

What We Mean When We Say Hello

Last week I wrote about [conversation starters](#) that follow “Hello” and “How do you do.” Many dozens of you have written in and generously included your comments and interpretations of what you think people actually mean when they say something like “Where do you live?” or “Where are you from?”

Here is what you’ve said so far:

The most popular suggestion is some version of “**Where do you live?**” But as you describe, you are really after an answer offering some social-economic-cultural hints about a person’s life.

You say that the geography of where you live in town tells so much about who you are: Are you rich or poor, artsy or sporty, are you there for schools or for the new urban measure of “walkability?”



Chicago neighborhood map, from [SeanParnell](#)

Those of you from the biggest cities of DC, NY, Boston, Chicago, SF, LA, and Houston often said the more granular the answer, the better. One of you from Boston writes:

For instance, in Cambridge and Somerville, people will often give where they live by their

nearest square or subway station: Davis, Porter, Harvard, Central, Kendall, Union, Ball, etc.

From Chicago: Identity is defined in layers. First, whether you're from the north or south side: the great, indelible divide. Secondly, what neighborhood you live in. There are so many gradations-- "near north side", "far south side", "south loop" -- but the orientation is always north or south.

Those of you from a surprising number of mid-size cities write that your version of “Where do you live?” is actually “**Where did you go to high school?**” All these places weighed in: Louisville, New Orleans, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Baltimore, and the island of Oahu.

From New Orleans: In New Orleans, the most common orientation question on meeting someone is probably "Where'd you go to school?" That means high school (for everyone... no doctor would think you were asking about med school). This nails down neighborhood and also social class to some extent since the answer could be a public, private or parochial (Catholic) school.

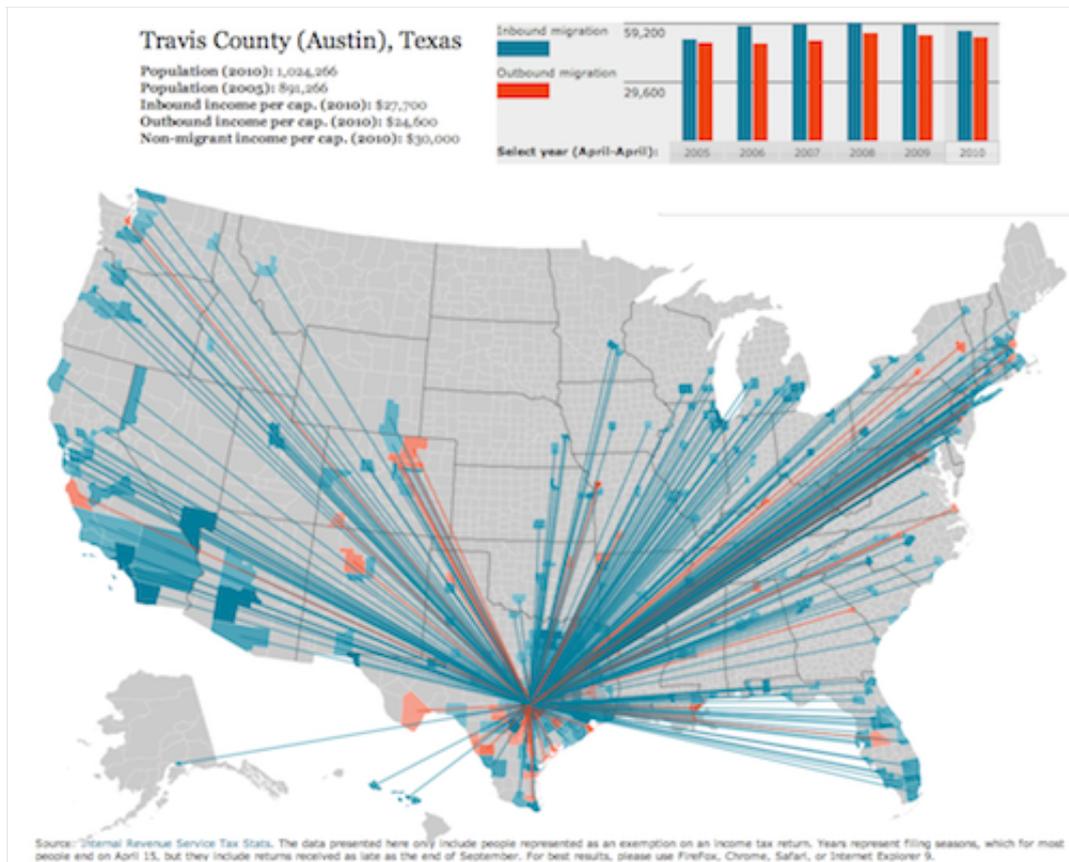
From Baltimore: Baltimoreans always ask "Where did you go to school?" and it ALWAYS means, "Where did you go to high school?" Baltimore is a working class town, and college was not an aspiration for folks; your identity, character, life's trajectory was defined in toto by the place you went to high school.

Several of you from smaller towns and rural areas say that your version of “Where do you live?” is “**Where do you go to church?**” These from Greenville SC, from rural Idaho, and VA, and I’ve seen it reported elsewhere from rural Maine and Kentucky. Interestingly, Chicago also makes this list. And in Chicago, you look for very thinly-sliced answers to the question “What’s your parish?”

Two Chicagoans writes that “parish” is the word to use, and everyone, even non-Catholics get this social parlance:

When I attended.. Loyola University Chicago, I often heard a local spin on the question "What neighborhood are you from?" which came out as "What's your parish?" Even the Chicagoans who were not Catholic usually knew the answer, and the answer served as a social marker for everything from your baseball team to your likely politics, to your geographical desirability as a candidate for a movie on Friday night at a school where so many students - in those days - were commuters.

And another echoes: "What parish did you grow up in?" Even non Catholics will answer St. Mathias, but we weren't Catholic.



Migration patterns in and out of Austin, from [GayInTexas](http://GayInTexas.com)

A different follow-up question comes from cities with lots of transplants or a transient population: **“Where are you from?”** Before you read on, take a guess yourself where you hear this question....

Yup: Seattle, Madison, Austin, Atlanta, the entire state of Florida, LA, SF, Houston, and a few more you perhaps didn’t guess – Corvallis OR and Danville CA. Here are your comments:

Here in Austin, a common follow up to "Hello" and "Nice to meet you" is "So what brought you to Austin?"

Down here in Florida you might actually expect the question to be, “Where are you from up north?”

Alaska and Hawaii ask this question with a twist.

From Alaska (where, we heard when there, some people have histories they are reluctant to divulge): The Alaska variant is, "How long have you lived here?" Bonus points if you've lived "off the road-system."

From Hawaii: The southern part of the Big Island of Hawaii is reputed to home many people in the federal witness protection program. During my honeymoon there I asked a guy selling coffee at the Southernmost Espresso Stand in the US how he ended up there. I got the most

cleverly evasive response I've ever received to that question.

And going international, expats everywhere get the question, "Where are you from?" When we lived in China, I got so tired of this question from shopgirls that I would start making them guess, saying "Where do you think I'm from?" Surprisingly but invariably, their answers were always France, Scandinavia, Germany, Australia, England, Canada.. and they almost never got around to the US.

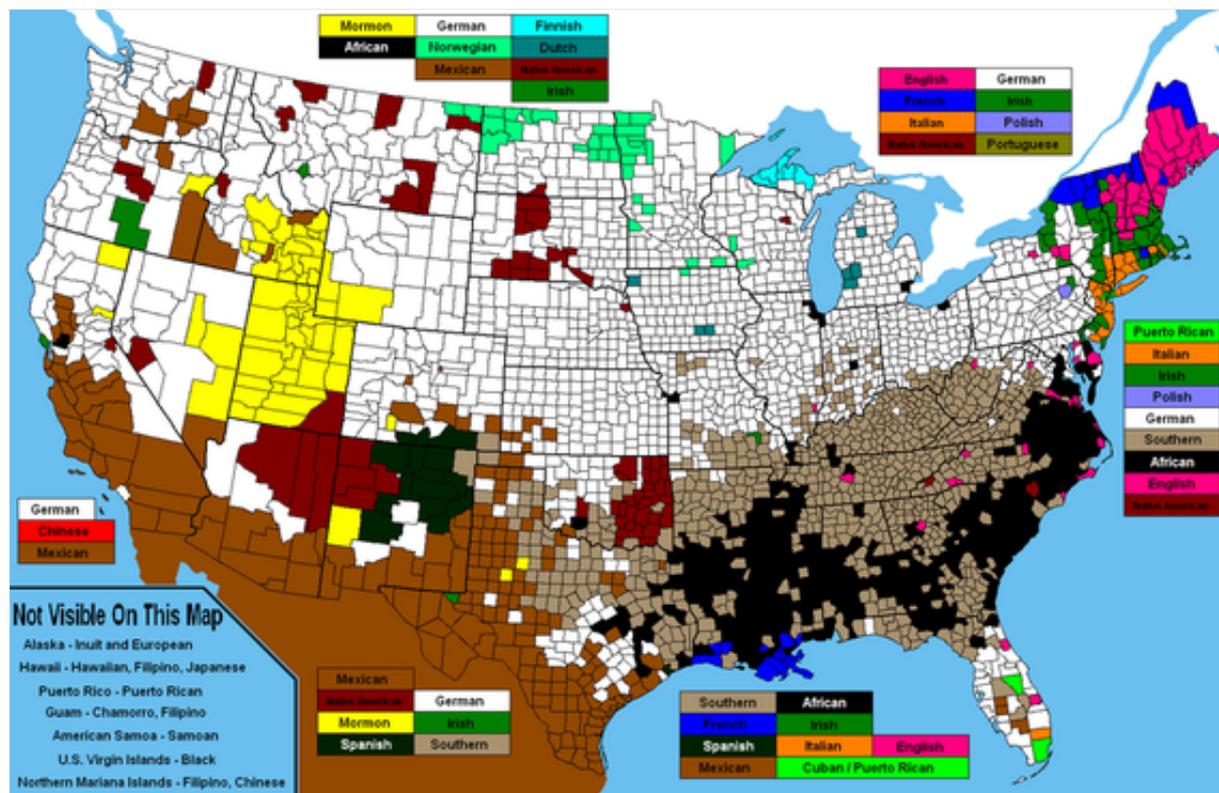
I was expecting many more responses of the "**Where do you work?**" variety. But not so! While it remains strong in DC (I can attest to that personally) and NY and also from one writer from Anaheim, some of you report this question this question is shrinking in popularity, and offer a few reasons why this is the case:

From a baby boomer formerly in Denver: I'm originally from Denver, where "What do you do?" and "Boy, those Broncos, they sure [fill in the blank based on how they're doing]" are used in about equal measure for people my age (I'm 46). It seems like Millennials ask "What do you do?" less, perhaps because many of them are still trying to figure that out.

From a Gen X'er in LA: asking what someone does for work seems too judgmental.

And even where the question remains popular, it has taken on a twist—going for the granular information.

From DC, with analogous versions in NY: in DC, the question is often more specific: So, are you a veteran of Rep/Sen X's office too?



American ancestry patterns, from [Wikimedia](#)

Finally, a number of you offer this: **“What are you?”** Talk about blunt! For those of us unfamiliar, this is a request for ethnic or genealogical information. It may have lost some of its popularity over time.

From Philly: I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, graduating from high school in 1980. When I was a kid, it seemed the first question you'd ask someone you first met was "What are you?" By this one meant are you "Irish", "Italian", "Polish", etc. The most common answer was either Irish or Italian, with Polish, German, and a few others being common enough as well.

And Boston: The one that made me cringe the most was when I lived in Boston. The first question after meeting someone always seemed to be, "What are you?" And by that they meant, Irish, Italian, or some other ethnicity (that they probably couldn't deduce from my then last name).

From Canada, an area with strong Scots populations: I am a Canadian who grew up in a small place. The island has a large population of Scots, with lots of MacNeil's, MacDonald's, etc. etc. But even for those who do not belong to a large Scottish family, the expression "What's your father's name" is commonly used.

From central WI: When I was growing up, the most common follow-up was “What are you?” by which was meant “What is your nationality?”

*And a clarification from New Orleans that “**Who’s your mama?**” is a real question: That’s simply N.O. patois for “Who are your people?” (don’t know why only mom’s side counts).*

Finally, there is a **grab-bag** category of questions, which seem to be driven by local obsessions.

*From LA: The opener, “**How did you get here**” meaning surface streets or freeway? And another LA resident adds, I also ask “Where did you park?” parking is so difficult or expensive here, that I am perfectly serious and sincere when I ask it.*

*From CO: In Colorado, it’s “**Where do you ski? (hike/mountain bike/fish)?**” And it’s never asked after noon on Friday because everybody is already en route.*

*From the Bay area: “**What will we be eating?/what smells great?/what did you bring?**” (Long conversation follows about similar things eaten)*

And from Houston, a comment that shows language change over time, reflecting a change in the town itself: I moved to Houston (which is where I live now) in 1980. At that point, nobody was from Houston. So the usual follow-up questions was “Where are you from?” and then “What brought you here?”. Over time, this has evolved into one of two questions (still in Houston) “What do you do?” and “Where do you live?”

*And from NY and DC, (not really an obsession): “**How do you know the host?**”*

Finally, from one sensitive reader, whom we should all be so lucky to run into one day: “**So, what’s your story?**”

I have found it to be a versatile and effective utterance. Probing enough to elicit some interesting responses, but not so specific as to seem overly invasive. It allows the respondent to adjust a reply to their level of comfort, to project an answer of really any form they want, describing any aspect of themselves with a higher degree of truth (or, at least, externally maintained truth) that they feel is essential to their... well, story. An additional perk is its leveraging of the narrative structure, through which we humans often frame most of life's events. Bonus points for uniqueness too.

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