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Outside/Inside

Jarrett T. Barrios

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OUTSIDE/INSIDE

SEN. JARRETT T. BARRIOS*

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“We were teenagers, and now we’re the man.”
Markos Moulitsas, Founder of the Daily Kos¹

I. OUTSIDE

Havana. August 1994. Hundreds of Cubans take to the streets in protest of extreme food shortages; thousands more take to the sea in rafts and other small hand-made watercrafts to reach the United States.² As the Cuban *balsero* crisis mushrooms, President Clinton orders the Coast Guard to

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1. Posting of Kit Kuzma to Mediaite, *Growing Pains: The Outsiders on the Inside at Netroots Nation*, <http://www.mediaite.com/online/growing-pains-the-outsiders-on-the-inside-at-netroots-nation/> (Aug. 17, 2009, 20:24 EST).

2. See Larry Rohter, *Flight From Cuba, The Policy, Castro’s Refugee Weapon Has Been Wielded Before*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 20, 1994, at 11 (comparing the August 1994 emigration of Cubans to the 1980 Mariel crisis).

begin sending Cubans to Guantánamo.³ There, they join thousands of Haitian refugees intercepted by the United States Coast Guard months earlier, Haitians whose fates—either a summary return to an ignominious homeland or permission to enter America in exile—also hang in the balance.⁴

A. Black and White

Washington, DC. September 1994. By Labor Day 1994, the number of refugees housed in squalid conditions at the naval base was beginning to spiral out of control.⁵ Images of hungry, half-clothed Cubans and Haitians broadcast from Guantánamo disturbed the world, but there was no official word on whether Clinton would send them back or allow them into the United States.⁶

Like many others around the country, the minority students at Georgetown University Law Center returned to classes after Labor Day, stirred by the news from the naval base. Some sought out concrete ways to help. Jointly, members of the African American and Latino law student groups set up tables with pre-printed postcards addressed to the President, urging fellow students to sign a few words to Clinton, encouraging him to admit into the United States these wayward refugees housed in Guantánamo.

I was one of those students—more “in your face” than many—demanding that anyone with whom I had the slightest acquaintance come over to sign a card. Naturally, when “Jill,” an officer in the law school Republican club, walked by, I took it as a personal challenge. “Hey, Jill, come here! Sign a postcard to the President?”

Her blue eyes gazed at me skeptically. Then she spoke. “I don’t think I’d help your cause much, Jarrett. I’m a Bush girl.”

Something in me decided to push her. “Jill, c’mon, it’s for the Cuban and Haitian refugees. Will you sign?”

Always sweet, she turned the table on me with a question. “Why are *you*

3. See Deborah Ramirez, *Warnings Fail to Stem Cuban Tide, Refugees Pouring off the Island Face the Unknown – And the Threat of Bad Weather Tonight*, ORLANDO SENTINEL, Aug. 24, 1994, at A1 (indicating many Cubans erroneously believed that those without criminal records would be allowed to immigrate to the United States).

4. See THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, *U.S. Expands Guantánamo Base in Cuba to Hold up to 40,000 in the ‘Flood’ of Refugees*, CHI. TRIB., Aug. 24, 1994, at 1 (noting a plan to expand the facilities at Guantánamo Bay in order to house the influx of Cuban and Haitian refugees).

5. See *id.* (explaining that Pentagon officials were planning to move military personnel, civilians, and dependents off base to accommodate incoming migrants).

6. See David Adams, *Avoiding Purgatory in Guantánamo*, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Sept. 18, 1994, at A1 (detailing efforts to secure immigration procedural rights for the Cuban exiles at Guantánamo Bay).

collecting these, Jarrett?”

“Jill, you know that I’m Cuban.”

“No, you’re not. You’re *American*.” Then she leaned into me, and whispered seriously. “And Jarrett, we don’t need any more of *those* people in our country.”

Trying to respond evenly, I observed, “Jill, *I* am one of *those* people.”

She laughed, perhaps shriller than she’d intended. “No, you’re not. You’re white.”

Until that word—“white”—I had assumed “those people” referred to their immigrant status, not their race. I stumbled for words, an answer. I found none.

In years since, I’ve played this part of our *tête-à-tête* over and over in my head, reaching for a pithier response. Perhaps the easiest answer would have been, “Hey, Jill, you’re wrong. I am not white.” But she’d win the argument sure as sugar cane: I was, according to the 1990 U.S. Census, white. To be more precise, “White” and of “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” origin.⁷

But Jill did not stop there. With a smile on her face, she continued. “Tongue tied, Jarrett? Listen, you’re born here. You’re American. And you’re white.”

By all accounts, Jill was right. I was not exactly the thing I said I was: Cuban. My last ancestor to leave Cuba was my grandmother Elena. She arrived in Key West on the steamship from Havana as an infant in the 1920s. My parents were born in Florida, and I was, too. I was of Cuban heritage, to be sure, but totally and thoroughly American.

The arresting, drawn faces staring from our television screens were a world away from my ancestors’ stories of Cuba. Their problems were hardly theoretical. In the 1930s, Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire described their Caribbean condition thus: *the awful futility of their raison d’être*.⁸ Had anything changed?

They were refugees from colonized places that were not working so well in the post-colonial era. Guantánamo was their hoped-for haven, but had become their day-to-day hell—a hand-to-mouth existence not unlike the one they had left in Cuba and Haiti.

In the sea of faces on the television screen, I saw pairs of brown eyes, pairs of blue eyes, and pairs of hazel eyes. I saw cheeks bronzed by tropical sun, nappy hair and straight hair, and hands thrust modestly into

7. See U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, MEASURING AMERICA: THE DECENNIAL CENSUS FROM 1790 TO 2000 91 (2002), <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/ma.html> [hereinafter MEASURING AMERICA].

8. AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, NOTEBOOK OF A RETURN TO THE NATIVE LAND 2 (Clayton Ashleman & Annette Smith trans., 2001) (1939).

worn pockets of second-hand blue jeans. In these images, I saw my cousins who remained on the Cuban island. I saw what had become of our shared island heritage. And against all logic, I was proud of them—all those determined faces on the television. But if Jill was right (and her facts were accurate: I was “white” and born in America), what did this heritage mean to me, beyond a bit of sentimentality for these “outsiders” on the television screen?

B. Brown and Gray

For Jill, it was about birthplace and race: I was born in the United States and was, in her eyes, white. In my eyes, it was about ethnicity, heritage and—well, it was about so much more. In the United States, the categories of race feel less mutable and far less forgiving than these heritage lines: one drop of non-white blood makes your race something-other-than-white.⁹ Unlike the rigidity of these racial definitions, Latino identity seems less firmly rooted in the American psyche.¹⁰ It is connected to color—“brown”—but “white” can be “brown” in America, too.¹¹ This lack of consonance between color and category leaves Americans to gloss over ethnicity, if it is considered at all.

The history of our nation’s decennial census marvelously illustrates the unstable nature of this Latino “category.”¹² In the first census in 1790, marshals asked the public few questions: how many in the family, gender, “color” (“white” or “other free people”), and the number of slaves.¹³ By 1820, the government added a separate category and set of questions for “free colored persons,” recognizing that one’s color did not necessarily deny him status as a person—some of the time.¹⁴ The 1850 census created

9. See MATTHEW PRATT GUTERL, *THE COLOR OF RACE IN AMERICA 1900-1940* 158 (2001) (describing the autobiographical account of a “mulatto” living in 1930s Washington, D.C., and discussing how the lives of the “light-skinned mulattos” were different from those of the “Negro,” so labeled under the “one drop rule”). See generally CLARA E. RODRÍGUEZ, *CHANGING RACE: LATINOS, THE CENSUS, AND THE HISTORY OF ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES* 65-104 (2000) (tracing the characterization of race in United States’ censuses).

10. See Linda Martin Alcoff, *Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?*, in *HISPANICS /LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES* 23, 23-24 (Jorge J. E. Gracia & Pablo De Greiff eds., 2000) (suggesting that debates over Latina/os and race combine “strategic considerations” with “metaphysical considerations”).

11. See GUTERL, *supra* note 9, at 3-4 (describing the racial identities of Jews, Letts, Finns, Greeks, Italians, Slovaks, Poles, and Russians as non-white).

12. See MELISSA NOBLES, *SHADES OF CITIZENSHIP: RACE AND THE CENSUS IN MODERN POLITICS* 1-2 (2000) (arguing that given the subjective nature of race, censuses help promote discourse concerning race).

13. See *MEASURING AMERICA*, *supra* note 7, at 5, 119 (noting that the census’ goal was “to assess the countries [sic] industrial and military potential”).

14. See *id.* at 6 (describing the additional questions that were asked to determine one’s profession).

a separate slave questionnaire, and the questionnaire for “free” inhabitants had a new column that asked for the “color” of the person, listing three possible choices: B for Black, M for Mulatto, and blank, which presumed the resident was white.¹⁵ The census-takers were specifically admonished of this question’s importance: “[i]t is very desirable that these particulars be carefully regarded.”¹⁶

Who was white, black, or mulatto? The 1870 census tried to explain to the census marshals and assistants that “scientific results” required anyone “having a perceptible trace of African blood” be classified as not white.¹⁷ This census included the first mention of “Indians,” and though it did not explicitly list “Indians” as a “color” choice in the questionnaire, census takers were nonetheless instructed to classify Native Americans in this column.¹⁸

Color was of primary importance for the designers of the 1880 census, preceding questions of gender, age, and other personal information on the questionnaire.¹⁹ This census formally added Indian (as in Native American, not South Asian), as well as Chinese to the color classification system.²⁰ The 1890 census added Japanese, and broke down “African blooded” people by what must have appeared to the designers a more scientific method based in blood: “[t]he word ‘black’ should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; ‘mulatto,’ those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; ‘quadroon,’ those persons who have one-fourth black blood; and ‘octoroon,’ those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood.”²¹

The 1900 census forms were notable for introducing the term “race” to describe this classification.²² In the United States, this is a term with a history all its own. Citizenship and language grew in importance as the twentieth century waxed: the entire second page of the 1910 questionnaire focused on “nativity,” “citizenship,” and “mother tongue.”²³ In the “color or race” column, another category was added—“other.”²⁴ For the first

15. *Id.* at 10-11.

16. *Id.* at 10.

17. *See id.* at 14 (defining “mulatto” as including “quadroons” and “octoroons”).

18. *See id.* at 15 (stressing the importance of determining the number of “Indians not taxed” for statistical reasons).

19. *See id.* at 17.

20. *See id.* at 18, 21 (instructing marshals to include half-Indians in the Indian category).

21. *Id.* at 27.

22. *See id.* at 34.

23. *See id.* at 45.

24. *See id.* at 48 (indicating that marshals should make note of the specific race of

time, those who did not fall into the neat categories had a classification—albeit, a non-descriptive one—of their own.

“Other” did not quite describe the ethnic origin of the peoples of Latino descent residing in the American Southwest. After the Texas Annexation, Spanish-descended Mexicans living within the new boundaries of the United States were considered “others” by the U.S. census.²⁵ It was not until 1940 that the census took cognizance of their heritage.²⁶ In a brief footnote to census-takers that year, the instructions directed that “Mexicans” were to be classified as white “unless they were definitely Indian or some race other than White.”²⁷

The 1960 census added Puerto Ricans and “other persons of Latin descent” to Mexicans, instructing that all these persons were to be classified as White, Negro, or Indian as appropriate.²⁸ The direction was clear: Latin descent wasn’t a race, but such persons were different enough from the other “white” immigrants—Poles, Italians, Irish, Germans, and so on—to merit this unique, clarifying explanation.

Some clarity came ten years later, in 1970. The census form added a formal category for Hispanic descent: for every twentieth person surveyed, enumerators were instructed to ask whether their “origin or descent” was Spanish—Mexican; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Central or South American; or “Other Spanish.”²⁹ In 1980, Hispanics in the United States graduated to a question on every form, though still separate and further down from the earlier question of race.³⁰ In 2000, Question 5 asked if a resident was “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino,” immediately following the question on race.³¹

Under the logic of the 2000 census, Hispanic immigrants arriving in America confront a curious challenge. They self-identify based on nationality—Colombian, Salvadoran, Dominican, Mexican, Cuban, and so on.³² Now, this identity was subsumed into the term, “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” Moreover, they would also have to select a

those who chose “other” by handwriting it in the left-hand column of the census form).

25. See SAR A. LEVITAN ET AL., *MINORITIES IN THE UNITED STATES: PROBLEMS, PROGRESS, AND PROSPECTS* 60-63 (1975) (stating that although many Mexicans were present in the United States Southwest before the Texas Annexation, currently a substantial portion of the Southwest consists of immigrants).

26. See *MEASURING AMERICA*, *supra* note 7, at 64 (noting the change in the race category between the 1930 and 1940 censuses).

27. *Id.*

28. See *id.* at 72 (noting that “persons of Latin descent” should also be categorized as “white” unless it is clear that they are of another race).

29. *Id.* at 77-78.

30. See *id.* at 84 (indicating that race was Question 4 and Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent was Question 7).

31. *Id.* at 100.

32. *Id.*

racial category to identify themselves—White, Black/African American/Negro, American Indian/Alaska Native.³³ For many of these immigrants, it was the first time they had known themselves by “race.”

C. Not White

West Tampa, Florida. 1980. Is “Latino” a state of mind that a black-and-white America has little interest in, like Jill seemed to think? Or an objective (if oft-misunderstood) category that was separate from, but parallel to, race, as the census forms seem to dictate? Or is it something else entirely—something outside the experience of those on the inside making up all these categories? Something I first began to appreciate as a teenager sitting on the swing with my grandmother Elena at her house on Main Street.

From the beginning of my family’s time in America, they knew “Latin” was something not white. Settling in Tampa, Florida, in the late nineteenth century, they lived in the largely-segregated Cuban quarter of a young Tampa—Ybor City and West Tampa—robust, but isolated neighborhoods improbably ensconced in the conservative confines of the American South.³⁴ Tampa was the cigar-rolling capital of the world, filled with immigrants in its factories.³⁵ This burgeoning population of immigrants caused the city’s Southern-accented, white city fathers to annex these parcels in an effort to control Cubans’ labor and social activities.³⁶ With the tacit support of these white civic leaders, Cuban unionists were even kidnapped and forcibly deported by local police.³⁷

In the narrower vocabulary of the era (the census had not yet come up with terminology to refer to us), early-twentieth century intolerance was memorialized in racial language. “When an American got mad at any Latin, he called him a Cuban nigger,” recalled New Yorker columnist Jose Yglesias, “During [a labor strike], the KKK would come into the Labor Temple with guns, and break up meetings. Very frequently they were

33. *Id.*

34. See NANCY A. HEWITT, SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT: WOMEN’S ACTIVISM IN TAMPA, FLORIDA, 1880S-1920S 124 (2001) (characterizing Ybor City as having a “polyglot” population of African Americans, Cubans, Italians, and Spaniards among Anglo-Saxon and German Americans and describing the effects of Tampa officials’ segregationist policies).

35. See GARY R. MORMINO & GEORGE E. POZZETTA, THE IMMIGRANT WORLD OF YBOR CITY 11-12 (1987) (describing the distinctive culture and racial politics surrounding the cigar factories of Tampa).

36. See ROBERT KERSTEIN, POLITICS AND GROWTH IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY TAMPA 27 (2001) (suggesting that the incorporation of Ybor City into Tampa was also motivated by a desire to benefit from increased tax revenue).

37. See ROBERT P. INGALLS & LOUIS A. PÉREZ, JR., TAMPA CIGAR WORKERS: A PICTORIAL HISTORY 9 (2003) (indicating that union funds deposited in banks were frozen and that landlords denied housing to striking workers and their families).

police in hoods The picket lines would hold hands and the KKK would beat them and cart them off.”³⁸ Vigilantism clothed itself more respectably in the form of Tampa’s “Citizens’ Committee,” a group that colluded with the police and states’ attorneys to ensure that lynching, kidnapping, and other abuses went unprosecuted.³⁹ In that era’s Tampa, there was no ambiguity over these “racial” facts: being Cuban was anything but white.

Cuban families were confronted squarely with different attitudes on race: arriving in America, these Cubans were not considered white,⁴⁰ but Latin, Hispanic or Spanish⁴¹—a social construct of the time that was neither as subjective as Jill’s jeering summation, nor as superficial as the census classifications.

Descendants of these immigrant Cubans learned about our “category” more often from family stories than formal history. From my grandmother Elena, I learned that there was little choice in Tampa about being “Latin.” She would sit with us on her front yard swing, telling stories like her dream of being a cheerleader at Hillsborough High School, only to be denied because she was a Latin girl, and Latin girls were not allowed to be cheerleaders. Two generations later, this discrimination lived on in her grandchildren as remembered injustice told from the safe distance of Abuela’s swing.

Today, those grandchildren are called “white,” which conveniently allows us to forget those days when we had a race: “Latin.” After all, if you can “pass” as white, why would you want your grandmother’s heritage liabilities, too? The lesson—perhaps unique to Latinos today, perhaps not—is that the experience of our less-rigid-than-race lines of ethnic identities force us to confront the question head on: do I assume the status of the ethnic and the outsider, or do I just let it go? It is not an easy question, and there are no easy answers.

II. INSIDE

Boston, Massachusetts. October 2002. I was elected to the

38. See STUDS TERKEL, *HARD TIMES: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION* 109-11 (1970) (detailing an interview with Jose Yglesias).

39. See ROBERT P. INGALLS, *URBAN VIGILANTES OF THE NEW SOUTH: TAMPA, 1882-1936* 114 (1988) (stating that former prosecutors led the 1910 Citizens’ Committee and the Citizens’ Association of 1911).

40. ALEJANDRA BRONFMAN, *MEASURES OF EQUALITY: SOCIAL SCIENCE, CITIZENSHIP AND RACE IN CUBA 1902-1940* 10-12 (Louis A. Pérez Jr., ed., 2004).

41. This term is particularly ironic given the Cubans’ war for independence from Spain.

Massachusetts State Senate in a contested primary in September of 2002.⁴² With no general election opponent, I was set to be sworn in as the first Latino and first openly gay man to serve in the nation's oldest State Senate the following January.⁴³ Instead of celebrating that week, I went to jail.⁴⁴

A. Acting Out on the Inside

Risking arrest was my own choice and came as part of my involvement in a bitter strike called by the janitors' union, Service Employees International Union ("SEIU") Local 615. After breaking off contract negotiations with a large office cleaning company, the union called for the public to show solidarity with its cause. As a way of getting the newspapers to continue writing about the low wages and rampant mistreatment of the all-Latino cleaning crews in downtown office buildings, the janitors organized acts of civil disobedience.⁴⁵ Mass arrests would get into the news and the charges of labor leaders would be republished in the daily papers and on the seven o'clock news.⁴⁶

Along with the three other Latino legislators and a number of other elected officials, I was invited to join in the most high-profile of these protests. "These men and women need to see someone like them, someone on the inside, standing up against the abuse. They don't think anyone cares," said the organizer as he pushed for my participation over the phone.

All told, a half-dozen local and state elected officials committed to participate. The day of the event, I was the only politician—Latino or otherwise—who showed up. After my arrest for civil disobedience, I was handcuffed to the president of the local labor council and marched to the holding vehicle.

"First time?" the crusty old Sicilian asked me.

"Yes," was all I could muster amid the glare of the television cameras. I must have looked dazed, I thought, as I continued reciting the prayer to St. Francis that my parish priest had given to me.

The old man smiled at me. "It all gets easy after we get into the paddy

42. See Cindy Rodriguez, *Activists Encouraged by Turnout of Latinos*, BOSTON GLOBE, Nov. 9, 2002, at B1 (highlighting the results of an election that coincided with a proposition to eliminate bilingual education).

43. See *id.* (noting that the author had previously served as a state representative).

44. See Kimberly Blanton & Douglas Belkin, *Tenants Ask 18 Tremont Owner to Fire Unicco, Move Adds to Support For Striking Janitors*, BOSTON GLOBE, Oct. 11, 2002, at E1 (explaining that a total of fourteen people were arrested for unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace during a janitors' strike).

45. See *id.* (showing that the janitors' union was also lobbying tenants of buildings that employed the Hispanic cleaning crews).

46. See *id.* (quoting a cleaning company representative as accusing the union of "trying to make it look as if the streets are full of striking janitors").

wagon.” His words were sage, if a little politically incorrect.

Why did this strike mean so much to me? I had never been in a union. Whatever the reason, it seemed to have something to do with why I held up the entire state budget the next year—2003—in order to override the “Unz” statewide ballot initiative that made two-language immersion programs illegal. English was my first language, and bilingual education never part of my own education. And maybe, too, it was connected to my challenge of an annoyed Speaker of the House at the end of an all-night budget debate to retain funds for citizenship assistance classes; and connected, too, to my strategy to trick the Republicans on a procedural move to support in-state tuition for undocumented children?

Why do these things? Why spend political capital, if I was born here and am as American as all my mystified colleagues? And why were my Latino colleagues always rolling their eyes at me? “Do we really have to do this now?” one colleague would always ask when I filed another bill to help the “cause.”

The answer is obvious, I believe, if not easy: each of these was a choice to reside on the outside.

I could ask, as well, why I had defied the demographic inevitability of third generation Americans—the thing we call the Melting Pot. I spoke Spanish where few others of my generation still did. I had previously lived in Mexico and travelled regularly to Cuba. I had reached back to a heritage, and to peoples from a foreign past, when so many in my generation looked only forward.

I suppose I could just as easily have asked why was I the one who always sat on the swing with my Abuela Elena, asking her for another story.

B. The Essence of “Outside”

Does “outsider” status allow us to posit something about our political and procedural preferences when we get inside? This question is of *particular* importance for many of us on the outside. We outsiders are presented with the conundrum of our first “outsider” president who, in his everyday acts, governs from the inside.

Current events lead us to ask whether we can expect an outsider to act differently than those who preceded him: to ask whether we can look at those gone from outside to inside in this new federal administration, and hold them to this different, higher standard.

First, we must ask *why* one would want to assume the mantle of “outsider” status when it is easier to be on the inside? This question confronts those—particularly white Latinos like me—whose outsider status is tied to the “fuzzy” category of Latino and not also tied to race. For these

men and women, an outsider identity is not always assumed, and may mean giving up opportunity on the inside. For some of us, that willingness to own up and identify is a conscious choice.

A response invokes the life experiences of each person, with the answer as subjective as Jill seeing white where I saw brown. My own strong heritage choice was tied inextricably to my other “outsider” status as a gay man. While in college, as an activist for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (“LGBT”) equality, I led the college gay group, engaged in politics, and formed social networks that incubated young activists. I started a “direct action” group that “integrated” heterosexual bars and dance clubs. Years later, as a legislator, I lobbied successfully to secure marriage for gay couples in Massachusetts. And I have always pushed my colleagues—in whatever forum—to do more.

Strong identification with my ethnic heritage was not connected to my sexual orientation per se, but instead, analogized easily to the social construction of the biological difference into an outsider status. I was quite familiar with what being an outsider meant from my Grandmother Elena’s stories back in my Cuban neighborhood in Tampa. It seemed natural to own and manage this inherited Latino outsider status as I had learned to manage the gay one.

C. Rabbit Holes

New York, New York. 2010. This whole debate treads dangerously close to falling headfirst into the madness of Alice’s rabbit hole. A socially constructed “Other” twice-over, I hear the question of heritage and orientation, each with its own category—each category fraught with unstable assumptions. Can I find home within my Latino culture as a gay man? Does being gay allow my Latino heritage—the generations of migrations, language, tastes and intolerance—to matter in my gay social networks and gay-focused political and cultural advocacy? Can I take on these identities—that is, be an “outsider”—as I work on the inside?

I confess to hating these questions and not wanting to wait around for their answers. Perhaps it is because, for those insiders invoking the rhetoric of results, these outsider statuses are seen as lodestones. *The perception from the outside in America is this: it is always easier to be on the inside.*

Perhaps it is because, for those outsiders, their preference for purity of purpose outweighs their interest or abilities to engage in positive change. *The perception from the inside in America is this: it is always easier to be on the outside.*

What I mean is, simply, that too many (both insiders and outsiders) prefer explanations and inaction to engagement. It is always easier to act

like an insider when you are inside, and to act like an outsider when you are outside. I hear the eternal complaint from the lips of my Latino legislative colleague: “do we really have to do this now?” Translated: “wouldn’t it be easier not to make waves now that we’re on the inside?” Same with gay colleagues. Same with other outsider colleagues.

To the larger question at hand: does outsider status imbue a responsibility on an “outsider” Administration—like President Obama’s in Washington, D.C.—to act differently than a traditional insider administration? The answer is an unambiguous “yes.” But there is more to the answer. The nature of humankind is, for our friends now on the inside, to push less forcefully than they would advocate for on the outside. With hopes riding high for the Obama Administration, it is unsurprising that outsiders are disappointed. It is also unsurprising that, despite the raft of initial disappointments, the outsiders-gone-inside profess the need for more time and more capital to deliver: *the awful responsibility of their raison d’etre*.

We outsiders are impatient for a different set of politics and outcomes that are more reflective of outsiders’ interests. There is an importance to this impatience—not one based on how long we have waited—but based on how this Administration came to power, with the assumed narrative of the outsider. It is a narrative whose power inheres in its authenticity. It is the same authenticity we find in our heritage—however unusual or usual, however clipped or flowing, however glorious or sad. *This authenticity is the reason why, when our President’s eloquence lifts me to the lofty heights of aspiration, that it is my grandmother Elena I see.*

Because logic and language follow the rules of the insiders, outsiders often choose to speak in metaphor. Adopting this strategy, I invoke one of the greatest of historical tragedies—the Spanish Inquisition—as metaphor for these travails. The Inquisition’s stated mission was to eradicate heresy among *conversos*—converted Jews who were the quintessential outsiders in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain.⁴⁷ In a nation where a habit or a trait associated with being a *converso* could result in prosecution by the Inquisition, Spaniards were careful to cultivate a visible persona that was anti-*converso*.⁴⁸ *Conversos* cooked with olive oil; nobles cooked with lard. *Conversos* valued formal education; nobles avoided too much education and never admitted to reading too much.

47. See CHURCH AND STATE IN THE MODERN AGE 119 (J.F. Maclear ed., 1995) (noting the reinstatement of the Spanish Inquisition following its abolition by Joseph Bonaparte in 1808).

48. See DAVID M. GITLITZ, *CONVERSOS AND THE SPANISH INQUISITION*, <http://www.pbs.org/inquisition/pdf/ConversosandtheSpanishInquisition.pdf> (last visited Oct. 5, 2010) (discussing the history of and reasons for Jewish people converting to Catholicism in Spain during the Inquisition).

Miguel de Cervantes saw backwardness in these nobles of Golden Age Spain.⁴⁹ Their love of the picaresque was not quaint to him, but instead, a sad admission to their limitations—that is, to Spain’s limitations—resulting from the persecution of the outsider *conversos*. For Cervantes, there was always a sense of being outside, even as he wrote squarely from within the structures of social power and privilege inside:

Algarrobo: Can you read, Humillos?

Humillos: No, of course not. Nor can it be proved that in all my lineage there has been anyone of so little judgment as to learn those chimeras that lead men to the stake and women to the brothel.⁵⁰

A wry smile from a reader is Cervantes’ victory. His lesson for us today might be a similar, slyly-worded acknowledgement: it doesn’t matter if it’s an outsider or an insider who governs. From the outside, it all looks like the Inquisition.

At a time when our wars in the Middle East rage on, when immigrants languish in wait of meaningful reform, and gay men and women continue to be denied the basic rights of marriage and employment non-discrimination, does it matter that we have an outsider on the inside of the White House? Not yet. Who is on the inside does not matter. Nor do their words, their color, their ethnicity, or ideas. What matters is their willingness to take up the mantle of outsider and start the change we imagined when we were all still standing outside, together.

49. AMÉRICO CASTRO, *THE STRUCTURE OF SPANISH HISTORY* 638 (Edmund L. King trans., 1954).

50. *Id.*