



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1999 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from the Olmec to Modern Times

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## **Mexicans: Mythology, Movement and Masterpiece**

Curriculum Unit 99.02.03  
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Fifth graders study the Maya and Aztec (Living in Our Country, Chapter 9, The First Americans) as part of their Social Studies curriculum. In Theatre classes, they are introduced to storytelling as represented in folk tales and mythology, which in turn reflect the cultures in which such stories came to be. Since nowadays, great focus is placed on interdisciplinary curricula, some of the early history of the Mexican people will be introduced through the vernacular of art and those voices, hands, and imaginations that helped to tell it.

Approximately twelve and one half million Mexican Americans make up the second largest minority in the United States. Students will explore aspects of the ancestral history of this group from the Paleo-Indians who crossed the Bering land-bridge some 30,000 years ago to Aztec merchants establishing trade (circa 1300). Artwork and photography, as well as stories, childrens poetry and mythology will serve as background for the students exploration into this culture.

Creative dramatics for the unit include: oral reading, discussion and analysis; characterization plotting; bio writing; story mapping; improvisation; tableaux vivants; storytelling; inventing a game; script writing; poetry recitation.

### **Introduction**

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Since a key objective of studying another culture is to gain an appreciation for it, and in doing so, become less of an other culture ourselves, the unit begins with a warmup exercise involving boundaries, which is listed below in lesson plan format.

#### Boundaries Lesson

**OBJECTIVE:** To introduce students to each other by exploring similarities and differences. To gain an awareness of how turf barriers can be assembled and disassembled.

**METHOD:** Students are given a worksheet (see Boundaries Worksheet, which appears before the bibliography of this unit) attached to a clipboard, and pencil, if necessary. They are asked to CIRCLE answers for A, B, C, and D. These questions describe the four main categories that they will be working with. Students will be

organized and reorganized into four (standing) groupings based on the following:

- A) Which season were you born in? Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall?
- B) Where were you born? North, South, East, or West?
- C) Which color do you like best? Purple, Green, Orange, or Brown?
- D) (Two groups) What gender are you? Male or Female?

With each grouping, students will be given two minutes to come up with three reasons why their group is better than the other three (or other one in the case of gender groupings). They will record this information on the worksheets.

**DISCUSSION: Common Ground** -- Students will discuss differences and similarities of opinions with regard to the groupings they wound up in, e.g., I agreed with Kisha that Spring was better because it wasn't too cold or too hot, but I disagreed with her about the choice for color; I like purple, she likes orange. Students will further discuss more serious divisions that groups of people set up, i.e., economic, racial, religious, stereotypical.

**WRITING:** Each student will fill in the last part of the worksheet noting three reasons why he or she feels that people sometimes find it difficult to find a common ground. They will also comment on why studying other cultures is an important part of being a good citizen.

**EVALUATION:** Shared reading of student writing will be discussed and commented on.

### The First Americans

Time is like the day: for the young it is the  
dawn, for the old man it is dusk.

(Mexico As Seen by Her Children, p. 15)

The quotes that appear below section headings (such as the one above) have been taken from *Mexico As Seen by Her Children* (edited by Luis Guillermo Piazza in association with Sara Sloan de Ayala and art editor, Teresa Piazza; 1978). These quotes are some of the many pieces of writing that will be shared with students throughout the unit. Because the book represents art work and writings selected from thousands of Mexican school children, ages three to 16, it serves as a living history of Mexico in which children are the storytellers.

### WHOS ON FIRST?

Students will share in an oral reading (accompanied by discussion) of a somewhat humorized Eurocentric overview of the discovery of America in a mini play entitled: *Whos on First?* The play features young Tremaine, a fifth grader, who is having considerable difficulty in completing (or even starting) a research project on the discovery of America. The Library Media Specialist sets him up at a computer. Overwhelmed and dazed by the assignment, he drifts off. But work is being done inside the computer as historical characters involved in

history-making sort out the details, not without considerable controversy and discord:

FATHER JOSE: The first people to come to America were nomads from Siberia, I tell you!

FIRST SAILOR: Atlantis! They were from the lost continent of Atlantis!

SECOND SAILOR: Lost continent, yes. Atlantis, no. They were from Lemuria. Oh yes, Asians from the lost continent of Lemuria -- in the Pacific.

THIRD SAILOR: No they werent. They were descendants of ancient peoples of the Middle East!

FOURTH SAILOR: Phoenicians! A great sailing people -- thats who they really were.

CLEOPATRA: Youre all wrong. They were Egyptians, the great pyramid builders.

MOSES: No, no, no! Ancient Hebrews from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel!

COLUMBUS: And I suppose I had NOTHING to do with discovering America, huh? I suppose thats why they have a parade every year to celebrate the discovery of America by -- who? Who could it be? Lets see. Is it the Nomads from Siberia parade? The Lost Continent People of Atlantis or Lemuria take-your-pick parade? How about the Ancient Peoples of the Middle East parade? Or the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Ancient Hebrews from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel Day parade? Any of those sound familiar? What? No? Ever hear of the COLUMBUS DAY PARADE!!!

FATHER JOSE: (Ignoring Columbus) Ill say it again: Nomads from Siberia.

ERICSON: Wrong, wrong, wrong. I made the first discovery in the year 1000, almost 500 years before he did (pointing to Columbus. Takes off his helmet and scratches his head) Ah, what a voyage. (To Columbus, angrily) They should have called it the LEIF ERICSON DAY PARADE!!!

COLUMBUS: Vikings, you all think youre so tough. (Smirking) Ridiculous hat.

(Excerpt from Whos on First, Yel Hannon Brayton)

At the end of the play, Tremaine winds up in the computer with these characters (as well as others) to figure out how America was discovered. In the course of the play, he learns that roughly 31,000 years after the first people settled on the North American continent -- having migrated across Beringia (nowadays, the Bering Strait) about 30,000 years ago -- America would be discovered by Leif Ericson, a Viking, in the year 1000, and newly discovered, once again, in 1492 by Cristobal Coln (otherwise known as Christopher Columbus). Subsequently this vast land mass would get its name from French geographer, Martin Waldseemller, who mistakenly named the continent after Italian sailor, Amerigo Vespucci, which Waldseemller published in an atlas thinking Amerigo to be the explorer who discovered the new world. (In 1505, several letters describing such a discovery by Vespucci had been printed in Europe; *The Cosmographiae Introductio* by Martin Waldseemller; *Exploring American History*, p. 55.) Misnomer notwithstanding, eventually the disenfranchised as well as the profiteers of Europe would come to call this new world home as their countries disputed land rights and suffered religious conflicts. In the process, hundreds of nations of long-standing civilized peoples would be displaced if not nearly destroyed either by disease or by the imperialistic efforts of these newcomers. They would be lumped together and christened Indians owing to Columbus faux pas in thinking he had discovered a fast track to the West Indies. Over the next several hundred years to present day, that

name would stick, only slightly modified by the equally inadequate misnomer, Native Americans.

By 1497, Cabot would lay claim to North America for England and in 1519 Cortes would conquer Mexico for Spain. (Perhaps it is some small credit to the early conquistadors that they at least realized they were conquering the land and not discovering what had existed for aeons hitherto.) Additionally, Coronado would march across the American Southeast (1540); Raleigh would settle Roanoke Island (1585); Champlain would explore Canada (1603); Jamestown, a British colony would be founded (1607); the Pilgrims, fleeing from religious persecution, would land at Plymouth Rock (1620); and Dutchman, Peter Minuit, would purchase Manhattan Island from the Man-a-hat-ta Indians for twenty-four dollars worth of goods (1624). At about this time, Dutch and English trading ships would begin transporting Africans to North America, some first as indentured servants, but most as slaves. Mexico, having been conquered and colonized by Spain, would win its independence a couple of hundred years later in 1821.

Having read and discussed *Whos on First?* (the play above), students will engage in an exercise designed to give them some awareness of the immensity of time involved concerning the first discovery of the Americas. What does a span of 30,000 years feel like?

#### Counting the Minutes Lesson Plan

**OBJECTIVE:** To give students a tangible idea of the enormous amount of time that 30,000 years represents.

#### TEACHERS SCRIPT (and Method)

As we have discussed, the first Americans probably arrived here about 30,000 years ago. Now, I want everyone to look at the second hand on the clock. When the second hand reaches 12, we will begin counting the seconds. (Students count to 60 out loud. If this gets tedious, so much the better. We want students to gain a visceral awareness of time passing.)

Lets say that the one minute we just counted equals one year. How long would it take us to count 30,000 years? (30,000 minutes.) What does that look like in hours or even days -- if we counted each minute, one right after the other, without stopping, day and night?

(Demonstrated on the chalk board)

$30,000 \text{ minutes} / 60 \text{ minutes per hour} = 500 \text{ hours}$

$500 \text{ hours} / 24 \text{ hours per day} = 21 \text{ days (20.83)}$   
 $21 \text{ days} / 7 \text{ days per week} = 3 \text{ weeks (2.98)}$

Three weeks doesnt seem like that long a time, but remember, youd be counting day and night. In real time, it would take you over 300 life times, thats if you lived to be 100 years old each time.

Using *The Native Americans, An Illustrated History*, along with two National Geographic articles: *The Peopling of the Earth* (October, 1988) and *Search for the First Americans* (September, 1979), students will receive a pictorial overview of the first migration to the Americas. Paleo-Indians will be discussed as the first people to inhabit America. One can only speculate how and why these early people came to this land, but many archeologists believe that by approximately 30,000 B.C., a nomadic people crossed a land-bridge that had extended from Siberia to North America where the Bering Strait now exists. In the late 1500s, Jos de Acosta, a Jesuit missionary, suggested that Indians came from Siberia: . . . in 1589, Acosta wrote that small groups of hunters, driven from their Asiatic homeland by starvation or warfare, might have followed now-extinct beasts

across Asia into America millennia before the Spaniards arrived in the Caribbean. (The Native Americans, p. 30)

Students will be told that there have been many ideas in the past about how the Paleo-Indians came to the Americas, as was depicted in the play. In 1552, a Spanish writer claimed that the Paleo-Indians were escapees from the lost continent of Atlantis. Others have believed that Paleo-Indians were Asians from the lost continent of Lemuria in the Pacific or descendants of ancient peoples of the Middle East. Paleo Indians have also been thought to be Phoenicians, a great sailing people; Egyptians, the builders of great pyramids; ancient Hebrews from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

However, geologists support Acostas theory and claim that because glaciers during the last Ice Age (Pleistocene) absorbed a great deal of water, dry land was exposed, which created a land-bridge. They also believe that these first Americans were fully developed humans since there is no evidence of earlier hominid fossil remains to be found in the Americas.

### The First Mexicans

We wander over the land, you and I. How  
many surprises, what strange plants, what  
odd shapes. Is that the way we are? Like the  
Mexican plants? They like us; we like them.  
The sap and the blood palpitating, playing,  
growing, traveling, living.  
(Mexico As Seen by Her Children, p.17)

In this next section students will gain a flavor of early Mexican civilization. They will journey through the ancient city of Teotihuacan, visit with the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, and learn to play a ball game with Hunter and Jaguar Deer, the twin brothers of the Popol Vuh, the Maya creation myth. In addressing some aspects of Mexican and Central American mythology, two books will come into play here for student reading: Mexico As Seen by Her Children and Warriors, Gods & Spirits from Central and South American Mythology. Additionally, students will be given pictorial presentations from Mexican and Central American Mythology, which includes hundreds of photographs of architecture and art works that such mythological stories have inspired. Included in this section will be student story writing and telling.

## MEXICO AS SEEN BY HER CHILDREN

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Migrations of small groups of Paleo-Indians occurred over thousands of years. The first hunters from Asia may have stayed in what is now Alaska for thousands of years. Eventually groups of Paleo-Indians moved to the south and to the east. They most likely used paths opened up by the shifting glaciers. These paths led to the west coast, and along the ridge of the Rocky Mountains, and into the central part of North America. Eventually some groups moved into Central America and South America and some crossed the sea to the Caribbean islands. By 8,000 BC, Paleo-Indians had reached the southern tip of South America. By 5000 BC, early Mexicans learned to plant seeds to grow maize (corn) and other crops, such as squash and beans and they made vessels from the domesticated bottle gourd. They were among the first farmers. As farming spread throughout Central America and South America, a new way of life -- unfettered by the transient search for food -- fostered the growth of several world-class civilizations; among them, the Teotihuacano and the Maya.

Before the Spaniards from Mexico As Seen by Her Children (pp. 37-48) will be read and shown to students. This chapter offers childrens writing and artwork about the early peoples of Mexico -- Olmec, Maya, Aztec, Zapotec, Teotihuacano, Mixteca, et al --and serves as an overview to introduce this section.

## TEOTIHUACAN

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As music is played, students are taken on an imaginary journey to a faraway place of long ago. To prepare for this journey, they have made themselves comfortable by lying on mats or blankets on the floor or propping their feet up on chairs. Their eyes are closed as they hear the wind song of waves rushing to the shore, the trickling scratch of a rainstick, the woodwinds, strings, and percussion of Agua Claras Andean music (Vol. II, End of Millennium). And so begins the journey.

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It is long ago. You stand on a street, alone in the warm spring evening air. Even though the street is big enough to fit more than sixty people shoulder to shoulder across its width, there is no one else around. Just you. You hear a fluttering of wings overhead. A voice whispers to you from the clouds, This is the Street of the Dead. But it is a loving voice and you are not afraid. Walk on young pilgrim says the voice.

You take your first step on the Street of the Dead. To your right you notice a great fort. There is a pyramid inside its walls. The pyramid is covered with hundreds of pictures of serpents. The sound of wings is just above your head now and the voice comes once again to tell you that this is his place.

You walk on. Many steps on. The ground beneath your feet bumps up and dips down as if you are walking on waves. The sky is magenta, a purplish red. The sun will be leaving soon for the night. The air is becoming cool. Once again you look to your right. Another pyramid, but much, much larger than the first. As you look to its top -- so high up -- you see the sun passing over. You walk to the great stairway that climbs up the pyramid wall and you wonder if you climbed to the top, could you touch the sun before it sets? But then you notice an opening at the bottom of the stairs. Where does it lead? Should you go through?

You are brave this night. A shadow of a great wing passes in front of your face. Suddenly a torch lights up and stands before you. The voice tells you, Go with this light. You take the torch and move through the opening.

You walk down, down, down into a great cave. There is a whooshing sound like the sound you hear when you hold a sea shell to your ear. There is the smell of the sea. It feels cool and damp. You are below the center of the pyramid, a long way underground. What is this place? A secret place? A holy place? As you look around, you realize that this is not a true cave. People made this cave like they made the pyramids and the street. But still you wonder: Is this where the world was born?

You come back out of the cave. It has been a while and the night is beginning to pass. As you walk from the great pyramid to the Street of the Dead, you look to the sky. A brilliant cluster of stars sparkle as the sleeping sun gets ready to make another appearance. This is truly a special place.

You walk on toward the end of the Street of the Dead. Another pyramid rises larger and larger as you come closer and closer to it. Behind the pyramid, you can make out the shape of a mountain. It looks like a great shadow that the pyramid has cast. This pyramid, too, has steps. As the dawn begins, your torch magically disappears and you begin the climb. Even though you have been awake throughout the night, you are not tired. You reach the top and it feels as though you are standing on top of the world. With your back to the mountain, you look down the long street upon which you made your journey here. You see the great platforms and pyramids, which lead your eye past the first pyramid with its serpent-covered walls to a range of volcanoes. Stretching your vision even further, to your right and left you see block after block of one-story stuccoed stone houses. You realize that this is indeed a great city, but where are all the people? What city is this?

Wings as large and soft as clouds surround you. As the morning sun shines through the feathers, you are held in a sparkling world of green. The wings gently open and the voice comes again: Teotihuacan. The voice who has guided you throughout your journey now has a face. I am the Feathered Serpent. And this is Teotihuacan, a great city that was built almost 2,000 years ago. It once held almost two hundred thousand people. But they are gone now. Many years after they left, the Aztec came to this city and believed that it had been created by gods. Teotihuacan means Place of the Gods. They believed that it was here that the sun and the moon were created. You have seen their pyramids and mine as well -- the first pyramid you saw -- what do you believe? \_\_\_\_\_

The visualization attempts to give students a visceral awareness of a journey down the Street of the Dead in Teotihuacan. The city's design is plotted along two axes in near perpendicular alignment. In the exercise, students begin walking from the southern end of the street heading toward the Pyramid of the Moon and Cerro Gordo, the mountain behind it. In the city's plan, this is the north-south axis. Upon emerging from the cave (beneath the Pyramid of the Sun), students are directed to a star cluster, which is the Pleiades. This is Teotihuacan's east-west axis. As Mary Miller writes in *The Art of Mesoamerica* (p. 68): From the cave entry, a sighting line to the west was drawn that linked the cave, the rising of the Pleiades during the two annual passages of zenith, and the arc of solar passage at that same occurrence . . . by the end of the first century AD, these two axes had determined the grid that informed all positioning at Teotihuacan.

After this visualization activity, students will be asked to share anything they wish about their personal journeys. Using pictures from the December 1995 National Geographic article, Teotihuacan (pp. 2-35), as well as pictures and diagrams from *The Art of Mesoamerica* (pp. 67-82), they will get to see the sights from which the visualization was drawn. The article features a map of the city and schematic drawings of an apartment complex and an ethnic neighborhood, both of which offer some insight into how the Teotihuacano lived (300-600 AD). We will then share in an oral reading of *A Pyramid's Buried Secret* (TIME For Kids, February 5, 1999, pp. 4-5), which discusses Teotihuacan and the discovery of a mysterious burial room in the Pyramid of



the Moon in October of 1998.

**Characterization@Text: Many of the pictures from the National Geographic article depict ceramics and paintings of people or gods and goddesses. Each student will receive a picture from which to create a biographical sketch.**

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Students are asked to look at the pictures before them. They are apprised that these pictures show various items found in archeological digs at Teotihuacan and that they will once again be calling on their imaginations in order to describe who the people in the pictures are. As they look over their pictures, several questions will be put to them that have to do with aspects of characterization:

Is the person male or female? Young, grownup or old? Strong or weak?

Attractive or ugly? (Physical)

Is the person nice or mean? Generous or greedy? (Social)

Is the person smart or dumb? Outgoing or shy? Happy or sad? (Psychological)

Is this a person who tries to do good things? Or a person who tries to do bad things? (Moral)

Does this person have a job? Is the person a king or queen?

A priest or a god? (Typified)

What is the most special thing about this person that makes him or her different from anyone else? (Individualized)

Do most people like this person? Or do they dislike this person? (Sympathetic)

To introduce students to the technique of characterization, the legend of La Loba (The Wolf Woman) will be relayed to them as an allegory for the process of creating a character. In the story (modeled after a retelling of the same by Clarrisa Pinkola Estes from her book, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*) we find:

La Loba, an old hag, roams the desert in search of bones. She particularly likes wolf bones. She gathers bones throughout the day and brings them back to her cave in the mountains at night. When she has gathered enough bones, she assembles them into a skeleton of a wolf. She then lights a fire and decides what song she will sing. As she sings, the wolf begins to change as muscles, organs, arteries and veins begin to form. La Loba continues her song and the wolf becomes fleshed out and covered with fur. She sings louder and the wolf comes alive and runs from the cave. But La Loba keeps singing even louder and stronger. And as the wolf runs away, a sudden rain shower stops him in his tracks. With the sound of La Lobas song and the rain, the wolf is



transformed into a beautiful maiden.

Characterization fits well with La Lobas methodology. In defining a character, we must gather the bones, the details with which to construct the person. We can shuffle through our details, selecting the most important ones in order to create a structure and eliminate what we feel is unnecessary. With the skeleton of our character complete, we must then call upon ourselves to breathe life into it. What of ourselves do we bring to the process? What emotions and thoughts do we give to this character? When the character is fully formed, we may think that we are done, but there is one further step -- transformation. This is the inspiration that we can give to transcend the mechanics of construction; perhaps a point where we can become our own creation and thus it becomes real.

## **Biographical Sketches**

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The following questions can be written on a chalk board or handed out as a worksheet. They are designed as a guide for the students in writing their biographical sketches. In other words, the answers to these questions should lead to exposition.

WHO is this person? What is his or her name?

WHAT does he or she look like?

WHEN did he or she live?

WHERE did he or she come from?

WHY is this person special?

HOW does this person behave?

WHAT problem is this person faced with?

HOW does he or she solve or fail to solve this problem?

WHAT happens as a result of this persons success or failure?

After the work is completed, students will share their offerings with the class.

## QUETZALCOATL

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Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, is the most well-known figure in all the mythology of Mexico and Central America. His image can be seen on numerous monuments, in friezes, mosaics and in paintings. He is as identifiable a motif to Mesoamericans as the Statue of Liberty is to U.S. citizens. He has also been thought to be an historical figure: a great law giver and civilizer; inventor of the calendar or Book of Fate; a compassionate king. In the Codex Chimalpopoca, Quetzalcoatl is described as beneficent and incapable of doing harm: He would never agree [to those who tried to persuade him to homicide and human sacrifice], because he loved his vassals the Toltecs, and his sacrifice was always of snails, birds, and butterflies (Mexican and Central American Mythology, p. 77). So admired is Quetzalcoatl that there have been wild claims as to his origin. It has been suggested that he came from the Mediterranean -- an ancient Greek relative of Homer no doubt -- or from Ireland or China. Perhaps due to some tempting correlations between Mexican mythology and Christian theology, he has even been thought to be the apostle Thomas.

Quetzalcoatl's name is composed of two words: quetzal, which is the name of a rare bird with green feathers that dwells in the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala; and coatl, the Nahuatl word for snake. Although the Nahuatl-speaking people of the high plateau named the deity Quetzalcoatl (which the Maya call Kukulcan), the quetzal bird belongs to Maya lands. He was envisioned by both Nahuatl and Maya as cosmically complete -- at once water, earth, and bird. He is the wind god, messenger of the gods, and road sweeper. As the discoverer of maize, he is the savior of humanity, if not its co-creator.

As bird, Quetzalcoatl may represent the heavens and the heavenly characteristics of human potential. As serpent, he appears corporeal as his spirit descends into matter to become instinctive and organic. He is said to be born of a virgin. His mother, Coatlicue, presses a feather to her breast and becomes divinely inseminated. Given this mythology of his virgin birth and god-as-man nature, one can understand the overzealous desire of Spanish missionaries to link him to Christian belief. Yet stranger things have happened in other mythologies, the Greek for instance. Though not a virgin birth, Zeus manages to deliver his daughter, Athena (fully grown and helmeted) through his skull. He also bears his son, Dionysus, in his leg from which the child is born.

Suffering, redemption, and resurrection seem to play important themes underscoring the story of Quetzalcoatl. Throughout most of his earthly existence he is plagued by the temptations and trickery of Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, who is metaphorically a polar image of himself. In the end, having succumbed to temptation, Quetzalcoatl is repentant and his heart is consumed by a bonfire that he builds for this purpose. From the ashes, his heart rises to the heavens to become the morning star, Venus. As the planet passes below the horizon and reappears, symbolically Quetzalcoatl's spirit transcends matter to illuminate its higher self. In this regard, Quetzalcoatl purged his own heart in fire and became deified through suffering to light the world. Later the Aztec would feed human hearts to his successor, Huitzilpochtli, for much the same purpose, however less philosophical. Yet the idea of a deified heart, a heart that brings light and shines through the face -- despite its perversions as represented in human sacrifice -- is an interesting one. The Nahuatl peoples believed that we are born with a physical heart and face, but that we have to create a deified heart and a true face. (Mexican and Central American Mythology, p. 74). To create the deified heart, the face must reflect a true nature unhampered by destructiveness. Such a face could be envisioned as the face of love, which today is probably more attributed to an assortment of biochemical reactions sparked by infatuation rather than divine inspiration. But since inspiration, divine or otherwise, can more often than not be gleaned from myths and legends, Quetzalcoatl's story serves as an allegory for human suffering,

responsibility and integrity.

## Storytelling

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To introduce the story of Quetzalcoatl, a couple of conch shells are passed around the classroom. Students are told to put them to their ears and listen. What sounds do you hear? The sound of the wind? The beating of the surf? A drawing of the transverse section of the shell is then displayed. In the drawing, one can see the record of its growth from its tightly curled center spiraling outward in a circular pattern. From within the shell, a soft worm-like body, the conch, will emerge. It is the conch that is the source of movement and life within the shell; a shell that represents a completed cycle of life. The conch would also appear to be the inspiration for the design of Quetzalcoatl's insignia as has been suggested in *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (p. 142). Several pictures from this book will be shown to students that depict the Feathered Serpent wearing this pectoral insignia. Although a story is usually envisioned in a more linear pattern, it too, follows a kind of life cycle. Students will be instructed that they will be writing a story about the Feathered Serpent that they met in their visualization exercise, the one they have just seen pictures of. In the visualization exercise, students visited the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan where according to Mary Miller and Karl Taube (*Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, p. 141) the earliest known representation of the deity can be found (third century AD). Students will learn about who Quetzalcoatl was and the things he did. They will learn that he is a part of Mexican mythology. After a shared reading of *The Story of Quetzalcoatl (Warriors, Gods & Spirits*, pp. 21-24), they will then use a pattern to start writing their stories. This pattern can be a list of items or a web. In either case, like the conch, the story will emerge. As the conch gives movement and life within the shell, so will they animate their ideas through storytelling.

## Story Writing

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Having read the story of Quetzalcoatl, sections of the story will be assigned to several groups of students. Each group will collaborate in the writing of their assigned story piece. The first step will be to re-read the story section and discuss ideas: Who are these people? What are they doing? In this initial discussion students can assign one person as the scribe who will write the story map based on the ideas they come up with. In this first step, students are also encouraged to use improvisation to help them flesh out ideas.

Next, students will work from their story maps to create a plot line. While the overall story has a plot, each episode also has a beginning, middle, and end. Below is an outline that describes elements of a plot, which students can use as a guide.

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### UNDERSTANDING THE PLOT

#### BEGINNING (Exposition)

## WHAT

1. is the setting?
2. WHERE is the setting?
3. WHEN does the story take place?
4. WHO are the main characters?
5. WHO are the supporting characters?
6. WHEN does the story begin to take off? (point of attack)
7. WHAT problem or challenge is presented? (inciting incident)
8. WHAT is the reader/audience expected to wonder about? (major dramatic question)

## MIDDLE (progressing action)

9. WHAT happens in the story to make it interesting? (complications)

Stories can have lots of complications. Each complication can also have its own beginning, middle and end. Complications often happen when someone in the story discovers something new.

10. WHAT new and unexpected thing happens that turns or changes the direction that the story has been going in? (turning point, crisis, peripetia)
11. WHAT dramatic thing happens as a result of the turning point?(climax) END (Denouement, resolution)
12. WHAT happens after the climax? How do things work out?

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After the plot has been written, students will collaborate to write a first draft. The drafts will be shared in class and commented on. Based on comments from the class, students will revise their work and present it once again. This time the class will make suggestions regarding presentation -- props, costume pieces, gestures, movement.

## Tableaux Vivants

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Living pictures, otherwise known as tableaux vivants, will be added to our storytelling of Quetzalcoatl. As each group's revised edition is critiqued, they will also be presented with the challenge of demonstrating one or two aspects of their story by striking poses that represent characters and action. Later on these tableaux (which may include some simple props or costume pieces) will be fine-tuned to flow from one to the next as the narration dictates.

## The Pochteca

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Among Quetzalcoatl's many attributes, he was also considered to be the god of priests and merchants. In order to put the students more in character with the nature of this particular storytelling, they will be introduced to Aztec merchants called the pochteca, who most likely accounted for the widespread belief of Quetzalcoatl. The pochteca were wealthy merchants that also functioned as emissaries, ambassadors, spies and warriors. As a result of their efforts, Aztec trade expanded greatly although often by nefarious means. The pochteca traveled to new territories and disguised themselves in order to blend in with local culture, surreptitiously taking inventory on desirable goods, such as bird feathers, animal pelts, and precious stones. If discovered and attacked, they returned to inform their own ruler, whereupon war was frequently declared upon the hostile region. If the Aztecs won -- and they usually did -- they imposed unfavorable trade conditions on the losers. (Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya, p. 112.)

In Mexican and Central American Mythology, Nichol森 gives a more romantic view of the pochteca as followers of Quetzalcoatl with ethical principals that forbade them to accumulate wealth. On the surface, they would appear as such in their humble -- however feigned -- behavior and their generosity in their offerings of great feasts and lavish gifts. But as Miller suggests in Gods and Symbols, this attitude was more protective than pious; protecting their wealth rather than flaunting it.

Students will be asked to imagine that they are a group of pochteca giving a great feast in a Mexican village. During the feast they will tell their stories of Quetzalcoatl. A poem from a lesser Chilam Balam manuscript (Mexican and Central American Mythology, p. 94; see excerpt below) describing the mission of the Pochteca will be read to students so that they may visualize their characters more clearly.

You are the wanderer,  
entering and departing  
from strange villages . . .  
. . . something you will achieve,  
something the Lord of the Universe  
will assign you.

Lastly, having rehearsed their work a few times, they will present the fruits of their labor to another class, or possibly offer it as a Library Media Center presentation for a larger audience.

## MAYA & MYTHOLOGY

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The Maya probably arrived in Yucatan by 2500 BC. Early on, they were influenced by the Olmec, which is reflected in their calendar and writing system. From 300 to 900 AD, the Classic Period and the apex of Maya civilization, the Maya flourished in three regions to the south of the Valley of Mexico: the highlands of Guatemala, from the coastal plain south of Chiapas in Mexico to the western half of El Salvador; lowland forests of northern Guatemala and Belize; and the Yucatan peninsula. They were also influenced by Teotihuacan (roughly 800 miles away in the Valley of Mexico) and had built great cities that featured pyramids and stone buildings. The carvings, pottery, paintings and ornaments of this period prove the Maya to have been superior artisans and artists.

Superior as well would seem to be the scholarly pursuits of the Maya. They had developed a sophisticated writing system using glyphs composed of both word pictures (logographs) and phonetic signs. The Maya created screenfold codices containing information about their religion, mythology, history, flora, fauna, trade, and tribute. Some 25 Postclassic and early Colonial screenfold codices are known, with eight of these being in pure pre-Conquest style. (Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya, p. 65.) Mathematics also played a key role in Maya scholarship. As Edward James Olmos in the role of Jaime Escalante, a math teacher at Garfield High School in East L.A., chides his eighteen students from the barrio: Neither the Greeks, nor the Romans were capable of using the concept of zero. It was your ancestors, the Maya, who first contemplated the zero, the absence of value. True story. You burros have math in your blood! (Stand and Deliver, 1988 film). With a mathematical system based on 20s (perhaps representing fingers and toes), the Maya made advanced astronomical calculations and configured their calendar.

The Maya cleared rainforests to grow maize, beans, squash, chilis and tomatoes. They also grew cotton, which they wove into cloth. As one of the earliest peoples of Central America to grow maize (circa 600 BC), the Maya worshiped a pantheon of gods that were connected to nature and the corn harvest. They also built great cities that served as religious centers. Priests and noble families lived in these cities while farming families lived in nearby villages. The villagers were ruled by the priests, who also shaped the Maya culture. Quetzalcoatl -- who gives maize to sustain humanity and is known as Kukulcan by the Maya -- is also part of their mythology. There is a sky god, a war god, a god of travelers and commerce, gods of the elements and numerous animal gods, many of whom are nameless and have been assigned letters to differentiate them, such as: the god of death (A); the sun god (G); the water goddess (I). The Maya believed that after death, souls went to Xibalba -- a place of fright -- regardless of moral or ethical standing. Only those who had died violent deaths were excused from an existence in this hellish underworld. Warriors and other special categories of people went to a kind of paradise dominated by a large Kapok tree where they could lie in its shade and rest eternally. The Maya legends and myths captured the interest of Spanish missionaries who found similarities between their religion and Christianity: the flood myth; baptism and rebirth; confession, penance, and pilgrimages; the cross (which for the Maya represented the four directions, i.e., north, south, east, west.)

By the end of the tenth century, the Toltec -- who had lived on the high plateau for many centuries before The Aztec became their successors circa 1300 -- dominated the Maya. Two hundred years later, Toltec power declined and the Maya separated into independent kingdoms or states, two of the strongest being Cakchiquels

and Quich in highland Guatemala, not previously a site of the highest civilization. By the time the Spaniards had arrived in the early 1500s, the greatest era of Maya civilization had past. The conquistadors, having concentrated their early efforts in acquiring the riches of the empires of Central Mexico, did not colonize the Yucatan until 1542. Missionary efforts to convert the Maya were not as effective as they had been with the Aztec. Accordingly, the indigenous religion and beliefs of the Maya remained stronger than elsewhere in Central America. Today, over 30 Maya languages are still spoken and the typically Mayan physical characteristic of a sloping forehead remains visible in the many of Central Americas people.

In the lesson that follows, students will learn about the Maya creation myth, the Popol Vuh, a Quich narrative that dates from the middle of the 16th century and was initially translated by a Quich nobleman. Within the narrative are three main parts: The creation of the Earth and its first inhabitants; the Hero Twins and their forbears (which is the most ancient part of the story); the legendary history of the founding of Quich dynasties (up to the years following the Spanish Conquest). Similar to other mythologies, or even biblical stories, the deities in power are often at odds with their creations, which results in severe punishment and impossible challenges. Failing to receive the praise they feel is owed them from the creations they have made -- animals, men of mud, men of wood -- the gods are vexed and the sky is devoid of sun and moon. In the next part of the story, the world is eventually illuminated through the cunning of heroic twins and the sacrifice of their father. Students will focus on these two parts of the Popol Vuh as they are represented in The Pacific Mountain Network, The Classroom Channel production of The Popol Vuh, a 60-minute film by Patricia Amlin. In this film, the Popol Vuh is presented as the longest existing poem in the American Indian language and all the characters in the story have been taken from Classic Maya pottery and animated into figures: gods, tricksters, the Hero Twins and the underworld.

Since the ballgame is a main feature in the film (as well as in our lesson plan below), students will be informed that it was played with a rubber ball and was popular throughout prehistoric Mexico and Central America. Games were played on ballcourts that were sometimes formed in the shape of an I -- an alley with end zones (broader in width than the alley). Two small teams (of two or three players each) competed in the game, the objective of which was to hit the ball through a ring or at a marker that appeared in the alley or end zones. Players were forbidden to use their hands to hit the ball, instead striking it with the upper arm and thigh. While the ballgame was sport, it could also include human sacrifice with the defeated team being decapitated -- giving new meaning to the term sore loser -- as can be witnessed in the skullracks that often adjoin ballcourts. During the time of the Spanish Conquest, spectators gambled their fine clothing. The ballgame may also have symbolically represented the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planet, Venus. In the Popol Vuh, the Hero Twins descend to the Underworld to play ball against Underworld gods; the game becomes the metaphor of life, death, and regeneration, and they resurrect their father, the maize god, from the court of death. (Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya, p. 43.)

## Popol Vuh Lesson

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**OBJECTIVE:** To introduce students to The Popol Vuh; to elaborate on the ball game aspect of this Maya creation myth through script writing and subsequently, a staged reading.

**METHOD:** Students will be given an overview of the Maya and will view the film, The Popol Vuh by Patricia Amlin. After viewing the film and a brief discussion period, they will share in an oral reading of The Twin Brothers (Warriors, Gods & Spirits, pp. 32-39, which will also be discussed. From these sources, they will work in small groups to collaborate on script writing.



## SCRIPT WRITING:

Script form is introduced.

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## SCENE NUMBER

Setting CHARACTERS NAME: Characters statement (stage directions).

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Each group will work similarly to the way they did when writing their stories about Quetzalcoatl (with each group taking a section of the story) using improvisation and story mapping.

While much of the story is serious, it offers several opportunities for comic relief, e.g, when the first twins sit on the red-hot thrones. Students will be encouraged to use such opportunities for comedy in their writing.

Students give oral readings of their scripted pieces for comments and suggestions by the class.

Students revise their scripts.

Students rehearse their scripts for a staged reading, using pantomime to show the

action. INVENTING A GAME: Using the information we have about the ballgame -- that it was played with a rubber ball that was to be propelled through rings or at markers; that players were not allowed to use their hands to hit the ball; that losers might have had their heads chopped off, etc. -- students will work to define the rules of the game. To aid in this process, several pictures from The Art of Mesoamerica of ancient ballcourts will be shown to the class and discussed.

#34 (p. 57) Nayarit-style clay model of a ballcourt with players and spectators

#69 (p. 95) The South Ballcourt at El Tajin

#72 (p. 97) Stone yoke carved with faces of defeated ballplayers (probably worn by a victorious ballplayer)

#73 (p. 97) Hachas in Classic Veracruz style; perhaps a portable marker on the ballcourt

#78 (p. 101) Stela 3, Santa Luca Cotzumalhuapa, (a ballplayer and a death god).

#109 (p. 138) The ballcourt at Copn

Additionally, students will use the guideline below:

What is the objective of the game? What are the players trying to do? How many players are there?

How are the players organized? In teams? Positions?

Where are the boundaries of the playing area within the ball court?

Do players need any special equipment to play the game?

Is there a time limit?

Can players plan ahead (use strategy) in the game?

Are there any penalties in the game?

From this initial work, students will give a theatrical representation of the game. This activity will be added to our final presentation of a staged reading of the students scripts. It will be used in the opening narration, which will be taken directly from the story of The Twin Brothers that talks about the historical aspects of this ancient game.

EVALUATION/PRESENTATION: After several rehearsals, students will present their staged reading to an audience -- either another class or special school presentation.

Mexico and Me

I love to sing to this beautiful land  
that reminds me of colonial times.

The houses and streets are decorations  
in a holiday of flowers and chimes.

(Mexico As Seen by Her Children, p.57)

## **MEXICO AS SEEN BY HER CHILDREN**

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We, the Children from Mexico As Seen by Her Children (pp. 150-156) will be read and shown to students. This chapter offers several self portraits and personal reflections wherein children speak to issues of national pride and freedom as well as war and poverty. Students will then be given an opportunity to flip through the pages of the book and select a piece of writing that they will choose to recite. Since there are sixteen chapters in the book, students will be assigned to a particular chapter from which to select poetry or prose. Once they have made their selections, they will write them down (these will become their practice sheets). We will then have an oral reading of the student selections in which meanings will be defined and pronunciations corrected as necessary. Afterward, students will continue to work on memorization and elocution. Lastly, they will recite their selections for the class.

Its All Relative Lesson Plan (The unit ends with the exercise below.)

OBJECTIVE: To lead into to issues of ethnicity and family by demonstrating how we are all related through our ancestry, or as Carl Sagan says, We are all cousins -- everyone on Earth.

## **TEACHERS SCRIPT (and Method):**

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(Chairs should be arranged in audience formation leaving ample playing space area. One student is selected to stand down-center. Instructions will proceed as follows:)

This person was born of two parents. (Two more students are selected and instructed to enter stage left and stand on either side -- down-center -- a half-step in back of the first.)

His/Her parents had parents, which are his/her grandparents. (Four students are selected and instructed to enter stage right and stand a half-step in back of the grandparents; with each generation addition, the formation should spread like an inverted triangle. Stage areas are also included in the instruction, i.e., up-right, down-left, etc.)

His/Her grandparents had parents, which are his/her great-grandparents. (Add eight more students.)

(If you have a combined class grouping and have enough students, add this last.) His/Her great-grandparents had parents, his/her great-great grandparents. (Add sixteen students.)

Everyone standing in back of (First student) is his/her ancestor, a family member who was born before he/she was. If anyone of you did not ever exist, he/she would not exist. (First person) as well as each group of parents represents a generation.

How many generations are represented here? (Four or five if you included the last grouping.)

How many ancestors does (First student) have? (14/30.)

(Students are instructed to take notice of where they are standing and then to take their seats. The organization of generations is repeated with the teacher calling each generational grouping.) (First students name), parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great grandparents.

(To the students) What happens to the number of members in the group with each additional generation? (It doubles; it increases exponentially.)

If we could continue going backwards in time, say about 64 times -- or 64 generations ago, (First student) would have about 18 and a half quintillion ancestors. A quintillion is the number one followed by 18 zeros. If we tried to count it by seconds, it would take 32 billion years, which is older than the age of the universe! (Students are instructed to be seated.)

Each of us has this kind of ancestry. If we go back in time to year 400 -- 1600 years ago or 64 generations -- each of us winds up with about 18 and a half quintillion ancestors. But theres a problem here. One quintillion

equals one billion billion. Whats the problem? (There are a lot more ancestors than there are or ever were people on Earth.)

**READING: From Billions & Billions, by Carl Sagan, p. 23.**

Something is wrong with our calculation. What? Well, we have assumed all those lineal ancestors to be different people. But this, of course, is not the case. The same ancestor is related to us by many different routes. We are repeatedly, multiply connected with each of our relatives . . . Something like this is true of the whole human population. If we go far enough back, any two people on Earth have a common ancestor . . . We are all cousins -- everyone on Earth.

## **BOUNDARIES WORKSHEET**

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

A. Which season were you born in? Circle one: Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall.

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Three reasons why your groups season is better than the other three groups:

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

B. Where were you born? Circle one: North, South, East, West.

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Three reasons why your groups location is better than the other three groups:

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

C. Which color do you like best? Circle one: Purple, Green, Orange, Brown.

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Three reasons why your groups color is better than the other three groups:

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

D. What gender are you? Circle one: Male or Female.

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Three reasons why your groups gender is better than the other group:

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

On the back, write three reasons why people find it difficult to find a common ground.

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