



FROM STRENGTHENING TO CENTERING THE MARGIN: KEEPING YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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For most of my life's work in the cultural development field, the lens has been one of representing and advocating for representation, ensuring that the cultures of those at the margins were fought for and represented.

I had a recent experience with the Smithsonian's ongoing Asian-Latino Program that rotated my consciousness on this issue of cultural representation—from one of *strengthening* to *centering* the margin.

I was raised by a father who fought in World War II and returned from the conflict fully expecting to be enfranchised in ways we could never have imagined growing up in East LA, and a mother who got on a train from El Paso to Washington, DC three months before the outbreak of the same conflict to work as an inventory clerk in the Department of War, the precursor to the Defense Department, where she labored alongside those living under segregation. My father took advantage of the GI Bill, got a college degree, and became a public school teacher and administrator the rest of his working life. My mother also earned a college degree, taught kindergarten, and served on the local school board for many years. She later tutored at my youngest daughter's elementary school until serious hearing loss set in. Both were very active San Bernardino, California's Mexican American community, spending countless hours advocating for new libraries and bilingual education, registering voters, and supporting many other community development causes.

Not surprisingly, both of my parents are community spirited, even at age 94. I was raised to give back to the Latino community. Inspired by their achievements and commitment to community, I went to college, during the height of the Chicano Movement, joined MEChA¹, graduated from law school thinking that the legal-political system was where I needed to fight

¹ MEChA stands for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, a popular Chicano student organization. There are some MEChA chapters active today.

the good fight, only to discover the media and theater arts and understand that the realm of cultural representation and equity was where I wanted to be, and where I was needed.

In her recent book, *Culture Works*², NYU Professor, Arlene Dávila, posits that “Race and ethnic specific initiatives stem from racial minorities’ exclusion from the U.S. canon and from its history and institutions. Accordingly, ethnic-specific initiatives are central to guaranteeing a more unified society, and banishing their existence can only lead to a society that is less representative and less informed about its history.” Historically, Latino cultural workers and activists have advocated and fought for equity in public funding, access to spaces to do their work, and an expanded notion of recognized and valued aesthetics, among other battles. While there have been many noteworthy advances, the strengthened vantage point is, still, one from the margin, of cultures seemingly stuck in the realm of “the other.”

This past August the Smithsonian’s Asian Pacific American and Latino Centers convened a group of Asian, Latino and Asian-Latino scholars, artists and writers to help us think through and shape where our Asian-Latino initiative goes next. To this point, we have done programs focusing on shared urban cultures, similar struggles with mass media stereotypes, food fusions, and co-curated a Pop-Up Museum. Pop-Up Museums are a “Museum Without Walls” concept, which, in our case, featured projected artwork, roving curators, music and a photo booth. It was a real community happening in Silver Spring, MD’s Civic Center,

During this recent convening it became clear to me that, going forward, our attitude and focus must transition to centering the margin within the core of this country’s culture. The strategy should be one of embedding our best scholars in the academy, our best curators in the museums, and our distinct and hybrid community aesthetics and values in the American canon. Importantly, this continuing Asian-Latino dialog and exploration must laser inward, and not drift into tiresome comparisons with standards and assumptions traditionally prescribed by our “leading” cultural institutions and experts. This is an exploration of how our peoples and our cultures relate, engage with each other, and how we map-out the future.

Asians and Latinos are the fastest growing populations and cultures in the United States. As the “Nation’s Museum” with an *.edu* in our web address, the Smithsonian has a special opportunity and responsibility to lead the way in this margin-centering process.

² NYU Press, April 2012, Chapter 4, The Trials of Building a National Museum of the American Latino