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## The Culture of Conquest in the Modern World

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The present work deals with matters concerning the finding by Columbus of the continent presently called America, and with the following invasion and onslaught by Europeans and Africans, of the territories and peoples who populated the land. As we understand it, culture had a decisive role in the outcome of things, and through culture a new world was created and nurtured. This drama inaugurates the birth of the modern world in general, and of what is now-a-days known as Latin America in particular.

This curriculum unit is intended for students fifth through eighth grade, although it could be adapted to lower and higher grades at ease. Its presentation in the classroom is flexible: it could be done in four or five lessons as enrichment for social studies, for art, math, drama, etc., depending on the needs and desires of a particular class.(1) Whichever way we present it, we are dealing with a multidisciplinary approach, where geography, to take as an example, “speaks” with and about math, history, culture, etc. There is a dialogue of disciplines, so to speak. Also these lessons could be further divided into smaller lessons, or mini-lessons, and stretched into a longer period. It could be developed in a couple of weeks, during an entire month, or even throughout the school year. Whatever the choice might be, it has to be consistent, and introduced and kept as an intrinsic part of the curriculum. Presently, much of this material has been used in a fifth grade bilingual (Spanish and English) class, with many positive, and in some instances unpredictable results. (2)

The material itself deals with the initial stages of conquest in three major areas of action: the Caribbean, Mexico and Peru. Each major area represents a lesson. We know that in studying the texts of the period, the Caribbean is the beginning, and the center stage of the action. From this geographical area we stem in any direction. We could go back into time and space to where Columbus and the Spanish royalty decided to take over the Indies, as read in the *Capitulaciones*, these marvelous documents where we witness the partition, *a priori*, of a land that didn't exist. Students have a lot of questions about this sort of matters. They feel that something has not been told to them *like it is!* The modern world starts to make sense to them, and they start to get a liking of history and geography, and, perhaps, if we get fortunate, young inner-city students might venture to see the power of writing and culture in the modern world. Sometimes we might need to be dramatic, in order to keep the level of interest of the students, who think that everything historical is “corny.” Then, we could evoke the legendary beauty of Tenochtitlan.(3) What is more, we could turn legend into reality if, after some considerable research at grade level, we sojourn in a model Tenochtitlan with highways and bridges; canals and chinampas; towers, colorful gardens and people, all embedded in a body of water surrounded by mountains. Give it some sound effects if you want. Build thirteen ships, like Cortés, if you wish.(4) And then, when you have a thriving city floating on the water, destroy it! Whether you do it or not,

what becomes relevant at this point of destruction is the historical core of the conquest. The culture of conquest unmasked. From then on Peru is but an echo, a sordid anticlimax.

Students are most of the time enthusiastic about learning about themselves, and this fact enhances their self-esteem and respect for a multicultural situation. Unequivocally when we address the center stage in the Caribbean, we must take into account right from the start the presence of Africa.(5) To be sure, we already have the presence of Africa in the discourse of Columbus. His experience about navigation in the Atlantic ocean is rooted in his experience in the islands off the coast of Africa and in Africa itself, and possibly with the know-how of African navigators. His writings are always making references and comparisons with Africa. Even more surprising for us, perhaps because it is so obvious, is the presence and importance of Asia in the adventure of exploration of the world. As a matter of fact, we all have been pounded on the head, literally, with school textbooks, heavy to carry, the vision that Columbus had of Asia, Cipango, the Grand Khan, etc., in the Caribbean. Isn't this discourse the very first one where the whole world takes part in a drama? Here is the multicultural, multiethnic nature of our exposition. Columbus gives us the material to make some interesting considerations.

The nature of the material about the exploration and conquest of this continent makes it an interdisciplinary subject where history, anthropology, geography, math, etc., can play an essential role in elucidating fascinating possibilities of the period. Moreover, a multicultural strategy, as we could already sense in this unit, would be necessary in order to teach children who come from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, effectively. Children who are full of questions about their past, and who do not like history, need honest and imaginative answers. And, needless to say, this is one of the opportunities for the teacher to present, in a multicultural context, the initial impact of the meeting of different worlds in 1492. Although the Asian protagonist was present, it was in the beginning an imaginary participator. We must reiterate, the exploration and conquest of this vast continent has three mayor protagonists from its genesis: European, African, and the original inhabitants, the people who we call Indians. Generally, when we talk about this time of history we don't consider the African as an intrinsic part of the subject. As a matter of fact, I have not been able to find a school textbook where an African is presented as a *conquistador* .(6) The African is only presented as a slave, in the back of the stage, unseen, unheard, if ever mentioned at all. The truth of the matter is far from this situation, since the presence and participation of the African starts to be particularly strong from the very beginning of the XVI century. Even more dramatic would be the increasing presence of *palenques* and *cimarroneries* later in the century as in the case of Esmeraldas in Quito.(7)

The objectives of this presentation are varied. In the first place we are interested in presenting a timely historical subject matter to students and teachers, hoping that it would be of benefit to all. One of our goals is to create activities where the interaction of teachers, students, parents and in some instances the whole school could generate a sense of accomplishment and growth for all. School assemblies are well recommended activities since teachers could organize collective involvement. Backdrops, dance, drama and music related to the period, when well planned and executed, bring excellent results. By-products of assemblies, or material for its preparation could be an exhibition, a writing contest, a field trip to a museum. We have already mentioned the importance of a multicultural context: having students sharing texts and information that will make them aware of differences and similarities of cultures, and the need for mutual respect. We often find texts that deal with the "difference" of peoples of the world with a language that only serves to perpetuate ethnocentrism and in most cases Europocentrism. Key words and concepts such as savages, primitives, heathen, inferior, lazy, etc., only serve to distract, confuse and discourage young students. These concepts, in time, develop into deep-rooted myths used to perpetuate a literature and an educational system that thrive in oppression. It is easy to understand, from this point of view, that in this case

our objective is to create interest and respect for the differences of people.

Furthermore, it is of utmost importance to establish ways and techniques to develop in the student a critical sense of reading a text. The student who reads avidly, but with no sense of evaluation and critical thinking, is a passive reader. If we were to take, for example, a vertical approach to a text of the conquest, that is, a reading, linear and chronological, i.e., first this happened and then that, and so forth so on, we shall be giving a student a peephole from where he or she could see that—whatever any one is able to see from a hole. Whereas, if we were “to select one or two points in time, or a particular person or event, to be the focus for a modest bibliography of enrichment for a class,” the results could be very rewarding. We would be presenting the student a “wide-angled view . . . picture windows rather than peepholes.”(8) This wide-angle view could very well lead into experiences of critical thinking and higher level of thinking. It is also could lead into experiences of permanent interest and intellectual value for the student. Another way to present a horizontal view of the text of the conquest would be by introducing to the student a text originally written in XVI century Spanish accompanied by an English translation, as an exercise of language.

A critical reading of a text would make the student think differently of textbooks in school and elsewhere. The impression that a text is infallible and monolithic would be irremediably eroded and eventually eradicated. Maybe then, a student might consider writing a text himself or herself. Every reading of a text in this fashion would be equivalent to writing it for the first time. But would this be also the beginning of a new exercise in writing? Reading must lead to writing. Whether it is a writing of a dramatic piece, a dialogue, a short description of a vista from a text of the conquest, a short story, a poem, etc., writing must be a consequence of reading, and vice-versa: writing again must encourage and further develop reading. These are some of objectives that I have in mind in presenting the ample text of the conquest of America. Together with these objectives I have introduced some strategies. Later in the text I would present to the reader some specific classroom activities that would advance the understanding and the enjoyment of the student and possibly the teacher also. Now I deem it necessary to go into the elaboration of the texts and concepts of the culture of conquest and its mechanisms in history.

The adventure of the navigation in the Atlantic ocean by Columbus and the subsequent conquest of the continent that we know today as America by Europeans and Africans “made” the world spherical for the first time in the history of human kind. Before this encounter of new worlds, the conception of the earth was as varied as the people who chose to think about it. For some people it was flat, for other the earth was held by an elephant and that elephant was held in turn by other elephants, so forth so on. Ironically, the knowledge of the roundness of the planet might be the greatest discovery that Christopher Columbus was able to achieve. It really changed the notion of existence, and that of the universe. And indeed, this is a cultural postulation for more than one reason. On the one hand, every culture of the world touched by the information of this knowledge did not remain unchanged, and on the other, this information set out a production of a myriad of cultural products and patterns that have continued to the present time.

Before we go on, it is imperative to understand what I meant by “culture,” “cultural product” and “culture of conquest.” The concept of culture is essential for the understanding and development of the present work. Once we understand what we mean by culture, and particularly, what we mean by culture of conquest, we could go on to integrate into this writing the different texts relevant in drawing a richer picture of the conquest. It is interesting to note that for professor González Echevarria, culture is the sum of institutions that make up a society or a civilization. As an illustration of this concept we have taken the founding of the first nucleus of European power in Mexico—Vera Cruz, established by Hernán Cortés, bypassing the authority of Diego de Velázquez in Cuba. So we have that this original act of founding a city, the *polis*, is in itself a cultural

act that generates a myriad of relationships within its institution, and with other institutions as well. To be sure, as soon as the act of founding Vera Cruz is performed, something unprecedented took place: the presence of a proto-culture of modern Mexico and of the modern world. The vision of the founders was extended in time and space. And Vera Cruz was only a speck in the long trek that the *conquistadores* laid out for themselves.(9) This moving society of the conquistadores had brought an institution flexible and sedentary. It is an institution which was brought in the ships by the Spaniards and that was transplanted in the soils of this vast continent. We could even visualize this concept of the power of this first founding in Mexico by envisioning the Spanish castles as centers of the force of culture in central Spain, a center that expanded in all directions until it was shipped in the vessels of exploration and conquest of the navigators.

The castle with all its might, its overwhelming presence and intricacies is, in a way, incarnated in the caravel as a floating fortification, a nucleus of information and perpetuation of European culture, ready to move on and to clone that information wherever and whenever necessary and at any cost. Columbus is the first example of it: Navidad, the fort, the “castle,” even though it was not successful, was built from a ship-the Santa Maria.(10) Castle, ship, Navidad, Vera Cruz: they are all different faces of the same institution. Columbus himself gives us an indication of this notion.

I myself have tarried no where longer than I was compelled to do by the winds, except in the city of Navidad, while I provided for the building of the fortress, and took the necessary precautions for the perfect security of the men I left there.(11)

In expanding our view of culture, “We recognize as cultural all activities and resources which are useful to men for making the earth serviceable to them, for protecting them against the violence of forces of nature, and so on.(12) Thus far, it is comprehensible that the founding of a nucleus of European power, a municipality, is an act of protection against potential forces of destruction, internal and external. Columbus tells us this himself. It is an act of self-preservation, from the point of view of the invading forces in this new land (“new” from the point of view of the European). But, this single act is complex; Cortés, by founding this first *asiento*, is really creating and generating power for himself, vis-à-vis Diego de Velázquez, the Aztecs and all his crew. His real objective was to reach the emperor, Charles V, ignoring the power of the former. But, if we recognize the founding of a city as cultural, and as such, as an instrument to make the earth serviceable, and for protection against violence, and so on . . . wouldn’t the opposite be true also? This is exactly what the actions of Cortés lead us to believe. This conquistador has enacted the necessary steps to fool a superior and to inflict violence upon the owners of the country: the Aztecs. This leads us to believe, here, as well as in other episodes of the conquest, that culture could also incarnate violence and deceit, death and destruction in an organized manner. In other words the culture that the Spaniards transplanted from Europe to Mexico had such an adaptability to the new environment, such a finesse and versatility and great potential for growth: a culture that had the potential to incarnate building and destruction, truth and deceit as its producers saw it fit. This is a glimmer of the culture of conquest. A culture that is able to see and understand an enemy that has not been seen yet, and that doesn’t even speak or understand the language of the land .(13)

We recognize that founding a city is an exercise of power that generates power, especially in this continent in the XVI century. Nonetheless, it is difficult to understand the nature of this power if we don’t take into account a basic underlining structure that gives sense and significance to this act. This new underlining structure is writing. To be sure, “Writing is bound to the founding of cities and to punishment.”(14) Cortés could not have even attempted to found Veracruz without being able to keep contact with Europe. Writing gives meaning and coherence to his adventure, and writing gives a different dimension of the implications of culture. And in this sense, writing is one of the institutions that make up the complex tissue of culture. Writing opens up windows

to many cultural dimensions. And writing is essentially work. In effect, if we take a definition of “culture” as “work,” we’ll find

the sum of nonhereditary information, accumulated, conserved and transmitted by numerous groups of human society.” Therefore, it is of utmost importance, for the objectives of this investigation, to indicate the principle that culture is information.(15)

The role of information in the process of the conquest of the continent is a phenomenon of culture. Keeping this in mind we could depict the utmost importance of information, its production and the control of it in the path of conquest in the continent. Columbus, Cortés and Pizarro utilize information in different ways, but for similar objectives: to mislead people so as to get what they want; to conquer and to get the wealth of the land; to get power and land; to found cities and build the culture of Europe, as in the beginning, *in illo tempore*, as an act of mythological dimensions.(16)

The nature of information is intricate and complex. Information could be bound together with writing, but this is not the only vehicle of information. Let’s consider any society without a writing system in the path of conquest. Communication could have never been established through writing for this people. It is the realm of language to function, among other things, as the vehicle of information and communication. All human beings have languages, no matter what condition or origin. But the Europeans and the inhabitants of this continent did not have similar codes of communication; they did not have the slightest notion of what each other were about. This we could see from the distance of time and basic historical information, and common sense. We have that advantage. What is disturbing is the realization that the Europeans were not interested, by and large, about the natives themselves, as people. They looked at them as things, “pieces” they call them,(17) as means to get what they were really looking for: power, gold or some sort of illusion taken from the bestiaries of the time.

Before we dig deeper into these illusions, let’s take a look at the way that Columbus makes use of information. Carpentier, in *The Harp and the Shadow*, entitles one part of the novel, “The Hand.” Hands are powerful tools. They do and undo. Hands give and take; reveal and hide. Hands manipulate, kill and implore: the hand as a metaphor. This idea of the hand made me think of Columbus as a person who knows how to use hands. He knows how to reveal and how to hide things. One of the most celebrated lies, that he himself tells us about, is the manipulation of the distances that they traveled day after day in the caravels. It occurred to me that perhaps Columbus is hiding many other secrets from us. But really there is not a clear way to be sure about this. Notwithstanding, this situation might just be like the one where a letter is hidden right in front of everybody’s eyes (Poe is a master for this). And then, perhaps, Columbus might not be aware of this situation at all. In any case, one way or the other, when Columbus tells and “informs,” his reader that the naked people he found in the island were screaming, “Come and see the men who have come from the skies; and bring them food and drink,” (October 14, 1492) we cannot, but stop and think, critically, whether the inhabitants of the Guanahani would really think of people who came from the skies. Incidentally, the translation is not accurate; the Spanish “cielo” could mean heaven or sky. In another document, Columbus would repeat the same idea, except that now he puts in the mouth of the natives: “Come, come and look upon beings of a celestial race . . .”(18) Perhaps Columbus was so high and elevated from having crossed the ocean for the first time that he really started feeling celestial.

Students in the fifth grade were fascinated by this idea of interpreting people, and people meeting for the first time. The context of Columbus made them want to live the experience themselves trying to figure what it might have been like. They made a drama. The actors were Columbus and a few of his men, and the naked



natives. Once the skit was set up actors started having problems understanding each other. The Europeans, aggressive, wanted gold, and they would point out the gold in the beginning and pull it away from the natives later on. They started chasing each other, some scared, so they seemed, others, including myself, laughing at such an absurd and bizarre scene. We tried it several times with similar results: lack of communication and general laughter at the absurd situation! Students postulated the impossibility of Columbus' assertions about the interpretations of the natives about people from the skies. " *Maestro!* Celestial beings is hard to swallow!" they would say. "We can't even understand gold!" they would add.

Columbus is a creator of myths. He seems to feel the dimensions of a mythological being. This is one of the fibers that hold together the culture of conquest. With this thought, other more daring and cunning followers will get ready to conquer entire civilization greater than any in Europe or the world. Cortés and Pizarro are the direct beneficiaries of the Columbian impact on culture. Information gathered through several sources was always necessary.

If Columbus was the initiator of this interpretation of how the natives looked at him, Cortés was the perfectionist. There are several examples where Cortés makes use of this fit of the imagination. Bernal Diaz del Castillo relates to us the scene where Cortés makes the Mayas believe that the horses have extraordinary powers. The cannons are gods in wrath.(19) It is common knowledge that the Mexicans, in accordance to European writers at the time, thought, so they say, and so they inform us, that he was Quetzalcoatl. The Incas in Peru would similarly think Pizarro to be Viracocha. We know that Pizarro and Cortés met in Spain in 1528 to share "information" about their enterprises.(20) It is my belief that the culture that was transmitted to the newly acquired continent fed itself from the sap of the peoples at its path. It was used to dominate the material and the spiritual world, for better or for worse and we all are part of it.

CLASS ACTIVITIES One very simple, but exciting activity is the activity of the apple. The apple? Yes, the apple! Usually, at least once a month, breakfast includes an apple in the New Haven School System. Well, we take advantage of this apple. Let's assume, that this particular apple embodies, or rather is embodied in a sphere. To be geometrical, the belly of the apple could be inscribed in a circle. Because of this we could also say that the apple has 360 degrees around its widest part. Shall we say, its equator? Now let's take a trip to History and let's take Geography along. It is a wonderful drama. And in the center of it is Columbus and his vision.

The apple is on the table. Belly-up, waiting to be slashed. Don't be alarmed!! Slashed with a pencil. From top to bottom, with a single line. That line, already juicy, would represent the meridian of Greenwich: London. This line crosses France, Spain and Northern Africa. At this point we must realize that we are using several skills and disciplines: math, geometry, geography, history. And, because of this, we should be using a language rich in its roots, its affixes, its etymology. Needless to say, we should be using maps, compasses, protractors, common sense and sheer fun!

*(figure available in print form)*

Using estimates, another skill necessary to master in math, we go from 0 degrees in Greenwich towards Cuba (Cipango of Columbus, modern Japan), 80 degrees west longitude, and we draw another line, that piece of the apple is what Columbus and his crew navigated. Now, going in the direction that the Portuguese went, east, 135 degrees, we find ourselves in Japan. That piece of the apple, from Cuba to Japan, is the part that Columbus didn't know about. We did this in class already, at Vincent E. Mauro, and students loved it. Notes

(1) There are many interesting and valuable activities that relate directly to mathematics in the chronicles. As we all know, estimation is one of the skills that students should master at the elementary school level. The

population of the continent or of parts of the continent, and island, etc., has always been a fascination for all kinds of writers ever since Columbus first touched land in 1492. What is meant by genocide? Statistical data could be analyzed in order to make mathematical, social, economic, etc., inferences. Charts, curves and tables are great mathematical tools that we could use to understand this historical period better. How much water did Columbus have in his first trip? Giving that earth is 360 degrees in any given parallel, by how many degrees did Columbus miss Cipango (Japan)?

(2) One of the classroom activities in this curriculum unit is to introduce a piece of the original Spanish text of the first two days of Columbus, in October 1492, at Guanahani. After reading the text and having an open discussion about it, students took initiative to make a play out of it. As time went by, students decided that they wanted to make a play out of an African myth of creation that we read later on. One student, Luz Colón (notwithstanding that she became very self-conscious about her last name: Columbus), decided that she wanted to enter her version to the Yale Dramat Children's Theatre Playwriting Contest. She won the GRAND PRIZE!

(3) There are several descriptions of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, but there is a memorable one that endures because of its resonance and plasticity as seen by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, "ver cosas nunca oidas, ni vistas, ni aun so-adas, como viamos (to see things never heard, nor seen, nor even dreamt of, as we were seeing)." Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1968), p. 178.

(4) Cf. C. Harvey Gardiner, *Naval Power in the Conquest of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1959), p. 130.

(5) Cf. John Thornton, *Africa and the Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). In the Caribbean the presence of the African generally means the genocide of the native population. Let's remember Las Casas on this matter.

(6) Although the presence of the African is to be seen in many of the chronicles playing a variety of roles, history has somehow left this human element aside. To be sure, there are instances where the African is a conquistador, as in the case of Juan Garrido. Ver Ricardo Alegria, 1990.

(7) Cf. Cabello Balboa, 1945.

(8) Patricia Manning, "The world of 1492: in company with Columbus," *School Library Journal*, 38 (1992), 30.

(9) See "Primera Carta" in Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de Relation de la Conquista de México* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1970).

(10) Cristóbal Colón, *Los Cuatro Viajes del Almirante y su Testamento* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1977), pp. 107-113.

(11) Columbus, "A letter addressed to the noble Lord Raphael Sanchez," Lisbon, the 14th of March, 1493.

(12) Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962), p. 37.

(13) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, p. 127.

(14) Roberto González Echevarria, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 3.

(15) IU. M. Lotman, "El problema de una tipología de la cultura," *Los Sistemas de Signos* (Madrid: Alberto Corazon, 1972), p. 86.

(16) Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 105.

(17) Cf. Beatriz Pastor, *Discurso Narrativo de la Conquista de America* (Habana: Casa de las Americas, 1983).

(18) Ibid. Letter to Lord Rafael Sanchez, p. 8.

(19) Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1968), p. 80.

(20) M.J. Quintana, *Vida de Francisco Pizarro* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1959), p.34.

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