

Good morning. I'm Stephen Pitti, a Professor of History, American Studies, and Ethnicity, Race and Migration at Yale, and the Founding Director of Yale's Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration. I'm also a past member of the National Park Service Advisory Board, and the past chair of the National Historic Landmarks Committee for the National Park Service. I am an historian of Latino communities in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States, and I have worked closely with curators at the Smithsonian, whom I admire deeply, where I have taught two Yale courses that focus on how the Smithsonian presents American history to the public.

I am here today to underscore that Latino history is American history, and that any serious attempt to document and interpret this continent's history over the past five hundred years requires serious engagement with Latino experiences. This claim is hardly controversial among scholars and academics who research, teach, or write history for a living. The central importance that Latinos have played in American history has been recognized for decades by academic associations, publishers of books and journals, museum professionals, college and university history departments, K-12 students and educators, and many others. We have long known that we cannot understand important patterns in American history or how the United States fits into broader developments in the world, in the hemisphere, or in North America without recognizing the place of people of Latin American descent in what is today the United States. A focus on Latinos is in fact critical for understanding histories of colonization, slavery and anti-slavery, democratic struggles, economic growth and the struggles of working people, foreign policy, religious dynamics and city life, and much more.

Scholars have explored those themes and many others in great detail over the past century. In 2013 I helped to write and assemble the American Latinos and the Making of the United States theme study for the National Park Service, an edited collection of sixteen original essays that now guides federal preservation and interpretation efforts. We remain proud of that study as an encapsulation of the range of perspectives and depth of scholarship about Latinos in the United States, and as a resource for public historians and others interested in learning more about a wide range of topics – including the history of wars and revolutions, the American military, business and commerce, religion and spirituality, science and medicine, education, and law and government.

We knew in 2013 that Americans from coast to coast were eager to understand these topics and others, but unfortunately we also know in 2019 that too many people in this country remain uninformed about the longstanding historical

importance of Latinos. Ignorance about the past threatens to be divisive or even destructive in the present. We know, for example, of the ways in which violent extremists in the United States have misrepresented Latinos as a new cultural threat; how well-meaning journalists and educators have mischaracterized Puerto Rico's political and economic relationship to Washington D.C.; how Latinos have been written out of historical accounts of popular music and Hollywood film; or how narratives about the American Revolution, the U.S. Civil War, the labor movement, or entire regions of the United States continue to be told as if Latinos played no historical role.

We need national leadership that can educate the public about these topics and others, that can convene scholars and large audiences, and that can guide ongoing conversations about Latino history that are grounded in scholarship and research. Those efforts will benefit from the rich and varied histories that have already been published on these and other topics for decades, and from the expertise of hundreds of researchers, writers, archivists, curators, and other professionals who have deep historical fluency in these areas. And those efforts will of course also benefit from the involvement of other Americans who still have untold stories and family treasures to share – documents and memories that capture histories of Latinos arriving in the U.S., creating and animating communities across many generations, raising children and building institutions, and so forth.

In the mid-nineteenth century James Smithson provided the initial resources to create a Smithsonian institution that would serve as “an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” While the Smithsonian has done incredible work since that time, it has focused far too little attention on advancing research and public understandings of Latinos in the United States. If twenty-first century Americans are going to be fully informed about U.S. history, and if we are going to face our society's most pressing challenges today, we need a new national museum dedicated to foregrounding the Latino past as central to the American story.