



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative, bibliography, and appendix of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/summer-stipends> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative, bibliography, and appendix, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: A Critical Translation of Miguel Angel Asturias's Leyendas de Guatemala

Project Director: Richard Kelly Washbourne

Institution: Kent State University

Grant Program: Summer Stipends

### *Research and Contribution*

I am submitting my project, an English-language critical translation of 1967 Nobel laureate Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930) [Legends of Guatemala], the author's first major work, for consideration for support from the NEH Summer Stipend.

Asturias (1899-1974; Guatemala) is one of the great forerunners in the pantheon of modern Spanish American prose fiction writers. His short narrative works are socially conscious, Surrealism-infused Mayan legends rooted in Guatemalan political and historical reality and written in an ecstatic, prose-poetic style. As he noted in an interview, the fusion of realities that characterizes many of the early indigenous writings—the *Popol Vuh* or the *Anales de los Xahil* (also known as *Memorial de Tecpan-Atitlán*)—springs from the “magical imagination” of the indigenous sense of causality: “The Indian thinks in images. He does not see things in process, but he always displaces them into another dimension, in which we see the real disappear and the dream emerge, in which dreams are transformed into tangible and visible reality” (*Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, Issue 71, Vol. 38, no. 2, 2005, 185). *Leyendas de Guatemala*, reimagined twice-told tales and myths of origin from the oral tradition, and even featuring verbal transpositions of Mesoamerican codices, is a book replete with this kind of imagistic transformation, at the same time it constitutes a Neo-Indigenist defense. Asturias's interpretation, a hybridization of precolombianism and Western discourse and institutions, reveals a Guatemala in mythical time. Critic Gerald Martin called it “the first major anthropological contribution to Spanish American literature.” Saul Hurtado Heras notes aptly (116) that *Leyendas* marks the beginning of Asturias's “exaltación de la nacionalidad guatemalteca” [exaltation of Guatemalan nationhood]. And in Philip Swanson's *Landmarks of Latin American Fiction*, the author notes that Asturias's *Leyendas*, *El Señor Presidente*, and *Hombres de maíz* “will remain as Latin American classics when most of this [20th] century's writing is forgotten” (54).

*Leyendas de Guatemala* consists of eight, originally seven, tales. They have not been translated but for three (flawed) exceptions, “Legend of El Cadejo” in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* (R. González Echevarria, ed.), 1997; “Tatuana's Tale”, in an anthology from 1974, *Eye of the Heart: Short Stories from Latin America* (B. Howes, ed.); and “Legend of the Treasure in the Place of Flowers”, from *Columbus' Egg: New Latin American Stories on the Conquest* (N. Caistor, ed.), from 1992. Latin American Literary Review Press (LALRP) published a translation (1997) of Asturias's later short story collection, *The Mirror of Lida Sal: Tales Based on Mayan Myths and Guatemalan Legends* (*El espejo de Lida Sal*, México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1967), a text that rounds out both Asturias's career and the story cycle begun with *Leyendas*.

The work of this Guatemalan writer has been neglected in the criticism, infamously, and ill-served in English. In the nearly eighty years of its existence there has been no English translation of this major early work, hailed by Paul Valéry in his famous prologue as a new genre: “*historias-sueños-poemas*” (stories-dreams-poems). Editions of *Leyendas* exist in six languages apart from Spanish, the earliest—French—dating from 1931:

*Gvatemalske legende* Beograd: Nolit Croatian

*Legendy gvatemaly* Moskva: Khudzoh. Lit. Russian

*Legenden aus Guatemala* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp German

*Guatemala densetsushu* Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai Japanese

*Gvatemalske legende* Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga Slovenian

*Légendes du Guatemala* Paris: Gallimard French

Unabating scholarship on Asturias—including the recent *Cien años de magia: ensayos críticos sobre la obra de Miguel Angel Asturias* (O. Preble-Niemi, ed.; Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2006)—suggests that a new generation would be receptive to reengaging with this past master, and in particular, reading and teaching his short works in English. This is particularly so now that a postcolonial awareness of his writings has emerged—as early as 1995, René Prieto had detailed the resistance to colonialist ideology present in the legends. *Legends of Guatemala* fills a major gap in the Latin American canon in English.

My introductory essays will contribute on three main fronts. First, they will give insight into how the anthropological consciousness of the new narrative in Latin American writing conditioned its discursive strategies, and how Asturias and his contemporaries (Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Mário de Andrade) used myth in the fabulation of its past and present. In this connection, I plan to elucidate the particularly *oral* nature of the tales, their multiple temporal layers and the “excavational” trope organizing them, and shed light on the narratological framework in which they are inscribed. Historically situating Asturias’s revolutionary stylistics and technique is my second goal: Readers familiar with the masterworks of the Boom, for example, Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), will see and hear startling prefigurations in Asturias, written four decades earlier:

The ants extracted from the water a new city, grain by grain of sand—the primitive city of reflections—and with the blood of millions of ants that in time, once the work was done, died, numb with fatigue, built veritable walls as high as the tops of the highest trees, and temples in which the flight of the sleeping birds turned the vestments of the gods to stone. (“The Wizards of the Spring Storm”)

[*Las hormigas sacaron del agua una nueva ciudad, arena por arena —la primitiva ciudad de reflejos— y con sangre de millones de hormigas que cumplido el trabajo morían aletargadas de cansancio, se fueron edificando verdaderas murallas, hasta la copa de los árboles altos, y templos en los que el vuelo de las aves dormidas petrificaba las vestiduras de los dioses. (“Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral”)]*

An overarching purpose of the proposed project is to revalorize Asturias as a pioneer of avant-garde technique and neo-indigenism, what James Clifford called “ethnographic Surrealism” (Vicky Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards*, 139). Those who write in the “Magic Realist” vein have suffered aprioristic accusations of inauthenticity; Asturias will be reexamined in light of the eroded critical respect for this current of writing. Third, and finally, in my analysis I wish to investigate the “double translatedness” of the works—from Quiché (Asturias was himself a translator of the *Popol Vuh*) through Spanish to English. How are the cultural assumptions “behind the text” in Spanish transmissible? What does Asturias do as a storyteller to make his source material his own? And crucially, what translation and editorial strategies can further the “afterlife” of this work in English? To this end, I will survey translations by Martin (*Men of Maize*, the notes and glossary of which are, moreover, indispensable aids to this project) and Rabassa (of the so-called “Banana Trilogy” of novels, considered a disappointment in English).

#### *Methods and Work Plan*

For reasons of unity these individual legends should be presented as the complete story cycle they originally constituted: “Guatemala”, “Ahora que me acuerdo”, “Leyenda del volcán”, “Leyenda del Cadejo”, “Leyenda de la Tatuana”, “Leyenda del Sombrerón”, “Leyenda del tesoro del lugar florido”, and “Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral”. This eighth tale, “Los brujos de la

tormenta primaveral” (Wizards of the Spring Storm), was included in the 1948 edition, and this *tour de force*, a tale of Mayan origins and ultimately humanity’s loss of contact with the gods, would be particularly appealing for readers, and is an extraordinary translational challenge. During the award period, I would be finishing the proposed translation, writing two introductory essays at 12-15 pages each, including a translator’s introduction detailing strategies and choices made, and researching 20 pages of glossary entries and notes on concepts and names from Mayan cosmology—included in Asturias’s own Spanish editions, and which he titled “Indice alfabético de modismos y frases alegóricas” [Alphabetical Index of Colloquialisms and Poetic References]—for 165-175 manuscript pages in total for the book. The weekly breakdown of the itinerary is envisioned to be in five general stages: June 1-21 (final drafts of main text translation); June 22-28 (translation of index; revision); June 29-July 12 (draft of introductory essay); July 13-19 (draft of translator’s introduction); July 20-31 (follow-up research, troubleshooting, and finalization of manuscript).

### *Skills and Materials*

The translator’s competence has been theorized variously, though González and Wagenaar (2002) proposed a model in which capacity for analysis and synthesis, information management skills, decision making, appreciation of multiculturalism, and cultural understanding figure prominently. These subcompetences plus the need for exceptional degree of sensitivity to wordplay, culture, figuration, symbol, religiosity, textual and intertextual cues, compound metaphor, and rhythm, make this translation exceptionally demanding. It would not be idle speculation to assert that this complexity has dissuaded would-be translators from attempting this masterpiece. My extensive work translating Modernista works from the preceding era (1880s-1920), in addition to having translated from the Portuguese and published Raul Bopp’s anthropophagist epic, *Cobra Norato* (1931), give me the requisite background to overcome the inherent difficulties of the text.

My workspace would be the multiple institutions in my immediate area—especially Kent State University and the University of Akron, where I have access to reference works that can assist me with Guatemalan regionalisms and culture-bound allusions.

### *Final Product and Dissemination*

During the two years I have been researching these tales, and the work of Asturias in general, I gave a bilingual reading of some drafts with other faculty presenters at Kent State University. Later, in June 2009, the project attracted the interest of Dr. Yvette Miller at Latin American Literary Review Press (<http://www.lalrp.org/>). She has pledged her support for publishing the work. I have also contacted one of the premier Asturias scholars (and indeed, one of the best-known critics of Latin American literature), Dr. Gerald Martin, who kindly provided needed contacts and who, in the early stages, wrote “I’m delighted to hear that *Leyendas* may at last be published: I am sure people will be dazzled” (personal communication, February 2, 2008). LALRP’s *The Mirror of Lida Sal* appears in over 350 libraries around the world and is arguably the most admired translation of Asturias; my goal is to make *Legends*—a contestatory, hybrid, foundational text—even better known, and aesthetically and intellectually successful with new and initiated readers alike. The target audience for my project would be both general interest readers and academics in the areas of folklore, Mayan history, ethnic studies, mythology, cultural identity, Latin American literature and culture, and comparative literature. Thank you very much for the opportunity to have the project considered for support.

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