discuss, write, and rediscover a valuable part of their heritage. This will then provide them with the opportunity create and even re-create some of the pre-Columbian literary pieces seen in class.

## LESSONS

### Lesson 1: (For LOTE and Native Speakers/ESL Classes)

The first lesson of my unit will be a small introduction to Pre-Columbian cultures and the first steps for reading the *Codex Nuttall*. Working in small groups (2 or 3 per group), students will research short, guided questions about the most important Mesoamerican cultures, focusing especially in the Mixtec culture. Students may do this research using the FAMSI or Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerica Studies website. The objective of this lesson is to the students the opportunity to acquire prior knowledge on the topic and that will be necessary for the development of the unit.

After answering their guided questions, students will introduce to the *Codex Nuttall*. A manual of how to read the codex (see Appendix I) will be used to help the students with the reading process. The sections of “How to read it” and “The Calendar” from the manual are going to be covered. Using them, students will have to look for dates and some of the main characters in the Codex, identify them and complete a handout given by the teacher.

Once the students have mastered the calendar, they may find out their date and name in the Mesoamerican calendar using as source the web site <http://www.azteccalendar.com>. Then they will prepare a brief presentation to the class with their Mixtec name and the introduction of one of the characters.

#### *For Native and Heritage Speakers:*

Working in groups, students will be decoding the whole story Lord Eight Deer in *The Codex Nuttall*. At the same time they, will be learning about more aspects and customs of the Mixtec culture. Students will get bilingual information and activities.

Keeping in mind the principal goal of the Mesoamerican writing systems — created to be read aloud— students may perform as orators, give themselves names and read to their audience (class) a portion of the story, according to their language acquisition level. LOTE students may describe a character physical characteristics, personality traits, clothing, colors, etc., while the native speakers may give more complex narrations.

### Lesson 2: (For LOTE and Native Speakers/ESL Classes)

Students will be introduced to the *Popol Vuh*. Only the creation of the mankind myth (the men of maize) and some chapters of the second part that tells the adventures of the semi-gods twin brothers Huanhpú and Ixbalanqué will be used: chapters V and VI. Like the first lesson the material will be bilingual.

As pre-reading activity, students will share the creation stories that they may know: Biblical account, Greek or Roman mythology, etc. The same can be done with mythical stories of twins in different cultures: Romulo and Remo in the Roman tradition, Apollo and Artemisa in the Greek tradition, etc. All these stories will be located geographically on a map in front of the whole classroom.

Students, working in-groups, will answer a series of questions about the Maya culture, emphasizing the Maya-Quiche group. For this task they will visit the web site [www.mayankids.com](http://www.mayankids.com) and later locate the center of this civilization on the same map used before.

The three stories of the *Popol Vuh* (the creation of the men of maize, Chapter V, and Chapter VI) will be read separately by groups of students. Later each group will be in charge of presenting their stories to the rest of the class following specific guidelines given by the teacher: identification of characters, places, sequence, and important elements.

After reading, it may be possible to compare both literary pieces, the *Codex Nuttall* from the past lesson and the *Popol Vuh*, focusing especially on the reference to the calendar, cacao, maize, and the rubber ball game. Materials, sources, and a field trip to the MFA will be used for this purpose. The identification of these elements still alive and adopted for other cultures and languages will become the main goal at this stage, and students will try to imagine their lives without chocolate, tortillas, rubber balls, gum, maize, etc.... and the words to name them. As a project, students may try to find out other important elements of the Legacy of the Pre-Columbian cultures to the modern world. This one could be also a great opportunity to make a parallel and contrast activity between the literary concepts of myth/ fiction and reality/ no fiction.

### **Lesson 3: (For Native/Heritage Speakers Classes)**

After studying the *Codex Nuttall* and the *Popol Vuh*, students will read according with their grade level, literary pieces written by contemporary Latin American writers. Students will search for elements of the Pre-Columbian cultures in these works and how they were used by the authors. Different types of reading and analysis activities will be done in group and individually. Since these classes are given only in Spanish, the activities are written in this language. They include pre-reading, reading and vocabulary, post-reading and critical thinking activities.

#### ***Sixth Grade: Miguel Ángel Asturias “Leyenda del Tesoro del Lugar Florido” from Leyendas de Guatemala.***

##### A imaginar. (pre-reading)

1. ¿Qué sabes sobre las guerras entre los españoles y los indígenas del continente americano?
2. ¿Cuál de las siguientes armas todavía no existían en la época de la conquista?  
1) Las flechas      2) Los rifles      3) Las lanzas      4) Los arcabuces
3. Hace quinientos años, en una guerra, ¿qué era más importante: muchos soldados con malas armas o pocos soldados con buenas armas?

##### A recordar. (post-reading)

1. El Volcán cuando estaba cubierto de nubes significaba: (Escoge una de las dos)  
a) anunciaba la paz y la seguridad en el Lugar Florido.  
b) anunciaba que se acercaba una guerra y que estaban llegando los enemigos.
2. Por lo tanto, cuando el Volcán estaba despejado, ¿qué significaba?
3. ¿Cuál de estos tres objetos permitía a las madres identificar a sus hijos?  
a) el color de la pintura      b) la máscara      c) El vestido.
4. ¿Qué les sucede al final a los españoles?
5. ¿Para qué servían las plumas que llevaban los guerreros?

##### A relacionar vocabulario.

1. ¿Cuál de estos tres objetos no es un instrumento?  
a) la flauta      b) el tambor      c) La lanza

2. Relaciona las palabras de la izquierda con las que tienes en la columna de izquierda.
- |               |                        |
|---------------|------------------------|
| 1. pregoneros | a. lago                |
| 2. miel       | b. planta              |
| 3. barca      | c. arma para la guerra |
| 4. arco       | d. personas            |
| 5. girasol    | e. comida              |

### Project

Students will recreate a typical pre-Columbian market day. They may represent it in a form of performance or in a scale model. They may also submit a detail explanation of the elements included in their work (foods, animals, items, etc.).

#### ***Seventh Grade: Carlos Fuentes “Chac-Mool”***

##### A. A imaginar. (Pre-reading)

- A.1. Los cuentos fantásticos se basan en personajes, sucesos y lugares que generalmente no son reales. Según esto, en un cuento fantástico:
1. Una estatua puede convertirse en un ser humano.  
verdadero/falso
  2. Los sucesos que se narran están basados en hechos reales  
verdadero/falso
  3. El final debe ser siempre feliz.  
verdadero/falso
  4. Los animales no pueden hablar  
verdadero/falso
  5. Los personajes nunca pueden ser mujeres.  
verdadero/falso
  6. Las piedras pueden tener poderes mágicos.  
verdadero/falso
- A.2. ¿Conoces algún libro o historia de fantasía? ¿Te acuerdas del título?

##### B. A recordar. (post-reading)

- B.1. Ordena la historia.
1. Coloca la estatua en el sótano.
  2. El Chac Mool se le apareció una noche en el cuarto de Filiberto.
  3. Se le estropearon las tuberías y se llenó de agua la casa.
  4. Filiberto muere y unos hombres lo llevan al sótano.
  5. El protagonista ordena trasladar a su casa la escultura.
  6. Filiberto decide huir de la casa.
  7. Debido a la humedad del agua, el Chac Mool quedó cubierto de lama y tuvo que rasparla.
  8. Filiberto compra la escultura del Chac Mool en una tienducha.
- B.2. ¿Cuál de estas transformaciones no se da en Chac Mool?
1. Escultura de piedra.
  2. Escultura de arena.
  3. Escultura con rasgos humanos.
  4. Ser humano.

B.3. ¿Cuál de estos sucesos no ocurre en la historia?

1. Se inunda el sótano.
2. Filiberto devuelve la estatua a la tienda.
3. El protagonista se despierta por la noche debido a un quejido.
4. Compra el Chac Mool en una tienda muy pequeña.

C. A opinar.

C.1. ¿Quién descubrió el Chac Mool?

C.2. Según tú, ¿por qué murió Filiberto?

D. A relacionar.

D.1. Relaciona las palabras de estas dos columnas.

- |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|
| a. tubería   | 1. burlón    |
| b. lama      | 2. Chac Mool |
| c. escultura | 3. plomero   |
| d. guasón    | 4. humedad   |

**Project:**

Students will research other pre-Columbian gods. They will choose one and prepare a presentation about it and create a short story using this figure as a main character. The story must be accompanied by story map.

***Eight Grade: Julio Cortázar “La Noche Boca Arriba”***

A. A imaginar. (pre-reading and reserach)

- A.1. ¿Cómo describirías los sacrificios humanos? ¿Con qué finalidad se celebraban los sacrificios? ¿Conoces alguna cultura que los practicara?
- A. 2. Según lo que has investigado, intenta dibujar la escena de un sacrificio tal como te la imaginas.

B. A recordar. (post-reading)

B. 1. En el cuento *La noche boca arriba* se entremezclan dos historias: la de un accidente y la de un sacrificio humano. Coloca las siguientes oraciones en la casilla correspondiente y a continuación intenta ordenar cronológicamente cada una de las historias.

- Lo llevan a las mazmorras de un templo.
- Le hacen unas radiografías y a continuación lo operan.
- Llevan al accidentado a una farmacia.
- El protagonista corre en la oscuridad de la noche a través de los arbustos.
- Comienza a recordar de nuevo el accidente.
- Intentó esconderse en las ciénagas para no ser capturado por los guerreros.
- El zaguán sale del hotel y se va con su moto.
- El enemigo se acerca hacia a él y logra atraparlo con una soga desde detrás.
- Cuatro acólitos lo llevan boca arriba por un pasadizo que alumbraban los portadores de antorchas.
- Después de la operación lo trasladan a una habitación y comienza a “soñar”.
- El motorista atropella a una mujer y pierde la visión.
- Al abrir los ojos descubre las manos de un sacrificador que aprietan un cuchillo de piedra.

- Suben al herido a la ambulancia y lo llevan a un hospital.
- Lo suben por una escalinata con la cabeza colgando hacia abajo.
- Descubre que el sueño maravilloso había sido el otro.

El accidente

El sacrificio humano

B.2. ¿Cuál de estos sucesos no se narran el cuento?

1. Se esconde de los enemigos.
2. Con la ayuda de su cuchillo vence a los enemigos.
3. Atropella a una mujer.
4. Finalmente descubre que lo van a sacrificar.

C. A reflexionar.

C.1. ¿Después de haber leído el cuento crees que existen algunos elementos en el cuento que te ayudan a determinar cuál de los dos sucesos es real?

C.2. ¿Crees que los sueños están relacionados con el pasado o con el futuro?

D. A relacionar vocabulario.

- |               |                       |
|---------------|-----------------------|
| a. sacrificio | 1. suerte             |
| b. amuleto    | 2. ambulancia         |
| c. zafarse    | 3. súplica            |
| d. hospital   | 4. cuchillo de piedra |
| e. plegaria   | 5. escaparse          |

## General Project:

In the “Writing My History” project, students will be encouraged to write their families’ history using ancient writings and the pre-Columbian calendars to give their characters names and themselves names and personality traits. These stories will also be translated into Spanish, which will create a valuable opportunity for self-discovery and critical thinking about their heritage. It may surprise the class to find out that some of their peers are able to speak *Nahuatl* or *Quiche*. This will help them recognize the importance of these languages and it may empower them to keep their languages alive.

The last section will be a research project about the contributions of other pre-Columbian groups (*Incas*, *Tainos*, *Chibchas*, etc.) or the way the descendants of these magnificent cultures live today and the languages that they speak.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Excellent source! This book has contributions from well known experts in the subject. Each chapter is dedicated to a particular aspect in the life and history of the Mesoamerican cultures.
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This book gives extensive information about various Indian groups in Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish Conquers.
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A very complete, clear and easy to understand information. The web site guides you thru different cultures and aspects of the Mesoamerican studies. Also gives you references and possible sources for researching. A great source!!!
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## Supplemental Resources

### For Teachers

- Alcina F., José. *Las Culturas Precolombinas de América*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2000.  
Easy and educational reading about the most important Pre-Columbian groups in the whole continent: from Mexico to the Patagonia.
- Aleza I, Milagros and José María Enguita. *El Español de América: Aproximación Sincrónica*. Valencia: Universidad de Valencia, 2002.  
This book presents detail information about the characteristics of the Spanish in the Americas. It provides a complete list of those words that have their roots in Pre-Columbian languages.
- Arias L., Abraham. *Literaturas Aborígenes de América*. Kansas City: University of Missouri, 1976.  
An extensive anthology of the Pre-Columbian literature; includes pieces from different cultures and styles: poetry, drama, and narrative.
- La Biblia de los Mayas: El Popol Vuh*. Trans. Francisco de Ximénez. Barcelona: Ediciones Aura, 1986.  
Spanish version of the Mayan's book of life.
- Rodríguez, Rodeney T. *Momentos Cúmbres de las Literaturas Hispánicas. Introducción al Análisis Litearario*. Upper Saddle River, NJ. Pearson Prentice Hall.  
Excellent reference book for Spanish Language Arts teachers. It contains the most important literary pieces from every single Spanish Literary Period. Also offers biographies of the authors and historic references.
- Saravia, Albertina. *Popol Vuh: Antiguas Historias de los Indios Quiches de Guatemala*. Mexico D.F: Editorial Porrua, 1965.  
Another version of the Popol Vuh, with beautiful illustrations.
- Sharer, Robert J. *The Ancient Maya*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.  
Life, politics, rituals, religion, art, every single aspect of the Mayan culture is explain in this books, that also have wonderful photos, maps and illustration. Great for research purposes.

### For Students

- Barlow, Genevieve. *Stories from Latin America – Historias de Latinoamérica*. Collection Side by Side Bilingual Books. Chicago, IL: Passport Books, 1995.  
A collection of legends and myths, both in English and Spanish. Very useful in classes of Spanish with native and non-native speakers.
- Bergdolt de W., Ute E. *El Tesoro de los Tibabuyes y otros Mitos y Leyendas de Nuestra América*. Bogotá D.C: Panamericana Editorial, 2001.  
Great reading source especially for upper levels.
- Coulter, Laurie. *Secretos en Piedra: Hablan los Jeroglíficos Mayas*. Colonia, Florida: Madison Press, 2001.  
Perfect for Middle School students. It takes the young readers thru a fantastic journey and discovery of the Mayan culture. Beautifully illustrated include activities that make its reading interactive. Also brings suggestions and activities for hands on projects.
- Delacre, Lulu. *De Oro y Esmeraldas. Mitos, Leyendas y Cuentos Populares de Latinoamérica*. New York, NY: Scholastic, 1998.
- El libro de los Cuentos y Leyendas de América Latina y España*. Barcelona: Ediciones B, 2000.  
A beautiful compilation of myths and legends from all Latin America. Very attractive to young readers
- Flor Ada, Alma and F. Isabel Campoy. *En Alas del Condor*. Alfaguara Infantil. Colección Puerta del Sol, 2002.  
This and the following two books are not just beautifully written and illustrated but also show the magnificent of the Pre-Columbian cultures, their contributions to today's modern world, and the life of the native groups that still live in the Americas.
- . *Ojos del Jaguar*. Alfaguara Infantil. Colección Puerta del Sol, 2002.
- . *Vuelo del Quetzal*. Alfaguara Infantil. Colección Puerta del Sol, 2002.
- Los Descendientes del Sol y otras Leyendas de América*. Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1987.  
A beautiful compilation of myths and legends from all Latin America. Very attractive to young readers
- Pohl, John M.D. *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico*. Oxford University Press, 2002.  
Oriented to young readers, this carefully illustrated book retells the Epic of Lord 8 Deer, a powerful ruler in 11<sup>th</sup> century.