I’m very happy to be here speaking with you about the *Latino Americans* documentary that aired on PBS. And it was a privilege to play a role in that documentary which is, I think, a terrific encapsulation of the rich and complicated histories of Latinas and Latinos in the United States across several centuries.

I was asked to talk about the key humanities themes in the *Latino Americans* series. It’s a tough task because there are so many ways to characterize the humanities and so many things happening in the documentary series. If you look carefully at the films you can find at least hints of dozens of concerns and approaches that dominate various fields of the humanities. You can see the influence of art historians, literature scholars, linguists, historians and humanists of other sorts.

That influence is a real strength of these films, in my view. It seems silly to say, but I think it’s worth being clear that the types of questions and research one encounters in the humanities can provide critical insights about Latinos in the United States. I mean no disrespect towards any other fields. I have the greatest respect for the sciences, for engineering and for math. And – as they say -- many of my best friends are social scientists. But for me, at least, the humanities embody a set of promises that can’t be lost in our admiration for other fields.

There is a very rich body of humanities scholarship about Latinas and Latinos in the United States, and as some of you know scholars in these fields have been leaders for several decades in American history, in English departments, in professional associations that promote interdisciplinary scholarship, and elsewhere. But despite the hard work of these researchers and writers, and their leadership in the academy, humanities insights about Latinos have often not received the attention they deserve. The impact of the humanities in public discussions about Latino communities has been muted.

When we read news stories about Latino families, or see television reports about Latino immigrants, or hear about high incarceration rates in these communities, or debate the aspirations or needs of Latino youth, we tend to hear from sociologists, legal scholars, anthropologists, and political scientists. These are the social scientists, and they have been quite successful in framing public policy debates and answering the questions posed by our nation’s punditocracy. This isn’t new. Observers joked in past decades that Mexican American or Puerto Rican households in the 1930s or 1950s often included two parents, a couple of children, and at least one sociologist. The social scientists were close at hand.

One of the things that I like most about the series *Latino Americans* is that it looks beyond social science frameworks to discuss the history of North America and the Caribbean, and to insist that we historicize contemporary communities and
contemporary political concerns. You can find important social science perspectives in the series, of course, but this is a humanities project through and through.

And I gather that you will be developing efforts in your respective communities with NEH and ALA support that will follow the film’s example. I’ve seen some of your applications and have been overwhelmed by the quality and the diversity of what you’re doing. It makes it hard for me to stand up here with any confidence and pretend to give you any new ideas.

Some of you have deep experiences in these areas and others of you don’t, and your projects engage many different communities around the country in all sorts of different ways. But let me name five features or hallmarks of this series that resonate broadly with the interests of many humanities fields, and that may be of some use to many of you as you think about your own local efforts.

**First** is what I will call, for shorthand, **voice**.

This is most important feature to me, and I see it as key to the humanities fields that interest me the most.

By voice I mean to state what’s pretty obvious: The series amplifies – makes louder - the words and opinions of Latinos themselves. It uses the observations and experiences of people who have not received much historical attention to rethink American history. It theorizes from their perspectives rather than imposing abstract concepts about society or culture. The films are, to a considerable extent, a collection of voices; the filmmakers allow historical subjects to speak for themselves, and they force those who watch the documentaries to hear directly from people who might otherwise be ignored.

By voice I also mean something else -- that these filmmakers also allowed experts who know something about Latino histories to speak. The series is quite good, I think, in amplifying not only historical voices that characterize 19th century California, or turn of the century Florida, or mid-20th century New York City, but also the scholars who have spent decades working on those topics and trying to make sense of Latino experiences.

In reading about the grants that have been made to support your projects on Latino history that make use of the Latino Americans series, I’m most excited by the ways in which many of you intend to take this opportunity to hear new voices in your communities or to allow the voices of the past to speak more loudly to students and others. People often joke that librarians are the people in our neighborhoods who say “shhhhhhh” … who don’t want to hear talking in their buildings. I already know this is a mischaracterization of who you are and what you do, and I think these grants will make it crystal clear to others that many of you play important roles in collecting stories, not silencing them; in hearing from your communities; in drawing out those who have been quiet in the past.
In the spirit of the documentary series, I would urge you all to think about how you will encourage members of your communities to give voice to their experiences in the coming months and years. How will you make them feel comfortable? How will you dignify them as interpreters of their own experiences? How will you keep safe those stories, and how will you share them with others?

This in part raises questions of language for you to consider. My colleague on the panel will be talking more about these issues in a few moments, and I’m sure you have thought about issues of translation and bilingualism already, and of which communities are encouraged and discouraged from raising their voices in public.

It’s my sense that most of you plan to provide a podium to writers or scholars who are experts in Latino communities, and I would hope that you assure they represent a diversity of voices.

I would suggest that you spend some time considering what you might do to sustain the conversation between them and others in your city or town beyond the hours of the event that you are hosting. How might their voices continue to be heard for the rest of the year? In what ways might you continue to draw attention to their expertise? And do you worry that celebrating their expertise might risk making them seem unapproachable to others in your audience, untouchable figures who speak from Mt. Olympus rather than fellow community members?

The second humanities theme that I’ll highlight as key to the *Latino Americans* series is *time*.

Many scholars in the humanities have long been obsessed with time, with chronologies, with change, with patterns in history and more. This sort of concern distinguishes them from many scientists and social scientists who are quicker to look for trans-historical, static models that explain behavior.

You’ve seen the documentary, so you know that *Latino Americans* takes a chronological approach to describing the histories of Latinos in this country. It’s a destabilizing way to talk about who we are. When we remember the passage of time, we have a more difficult time speaking in absolutes. You’re a different person today than you were 20 years ago, just as Mexican Americans are different today than they were in the past century.

A focus on change over time can be very valuable in discussions about identity – whether individual or communal. The documentary series helps to make clear that identities are always in motion, and I’ve used the films in some of my own teaching to help students better understand that their assumptions, their concerns and their conclusions are framed by their own historical moment – in ways not unlike those captured in these PBS segments.
You might find yourself doing something similar with different audiences in your own locales. In thinking about how populations have changed over time, about how political concerns have changed, or about how specific places have changed, we might get more comfortable with the types of changes we recognize in our own lives. We might also develop insights or tools that will help us grapple with all sorts of changes that are affecting many communities around the country.

For one thing, keeping our eye on time – keeping our eyes on the clock, if you want to put it that way – can remind audiences to ask questions that get beyond static identities (like “what is an American”), to focus on the causes and effects of change. When we ask questions about when certain things happened, we often find it impossible not to follow up with a question about why. We might take an example just from this past week’s news cycle:

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We’ve had our collective attention turned to something that hasn’t been discussed nationwide in recent years: Confederate flags fly over statehouses in certain regions of the South. (That’s the “what”.)

We might ask this question: When did state governments decide to raise them?

And we would get this answer: The 1950s and 1960s.

We might then ask: Why were they raised then?

And we would surmise an answer: They were raised, at least in part, as a response to civil rights protesters.
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And now we have a different way of talking about what the Confederate flag means today.

For me, the *Latino Americans* series does similar types of work. It does not create a set of monolithic portraits of Latinos as a people. It does not list the timeless qualities of a Puerto Rican or get to the essence of what it has meant to be a Mexican American in this country. It shows, instead, these groups have changed over time. There may not be an essence. And it shows why they changed and how change produced different experiences and different perspectives.

So as you do your work with Latino public history and use these films as jumping off points, I would urge you to think about how you can help your communities think more clearly about changes over time.

The third humanities theme that I want to highlight – and that I know most of you are already thinking about -- is the importance of place, of geography, of location. We all come from someplace, and we are somewhere now, and we all know that these locations matter. It was recently graduation season in our nation’s high
schools and colleges, and one of the bestselling Hallmark card quotes is from Dr. Seuss ... “oh the places you’ll go.” You’ve probably seen it and I’m sure you’ve read it.

But I think it’s very clear that when we aren’t careful we elide how critical place can be in shaping our experiences. We make generalizations that cross not only time (things have always been this way) but also space. And we know they’re wrong but we say them anyway. Some of this is probably unavoidable, but when we work to be more specific about spatial differences, regional varieties and the difference that location makes we can develop huge insights about specific experiences and entirely new ways of thinking about broad categories.

Latino history scholars, for example, have spent a lot of time on local community studies that test how big patterns played out in specific neighborhoods, or towns, or cities. Puerto Ricans on the East Coast in the early-20th century were moving into cities and experiencing racial discrimination. But was the experience similar or different in Philadelphia and New York? And how did the experiences of the large number of Puerto Ricans who moved to Hawaii compare to those back east?

Scholars and filmmakers have also shown how important other local dynamics are for shaping Latino experiences and perspectives. We now have a much better sense of how instrumental one major employer or industry can be in shaping an entire community. Think about the Ford Motor Company’s effects on defining generations of Detroit residents – their understandings of their city, their aspirations, what they wanted for their kids and how they understood one another.

We also know how important a local institution can be for shaping the specific experiences of local Latinos or another group. Think of the power that some churches have had in shaping families or neighborhoods – the influence of a local priest or pastor, or of a Catholic school.

And although it may be less clear today in the age of the internet, we also know that historically immigrant communities had relationships to their homelands, to their home towns and to their native languages that differed a great deal based on location. Cubans living in Key West, Florida a short boat ride away from Cuba moved back home more easily than those in New York City – and probably had a different understanding of where their home was. Spanish speakers who lived in large urban communities with other Spanish speakers and with Spanish-language movie theaters and radio stations forged a different sense of Latino ethnicity than those who lived in smaller, more isolated places.

In fact, a focus on the importance of place in Latino history highlights not only variability and diversity in Latino experiences, it also reminds us that Latinos -- and others – have managed to claim spaces in many interesting and exciting ways. They have laid claim to sites like churches, and schools, and bars, and street corners; they have articulated a sense of themselves by building or decorating their private home spaces; and they have been vocal residents of neighborhoods and cities.
But they have also managed to make and sustain connections to very faraway places. They have lived in Tampa while remaining hopeful that they might return to Havana. They have organized clubs in Los Angeles to send money home to their small hometowns in northern Mexico. They have moved as seasonal workers and put down roots in California, the Northwest and the Midwest.

They have claimed, in short, more than one place as their own.

So as you think about these issues, I would urge you to keep in mind what scholars of Marcus Garvey have called a focus on both “Roots and Routes” – not just deep attachments to place, and the importance of local developments, but also attention to the migrant stories, the trans-regional stories, that define people and communities.

What might this mean for you as local historians interested in these communities? Simply that you keep these questions of space and place in mind as you discuss the Latino histories in your communities. Where have people moved to and from? Why have they moved there? What places and spaces have mattered most? How have people imagined the maps of their lives, the cultural geographies of their communities and families?

You will get many different answers to these kinds of questions, I think, and I want therefore to use this chance to highlight quickly a fourth theme that emerges in the Latino Americans series and that might guide your work: An interest in the complexity and internal diversity of Latino communities.

We really wouldn’t want it any other way, right? We know that the people we know are endlessly interesting, that they aren’t drawn in black and white, that they are three dimensional and contradictory characters. Good public history approaches good literature by representing characters in ways that seem real in these ways. And good public programming doesn’t assume people are too dumb to understand the world is a complicated place.

The documentary series does what it can to make the complexity of Latino subjects clear in the space of just a few hours. You can build on that work to do more, to make sure that you hear Latinos speaking in many discordant voices (theme 1!). Multiplicity is the point. Public history can help people better understand that we don’t live in a world of binaries ... of black or white, of Latino or white, of women or men, of gay or straight, of young or old. People often do live in these categories and experience them as real, but they do so in many different ways.

So I would urge you to think about your projects as working not just to make Latino history more clear but also – when you can -- to make it more confusing and more complex. Help the public to resist simple explanations and see the multiple factors that shaped events in the past; and help them to see that intersecting power
relations assured that different groups of people would experience certain events, or periods of history, or places very differently.

An acceptance of complexity in this way is a defining feature of the best humanities scholarship, and it characterizes some of what I like best about the *Latino Americans* series.

But I want to close (#5) by saying clearly that our work with Latino history is not about cataloging endless variety and multiplicity, showing all the ways in which people in one place or one historical period were different from another, or recording the experiences of one social group that are unlike the experiences of anyone else.

Thinking about differences and multiplicity is fundamental, and I think *Latino Americans* manages all that very well, but so is connecting these stories to other histories and other experiences – especially local experiences. **Making connections is my fifth and final theme**, and it’s one that is inescapably important in working with the public. You want to introduce them to new material, and you want to elicit their perspectives and hear their unique voices. But you also want them to connect what they are learning to what they already know; you want them to connect their experiences with those of some of their neighbors; you want them to ask questions that emphasize comparisons, contrasts, analogies and possible parallels.

This can be a powerful form of learning and community engagement. And so I would urge you in closing to use the *Latino Americans* series to help your communities make connections to their own experiences and perspectives. This is a rather obvious way of expanding from the films, using them as a platform to do more, and recognizing them as a valuable starting point.

I’d simply suggest that you keep the word “connections” at the front of your mind.

If we listen to Latino voices in the past and present (theme 1), if we think about how communities and priorities changed over time (theme 2), if we are attentive to the places that have mattered to these residents and ask why they’ve mattered (theme 3), and if we remain committed to drawing complex portraits of ourselves and others (theme 4), we can make analytic connections between Latino histories and the experiences of others. They may be uneasy connections, often tenuous connections, connections that burst forward under certain conditions and then flame out, connections that are friendly and connections defined by conflict, but they will be connections that help us think about the humanity of Latinos today and in the past.

AND THESE ARE IMPORTANT CONNECTIONS TO THINK ABOUT TODAY.