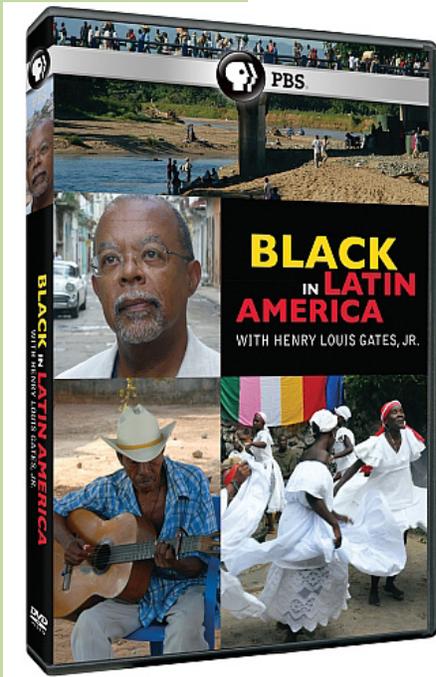


# FROM THE VIDEO SCREEN: Reviews of two videos conveying Latino American history and culture

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## Black in Latin America 2011, Public Broadcasting System

[website](#) and are available for online viewing at [pbs.org](http://pbs.org).



Our schools give witness to a major demographic shift in this country. We see a growing number of Latino and Latina students representing newer generations from long-time U.S. residents, as well as recent immigrants from Mexico and Central and South American countries. Educators in the U.S. need to know more about the history and cultures from these countries, and about the largely unwritten

Latino American history.

Two recent PBS documentaries may be helpful: *Black in Latin America* (2011), and *Latino Americans: The 500-Year Legacy That Shaped a Nation* (2013).

Both are two-disc sets with multiple 50- to 60-minute episodes on each disc. Both include Spanish and English voice-overs and subtitles. They are available on DVD from Public Broadcasting Service via [their](#)

*Black in Latin America* includes four episodes: “Haiti and Dominican Republic: An Island Divided,” “Cuba: The Next Revolution,” “Brazil: A Racial Paradise?,” and “Mexico & Peru: A Hidden Race.” Narrator Henry Louis Gates Jr. takes the viewer on a guided tour of these six countries, re-tracing historical footprints of the Africans and Europeans who came from abroad to settle in these lush countries. Gates, professor at Harvard University’s W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Studies, researches the central question of this series: *how have the people of Latin America embraced their African history?*

Viewers will learn of Haiti’s origin as the birthplace of the black experience in the Americas, the first place in the “new world” to import slaves from Africa. Haitians speak Creole and are proud of their black heritage. Just across the river



**Narrator Henry Louis Gates Jr.**  
**Screenshot from *Black in Latin America***

from Haiti in the Dominican Republic, the people speak Spanish, and a rainbow racial mix of people seem proud of that heritage. One island over is Cuba, where Gates asks, did Castro's revolution in 1959 put an end to racism in Cuba? Cuba imported more than twice the number of African slaves as the U.S.

In South America, Brazil describes itself as a "racial democracy" with over 100 descriptive categories for variations in skin color of the population. Ten times the number of African slaves were imported into Brazil compared to the U.S., due largely to its closer proximity to Africa and a shorter sea voyage. In Mexico, referred to in this episode as the country of "the black grandma in the closet," black heritage is not acknowledged openly. And in Peru, one of the countries liberated from Spain by Simon Bolivar, blacks are currently undervalued, despite their major role in Peru's history.

One fascinating newer development in these Latin American countries is the emerging new role of pop singers urging an end to racism and a truly equitable society. For example, Susana Baca is bringing about a resurgence and rebirth of Afro-Peruvian music. Brazilian rapper MV Bill and Cuban rapper Soandres del Rio each buck societal norms in their countries, musically calling for an end to racial inequality.

Similarly, religions unique to many of these countries preserve much of the ancient African religious practices in new combinations, blended with European religions. For example Candomble in Brazil and Vodou in Haiti both have roots in such African cultures as the Yoruba of Nigeria. It is through these cultural practices, often in hidden, out-of-the-way places, that contemporary blacks struggle to keep alive elements of their own African heritage.

Louis Henry Gates Jr., narrator and guide, provides an amazingly rich and insightful commentary throughout his visits to these Latin American countries. Speaking with the local people of each country, interviewing university professors from each, and digging in the actual physical places, ancient and contemporary, Gates probes for answers to questions about the black heritage and current situation in these countries. Because these countries all have historical ties to the United States, and our history, music, religion, and culture, this documentary provides a complex, multi-faceted look into a significant part of our history that is important for American teachers and students.

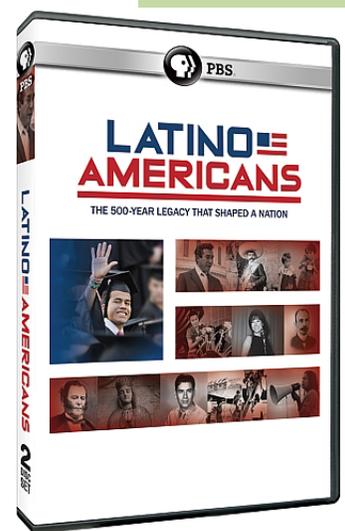
## Latino Americans: The 500-Year Legacy That Shaped a Nation

2013, Public Broadcasting System

The *Latino Americans* documentary focuses on the Latino American chapters of the American story, starting when various groups arrived in the U.S. As the subtitle says, this series reviews "the 500-Year Legacy That Shaped a Nation." This documentary includes six episodes, each with a chapter in the companion book of



**Professor Gates examines the "rainbow nation" of Brazil. Screenshot from *Black in Latin America***



the same title, sold separately. The information in the book is really supplementary to the DVD, and unfortunately, a teacher's guide is not included with the DVD set.

Hourlong episodes include "Foreigners in Their Own Land," (matching chapter 1, "The Convergence Begins"), "Empire of Dreams" (chapter 2, "Shared Destinies...Made Manifest"), "War and Peace" (chapter 3, "At War: Abroad...And At Home"), "The New Latinos" (chapter 4, "I Like To Be In America"), "Prejudice and Pride" (chapter 5, "Who's 'In'? Who's 'Out'? Whose America?"), and "Peril and Promise" (chapter 6, "Where Are We Going?"). I'll begin this review with a quote from the introduction of the companion book:

*"The Latino Americans come from Europe, Africa, Asia, and from the ancient nations of this hemisphere. They are the offspring of Spain's New World Empire. They arrived in the United States by jet aircraft this morning; they crossed a dusty, empty stretch of desert just yesterday or long years after arriving here to work, they raised a right hand in front of a federal judge and swore to renounce all other allegiances to any other country. And most important, alongside those whose American story is a recent one are the generations of Latinos whose families have been in this country far longer than there has been a place called the United States, even longer than the arrivals from the British Isles who would go on to invent the United States.... **You cannot understand more than fifty million of your fellow Americans without knowing this history. More important, you won't be able to understand the America that's just over the horizon if you don't know this history. Latino history is your history. Latino history is our history.**"* [emphasis mine]

In contrast with the *Black in Latin America* documentary, this series approaches the subject through historical research, personal and historical documents and films, and interviews with Americans whose ancestors came from Mexico, Spain, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and countries in Central and South America.



**Julia Alvarez, Dominican-American Poet, novelist and essayist.  
Screenshot from Latino Americans**

Interviews with professional historians and with elders who share family stories convey tales of ancestors who came to this country arriving from afar, seeking a better life in the new land. The first episode studies the period from 1565 to 1880, when the first Spanish explorers, Catholic missionaries, arrived from Mexico and Spain, coming up the Pacific coast. At the same time, colonial Americans expanded into territories in the Southwest that had long been home to Native Americans and English and Spanish colonies, and by 1848, the Mexican-American War left Mexico with half of its original territories in North America.

It includes the story of Juan Seguin, a Tejano, Mexican-born Texan who fought with the Anglos at the Alamo and led the eventual combined army that conquered Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto. Another story is of Apolinaria Lorenzanna, who became "La Beata," the "Blessed One," at a San Diego mission, one of a string of twenty-one missions that were created along the coast of what became California. Her long life (she died at age 94) covered California's decades of transition from Spanish colony, to part of Mexico's independent nationhood, to the defeat of the Comanches and Apaches,

to the arrival of the Stars and Stripes.

Episode two builds upon that early history and documents how the American population as a whole began to be reshaped by an influx of Latinos from the 1880s into the 1940s, as Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans began arriving and building strong Latino American communities in South Florida, Los Angeles, and New York. One famous Latina American interviewed in this segment is Rita Moreno, the Oscar-winning actress from Puerto Rico. This episode relates details of “Operation Bootstrap” during the Great Depression, which saw 300,000 Puerto Ricans emigrate from Puerto Rico to the East Barrio of New York City.

Episodes three and four tell more stories of Latino Americans fighting within the U.S. Army during World War II but still experiencing discrimination and a fight for civil rights that continued through the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and beyond. Viewers learn the heartbreaking and exciting story of the Capo brothers, Luis and Carlos, who left Castro’s Cuba as teenagers and set up a furniture shop in south Florida that eventually became the highly successful El Dorado furniture company.



**Dolores Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez. Screenshot from *Latino Americans***

*Latino Americans* not only tells stories of individuals and their outstanding accomplishments, but of collective efforts of such leaders as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta who originated and led the United Farm Workers successful strikes and march to the California capitol of Sacramento, eventually winning a better wage and working conditions. Episode five also reviews the story of Sal Castro, a high school teacher who led the student walk-out/strikes at Belmont and Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, and of Herman Badillo, the first U.S. Congressman born in Cuba and elected in 1971. *Latino Americans* describes a people with a new identity—the “Chicanos” or “Mexicans.” Both words originally came from “Meshica,” the indigenous peoples’ term for Mexicans, pronounced “meh-shee-co.” By dropping the first syllable “meh,” became “shee-co” or “Chico.”

Using video clips from numerous news broadcasts, home movie clips from Latino families, interviews with historians and scholars, and interviews with elders who were actual participants in the various historical events involving Latinos and Latinas, this documentary relays a vibrant history of amazingly resilient people. Finally, episode six brings viewers to the current era and the ongoing, multi-layered issues of immigration on the southern borders of the U.S.—migrant laborers, undocumented others, and families split by deportations. The past thirty years has seen a second wave of Cubans arriving in Florida, and hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Guatemalans fleeing civil wars, death squads, and unrest, coming north into the U.S., transforming our culture along the way.

*Latino Americans*, along with *Black in Latin America*, should give teachers and students the necessary background to understand what Latinos and Latinas bring to the present, and hope for the future. — *Dave Lehman*