

Too Despacito: Reflections on Teaching Latin America in the Global Context

I love history, and most would say that my upbringing brought me to it naturally: I am the daughter of a Peruvian mother and an American diplomat who served in Cuba when the United States broke relations, in Guatemala during the Ydígoras regime, and in Peru during Velasco's coup. I have visited many of the pre-Columbian and colonial archeological sites in Peru and Guatemala and have kept abreast of recent excavations in both countries. I have also been fortunate to teach in communities with a Hispanic presence that has encouraged me to broaden the scope of my history classes to include their experiences as well. The course of my life, as well as my academic training, helped prepare me for addressing the possibilities of teaching Latin American topics within the wider field of world history. Some teachers have such experiences and training, but the overwhelming majority will not. I hope that the following discussion will benefit any teacher seeking to enrich their students' understanding of the world around them through the use of material drawn from the history of Latin America.

What Textbooks have or do not have to Offer

While we have seen some improvement in the teaching of the role of Latin America in world history, progress has been rather too "despacito" (slow). Back in 1984, when I first enrolled in a "World Studies" course in the United States, the course textbook, *Peoples, Men and Nations: A World History* was 878 pages long and nine years old.¹ Of its ten Units, only five made any mention of Latin America. The first mention, on page 281, was only six pages long, and covered all of the pre-Columbian Americas, North and South, with the intent of showing how "Indians developed distinctive ways of life." Global connections were addressed seemingly at random and unsupported by evidence in sentences such as, "some Chinese missionaries may have reached Central America in the 400s." The next mention comes on page 316 where Christopher Columbus arrived at San Salvador and other Europeans conquered the sometimes-mentioned locals. Eight pages describe the



Image 1: Moray, an Incan agricultural testing site in the Peruvian highlands. Author's photograph.

European exploration and conquest of the Americas, with little mention of the effects on their inhabitants. The region is again discussed on page 429 where four pages are devoted to describing the “rigid colonial society in Latin America.” In the subsequent section the “Age of Revolution,” four pages are devoted to its effects on Latin American settler society. Latin America next comes up on page 573 in the discussion of imperialism (after Oceania!), nine pages cover the “unsettled conditions” which “led to American intervention” in the region. The last mention of Latin America is on page 815, addressing the “unstable economic and political conditions” caused by the Cold War. I was fortunate in that my teacher, Mrs. Schepps, had been to Latin America and chose to spend time on some of pre-Columbian societies.

Some few textbooks today go beyond the standard narrative of, “they were there, they were conquered, they gained independence and then they were economically reconquered and then the Cold War.” Nevertheless, as a teacher of world history, I found that I needed

to supplement textbooks with additional information and images, some based on my own research. However, this is problematic, as many teachers do not have time for research or other means of deepening their understanding of the region's history sufficiently to employ teaching examples drawn from Latin American history. Hard pressed teachers can and do make use of their own experiences in high school classes, such as mine with Mrs. Schepps, as a benchmark of what they need to teach their own students, but few have had the good fortune to have had such experiences. Understandably, this leaves Latin America—often unknown to them other than in the context of immigration—getting the short end of the stick. Even those teachers with the time and inclination to increase their coverage of the region face the dilemma that any additional material might reduce the well-established coverage of topics at their school, such as the Eurocentric “Age of Absolutism” imbedded in traditional survey courses.

Acquiring a Compelling Narrative

Another part of the problem facing world history teachers without sufficient understanding of Latin American history is the lack of an overarching narrative like those that can be found about Europe, China, or the Middle East. Teachers new to teaching World History can get the broad strokes of pre-Colombian civilizations from their textbooks, but not the latest scholarly findings about the Maya (unless they read recent issues of *National Geographic*). They can learn more about the Columbian Exchange by reading Alfred W. Crosby's seminal book on the subject and/or Charles Mann's *1493*.² However, many teachers new to world history despair of ever “knowing everything.” The best thing that can happen is that they realize that they simply cannot know everything and definitely not immediately! Rather, they might begin by trying to learn a little bit of more about Latin American from what they have at hand. Teachers who have sizeable populations of students whose families hail from Latin America would do well to focus on that region sooner rather than later in their courses, so as to encourage students themselves to ask for more content and discussion.

So, what is a conscientious teacher to do? For starters one could do worse than start by watching John Leguizamo's *Latin History for Morons*.³ It is funny and, while it veers into US history, it does give one some broad strokes and a beginner's bibliography. Be forewarned: most schools will not permit showing it in high school classrooms given the pervasive foul language throughout. You can also build on students' own knowledge. Many high school students will have heard of Latin America from reading the Time Warp Trio's book *Me Oh Maya* or the Magic Tree House's trip to Machu Picchu in *Late Lunch with Llamas*. Of course, you also need to undo the damage done by films like *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.⁴

Micro-Additions

Another strategy is what I call micro-additions—just add a little spice to the narrative. For a unit on early civilizations, discuss Norte Chico (Caral), which moves the timeline of the Americas back considerably. When discussing the Muslim Agricultural Revolution compare it to the spread of American crops like corn or the domestication of the trees in the Amazon (see for example the discussion in Charles Mann’s *1491*).⁵ No discussion of the conquest of Mexico and Central America should leave out the Nahua who were given *encomiendas* by the Spanish king for their service against the Mexica (see Laura Matthew and Michel Oudik’s *Indian Conquistadors*).⁶ Wars for independence in Latin America should be prefaced with a discussion of Tupac Amaru II. For those not familiar with him, you might try the graphic history about his brother’s life: *Witness to the Age of Revolution*.⁷ The Smithsonian has a great music collection that can be used to show the musical effects of migration to Latin America in the 19th century.⁸ These are not the only examples that can be used; my students admittedly get a generous focus on Peruvian history given my heritage and interests. If it interests you, you can make it interesting to them.



Image 2: At Caral, a city of the Norte Chico civilization in Peru. Author’s photograph.

Student Research

Another tactic: have your students do some of the researching. I usually give my students inquiry-like research projects as culminating or review projects. One approach would be to focus on a theme like environmental history or social history and have them do a regional comparison. There are great resources on the environmental consciousness of the Inca or the role of women in Latin America where women have been president already.⁹ Another approach is to assign students the task of editing the sections of their textbooks that cover Latin America. If you have older texts handy, they can prove useful as a comparison. On the other hand, if you can get your hands on syllabi from university survey courses on Latin America, some of the articles that are assigned in these courses can prove useful; the students themselves can determine what is being left out. Such inquiries can inspire critical thinking at a higher level. Finally, having your students watch *Harvest of Empire* is a good starting point for a discussion of the treatment of modern Latin American history in textbooks.¹⁰ This documentary has a definite political point of view that students could try their hands at supporting or refuting.

Advanced Placement World History Ideas

For those teaching AP World History, below is a list of lessons, articles or images (not mentioned above) that one could incorporate into one's course.

- Unit 0—Be sure to mention at least one society like the Olmecs, Teotihuacan, Nazca.
- Unit 1—Global Tapestry—1200–1450—Have your students try to defend or refute the central argument in “Cereals, Appropriability and Hierarchy” by Mayshar and Moav or a simplified version of their argument.¹¹
- Unit 2—Networks of Exchange—be sure to address pre-Colombian trade routes, World History for Us All (<https://whfua.history.ucla.edu>) has a nice unit on spheres of interaction in the Americas as does the OER Project. Making students cognizant of the interconnectedness between the different societies is helpful in explaining how disease beats Europeans to some parts of the Americas like the Inca.¹²
- Unit 3—Land-Based Empires—have students examine the Inca's economic system (e.g. no merchants, communal agriculture, social safety net) and see if it fits the definition of socialism, as argued by authors like Louis Baudin or it does not, as argued by Peruvian historian Maria Rostworowski.¹³
- Unit 4—Transoceanic Interconnections—include some items not commonly listed among the trade goods—e.g. cochineal or have your students analyze an image reflecting the power of the maroon communities/*Palenques*, etc.¹⁴

- Unit 5—Revolutions—Have students debate the role of pre-Columbian societies (e.g. Iroquois) in influencing Enlightenment ideals; or have students analyze the role of Manuela Saenz, *la libertadora del Libertador* or for an earlier influence they can look at Micaela Bastidas, the wife of Túpac Amaru II.¹⁵
- Unit 6—Consequences of Industrialization—compare the depletion of resources such as *guano* (bird feces exported for fertilizer) to those in other regions; examine the influence of other societies on Latin American food e.g. the so-called “Peruvian chicken,” uses soy sauce brought by Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the 19th Century; or compare instances of xenophobia in the US, Canada and Latin America.¹⁶
- Unit 7—Global Conflict—analyze the effects of the Great Depression on Latin America. Or have students investigate the actions taken during the World War II, as to why Peru sent Japanese (citizens or not) to the U.S. for internment, along with Japanese Americans, in response to an American request.¹⁷
- Unit 8—Cold War and Decolonization—this unit is particularly useful in making connections to the migration of Latin Americans to the US with CIA activity in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua being a particularly useful place to start. Be sure to bring up how some countries elected the same groups that the US fought against for so long. *Harvest of Empire* (cited above) is also useful here.
- Unit 9—Globalization—have students analyze the reasons behind the worldwide popularity of some Latin American songs—*Macarena*, *Despacito*, etc. Have students research the aid projects being done in Latin America by other countries such as China and Japan, and others.

Conclusion

When I attended elementary school in the United States, I was impressed by the growing presence of people of Latin American descent. Nowadays those who had arrived in the 1970s are old enough to have raised their own children. Both the newly-arrived and naturalized students need to see themselves reflected in the history being taught in the schools. Children need to understand why they are studying world history instead of another history. As educators we need to make history relevant to diverse populations as well as develop understanding about the past and present lives of the many peoples and cultures who dwell on our planet. Progress in inclusion of Latin American content in the world history mainstream has been slow, but steady. Hopefully specialists in Latin American history and world historians working together can further enrich world history teaching into the future, though perhaps less “*despacito*.”

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NOTES

¹ Anatole Gregory Mazour and John M Peoples, *Men and Nations: A World History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 3rd ed., 1975).

² Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 30th Anniversary edition 2003) or the briefer AHA pamphlet by Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian voyages, the Columbian exchange, and their historians* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1997). The latter is available at https://openlibrary.org/books/OL2413387M/The_Columbian_voyages_the_Columbian_exchange_and_their_historians. Accessed on December 28, 2020. However, teachers might appreciate this brief October 14, 2011 interview with Alfred W. Crosby by Megan Gambino, “Alfred W. Crosby on the Columbian Exchange,” at the online version of The Smithsonian Magazine (Smithsonianmag.com) at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/alfred-w-crosby-on-the-columbian-exchange-98116477/>. Accessed on December 28, 2020. Here, “Crosby discusses the ecological impact of Columbus’ landing in 1492 on both the Old World and the New World” in what may serve as a classroom-ready version of his work. See also, Charles C. Mann, *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

³ John Leguizamo, *John Leguizamo’s Latin History for Morons* (directed by Adam Rappaport for Netflix, 2018). See <https://www.netflix.com/title/80225421>. Accessed on December 20, 2020. GoodReads has lists of books mentioned in this production that can be found at https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/141444.Latin_History_For_Morons_Syllabus. Accessed on December 28, 2020.

⁴ Jon Scieszka and Adam McCauley, *Me Oh Maya! Time Warp Trio*, #13 (New York: Puffin Books, 2005); Mary Pope Osborne, and A.G. Ford, *Late Lunch with Llamas, Magic Tree House*, #34 (New York: Random House, 2020). *The Emperor’s New Groove* (directed by Mark Dindal for Walt Disney Productions, 2000) at <https://www.disneyplus.com/movies/the-emperors-new-groove/3jFGExhfWgXg/?cid=DTCI-Synergy-Disneycom-Site-Acquisition-USLaunch-US-Disney-THEEMPERORSNEWGROOVE-EN-NavPipe-MoviesPortalTheEmperorsNewGroove-NA>. Accessed

December 28, 2020. Another movie worth addressing is *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (directed by Steven Spielberg for Paramount Pictures, 2008). See <https://www.netflix.com/title/70084799>. Accessed December 27, 2020.

⁵ Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005), Chapter 9, “Amazonia.”

⁶ Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

⁷ Charles F. Walker, and Liz Clarke, *Witness to the Age of Revolution: The Odyssey of Juan Bautista Tupac Amaru* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). For information on Túpac Amaru himself, see Charles F. Walker. *The Tupac Amaru Rebellion* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016).

⁸ The Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and Smithsonian’s Office of the Chief Information Officer, “Smithsonian Folkways Recordings” (last modified 2020) at <https://folkways.si.edu/>. Accessed on December 27, 2020.

⁹ Donald J. Hughes, “The Middle Ages—Cuzco: Conservation in the Empire of the Inca,” in *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind’s Changing Role in the Community of Life*, Reprinted edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), Pages 99–104. See also Kevin Karjick, “ARCHEOLOGY: Green Farming by the Incas?” *Science* Vol. 281, no 5375 (July 17, 1998): 322. Accessed December 27, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.281.5375.322>.

¹⁰ *Harvest of Empire*. Directed by Peter Getzels and Eduardo López. Narrated by Juan González. Onyx Films, 2012. This program can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gW84cAN2Pw>. It can also be purchased as a DVD at <https://harvestofempiremovie.com>.

¹¹ Joram Mayshar, Omer Moavz, & Zvika Neeman, & Luigi Pascali, “Cereals, Appropriability and Hierarchy,” *Economic Research Papers* 269316, produced by the University of Warwick at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/workingpapers/2016/twerp_1130_moav.pdf. A slightly simplified version of its argument can be found in a presentation at the Warwick site, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/omoav/mmnp_presentation_july_16_2016.pdf. Both sites accessed on December 28, 2020.

¹² UCLA Department of History’s Public History Initiative, National Center for History in the Schools. “Big Era Five: Patterns of Interregional Unity 300–1500 CE.” Part of “World History for Us All” a collaborative work developed by Ross Dunn and others. Available at <https://whfua.history.ucla.edu/eras/era5.php>. See especially Landscape Teaching Unit 5.6. See also Nicole Magie’s lesson plan, “New World Networks: 1200–1490s,” developed for the OER Project at <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/PDFs/Origins/Era5/New-World-Networks-1200-1490s>. Accessed December 28, 2020. Charles C. Mann is also useful on this topic. See his *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) which includes a discussion of Henry F. Dobyns (page 92).

¹³ Louis Baudin, *A Socialist Empire: The Incas of Peru*, 2nd edition, edited by Arthur Goddard (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2011). One who argues against the Socialist label is Peruvian historian María Rostworoski in her *Tahuantinsuyu: Historia Del Imperio Inca* (Madrid, Spain: Punto de Vista, 2016). I believe the English translation of this book is *History of the Inca Realm*. For those seeking student assessments beyond a simple essay, you could show them an example of a brief article, Kevin R. Harris, “Was the Inca Empire a Socialist State? A Historical Discussion,” *Historia*, Vol. 16 (2007) at <https://www.eiu.edu/historia/Harris.pdf>. Accessed December 28, 2020.

¹⁴ For a brief discussion on cochineal see Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 3rd edition, 2013), 126. For a more extended discussion, see Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005). For Maroon communities or *palenques*, have students study the painting, *The Mulatto Gentlemen of Esmeraldas* (1599) Dana Leibsohn and Barbara E. Mundy, *Vistas: Visual Culture in Spanish America, 1520-1820* at <https://vistasgallery.ace.fordham.edu/items/show/1903>, 2015. Accessed January 8, 2020. See also The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, “Material Culture / Images—Getting Started” developed for the Center for History and New Media—World History Sources at <https://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/analyzing/mcimages/analyz%20%20ingimgintronf.html>. Accessed December 28, 2020.

¹⁵ Instructors may direct students to conduct a debate over the validity of the argument presented in Jerry D. Stubben, “The Indigenous Influence Theory of American Democracy,” *Science Quarterly*, Vol. 81, no. 3 (2000), 716–31 and at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42863999>. Accessed December 30, 2020. Also useful is Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers: How Native Americans Transformed the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2014) of which Chapters 7 and 8 are the most useful. Two useful sources on Manuela Sáenz are Nicola Foote, “Manuela Sáenz and the Independence of South America” at <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuinois.edu/7.1/foote.html>. Accessed on December 28, 2020, and Pamela S. Murray, “‘Loca’ or ‘Libertadora’? Manuela Sáenz in the Eyes of History and historians, 1900–c. 1990,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 33, no. 2 (2001), 291–310 also at www.jstor.org/stable/3653686. Accessed on December 28, 2020. For sources on Micaela Bastidas, see Ward Stavig and Ella Schmidt, editors and translators, *The Tupac Amaru and Catarista Rebellions: An Anthology of Sources* (Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, 2008). There is also a brief entry on “Micaela Bastidas (1745–1781),” in *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* at <https://www.encyclopedia.com>. Accessed December 28, 2020.

¹⁶ For guano, see Gregory T. Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), which addresses guano in terms of Inca conservational techniques. For a briefer discussion on guano, see Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 3rd edition, 2013), page 129. For a discussion on Asian influence on Latin American food, see Rachel Bierly, “Asian Influence on Latin American Food,” *Panoramas: Scholarly Platform*, October 23, 2017 at <https://www.panoramas.pitt.edu/about>. Accessed December 28, 2020. For a source on the influences on Peruvian food only, see Gastón Acurio, *Peru: The Cookbook*. (London: Phaidon Limited, 2015). For xenophobia, see Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019). Chapter 3 and 6 are particularly valuable for understanding this subject.

¹⁷ One resource written in both English and Spanish is Jaime Gonzalez de Gispert, “The Japanese-Peruvians Interned in the US during WW2,” edited by BBC Mundo, Los Angeles, CA. modified February 22, 2015, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31295270>. Accessed December 27, 2020.