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Suggested Responses to Frequently Asked Questions about Hispanics, Latinos and Latinas

Juan Perea[†]

Buenos días. I'm so pleased to be here with you today; this is always one of my favorite meetings of the year. I'm also very pleased to be in Puerto Rico. This is my first visit to "La Isla" and I'd like to thank Celina and Angel for having such a nice isla.

I'm going to attempt three things this morning that I've never tried before in public. First is to be brief. Those of you who have heard me speak before will understand that and may hope for that. The second thing is to be funny. And the third thing, which I realized in the course of prior panelists' presentations, is that I'm not going to talk about language.

My talk is entitled "Interpretations and Suggested Responses to Frequently Asked Questions About Hispanics, Latinos and Latinas."

Question 1: the what are you question. I'm often asked, "what is a Hispanic or Latino anyway?" This question may be asked with varying degrees of annoyance. The greater the degree of annoyance, the closer this question approaches something like "What are you doing here?"

Suggested response: The basic question is easily answered. The Hispanic, Latino, or Latina is typically someone of Latin American ancestry or birth. The questions of legitimacy latent in the question I shall address later.

Question 2: the where are you from question. I often meet people who consider themselves the real Americans. As soon as I mention my name, I'm asked, "Where are you from?" I answer, sincerely, "Washington D.C." I receive a quizzical look and I'm asked again, with growing annoyance and frustration, "No, I mean where are you really from?" I answer, sincerely, "Washington D.C., the nation's capital." My questioner may shift focus now, asking with exasperation, "Well, where are your parents from?" This is what my questioner really wanted, not my birth place, not my simple geography, but some foreign land, the exotic distant countries of my ancestry, to be able to locate me someplace outside the borders of the United States, where I'm presumed not to belong. I call this "symbolic deportation," since my identity has been swept beyond the borders.

Suggested response: To handle this sensitive social situation, I recommend asking the questioner "Where are you from? No, I mean

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where are your parents from?...No, I mean where are you grandparents from?" Use as many follow-up questions as necessary. You will have made two important political points. The questioner, like you, has ancestral roots in foreign lands. And you, like the questioner, belong to America.

Question 3: the you don't belong here conundrum. This is the series of questions and assumptions regarding the proper places for Hispanics, Latinos and Latinas. I will first describe 3 episodes.

Episode 1: One of my students is a brown-skinned Mexican-American woman. She arrived at the law school a few days early to acquaint herself with the surroundings. A white Anglo woman approached her and asked "Are you lost?" "No," my student answered. The white woman persisted. "Are you looking for a cafeteria job, because the employment office is elsewhere on campus."

After recovering from her initial shock, my student responded, "No, I'm starting school here." The woman, with incredulity, asked, "In the law program?"

Episode 2: Years ago I was an editor on the law review and I had a conversation with one of my classmates. We were both third-year students and we had known each other since our second year of law school. I forget how the subject came up, but I remember telling her "I'm Hispanic." "No, you're not," my classmate responded. Mulling it over a bit, I repeated, "Well, actually, I *am* Hispanic."

Episode 3: One of the administrators at my law school was very impressed with my grade point average. He complimented me about what a good student I was. I was a good student. One day we met by coincidence in the locker room at the school's athletic facility. Half clothed, and completely out of context, he asked me "Are you an Argentinean Jew?" I answered, "No." He expressed no further interest in my actual ancestry.

These three episodes share a common theme: the proper place of Latino people in an Anglo-constructed society. The cognitive dissonance experienced by Anglos confronted with successful Latinos illustrates the theme. My student's proper place was to work in the cafeteria serving food, not studying law. My classmate's conception of Hispanic did not include someone as smart as her. The administrator, aware of both my academic success and my Latino name, had to invent a fantasy neo-European theory to understand my success. In others' eyes one cannot be both successful and Latino of non-European ancestry.

Suggested response: When one receives such comments, one should point out the overly narrow conception of Latino that these persons carry.

Question 4: "Is your name Maria?" Or, for men, "is your name Jose or Juan?" One of my students reports that she is asked regularly and out of the blue, "Is your name Maria?" Many Anglos think all Mexican women are named Maria. Similarly, many persons think all Latino men must be named Jose or Juan, except some of us actually named Juan.

Upon learning my name, people act funny. They hear it as Ron,...Don. Or at the law firm...Warren, Orrin. After enough repetitions, when the weight of my name has finally sunk in, I often get the response, "You don't look like a Juan."

Suggested response: I encourage them to look again, carefully this

time, and to enlarge their conception of what a Latino named Juan looks like.

If you are asked the more insulting "Why haven't you changed your name?" I can recommend two responses.

Response 1: For the same reasons you haven't changed yours.

Response 2: Offer a few helpful suggestions for changing their names. For example, Brian should always be changed to Alfonso. Gregg lacks the character of Cesar or Carlos or Angel. You can feel free to experiment with you favorite name changes.

I hope I have been brief. I hope that I have been humorous, although many of the presumptions I have described are no laughing matter. It's up to each of us to correct them when they arise.

I thank you very much.

