Latino D.C. History Project
Synopsis and Prototype Case Study
Phase 1 (2009–2010)
Smithsonian Latino Center

Principal Investigator: Dr. Elaine A. Peña
Assistant Professor of American Studies
The George Washington University
Washington D.C. U.S.A.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project Overview: Objectives, Challenges, and Methods  3
Narrative Overview: Latinos in Washington D.C.  8
Prototype Case Study: The Cuban presence in Washington D.C.  13
Appendix:
   Census Table—D.C. Race and Hispanic Origin, 1800-1990  28
   Image 1: Storage Space: Santería artifacts in Columbia Heights (2010)  29
Deliverables  30
Acknowledgements  31
Project Overview: Objectives, Challenges, and Methods

The Latino D.C. History Project seeks to understand the presence of Latinos in the greater Washington D.C. area throughout the twentieth century. This research initiative is building toward an exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. In the short term, it is a tool to promote educational programming and cultural engagement between the Smithsonian Latino Center, its affiliates, and community organizations. Supported by colleagues across the Smithsonian as well as local academics, activists, and governmental actors, the project has several deliverables. Phase one (2009-2010) of this multi-year initiative focuses on the following goals—1) develop theoretical approaches for defining Latino history in D.C.; 2) identify, survey, and analyze existing studies and other resources related to the documentation of Latino history in the D.C. metropolitan area; 3) conduct research at national and municipal libraries, archives, record-holding agencies, churches, and other organizations to collect historical and contemporary information about D.C.-based Latino/ Latin American/Iberian populations; and 4) conduct research of documents, oral histories, images (photographs, posters, other graphics) that will form the core collection or core resources for the Latino DC History Project.

Ascertaining how different Hispanic or Latino communities have impacted the District’s social fabric and historical memory is a complex task. Especially when one takes into account hemispheric political economic factors such as political oppression, military interventions, and economic instability. Those push-pull factors, some engineered in the District proper, have steered various groups to the metropolitan area. Preliminary research has shown that language, financial, and legal issues often put new residents at a disadvantage. But this project does not encourage a sad, romanticized rendering of disenfranchised “Hispanic” or “Latino” communities. It deliberately focuses on the District as a host to several universities, federal, and
international agencies that attract actors who have joined the upper-echelons of the city’s bueracric workforce, non-profit groups, educational, and cultural centers. It also recognizes Hispanic or Latino groups as entrepeneurs, as political mobilizers, and as service sector employees—the invisible laborers who keep the metropolitan area whistling. The principal recommendation of this report is that subsequent phases of the Latino D.C. History Project attend to the task of connecting local integration processes with international political negotiations.

The issue of labeling groups according to ethnicity or race should also be acknowledged. The Latino D.C. History Project seeks to interpret the experiences of Latino/Latin American/Iberian populations but exactly who the labels “Hispanic” or “Latino” refer to remains contentious. Both categorizations affiliate individuals living in the United States according to a shared ancestry—Latin American or Spanish. Scholars of Latino identity formation have identified the use of those terms as debilitating because they conflate as much as they include. As Suzanne Oboler notes, “In the current usage by the U.S. census, government


agencies, social institutions, social scientists, the media, and the public at large, then, the ethnic label Hispanic obscures rather than clarifies the varied social and political experiences in U.S. society of more than 23 million citizens, residents, refugees, and immigrants with ties to Caribbean and Central and South American countries.”

Several of D.C.’s Latino groups, Bolivians for example, may not speak Spanish—often a key marker of Latino identity—but Aymara. This first phase of the project concurs with those assessments and attends to them by foregrounding the contingency and temporality of ethnic identification processes.

There is a long-standing tradition in Washington D.C., for example, known as the Latino Festival or Fiesta D.C. Latino-identified residents in the metropolitan area have gathered since the early 1970s in different parts of the District (from the National Mall to the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood) to showcase their distinct visions of cultural heritage through dance, music, food, and clothing. Different ethnic groups from across the hemisphere come together under the banner of Latino identity. In that setting, the terms Hispanic or Latino produce symbolic and material benefits that exceed the limitations of labels. During interviews and informal conversations, however, respondents identified themselves according to their place of birth (i.e. “soy Mexicana”/I am Mexican or more specifically “soy del D.F.”/I am from Mexico City), not as “Latina.” The findings of this phase of the Latino D.C. History Project use the terms according to how individuals referred to themselves in different environments and for different purposes.

Another pressing challenge is the lack of written materials or a classic archival footprint

---


4 Olivia Cadaval, Creating a Latino Identity in the Nation’s Capital: The Latino Festival (New York: Routledge, 1998). While the event receives substantial press coverage, Cadaval’s book and co-authored articles offer the most comprehensive examination of the festival.
documenting the presence of Latinos in D.C. The Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum as well as several of the District’s municipal and community centers like the Latin American Youth Center (L.A.Y.C.), the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, and the M.L.K. library have papers, records, and ephemera. But initial research efforts suggest that the majority of information may be found in personal archives—in homes and community meeting spaces, particularly in classic port-of-entry neighborhoods such as Adams Morgan, Mt. Pleasant, and Columbia Heights in the District of Columbia and the border zones of Langley Park/Adelphi, Takoma Park, and Silver Spring (Maryland), Alexandria/Barcroft, and Arlington (Virginia). In addition to using more conventional historical and anthropological methods such as the collection of oral histories and participant observation to identify potential sources, this initial phase of the project employs insights taken from human geography to meet those challenges. It promotes a space production optic that draws our attention to ad hoc meeting places used by different ethnic groups to converse and strategize. Looking at contemporary events organized by Hispanic leaders on Capitol Hill alongside a house in Columbia Heights used by Afro-Cubans as both a place to produce music and to practice Santería offers us an opportunity to critically compare not only the phenotypic, gender,

---

5 Conceptually, this project takes a site-specific approach that allows us to examine migration and local integration as a process—as layers of practice imbued onto particular spaces. As Henri Lefebvre proposes, “It is not the work of a moment for a society to generate (produce) an appropriated social space in which it can achieve a form by means of self-presentation and self-representation—a social space to which that society is not identical, and which indeed is its tomb as well as its cradle. This act of creation is, in fact, a process.” Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 34 (emphasis mine). This phase of research also draws from the work of Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), David Harvey, “Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 80.3 (1990): 418-34; Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003); Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); and Dwight Conquergood, “Life in Big Red: Struggles and Accommodations in a Chicago Polyethnic Tenement,” In Structuring Diversity, edited by Louise Lamphere, 95-144.
religious, class, and citizenship-based underpinnings of Latino identity formation but also intra-ethnic alliances, antagonisms, and power imbalances.

The key here is to pay attention to where Latinos have made their mark in the District, while understanding that contemporary physical structures may or may not reflect their efforts. Asking how individuals or groups remember sharing space and tracing the different places where they collaborated (be it a coffee shop, an office building, or an apartment) fills the gaps left behind by inadequate documentation. Establishing one of Washington D.C.’s foremost centers for Latino cultural production, the Grupo de Artistas Latino Americanos (GALA) theater, for example, required co-founders Hugo Medrano and Rebecca Read move their center of operations from a townhouse in the Adams Morgan neighborhood, to the All Souls Church, to the Lansburgh Arts Center, to the Sacred Heart Catholic School, to the Warehouse Theater, and eventually to the Tivoli Theater in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. Examining different uses of those spaces underscores how organizations like GALA have not only facilitated inter-ethnic artistic collaborations among Latinos but also among different groups in the District. A space production optic reinforces the idea that Latino history is an integral part of D.C. history.

Using this interdisciplinary approach, the first phase of the project gathered primary and secondary sources and produced two synthetic reports—“The Local is National” and “The Cuban Presence in Washington D.C.” They are organized chronologically in eight binders (e.g. 1950-1969, 2000-2010 vol.3). To maintain a focus on hemispheric/transnational relationships and the local built environment, documents are structured thematically (activism, 

---

6 Both reports were written for the Latino D.C. advisory board, community historians, activists, and curators. Those documents, archival materials, and digital copies of oral histories are housed at the Smithsonian Latino Center located at 600 Maryland Ave. SW, Suite 7042, Washington D.C. 20024 U.S.A.
economy, education, healthcare, international relations, local politics, and multi-ethnic space) and geographically (South America, Central America, Caribbean, and North America).

Additionally, there are also oral histories available in digital format. Interviewees were chosen from various federal and district organizations to highlight the ethnic and class-based diversity of Latinos in Washington D.C.

Narrative Overview: Latinos in Washington D.C.

Another first-phase goal of the project is to dispel the myth that the Latino presence in Washington D.C. is most prominently felt after 1980, a date that correlates with the influx of Salvadorans to the metropolitan area. According to the 1980 Census, Washington DC boasted 638,333 residents. The Latin American-born population at that time was 59,823 or less than 10% of all residents. Salvadorans, who today make up 32% of DC’s Latino population, accounted for only 6% in 1980 after Jamaicans and Cubans. Other countries represented in 1980 census include Colombia (6%), Argentina (5%), Chile (5%), Peru (5%), and Ecuador (5%). Salvadorans currently comprise the majority of the Washington D.C. metropolitan area’s foreign-born population (12.5%) but there are several preceding waves of migration and integration for which this project must account. Census statistics, oral histories, archival research, and secondary sources suggest that a range of communities—from Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Dominicans in the mid-twentieth century, to migrants from the Southern Cone in the 1970s, Bolivians, Peruvians, and Salvadorans followed by

---

7 That number has grown by 600% in the past 25 years. Indeed, census numbers are quite different in 2006 than in 1980. In 1980, Salvadorans did not make up 32% of the Latin American population in D.C. as they did in 2006.

Mexicans in the 1990s—have (and continue to) impact the nation’s capital [Appendix 1].

Some of the earliest Hispanic residents in the D.C. area were Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans who arrived in the 1940s to take advantage of federal jobs and international posts. U.S. citizenship facilitated their integration into the District’s post World War II bureaucratic labor force. One woman, Elisa Gonzalez arrived in Washington DC in September of 1941 after successfully taking the civil service exam in El Paso, Texas. She worked for the Department of War completing clerical assignments and conducting weapons inventory. She and a few of her female colleagues, who were also from Texas, lived together in a boarding house on the corner of 13th and Columbia in Columbia Heights.10 A few blocks over on 16th street, renowned Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jiménez and his wife Zenobia lived temporarily in the Dorchester House. The couple had moved to Washington DC in December 1942. Soon after, while Juan Ramon continued his work, Zenobia began teaching classes at the University of Maryland College Park and searched for permanent housing, which she likened to finding a mirlo blanco (a white blackbird).11 The aspiring poet, Claribel Alegria, who had arrived in DC in 1943 to study at George Washington University (GWU) for a BA in English, soon approached them and would often ask to use their phone to call her aunts in El Salvador.

9 In 1950, Washington D.C.’s total population was 802,178. 325 individuals were categorized as Mexican and 1,857 as “Other America.” See “Table 1: Characteristics of the Population by Census Tracts, 1950,” http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/41557421v3p4ch07.pdf. In 1960, the District’s population held steady at 763,956. A key difference in the racial categorization of residents was that data accounted for Puerto Ricans (1,001) and Puerto Rican parentage (372) among U.S. citizens (e.g. “white” and “negro”). D.C.’s population from Mexico had grown to 1,764. An “All Other and Not Reported” category (70,032) replaced “Other America.” See “Table P-1: General Characteristics of the Population, By Census Tracts, 1960,” http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/41953654v11c05.pdf.

10 Eduardo Díaz, director of the Smithsonian Latino Center, generously shared this story with me during the early moments of the project.

Although originally from Nicaragua, her family moved to El Salvador to flee Somoza’s regime when Claribel was nine months old. Her childhood memories were marked by the peasant uprisings in Santa Ana, El Salvador (1932), which she fictionalized in her text *Luisa en el País de la Realidad*. The year of her graduation at GWU (1948), she published her first book of poems *Anillo de Silencio* with a prologue by José Vasconcelos, then director of the National Library in Mexico and the Mexican Institute of Hispanic Culture.

These inter-ethnic conversations preceded the influx of white-collar laborers from Latin America after the creation of the World Bank group, the International Monetary Fund, and the establishment of embassies after World War II. Employees, particularly in service sectors, lived in port-of-entry neighborhoods Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, and Mt. Pleasant because of their proximity to embassy row. Hispanic-owned and run businesses such as La Casa Peña in the early 1950s and Casa Diloné, which was a Dominican-owned store that sold Latin American products in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood, doubled as sites for informal meetings in which Spanish-speaking residents gathered, conversed, and eventually mobilized. Political upheaval and civil unrest around issues of race, gender, and sexuality in the 1960s engendered various forms of political mobilization across the country. One of the outgrowths of that tumultuous period was increasing solidarity and support among marginalized groups in the District. Promoting Hispanic education and social services, in particular, became a platform for politically active Latinos in the metropolitan area. Several actors from across the Caribbean and Latin America played a fundamental role in creating the Program for English Instruction of Latin Americans—today known as the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School (1970), The Educational Organization for United Latin Americans (EOFULA) and Vida Senior Center (1968), the Office of Latino Affairs (1976, which was formerly known as the Spanish Community Advisory Committee in the Office of Human Relations, 1969), and the Latin

Future research cycles should frame those inter-ethnic political complications within the larger black-white master narrative that dominates Washington DC’s history, particularly in the 1980s. In *Dream City*, Harry Jaffe and Tom Sherwood suggest that the political stakes were high [for blacks] particularly because Mayor Marion Barry was “a lightning rod that was hot-wired directly into that most vulnerable and insecure part of the collective black psyche.” Quoting Milton Coleman, then a reporter for *The Washington Post*, they propose: “Many blacks [in a majority black town] feel that a part of their own future is wrapped up in Marion Barry’s success as a mayor […] He is a symbol—the most visible symbol—of those blacks who grew up in the ’60s, began to achieve status, influence and power in the ’70s, and don’t want to lose it

---


in the ‘80s.”

In 1980, Blacks numbered 448,906 or approximately 70% of the population and for only the second time in the District’s history had a black mayor. During his first term as mayor, from 1979 to 1991, Mayor Barry saw the ethnic composition of the District change, particularly with the influx of Central Americans fleeing war and poverty. One of Barry’s responses was to recognize the power of minority businesses. He strategically funneled “millions of dollars in city contracts to firms controlled by blacks, Latinos, and women.”

Subsidizing minority businesses was one way to counter decades of racial, class, and gender-based inequality but his decision also garnered support from those voter blocs. While Marion Barry is a polarizing public figure, it is worthwhile to look at the larger implications of his political strategies. Recognizing, for example, that the term black, as used by Jaffe, Sherwood, and Coleman, may or may not recognize Afro-Cubans, Afro-Dominicans, Afro-Panamanians, or Afro-Puerto Ricans is fundamental to producing a critical examination of Latino D.C. History. Ostensibly, Afro-Latinos can pass for black. That is, they can be black and Latino, which is a particularity that is not exclusive to D.C. but which affects how this

---

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, 141.

16 This first phase of the Latino D.C. History Project began the work of assessing the District’s history of fraught race relations and property value changes-cum-segregation strategies. Surale Phillips, a geo-demographer, used U.S. Census data and Hispanic population statistics to analyze how D.C. spaces/property value/consumer trends have changed over time. Her work is available in the archives housed at the Smithsonian Latino Center. For an excellent ethnographic analysis of those processes see Brett Williams, Upscaling Downtown: Stalled Gentrification in Washington, D.C (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

17 The Anacostia Museum’s exhibit Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity Among Black Immigrants in Washington (1994) has made the most important contribution to understanding the District’s black/white master narrative and immigration. For an astute analysis of the exhibit see Ginetta E.B. Candelario, “Black behind the ears—and up front too? Dominicans in The Black Mosaic,” The Public Historian 23.4 (2001): 55-72. For an excellent range of essays on Afro-Latino identity formation see Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores,
investigation considers Latino identity formation—its object of study. The presence and cultural impact of those marginalized groups, even within Latino communities, should not be subsumed under the city’s black-white master narrative. To bring those histories to fore of the conversation, the remainder of this report presents a prototype case study that focuses on the cultural imprint produced by Cubans in D.C., particularly by Afro-Cubans in Columbia Heights. It showcases anthropological, geographic, and performance-oriented approaches by focusing on international relations, racialized intra-District migration patterns, meaning-making rituals, and space production. Its framework and focus reflect the larger theoretical aspirations of the project.

Prototype Case Study: The Cuban presence in Washington D.C.  

As a small ethnic community that arrived well before, but also alongside, a tremendous wave of Salvadorans and other communities, a Cuban-focused case study allows Latino D.C. History researchers to consider the identity formation of a “low-density cultural group” in a multiethnic environment before 1980.  

By highlighting various destination points for Cuban

---


migrants within the metropolitan area (Barcroft, Virginia as opposed to the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood in D.C.), this analysis makes clear that *intra-community differences* based on phenotype, religion, and class are also part of the Cuban narrative. Cubans are not one monolithic or even united group. Further, this prototype case study presents the clearest justification for the necessity of attending to international relations and political economic factors in analyzing the local production of historical memory. It would be counterproductive to ignore the role the federal government, and by association Washington D.C.’s geographic identity as the nation’s capital, plays in bringing Cubans to the United States. Accordingly, this blueprint has three basic aims: 1) to offer a synthetic historical overview of the Cuban presence in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area; 2) to explicate how U.S.-Cuba international relations, shifting refugee statuses, and intra-group class-based distinctions brought Cubans to certain neighborhoods in the metropolitan area as opposed to other well-established points of entry such as Miami; and 3) to attain a sense of how religious practices, as well as other modes of musical and cultural production, create long-standing multiethnic Latino spaces within and beyond the immediate borders of the federal district.

**Overview of Cuba-U.S. relations**

This analysis of Cuba-U.S./la Habana-D.C. relations does not begin in 1959, the year that President Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba thereby creating political space for a revolutionary government and engendering the historical moment in which each country’s political and economic orientation ostensibly parted ways. In addition to being politically, economically, and culturally linked throughout the colonial era, U.S. and Cuban representatives created migratory ties by traveling back and forth between la Habana and Washington D.C. during the

---

nineteenth century. One example is Narciso López—a native of Venezuela and former general of the Spanish army who attempted to annex Cuba in the 1840s for the United States using violent force. He acted as a “ filibuster,” which refers not to a prolonged speech that obstructs advancement but to “irregular armies of adventurers from the United States and to the individuals who joined such armies.” More specifically, filibusters pursued “territorial conquests and other booty through intervention in foreign, domestic conflicts in which the United States was a neutral.” López organized multiple expeditions to invade Cuba. His actions align themselves with the Manifest Destiny agenda and the “Young America” movement that were sweeping Washington D.C. and the U.S. at large during the mid-nineteenth century. The U.S.’s position as “neutral” is arguable but López’s strategic discussions with President Polk set a precedent for U.S.-Cuba international relations, economic ties, and military interventions. Moreover, his “Young American” contemporaries who rallied to annex Cuba created overt and at times covert relationships well before the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Twentieth century migration from Cuba not only owes much to nineteenth century military and political networking but also to international business opportunities in South Florida. As early as 1886, Cuban entrepreneurs opened cigar factories near Tampa to evade import taxes thereby establishing migration outposts that solidified that region’s influx of


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid, 106-07.

political refugees in the 1950s. But other states, particularly New York and New Jersey, also have sustained migration ties with Cuba. It is worth mentioning that U.S. occupation and/or military interventions in the Caribbean at large (i.e. Cuba 1897, Haiti 1915, Dominican Republic 1916) often preceded welcome banners and subsequent accelerated immigration from the Caribbean to the United States in the early twentieth century. To be sure, Cuban immigration to the United States grew significantly after the Spanish-American War and in the years leading up to the Cuban Revolution.

The Cuban Missile Crisis altered Cuba-U.S./la Habana-Washington D.C. relations and most notably affected mobility between the two nations. There are three general phases for which this case study must account. Before the notorious Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, the U.S. welcomed approximately 125,000 Cubans as temporary political exiles after the Revolution. Many relocated to Southern Florida. It was not until December 1960, however, that the federal government organized an official response to the influx. After establishing the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center in Miami, President Kennedy initiated a Cuban Refugee Program. At this early point, resettlement was already strained. Many Cubans arrived on air flights during the next phase, roughly between 1961-1973. Some estimates cite the number of incoming “freedom flights” at 1500-1700 a week. “Operation” Peter Pan brought an estimated 14,000 children to the United States in the early 60s. Between 1973 and 1980, the U.S. limited

---


Cuban migration to political prisoners. Although anti-Castro foreign policy objectives generally dominated these periods, there were moments of dialogue. President Carter, for example, attempted to initiate talks “without preconditions” in 1977. The Mariel Boatlift in 1980, a focal point of this case study, brought Cuban refugees to the Washington D.C. area after rerouting them from Florida and Arkansas.

**Cuban migration to Washington D.C.**

The idea of Washington D.C. as a federally mandated destination point for Cuban refugees was never promoted. According to U.S. Census data published in 1970, approximately 1% of Cuban nationals, or 6,957 individuals, had settled in the federal district and surrounding areas. Nevertheless, they established themselves in the metropolitan area and a proportionate amount did so soon after the revolution. Yet historians and political scientists’ written accounts only briefly mention D.C. as an outpost, if at all. Paradoxically, many of those authors, particularly intelligence, policy, and defense researchers published their analyses through Washington D.C metropolitan area institutions.

One exception is Margaret S. Boone’s immensely informative study of Cuban immigrants in D.C. in 1974. According to some of the women with whom Boone worked, relocating to the Washington D.C. area, as opposed to New York City or Miami, was a

---


deliberate compromise. On one hand, D.C.-based Cubans had to sacrifice “warm weather” as well as geographic proximity to the homeland but they also gained cultural diversity, non-industrial/professional work settings, and a general sense of political autonomy.\footnote{Boone, \textit{Capital Cubans}, 39-57.}

According to Boone, early immigrants followed one of three general trajectories. Financially stable Cubans bypassed the heterogeneous neighborhoods of “Adams Mill-Morgan area” and the “Columbia Road area” to settle in Takoma Park, Maryland or the Barcroft/Alexandria Virginia area. One draw of that seemingly anomalous destination point in Virginia was the combination of an apartment complex known as “Little Havana” and a special foods grocery store that catered specifically to the Cuban influx. At the time of her research, the owners of that store had opened an outpost in the Adams Mill-Morgan area but they resided in Bethesda, MD.\footnote{Ibid, 79.} Living near Lake Barcroft, particularly the idea of buying lake front property, was another pull factor.\footnote{During an interview conducted with a Cuban-American (Miami-born) Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer, he mentioned that settling down and buying property in Barcroft, VA was one of his goals when he first settled in the area.} According to Boone’s informants:

Barcroft is the area where pre-revolutionary social life has been recreated to the fullest extent possible in Washington. Those who participate in it are, in both American and Cuban terms, upper middle class. This status is first derived from family prestige, and secondly from wealth and education. These factors were highly inter-related before the Revolution, and maintained through children, who are brought up knowing the status difference between families, and acting accordingly.\footnote{Boone, \textit{Capital Cubans}, 83.}
Cubans who did not relocate to Barcroft, because of class or status-related obstacles, settled in Takoma Park, Maryland. There were resources, like a Spanish-language film theater called *Teatro Takoma*, but more importantly, Boone’s informants cited a clear difference in residents based on willingness to integrate with whites and blacks as well as foreign-born residents from Latin American countries.

Cuban exiles populated these two suburban outposts but some established themselves in the highly diverse areas of Adams Mill-Morgan and Columbia Road before 1970. Not unlike other points of entry like New York, Cubans immersed themselves in multi-ethnic neighborhoods populated by phenotypically diverse Caribbean ethnic groups. An oral history conducted with Dominican-born Juana Campos, for example, who initially migrated to New York in 1940 but moved to Washington D.C. after visiting because “it was so clean,” recounts her experience as an Afro-Caribbean, Spanish-speaker living in the federal district among a multi-ethnic but racially segregated population. In an interview with Hector Corporan, conducted for the Anacostia Community Museum’s Black Mosaic exhibit, Campos relates her experience with two other Dominicans (presumably Afro-Dominican) at an all-black school. She remembers making her classmates laugh when she spoke Spanish. Although she admits having limited contact with other Spanish-speakers in the city, she recalls working for a “high-

---

37 A newspaper article featuring a refugee who was named Businessman of the Year by the Ibero-American Council Chamber of Commerce further illuminates Takoma Park’s connection with the Cuban diaspora. Gilberto Gonzalez migrated to the United States in 1963 to escape Cuba’s communist regime. After working in the sugarcane fields in Florida and unsuccessfully investing his life savings in a Baltimore-based ethnic food store, Gonzalez opened a bodega in Adams-Morgan. By 1984, Gonzalez owned “five-store, family-owned food chain and a distribution warehouse, with an estimated gross of $11 million.” This account suggests that inter-state and intra-district business routes, particularly foodway exchanges, catered to and connected Latino communities residing in D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. See Luis Aguilar Jr. and Alexander Kippen, “Cuban Refugee is Honored as Businessman of the Year,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1984, D.C. 3.

38 Ibid, 76.
society” woman from Costa Rica in the late 60s (after MLK’s assassination) and meeting a Jewish Cuban who worked as a tailor in a dry-cleaning business called “Dry Cleaning King Dry Clean.” She mentioned that he did not “serve” blacks.39

**The Mariel Boatlift: Cultural Production & Local Responses to Foreign Policy**

In May 1980, the el comité de la comunidad hispano-americana de Virginia (Hispanic-American Community Committee of Virginia), published a special edition of Información chronicling “el Exodo Cubano de 1980.”40 In addition to featuring a passionate, of-the-moment account of Cuban-American relations written by Herminio Portell-Vila—Editor Latinoamericano, American Security Council—the special issue offers readers a backstage perspective of their political mobilization efforts. The publication chronicles the work of a Cuban assistance committee organized by Dr. Luis H. Vidana, then head of the Spanish Speaking Committee of Virginia, and “last minute news.” A portion of the newsletter, which is cited at length below, reinforces the idea that the local is national and international.41 It created a parallel Cuba-America political discourse in which local actors like Portell-Vila and Vidana were shaping on-the-ground actions and responses to foreign policy.

---

39 Juana Campos, interview by Hector Corporan, January 4, 1993, interview 1 (disk 5, box 120), transcript and notes, Kiley G. Acosta, Anacostia Community Museum, Washington D.C. The lived experiences of some of these individuals may be found at the Latin American Youth Center’s Art and Media House. This improvised archive (literally piles of documents and materials), which needs to be attended to immediately, houses pieces of a project conducted in 2003 called “The Great Generation.” There is an interview with Felix Carvajal, a seventy-eight year old Afro-Cuban who moved to the United States in 1967 with only the clothes on his back. The collection contains a transcript of his interview, recorded tapes, and photos. Another archive worth pursuing may be found at the Andromeda medical clinic and its precursor—the Washington Free Clinic. Dr. Ricardo Galbis, a Cuban-born psychiatrist who was trained at the Sorbonne and Georgetown University, founded the Free Clinic with a colleague in 1968 and then the Andromeda clinic in 1970, which continues to cater specifically to the local Hispanic community and their cultural-linguistic realities.


Al momento de cerrarse esta edición, se ha acentuado la posibilidad de un acuerdo entre el Gobierno Americano y Cubano, en relación con la salida ordenada de cubanos. En cualquiera de nuestras Oficinas se encuentra copia de las planillas que deben firmar los familiares a ese efecto ["regards the aforementioned Cuban assistance committee"]. Es un paso más, pero no podemos afirmar aún que sea el definitivo y total. [ . . . ] La mente tortuosa de Castro entonces se negó a permitir la salida para Perú y Costa Rica, puso obstáculos a los viajes para España y anunció que todos los refugiados en la embajada de Perú en La Habana y los que quisieran seguirles, tendrían permiso para VENIR A LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS, POR EL PUERTO DE MARIEL, al oeste de La Habana. Fue así que surgió el éxodo cubano de 1980 para los Estados Unidos, ya que el Presidente Carter contestó a las bravatas de Castro con la promesa de que los Estados Unidos recibirían hasta 250,000 cubanos. Centenares de pequeños barcos, fletados al efecto por los cubanos radicados en los Estados Unidos, fueron de Cayo Hueso a Mariel, a pesar de todos los riesgos de la travesía, y el 15 de mayo treinta mil de ellos ya estaban en los Estados Unidos, recibidos y atendidos por funcionarios oficiales y entidades privadas de carácter cívico o religioso. Los cubanos de los Estados Unidos recaudaron millones de pesos para ayudar a los recién llegados y todos tuvieron ropas, medicinas, albergues y buena acogida popular. Naturalmente que el Comité Hispánico del Norte de Virginia en el acto se asoció al movimiento en escala nacional para ayudar a la nueva oleada de refugiados cubanos.42

42 Translation: “As we are going to press, the possibility of an agreement between the American and Cuban governments on an ordered exit of Cuban refugees seems more likely. Copies of the forms that need to be filled by interested relatives are available in any of our [the Cuban assistance committee’s] offices. It is one step further but we cannot tell whether it will be the definitive and comprehensive one. [ . . . ] Castro’s twisted mind then refused to allow the exits to Peru and Costa Rica, created obstacles for trips to Spain and announced that all refugees at
In addition to mobilizing D.C.-based refugees to respond to U.S.-Cuban relations, Portell-Vila also differentiates previous waves of Cuban migration from Mariel Boatlift refugees. He describes their occupations (from engineers to cabaret artists) and diverse backgrounds. The work of future researchers would be remiss without searching for these actors and examining how and where they lived in the metropolitan area.

Although this special edition offers detailed information about local responses to a national issue, it is but one source—a text that is written for and by established Cubans living in the D.C. metropolitan area. There are other sources of information, particularly oral histories, which complement and complicate those narratives. This is especially true of Afro-Cuban migrants like Hector “el Negro” Tabío, a singer, musician, and santero who came to Washington DC in Sept. 1980 along with 125,000 other Cubans as part of the Mariel boatlift. Initially, Tabío had traveled to the Miami tenant camps but pleaded to be sent elsewhere, to Washington DC where the rest of his musical group lived. José Suárez, a local Spanish-language newspaper editor originally from Galicia, Spain, hosted him and used money from the Peruvian embassy in Havana and anyone wanting to follow them were authorized to LEAVE FOR THE U.S., THROUGH THE PORT OF MARIEL, to the West of Havana. Thus did the 1980 Cuban exodus to the U.S. come about, since President Carter’s response to Castro’s was the promise that the U.S. would welcome up to 250,000 Cubans. In spite of all the risks involved in the journey, hundreds of small ships hired for the occasion by Cubans residing in the U.S. went from Cayo Hueso to Mariel. By May 15, 30,000 Cubans were already in the U.S. welcomed and look after by government officials and civic or religious private organizations. Cubans in the U.S. collected millions of pesos to help the newcomers and they all got clothing, medicines, accommodation and a warm reception by the people. Naturally, the Hispanic Committee of North Virginia immediately joined the nationwide movement to help this new wave of Cuban refugees.”

It is also worth mentioning that the special issue includes an advertisement for the IV Festival Artístico sponsored by the Comité Hispanoamericano. Held at the Thomas Jefferson Jr. High School in Arlington (also the site of many Argentine-themed cultural events in the 90s), the festival featured performances by el Grupo folklórico de Ecuador, el Conjunto folklórico de México, el Grupo folklórico Chile, as well as música nicaraguense, música española, and música argentina.
National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to support his singing and teaching. Tabío later performed with Ernesto Guerra and Roberto Batista at the Black Mosaic Anacostia Exhibit’s opening celebration in 1994. Their musical ensemble Otonowa performed variants of rumba—“guaguancó,” “the columbia,” and the “yambú”—to “contrast the commercial rumba of the 1930s.”

Not all expositions of Afro-Cuban musical idioms, however, were viewed favorably, particularly after 1980 and especially when those performances supported Santería rituals. Another Afro-Cuban who relocated to the D.C.-area is Francisco Rigores, a santero and musician, perhaps best known for his collaboration with “los Invasores de los 80” (The Invadors of the 1980s). In 1987, Carlos Sánchez, writing for the Washington Post, covered Rigores’ use of animal sacrifice for Santería rituals. Sanchez noted that a calf, goat, and pig, along with six doves, three chickens, three roosters, and six quails were confiscated from his home on Park Road (Columbia Heights). The article also cited that he acquired those animals in Thurmond, MD for $400. The backstage practical logistics of animal sacrifice are interesting because they unveil how these cultural practices help sustain regional economies. Another thread worth following involves tracing inter-ethnic Santería practices outside of private homes, particularly natural areas of the metro-area such as Rock Creek Park and the Potomac River. In the late 1980s, Rigores envisioned a distinct but parallel scenario when he threatened to sacrifice animals in front of the White House if his animals were not returned to...

---

44 José Sueiro, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2009.
46 See, for example, the cover story of Farándula, The Washington Hispanic, May 1, 2009.
him in time for the December feast days. Although he was eventually absolved of any wrongdoing, this case received negative attention, especially from the Washington Humane Society. In 1993, the Supreme Court effectively ruled that the right to sacrifice animals for religious purposes is protected by the Constitution.\textsuperscript{48}

At that point in time (1987), an estimated 10,000 Cuban-Americans lived in the Washington D.C. area. Initial research does not suggest that this was the first time Santería practices and or animal sacrifice had been covered locally or that Cubans were not practicing Santería in the District before 1980.\textsuperscript{49} But it does show an increase in antagonistic public perceptions. The social construction of the Mariel boatlift in the public sphere had already perpetuated an “undesirable elements theme,” which created a blanket interpretation for Cuban immigrants after 1980. Criminality, homosexuality, and other antisocial behaviors were often associated with the \textit{marielitos}. It was also claimed, from a realpolitik international relations perspective, that Castro wanted the U.S. to absorb a degenerate population. These meta-narratives effectively directed post-1980 refugees away from the already-crowded Miami area and toward other U.S. cities like Washington D.C. St. Elizabeth’s hospital in Washington D.C., for example, was one destination point for the mentally ill.\textsuperscript{50}

The issue of phenotype further complicates the narrative. Earlier waves of Afro-Dominicans and Afro-Panamanians as well as Afro-Cubans—who came to the United States during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 and were redirected to the Washington D.C. metropolitan


area—also dealt with the reality of being black, not only in terms of phenotypic characteristics but also cultural and linguistic diversity. Research has shown that local organizations such as the Afro-Caribbean Youth Center and the Martin Luther King Memorial Library collaborated to address those issues. In 1983 they hosted “La Noche de los Jóvenes Afro-Caribeños,” which featured dances, songs, and poetry from Panama, Guatemala, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico.\(^{51}\) This local event was but one way the District showcased Afro-Caribbean cultural production as a positive.

As early as 1969, for example, Ralph Rinzler, director of the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, collaborated with Bernice Reagon to organize a program “that would celebrate the shared aesthetics of black music as performed and sung by African Americans of the former English, French, and Spanish colonial regions of the Americas.”\(^{52}\) That year, Cuban musicians Arsenio Rodríguez, his brother Israel “Kiki” Rodríguez, and close friend D.C.-based bassist Luís Salomé played Cuban secular folk music as well as a selection of Palo Monte, Santería, and Abakuá in a program entitled “Black Music through Languages of the New World.”\(^{53}\) A photograph of their performance is housed in the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Their collaboration is important because it exposed the diverse repertoires of Afro-Cuban music to a wider public. For our purposes, that gathering space is particularly striking because it physically connects D.C. as a site of Afro-Cuban religiosity to a transnational circuit of Latin American music production.\(^{54}\)


\(^{53}\) Ibid, 17.

\(^{54}\) A rich strand of future research could include mapping and reconstructing when international superstar Arsenio Rodríguez and his brother practiced in D.C. One site, for
Another way to continue excavating the historical legacy/cultural footprint of Cubans and their collaborations with other Latino communities is to focus on the Latin American Youth Center (15th & Columbia), which hosted “la escuela de rumba” from 1978-1982. This community music school was founded by veteran Latin and Latin Jazz musicians María Rodríguez and Luis Salomé, as well as Dominican singing star Camboy Estevez. The school, in all of its physical manifestations, whether at the Latin American Youth Center, at festivals, or in private homes, laid the groundwork for dialogue and debate not only among Cubans but also Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Anglo-Americans, and African-Americans across generations. Moreover, rumberos’ artistic labor and spatial practices have had regenerative effects beyond the music world. They have lent themselves to places where santería practices are kept alive. Religious beliefs continue to live and breathe through the repetition of certain lyrics and rhythms—a particular touch of a batá drum, for example, can be polyvalent and represent a diverse repertoire of idioms including Lucumí, Arará, Abakuá, and Kongo. Through an explicit focus on those embodied expressions, on ephemeral acts and improvised encounters, we are able

example, is a house in the Columbia Heights neighborhood where Rodríguez produced music alongside D.C.-based Latinos like Luis Salomé. Luis Salomé and his wife Caridad [Hernández] lived and worshipped in that space for more than three decades. Although they have passed on, their home continues to serve as an inter-ethnic Santería community meeting place. Its value is immeasurable. An oral history with 82-year-old Eloy Hernández, Caridad’s brother who relocated to D.C. during the Mariel boatlift, is particularly insightful. In it, he explains that his sister moved to Washington D.C. in the 1950s. His other sister Juana had already relocated in the late 40s to seek a better life. She came to D.C. with a contract to work as a domestic laborer. He recalled that his sister Caridad and her husband Luis Salomé acquired the house on Parkwood Rd. in the 1960s. During the interview, Hernández allowed photography of his basement and backyard, the places where he celebrates Santería rituals, as well as his storage spaces (Appendix 2). A close examination of this built environment makes visible dimensions of Latino D.C. history that are not documented in local archives. These photos are filed in the Smithsonian Latino Center archive (2010, vol. 3, multiethnic space). Admittedly, there are ethical concerns when divulging such sensitive information. Portions of Hernández’s story, however, may be found in other publications. See, for example, Sylvia Moreno, “The Spirit of Santería, Once Largely Unknown in Area, Afro-Cuban Faith Attracts a Following,” The Washington Post, January 4, 2000, Metro B1, cont. B4.
to learn about histories that may or may not be documented. The point here is not to move away from books or to overstate the power of oral and embodied communication but to acknowledge the limits of textocentric analyses.

From focusing on a “low density group” to underscoring the role of racial, religious, and class-based differences among Cubans, this prototype case study explicitly highlights the margins of Latino identity production in Washington D.C. And while Cubans are but one of many ethnic groups, it is important to place them at the starting line of nationally-sponsored research initiatives like the Latino D.C. History Project. Their stories, particularly those of Afro-Cubans, are often elided from mainstream renderings of Latino history in the United States. This is not a political problem but an analytic problem. Using a conceptual framework that draws not only from theories and methods in social history but also cultural anthropology, human geography, and performance studies, this report seeks to challenge default modes of representation and categorization that conflate histories, cultural sensibilities, and economic realties. Further, acknowledging overarching challenges and issues like the limitations of ethnic or race-based labels and the shortcomings of archival collections will also facilitate a more comprehensive rendering of the Latino presence in Washington D.C.

Table 23. District of Columbia - Race and Hispanic Origin: 1800 to 1990
(See text for sources, definitions, and explanations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut</th>
<th>Asian and Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Other race</th>
<th>Hispanic origin</th>
<th>White, not of Hispanic origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>606 900</td>
<td>179 667</td>
<td>399 604</td>
<td>1 466</td>
<td>11 214</td>
<td>14 949</td>
<td>32 710</td>
<td>166 131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>663 091</td>
<td>474 326</td>
<td>187 266</td>
<td>19 1 309</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>473 606</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>486 869</td>
<td>353 981</td>
<td>132 988</td>
<td>40 780</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>(NA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>331 069</td>
<td>236 128</td>
<td>94 446</td>
<td>68 427</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>(NA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>278 718</td>
<td>191 532</td>
<td>86 702</td>
<td>22 462</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>(NA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>230 392</td>
<td>154 695</td>
<td>75 572</td>
<td>25 100</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>(NA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENT</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Free</th>
<th>Slave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>65.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Footnotes:
- Represents zero or rounds to 0.0. (X) Not applicable. (NA) Not available. 1Hispanic origin based on Spanish language. 2Hispanic origin based on the White population of Spanish mother tongue. Percentages shown based on sample data prorated to the 100 percent count of the White population and on the 100 percent count of the total population. These estimates are in italics. See Table E-6 and text. 3Includes Indian reservations. 4Excludes Indian reservations.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
Internet Release Date: September 13, 2002
Storage Space: Santería artifacts in Columbia Heights (courtesy of author, 2010)
DELIVERABLES

1) Research with local agencies (such as education, law enforcement, public health, commerce, housing, sports and recreation, etc.) as well as with churches, schools (public, private, and charter), community and social organizations, and other non-profits from D.C., Maryland, Virginia to analyze what legal, public policy, and community initiatives have been generated in response to the Latino/Latin American/Iberian populations in the greater DC metropolitan area.

2) Research in the archives of Spanish language newspapers and radio stations in the greater DC metropolitan area.

3) Research that attempts to document the cultural legacy/footprint of the Latino/Latin American/Iberian populations in the greater DC metropolitan area in the areas of community-generated music, performances, exhibitions, murals, festivals, etc.

4) Identify a list of candidates for oral history interviews; identify objects related to Latino DC History in existing Smithsonian collections.

5) Develop an initial collecting plan for SI collecting units to document the history and expressions of the Latino/Latin American/Iberian populations of the greater DC metropolitan area.

6) Identify specific objects for future acquisition by SI collecting units in accordance with the objectives of the collecting plan.

7) Organize periodic meetings with members and leadership of DC metropolitan Latino/Latin American/Iberian community to promote participation in and support for the Latino DC History Project. The findings of the first phase of the project, many of which address these objectives, are housed at the Smithsonian Latino Center in Washington D.C.
Acknowledgements: The first phase of this project, particularly the completion of the prototype case study, owes much to José Sueiro, Roland Roebuck, Hector “el Negro” Tabio, Eloy and Fani Hernandez, Alexis Landa, Kiley G. Acosta, Dr. Michael Mason, James Early, Luis Rumbaut, Hector Corporan, and Rene López. I would also like to thank interviewees and those who took time to express their point of view. Marisela Chávez deserves special thanks for her research assistance. I must also thank my students, especially Kelsey Chatlosh and Amy Weishampel, at the George Washington University who took seminars in “Field Methods” and “Diasporic Religion.” It is important to note that this project responds, in part, to “Willful Neglect,” a report drafted by a Smithsonian task force in 1993 to acknowledge the institution’s disregard for Latino affairs.

Author Bio: Elaine Peña received her PhD in Performance Studies with Northwestern University in 2006. She has held postdoctoral appointments in the Department of Latina/Latino Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and in the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. She is the author of Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe (University of California Press, 2011), which received an Honorable Mention for Best Book by the Association of Latina Latino Anthropologists (ALLA), and editor of Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy with performance artist and cultural critic Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Routledge, 2005). Peña is currently an Assistant Professor of American Studies at George Washington University. Contact: eapena@gwu.edu.