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PANEL: LATINA/O IDENTITY AND PAN-ETHNICITY: TOWARD LATCRIT SUBJECTIVITIES:
Introduction to Panel One: Latino Pan-Ethnicity? Histories and Conditions that United and Divide our Communities

Leslie Espinoza *

BIO:

* Professor of Law, Boston College School of Law.

SUMMARY: ... I live by myself, and have for a number of years, but this summer my 19-year-old niece, Maya, is coming to spend three months with me. ... In weaving, Maya has taught me, one observes the details of the individual threads, and how they are brought together, because both the details of the individual components and your vision of the whole are important to your goal- the finished product. ... And yet, neither the dynamic nor the reality of this invisibility is addressed, taught or critiqued, whether in the lower grades, or in the graduate schools, or in the law schools of this nation. Thus, the system of education and the discourses and norms of American society perpetuate Latina/o invisibility. This shared invisibility, its causes and its consequences, therefore may provide a common condition, or point of departure, for exploring Latina/o pan-ethnicity. ... It had this wonderful familiarity with it -- I'm Mexican-American, so the language and culture there has a feel to it that was familiar to me and, yet, it was also so different. ... These personal and continuing encounters with difference and familiarity thus lead me to view Latina/o identities, groups and cultures as neither static nor abstract. ...

[*175] I live by myself, and have for a number of years, but this summer my 19-year-old niece, Maya, is coming to spend three months with me. Maya is an artist. She is a weaver. And one of the things she has taught me is that, when you weave, you observe different kinds of beauty. There is the beauty of the threads, and of noting the origins of the materials you use; there is the wool, and its origins; there is the cotton, and its texture. In weaving, Maya has taught me, one observes the details of the individual threads, and how they are brought together, because both the details of the individual components and your vision of the whole are important to your goal- the finished product. And, that is what our panel is about.

To open this first-ever conference we begin with an interdisciplinary panel to explore the notion of Latina/o panethnicity based on Latina/o experience and circumstance. The panelists will be addressing both the ways in which we may differ as well as the ways in which we may be similar. In this way, we can consider more broadly some of the origins and material conditions of this group -- Latinas/os -- so that we can begin to consider both the details of each group and the whole of our intragroup similarities and differences.

In general, the panelists will discuss how education, culture and [*176] politics ignore us -- how we are, in the word that Juan Perea and others have used many times, "invisible" in this society. And yet, neither the dynamic nor the reality of this invisibility is addressed, taught or critiqued, whether in the lower grades, or in the graduate schools, or in the law schools of this nation. Thus, the system of education and the discourses and norms of American society perpetuate Latina/o invisibility. This shared invisibility, its

causes and its consequences, therefore may provide a common condition, or point of departure, for exploring Latina/o pan-ethnicity.

In addition, as we look at the details of the individual threads of Latina/o existence in the United States, I hope we will also note the dynamism of Latina/o cultures. Thus, one purpose of this opening panel is to prompt us to look for, and at, the different aspects and the different perspectives within Latina/o cultures. But this dynamism also points to an overarching and enduring sense of familiarity that Latinas/os seem to share with each other.

This point always reminds me of the first time I visited Puerto Rico, which was right after law school. It had this wonderful familiarity with it -- I'm Mexican-American, so the language and culture there has a feel to it that was familiar to me and, yet, it was also so different. It made me reflect on the various aspects of my self, on how I'm "different" in always-evolving and acutely contextual ways; how I can go to Mexico and feel the same sense of familiarity that I sensed in Puerto Rico, and yet how, as a Mexican-American, I'm not "really" a Mexican. I experience this dynamic and contextual sense of difference and familiarity in other ways, too: for instance, I go to Los Angeles, where I was raised, but, having spent years away from it, I no longer feel the same degree of familiarity with it -- my hometown! These thoughts make me appreciate the dynamic and contextual nature both of familiarity and difference.

These personal and continuing encounters with difference and familiarity thus lead me to view Latina/o identities, groups and cultures as neither static nor abstract. We are constantly changing in concrete and contingent ways as we move throughout "different" [*177] yet familiar worlds. What does it mean to be "Mexican-American"?; is it about Mexico, is it about Los Angeles, is it about Chicago, is it about Cuba (where, as "Americans," we are not legally allowed to visit), or is it about Miami? Is it about Puerto Rico or is it about the Bronx? What do we mean when we use the term "Latina/o"? Today's conversation on pan-ethnicity is intended to begin our exploration of these and similar questions.

As we embark on this conversation, I think it important to keep a vision of the whole in mind -- even if we don't, and can't, yet know exactly what this whole will become as a "finished" product. Broad perspective is important because, as Maya has taught me, we have the individual threads to begin our work, but it is in the way that we intersect them that creates the thing that becomes the whole, that forms the complete piece of work. It is not the individual threads, but the way they come together -- the way *we* weave them together. Indeed, the strength in a piece of weaving is in its intersections.

A final lesson to be drawn from Maya's weaving for our consideration of pan-ethnicity is this: Maya interweaves branches of trees and pieces of metal or jewelry that she finds in Mexico or around Santa Fe, which makes me realize that pan-ethnicity is an exercise in creativity. As we set out to intersect our identities, let us remember that neither identities nor intersections are fixed; we want to keep in mind our creativity, or ability to shape the dynamics of identities and intersections. In key and basic, ways Latinas/os *are* our history -- undeniably, the past is a part of us. But our future, over which we can exercise our creativity, is so much more.