



Country of Origin; Community of Residence: Cultural and Identify Implications

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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Like many of you, I eagerly awaited the U.S. Census Bureau's recent report, which indicated that the Latino population has exceeded 50 million, over 16 percent of the total U.S. population. This dramatic 46 percent growth in our population over the past decade has major social, educational, political and cultural implications for our country.

As I explored a little further, perusing the very solid work of the Pew Hispanic Center, I learned that an estimated 38 percent of U.S. Latinos are foreign born; 53 percent for adult Latinos. I was interested in these figures because, as mentioned in my last message, the Latino Center is re-grounding its efforts on the U.S. Latino experience. Why is the foreign born quotient important? It strikes me that, given the just noted percentages, much of the U.S. Latino experience is foundationally shaped by social, political, economic and cultural realities in other countries—Mexico, Brazil, Spain, El Salvador, etc.

So, as we move forward with several of our research projects and public programs, the Center needs to comprehend the dynamic of *Country of Origin* juxtaposed with *Community of Residence* in the manifestations of cultural practices and the formation of community and identity in this country and, as consequence, the impact of our foreign born when they return to or otherwise engage with their native countries. This interplay of *de allá y de aquí* is alive and well—it plays itself out every day in countless communities and in all manner of social intercourse throughout this country. I can tell you that it is really vibrant in Columbia Heights, my neighborhood in Washington, DC.

This juxtaposition struck me during a recent trip to the Dominican Republic. Program staff from the Latino Center, National Museum of American History and National Museum of the American Indian, together with colleagues from the Dominican Studies Institute and Museo del Barrio in New York, had participated in meetings with local cultural leaders and officials from the U.S. Embassy discussing the Latino Center's recently launched Dominican Initiative. Clearly, one cannot understand the Dominican American community, the fifth largest Latino population in the U.S., without comprehending the history and culture of the Dominican Republic, and without coming to terms with the consequences of decades of the *va y viene* of millions of our Dominican compatriots.

If you are a Dominican living in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood your life may have much to do with the Dominican Republic on the one hand, but nothing do with it on the other. It is the exploration of this culturally negotiated experience and identity that lies at the heart of our Dominican Initiative. I was recently listening to Fulanito, a popular Dominican group from New York. The music of Fulanito is rooted in *merengue típico* (sometimes referred to as *perico ripiãõ*), the accordion-based folk merengue native to *El Cibão*, the central northern region of the country. Some musicologists actually credit groups like Fulanito for the resurgence of this folk music tradition, which had been fading somewhat on the island. Not surprisingly, when you listen to the lyrics, double entendres aside, what you hear is a very New York sound, replete with mixed-in, hip-hopish English lyrics that pay homage to *mi patria dominicana* (my Dominican homeland), scoff at Columbus' 1492 "discovery" of *Quisqueya* (the Taíno¹ word for the island of Hispaniola, which the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti), and toast

¹ The Taínos were the predominant indigenous group that met Columbus at Hispaniola. Today, there is resurgence in the preservation of Taíno culture and identity, which is the subject of another project of the Latino Center.

with Barceló, a popular Dominican rum. Their music bridges, with inbred tenderness and nostalgia, two interconnected realities in ways that Dominicans on both islands, Manhattan and Quisqueya, get. During the previously mentioned trip, our group visited *Signos de Indentidad*, a permanent exhibit on Dominican history and culture at Centro León, a marvelous cultural center in Santiago, the second largest city in the Dominican Republic. As you exit the gallery, there is an installation of photos and objects, notably suitcases, highlighted by the following caption: “*No me estoy yendo. Estoy solo preparando la hora de volver.*” (I am not going. I am only preparing for the hour of my return.) Santiago is quite a distance from 180th and Broadway, near the entrance to the George Washington Bridge, but not where it counts the most—in the heart, in collective memory and now, with technology, in daily Dominican-ness.

The subtleties of being foreign born, or being the offspring of the foreign born—negotiating cultures, languages, and social, political and educational systems—are things that the Census can register, but it is up to institutions like the Smithsonian to explore, deeply, what is clearly the changing face of the United States, that the rapidly growing and diversifying Latino population embodies and symbolizes.