



The Complexity of Latino Diversity

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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The other day I ran into colleagues at the soon-to-be National Museum of African American History and Culture. We share offices in the same Smithsonian building and check in occasionally. “So,” I say, “When are you going to start taking care of my Dominican peeps; they’re African Americans, you know.” They looked at me bemusedly. Sensing I had some explaining to do, I rattled off that Dominicans are the largest African- descended U.S. Latino population group, that the reality of 178th Street and Broadway (New York’s Washington Heights neighborhood, and the largest Dominican aggregation in this country) is a far cry from that of Altos de Chavón, DR, and that Afro-Dominicans in this country have, in large measure, contextualized their homeland’s peculiar view of *africanidad*—you may be *India Canela* (Cinnamon Indian) in Santo Domingo, but you are Black here. My underlying plea, given their African American reality, was that we needed some help in exploring these implications as part of our ongoing efforts to serve the Dominican community.

My interest in *africanidad*, a foundational notion of African miscegenation in the Americas, is nothing new and, no, I was not moved by the UN’s designation of 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent—it will take more than a lifetime to fully explore, understand and celebrate all that African-descended peoples have contributed to our shared American (continent, not country) history and culture. It began when, as a child, I quizzed my parents about how they fell in love during the 40’s Mambo craze (mambo means “conversation with the gods” in Kikongo, a principal language of Central African slaves taken to Cuba), continued when Francisco Aguabella, famed Afro-Cuban percussionist, joined Carlos Santana’s band, and was really driven home with the National Museum of Mexican Art’s watershed 2005 exhibition, “The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present.” I’m of Mexican heritage, tied to a country with supposedly minimal African legacy—this despite the fact that during Colonial Mexico there were more Africans (slaves, of course) than Europeans. What happened to all of them after independence from Spain and the abolition of slavery? Hmm...

A recent acquaintance asked me what my greatest work challenge was. I quickly responded—understanding and managing cultural diversity. Not the expected response from a cultural worker of color like myself. The above rumination on *africanidad* is tied the iterative exploration of Latino identity, which is African, Christian, Gay, Indigenous, Muslim, European, Jewish, Asian and “other”—some or all in one person, in one family or in one community—all the time. The Latino population continues to grow and to be enriched by this amazing mix. These complex, unexpected and daily confluences and collisions, and the communities and vernacular cultures they yield, are not easy to understand, manage and interpret, but that’s our job—the challenge that we at the Latino Center cherish, relish and wrestle with each day. We are blessed to have this opportunity.

Last October, we lost Piri Thomas, one our most eloquent voices. Born to a Puerto Rican mother and Cuban father, Thomas knew New York’s Spanish Harlem well and, in his volume,

Down These Mean Streets, one gets a glimpse of his life's challenges, which, while special, are also communally held by many in our community. From him we also derive inspiration to move forward with our important shared or individual enterprise. From his poem, "Born Anew at Each A.M.":

*The streets got life, man,
like a young tender sun,
and gentleness like
long awaited dreams to come.*

*For children are roses with nary a thorn,
forced to feel the racist's scorn,
Our children are beauty
with the right to be born.*

*Born anew at each a.m.
Like a child out of twilight,
flying toward sunlight,
Born anew at each a.m.*

As we move forward in this New Year, may it be so. *Ashé.*