

An Introduction to Latin America Myths, Icons and Heroes

SPRING 2026

Prof. Kathryn Sanchez
kathryn.sanchez@wisc.edu
Hours: Thursdays 12:30-1:30pm by appt.

The course is organized around five chronological units and daily “modules” that explore key moments, issues, art forms and legacies from pre-conquest times to the present. By focusing on different myths and mythic figures during these phases of historical development and experience, the course will approach the study of Latin America from a multi-disciplinary and multi-faceted perspective. The structure is fundamentally chronological; however, this course is not a history class, and it aims to present different disciplines within this overall structure.

Unit #1: The First Peoples of the Americas

Key words: Pre-colonial times; Pre-classic, Classic and Post-Classic periods; Pre-Hispanic Andean Civilization.

Unit #2: The Foundational Era

Key words: colonizers; Spanish and Portuguese colonies; conquest; conflict; economic exploitation.

Unit #3: Neo-Colonial Times

Key words: Early Republics; Independence; Race; Citizenship; Neo-Colonial societies; Progress; Nationhood; National Identities; Racial whitening; Caudillos.

Unit #4: The Rise of 20th-century Mass Politics

Key words: Heroic State / Pueblo; Populism; Reform; Revolution; Violence; Dictatorships; Social conflict; Social rights; War.

Unit #5: Post-Heroic Latin America

Key words: Neo-liberalism; Democracy; Grassroots activity; New social movements; Indigenous people; Women; New values; Human rights.

UNIT #1: THE FIRST PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS

Week 1: January 20 - 22

Pre-Conquest America: People, Culture and Society

Module #1: Pre-Classic Period: The Olmecs:

Key concepts: Monumentality, Scale and the Politics of Stone

Course overview and expectations

What is “Latin American Studies” and why study Latin America?

Readings:

- “The First Peoples of the Americas” pp. 1-9 (esp. 7-9)
- “Welcome to Latin America”, Chasteen Chap. 1

Module #2: Classic Period: a) Teotihuacán; b) Tikal and Palenque (Mayan)

Key concepts: Planned cities then and now, migration, multiethnicity, density

Reading: “The First Peoples of the Americas” pp. 11-19 (esp.13-19)

DISCUSSION: Wed. 1/21 or Thurs. 1/22

Map of Latin America

Quick Facts about Latin America

Review syllabus

Reading:

- “Welcome to Latin America”, Chasteen Chap. 1

Week 2: Jan. 27 - 29

Pre-Conquest America II

Module #3: Post-Classic Period: a) The Toltec; b) The Zapotec; c) The Maya

Key concepts: Challenging the idea of “collapse” as cultural failure

Reading:

- “The First Peoples of the Americas” pp. 24-27

Module #4: The Aztec (also known as the “Mexica”)

Key concepts: Human sacrifice as cosmological obligation and the invention of Indigenous barbarity

Reading:

- “The First Peoples of the Americas” pp. 34-43

DISCUSSION: Wed. 1/28 or Thurs. 1/29

**Map quiz

Review: Pre-Conquest America in Meso-America

Reading:

- “The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society”

Week 3: February 3 - 5

Module #5: Pre-Hispanic Andean Civilization: a) Chavín; b) Nazca; c) Wari

Key concepts: Expansion through infrastructure and vertical ecology

Reading:

- “The First Peoples of the Americas” pp. 9-11; 19-23

Module #6: Pre-Hispanic Andean Civilization: The Inca
Machu Picchu

Key concepts: Textiles in Andean culture: political currency, imperial language,

and quipu record-keeping

Readings:

- “The Andes in the Fifteenth Century” pp. 43-53
- “The Origins of the Incas” *Peru Reader* pp. 49-54

DISCUSSION Wed. 2/4 or Thurs. 2/5

Review: Pre-Conquest Andean Civilizations

Readings:

- “The Aztecs and the Incas Compared” pp. 51-53
- “Cloth, Textile and the Inca Empire” *Peru Reader* pp. 55-69

UNIT #2: FOUNDATIONS: THE MAKING OF A “NEW” WORLD

(ca. late 15th to 18th centuries)

Week 4: February 10 - 12

****Module #7: Exam #1: Pre-Conquest America**

Module #8: The Conquest of the Americas
a) The discovery of Brazil
b) The Fall of the Aztec and Inca Empires

Key concepts: The problem of reading Indigenous worlds through European categories

Reading:

- “The Encounter”, Chasteen, Chapter 2

DISCUSSION Wed. 2/11 or Thurs. 2/12

Readings:

- John Hemming, “Atahualpa and Pizarro”

Week 5: February 17 – 19

Module #9: Colonial Rule: a) Portuguese slave trade; b) Palmares

Key concepts: Brazil as a laboratory of racial capitalism

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 3, “Colonial Crucible”

Module #10: Film: *Quilombo* (Dir. Carlos Diegues, 1984)

Key concepts: Why art matters where documents fail

Reading:

- Anon., “The War against Palmares”

DISCUSSION Wed. 2/18 or Thurs. 2/19

Film discussion: *Quilombo*

Reading:

- Bartolomé de las Casas, “In Defense of the Indians”

Week 6: February 24 - 26

Module #11: Hero Cults of Independence

Key concepts: Public rituals, monuments, statues, and anniversaries: What does hero worship do socially?

Readings:

- Chasteen, Chapter 4, “Independence”
- “The Great Liberator, Simón Bolívar, 1783-1814”

Module #12: Film *The Liberator* (Dir. Alberto Arvelo, 2014)

Key concepts: The film’s relationship to contemporary Venezuelan politics, and why Bolívar matters in the 21st century.

DISCUSSION Wed. 2/25 or Thurs. 2/26

Film discussion of *The Liberator*

Reading:

- “The Final Victory, Simón Bolívar, 1815-1830”

UNIT #3: RACE, WAR AND CITIZENSHIP: PEOPLE AND NATION IN NEO-COLONIAL TIMES (ca. 19th to early 20th centuries)

Week 7: March 3 - 5

Module #13: Caudillo Legends

Key concepts: Why do communities invest emotionally in strongmen? Are there historically female caudillos? Who, where and when?

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 5, “Post-Colonial Blues”

Module #14: The Whitening Syndrome and the Myth of Progress

Key concepts: How is race reproduced through gender norms?

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 6, “Progress”

DISCUSSION Wed. 3/4 or Thurs. 3/5

Towards a Latin American Identity

Readings:

- José Martí, “Our America” (1892)
- Rubén Darío, “To Roosevelt” (1904)

**UNIT #4: THE AGE OF MASS POLITICS: BUILDING A “HEROIC” STATE
AND “HEROIC” PUEBLO
(ca. 1910s to 1970s)**

Week 8: March 10 - 12

Module #15: Colony into Neo-Colony: Building Aristocratic Republics of Progress?

Key concepts: Architecture, opera, boulevards, and Europe in the Tropics.

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 7, “Neocolonialism”

Module #16: From Revolution to Populism: 1910s to 1940s

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 8, “Nationalism”

Key concepts: Murals, music, cinema, and radio as nationalist tools

DISCUSSION Wed. 3/11 or Thurs. 3/12

Film: *Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman* (Dir. Isabelle Tardan, 1996)

Readings:

- “Pancho Villa: Icon of Insurgency” [from *LA Icons*: pp. 21-33]

Week 9: March 17 - 19

Module #17: Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists

Key concepts: History told on wall, not in books: Imported Marxism

Readings:

- “Art and Corruption”, pp. 492-99, *The Mexico Reader*

Module #18: The Art of Frida Kahlo

Key concepts: The female body as site of history, trauma, disability, and resistance

Film: *Frida* (Dir. Julie Taymor, 2002)

DISCUSSION Wed. 3/18 or Thurs. 3/19

Film discussion: *Frida* (Dir. Julie Taymor, 2002)

Reading:

- “Fetishizing Frida” [from *LA Icons* pp. 173-85]

****Exam #2**

Week 10: March 24 – March 26

Module #19: Populist myths: the example of Peronism

Key concepts: Eva Perón as a gendered political figure: sainthood, motherhood, martyrdom, limitations

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 9, “Revolution”

Film: *Evita* (Dir. Alan Parker, 1998)

Module #20 Fidel Castro and the New Age of Revolution

Key concepts: Gendered language of sacrifice, heroism, and revolution

Readings:

- Fidel Castro, “History Will Absolve Me” (1953); “Facing U.S. Aggression” (1960); “Denouncing U.S. Bay of Pigs Invasion” (1961); “Cuba’s Achievements and America’s Wars” (2003):

<http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/>

NO DISCUSSIONS THIS WEEK: Enjoy your break.

Spring Break: March 29 – April 4

Week 11: April 7 - 9

Module #21 Che Guevara

Key concepts: When does revolutionary violence become doctrine? What happens when revolution becomes style?

Readings:

- “From Korda’ Guerrillero Heroico to Global Brand: Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara” [from *LA Icon* pp. 47-60]
- Che Guevara, “Man and Socialism”
- Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*. Intro. by Marc Becker; “Message to the Tricontinental”

Module #22: Cold War (and “Dirty War”) in the Southern Cone

Key concepts: Violence with and without Spectacle

Reading:

- Chasteen, Chapter 10, “Reaction”

DISCUSSION Wed. 4/8 or Thurs. 4/9

- Hebe de Bonafini and Matilde Sánchez, “Madwomen at the Plaza de Mayo”
- National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, “Never Again”

UNIT #5: POST-HEROIC PREDICAMENTS: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GLOBALIZATION (ca. 1980s to present)

Week 12: April 14 - 16

Module #23: Recent Revolutionary Times: The Zapatista Movement of Chiapas
Key concepts: Indigenous identity as historical, relational, and mobilized;
or what does it mean to be “visible” as Indigenous?

Readings:

- Chasteen, Chapter 11, “Neoliberalism”
- “Visible Indians: Subcomandante Marcos and the ‘Indianization’ of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation”

Module #24: Film *Even the Rain* (Dir. Iciar Bollain, 2011).

Key concepts: Water privatization as contemporary colonial extraction

DISCUSSION Wed. 4/15 or Thurs. 4/16: Cuba Today Presentations

Week 13: April 21 - 23

Module #25: Hugo Chavez, his legacy and Venezuela today

Key concepts: Venezuela and petro-politics

Readings:

- “Latin America’s Left Turn”. In Foreign Affairs.
- Trump in Venezuela (Reading TBA closer to mid-April)

Module #26: **Exam #3

DISCUSSION Wed. 4/22 or Thurs. 4/23

Recent politics in Latin America today: The case of Bolsonaro and Lula in Brazil

Week 14: April 28 - 30

Module #27: Work on final projects / final reflections

Module #28: Work on final projects / final reflections

DISCUSSION Wed. 4/29 or Thurs. 4/30

Class conclusions: Presentation of final projects