



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

*to strengthen teaching in public schools®*

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2023 Volume II: Writing About Nature

---

## Self-Identity through Nature and Magic

Curriculum Unit 23.02.06, published September 2023

by Ricardo Moreno

### Introduction

---

Henry David Thoreau writes about nature and one's place within it as, "the indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the wood shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"<sup>1</sup>

Our seminar, titled "Writing about Nature" with Jill Campbell, introduced me to something I took for granted: the nature all around us, but more specifically in my case, the nature of the urban setting. By consciously slowing down, putting aside the hectic pace of our present-day world, we can immerse ourselves into the world of the observer. We have the opportunity to get closer to nature. To take notice. To pay close attention to sight, sound, scent, touch and taste. By finding your "sit-spot", a teaching strategy introduced in seminar, we locate our perch, our own lookout tower you might say, and nature is now laid at one's feet. The colors of nature seem to burst out of its crevices and hidings, to spring forth with all the shades of sky blue; the evergreen of leaves and foliage wrapped about you to a point of almost suffocation; the feel of the summer breeze on the scruff of your collar; the glare of morning sunshine as it soaks its warmth into every nook and cranny of your being. I find this a revelation.

As a teacher I need to have some sense of purpose and guidance. Not just inside my classroom and with my students, but on a deeper and personal understanding. As I reflect on the words of Thoreau, I cannot help to feel that I have stumbled upon a not so carefully hidden secret. That maybe I am a part of something bigger than what I once thought. On those days where loneliness and sometimes even despair crept into my life, I now can hopefully find some peace and solace in the experience of my sit-spot amidst nature. In some way, I now feel that I belong to something I still have a hard time understanding, but something which brings some sense of comfort and acceptance, this connection and awareness to all that is nature.

Before arriving on the metaphoric shores of New Haven to attend this latest of seminars, I had saddled myself with quite literally and figuratively too much baggage. Embarking from my home in tow with my extra-large rolling duffel bag, it seemed as though I had crammed everything humanly possible inside of it to survive the end of days. Note to myself: I am quite prepared for any catastrophe or social function which might arise. The

figurative baggage which I also brought with myself as I disembarked the airplane I carried not in my arms and hands, but up top in the attic, upwards in my tangled nest of my inner self. I have been carrying this baggage for the greater portion of my human existence.

Ever since I was a wee bit muskrat, I seem to be searching for something I had lost, or even for something I never had to begin with. This idea of who I am. I don't know why but I do recall those early days of trying to figure out meanings in solitude. At times of having these feelings of not knowing which way to turn, no one there to tell me, "This way son, come this way." There were times of course when I was successful in stashing this baggage away into the corners of some basement closet, jammed into the furthest of darkened corners.

But like everything in life which matters and is of consequence, those things which gnaw at you and those things one tries to hide and forget about, they have the tendency to rise up out of the spindly shadows and break free into the daylight. The "Who am I" baggage of childhood, teenage-hood, and adulthood.

I still keep it stored deep in my psyche: The passenger riding shotgun, fiddling with the knobs on the radio; the rider sitting next to you on the roller coaster, white knuckles and all; the exhausted commuter sitting across from you on the local express, staring obliviously out a racing window of blur. As a middle-aged man, I should not be burdened with so much baggage, I have too many responsibilities. Too many people depend on me. The search for self-discovery. The game of filling in the blanks on a Mad Lib and everyone laughing at you. Oh bother, I've come full circle to where I began. Can nature be the guide which points me in the right direction towards self-discovery? To find out who I am and to find my place in this world? To help me fill in the blanks? I will move forward with this idea of self-discovery with nature as the centerpiece of this teaching unit, not just for myself but for my family, my friends, and my students.

With great thought and consideration I will attempt to bring an understanding of self-discovery through my introduction to the mythology and magic of the Aztec gods; the shared experience of the immigrants which ensnares the Hispanic tribe I find myself belonging to as well as the majority of students I teach; culminating with the tales of Latin American writers such as Marquez, Paz, and Asturias as they immerse us all into the mythical beauty of the literary genre known as magical realism. This journey of self-discovery will travel along the path of these three subjects—the Aztec gods, immigration, and magical realism—to explore and consider the role of nature and how it intertwines like roots buried beneath us, a path leading to clarity and acceptance. A path of discovery, and the clarity of belonging to one self and to the world.

## Background

---

I am so blessed to be a public-school teacher. I love teaching my students both math and language arts. Up until last school year I taught middle school math. Presently I am looking forward to teaching Language Arts in both Reading and Writing. Starting new in a specific content area like Language Arts meant that I had to cobble together Reading and Writing units in time for the start of the new school year while considering anchor texts I would be utilizing for the year. These texts included *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Night* by Elie Wiesel.

I teach 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts—Reading and Writing to approximately 75 students. I have three in classes which I see on a daily basis. These consist of one class in which I solely instruct Writing for 55 minutes. In

addition to this, I teach two additional classes which are two hours long. Those two hours are broken up into one hour of Reading and one hour of Writing. The majority of my instruction time is in English with some Spanish. I teach speaking English to my monolingual students but I can speak Spanish as well to those students who have a stronger capacity for Spanish. Our Language Arts classes have been dramatically impacted with the loss of instruction due to COVID. Middle school students perform well below their grade level in these areas. It is a challenge for students to open books up and write a standard paragraph with proper grammar skills being used.

My school, Richard Edwards IB Dual Language Elementary, is a part of Chicago School District #299. Edwards has one of the largest elementary student populations in Chicago with an enrollment of approximately 1,300 students. The demographics of the school are: Hispanic 95.8%, White 1.6%, and Black 1.2%, with approximately 90% of the student enrollment low income, 51.6% limited English proficient, and 15% diverse learners. There will be approximately 80 eighth grade students. I will be teaching Reading and Writing for the upcoming 2023-2024 school year.<sup>6</sup>

## Self-Identity

---

As I look around my classroom and stare into the faces of my students, oftentimes what I see is a blank canvas. Dull dark eyes, expressionless. As a teacher I reach out and put myself out there for them to see me. I talk of my successes but more so my struggles. In life, my family and career. I then circle around back to the beginning to state out loud, “who am I and how did I get here?” Together with my students I participate in a journey of self-discovery.

J. Drew Lanham expresses this as, “to help others understand nature is to make it breathe like some giant: a revolving, evolving, celestial being with ecosystems acting as organs and the living things within those places—humans included—as cells vital to its survival. My hope is that somehow I might move others to find themselves magnified in nature, whomever and wherever they might be.”<sup>10</sup>

I came to this conclusion by introducing nature as a kind of overlapping blanket of all of the following three: the mythology of the Aztecs; the present reality of a social issue as immigration; and the spawning of the genre known as magical realism, which some would argue takes Latin America as its birthplace and rise to prominence in the literary world. But how can we define what nature is and how can we understand its role with an ancient people’s culture and religion as well as the controversial issue of immigration? It is this exact undertaking which will guide us to self-discovery. If we are to understand what is to become of ourselves, then should we not discover all that is now and all that was? But is this idea of how we see time as misunderstood as the countless things we see clearly in the dark, but when the light pours into windows we find ourselves as blind as a newborn taking its first breaths. Robin Wall Kimmerer states,

In the way of linear time, you might hear Nanbozho’s (First Man—part man, part *manido*—powerful spirit being) stories as mythic lore of history, a recounting of a long ago past and how things came to be. But in circular time, these stories are both history and prophecy, stories for a time yet to come. If time is a turning circle, there is a place where history and prophecy converge—the footprints of First Man lie on the path behind us and on the path ahead.<sup>2</sup>

Whether time is linear or circular, we must understand that this experience is a shared one, inter-connected through your idea of time to realize that we are not alone in this journey. Though our company on this journey does come from the first tribes, we are accompanied also by all who walk with us: the earth, the wind, the trees, the sky. Mother Nature is the first witness on our journey, a journey of self-discovery. A journey we have walked, one we walk today and one we have walked before. In the words of Kimmerer,

...some contemporary scholars who see in the social pathologies and relentlessly materialist culture the fruit of homelessness, a rootless past. America has been called the home of second chances ... But can Americans, as a nation of immigrants, learn to live here as if they were staying? With both feet on the shore? What happens when we truly become native to a place, when we finally make a home? Where are the stories that lead the way?<sup>3</sup>

Through our seminar study, readings, and discussion I came to realize that nature itself was the all-encompassing force which surrounds itself. It is nature which bequeaths the past and the present. It is nature which spins both reality and magic together, to forge an unequalled compromise in literary form. To capture the essence of nature, harness its power and come to an understanding. What more generous gift can be offered to my students than the chance for them to become observer, participant, and keeper of this idea we call nature. These themes of the past and the present, at once set apart but now combined into one in the genre of magical realism. I will present that our use of nature can be used as the glue which holds all three together. As I moved forward with the unit on magical realism I began to realize how nature is found in its most basic forms throughout the histories and tales of Latin America.

When introducing the Aztec gods, we will begin to discover how the earth and heavens are so powerfully represented. Lucia Nunez shows us,

In accordance with other meso-American traditions, the Aztecs experienced "nature" in all its complexity not as a mere mundane entity out there, but rather as deeply connected with superhuman powers and beings, manifesting themselves in countless aspects of the surrounding world and a sacred landscape.<sup>4</sup>

Next, we enter the realm of the present which is represented with the issue of immigration. An aspect of our conversations will be focused on the natural landscapes immigrants endure passing through: the jungles, the arid deadly deserts, and the bending rivers.

We conclude with our readings on magical realism. Not only will my students read of places and magical characters, they will discover more about themselves, the past. "The greatest discovery in life is self-discovery. Until you find yourself, you will always be someone else. Be yourself," Myles Munroe.<sup>5</sup>

## Nature

---

The theme of the unit is nature and how it covers our three subtopics of mythology, migration, and magical realism. I will propose that it is nature which connects both reality and fantasy to produce the genre of magical realism. I will argue that nature is not only setting and location, but also something much more. My students will consider and discuss why we think that this unit on Nature and the selections of topics ranging from the indigenous gods of Mexico, the history of immigration in America, and the fantastical reality of magical realism fiction represent our understanding of nature and its role in our self-discovery. They will also consider the role of our own personal stories and how they foster and promote interest in the unit and how these experiences play a role with our expectations of the unit. We also ask ourselves what other potential interdisciplinary connections can we identify with nature? What are the historical and mythological connections we can make by looking at these sub-groups and their combined representation of nature?

## Magical Realism and Latin America

---

Novels and short stories, especially by Latin American writers, use a combination of realism and fantasy. This genre is known as magical realism. An example of magical realism can be found in the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gabriel Garcia Marquez there uses food in the form of a cocoa drink to connect nature and the magical, as when a priest lifts up off the ground and levitates after drinking a cup of cocoa: “he wiped his lips from a handkerchief that he drew from his sleeve, extended his arms, and closed his eyes. Thereupon Father Nicanor rose six inches above the level of the ground.”<sup>7</sup>

The unit will include the works “My Life with the Wave” by Octavio Paz, “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and *Hombres de Maíz (Men of Maize)* by Miguel Ángel Asturias. Magical realism is the convergence of magic with reality. Maggie Ann Bowers defines magical realism in terms of “its distinguishing feature from literary realism”: “it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective. Because it breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the realist, magical realism is often considered to be a disruptive mode.”<sup>8</sup>

## Teaching Strategies

---

As a Language Arts teacher, my learning goal is to make my students stronger readers and writers. Before we step into the strategies, I would like to place some emphasis on the classroom environment. As a teacher I want my students to be comfortable when they sit at their desk. My classroom is set up to promote sensory attention: scented candles, meditation music, soft lighting are but a couple of strategies I have in place to make my students at ease and at peace. Another is books. It’s one thing placing a book into the hands of students and asking them to read, and it’s another thing to have the students choose books and genres they like to read. What I have seen in the classroom is this: reading books is not dead. The majority of my students

pick up books they like to read. As a Language Arts teacher, I think having a classroom library can only make the learning and teaching experience more productive.

As a teacher I work with both mono and bilingual students, with the vast majority of the latter speaking Spanish. I understand that having visible content strategies and language objectives posted on bulletin boards is a proven method in the classroom. These language objectives can be posted in both English and in Spanish. English Language students are offered the opportunity to have the same pathway to comprehending curriculum, even with some students not having acquired strong language comprehension in their second language. Incorporating a just approach on acquiring these language skills is fostered through the use, implementation, and assessment of these language skills. As students observe these strategies on a daily basis, the teacher must define and discuss these strategies for students to begin applying these same strategies into the lesson instruction and activities. With each new lesson, these content strategies will be modified and updated to include academic language pertaining to students' mastery of Common Core state standards in Reading and Writing. As a teacher working with English Language learners, the introduction of academic language is key for students to comprehend content area knowledge. When implemented clearly, the use of language objectives helps promote the mastery of academic language, how these objectives are used, and ultimately how students meet and master standards related to the curriculum.

A goal of language objectives is having students know what the goal of the curriculum is. In essence one might look at this as working backwards. Know the destination you are going to, and apply understanding and guidance in circumnavigating the turns and twists on getting to your final goal. Utilizing clear and organized instruction helps keep our students focused and centered, and in doing so attaining student comprehension with learning objectives. We can be looked at as the light which shines on the path towards moving to understanding and mastery.

Through weekly formative assessments, students will be monitored on their understanding and comprehension of the learning objectives. Students will have the opportunity to read prior to understanding texts. Students will be able to set personal goals in what they plan and wish to comprehend and master. Students will make connections to previous knowledge to apply it towards their goals. They will be invited into settings in which questions may be asked as well as predictions and be given feedback through open discourse with their peers. Students struggling with the text will be offered the opportunity to re-read the text and again introduce their understanding and questions.

The nature found in magic and mythology of the Aztec gods appears, for example, in *Tlaloc*, god of rain, water, lightning, and *Ehecatl*, the god of air and winds. When introducing the Aztec gods, we began to discover how the earth and heavens are so powerfully represented. The Aztecs experienced "nature" in all its complexity not as a mere entity out there, but rather as deeply connected with superhuman powers and beings, manifesting themselves in countless aspects of the surrounding world and a sacred landscape.

### **Sit Spots/Journaling**

Routine and repetition of journaling represents the perseverance of the act of struggle and finally clarity. Students will create a journal using various settings where fantasy is intertwined with reality. My students will be able to produce journal response/texts, sketches, doodling that demonstrate thought, imagination, and sensitivity while exploring and considering new perspectives and ideas arising from personal engagement with the creative process.

## **Using hands-on materials**

The importance of standing alongside mother and grandmother in the kitchen to learn the art of homemade tortillas cannot be denied. Through this act of cultural practice and transmission we come to understand the wisdom of our own identity, a connection from the past to today. Tortillas are not just a means of nourishment, but also the act of connecting to rites and rituals of our parents, grandparents, and our ancestors. They bring joy to a family. They connect us to our gods. The use of corn husk, feathers, flower petals, cocoa beans, water, and earth in our students' activities helps us make connections to nature. The use of these hands-on resources guides us down the path of self-discovery. It is critical that students participate in hands-on learning through observation, data collecting, analysis and experimentation.

## **Reflection**

As a teacher that is the challenge I bestow on myself: a journey of self-discovery. J. Drew Lanham expresses this as, "to help others understand nature is to make it breathe like some giant: a revolving, evolving, celestial being with ecosystems acting as organs and the living things within those places--humans included--as cells vital to its survival. My hope is that somehow I might move others to find themselves magnified in nature, whomever and wherever they might be."<sup>12</sup> These themes of the past and the present, at once set apart but now combined into one in the genre of magical realism. I will present that our use of nature can be used as the glue which holds all three together. Offering students opportunities to reflect on the activities and the class discussion gives them opportunities to work in team building collaborations, while I promote the use of digital tools and resources and engage in inquiry-oriented methods of discourse. Students will be expected to take meticulous notes during the lecture portion of class with periodic informal assessments.

## **Perspective**

From the student perspective, one will consider how fantasy is used as a metaphor externalizing imagined conflict and moral conflict. Students will create a journal using various settings where fantasy is intertwined with reality. Another vital strategy of this unit will be the opportunity afforded to students in considering multiple perspectives from texts.

## **Blended Learning**

The unit will focus on the students working in small independent groups and being prepared to complete both informal and summative assessments. Students will participate in blended learning so as to utilize online resources and materials in an effort to promote online discourse with the traditional classroom method. Students will have a set of high expectations in place, to promote a challenge to succeed. They will investigate environmental and engineering challenges to spur creative design and solutions. The gradual release of responsibility to the students will occur as the teacher becomes facilitator while at the same time spurring discussion and critical thinking through the use of open-ended questions. Use events to hook students into engagement of problem solving.

## **Enduring Understandings/Big Ideas**

The three sections of the unit, Latin American Mythology/History/Magical Realism can be incorporated into IB strategy and curriculum. The IB approaches to learning skills (ATL) are grounded in the belief that learning how to learn is fundamental to a student's life in and out of a school context. In broad terms, IB programs support learners in developing: Thinking skills, Communication skills, Research skills, Social skills and Self-



management skills. A key concept is creativity because students will see how writers can make highly creative use of language. A related concept is genre and identifying setting to aid in describing a work of fiction where fantasy slips into everyday life. Writers use creativity to explore different genres and settings on social construction of reality.

### **Essential Questions**

The following questions are considered when pertaining to the use of classroom strategies with the unit.

Factual: What is the value of exploring and reflecting on historical context when referring to fiction?

Line of Inquiry: In which different ways can creativity be expressed?

Conceptual: How is creativity utilized within the same perspective through fantasy and reality?

Factual: How is perspective viewed in multiple ways such as reality and magic?

Line of Inquiry: Can creativity affect the social construction of reality within various genres and settings?

Conceptual: Can the perspective from characters justify or challenge moral reasoning?

## **Classroom Activities**

---

### **Nature Activity 1—The Aztec Gods and Codex**

This first section of three from the unit will concern the magic and mythology of the unit. It also gives us the opportunity to begin laying down a foundational aspect as to how we can find this idea of self-identity. The culture of the Aztecs was essentially wiped out and in doing so left an emptiness for the generations which followed. Therein lies the attempt in coming to an understanding of who we are as the children of Latin America now living in the United States. The magic and mythology of the Aztecs is what we will use to build our structure. We will combine this rich perspective as we include the role of nature among these early cultures. We will examine the critical role and impact nature played on Aztec religion, their gods and their way of life.

There will be a number of activities students will participate in to make connections with these perspectives. Students will create an Aztec codex of at least six panels with three written pages describing an original origin story/myth of a god centering on an aspect to Nature, i.e. rain, earth, fire sky, etc. The three remaining panels from the student codex will be original art depicting the god itself with emphasis on all aspects to Nature. Students' focus will be on their incorporating traditional Aztec patterns, symbols, designs and glyphs into their work. Students will draw an original Aztec god connecting nature on three panels illustrating a sequence of stories.

### **Maize and the Tortilla**

The website [vivirmexicohermoso](http://vivirmexicohermoso) provides a rich re-telling of the Aztec myth of corn:



History says that before the arrival of Quetzalcoatl, the Aztecs ate only roots and animals they hunted. They didn't have corn, because this super nutrient cereal was hidden behind the mountains. The old Gods tried to separate the mountains with their colossal force but they failed. The Aztecs went to put this problem directly to Quetzalcoatl. I'll bring you the corn, God answered them. It was Quetzalcoatl, the mighty God, who used his strength and his intelligence to separate the mountains. He transformed himself into a black ant and accompanied by a red ant, went to the mountains. The road was full of difficulties but Quetzalcoatl overcame all of them, thinking only of his people and their food needs. With great efforts he never gives up before the fatigue and difficulties. Quetzalcoatl went to where the corn was, and since he was transformed into an ant, took a ripe grain in its jaws and started back. He traveled all the way back to deliver the promised corn grain to the hungry indigenous. The Aztecs planted the seed. They obtained the corn and since then they planted and harvested it. The precious grain increased their wealth, and they became stronger, built cities, palaces, temples ... And they lived happily ever since. And from that moment, the Aztecs worshiped the generous Quetzalcoatl, the god friend of the men, the god who brought them corn.<sup>13</sup>

Many important deities had at least three distinct types of image: a permanent representation as an effigy made of stone, wood, or terracotta, which was fed, dressed and scented; a temporary representation in a dough image, which was sacrificed and eaten by the people, representing the gods' original sacrifice; and another temporary representation in the form of a living victim who was sacrificed and then eaten by the people, standing for the original sacrifice of the deities as well as man's return of their gift of life.

In Aztec thought these perishable and communally ingested deity representations were as important as the permanent statues. The making of dough images may have predated the images made of wood and clay, and perhaps originated in agricultural ritual when plants were domesticated in Mesoamerica in early times. We do not know the forms of the dough images, but they may have resembled the stone, wood, or clay figures of nature deities.

In the *Codices Matritenses*, the illustrations of the dough images that represent mountains show them as deity busts against a temple doorway. According to Dr. Jaime Lara,

The use of a light and pliable mixture derived from the pith of the corn had deep significance, for corn was the staple food and had itself been a god in the Aztec pantheon. In a very Hebraic way, maize had been one of the principal "first fruits" offered in the Mesoamerican temples, among the sacrifices to the divine mouth of the earth deity. The Nahuatl word for maize dough is in fact 'our sweet sustenance' (*toneuhcayotl*), which lent itself metaphorically for the flesh of Christ hanging on the cross or eaten at Eucharist. In fact, the Nahuatl verb 'to sacrifice' was the same as 'to knead and spread out', like the act of preparing the dough of the corn tortilla before roasting ...<sup>15</sup>

Students will participate in a hands-on activity in making corn tortillas. During the seminar we had a wonderful learning opportunity on nature. Nature is everywhere and everything. Sometimes we can forget this when we try to expand our understanding and look at nature in the broadest of terms. In reality, nature sits in front of us, face to face, at our fingertips. By stopping to pay attention closer and studying the details I came to the understanding of how corn is critical and vital in all aspects of Latin American culture and life. By conducting this activity, students will actually get their hands working on how to make handmade tortillas. How much

more can you connect with an act which sustains families and community. Students will feel and understand what their parents and past generations did to survive by making tortillas. Students will be participating in writing a short, paragraph long writing assignment from the perspective of an ear of corn, an ode or poem. Students will write their writing upon a single dry piece of corn husk.

### **Nature Activity 2—El Norte: The Mountain, the Desert, and the River in Film**

The second and middle of the unit's three main sections will be on immigration and the experience of traveling across different regions of landscape and nature. How these landscapes and nature act more as obstacles and challenges placed ahead of the immigrant is what I sought out. I aimed to compare and contrast the mythology of the past with the reality of the present in the form of the immigrant experience. The journey of immigration is not only a physical journey but one in which the spirit and dreams of the people are represented. After all, our country is a nation of immigrants and we have come to this land from every imaginable corner and crevice in the world. All immigrants have tales to tell with journeys made. A journey which is shared by all immigrants. A journey of reality and not illusions. We introduce the landscapes of nature as the setting. The journey through mountains, deserts and rivers to reach America is a real experience, grounded in truth.

Students will watch the movie *El Norte*. I remember watching this movie in the mid 1980's as a teenager and how it impacted that day and even now to this day. *El Norte* led me to a window to see inside of something I had no understanding of: what would make families leave a place where generations from the same family spent their entire lives. This movie shows the path and decisions made by families to become immigrants and begin the journey up north. Using film as a resource to understand the theme is an ideal strategy. Paying attention in literature to the details is one way to comprehend the theme, and the same can be said of watching film. Using film can address the strengths of students who are predominantly visual learners. Film can be a tool which balances the playing field between the strengths and weaknesses of students.

### **Nature Activity 3—Reading Fiction Text**

The third and final section of the unit's three sections is a convergence of the magic of the gods with the reality of a people traveling across landscapes in search of a better life. The product of these factors is what we introduce to the students as magical realism. In these stories we find and cross the bridge between magic and reality. A convergence of nature in what we call magical realism. This genre made famous by Latin American writers includes the tales of drowned men, of a love affair between a man and an ocean wave, and of how men accept corn as the key to creation.

There will be three pieces of fiction; two short stories and excerpts from a novel. All three fiction pieces are classified as magical realism fiction and my focus will be on the genre, but to a greater extent I move forward with the idea on how nature is represented in all three texts, and how nature is represented critically and awe inspiring. The first of the three texts is the short story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in which the body of a drowned man surfaces on the beach of a small town. I find it remarkable how Marquez writes the prose without one example of direct dialogue. Almost akin to a controlled rambling of metaphor and observation to the point of genius. This strategy allows him to write freely and descriptively, almost wonderingly in thought and reflection, to tell his tale. But his best writing comes in how he showcases and describes nature in all its beauty and ferociousness. From the wonder and awe of an overpowering fragrance of gardens in the middle of the sea to the apocalyptic way he describes invading, marching hordes of crabs literally breaking through doors and windows. A story about acceptance, community, and honoring the dead, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" is one of Márquez' most

powerful and widely read stories. I will ask the students to identify other examples of nature from the story, and how they can be compared and contrasted with each other.

The second short story used is called “My Life with the Wave” by Octavio Paz. This short story represents the fantastical far end of the magical realism spectrum. Students will be introduced to personification and how it is used to bring to life an inanimate object such as a wave of water from the sea. Students will share examples of personification in other forms of text and media. The students will reflect on how the wave of water representing nature is described and demonstrates human characteristics and emotions.

The final selection of text is the novel *Hombres de maíz (Men of Maize)* by Miguel Ángel Asturias. In this story we come full circle with the understanding of how corn represents a vital role in the history and community of Latin America. It tells the story of the Mayan people whose own tissue and skin are formed from corn. It is in the indigenous towns and communities of these same Mayan townsfolk that the magical and mythological still continue as part of their lives. The traditions, rituals, and way of life harken back to a time before the arrival of the Spanish and the conquest which followed. The students are asked: What role does corn play in the indigenous society of the Maya and what does it represent in the present Latin American communities, i.e. corn in the form of tortillas? The main characters from the story fight to keep their way of life from coming to an end from the economic development represented here by big companies.

I really connect with the following quotation by Maggie Ann Bower summarizing the novel as a re-telling of the Mayan myth, “the “rain woman” or “mother of maize” who is lost to the worlds of the earth and the sky and lives caught between the two. It emphasizes the association of the man’s loss of his wife with the loss of his land and the ability to grow maize. The novel ends when the man seeking his wife finds “rain woman”. In this instant the man appears to be reunited with the earth after having his land taken from him by the colonists.”<sup>18</sup>

Overall, the students will make connections to the concepts learned of the indigenous way of life as an example of the past, rich with legends, folklore, and magic of the ancient people. The students will compare the mythology with the experiences of the immigrant, so as to attempt an understanding of who we are as products of this past way of life, products of these tales of journeys and crossings. These passages where nature plays the role of guide, directing both young and old, down a path through mountain trails, the endless barren desert landscape, and rivers whose waters carry the memories of all those who made it across, and those who were carried away to their final journey. All of this in some vain attempt to come to an awareness of self-identity. Once a picture with a clean, blank slate and now into one with a rich canvas of brilliant brushstrokes of colors, where pages have been filled in with the tales of Gods and of ordinary, brave people sacrificing everything for the generations to come.

## **Appendix: Implementing District and Common Core Standards**

---

The following standards used for this unit will help with the direction to unit moves, will aid in our faithful implementation of strategies to determine key learning objectives in the form of theme and central idea. The standards will help us address various points of view from both the fiction and non-fiction texts used throughout the unit.

CC.8. R.L.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development

over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.8. R.L.6 Craft and Structure: Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

CC.8. W.3 Text Types and Purposes: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

In order to master these standards, students must be able to identify and explain the content, context, language, structure, technique and style of text(s) and the relationship among texts. Students must be able to identify and explain the effects of the creator's choices on an audience. Students must be able to justify opinions and ideas, using examples, explanations and terminology. Students must be able to interpret similarities and differences in features within and between genres and texts.

## Bibliography

---

"A Summary and Analysis of Márquez' 'The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World.'" Interesting Literature, April 7, 2023.

<https://interestingliterature.com/2022/03/marquez-handsomest-drowned-man-in-the-world-summary-analysis/#:~:text='The%20Handsomest%20Drowned%20Man%20in%20the%20World'%20is%20a%20short,of%20M%C3%A1rquez'%20most%20powerful%20stories.>

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magical Realism*. Routledge, 2018.

Brinton, Daniel G. *Nagualism: Aztecs Folklore and Magic*. BLURB, 2018.

"Crossing the Darién Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed July 15, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darien-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Olive Editions, 2016.

Drost, Nadja, and Bruno Federico. "What Migrants Face as They Journey through the Deadly Darien Gap." PBS, August 12, 2020.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-migrants-face-as-they-journey-through-the-deadly-darien-gap>.

"English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 8." English Language Arts Standards Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed June 18, 2023. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/6/>.

"Edwards," Chicago Public Schools, accessed June 18, 2023, <https://www.cps.edu/schools/schoolprofiles/edwards>

Garsd, Jasmine. "Desperate Migrants Are Choosing to Cross the Border through Dangerous U.S. Desert." NPR, May 3, 2023.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/03/1169010633/desperate-migrants-are-choosing-to-cross-the-border-through-dangerous-u-s-desert>.

"Interview with Gabriel García Márquez." UNESCO, December 5, 2018.  
<https://en.unesco.org/courier/octobre-1991/interview-gabriel-garcia-marquez>.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Vancouver, B.C.: Langara College, 2022.

Lanham, J. Drew. *Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man in Nature*. Milkweed Editions, 2016.

Lara, Jaime. *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Lifford, Tina Positively Positive. "When You Know Yourself, You Are Empowered. When You Accept Yourself, You Are Invincible." Positively Positive, September 10, 2012.  
<https://www.positivelypositive.com/quotes/when-you-know-yourself-you-are-empowered-when-you-accept-yourself-you-are-invincible/>.

Magazine, Smithsonian. "Tracing Anthropologist Zelia Nuttall through Smithsonian Collections." Smithsonian.com, October 26, 2021.  
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/smithsonian-libraries-and-archives/2021/10/26/tracing-anthropologist-zelia-nuttall-through-smithsonian-collections/>.

Márquez, Gabriel García, and Gregory Rabassa. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. London: Penguin Books, 2014.

"Men of Maize." Wikipedia, July 4, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men\\_of\\_Maize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_of_Maize).

Mexicolore. Accessed July 15, 2023.  
<https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/ask-us/making-art-figures-of-corn-stalk-paste>.

Mexicolore. Accessed July 16, 2023. <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/ask-us/why-wear-headdresses>.

"Myles Munroe Quotes (Author of Understanding the Purpose and Power of Woman)." Goodreads. Accessed July 18, 2023. [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/88114.Myles\\_Munroe](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/88114.Myles_Munroe).

"'My Life with the Wave' Summary and Study Guide." SuperSummary. Accessed July 16, 2023.  
<https://www.supersummary.com/my-life-with-the-wave/summary/>.

Nava, Gregory. *El Norte*, n.d.

Nunez, Lucia. *Visions of History: the Aztecs and the Spanish*. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, 1996.

Pasztory, Esther. *Aztec Art*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

Soustelle, Jacques. *Daily life of the Aztecs*. London: Phoenix, 2002.

Thoreau, Henry David, Alcoriza Javier Vento, Antonio Lastra, and Adolfo Serra. *Walden*. Spain: Editorial Alma, 2022.

Vargas, Jose Antonio. "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant." *The New York Times*, June 22, 2011.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/magazine/my-life-as-an-undocumented-immigrant.html>.

Vivirmexicohermoso. "Mexican Corn, an Aztec Legend." vivirmexicohermoso, January 11, 2016.  
<https://vivirmexicohermoso.wordpress.com/2015/12/28/mexican-corn-an-aztec-legend/>.

## Notes

---

1. Thoreau, Henry David, Alcoriza Javier Vento, Antonio Lastra, and Adolfo Serra. *Walden*, 70
2. Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 207
3. Ibid
4. Nunez, Lucia. *Visions of History: the Aztecs and the Spanish*.
5. Myles Munroe Quotes (Author of "Understanding the Purpose and Power of Woman)." Goodreads
6. "Edwards," Chicago Public Schools
7. Márquez, Gabriel García, and Gregory Rabassa. *One Hundred Years of solitude*
8. Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magical Realism*, 17
9. Lifford, Tina Positively Positive. "When You Know Yourself, You Are Empowered. When You Accept Yourself, You Are Invincible."
10. Ibid, 6
11. "Interview with Gabriel García Márquez"
12. Lanham, J. Drew. *Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man in Nature*, 6
13. Mexicolore
14. Pasztory, Esther. *Aztec Art*
15. Lara, Jaime. *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico*
16. Ibid
17. Soustelle, Jacques. *Daily Life of the Aztecs*
18. Ibid

---

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit [https://teachers.yale.edu/terms\\_of\\_use](https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use)