

# **AMERICAN IMMIGRANT CULTURES**

## **Builders of a Nation**

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## HONDURANS

Strikingly, though the Honduran community is defined as a group by national origin, it is ethnically and racially quite diverse, leading to varied experiences of integration, residential patterns, economic participation and community life in U.S. society. Honduras's population is 90 percent mestizo or Ladinos, racially and culturally of indigenous and Spanish origin. The other 10 percent consists of eight indigenous groups, the Garifuna, and blacks of West Indian descent, all racially, culturally, and linguistically distinct from mestizos. Black West Indians were brought by the British as slaves to the Bay Islands, off the Atlantic coast of Honduras, in the 1800s; others came as freedmen, mainly from the Cayman Islands. They still speak English and maintain an Anglo-based rather than a Hispanic culture. Another wave of West Indians came to work in the early 1900s on the American-owned United Fruit Company (UFCo) banana plantations on Honduras's Atlantic Coast. The Garifuna and blacks of West Indian descent make up a large percentage of the Honduran immigrant population in the United States despite their minority status within Honduras. These two subgroups are often associated with the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, while mestizos are associated with other Central Americans, especially Salvadorans, through cultural similarity and residential proximity. Despite

this linguistic and racial variation, all Honduran immigrants do speak Spanish as a first or second language and are also in the larger category of Hispanic.

Demographic data on Hondurans are difficult to obtain due both to the nature of the community and to the Immigration and Naturalization Service's statistics on Central Americans, which represent only a fraction of the population because they provide no data on undocumented or second- and third-generation Hondurans. Most estimates of undocumented immigrants come from asylum organizations and academics involved in refugee issues in the 1980s; however, because Hondurans have not qualified as political refugees, they are largely ignored in these studies. The U.S. Census is also misleading because the Garífuna and West Indians may be counted as blacks rather than Hispanics. The best estimates are from studies done in the 1980s that place a total of 15,000 Hondurans in Los Angeles, 30,000 to 60,000 in New Orleans, and 5,000 to 10,000 in Houston in 1985. Considering that New York City had at least the same number as New Orleans, and that Boston had at least the same number as Los Angeles, that leaves an estimate of between 95,000 to 160,000 first-generation Hondurans in the United States in 1985. If all the children of these immigrants in the Honduran community were counted, no doubt the numbers would double or triple.

## Immigration History

The history of Honduran immigration to the U.S. is closely tied to the establishment of the U.S.-owned UFCo and Standard Fruit Company on

the North Coast of Honduras in the 1880s. The banana companies were given large land concessions from the Honduran state, which allowed UFCo to monopolize planting, transportation, company stores, railways and ports. During World War II UFCo hired many of these Hondurans as merchant marines, which gave them as well as maids, gardeners, the children of Honduran managers, and others associated to the company entry through New Orleans, New Jersey and Boston, where many settled and marry U.S. citizens. These communities continue to grow, mostly with immigrants from the northern departments of Honduras (Atlántida, Cortés, Colón and Yoro).

During the 60s and 70s, most Hondurans arrived as students, tourists or under family reunification quotas. Immigration at that time came mostly from the middle-class mestizos. Because of the lack of strong Honduran niches within which they could settle, it required more resources to come and survive in the U.S. While many were men, it became more common for both sexes to immigrate on their own, so that they could later bring their spouse from Honduras or get married in the U.S., generating thus equal distribution among the sexes. The most common ages for new arrivals are between twenty and thirty-four years old and younger than fifteen, which reflects the tendency of Honduran immigrants to immigrate during their prime working years and, once settled, to bring the children that they left in the care of family members in Honduras.

In the 1980s, economic and political crises in Central America generated a dramatic increase in documented and undocumented immigration to the United States. In Honduras, this decade was marked by a national

economic modernization plan, based on export agriculture, that displaced many campesinos from their land without generating enough job alternatives in industry and the cities to absorb this work force. Regional conflicts prompted the United States to militarize Honduras, compounding an atmosphere of repression, while refugees from neighboring countries poured into Honduras. Meanwhile, the growth of the service sector and subcontracting in U.S. industry created an economic niche that undocumented workers could fill. This new wave of Honduran immigration, which often came through Mexico, was more characteristically undocumented, from poorer sectors of Honduran society. In fact, in 1988, Hondurans were ranked fifth in number of deportees, reflecting this new trend.

### Settlement in the United States

Since the 1980s, already established Honduran communities in the United States have grown dramatically, new communities have developed in Houston and Los Angeles, and internal migration and secondary settlement have expanded. These communities have taken on different characteristics depending on the particular ethnic mix of the city and economic niches available. For example, in New York City the Garífuna represent a majority of the Honduran population, living mainly in the South Bronx (in predominantly Dominican and Puerto Rican areas) and in Harlem and Brooklyn (in predominantly African-American areas). They work within a traditionally West Indian and Caribbean economic niche: women in health care and men in building maintenance. Mestizos live dispersed throughout the city in neighborhoods where Salvadorans are numerous, as in Queens.

Brooklyn, and elsewhere on Long Island, though many are also in the South Bronx, and generally work in what is considered a Mexican or Central American niche: women as domestics, men in construction, restaurants, and day labor. In Houston and New Orleans, where mestizos are a majority (though the Garífuna still are a sizable percentage), a similar pattern is observed.

Blacks of West Indian descent have settled in West Indian neighborhoods in Brooklyn and were the pioneers of the Honduran community in Boston in the 1950s. In the 1980s, the communities in Boston and New Jersey grew, with many Hondurans seeking greater employment opportunities in factories and domestic work, sectors that were saturated in New York City. Miami, a traditional destination for upper-class Honduran businessmen, also has become an area of secondary settlement, mainly for economically successful Hondurans from the northeastern United States looking for a more tropical climate.

Hondurans immigrate to the United States, as so many other groups do, with the idea of getting an education and/or making enough money to return to their native country and open a business, build a house, and help other family members there. Many Honduran immigrants return to Honduras periodically for vacations and extended stays, eventually reestablishing themselves there (return migration) with a business and/or retirement checks after years of working in the United States. Others find reintegration into Honduran society difficult after many years in the United States and tend to move back and forth between the two countries (circular migration). Still others are never able to save enough to return to live in

Honduras, or else they become financially successful in the United States and decide not to return to live in Honduras. While Honduran immigrant communities are more and more rooted in the United States with second and third generations, the steady stream of new immigrants and circular migration keep links to Honduras alive

The culture and social organization of Hondurans in the United States reflect this transnational system and their relationship to the race/ class system of the cities in which they live. Possibilities for class mobility are influenced by the general class position of the community into which they will be integrated because acquisitions of construction, restaurants and day labor. In Houston and New Orleans, where mestizos are a majority (though the Garífuna still are a sizable percentage), a similar pattern is observed.

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For example, many of the earlier immigrants who were not integrated into a large Honduran or Hispanic community and had to learn English (as well as the West Indians who already spoke English and often had a British-based education in Honduras) have assimilated to more “mainstream” American culture and are professionals working as teachers, nurses, lawyers engineers, and so on, representing an emerging middle class. Despite the growth of the Honduran community since the 1980s, class mobility for this

generation is more difficult because they tend to live in largely Hispanic neighborhoods where English is less necessary to get by; and they are prevented from studying a profession or at least English by the necessity of working long hours to survive in the United States while also supporting family members in Honduras. What assimilation occurs is most commonly to a "minority" inner-city working class. Concern about this fact has sparked a growth of community organizations (especially among the Garifuna) whose goals are to promote linguistic maintenance and cultural persistence while simultaneously promoting success in U.S. society through education, economic enterprise, and political participation. However, the fractious nature of the community has impeded unity and the creation of a Honduran political and social "bloc."

## Employment

Hondurans have not created a strong ethnic economic niche into which new arrivals can be integrated. The few Honduran businesses that exist tend to serve the community's transnational character: restaurants, travel agencies, courier services, shipping agencies. There is an informal ethnic economy of Honduran food vendors at soccer games; bands playing at social events, individuals making videos of weddings, birthdays, and other occasions to be sent to family in Honduras; and people providing intra-community child care. One exception to these small family-run enterprises is a Honduran-owned ice cream factory in New York City that hires **many** Hondurans to sell paletas from street carts in the Hispanic neighborhoods of the city.

Those who entered the United States legally and declared a profession in the 1980s had been concentrated in their homeland in the categories of "service, operator, fabricator, and laborer," and "precision production, craft, and repair," indicating a mainly blue-collar and low-skilled urban working-class population. Upon arrival in the United States they tended to work in similar sectors of the economy. For both men and women factory work has been a constant source of employment and often is a stepping-stone in the labor market, especially if they are undocumented and speak no English. Yet with the decline of U.S. industry since the 1970s, factories moving to other countries (among them Honduras), and industry's greater reliance on contract labor, this once-stable niche with unions and benefits became highly unstable, relying more on nonunionized labor and undocumented workers. Many more Hondurans are now employed in the growing U.S. service sector, women especially, as home attendants for the disabled and elderly and as domestics in wealthy suburban homes; men are commonly found in restaurants, construction, and building maintenance.

Though many Honduran professionals immigrate to the United States, those who do not speak English often end up with the same types of jobs as nonprofessionals. Thus for many, immigration means downward class mobility. Yet the immigration stream continues, as lower-class living standards in the United States still allow for greater possibilities for consumption than middle-class status in Honduras, especially if the U.S. consumption is focused on using dollars to invest in property in Honduras.

## Housing and Family Structure

Hondurans tend not to dominate any one neighborhood, but may dominate a single apartment building as they either become the superintendent or recommend family and friends as tenants. In more suburban areas groups of households often rent a house together. Most individual households consist of nuclear families, but extended family members also often live together for temporary periods, as with a new arrival from Honduras or in cases of marital separation. Family reunification is a strong ideal among Hondurans. Women work especially hard to make it possible to send for young children they left in Honduras. They also often send for their own parents, who will then take care of the children. Child care is a serious issue within the community as private child care is expensive and government-subsidized child care is hard to get, so the most common solution is to leave children with an unemployed relative or compatriot.

Legal marriage is a desired status; however, the combination of the transnational system and U.S. immigration laws makes this a complicated affair. Many families are separated between the United States and Honduras while waiting for U.S. residency papers to come through; marriages are postponed until legal status can be attained; others are contracted for strictly legal purposes. The result is many common-law unions that produce children, as well as the "ideal type" American nuclear family. Gender relations also are affected by these constraints as both men and women must work to maintain a decent standard of living in the United States while simultaneously supporting family members in Honduras, so it is more common for them to share household and child-care duties. Many women comment that they prefer gender relations in the United States because long work hours and dangerous inner-city street life give men less

opportunity to be *callejeando* (in the streets); because spousal and child abuse are more harshly punished in the United States; because women have more opportunity to reduce their dependence on men via government aid; and because of greater educational opportunities. on the other hand, Honduran women in the United States must work long hours away from their children and deal with a state bureaucracy that is complex and often dehumanizing toward non-English-speakers to obtain social services.

Most Hondurans are Catholic, though there are some Evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses. Garífuna have their own religion. the practitioners of which are *buyeís* (shamans) who interpret dreams and contact the ancestors in cases of illness or emotional problems. Though most Hondurans go to the hospital for medical care, they also use traditional herbal medicines. AIDS is a serious health problem for Hondurans both in the United States and in their Honduran Atlantic Coast communities, the area with the highest incidence of HIV infection in Central America. Community AIDS workers say it is compounded because those who are known to be infected are reluctant to admit it and take precautions, for fear of being treated as "socially dead" in a culture held together by tightly knit social and family networks.

Family and social gatherings make up for the residential dispersion of the community. Birthday parties, weddings, baptisms, and wakes attract large networks of family members. Often these gatherings are videotaped and sent to family members in Honduras, with the same done from Honduras to the United States. The Garífuna replicate their village life with the patron saint's fiesta, a gala dance, the crowning of the community "queen," and

*fedu* and máscaro dances at Christmas. Fiestas at social clubs organized by voluntary associations representing each village use profits from admissions and concession stands for development projects in their native Honduran communities, such as the supply of potable water and electricity and the building of schools. In the summer, New York Garífuna also organize day trips to the beach and to Atlantic City.

A few areas of activity attract a wider base of Honduran participation, including national civic events such as Independence Day and the annual Mass for the Virgin of Suyapa, as well as involvement in soccer clubs, social clubs, and cultural associations. Since the 1960s, Honduran soccer clubs have played in city leagues in New York City and New Orleans, drawing large crowds to parks, where they socialize, have barbecues, and eat Honduran food.

### Honduran Cultural Contributions

Hondurans, both mestizo and Garífuna, have been particularly active and visible in the arts, especially in New York. For example, the Honduran-American Cultural Association produced a series of major cultural events from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, including performances of Honduran popular and contemporary theater, traditional dance troupes both local and based in Honduras, visual arts exhibits, poetry recitals, book sales, and conferences. In the summer of 1995, at an arts festival in the Bronx, a group of Honduran Garífuna and mestizo performers and musicians staged a pioneering outdoor performance representing the arrival of the Garífuna in Honduras. The work of artists in all disciplines has

begun to attract media attention and will encourage others. In the mid-1990s, punta (drumming music traditionally played at Garífuna wakes) began to achieve acceptance by greater audiences through the Punta Rock movement, with its growing number of Garífuna bands and more sophisticated production, as well as through dance troupes that choreograph traditional Garífuna dances to present to multicultural audiences. Local mestizo dance troupes replicate their Honduran colleagues' research and study of their particular dance forms to help spearhead a movement to enrich and revitalize this long-neglected tradition. Hondurans are active in the Spanish-language media. Some of Honduras's most respected radio journalists have worked for many years in New York City. In 1995, a core group of Honduran writers founded *Nosotros los Latinos*, a monthly newspaper/magazine with commentary on and analysis of diverse subjects of interest to greater Hispanic audiences and a special focus on the arts. On Bronx local access cable television there are *Abriendo Brechas*, *Centro América Show* (which sometimes broadcasts in Garífuna), and *Conversando con Antonieta*; these series feature soccer clubs, interviews with members of the community, and coverage of local dance and music performances. The first two are also broadcast in New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Honduras. In Los Angeles a Honduran-run newspaper called *El Sol de Las Américas* covers the entire Hispanic community.

Preference for the Spanish media may be explained by the high degree of bilingualism within the Hispanic community. For most first-generation Hondurans, Spanish still is their primary language. Their children become bilingual through contact with their Hispanic neighborhood and bilingual

schools. Garífuna children may also speak Garífuna if their parents reinforce it at home. Though Garífuna is traditionally a nonwritten language, there has been a transnational movement among Garífuna organizations in Los Angeles, New York, Belize, and Honduras to create a standard spelling system for the language so youths can learn to read and write it.

## Politics

Despite a growing population and an increase in community organizations, Hondurans' participation in U.S. politics has remained weak. This can be attributed to the lack of a strong ethnic economic niche, residential dispersal, the large number of undocumented immigrants, the ideology of return, community fragmentation, and less of a tradition of large-scale organization around national issues than other Central American groups. Organizational efforts and community identity tend to be strongly focused on Honduras rather than the United States (since most see themselves as only temporary sojourners in the United States), and more specifically on their home communities in Honduras.

Fragmentation and segregation along ethnic, class, and party lines from Honduras carry over to the United States. Additionally, U.S. racial and ethnic politics further divide the community. In the South and Southwest the Garífuna are racialized as black and the mestizos as Hispanic, two often antagonistic and segregated groups. In New York City the presence of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban blacks has created more leeway for the formation of a middle ground Afro-Latino identity for the Garífuna, yet there still is a marked division between Garífuna and mestizo social and

political activities. This means that the Honduran community does not necessarily see itself as a single coherent group with the same needs and goals vis-à-vis U.S. society.

## National Awareness and Development

The severe situation of many Honduran immigrants in New York City came to international attention through the March 25, 1990, Happy Land social club fire in the South Bronx, where eighty-seven people, a majority Hondurans, were killed by asphyxiation. Happy Land was, like many other clubs, in blatant violation of city safety regulations, with only one fire exit. Hondurans have gathered in places like this over the years to celebrate family events and listen to punta. The aftermath of the tragedy revealed poor housing conditions, precarious financial situations, a multitude of problems caused by various states of documentation or lack of it, the degree to which many family members in Honduras rely on immigrants for financial support, and the fact that the community had no self-help mechanism or organization to cope with such a large-scale tragedy.

The creation of the Federation of Honduran Organizations of New York in 1991, in response to this tragedy, is an important initiative in the U.S. Honduran community's history. Though it first worked to address the immediate needs of surviving family members, its scope widened to include problems of housing, health care, legalization, financial assistance, English, job training, and small business development. The federation represents an initial attempt at unity within the community, but many more initiatives are

needed for the community to reach a level of development consistent with its numbers.

See also: GARIFUNA

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