



Hispanic Heritage Month

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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Hispanic Heritage Month will soon be upon us, and I'm reminded about the critical issues related to Latino cultural identity in this country.

As Director of the Smithsonian Latino Center, I received a request from a Latino student group at the University of Maryland to speak to them on the importance of Hispanic Heritage Month. I've never done one of these before, so I accepted the invitation, figuring maybe they were looking for an elder perspective on Latino history and identity. I'm a little nervous about it.



Public Law 100-402 was enacted in August 1988 to recognize the contributions of Latinos to the United States. President Johnson initially declared a Hispanic Heritage Week. President Reagan extended it for 30 days. So now, from September 15th through October 15th, it is our time to shine. The dates were chosen because eight Latin American countries celebrate their declarations of independence from Spain during that timeframe. Given the majority position of the Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano community within the United States' Latino population and the ubiquity of Mexican culture, much attention focuses on "El Grito," The Cry that launched Mexican Independence on September 16, 1810. As the populations of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, countries that also commemorate independence during this timeframe, continue to grow, disperse, and flex their economic, political, and cultural muscle here, we will surely hear from them with equal fervor, and soon.

I will admit to having a hard time with the word "Hispanic," per se, as it can serve to aggregate and homogenize our communities in unhelpful ways. It is easier to facilely categorize than to recognize and embrace the inherent messiness of diversity born on both sides of the Atlantic, and manifested beyond. The term Hispanic references Spain and its former colonies, which means that colossal Brazil and the legacy of once mighty Portugal are, oftentimes, excluded. It seems to me that an identity can continue to evolve and include.

The term Hispanic came into vogue during the eighties, to group us for statistical, practical and political purposes—to follow population trends, estimate Medicaid utilization, monitor political empowerment, etc. Government officials might not have been thinking too much about the complexities of cultural identity at the time.

To readers, I recommend When Labels Don't Fit: Hispanics and their View of Identity, published by the Pew Hispanic Center. This recent report finds that the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are not fully embraced by our community. Tellingly, “a majority (51%) say that they most often identify themselves by their family’s country of origin; just 24% say they prefer a pan-ethnic label.” I guess my take is that, for purposes of individual and communal identity, the country of origin orientation is something to be honored; however, we’re not a focus group any more. We’re over 50 million strong with all that that means practically from demographic, political and cultural perspectives. I believe we need a term that unites us in important contexts and at critical times. I’m a Chicano, and I’m good with “Latino” if it helps represent and mobilize our community.

On a recent Saturday morning I was working on my iPad at Tryst, my favorite coffee shop in Adams-Morgan, a wonderfully diverse DC neighborhood. One of the fellows bussing tables stopped to ask me about the iPad because he wanted to get one for his son. (I can envision people who know me chuckling, “The blind leading the blind.”) Learning that he was Salvadoran, the largest immigrant group in the DC region, I pulled out a poster of our upcoming exhibition, *Cerámica de Los Ancestros*, an exploration of Pre-Columbian Central America at the National Museum of the American Indian. (I carry these around with me as I make my customary rounds through Adams-Morgan, Mt. Pleasant and Columbia Heights.) His eyes went straight to the image of *Huehuetotl*, a 900-1200 AD elder God of Fire from present-day El Salvador. He’s since proudly put up the poster in his home. It struck me that these momentary confluences of country of origin (El Salvador) with community of residence (U.S. Central American/Latino) are going to multiply, and impact how we serve our diverse communities. I’m also thinking that maybe I should take a basic course in hydrology to better understand the manifestations and consequences of confluence itself.