## DRAMATURGY GUIDE



\*JOHN LEGUZAMO\*
LATIN HISTORY
FOR MORONS

Omested by TONY TACCONE



The National Theatre Washington D.C.

### Latin History for Morons

The National Theatre November 21–23, 2019 Written by and Starring John Leguizamo Directed by Tony Taccone



LATIN HISTORY FOR MORONS is inspired by the near total absence of Latinos from his son's American History books. John Leguizamo embarks on an outrageously funny, frenzied search to find a Latin hero for his son's school history project. From a mad recap of the Aztec empire to stories of unknown Latin patriots of the Revolutionary War and beyond, Leguizamo breaks down the 3,000 years between the Mayans and Pitbull into 110 irreverent and uncensored minutes above and beyond his unique style.



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# INTRODUCING LATIN HISTORY FOR MORONS

What compels a man to squeeze centuries of Latin history into an hour-and-a-half show—never mind an hour-and-a-half show that he performs by himself? As it turns out, much the same thing that compels people to do all sorts of extraordinary things: love. In Latin History for Morons, writer-actor John Leguizamo draws from personal experience to craft a compelling story about family, belonging, and, yes, history. Prompted by the racist bullying his son faces at school, Leguizamo journeys all the way back to the pre-colonial Americas in search of a Latin hero his boy can look up to. Unfortunately, Latin heroes are thin on the ground in textbooks and popular histories, which means he'll have to do some digging. Clad in tweed and armed with a dusty old chalkboard, this self-proclaimed "ghetto scholar" takes on the role of teacher and invites—no, demands—the audience learn along with him as he journeys backwards and forward through time, embodying countless different characters as he goes. For all his hard work and all his bravado, the challenge only seems to grow more daunting as time goes on. Fortunately, he proves himself to be like any great teacher: willing to learn as much, if not more, than he imparts.

Leguizamo is no stranger to the one-man show game—in fact, he's a bona fide all-star. Throughout his solo career, whether delving into his childhood or confronting his grownup struggles, Leguizamo has always brought a quirky perspective and irreverent sense of humor to the stage. His version of Latin history may seem outlandish at times, but it's only a slightly wound up take on what history is ultimately about: interpreting the past. Anyone who writes—or, indeed, performs—history is creating a representation of the past based on their own perspective of what is necessary and valuable. Sure, they should all do their research, and yes, there are important facts to consider, but every historian knows that decisions have to be made about what gets included and how it gets portrayed. Leguizamo gets that, and he has a lot of fun with it, but he's also interested in who gets left out all too often—namely, his people. Performing this particular history his way is one small but important step toward correcting that imbalance and spreading word of the great Latin contributions to the United States, to the Americas, and to the world.

In this study guide, you'll meet some other great Latin heroes, learn more about Leguizamo and his work, and take a closer look at the politics of representation. You'll also be asked to create a little history of your own using an unsung hero as your subject. As Leguizamo himself learns, heroes can come in all forms. Take this opportunity to discover a hero in your midst—even within yourself!



### **SUMMARY**

If Latin History for Morons is the lesson, John Leguizamo is the teacher and we, the audience, are his students. Leguizamo establishes this rapport from the first moment and returns to it throughout the play (when he's not traveling through time or embodying one of dozens of different characters). The genesis of this lesson is the racist bullying his son, Buddy, has been experiencing at the hands of a white classmate. When the bully's father dismisses Leguizamo's concerns, Leguizamo decides to get to the root of the problem. He starts by taking us back in time to his old middle school, where his racist teacher, Mister Flynn, first dismissed his concerns about the lack of Latin representation in their history books. Frustrated, Leguizamo turns to his knowledgeable Uncle Sanny, who, though supportive, can only offer so much help.

So, faced with a yawning absence of history to draw upon, Leguizamo declares himself a "ghetto scholar" (holla!) and gets to work uncovering the history of pre-colonial Latin America. He starts by debunking an old myth: that Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Americas, which were actually home to some 73,000,000 million people long before Europeans arrived. Leguizamo encourages Buddy to use this information the next time the bully starts trouble. As it turns out, Buddy has a more pressing need: to find a hero for his class history project. Unfortunately, while Leguizamo is excitedly searching for a great Latin subject, his suggested comeback backfires and leaves Buddy all beaten up. When Leguizamo urges him to fight back, Buddy defers to the peaceful teachings of Gandhi, much to his father's dismay.

Leguizamo's own fight with history continues. He praises the many contributions of the Latin peoples and mocks Columbus and the Spanish Conquistadors, whose arrival in the so-called "New World" brought with it only disease and destruction. After charting the demise of the peaceful Taino people at the hands of Columbus, Leguizamo goes back to Buddy to devise a hero test. This test will be used to assess whether or not a subject is good enough for Buddy's project. Leguizamo's first contestant: the Aztecs. In a hilarious sequence, Leguizamo acts out the betrayal of the once-mighty people by their King, Moctezuma, who hands them over to the Spanish Conquistador, Cortes. Despite their best efforts to resist, the Aztecs succumb to Spanish cannon fire. As Leguizamo points out, though, the Conquistadors' real weapon was "germ warfare," i.e. the diseases they brought with them from Europe; only after these germs took hold

did the Conquistadors attack (a trick they will repeat later). Unfortunately, for all Leguizamo's hard work, Buddy is unimpressed.

After a brief visit to his therapist to discuss the corrosive "ghetto rage" left over from his childhood, Leguizamo returns to take on another great civilization: the Incas. Sadly, though they were once the largest empire on earth, the Incas meet a similar fate at the hands of Cortes's brother, Pizzaro. Once again, Leguizamo excitedly acts out the various parties, and once again, the Conquistadors are victorious—but once again, Buddy is not moved.

In fact, Buddy is too busy getting into trouble for punching his aggressor in the face—just as his father told him to. After getting thrown out of the subsequent meeting with the principal and being lectured by his family members, a discouraged Leguizamo goes back to his therapist for advice. The therapist encourages him to use his anger productively and participate in a diversity panel in Texas, which only serves to set up an angry conflict with a racist member of the panel. Only later does Leguizamo realize that instead of lashing out with ghetto rage, he should follow his son's peaceful example and let the *content* of his message do the talking.

Unfortunately, his son doesn't want to talk to him at all. Dejected, Leguizamo dives back into Latin history, taking in the murder and forced relocation of Native Americans overseen by President Andrew Jackson, the removal of Latin peoples under the Repatriation Act, and the oppression of Latin and Native peoples that continues to this very day. In the face of such dire facts and his failures to help Buddy, Leguizamo considers giving up.

Just when all seems lost, Buddy's graduation arrives with a surprise: Buddy's hero project has been such a hit, he's been asked to turn it into a speech. While at the ceremony, the father of the bully confronts Leguizamo, but rather than take matters outside, Leguizamo handles the issue with words, thus employing his son's message: that violence is the lowest form of communication. Buddy's speech, meanwhile, reflects on the fact that Latin people are still here even after all the bullying they've been through. Buddy lays claims to that noble heritage and shares his epiphany: that with all that history inside him, he can be his own hero.

### **JOHN LEGUIZAMO: ONE-MAN MACHINE**

John Leguizamo has range-serious range. Moviegoers might know him for cult hits like Romeo + Juliet, Moulin Rouge!, or To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar, or blockbuster franchises like Ice Age and John Wick, or any number of countless films and TV shows in between. To theatre folk, however, John Leguizamo is one of the premier solo performers in the United States. His past shows include Mambo Mouth (1991), Spic-O-Rama (1993), Freak (1998), Sexaholix...A Love Story (2002), and Ghetto Klown (2010), all of which have garnered tremendous critical acclaim. Each show dives deep into Leguizamo's life, taking in his upbringing, his family, his neighborhood, and his acting career. In fact, it's his struggles as an actor that prompted him to go into solo performance in the first place. Upon leaving school, Leguizamo found that the roles available to him as a Latino were extremely limited, and those that were up for grabs were mostly underdeveloped and rooted in unflattering (sometimes downright racist) stereotypes. So, like a lot of the great theatrical innovators, Leguizamo decided to use what he had. By writing his own material full of people from his own life, Leguizamo was able to create a whole range of characters to showcase his impressive chops. At once a nimble mimic and a crafty comedian in his own right, Leguizamo spends his time onstage constantly hopping from character to character, always putting in his own zany spin and firing off a comment or two in between jumps. The results are amazing—and provocative—but they all spring out of the same man.

Although Leguizamo may inhabit dozens of characters in a single evening, he's ultimately revealing to us something about who he is, which is part of what makes his work, and the work of other great solo



John Leguizamo in Ghetto Klown

Photo by HBO, Craig Blankenhorn

performers, so fascinating. As Miriam Chirico writes, "the poignancy of the authentic self upon the stage, relaying painful or awkward situations from life, constitutes much of the genre's appeal; we feel we are being let in on the secrets of the performer's soul, even though he or she shares these same stories night after night with other audiences" (p. 42).\* In other words, even though Leguizamo has worked these stories into shape in rehearsal and even though he performs them hundreds of times for thousands upon thousands of other people, he is still able to make it appear as though he's discovering himself along with us.

### **Quick Note on Language**

You'll notice a few different terms coming up in this study guide, namely "Latin," "Latinx," and "Hispanic." Throughout the show, Leguizamo refers to the people he is studying and with whom he shares a heritage as "Latin," while in everyday life, you might hear the term "Latinx." "Latinx" is a gender-neutral term for people from or descendant from Latin America (you may also hear the male "Latino" and the female "Latina"). Hispanic, meanwhile, refers to people from or descendant from Spanish speaking countries. While there is a lot of overlap and while they are often used interchangeably, they do mean different things. Ultimately, it is up to people to choose how they identify. Many prefer to identify first by the country they were born in or to which they trace their heritage. This study guide has attempted to reflect that by including the terms used by or associated with the people being discussed.

<sup>\*</sup>Chirico, Miriam. "Performed Authenticity: Narrating the Self in the Comic Monologues of David Sedaris, John Leguizamo, and Spalding Gray." Studies in American Humor 2, no. 1 (2016): 22-46.

### TWO WAYS TO REPRESENT



Photo by Matthew Murphy, 2017

Representation—or the lack thereof—is a major concern for John Leguizamo, both on the stage and off. As you've already learned, it was his personal frustrations with limited representation for Latinx performers that prompted him to become a solo star. Decades later, the racist encounters his son had at school provided the impetus for him to create Latin History for Morons. In taking on Latin history, Leguizamo is addressing two kinds of representation: whose stories get told and how those stories get told. Recovering Latinx stories that have been lost and bringing them to greater attention is one way of addressing the inequities that persist in modernday USA. It's more than just getting the past right; it's about setting up a better present and future. As Leguizamo says in the show, "when you don't see yourself represented outside of yourself, you feel \$#@%& invisible." By putting these stories—these people—front and center, Leguizamo gives them a platform from which to be seen, demonstrating that they are as valuable as any others, even if (white) society fails to recognize that.

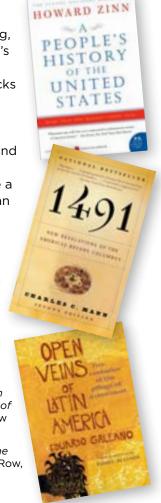
But representation is not just about who gets to be onstage, it's also about the decisions that get made regarding what to include in the story and how to tell it. In the process of recovering lost histories and sharing them with the audience, Leguizamo is creating a representation of what he feels is valuable to our understanding of the periods and people he is looking at. Obviously, representing other people on stage is nothing new to an actor, but this project puts him in another role, that of a historian. All histories are a representation—ideally a truthful one—of people, places, events, and even things from the past, and though they may be thorough, they are never truly complete. Even the skilled experts who write or perform histories professionally have to make decisions about what gets included and what gets left out. Sometimes, entire histories are written to correct what other histories have missed out on or deliberately eliminated. No history is perfect, not even the good ones, but all of them strive to be honest about their subjects and the processes undertaken to bring them together.

If you come out of the show itching to do some more reading, look no further than Leguizamo's own bibliography. Throughout the show, Leguizamo namechecks several sources, including these three books: Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States, Charles C. Mann's 1491, and Eduardo Galeano's Open Veins of Latin America.\* All three take a hard look at aspects of American history that often get left outor cut out—of major textbooks. While a lot of it's not pretty, all of it is vital to creating a rich, detailed, and honest account of America's past.

\*Mann, Charles C. 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus. New York: Vintage, 2006.

Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 1973.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.



### RECENT HISTORY: 8 GREAT LATIN HEROES OF THE PAST 100 YEARS

John Leguizamo states outright that he's working primarily with the foundations of Latin history before the arrival of the colonists, and that's where he spends most of his time in the show. However, he does namecheck a number of modern greats who have contributed to the United States, including labor leader Cesar Chavez and current Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Here are eight great Latin heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, all of whom have contributed enormously to the social fabric of the United States. One problem: you'll need to do a little research to find their names!

was an Afro-Puerto Rican baseball player and activist. In 1972, he had his 3,000<sup>th</sup> career hit, making him just the 11<sup>th</sup> person in Major League history to reach that milestone. Later that year, he died in a plane crash on his way to Nicaragua to assist with earthquake relief. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1973 in a special election that waved the usual waiting period following a player's death.

was an Afro-Cuban singer who helped popularize
Latin music in the United States. Before leaving
Cuba, she was the headline act at Havana's famous
Tropicana nightclub in the 1950s. She later became
known as the Queen of Salsa and helped popularize
the genre throughout New York in the 1970s. She was
an outspoken member of the Cuban community in
exile in the United States.

was named the first Chicano Poet Laureate of the United States in 2015. The son of migrant farm workers, he draws inspiration from the landscapes of California and has taught at several universities in his home state. In addition to being a poet, he is also a performance artist and celebrated children's author.

is a legendary feminist activist and community organizer. In 1962, she co-launched the National Farm Workers Association with fellow activist Cesar E. Chavez. Her tireless advocacy on behalf of farmers led to sweeping legislative changes in California and across the United States. She has also proven an invaluable political ally for the Democratic Party and has helped elect numerous candidates for office. Her advocacy earned her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012.

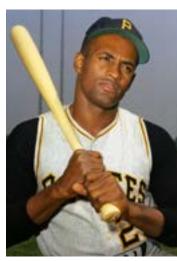


Photo File/National Baseball Hall of Fame Library



Herrera Studios (courtesy of Omer Pardillo-Cid)



Courtesy of UCLA



Photo by John Kouns via Farmworker Movement Documentation Project

5)

was the first Hispanic to serve in the United States Senate. He was born in Chihuahua, Mexico in 1859 but was forced to leave due to the aftereffects of the Mexican revolt against the French. After holding public offices in Texas and New Mexico (for both the Democratic and Republic parties) he became Governor of New Mexico in 1919 and later a Senator in 1928 (albeit for a brief time). He was renowned as a brilliant speaker and crafty political operative.

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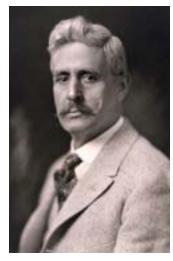
was still in high school when he voluntarily entered the Japanese American internment camps operated during World War II in order to stand in solidarity with his friends. He is the only known non-Japanese person to voluntarily enter the camps. He later served in the United States military and maintained lifelong ties with the Japanese American communities affected by the internment. His support for their cause contributed to the passing of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

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is a Puerto Rican actress and singer who is still enjoying an extraordinary 70-plus-year career. Despite struggling against Latina stereotypes in the entertainment industry, she carved out a place for herself in many classics, including the 1961 film version of *West Side Story* and the much-loved television show *The Electric Company*. She was the third person to EGOT, i.e. win an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony. You can catch her in *One Day at a Time* on Netflix (or on Pop starting in 2020).

8,

was the first Latina astronaut to travel to space when she participated in the nine-day STS-56 mission aboard the space shuttle Discovery in 1993. She went on to serve as the director of the Johnson Space Center, the first Hispanic and the second woman to hold that prestigious position. She has won numerous awards for her service to NASA and holds multiple degrees and patents for her work.



Public Domain



Japanese American National Museum (gift from Rose Hanawa Tanaka)



Bettmann Archive/Getty Images



Photo courtesy of NASA

### **YOUR UNSUNG HERO**

The greatest heroes often do their work away from the spotlight. Maybe there's someone you know, whether out there in the world or even in your own personal life, who deserves some recognition. Using what you've learned in history class and from watching John Leguizamo work, start telling your hero's story. Answer the questions provided here and then try your hand at crafting your own solo performance script!



First, a few biographical details. What do they do? Where do they call home? What is your relationship to them?

Now lay out their case for being a hero. Have they done something extraordinary? Do they have a special quality about them? Have they faced up to great adversity?

Talk about an instance when they showed their heroism. What was the situation? What were the stakes, i.e. why did that situation *need* a hero? What did they do?

Think about why they might be underappreciated. Is it because they don't seek attention? Is it because society might not value them for who they are?

Finally, imagine you are creating a one-person show about your hero and start drafting your script. You can tell the story as yourself, you can create a character to play, you can create multiple characters like John Leguizamo does—you can even play the role of your hero. Get creative with it!

### FURTHER READING: PLAYBILL INTERVIEW

### How John Leguizamo Turned Heartbreak Into Broadway History

BY ADAM HETRICK OCT 19, 2017

The multi-hyphenate artist recalls his own theatrical history up through the emotional experience behind *Latin History for Morons*—now on Broadway.

John Leguizamo returns to Broadway with his latest play *Latin History for Morons*, which begins performances October 19 at Studio 54. Leguizamo's irreverent and powerful solo show spans 3,000 years of Latin history—from Aztec and Incan culture to overlooked contributions of Latin patriots in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars and beyond—all brilliantly crammed into a 90-minute evening.

Leguizamo was just 26 years old when his explosive and incisive solo play *Mambo Mouth* premiered Off-Broadway to a flurry of rave reviews. Hailed as a promising playwright-actor with a preternatural ability to transform himself into a multitude of characters onstage, the fearless Colombian-born artist reshaped the definition of solo theatre, and has gone on to push artistic and cultural boundaries on stage and screen as a playwright, screenwriter, actor, and producer, and beyond.

We asked Leguizamo to take us through his own history as an artist, from the downtown performance art roots that gave life to his first autobiographical play to the emotional discovery the led to *Latin History for Morons*.

#### You started out making your own work.

John Leguizamo: It was the 1980s, back in the day, right after Latin freestyle hit, Madonna, tech music, and Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam; I felt that I could start coming up with my own stuff. I did Mambo Mouth downtown at all the performance art spaces; Dixon Place, Gusto House—which no longer exists—PS122, HOME, The Kitchen, The Knitting Factory. I used to perform at all those places and do my characters, and then the compilation of all that became Mambo Mouth, which I did at the Orpheum Theatre Off-Broadway.

#### What originally inspired you to write these shows?

JL: I was going to school with these great actors at NYU, and all my friends were going to five auditions a day, and I was going on one maybe once a month, and they were going up for Shakespeare, and to play lawyers, and doctors, and I'm going up for criminals and murderers. And I'm like, "This just is not right." I felt equal to them. I felt like we had studied equally, we had performed equally in class, but in the real world it just wasn't there. And I was like, "You know, this really is not the way I expected life to be, and I'm not going to let it be that way." So I started writing my stuff as an antidote to the Hollywouldn't of it all.

You kind of broke the theatrical mold and then invented a new mold for this kind of autobiographical work. Who were the people that first took notice said 'yes' when you started out?

JL: It was the performance art-based people—Mark Russell, who now runs Under the Radar at the Public Theater, he was running PS122 back in those days; Ellie Covan at Dixon Place, Randy Rollison from HOME... Camryn Manheim was my stage manager and she was a performer. These were performance art spaces where I felt at home. They gave me the freedom to do one-man shows, because nobody was doing that. Everybody was doing very performative stuff, very arty stuff, or the comedy club stuff, but nobody was doing one-man plays, which is something I helped pioneer, the autobiographical one-man play.

Did you always feel compelled to be a writer, or did it come out of your desire to perform and the drive to create your own work?

**JL:** I always wanted to write, I just never had the belief that I could. I was writing back in high school, jokes and stuff, I used to have files of what I wrote, but I never really believed in myself until I did *Mambo Mouth*. I started accruing all these characters and all these monologues, and all of a sudden I felt like I could be a writer and that was the beginning of it.

With a show like *Latin History for Morons* you have a clear objective of what you want to talk about. What was the process like? So much research went into this project. Was it a different experience?

**JL:** It's always a discovery process. I never tackled history before or historical characters, and I was like, "How am I gonna make this palatable and make this

interesting to the general public who just come to laugh?" So that was tricky, and at the same time I also fell in love with the history, and I thought that would be fascinating. But the first I performed it in Buffalo, New York, it was too much history for them. They were sick of it. First of all, they were drunk so they didn't understand half of what I was saying, but they were like, "It's too much history. I don't wanna be in school." And I thought, "Oh, shit. I'm going to rethink the whole thing." And I started adding analogous moments of my life to the history, just making the history a little funnier, paring it down. But now, since the run at the Public Theater, I got more confident. So, I made some different choices with some historic moments, there's a little bit more information.

### Like all of your self-created work, there's a personal story behind this play.

**JL:** The genesis was that my son was being bullied at school. He was going to a fancy private school, and he was being picked on racially. I was like, "Wow, this is crazy." And I just wanted to give my son facts and words to protect himself. I think violence is the lowest form of communication and I think words are the highest form of communication. I wanted him to defend himself with words and not fisticuffs, and I tried to empower him with that. As I started doing research, I was like, "Oh my God, the combination of my son's story and the history, I'm actually the one who's being educated and empowered, and my self worth is boosting. It's not just my son, it's me who's growing as a man."

You point out in the play that we didn't learn Latin history in school. It's not part of the curriculum or in text books. That really struck me personally. They didn't teach gay history when I was in high school, either. So we end up discovering our own history and cultures for ourselves. It's frustrating, and really beautiful when you turn those pages and discover these people you've never heard about, right?

JL: It's so true. You have so many emotions when you discover this stuff. First of all, you're angered, then you're heartbroken, and then you feel empowered. It's incredible. It's like the stages of empowerment, you know? Anger, sadness or loss, and then hilarity. I definitely did feel that. When I learned that we Latin people are the sons and daughters of the American Revolution... Cuban women in Virginia sold their jewelry to feed the patriots. Gálvez, the Latin general in New Orleans, gave \$70,000 worth of weapons to George Washington. So we helped finance the American Revolution. Ten thousand Latinos fought. Venezuelans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexicans fought in the American Revolution. You never hear about that. You never hear about those contributions.

Do we just let other people continue to write history books, or are each of us—from our own cultural perspective—are we responsible for telling our stories? Can we afford to just sit back and rely on the people writing the MacMillan textbooks to tell our history?

**JL:** We can't. MacMillan textbooks are made in Texas, so there you go. Arizona just blocked Mexican studies from their schools. How do you do that? Arizona was Mexico. A majority of the people there are Mexican. Obviously, there's been a c\*ckblock for our history. The fact that 20,000 Latin people fought in the American Civil war... and we had the first admiral in the United States Navy, David Farragut... Where is that? You don't see any of that stuff.

Would you rather tell that story rather than have someone at a textbook publishing company try to shoehorn it into a history book when they don't really get it? Do you feel like you're opening the door for more Latin people to join that conversation with this show?

**JL:** Absolutely. I've been doing it for four years and traveling around the country, and I can see the changes happening. I really feel like Latin people feel their responsibility to start searching out our contributions and giving them a place, and putting them out there. I'm doing a book with Abrams, A Latin History for People With Short Attention Spans, and I want to try to be as accurate as possible, and hopefully it can be a text book. You know lots of people use Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States as a text book. So I'm hoping if I'm accurate enough, and historically fact-proofed, I can do that.

### What were some of the biggest surprises for you in this process that were huge emotional moments?

**JL:** There were a lot. I guess when I found out how much we have contributed to the world civilization. When the conquests came here, we were almost 100,000,000 Native American people—we Latin people are mostly Native American—I guess where it's hard for Americans to comprehend that Latin people are mostly Native American.

But when I found out that the conquistadors came and they destroyed 95% of the people living here, and destroyed their books and the codices; they were all burnt. That's how you destroy a culture. And now, the fact that we bounced back and we are sort of re-conquesting the Americas, I feel very empowered by that.

### FURTHER WATCHING: JOHN LEGUIZAMO TALKS *LATIN HISTORY*

#### **Real America with Jorge Ramos**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhYaWtU498E



The Late Show With Stephen Colbert https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SidNKw7NPuc





### FURTHER WATCHING: LATIN HISTORY FOR MORONS ON NETFLIX

