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In the Washington, D.C. area contemporary Black community life has been shaped in large part by a pattern of migration and settlement of African Americans from southern states. But international immigration has also made its mark on the local Black community. Today, Washington and its suburbs in Virginia and Maryland are home to significant populations of Black people from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This international movement of people has resulted in the broadening of Black community life and the development of a multicultural and multi-ethnic Black population in the area.

Contemporary immigration to Washington, D.C. can also be seen as part of a larger and ongoing movement of Black people within the Western hemisphere. Historically, Black populations in the Americas have been rather mobile—moving from rural to urban areas within regions and migrating across oceans and international borders. This pattern of migration has created regional and international connections among diverse and farflung groups of Black people.

In 1992-1994 Anacostia Museum, a museum of African-American history and culture at the Smithsonian Institution, developed a public history project culminating in an exhibit that looked at people of African descent from Haiti, Jamaica, and Latin America, and their migration to the Washington area. This exhibit, *Black Mosaic: Community, Race and Ethnicity Among Black Immigrants in Washington, D.C.*, examined how the perceptions and realities of race, color, and ethnicity have shaped people's identity in Black immigrant communities; and how those communities have interacted with African American and other American populations.[1]

The *Black Mosaic* exhibit featured—in their own voices via audiotaped listening stations—the personal reflections of Black immigrants on leaving home, arriving in a new country, and making a new life. An exhibition, the archetypical artifact of public history, is an excellent format for discussion of a dynamic subject like immigration.[2] Images of the family, home, friends, classmates; community landmarks; memories of religious holidays and family get-togethers; popular music; and, mementos of events and people, all these things serve as ties that bind immigrants to the places and people they left behind. The exhibition also provides the opportunity to celebrate the diversity immigration has created for the Black diaspora and the United States.

Ethnic and Racial Identity

One of the first and most immediate tasks facing the Anacostia Museum staff was to define the target population for the exhibition. The focus on Black immigration was a source of some confusion and much discussion among the community leaders who were approached and also among the staff: Who exactly was Black anyway? And according to whose standards? Some people whose physical appearance would clearly have them designated as "Black" in this society, claimed not to be so; for example, at the Brazilian community meetings (sponsored by the museum to plan that component of the exhibition) many white-skinned, blue-eyed, blonde Brazilians came and participated. Those attending considered themselves as spokespeople and indeed as representatives of Afro-Brazilian culture. Clearly, there were divergent views about the meaning of what it meant to be Black.[3]

There were also differences about the value of focusing on people of African heritage as a distinct group. Some Hispanic and Brazilian participants, for example, while eager to support an exhibit that would highlight their community's achievements, complained that the focus on race was unseemly and divisive; while others welcomed it as an opportunity to discuss festering racial attitudes and problems. Concerns with privacy (always an issue in community-based exhibitions) became magnified, sensitizing museum staff to other cultural differences concerning race—the realization that it is a big step, for instance, for some people to publicly identify themselves by racial and ethnic labels. What people call themselves, particularly in a public forum, says something about the different communities to which they claim membership. Some participants in the project complained of competing claims for their allegiance, and the assumption by U.S. Blacks that their primary allegiance must be to a shared African heritage. Also, in many Latin American societies custom and the "etiquette of race relations" prohibit open discussion of racial tensions or even racial differences within their population. Not only whites, but some Indian and Black people adhere to this custom, and the focus on race in the exhibit was seen as a distinctly "American" way to approach community life.

Cultural differences also shaped the exhibit staff's research and interpretation of racial identity "at home," in countries of origin of immigrants. Despite the availability of varying demographic approximations, it was, of course, impossible to state with any exactitude the proportion of people that are of African descent in any of the immigrant communities. Different regions and countries have different definitions of who is Black; and racial labeling and categorization differ greatly from that practiced in the United States. Also, African ancestry is often overlooked or ignored in official census of many countries, particularly where people of African descent exist in

small numbers or where there has been significant intermarriage with other groups.

Upon arrival, Black immigrants share difficulties common to all newcomers of the D.C. area: meeting new people, riding the Metro system, and learning new city streets. For those speaking a language other than English, learning the new language becomes a major problem to overcome. Usually, the first people with whom they come into contact and interact are relatives, friends, and others from home. But the diversity of the Washington area soon brings them into contact with people from other immigrant communities. Many come from countries within the same geographic region and thus share language, religion, and other cultural traditions. These shared traditions become the cultural foundation for the emergence of group identities. This sense of solidarity across national and racial boundaries often coexists with loyalties to national groups and with loyalties to smaller communities, such as hometowns or ethnic and cultural groups within the country of origin; it also coexists with feelings of racial solidarity or "Pan-Africanism," no matter how inchoate or militant such feelings may be.

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Black immigrants arriving before 1964 and the passage of civil rights legislation against racial discrimination recall having to adjust to segregated Washington, D.C. For many, being denied access to public facilities and employment was their first inkling of the impact that U.S. racial attitudes would have upon their day-to-day lives. Immigrants coming from majority Black situations such as in Jamaica and Haiti, were compelled not only to adjust to the new situation of being foreign and a racial minority, but also to accommodate their newly-stigmatized status. Afro-Latinos had to adjust to the unaccustomed social distance between the races, a different system of racial labeling, and U.S. social mores that sought to divide their ethnic community into two racial groups, "Blacks" and "Hispanics." They also complained of having to negotiate in public, work, and social settings where race and color took on entirely new meanings than those they learned at home.

Building a Multicultural Black Washington

Black immigrants began arriving in Washington, D.C. in significant numbers during the New Deal era and World War II. At that time, Hispanic immigration to this area was dominated by the arrival of people from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. The roots of the Spanish-speaking population in the Washington area, now largely Salvadorean and Central American, can be traced back to this group of Caribbean immigrants. Many Black immigrants who arrived in the 1940s and 1950s came to work at international agencies and embassies; some in professional settings, while others worked as domestics for the embassy staff.

Other Blacks came to attend universities here, including Howard University. In the early 20th century Howard University recruited West Indian intellectuals to teach in its departments. They, in turn, attracted many students from the Caribbean to the university and initiated an ongoing intellectual exchange between scholars here and in the Caribbean. There is an active Howard University alumni association in Jamaica, for example, and Howard University's Caribbean Student Association has been in existence since the early 1940s.

For some, the trip to Washington, D.C. is much more difficult than for others. Those who come from communities that were close-knit or that placed greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships or those coming from rural, small town areas, often complain of the impersonal nature and the hurried pace of life in Washington, the loss of family values, and the way of child rearing and parent-child relationships here. To ensure that children here grow up with the kind of family values that they desire, many parents send their children to their homeland to stay with relatives during school vacations. Others send their children for periods of time to be formally-educated and to learn social skills that they would not otherwise obtain. Some participants in the *Black Mosaic* oral history project spoke specifically of the need for their children to avoid the socialization of low expectation and negative imaging that they believe this society imposes upon young Black people.

For newcomers, there are local networks of support and information, marshalling all the resources available to the community, that have been developed over the years by those who arrived earlier. Job information, assistance with immigration problems, news from home, and information about goods from home are exchanged in community newspapers, radio programs, and informal networks.[4] Informal networks, such as local store owners and the elderly of the community, are especially resilient and flexible. For example, the Jamaican-born owner of Coronation Market, a local grocery store, was featured in the exhibit on audiotape discussing the bulletin board from his market:

> Over the years everybody that needs anybody of any business or service, they would call me. I've had women call me and ask me to tell her the name of a gynecologist. Now a man wouldn't know that, but I've had gynecologist customers come here so I am able to do that. People want to hear an address, they want a barber, they want a carpenter, a bricklayer, anything they want...they would call and ask...I have a bulletin board and if you'll look and check you can see that all of the

businesses are Jamaican. I have a big reference book right there.[5]

Additionally, organized cultural activities, ranging from public programs, holiday celebrations, dances, religious activities and political development organizations, all provide Black immigrants with a sense of connectedness, both with the communities from which they came and with the new community here in Washington.

Each year, more Black immigrants move into this international city. They find new challenges and obstacles to overcome as they settle into their new home. And, as mentioned above, they also find many resources and strategies to survive and sustain themselves. The *Black Mosaic* exhibition did not resolve and answer the many questions asked about this issue of immigration and its impact on our society. However, it did present, realistically, the successes, problems, achievements, and connectedness that Black immigrants have within themselves and with the African diaspora.

Notes

[1]*Black Mosaic: Community, Race and Ethnicity Among Black Immigrants in Washington, D.C.* Exhibit brochure. (Washington, D.C.: Anacostia Museum, 1994); Also see exhibit script.

[2]Portia James, "Building a Community-based Identity at Anacostia Museum," *Curator/The Museum Journal*, 39 (1), 1996, 19-44.

[3]*Black Mosaic* community meetings (1991-1993); taped sessions of Brazilian community (May 15, 1991), Rastafari community (September 12, 1991), and Jamaican community (November 12, 1993).

[4]For examples of the community networks, see *Kiskeya*, a locally-produced publication on the Haitian community; Olivia Cadaval and Roy Bryce-LaPorte, *Tirarlo a la Calle* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, n.d.) on the Spanish-speaking communities in the area; and, Phyllis May Machunda, "Migration to Washington: Making a New Place Home," in *1988 Festival of American Folklife Program* (Smithsonian Press, 1988).

[5]See *Black Mosaic* exhibit script.

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