

Written Statement of Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte  
Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and  
Public Lands

U.S. House of Representatives

Thursday, October 17, 2019

Dear Chairman Haaland and Ranking Member Young,

It is a great honor to sit here before you today, as a lifelong public servant, an advocate for my community and, more importantly, as a Latina, a Puerto Rican, AS an American. Thank you for your invitation, and thank you to my friends and colleagues who join me here, Eduardo Diaz, Dolores Huerta and Professor Stephen Pitti. In addition to the great work that each of you advance, you also carry with you a commitment to the art of storytelling, which is in great part what brings us here today. The story of our great nation. For that, de mi corazon/from my heart, I am eternally grateful to each of you.

I have thought deeply about what it means to be here at this historic time in our nation considering the seeds that were planted more than 25 years ago by my dear friend Raul Yzaguirre, myself, and an amazing team of Latina and Latino historians, leaders and advocates. We gathered then at the request of the Smithsonian to investigate the egregious absence of exhibits, stories, films and displays of the 500 years of U.S. Latino history throughout the halls of the Smithsonian Institution. As we stated in the opening of our report, *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian and U.S. Latinos*, “The report was designed to benefit all the people of the United States. . . The [recommendations] were developed not to address the concerns of one single

population group, but to help the Smithsonian to become truly representative and inclusive of all the diverse people and population groups of this nation.” That remains true to this day, but I will add, that we were also driven by the singular idea that if these stories could be shared across our National Mall, they would serve to inspire each coming generation of Latino youth to reach the greatness of their innate potential.

In the twenty-five years since that report, we have celebrated the ascendance of Justice Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court of the United States, Ellen Ochoa, the first Latina astronaut, taking the helm of NASA’s Johnson Space Center, the first Puerto Rican Major League Baseball team manager to not only head a team but to lead it to the World Series, Alex Cora of the Boston Red Sox, a historic number of Latinos and Latinas, from both sides of the aisle, have been elected to seats of power in Congress, and most recently, a Latino candidate is running for President of the United States. These are truly historic times we are witnessing. Unfortunately, what we have not seen in these 25 years is the creation of a Smithsonian National American Latino Museum which could host all of these amazing stories.

Among the ten recommendations that we presented to the Smithsonian and Congress it was clear that inclusion of U.S. Latino exhibits into the existing museums was critical, but it was also clear that there were hundreds of years of history that would require a separate stand-alone museum. In fact, our fourth recommendation read, “The Smithsonian should begin immediately to do the

groundwork needed to assure the establishment of one or more museums portraying the historical, cultural, and artistic achievements of U.S. Hispanics.”

It should come as no surprise that as we investigated the failings of the Smithsonian and possible remediation we heard from many within the Smithsonian that budgetary constraints would make many of our recommendations unlikely. Twenty-five years later, as we push forward on the fulfillment of our fourth recommendation, we, unfortunately, are hearing the same concerns. Yet, we see that great progress has been made notwithstanding the budgetary fears we were warned about over two decades ago. The Latino Center thrives, nearing its 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary. The opening of the Molina Family Latino Gallery is on the horizon and promises to house some initial exhibits that begin to dive into our unexplored history. I would argue that these are dreams made reality because we dared to ask, we dared to demand, not for us, but for the next generation and every American that comes to our nation’s front yard in an effort to better understand who we are and how we came to be.

I was honored to answer the call to become among the first Latinas appointed as a U.S. Ambassador of the United States, assigned to El Salvador from 2012 until February 2016. I was the first Puerto Rican woman to hold the title of Ambassador. I wish that I could say that I had a vision and a plan to become an Ambassador, but I had no idea someone from my background could rise to those levels. I had no role models to emulate, whose path I could follow. I was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the mainland to pursue my education and through my stubbornness and *ganas* to do more for my community I not only found myself as one of the only Latinas in

law school at that time, but I became the first Latina lawyer in the entire state of Pennsylvania.

I know that I, and others, may have achieved a level of success without these role models and icons laid out in our nation's museums, but how many have not? How many did not see themselves portrayed in a positive light in mainstream media, news, or our museums and abandoned their dreams as a result? And, for non-Latinos, how many continue to see Latinos as "them", "others", or "invaders", instead of partners, *compatriotas*, Americans, that have a stood shoulder to shoulder in every war dating back before the War of Independence simply because they have a limited understanding of the role of the Spanish, Mexican, Indigenous and Caribbean people who helped settle more than half of this land 500 years ago? How much of what divides could be addressed by a more accurate telling of our American history? How many stories have remained buried in storage or in family attics that could do more to unite us?

For that reason, I will continue to dare to ask, and demand, that all of our stories have a home and that we finally fulfill one of the greatest challenges set before the Smithsonian and Congress 25 years ago, that we open a Smithsonian National American Latino Museum so that American history is presented in its totality, not through a filter of what can fit into the existing limitations of our current museums. Five hundred years of sacrifice, contributions, creativity and innovation deserve much more than that.

Thank you, again, for inviting me to join you here today. I hope that my next visit on this subject will be at the grand opening of the Smithsonian National American Latino Museum.