



A Message from the Desk of the Director

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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On May 5th the National Museum of the American Latino Commission presented its report to Congress and President Obama. Many involved in Latino cultural work, education, social and economic development, and other fields heralded the report and its call for a venue, located on the National Mall, which would research, present, celebrate, promote and preserve the Latino experience and our achievements in the arts, culture, humanities and sciences.

I read with interest, and a mix of disappointment and resignation, some of the on-line commentary in the *Washington Post* that accompanied the report's release. It's not helpful to quote from the entries; only to say that they ranged from mostly negative to flagrantly racist. What concerns me is that, again, vociferous and misguided elements of our society are manifesting the kind of historical amnesia that seems to raise its ugly and unproductive head at critical points in our history. This often leads to hurtful finger-pointing or, worse, legislative efforts punishing immigrants for doing what immigrants to this country have done for several waves now—come here in search of a better life for themselves and their families, while becoming productive members of society. I suspect that if you peruse newspaper headlines during the peak of Ellis Island-era Irish, Italian, Greek and Jewish immigration, you will discover jingoistic diatribes masquerading as reportage. Can you imagine the U.S. without the contributions of these and other immigrant groups? Similarly, can you imagine current labor economics without the contributions of millions of Latino immigrants? I specifically mention Latino immigrants because much of the anti-immigrant attacks today are primarily targeted at them.

On a recent trip to South America, I took a bus across the Andes from Santiago, Chile to Mendoza, Argentina. (This spectacular ride is worth its own travel column.) I was sitting next to an indigenous Bolivian woman returning to her home in Mendoza. While we shared stories I found out that she immigrated to this mostly agricultural region of Argentina almost 20 years ago to work in the fields. She has no more family in Bolivia; they are all *Mendocinos* now. She commented that she didn't understand why the U.S. didn't have the kind of welcoming immigration laws that Argentina has on the books. While visiting two of the over one-thousand wineries in the Mendoza region (some of the world's finest wines, notably Malbec, are produced here), I learned that many of the workers who tend to the vines are immigrants, mostly from Peru and Bolivia. From my cab driver I learned that these workers aren't treated particularly well by the owners of these large businesses. Immediately I was able to draw parallels to the Latino immigrant experience that I have seen in our country. At least in Argentina immigrants aren't laboring under draconian legislative schemes or threats thereof, or the kind of unbridled vitriol we are currently subjected to here. Like most immigrants, I don't imagine that my Bolivian acquaintance really wanted to leave her native land. Most don't. They do what they have to do. Human nature trumps foreignness.

So, why the fear, why the hate? I have observed it and have felt it, and I was born and educated here in the U.S. Maybe I'm naïve, but I still believe that if most North Americans actually knew us they would grow to appreciate and understand us—our culture, our customs, our valuable contributions and even our language (the U.S. is already the third-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world). Whether a national museum dedicated to Latinos is located on the National Mall or whether it is part of the Smithsonian is yet to be determined. What I ask you to imagine though, is a place where Latinos and non-Latinos can come together to learn more about our rich culture which will no doubt play a role in healing our country's wounded psyche.