

Signs of Change

Grade Levels: 8th, middle-high school

Subject/Topic Areas: Fiction, Testimonio, and Documentary of the Maya Genocide

Key Words: Maya, cooperation, democracy, atrocity

Designed by: Sarah Donovan

Time Frame: Four weeks (five with tree unit)

School District: Community Consolidated School District 15

School: Winston Campus Junior High

Brief Summary of Unit:

This unit is an example of what English teachers can do to explore global issues of social justice through reading and writing. It is specifically designed using eighth grade Common Core Standards, but the unit is appropriate for middle through high school students. The unit goal is to learn through inquiry by beginning with a central text and then filling in the narrative gaps with additional inquiry. History is a narrative just as stories are, so we need to see any story as having gaps that prompt questions and further inquiry. Another goal is to consider strengths and weaknesses of the different renderings of the Maya experiences. In addition, there are a variety of texts and writing activities with particular attention to comprehension skills, authorial language, and theme. The culminating assignment is a multigenre project (see Romano's *Blending Genre, Altering Style*) that synthesizes the various sources to answer our essential question: How have the Maya responded to signs of change; and what can the Maya teach us about democracy? The texts in this unit capture the resilience of people and the value of cooperation. By focusing on Maya genocide of the early 1980s and exploring their culture, American students can learn the true meaning of cooperation and gain a greater sense of democratic living while celebrating the resilience of a people. The novel, *Tree Girl*, is the central text, so the study guide follows the book chapter by chapter indicating places for additional inquiry. The *testimonio* of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, and numerous documentary and other media resources, capture the social structures that created oppression in Guatemala and the mechanisms people used to resist and maintain traditions. As we see in Grandin's book, "Repression severed alliances between reforming elites and popular classes, disaggregated powerful collective movements into individual survival strategies, extracted leaders from their communities, and redefined the relationship between human beings and society" (Grandin 196). However, individuals, especially activists, while extracted did not remain isolated. Out of such manifestations grew a new way of thinking that resisted oppression. The state sanctioned terror in Guatemala ignited a collective consciousness which extended to organized opposition. Guatemala advanced democracy not through autonomy or isolated freedom but rather a "collective action laid bare the social foundations of self" (181). This is what is worth knowing and teaching in our schools; this notion of democracy is worth contemplating, and so this unit attempts to explore these notions by using stories as points of access for young thinkers.