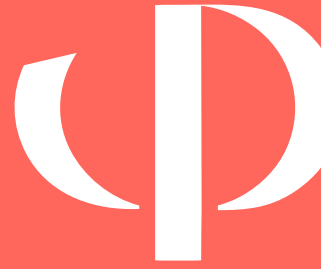


# Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy



FALL 2024

VOLUME 24 | NUMBER 1

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APA STUDIES ON

# Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

LORI GALLEGOS, EDITOR

VOLUME 24 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2024

## FROM THE EDITOR

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TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

By now, you are likely to have heard—and perhaps puzzled over—the term “Latinx.” This is the term that is currently used in US academia, at least, for referring to Latin American-descended people living in the US. It includes both those who were born outside of the US and those whose families have lived in the US for generations. The term, however, has generated significant backlash. Indeed, several Republican lawmakers have proposed or passed legislation that would ban the use of “Latinx” in official state documents.

This issue of *APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* brings together a group of philosophers to untangle (or, further entangle, but in a systematic way) some of the issues surrounding “Latinx.” Although people in Latinx Studies and popular media have written about the topic, I wanted to see how the ideas would take shape when a group of philosophers apply their skills, methods, and experiences to the task. The authors in this issue do not disappoint.

The first essay, written by José Jorge Mendoza, is called “What’s the Trouble with ‘Latinx’? A Qualified Defense of a Vilified Term.” Mendoza describes three major objections to the use of the term “Latinx” and suggests ways in which a proponent of “Latinx” might respond to each of the objections. In doing so, Mendoza hopes to show that, for the moment, “Latinx” is the best possible term to use to refer broadly to the Latin American community in places like the US.

In the next essay, “The History and Hope of Labeling Yourself,” author G. M. Trujillo, Jr. draws from his own uncomfortable experience with labels, highlighting the myriad stakes and complexities involved in labeling oneself. The essay offers a rough history of previously used terms, and it examines the motivations for the use of those terms. Trujillo, Jr. proposes that “Latine” is more inclusive, works in both Spanish and English, and continues the process of finding ways to label yourself in a language that your soul doesn’t speak.

The issue concludes with Alejandro Arango and Adam Burgos’s essay, “No Latinx without Afro-Latinx: A Desideratum for Accounts of Latinidad.” The authors begin by noting that the concept of Latinidad has a pernicious,

exclusionary history. They argue that in order to be reflective of those whom it purports to describe, the term “Latinx” must be plastic enough to encompass the many internal differences, and even antagonisms, between its different constituent parts. Arango and Burgos propose that there is no adequate conception of Latinx without an attendant conception of Afro-Latinx. They claim that a certain *African-descendedness* is constitutive of Latinidad in multiple registers, including history, cultural practices, and social identificatory processes.

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

*APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* is accepting contributions for the Spring 2025 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on that topic or on any topic related to Hispanic/Latinx thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as *meditaciones*, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

### ARTICLES

All submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All essay submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All articles undergo anonymous review.

### BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.

### DEADLINES

The deadline for the spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. The deadline for the fall issue is May 1. Authors should expect a decision by June 15. Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions electronically to the editor, Lori Gallegos, at [LoriGallegos@txstate.edu](mailto:LoriGallegos@txstate.edu), Department of Philosophy, Comal Building 102, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

### FORMATTING GUIDELINES

The *APA Studies* adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers,

headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (--). Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90. See Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?” *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

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## ARTICLES

### *What’s The Trouble With “Latinx”? A Qualified Defense of a Vilified Term*

José Jorge Mendoza  
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In March of 2023, *ABC News* ran an article with an attention-grabbing sub-headline: “One poll shows only 4% of U.S. Latinos use the non-binary term, Latinx.”<sup>1</sup> If one were paying close attention, however, they would have already known that three years prior the *Pew Research Center* had released a report headlined by a similar finding: “About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It.”<sup>2</sup> Even the year before that, Ross Douthat had accused Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren of being as clueless as Donald Trump when it came to engaging with the Latin American community. What evidence did Douthat offer to defend such a serious accusation? It was Warren’s use of the term “Latinx” on her campaign trail and thereby “describing Latinos with a term that few would use themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

For those not closely following these debates, this might all come as a surprise. After all, for over a decade now the term “Latinx” has been the most often used term by US academics, politicians, marketers, and the media to refer to peoples of Latin American—and sometimes even Iberian—descent.<sup>4</sup> What is even more interesting is that, at a time when the US is as politically polarized as it has ever been, one of the few areas of common political agreement seems to be with respect to a shared opposition to the term “Latinx.”<sup>5</sup> For those on the political right, the term “Latinx” is just another example of “woke” politics gone amok. For those on the political left, “Latinx” is a term imposed on the Latin American community by outsiders and furthermore it is a term that continues to display an undue preference for European ancestry at the expense of African, Asian, and Indigenous heritage.<sup>6</sup> Even political moderates are upset with this term. They see it as yet another political litmus test that undermines “sensible” (i.e., non-radical) politicians and thereby only helps to fuel the political polarization that is paralyzing US politics today.<sup>7</sup>

It therefore seems that finding reasons to oppose, or even hate, the term “Latinx” is not hard. And given the amount of animosity and anxiety generated by this term, perhaps we would be better off without it, and we should move on to a less controversial term (e.g., “Latino/a,” “Latíné” or “Hispanic”). In this essay, however, I want to do something

risky and provide a qualified defense of “Latinx.” I will start by looking at what I take to be the three fundamental criticisms of “Latinx.” These criticisms are its grammatical inaccuracy, its susceptibility to the domination objection, and its lack of respect for the Latin American community. What I hope to show in this essay is that, even though it is far from perfect, in places like the US, “Latinx” might be the best term we have to refer to the Latin American community.

## 1. GRAMMATICAL INACCURACIES AND LINGUISTIC DISRUPTIONS

When spoken, “Latinx” sounds like neither normal English nor conversational Spanish, and it looks like what it is, a word designed for ideological purposes rather than for felicity in speech. If you are deep inside progressive discourse, you will immediately understand those purposes—“dismantling the default masculine” of romance languages, centering gender neutrality or nonbinariness in place of a cisgender heteronormativity.<sup>8</sup>

The passage above comes from the political analyst and *New York Times* columnist, Ross Douthat. It is a standard criticism that has been leveled against the use of “Latinx” by political conservatives. It charges the term with being both grammatically inaccurate and ideologically driven. In this section I want to examine the first part of this criticism and suggest ways in which a proponent of “Latinx” might respond. The conclusion this section comes to is that “Latinx” is not grammatically inaccurate, at least not in contemporary US English usage, and to the extent that it defies conventional linguistic norms, it does so for the sake of disrupting established patterns of linguistic oppression.

There is some truth to Douthat’s criticism; the word “Latinx” is not a standard one in either Spanish or English. Its construction also does not seem to follow the conventional norms of either language. This, however, should be taken as an opening to a longer conversation not the final word. A proponent of “Latinx” can and should remind their critics that languages are not fixed or static. They are alive and constantly evolving, generating new words, new phrases and new conventions. This is something we are all familiar with about languages, and it’s the reason why some of our current words, phrases, or linguistic conventions would seem absurd to an earlier generation of speakers or even to contemporary speakers in different contexts. To be fair to Douthat, he is not actually confused about this point. He is more concerned about the second part of his criticism, the ideology part, but before moving on to that I want to make sure we have adequately dealt with the worry of grammatical inaccuracy.

As Douthat himself recognizes, the use of “Latinx” is part of a growing movement in the US to make language, specifically English, more gender inclusive and less oppressive overall. This to me seems like a worthy goal, but let us bracket for the moment whether or not it is a good thing. The question to consider first is whether, despite its potential for social justice, “Latinx” is a comprehensible English term. There are some strong reasons for thinking

that it is. To begin with, the term “Latinx” already appears in the Merriam-Webster English dictionary. It has also been in public usage for well over a decade and there is not mass confusion about what the term is supposed to denote. This doesn’t mean there are not people who would prefer a different term or that there is not a heated debate about who counts as an authentic member. There is all of this and more. But the point is that no US English speaker is befuddled by what “Latinx” is supposed to mean any more than they are befuddled by a term like “Hispanic.” If there is a problem with “Latinx,” grammatical inaccuracy in contemporary US English usage is not it.

If “Latinx” suffers from grammatical inaccuracy, it would probably have to do with its use in Spanish or, more specifically, the worry that it masquerades as an authentic Spanish term, when it is far from proper Spanish. This line of criticism is strong, especially since “Latinx” is hardly, if ever, used by Spanish speakers nor did the term arise in a wholly Spanish-speaking context. Instead, it is a kind of hybrid term—a term that blends a Spanish word with some contemporary US English conventions.

Here, however, we would do well to distinguish between failed uses of language and linguistic disruptions that aim to combat oppression. Failed uses of language and linguistic disruptions are similar in that they both discombobulate or cause discomfort in the intended audience. They differ, however, in that the discombobulation in the former case is the result of the intended message not coming through. In the latter case, the message comes through, but the discomfort is the result of the audience being made aware of previously hidden forms of linguistic oppression that they perhaps would have rather kept submerged. Linguistic disruptions, unlike failed uses of language, should therefore not be quickly dismissed. Take, as an example, the work of theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, and specifically her defense of Spanglish against charges of grammatical inaccuracy:

For a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but the create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español ni ingles, but both.<sup>9</sup>

As Douthat himself concedes in his criticism above, “Latinx” is not pretending to pass itself off as a neutral term. It was designed with the stated intention of dismantling the cisgender heteronormativity of language, but it also tried to do much more than that. The use of the “x” is also supposed to be a nod to both the Black and Indigenous ancestry of the Latin American community—an ancestry that is often covered over or forgotten. “Latinx” does this because the “x” was earlier adopted as a last name by some in the US Black power movement (e.g., Malcom X) and it also became common practice within the Chicano movement to replace the “ch” in Spanish words with an “x.” This is because phonetically the “x” in Nahuatl makes the “ch” sound. So as a way of recognizing and showing respect to their Indigenous roots, some within the Chicano

movement began replacing the “ch” with an “x” (e.g., Xicano). So, to simplistically dismiss “Latinx” as being grammatically inaccurate because it discombobulates or causes discomfort in the intended audience misses the deeper linguistic disruption “Latinx” is performing. “Latinx” thumbs its nose at proper Castilian Spanish not because its users don’t understand basic grammar, but for the sake of both gender equality and a recognition of Latin America’s Black and Indigenous ancestry.<sup>10</sup>

Now, whether “Latinx” accomplishes this overly ambitious task is another matter, which we will consider in more depth in the following sections. For our purposes in this section, it seems that “Latinx” has a convincing response to the charge of grammatical inaccuracy. Its response to this charge is similar to Anzaldúa’s defense of Spanglish. So long as we restrict ourselves to places like the US, “Latinx” does not seem to have a problem of grammatical accuracy. It is both a part of contemporary US English, and it serves as a laudable linguistic disruption that takes advantage of the clashing of Spanish and English in places like the US.

## 2. THE ONTOLOGY OF THE DOMINATION OBJECTION

The concepts of Latinx and Hispanic . . . center a common European heritage. . . . Both Latinx (or any of its variants) and Hispanic take on different meanings in different locations and within various groups throughout the U.S. But many whose identities may fall under these umbrella terms openly question whether they should cancel the concepts of Latinx and Hispanic communities that center a centuries-old, European project of conquest and empire.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of “Latinx” as a linguistic disruption is useful in responding to the charge of grammatical inaccuracy, but it leaves it open to other lines of criticism. One of these lines is articulated by Adriana Maestas above. This line of criticism, which we can call the domination objection, suggests that terms like “Latinx” and “Hispanic” favor the dominant race or ethnicity in Latin America (i.e., Europeans) while ignoring or disavowing the dominated races or ethnicities (i.e., non-Europeans). According to this line of criticism, even with its supposed nod toward more inclusivity, “Latinx” is irredeemably Eurocentric and therefore a tool for perpetuating ongoing relationships of domination. If correct, this criticism is devastating. It takes what should have been a strength of “Latinx” (i.e., its ability to linguistically disrupt relationships of oppression) and turns it back on itself. If “Latinx’s” ability to disrupt Eurocentrism was supposed to both differentiate it from other similar terms (e.g., “Hispanic”) and was key to circumventing the charge of grammatical inaccuracy, what happens if it is not any better than traditional terms like “Hispanic”? Perhaps this means we need to quit using “Latinx,” as Maestas suggests, and begin using terms that center historically dominated groups (e.g., Chicano)?

Is there anything a proponent of “Latinx” can say in response? Perhaps the first thing a proponent should do is point out that this criticism applies to terms other than

"Latinx." Presumably, this criticism should apply *mutatis mutandis* to terms such as "Hispanic," "Latino," and "Latino/a." This criticism therefore seems to have less to do with the choice of terminology, and more to do with something else. I submit that this something else is the ontology undergirding what Maestas calls "umbrella" terms. What actually motivates the domination objection is the worry that relationships of domination get covered over by "umbrella" terms. These terms give off the mistaken impression that there is a unified and clearly defined social group undergirding them. For critics, there is no such group. Instead, what we find is a collection of oppositional groups whose condition of domination would be better understood, and correctly diagnosed, if we did not try to lump them all together into one homogenous group. In covering over these important group differences, critics charge terms like "Latinx" and "Hispanic" with presenting an inaccurate view of reality that undermines projects of liberation.

If this is the case—if the domination objection is, at bottom, an objection based on ontology—then what are the different ontological positions one can take, and is there one that is friendly to proponents of "Latinx"? Let us start with the position that is least favorable toward "Latinx." This position, Denier Eliminativism, denies that there is a unified and clearly defined social group underlining a term like "Latinx" and suggests that we should eliminate (i.e., cancel) "Latinx" talk because it does not refer to anything real. Instead, by referring to a mythical or nonexistent thing (e.g., *latinidad*) it perpetuates or covers over ongoing relationships of domination.

On the other side of this ontological debate are Truther Conservationists. These folks believe that there is a unified and clearly defined social group undergirding a term like "Latinx," even if they do not believe "Latinx" is the best term to use to refer to this group. These folks might also disagree among themselves about what this group is, is supposed to be, or who gets to count as a member, but they all agree that it exists and that terms like "Latinx" have an extension. They furthermore reject the eliminativist proposal, and instead argue we should, at least in certain circumstances, hold on to terminology that can refer to this group.

Alternatively, there are some who fall in-between. These folks are not deniers, but they are pessimistic about the status of the social group undergirding "Latinx." They believe this social group currently exists, but they doubt it will remain a unified and clearly defined social group for very long. Perhaps the best exemplar of this position is Cristina Beltrán, who argues that the social group undergirding "Latinx" is a recent formation, cobbled together by political and media forces. This same social group, however, is currently under intense pressure to dissolve and will likely do so.<sup>12</sup> A Pessimist therefore believes that, regardless of whether one approves or disapproves of the term "Latinx," there are strong forces already at play that are pulling this social group apart and will likely succeed.

So here is a brief summary of the three ontological positions:

**Denier Eliminativist:** believes that no social group exists to which "Latinx" or any similar term applies, so we ought to dispense with this terminology.

**Truther Conservationist:** believes a social group exists to which "Latinx" or a similar term applies, so we ought to continue using this terminology.

**Pessimist:** concedes that a social group exists to which "Latinx" or a similar term applies, but also believes this terminology is becoming obsolete, since this social group is (or will be) dissolving.

A proponent of "Latinx" can adopt either a Truther Conservationist or a mild Pessimist position, but they cannot be Denier Eliminativists of any stripe. So what case could a proponent of "Latinx" make against Denier Eliminativism? Perhaps the most convincing case begins by noting that as a group, Latin American-descended peoples have and continue to experience discrimination, oppression, and marginalization in places like the US. If this is the case, then it seems that, if we want these forms of group discrimination, oppression, and marginalization recognized and confronted, we need a term with which to refer to this group in places like the US. Unfortunately, there is not enough space in this essay to provide a full defense of the antecedent claim—that Latin American-descended peoples have and continue to experience discrimination, oppression, and marginalization in places like the US. I therefore ask the reader to simply grant the truth of this antecedent claim for the sake of argument. So, assuming that the antecedent claim is true, the Denier Eliminativist seems to be in a weak position, at least in places like the US. It seems that without a term like "Latinx" we have no way to acknowledge, recognize, or use to combat the discrimination, oppression, and marginalization that afflict Latin American-descended peoples, as a group, in places like the US.

Assuming one finds this rebuttal of Denier Eliminativism persuasive, does it entail that the Truther Conservationist position must be correct? Not necessarily. It could be the case that we are caught in a double bind: we neither want to ignore the group-based discrimination, oppression, and marginalization that afflict Latin American descended folks, nor do we want to cover over important divisions and distinctions internal to this group by deploying problematic "umbrella" terms.

To get us out of this potential double bind it might be helpful to divide our terminology into two camps, terms that aim to be general and terms that are more specialized. We can also further divide each of these into those that are higher-order and those that are lower-order. On this parsing of terminology, a proponent of "Latinx" could argue that the kinds of "umbrella" terms that worry folks like Maestas are general terms, but if we think of "Latinx" as a specialized term, it seems that we might be able to avoid the domination objection.

This is because general terms attempt to capture something universal in scope and are meant to be used and comprehensible across time and location. For example,



Miguel de Cervantes and Antonio Banderas are both “Spanish” even though they existed in different times and locations. Similarly, Benito Juárez and Saúl Canelo Álvarez count as “Mexican” despite their respective differences in time and location. The importance we place on these claims might change depending on our time and location, but the changes of venue neither add to nor subtract from the Spanish-ness of Cervantes or Banderas, nor the Mexican-ness of Juárez or Álvarez.

Terms like “Spanish” and “Mexican” are therefore universal terms, but they are lower-order ones in that they can be subsumed under higher-order general terms, such as “Hispanic” or “Latin.” For example, included within a higher-order general term like “Hispanic” we find Spanish folks (i.e., Cervantes and Banderas), Mexican folks (e.g., Juárez and Álvarez), and folks of other Iberian-descended nationalities (e.g., Argentinians and Cubans). One last point about general terms is that both lower-order and higher-order general terms contain groups that can, and often should be, recognized with specialized terms (e.g., Chicano, Nuyorican, Tejano), or by race (e.g., Black, White, Asian, or Indigenous) or ethnicity (e.g., culture, language, or religion).

We can therefore see why higher-order general terms, like “Hispanic” or even “Latin,” lend themselves to the domination objection. These are the sorts of terms that Maestas rightly criticizes as “umbrella” terms. They cover over important divisions and distinctions internal to the group. I submit, however, that if used correctly both lower-order general terms and specialized terms can avoid this objection. By correct usage I mean that they are used strictly as what they are (e.g., nationalities) or in the case of specialized terms they do not get applied beyond their specific boundaries. So what are specialized terms and can “Latinx” be one of these terms?

Unlike general terms, specialized terms are not meant to be used nor are they supposed to be comprehensible across time and location. These terms attempt to capture something very specific and often only at a particular time and place. Paradigm examples of specialized terms in the US include Chicano, Nuyorican, and Tejano. These terms are often used and are comprehensible to people in the US, but they might not travel well outside of this context. It is also the case, however, that there are higher-order but still specialized terms. These are terms like “Latino/a.” They subsume lower-order specialized terms (e.g., Chicanos, Nuyoricans, and Tejanos), but their meaning is not universal enough to travel far beyond its original context, so they are not broad enough to count as general terms. A proponent of “Latinx” can therefore suggest that “Latinx” is one of these higher-order, but specialized, terms and that it is a mistake to think of it as a general term. This means that “Latinx” does not aim to be an “umbrella” term like “Hispanic” or “Latin,” but is also not a lower-order term that is in competition with terms like Chicano, Nuyorican, or Tejano.

Assuming this is a plausible account, where does it leave us? If Denier Eliminativism is wrong and, furthermore, if “Latinx” is conceived, not as a general term, but as a higher-order specialized term, then it seems that “Latinx”

can avoid the domination objection. This, however, comes at a high cost to its proponents. First, the term “Latinx” cannot be expected to travel very far. The term might be comprehensible in places like the contemporary US, and it might prove helpful in recognizing and combating discrimination, oppression, and marginalization in this context, but it’s not clear that it can function or even be comprehensible outside of places like the US. Second, in most cases we ought to defer to lower-order specialized terms—or race and ethnicity—rather than using “Latinx.” Maestas’s worry about terms becoming totalizing should be heeded. It is not just general terms, but also higher-order specialized terms that are at risk of going rogue. So higher-order specialized terms (which includes “Latinx”) ought to be used as sparingly as possible. For some proponents, these qualifications might take away some of “Latinx’s” shine, but they are necessary if the term is to get around the domination objection.

### 3. DISRESPECTING THE REFERENT GROUP

[T]he language that dominates progressivism [“Latinx” being one example] often emerges out of a dialogue among minority activists and academics and well-meaning white liberals, without much engagement with the larger minority population, its assumptions and habits and beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of “Latinx” as a higher-order specialized term might get it around the domination objection, but there is yet another criticism which is not based on either a concern for proper grammar or ontology, but on respect for the referent group. As the passage from Douthat above suggests, even if there are social justice-based reasons for adopting “Latinx,” if the term is disrespectful toward the intended referent group, we have good reason not to use it. Douthat’s criticism therefore raises the following two-part question: When and how is it possible for a term to disrespect the intended referent group, and is “Latinx” guilty of this charge?

To my way of thinking, there are two ways in which a term can disrespect the intended referent group. The first is easy enough. If a term is a slur or in some other way offensive to the referent group (e.g., making fun of the group, its language, or culture), then it is clearly disrespectful and we have good reason not to use it. The second way does not necessarily require that a term be offensive. The term itself could be neutral or even complementary, but if the term is imposed on the group without the group’s consultation or approval, then it is disrespectful. It is disrespectful in that it attacks the group’s sense of self and who they are. It is a form of imperialism.

As far as I can tell, no one is suggesting that the problem with “Latinx” is that it’s a slur. There are some who have taken offense to its grammatical construction, so they feel insulted by the way the term looks, but we have already addressed a version of this objection in section one. So, for these reasons, I will put this first possibility to the side and instead focus on the second way in which “Latinx” might be disrespectful. On this second way, “Latinx” is disrespectful because the elitist and more English-speaking segment of US society has imposed this name

on the less powerful and more Spanish-speaking segment with little or no consultation. Here the polls that show few Latin American-descended peoples in the US use “Latinx” becomes relevant. If “Latinx” is in wide circulation among academics, liberal politicians, and the media, but less than 5 percent of the Latin American community uses the term, then there is strong reason to think that this term has been disrespectfully imposed on the intended referent group, and this is a good enough reason to stop using the term.

It is hard to argue that “Latinx” has gotten much uptake within the Latin American community. But let’s also recall that “Latinx,” if it is to avoid the domination objection, must restrict itself to being a higher-order specialized term. This means that “Latinx” does not require uptake from Latin Americans worldwide, it just needs uptake from a specific group within a particular time and place (e.g., the current US). Even with this caveat in place, polls show that something like less than 5 percent of Latin American-descended peoples in the US use the term. So what can a proponent say in response?

One thing a proponent could do is challenge the validity of these polls, but this strategy is unlikely to succeed. The results of these polls are probably close to accurate. Proponents can, however, say that these polls are misleading in a number of ways. First, they tend to give the mistaken impression that if only 5 percent of the Latin American community use the term “Latinx,” then there is a term that garners the agreement of the other 95 percent. This is far from the case. If one looks deeper into these polls, they will quickly find out that there is no consensus on terminology and no one term whose usage garners a majority. The battle over what to call Latin American-descended people in general and in specific places like the US remains at a stalemate. So when it comes to the title of being the referent group’s consensus choice, no term can claim victory.

Another way in which these polls can be misleading is that they run together general and specialized usage. One reason it has been difficult for the Latin American community to collectively settle on a term is that different terms capture different sets of experiences, and those polled are not often instructed on which set of experiences they want the term in question to capture. For example, in places like the US we find that Mexican-Americans living in California or Texas (i.e., Chicanos or Tejanos) have a different set of experiences than people of Puerto Rican descent living in New York (i.e., Nuyoricans), or Cuban-descended peoples living in Miami. This means that if the person polled has their specific situation in mind (e.g., the Mexican-American experience in California), it should be no surprise that they would reject any term that is broader than a lower-order specialized term (e.g., “Chicano”). This does not tell us what their thoughts would be if what we needed—perhaps to recognize and address a particular brand of US xenophobia—was a higher-order specialized term like “Latino/a.”

In short, these polls do not seem to compare apples to apples. They are not clear about whether the respondents are rejecting “Latinx” as their preferred higher-order

specialized term, if they are rejecting it along with any other higher-order specialized term, or if they are merely expressing their preference for using lower-order specialized terms. This is an important difference, because it’s only in the first case that the Disrespect for the Referent Group objection holds. If people are not using “Latinx” because it is not the kind of low-order specialized term their particular circumstance calls for, they are right to reject it. Yet, it can still be the case that “Latinx” is (or would be) the higher-order specialized term they would prefer when such a term is called for. We can run a similar argument if the respondent is rejecting “Latinx” because their interest is in finding a general term. If the respondents are looking for a term that captures something universal in scope and can be comprehensibly used across time and location, then “Latinx” is not it. But we don’t always need general terms. Sometimes what we need is a higher-order specialized term and, potentially, “Latinx” could be it.

So in order to see if the Disrespect for the Referent Group objection holds, we need to see how “Latinx” fares against other terms when the kind of usage we are looking for is unequivocally a specialized higher-order usage (e.g., “Latino,” “Latino/a,” “Latin@,” and “Latiné”). Unfortunately, no such customized poll exists and even if it did, it is unlikely to produce a clear winner. So, given that no term is likely to gain the consensus of the referent group, are there other reasons to prefer one higher-order specialized term over the others? I think there are, and I think “Latinx” comes out the winner.

Let’s return to the prior criticisms. On grounds of grammatical inaccuracy, “Latinx” turns out to be as good, if not better, than most of the competition. If we look at terms such as “Latino/a” and “Latin@,” they do not necessarily have a leg up on “Latinx” with respect to grammar. Terms like “Latino” and “Latiné” do have an advantage, but they are so inoffensive that they are the most susceptible to the domination objection. “Latinx,” “Latino/a,” and “Latin@” are linguistically disruptive, in a good social justice sort of way, so they here have an advantage over “Latino” and “Latiné.” But “Latinx” has an advantage over all of them in that it is not just concerned with gender inclusivity. It also tries to recognize and represent non-White members of the Latin American community. “Latinx” might do this in a clumsy manner, and we might wish it did a better job, but unlike the other higher-order specialized terms, at least it tries.

### CONCLUSION: THE BEST WE HAVE, FOR NOW

The term “Latinx” generates a lot of anxiety and conflicting emotions. There are some who think we would be better off without the term. Some suggest that the term should be replaced with other, more fitting terms (e.g., “Hispanic,” “Chicano,” “Mexican,” “Latino/a,” or “Latiné”), while others think we ought to quit trying to find a totalizing term altogether. This essay is under no illusion that it can or will resolve all of the problems that bedevil a term like “Latinx.” Hopefully it has at least provided a roadmap of the various criticisms leveled against “Latinx” and put forth a fair, yet strong, case in its favor—even if such a case is ultimately unconvincing. This might also not be the most resounding victory for proponents of “Latinx,” but for the moment it seems that it’s the best we got.

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## The History and Hope of Labeling Yourself

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### 1. NAMING YOURSELF IN A LANGUAGE THAT YOUR SOUL DOESN'T SPEAK: A HISTORY

Sometimes I wish that I didn't have to be philosophical, and I fantasize about moving fluidly through the world. But then I have to do something stupid and mundane, like fill out a doctor's office form or apply for a job, and metaphysical and existential questions beset me. Is your race Black, Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, or White? (Remember, you

are only Native for them if you maintain tribal affiliation.) And if White, are you ethnically Hispanic (whatever that means)? Maybe, as a third-grade teacher once told me, I am basically *White* with a non-White last name. Maybe this question about what I should call myself is not a question with objective answers. Nonetheless, I face it continually, and it doesn't feel resolved. In fact, Latinx and Latine (the current trending terms for Latinos, at least in my interactions), result directly from dissatisfaction with the previous terms. So, what have we tried to call ourselves? (And what has been tried on us?)

"Spanish"? No thank you. This term overdetermines people, gives the false impression that if we went to Spain, that we would be understood or fit in or somehow resonate with the culture. Additionally, the term directly relates to the Spanish, who not only colonized their "New World," but also fought to distinguish themselves from the *criollos*, *mestizos*, and *indios*. That is, they cared to distinguish themselves from people like me, my family, and my friends because, if they could not be born in Spain, at least they wouldn't be all mud-blooded like me.

OK, so "Hispanic"? Maybe. This term denotes a Spanish-ness, a descendent relation. That is undeniable in a genealogical way. But maybe the term just rehashes the same problems as "Spanish," albeit with a bit of conceptual distance. The priority with this term, again, is relating people to the *Spanish* point of origin, even though Hispanics might never have set foot in Spain, learned Spanish, or cared about Spanish customs. Additionally, the term certainly doesn't give much consideration to the cultures of the Americas.

So, then we arrive at "Latino." This one is even more complicated. It does seem to describe all of those affected by the *Spanish* colonization of the Americas. But what about the Brazilians and others affected by Portugal? What about French colonization around the Mississippi River or Haiti or other parts of the Americas? What about Black members of the communities of the Southwest who became *vaqueros* and learned the language, customs, land, and people? Are they not part of the same family with some of the same core issues? What may have started as separate has blended, beautifully.

Critics might think that I'm paying too much attention to too many marginal cases, or that I'm overcomplicating the distinction. But in a culture as large and vibrant as ours, the so-called "exceptions" don't provide a *foil* for the rule; they're the *rule*. We're the exceptional.

"Latino" also bears a mark of contention in the suffix -o. Same as "Chicano." (A term I won't address here for brevity's sake.) -o is a masculine ending in Spanish, and some activists have argued that it underemphasizes the contributions by women to political movements. So, they proposed Chican@ or Latin@, the "@" being an "a" within an "o," an irreducible typographical representation of men and women contributing to a movement together. There's no Cesar Chavez without Dolores Huerta, no Diego Rivera without Frida Kahlo, no Hernán Cortés without Malintzin, hell, no Jesús without La Virgen. We're tied together in



complicated ways, and we need a term that respects this. Ropes get their character and strength from their twists of integrated fibers. And when there are people we have not integrated, we weaken ourselves. The problem with “Latino” is not just that it relegates women. Rather, it points to a deeper problem: not all Latinos are men or women. Some are nonbinary or genderqueer or two spirit or searching for new terms or identities. I consider myself someone born of and fluid in these liminal spaces. I consider my deepest friends those who understand living in these liminal spaces and who refuse to collapse the ambiguity and weirdness of life into convenient categories. In spaces for queers and weirdos and mutts, places for people like me, I’ve learned new words and new ways of being.

Enter “Latinx.” As a *metalero* myself, a metal foo, I can appreciate the edginess and disruptiveness of the “x,” the denial that some value will define you. It looks cool. It’s confrontational. It won’t be passive or easy to bear. But as a speaker of English and Spanish, I’ve heard this term pronounced far too many ways: la-tinks, la-tenks, latin-ecks, latin-uhhh . . . [hesitation]. For all its typographical badassery (like the @), “Latinx” fails in practical oral communication, especially in Spanish. In fact, I’ve seen the term memed on TikTok and Instagram recently. The general lesson of the memes is that you cannot offend Latine people, or not easily. The setup is a video zoomed in on a Latine person and someone off-camera calling them a *frijolero* or something similar, which elicits no reaction stronger than an eyeroll or a sigh. The punchline is that, after being called Latinx, that same, previously cool, Latine person charges at the camera with a balled fist. Like so many jokes, the comedy depends on the delivery. However, also like many jokes, there is at least some truth. The joke expresses a common sentiment among my friends. And I suspect it comes from the tangle of weird feelings that people get when *other people* (from outside the relevant community) tell you (who’s a part of the relevant community) what you need to call yourself if you want to be considered a conscientious person. Sometimes in the Southwestern USA, you’ll hear the phrase “We didn’t cross the border. The border crossed us.” Meaning, we get maligned as *mojados* or border bunnies or whatever. But we were just living our lives, and then some imaginary border changed and made us into villains. Maybe there’s something similar going on with the language here, if it is imposed on people from the outside. And given the ways that language can be policed in off-putting ways, Latinx has unfortunately been weaponized as a tool of gentrification for some people, whatever its origins or intentions. This needn’t be the case. But I know that many people feel it to be so.<sup>1</sup>

But there is also another reason that some people defend Latinx’s -x (the same reason that some prefer Xicano/a/@/x/e): it is reminiscent of Nahuatl phonemes. But even a preference for Nahua or Mexica people, as desirable as it might be to the current total erasure of indigenous roots, does its own damage if it makes it seem like the Nahua were the only people indigenous to the Americas. So, sure, maybe we can tie Xicanx to Nahuatl. But what about the people who are not Nahua, or the people who have complicated social relationships with the conquests of the Nahua Empire?

So, now we have “Latine.” My ultimate suggestion is that we try this one out. I think that this suggestion works especially well in Spanish, a neutral -e being neither a masculine -o nor a feminine -a, but still being a vowel ending. I’ve heard it used fluidly in simple welcomes to events in queer spaces, as when an MC says, “Bienvenidos, chicos, chicas, y chiques.” The new suffix provides a novel linguistic marker for new forms of gender, sexuality, and expression, all while preserving the vowel endings in Spanish and the conventional phonetic sounds. The only hangup here is that in English, it looks like La-tie-n (rhyming with “mine”). Maybe if we make the term “Latiné,” giving an accent to the final e, we can set off typographically the separateness of the final vowel sound, like *The New Yorker’s* diaeresis over repeated vowels with distinct vocalizations (writing “coöperate” or “reëlect” to ensure that we do not say coop-erate or reelect), like Shakespeare or Romantic poets might distinguish “blessèd” from “blessed” to mark a distinct set of syllables. The technologies that are languages adapt to their users and their uses. And as language users change how they see themselves, it makes sense that the language would change too. But it’s also important to stress convenience. Adding special typography might be just inconvenient enough to turn people off of the term.

As a practical and aesthetic decision, I prefer the term Latine to Latinx, Latino, Spanish, or Hispanic. It’s practical in that it works in English and Spanish with very little explanation required. It’s aesthetic in the sense that, to me, it *feels* better than the other terms. But I don’t pretend that I’ll settle any of the deep semantic, metaphysical, or other philosophical issues here. And I think it’d be a mistake to insist on any linguistic purity here, or maybe even that we use one term for all of us, especially if imposed on us from the outside.

Linguistic purity would be a strange thing for philosophers to maintain. But it would be especially hypocritical for Latine philosophers. English represents the colonization done by Great Britain and the United States. Spanish represents the colonization done by Spain. And even the insertion of Xs into Xicanx or similar terms obscures that the Native people of the Americas spoke more than Nahuatl. There is no purity. There is no going back. There was never an ideal age. This is what we got. And we gotta make things work. For my time and effort, I prefer the -e of Latine. And I could see getting people to use it and understand it, even if they had never heard it before.<sup>2</sup>

This, too, is a point that philosophers sometimes neglect. The *logos* is not all that matters, though that is our specialty. It makes sense that we philosophers would defer to logic or precision. But the *ethos* and *pathos* matter too if we want to win people to our sides. And in order to get a term to spread, make no mistake: we’ll have to win most people to our side. I should mention, though, I’ve been laughed at for calling myself Latine because those unfamiliar with the term thought I was calling myself Latina, and I guess the juxtaposition of my beard and shoulders and baritone voice made it comedically incongruous. Since the laughs were my friends, it was easy to bear and explain. But I don’t know how I would’ve reacted to strangers with the same reaction to Latine, and I don’t know if I would’ve had the patience

or energy to correct strangers. In fact, among strangers, I'll often resort to whatever term makes me legible to them, usually "Latino." I mention my personal waffling on the term because I think that it shows how messy these things are in practice. And yet, by not correcting people, maybe I'm making it more difficult on queer Latines who need to introduce the term to feel recognized, especially those without pale skin, masculine features, and a negligible accent like me that can make me more sympathetic to otherwise unsympathetic people.

And that's exactly the bind of creating new language and insisting on its use: you have to decide whether the indignity of being called something that doesn't represent you is worse than the epistemic and social strain of educating people who don't know what they don't know (or don't care). Since my people know a history of genocide, lynching, forced assimilation, and oppression, we can certainly acknowledge that the harms of language and ideas are far different than those of chains and nooses. But the assimilation and oppression also tell us that dehumanizing, disrespecting, or disregarding words and ideas go hand-in-hand with oppression. Worse, the most insidious forms of oppression are when the externalized and physical punishments become internalized and spiritual disciplines, when the words *they* use to describe you displace and delete the words *you* would use for yourself, when the truer concepts and vulnerable realities whimper and wither away. First, they're on your horizon. Then, they're in your homes. Then, you're smothered and dead. Then, you never existed at all.<sup>3</sup>

It's appropriate to grieve not only the history and continuation of oppression, but also the many ways that oppressed people cannot even understand or feel their oppression because they've lost the words and concepts and practices that might contribute to their liberations. So, what can I call myself in a language that my soul doesn't speak? I don't know. But I guess I'll try and retry and remember that these digital squiggles and ink scribbles and pulses of air from mouth to ear are not the only ways to communicate. After all, I can talk with my dog and my land and the stars, and we all seem to understand each other without a literal language.

## 2. USE YOUR WORDS

Something that people often voice to me, in less formal settings, is "Why care about these words or identity politics?" They seem to think that if we fight for *linguistic* reform that we somehow lose focus on *institutional* reform.

In hypothetical cases, I can hypothetically agree. Were the choice between equitable institutions and more accurate and socially conscientious language, the clear choice would be for institutions. And *if* linguistic reinvention ever impeded justice or degraded the lived lives of actual Latines, in that hypothetical world we would have an obligation to stop the linguistic reformation. But no such cases exist now, and I don't think that these critics are right, or really concerned with anything plausible. How uncreative such critics are in imagining the depths of my rage at injustice, as if it weren't an inexhaustible source, one that I couldn't direct toward many targets at once. How uncreative such

critics are to imagine that people who form communities and organize movements can't use the linguistic reform as an important part of advocating for systemic justice. There are reasons why you might see "Latinos for Trump" signs but never "Latinxs for Trump" signs (hopefully). These terms are symbols not only of descriptive problems about the metaphysics of race or ethnicity. These terms are also symbols of *aspirations* that our communities have about who we wish to become and how we would talk and live with each other in an ideally just society.

As implausible as I find these critics, I'll nonetheless share an experience that I always think of when critics bring up such issues. I think it illustrates how language and institutions can come apart; proper language doesn't always indicate respect. I lived in Germany for a year as a Fulbright. Germans, as well as many Western Europeans, were oblivious to their own forms of racism. I heard many casual slurs for various groups—outright slurs for Turkish, Romani, or Black people, veiled slurs like "Asi" (short for "Asozial") for undesirables, literally meaning "antisocial" but loosely meaning uncouth, uncivilized, rude, not-German-enough. And yet, I spoke with many people—including a man who begged at the train station nearest my apartment and with whom I went to lunch on occasions—who felt well in Germany and other Western European nations. Some at the bottom of the social ladder knew that they had a basic social safety net. They knew that petitions for asylum would be heard. They could access education, including university and graduate education, for free (or nearly so). They could access health care, dental care, and prescriptions for reasonable prices. They could rely on infrastructure and governmental agencies. And generally (though history certainly adds caveats in a country like Germany), there was a social agreement that basic resources for living a decent life would be assured, no matter shifts in the political landscape. I could imagine asking a German who just slurred an ethnic group about American politics, and he'd probably call us monsters for the ways our government treats our people.

Whereas in the United States, more than Germany or other Western European countries, people generally don't say slurs, or not in public. Even if they grumble about pronouns or politically correct language, they won't say much in open air. (Speaking comparatively and generally here. Of course, there are exceptions.) And yet, for whatever conscientious language we might have in the United States, or for whatever social pressures we might have in place, the United States is actively hostile toward minorities. Policing is the obvious example. But you could also look at approval and interest rates for loans. You could look at the quality of public schools for minorities. You could look at rates of home ownership. You could look at the demographic numbers of graduates from universities, law schools, medical schools, and graduate schools. You could look at demographic percentages of C-suite executives in Fortune 500 companies. You could look at pretty much anything in the United States and see the disparities. My first two years in college were a painful deprogramming of American propaganda. All my life I'd felt the effects of these things. But it's one thing to be a minority, and it's another to have all the pains catalogued and displayed in front of you.

I can live in three languages—English, Spanish, and German. As such, I could live not only in the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. I could also move to countries such as Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. I could move to countries such as Mexico, Argentina, Chile, or Spain. I could certainly move to other countries with cosmopolitan cultures, where English is the *lingua franca*. But in considering leaving the United States, I face this dilemma: (1) Do I stay here in the United States where I can find small pockets in cities where I can be fluid in the culture but where I also face consistent systemic violence, or (2) Do I move somewhere where the system will facilitate my flourishing as an abstract human but where the particularities of my culture and identity will be misunderstood and I'll constantly feel that I don't belong? Which do you pick? (1) The society where your friends and family are and where you (usually) won't be slurred in public, but where everything is set up against you, or (2) the society where you'll face the most obtuse forms of stereotyping and the most casual use of slurs but where everything will protect your ability to lead a safe and secure life? Generally speaking, consent requires that one could answer in whatever way and not face ill effects; free choice requires the absence of overwhelming negative pressures that force you to one side. Generally speaking, though, my choice to stay in the United States doesn't feel like a choice that I can get right; rather, it feels like a decision that I have to make and then make right.

There are real consequences to the language, though. And here I think especially of my trans and nonbinary homies. They face large rates of being kicked out from their families and being assaulted. And if I, as a simple gesture, can use "Latine" or "Latinx" or whatever term makes them feel more at home in the world, then whatever practical or aesthetic inconvenience I might face pales in comparison to helping them. I only wish that others saw the issue the same way. And if language can give me a weapon to feel better about myself, or make my friends feel better about themselves, then I'll use it. And if language can mobilize a movement or make occasions for conversations about race, gender, sexuality, class, and politics, then I'll use it. And given that this conversation has already done these things in my life, I think that my concern for the labels of Latine people holds up to casual criticisms that many people voice. Language can create a home, so I build a place for myself and my homies. Even if I understand that a single home is not enough to compensate for a community, that a single community doesn't make up a country.

### 3. WHAT WORDS CANNOT DO

I think that we should call ourselves Latine, especially when talking with each other. I think this is relatively important. But I also know that this gesture won't solve many philosophical or existential debates. And maybe that's OK. Let me explain.

There is an important and unassailable way in which I know who I am. I'm the son of Glenn Trujillo and Katrina Gutierrez. I'm the grandson of the Trujillo, Valdez, Lovato, and Quintana families. I'm the product of people who worked industries that emerged from railroads and oil fields. I grew up with the infinite horizon of the Llano Estacado that underlined

the sun and clouds and stars that themselves underlined my family's devotion to the divine. But not the divine of churches, though we certainly attended many Roman Catholic ones. I mean more the divine of *tortillas* and *chiles* and cruising to oldies on the radio. If being Latine is a way of life, I can live it. Moreover, I like living it, and I miss living it whenever I can't.

But I didn't generate myself, and my family members are not the only ones who I interact with. So, there's also a sense in which I don't know who I am. At least not in a demographic way that seems to be important for institutions and people outside of my community. Many just want to get to know you, asking (innocently enough), "Where are you *really* from?" or "What part of you is Mexican again? I'm just not seeing it." I'm not opposed to labels, but no one can decide on one for me, and it's been this way since my beginning. It says "Spanish" in both boxes 7 and 13 of my State of Texas Certification of Vital Record, which asked my father and mother (respectively) to input their *rac*es. It also says "Hispanic" on the same document in boxes 8b and 14b, where Texas asked for more specifics (verbatim: "If yes [of Spanish origin], specify Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, etc."). In most other boxes on legal forms today, I check "White" for race and "Hispanic" for ethnicity. This is a common experience among Latines. If being Latine is having words that describe your origins with precision, I don't know that I'll ever be able to meet that standard. And I don't think that that's an important standard for determining who's Latine.

To better understand who I am, I asked my grandmother Rosa where we were from originally, and she said, "Here." For her, that meant Northeastern New Mexico. That is true for her (and by extension true for me). But I know I also have a great grandmother Adela Weldon of direct Irish descent. As I asked further, no one in my family could answer very definitively, in Spanish or English. But I felt different things from different members when asking—mystery, uncertainty, and regret; pride, shame, and rage. Mystery and uncertainty usually preceded regret. My elders grieved not asking more of their elders to retain the family history. But we also lacked opportunity since my lineage is full of young deaths and departures, and if you know anything of Mexican or Native peoples in the Southwest, we weren't exactly encouraged to maintain our cultures. Genocide, lynching, and other forms of harassment have a way of making people devalue, underemphasize, and (eventually) forget their history. Pride and shame and rage I can only speculate about—family secrets (shame), survival (pride), family remembering being called *mojados* (rage), family fighting those slurs (pride and shame), family always teaching the kids to pronounce their last names with diction and enthusiasm (pride), even if many only spoke Spanglish (shame). I took a DNA test hoping that science might help. Results: 41 percent Iberian, 5.5 percent Irish, 35.3 percent Indigenous American, and the other 18.2 percent from all over the world. No, not much clarification there either. I mean, did I really think that blood quanta would help me when I know what such rules about bloodlines did in North America? Shame. After all, do the labels matter more than knowing how to conjure a feast from beans, *chiles*, *manteca*, flour, and hot water? Pride.

I hope that you don't take this as academic self-indulgence. I hope you take this as me expressing that I'd like very much to know what to call myself. But when people give me available options, I must often guess. Boxes must be checked, after all. However, the black-and-white checkmarks offer only artificial clarity. The monochromaticity of the symbol cannot capture the flushed and vital referent.

There's magic in words. But philosophy has traditionally paid most attention to the locutionary utterances, the naïve realism of words latching onto reality like atomic numbers do to atoms. Only recently in the millennia-long history of philosophy have philosophers started to consider illocutionary and perlocutionary magics, the ways that our words can express speaker intentions and have effects on audiences that go beyond quasi-scientific reference. And while I do think that language matters, I want to emphasize that anyone who prioritizes the locutionary over the illocutionary and perlocutionary isn't a neutral party. Race and ethnicity cannot be reduced to biology, even if it plays a part. Race and ethnicity (and the terms that we use to understand and shape them) also include social, historical, moral, and political components that express where we've come from, where we are now, and where we're headed. They mark boundaries with varying degrees of porosity. They point toward values with varying degrees of realizability.

When using Latino/a/@/x/e, I have all of these things in mind. But I know that one word can mean radically different things in different contexts. Reliance on context doesn't evacuate meaning from terms. It just means that we need to know when we're speaking in restricted domains with formal definitions and logical connectives about academic abstractions. And we need to know when we're not doing this, but instead are speaking to souls and hopes and people outside of scholarly communities who we need to coordinate with. This meta-awareness of the language and what it can and cannot do is what will keep our moral, social, and political expectations in check about what a certain word has done or might do.

It would be nice if I had a magic word that made my problems go away. But I don't think that there will ever be a term that can find my historical origins or undo the forced assimilation. Sometimes histories are destroyed. Sometimes there is only going forward. I don't think that there's a term that will buy me automatic credibility with people I meet. I will be Latine enough for some but not for others, both for kin and strangers. I don't think that there will ever be a term that will matter more than my cultural knowledge and practical experience. Give me orthopraxy over orthodoxy. I don't think that there will be a term for all Latines here and now, much less for who we become later. And yet we need to call ourselves something, or others will make that decision for us.

Words are as helpful as borders—they shift throughout history and get policed on all sides; they get reinforced and crossed, in ways public and clandestine; they get praised and cursed and dismissed as social constructs. Like borders, our words can't be wished away, nor can they have their material effects ignored. Borders are constantly

negotiated. But if we can make pyramids and poetry from mud and beans and corn, I think we can make something of this situation too.

#### NOTES

1. It's also certainly possible that we Latines might be conscientious of race here in the USA or class in Mexico, but that we have much more work to do in terms of combatting misogyny or homophobia. Intersectionality matters. And membership in a minoritized class certainly excuses no one from practicing self-critical and community-focused criticism, which includes scrutinizing why one uses Latinx or not.
2. An anonymous reviewer offered two fantastic suggestions here. First, the reviewer asked about "Latin American," which seems less fraught than the other terms in its political implications and has direct English and Spanish words. And second, the reviewer emphasized their own position of letting people use whatever term they feel best suits them. I addressed these concerns as best I could in the word limit, but they deserve more words.
3. A more comical example might be the use of stereotypes within Latine spaces. This is something I have no idea how to make sense of. I know that for my parents and older generations, context would determine whether it was safe to lean into the boots and big hats, or flannel and Chuck Taylors, or tortillas and beans, or whether you opted for less stereotypical stuff. Even for my generation, Latine kids in high school would separate pretty clearly between the rural kids that dress like *vaqueros* with boots and jeans and straw hats, and the kids who dressed like *cholos* with pressed Dickies and Nike Cortezes and oversized polos or graphic t-shirts, and the kids who wore Doc Marten dress boots, jeans, polos, and baseball caps. When it came down to it, we were all Latine. But we let it show in different ways. I think it's been a big move, then, for millennials in the United States to reclaim traditional motifs such as *nopales*, *luchadores*, *pan dulce*, tortillas, etc., maybe in ways most basically displayed on social media accounts such as We Are Mitú. But I have seen growing dissatisfaction among my zoomer students and their peers on the internet with dismissing all of the traditional motifs as cheesy millennial pandering. Even if the identity remains consistent, the expression shifts and gets negotiated, especially across generations.

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## No Latinx without Afro-Latinx: A Desideratum for Accounts of Latinidad

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to articulate a specific desideratum for any theory of Latinidad, namely, that there is no adequate conception of Latinx without an attendant conception of Afro-Latinx.<sup>1</sup> If the term "Latinx" is going to be retained as a meaningful category of social identity, it is essential that it include Afro-Latinx as a core element. It is essential, first, because to do so is historically and conceptually honest, and second, because this allows Latinidad and Latinx to be understood in their fullness rather than in ways that hide and exclude certain constituent elements.<sup>2</sup> This articulation entails critical genealogical attention to the role of racist, antiblack, and colorist histories within the emergence and construction of Latinidad, up to the present and as an ongoing process.<sup>3</sup> Those histories



have excluded, sidelined, distorted, belittled, dwarfed, and otherwise rendered invisible or insignificant African-descended peoples and cultures and their participation and contributions in and to the construction and development of Latinx identity. In contrast, we seek to show that such excluded realities nevertheless remain defining features of Latinx, and remain so despite the exclusion and partly characterized by it.

In order to be reflective of those whom it purports to describe in the US and elsewhere in the hemisphere, the term Latinx must be plastic enough to encompass the many internal differences, and even antagonisms, between its different constituent parts. Within it, we argue here in particular, it must include its Afro-descended history, which includes not just African-descended people but also a denial of the influences of African-descended culture writ large.

Our central claim here, then, is that a certain *African-descendedness* is constitutive of *Latinidad* in multiple registers, including history, cultural practices, and social identificatory processes despite *Latinidad*'s pernicious exclusionary history. We bring a specific argument to bear on, and with regard to, that pernicious history: we draw and seek to understand an explicit link between Afro-Latinx and *mestizaje*.<sup>4</sup> Briefly, *mestizaje* has historically been one of the most decisive ways in which Afro-Latinidad has been sidelined. Reclaiming and centering Afro-Latinx involves grappling with the role of *mestizo* identity, the ways it's been understood and played out, in erasing it.<sup>5</sup>

## II. CRITICAL GENEALOGY

We are interested here in the historical constitution of present social realities. In describing our process as a critical genealogy, we focus on the ever-evolving historical repertoire of socially meaningful concepts associated with *Latinidad* for certain sets of peoples, as well as the array of actions available for and allowed to them. That is, we are looking for the conditions that gave rise to what has emerged historically around the concepts and identities associated with *Latinidad*, as they developed socially, politically, etc.<sup>6</sup> These are the overarching historical givens that at any particular moment structure action and events, the conditions immanent to historical reality, that are also nonetheless products of antecedent events and actions. We are asking: What is the historical ontology—"not only 'material' objects but also classes, kinds of people, and, indeed, ideas . . . the coming into being of the very possibility of some objects"—that we find within *Latinidad*?<sup>7</sup>

Bernard Harcourt, writing specifically about the importance of *critical genealogy*, advises, "Rather than sorting critical philosophers into these taxonomies [validating, debunking, problematizing, and possibilizing], arguing over the essence of their method, or asking us to take sides, I believe it would behoove us instead to conceive of the different types of genealogy rather as different modalities that we can draw upon in combination or serially, together or at different times, to achieve the objective of critical philosophy, namely to augment and nourish our praxis."<sup>8</sup> Harcourt focuses his conception of genealogy on whether or not it is

useful for action, and whether that action is productive or unproductive.<sup>9</sup> This is alongside the more traditional view of genealogy, which understands it to be doing the work of uncovering, demystifying, or problematizing concepts or objects through analysis of their historical unfolding,<sup>10</sup> or of understanding the development of meanings.<sup>11</sup>

Such a focus on action is important for us because we recognize that it is not only how we understand concepts like Latinx that matter for the material realities and lives experiences of persons, but what we do with those concepts. Our understanding of concepts takes shape, pragmatically speaking in what we do, in our current practices. And since current social practices regarding Latinx and Afro-Latinx are continuously being decided and negotiated, there is a place to see how the available concepts and categories do the work of inclusion or exclusion, or contribute to personal and social identification or of alienating people. In this sense, critical genealogical work has an outlet of action and practice that we are interested in.

## III. FROM INHERITANCE AND IMPOSITION TO TRANSFORMATION

There are well-known critiques of a whole host of concepts related to the very idea of Latin America, including *Latinidad*, Latinx, and *mestizaje*. The term "Latin America" itself originates in French usage. As Linda Martín Alcoff has pointed out, the terminology "Latin" was introduced by the French to demarcate French Catholic colonial territories from Anglo-Saxon ones.<sup>12</sup> In the 1830s French economist Michel Chevalier was the first to use the term "Latin race" to refer to the people in the Americas. The term "Latin America" was first used in writing decades later by Chilean politician Francisco Bilbao at a conference in Paris. Finally, in 1856 an alliance was formed across "Latin America" in opposition to the US recognizing William Walker's regime in Nicaragua. From this very brief mapping of moments in which the term was mobilized, we can see it shift from European imposition to "local" usage and endorsement for political ends.<sup>13</sup>

As such history clearly illustrates, these are all colonial terms, and we must grapple with their coloniality. We cannot simply reject them because of their unsavory history, a move that strikes us as an attempt to divest from an ineliminable historical connection to things. Our critical account begins with these histories and the details of their emergence in the crucible of colonialism, which must be reckoned with. That colonial context is antiblack and colorist, and non-European populations, African-descended and Indigenous, have been excluded from the construction of *Latinidad*.<sup>14</sup> Those exclusions are the conditions of possibility for colonial conceptions of *Latinidad* and Latinx identity.

The history of the concept of *Latinidad* was built on drawing social and political distinctions relative to a center of whiteness, Europeaness or civilization. In that context, from enslavement and colonialism in the Americas and the creation of the very idea of Latin America; from the *criollos* to the adoption of a Pan-Latino identity against colonialism; to contemporary erasure of Afro-Latinx folks in the United States, African-descended peoples have been



systematically excluded from definitions of *Latinidad*. A similar pattern appears when exploring the twentieth-century question of Afro-*latinidad* that interested many black intellectuals, for it takes place against the background of *mestizaje*.<sup>15</sup>

There are myriad figures whose work is illustrative of this history, though here we focus on only one of the most prominent figures in the construction of *Latinidad*, Simón Bolívar.<sup>16</sup> Bolívar's identifications first as *criollo* and then as *mestizo* in his Jamaica Letter and Angostura Address, respectively, shed light on the dynamics of identity construction of certain forms of anticolonialism, as he attempts to consolidate a new continental identity by excluding *both* Europeans and African-descended peoples, as well as distancing himself from any Indigenous populations.

In particular, the Angostura Address shifts to emphasize *mestizaje* as a solution to the problem of governing in the Americas without a shared nationality, people foreign in their own land: "We . . . do not even retain the vestiges of our original being. We are not Europeans; we are not Indians; we are but a mixed species of aborigines and Spaniards. Americans by birth and Europeans by law, we find ourselves engaged in a dual conflict: we are disputing with the natives for titles of ownership, and at the same time we are struggling to maintain ourselves in the country that gave us birth against the opposition of the invaders."<sup>17</sup> 'We' here means *criollos*: he rejects indigenous peoples and he leaves Africans and African-descended identity excluded entirely.

In this brief foray into Bolívar's famous words, we can already see what Alejandro Vallega calls the "abyssal truth" Bolívar is grappling with.<sup>18</sup> Namely, that identity in the Americas will be marked by an essential "uprootedness" and "self-negation" that brings with it a "perpetual internal violence."<sup>19</sup> The relation between identity-formation and violence is apparent in the development of *mestizaje*, to which we now turn.

#### IV. MESTIZAJE

Any consideration of Latinx identity and the development of *Latinidad* must grapple with *mestizaje*, which, as the foregoing example of Bolívar illustrates, is intertwined with the place of its African influences. Alcoff highlights the Spanish acceptance of *mestizaje*, though she is less forthcoming about the underside of that acceptance: the denial of Blackness as an acceptable part of *Latinidad*.<sup>20</sup> Even a text as potentially radical as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been read as excluding Black geographies from its analysis.<sup>21</sup> This is the idea that Anzaldúa's alternative geography does not and cannot generalize, and must be read as a specifically Chicana geography alongside an alternative Black geography.<sup>22</sup> According to Madelaine Cahause, the two begin from different places and historical moments, and as such grapple with different particular problems. Ultimately, the Black geographies that are foundational for Anzaldúa's Chicana geography, due to the relationship between 1441 when the Portuguese first arrived in what we now call Senegal, Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean in 1492, and

the Spanish colonization of what we now call Mexico in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are absent from her framework.<sup>23</sup>

It is not only as a vector of antiblack racism that *mestizaje* has been criticized. In this very publication, in his "Letting Go of *Mestizaje*: Settler Colonialism and Latin American/Latinx Philosophy," Julio Covarrubias argues that the concept itself is an instance of epistemic injustice against both Indigenous people as well as "*mestizos*" themselves.<sup>24,25</sup> His argument is that *mestizaje* as an identity and the idea of *indigenismo* that came along with it were products of colonial state-formation that on the one hand prioritized the integration and assimilation of Indigenous peoples in the name of national cohesion, and on the other hand treated Indigenous ways of life as static and frozen in the past. The result is an erasure of contemporary Indigeneity as well as a denial of Indigenous futures.<sup>26</sup> In the same vein, it is instructive to note that the erasure of African-descended realities—people, cultural practices—can be inscribed in the twentieth century in the context of "the idea that race was not an important dimension of Latin American societies."<sup>27</sup> In the context of the "racial democracies" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the groups that made up societies in Latin America were seen by the powers of the state as social classes rather than other sorts of groups, some of which would clearly be races.

Additionally, Jared Sexton argues that the general discourse of multiracialism, of which *mestizaje* is surely a form, is itself a move to exclude Blackness. As he writes in *Amalgamation Schemes*, "Impurity and hybridity, in and of themselves, are no guaranteed challenge to the racial orders of white supremacy and antiblackness—such are their conditions of possibility."<sup>28</sup> At the very least, Sexton and Cahuas set some parameters of what any conception of *mestizaje* must live up to, and that our account of Afro-*Latinidad* hopes to reach.

*Mestizaje* is an important locus of our critical-genealogical approach, which aims is to provide an apt, epistemologically and ontologically anticolonial version of a *constellation of mixings* that reflects the historical realities involved. Our positive proposal is that *mestizaje* and other hemispheric modes of racial mixture should be understood in a way that embraces not only their internal differences between their constituent parts but also the antagonisms.<sup>29</sup>

In charting this path, we are aiming to address how the development of *mestizaje* has gone hand in hand with the erasure of any connection to Africa. This is a distinct, though parallel, wrong to the one that Covarrubias highlights, namely, that erasure of "contemporary Indigenous complexities . . . renders indigeneity no longer fluid or dynamic or coeval: to be Indigenous is to exist in the past."<sup>30</sup> While indigeneity on his view is frozen and tied to the past by *mestizaje*, we are focused on how *mestizaje* has rendered its African-descendedness completely unseen or erased.

Accordingly, we understand *mestizaje* pragmatically to appreciate the cultural, linguistic, religious, etc. interconnections that occur under the umbrella of

Latinidad, while avoiding any ontological commitments relating to purity and mixture. Indeed, as Sexton has also pointed out, “The general is *always already mixed*, if only because it inheres in a restless contradistinction to the particular as its most fundamental differential term.”<sup>31</sup> Or, in complementary fashion, as Marisol de la Cadena writes, “A multiplicity of meanings can be uttered through the same word, at the same time—yet mostly only some of them get to be heard.”<sup>32</sup> We reject, then, any logic of mixture that is dependent on purity, that is, on the mixing of supposed pure elements. According to our pragmatic approach, when someone is identified as Latinx, it is an identification based on a set of possibilities for action and understanding and grounded in the context in which the identification occurs, which includes realities such as power relations and histories of oppression. This is opposed to an approach focused merely on categorization that essentializes identities.

With that approach in mind, we highlight three paths forward for thinking through the transformation of mestizaje against its explicit antiblack political and social history. First, Marisol de la Cadena, who develops a genealogy of the terms “mestizo” and “mestizaje,” argues that the terms are hybrid in multiple ways. She argues that in the different meanings of mestizaje some appear to be dominant, while others “circulate either marginally or cloaked under dominant meanings.” That exploration allows her “to rescue mestizos from mestizaje—and thus challenge the conceptual politics (and the political activism) that all too simplistically, following a transitional teleology, purify mestizos away from indigeneity.”<sup>33,34</sup> For us, this means that the story of mestizaje is both its overarching political history of identity formation through exclusion, as well as the myriad ways that it is lived and negotiated in everyday life in very different ways in different places, as evidenced by Cadena’s recounting of her experience as a Peruvian encountering a Native American man in Arizona.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui offers an alternative to mestizaje through the Aymara idea of *ch’ixi* (chehe), which may be translated as “motley” and points to the color seen as unified from a distance but that reveals its parts up-close: “the notion of *ch’ixi*, like many others (*allwa*, *anyi*), reflects the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time. It is the logic of the included third.”<sup>36</sup> What is *ch’ixi* has a potential of undifferentiation that can bring opposites together without combining them. *Ch’ixi* is not autonomous, it entails a type of heteronomy that “alludes . . . to the idea of muddling, to a loss of sustenance and energy . . . it is feeble and intermingled.”<sup>37</sup> But, importantly, it is *not* hybrid. Rivera opposes what she calls the “hybridity lite” championed by scholars like Néstor García Canclini, a type of amphibian identity that one can use to “enter and leave modernity.” The mestizo type of existence, understood as *ch’ixi*, is for Rivera not the new product, a mixture of two things, that harmoniously preserves, in some form, its two components. Instead, *ch’ixi* lives in the “coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other. Each one reproduces itself from the depths of the past and relates to others in a contentious way.”<sup>38,39</sup>

Lastly, Maria Lugones argues that the logic of purity underlies our understanding of racial categories, and even of mestizaje when conceived as a certain type of mixture—the lazy metaphor of the melting pot. For Lugones, we should reject the logic of purity and replace it with curdling. She focuses on the type of dual personality that is produced by an ethnocentric and racist culture, one example of which is the Chicano, whom she describes as “the curdled or mestizo person.”<sup>40</sup> Lugones argues against both assimilation and authenticity, each being a “mythical portrait” that actually obscures reality.<sup>41</sup> Her response is to invoke “curdle-separation” as an embrace of heterogeneity and of not attempting to overcome any internal differentiation of the self. It “is not something that happens to us but something we do . . . in resistance to the logic of control, to the logic of purity.”<sup>42</sup>

These three thinkers show us inventive ways to grapple with the complex history of mestizaje that in no way undermines facing up to the pernicious role that it has played in, on the one hand, the construction of Latinx identity, and on the other hand, simultaneously, the exclusion of Afro-Latinidad. Our treatment of mestizaje, hybridity, the motley and muddled and curdled, and *ch’ixi* is threefold. First, it recognizes the historical and contemporary antiblack deployments of mestizaje, while insisting that they not be taken as definitional of the potential of mestizaje itself. Second, we contest the role of “purity” in identity. A richer take on the cultural, ethnic, and racial hybridity of people in Latin America and their descendants in the US is itself a breaking down of the seemingly clear lines that demarcate race and ethnicity which have been articulated as instances of some sort of purity. Following Sexton, all conceptions of purity are always already mixed. Finally, although it is an identity central to understanding of the Latin American and Latinx peoples, it need not necessarily be claimed as an identity by all individuals there even though it may be available to them.

The relationship of Latinidad with Afro-Latinidad has often been one of antagonism and exclusion, and yet also of coexistence that yields a motley landscape. Instead of shying away from the tensions, we invite the aforementioned three paths—a doubly hybrid mestizaje, the Aymara, high-Andean notion of *ch’ixi*, and the curdled—to help us understand the contentious motley that constitute Latinidad as a constellation of mixings.

## V. AFRO-LATINX

The relationship between Afro-Latinx and mestizaje has been one of exclusion within, as we have seen. Often, the notion of mestizaje has been used to affect that exclusion, inextricably linking Afro-Latinidad and mestizaje. We have termed this excluded within *African-descendedness* to counteract the English-language word for Latinidad, Latinness. The importance of the choice is reflected in the fact that, although Afro-Latinx identity is usually applied to a Black Latinx person, phenotype and skin color do not exhaust the identity. The concept of Afro-Latinx exceeds the narrow meaning of race as phenotype or skin color, thus going beyond the identification of Afro-Latinidad and Blackness. We are aiming here for a broader identity concept that allows for other elements to be part of the

identity, and which may be context-sensitive, such that they may apply to people in different ways in different contexts.

In different contexts—whether New York City, Miami, Santo Domingo, or anywhere else—the vectors of meaning within which being Latinx operates are ever-shifting. Maria Lugones writes about navigating her experiences across different contexts in terms of “worlds.” She writes, “In describing my sense of a ‘world,’ I am offering a description of experience, something that is true to experience even if it is ontologically problematic.”<sup>43</sup> Ontology is generally thought of as being or not being. Applied to personality traits or to individuals, the thought is that we are a thing or we are not a thing—we have an attribute or we do not. Against this, Lugones is writing of her experience of being *both*, of being and not being something, here the example being a stereotypical Latina as opposed to simply being a Latina. In that way, she inhabits multiple worlds and has to navigate moving between them. Her real lived experience, then, runs counter to the ontological entreaty to be or to not be. Her distinction between the experiential and the ontological is helpful here. It highlights the fact that there are often tensions between individual experiences and the overarching, historically constructed concepts like Latinx or Afro-Latinx, such that the latter can never fully inhabit or manifest the former. As a result, some behaviors or self-conceptions can seem ethically puzzling or performatively problematic, or ontologically problematic as Lugones describes.

Latinidad has erased or excluded Blackness, both politically and conceptually, which underscores the necessity of grappling with antiblackness in any attempt to understand Latinidad, and with it, to illuminate the options of jettisoning or retaining it. But it should also underscore the fact that there is no way to separate Latinidad from its links to Blackness. From the very beginning, both historically and conceptually, articulations of Latinidad and of Latin America have grappled with being “Afro.” The Afro in Afro-Latinidad has functioned as a constitutive outside, denied repeatedly, both explicitly and implicitly, yet always present and determining the content of Latinidad.

Eric Bayruns García has outlined how certain situations demand the use of Afro-Latinx in certain contexts where its use brings additional explanatory power that either Latinx or Black (or others, like Dominican) do not. One way of framing the issue is that Blackness doesn’t exhaust the concepts at hand or the experiences of those who navigate those concepts, and neither does Latinidad. He writes, “Even if ‘Afro-Latinx’ is more apt in certain cases because it yields subjects understanding that ‘Latinx’ does not, ‘Latinx’ will still be apt in many, if not more, cases because ‘Latinx’ will yield understanding that ‘Afro-Latinx’ does not similarly yield. A basic idea here is that whether an identity term is apt will depend on the event, episode or portion of social reality that a subject seeks to explain and thus understand.”<sup>44</sup>

## VI. DISTINGUISHING CONCEPT AND IDENTITY

An important upshot in arguing for the centrality—indeed, the indispensability—of Afro-Latinx for any conception of Latinx, is a distinction between concept and identity,

and so our analysis operates on those two distinct levels. At the macro level, we find the history of what we now call the Americas, including its violent colonization and the collision, asymmetrical in nature, between its pre-Columbian Indigenous inhabitants, European colonizers, and the enslaved Africans and their descendants’ subjection to discrimination and oppression. Here we find the discourses circulating over time that give us our inherited conceptualizations of race, place, and ethnicity, including the concepts of Latin America and of Latinidad, and more recently of Latinx.

At the micro level, we find the multitude of lived experiences of individuals and collectives throughout the hemisphere, experiences that are not always clean fits within the black/white binary but that are often made to be understood in relation to it nonetheless.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes white/non-white and black/non-black binaries enter the explanatory picture. Time and place determine to some degree which explanatory frame is given and whether multiple frames of reference come into conflict.

At the conceptual level, we affirm Latinidad as having always been Afro-Latinidad, a claim that means at least two things. First, the cultural history of Latinidad is incoherent and impossible to understand separate from its connection to African-descended peoples and practices.<sup>46</sup> Second, it means a normative call to be accountable for the racist and colonial dimensions of inheriting the history within Latinx identity, and to move forward rejecting that dimension.

Shifting from the level of concept to the level of identity, there is also an additional thing that it emphatically does *not* mean. In terms of an individual’s social identity, it does not mean that nonblack Latinxs are now to be considered Black. In other words, a white Latinx person does not become an Afro-Latinx person. Yet what it does mean is that Latinx folks, of any race or ethnicity, or any combination thereof, in understanding themselves as being predicated of the concept of Latinx, exist in relation to the African-descended history we have written of here.

This is not a wholly *racial* claim, but a claim about the centrality of African-descended influence in the construction of the concepts of Latinidad and Latinx. Normatively, it is incumbent upon Latinxs to understand and grapple with this history in much the same way it is for white North Americans to grapple with the legacies of racism that structure the worlds in which they live.

There are many texts to look to, and stories to tell, that articulate the meaning of being Afro-Latinx from within, and that highlight its plurality. That path leads to particular narratives of navigating the complexities of what is often thought of as the racial paradoxes of Latinidad.<sup>47</sup> Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán, one of the founding members of the radical Puerto Rican group the Young Lords Party in New York City, gives voice to this complexity when he recounts the group’s coming into being. He writes,

Even in New York, we found that on a grass-roots level a high degree of racism existed between Puerto Ricans and Blacks, and between light-

skinned and dark-skinned Puerto Ricans. We had to deal with this racism because it blocked any kind of growth for our people, any understanding of the things Black people had gone through. So, rather than watching Rap Brown on TV, rather than learning from that and saying, "Well, that should affect me too," Puerto Ricans said, "Well, yeah, those Blacks got a hard time, you know, but we ain't going through the same thing." This was especially true for the light-skinned Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans like myself, who are darker-skinned, who look like Afro-Americans, couldn't do that, 'cause to do that would be to escape into a kind of fantasy. Because before people called me a spic, they called me a n\*\*\*\*r. So that was, like, one reason as to why we felt the Young Lords Party should exist.<sup>48</sup>

Guzmán's forceful articulation, in the YLP newspaper, of the seeming paradox of thinking Black alongside Latinidad—of thinking Afro-Latinx identity—also points the way toward its possible overcoming.

## VII. REMAINING TENSIONS

Rather than arguing that the concept of Latinx can overcome, outgrow these colonial and antiblack histories, the aim of our larger project, of which this essay is one of the building blocks, is to re-articulate the meaning of Latinx through critical analysis of the role of antiblack racism in the construction of Latinidad, and outline the ways that Afro-Latinidad is lived, felt, and experienced by Afro-Latinx people.

One's social identity has an undeniable subjective element, albeit one that exists within a public and historical context.<sup>49</sup> It is therefore central that any understanding of being Latinx does not erase the identity of those who understand themselves as both Latin and Black. Rather, the social identity Latinx does not require the rejection or replacement of other social identities. It is an explanatory requirement that our proposal can articulate that some Latinx folks see themselves as belonging to certain racial or ethnic groups or subgroups while Latinidad itself is neither a race nor an ethnicity.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Latinidad as currently lived by many Latinx folks remains significantly racist, while Latinidad is lived by many Afro-Latinx folks as part of their identity.<sup>51</sup>

Consider the case of the famous Cuban singer Celia Cruz, as told by Frances Negrón Muntaner: "Given [Celia's] 'undistinguished' class origins and membership in a racial and ethnic group rarely afforded the dignity of individuality, Celia's shoes insisted on her uniqueness as a person and a performer."<sup>52</sup> It is worth noticing here the individual performance of someone who cannot only be said to have thought of themselves as Latin American, yet understands that given her racial and ethnic background she must act in certain ways. Shoes, for her, afforded a type of distinction that was perceived as cutting across class and race.

Cruz directs us to how Latinidad extends beyond the visual into perceptual practices. But the fact of visual racial identification is not eliminated, instead being provided for by the affordances of Latinidad. Cultural mestizaje in

Latin America, and in Latinx populations more broadly, is inconceivable without its African heritage: in food, in clothing, in music, in dancing, in spoken language, and in innumerable other ways. Accordingly, the perceptual practices linked to the wide cultural backgrounds of Latinx folks are partly nonvisual. As Latinidad was being constructed in ways that explicitly excluded Indigenous and African peoples, that construction was being done using practices from those very populations being excluded and whose relation to those practices were then being effaced. Here we can think of religion, music, food, etc., which we can easily see today as making up various aspects of different Latinx cultures. The content of Latinidad was, upon inspection, thoroughly Afro and Indigenous, even as that link was being disavowed. Here, our focus on the African-descendedness of Latinidad is not only racial or phenotypical, but more broadly cultural as well.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

We understand Latinidad in terms of a constellation of mixture that on the one hand calls into question any logic of purity and on the other hand makes explicitly its inheritance of *African-descendedness*, including practices surrounding food, music, and religion, to name a few, that define in large part the hybridity of Latinx folks. Latinidad is undeniably Afro-descendant. To insist on the necessity of Afro-Latinx within any articulation of Latinx is not to imply that other identities are not also at play. Be they class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or disability status, they are each also at play, with their specific social pragmatics. Myriad racial and ethnic categories are always at play in the lives of Latinx folks, while Latinidad itself has been constructed through interaction with those categories. This means that racial and ethnic categories are sometimes part of what being Latinx means for some, perhaps not for others. By the same token, to say that Afro-Latinx is at the heart of Latinx, when thought of at the level of persons, means that for some persons the Afro-dimension comes to infuse their social identity in a particular way.

Latinidad must be understood as a concept and an identity perpetually in tension with itself due to its political history. That tension cannot be resolved or overcome, but demands a response, which we argue must be anti-black and, in a more general sense, must oppose Afro-descended exclusion, thus pointing toward the possibility of solidarity across Latinx populations, Afro-Latinx and non-Afro-Latinx. It must also acknowledge and affirm the ineliminable co-constitutive presences within Latinidad of a foundational African relation, and its denial down through the generations.

## NOTES

1. "Latinidad" as a noun is a quality, property, or condition that refers to a sociohistorical reality that attaches to persons, customs, objects, ideas, etc. "Latinx," as an adjective, is an identity marker. To ascribe the term Latinx to someone, some thing, etc. is to claim that it partakes of Latinidad. Linking Latinx and Latinidad in this way allows us to make a broader claim than one simply about Latinx, as it most often refers to persons. Not only, then, "no Latinx without Afro-Latinx," we also want to say "no Latinidad without Afro-Latinidad." As such, we use both Latinx and Latinidad throughout, alternating when context demands. We, too, are not litigating the x of Latinx and accept it as is.



2. This essay is part of the development of our monograph-in-progress, *From Latinidad to Latinidades: The Radical Plurality of a Social Identity*. See also Arango and Burgos, "Neither Race nor Ethnicity"; and Arango and Burgos, "The Social Identity Affordance View" for other elements of our under-development study of Latinidad.
3. See, e.g., the Pew Research Center report on *Latinos and Colorism*: "Latinos and Colorism: Majority of U.S. Hispanics Say Skin Color Impacts Opportunity and Shapes Daily Life."
4. Latinx is to Latinidad as mestizo is to mestizaje.
5. There are many examples of analyses that bring these exclusionary manifestations of mestizaje to the fore. See, for example, Ramírez, "Colonial Phantoms"; Mayes, *The Mulatto Republic*; Paulino, *Dividing Hispaniola*; Rappaport, *The Disappearing Mestizo*; Covarrubias, "Letting Go of Mestizaje"; Abreu, *Rhythms of Race*; Miller, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race*; and Talante, "Fungible Indigeneity and Blackness." We discuss some of these in more detail below.
6. It may be helpful here to think of our methodology in terms of Deleuze's reception of Kant. Deleuze transposed Kant's quest for the (transcendental) conditions of possible experience to the (immanent) conditions of real experience. We understand critical genealogy to be providing something like the conditions, immanent in the historical constitution of the present, for real experience, action, and decision making at both the individual and collective level. See Daniel W. Smith, "The Conditions of the New."
7. Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 2.
8. Harcourt, "On Critical Geology," 2.
9. Harcourt, "On Critical Geology," 16–17.
10. Harcourt, "On Critical Geology," 2.
11. De la Cadena, "Are Mestizos Hybrids?" 263.
12. Alcoff, "Latino vs. Hispanic," 401–2.
13. See Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* and Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea*. The notion of Indigeneity is entangled with colonialism in similar fashion. See Nahwilet Meissner and Whyte, "Theorizing Indigeneity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism."
14. Regarding colorism, see Quiros and Araújo Dawson, "The Color Paradigm."
15. Hooker and Guridy, "Currents in Afro-Latin American Political and Social Thought."
16. We could speak as well, for example, of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, José Martí, Samuel Ramos, José Vasconcelos, José Mariátegui, and others. The dialectic between José Enrique Rodó's influential *Ariel* and Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Calibán* is another.
17. Bolívar, "Address," 69.
18. Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*, 20.
19. Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*, 21.
20. Alcoff, "On Being Mixed."
21. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.
22. For a proposal that articulates and centers such a geography, see García-Peña, *Translating Blackness*.
23. Cahuas, "Interrogating Absences in Latinx Theory and Placing Blackness in Latinx Geographical Thought"; see also Talante, "Fungible Indigeneity and Blackness."
24. Covarrubias, "Letting Go of Mestizaje," 4; emphasis his.
25. For the relationship between genealogy and epistemic standing see Srinivasan's "Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking."
26. Covarrubias, "Letting Go of Mestizaje," 4.
27. de la Fuente and Andrews, "The Making of a Field: Afro-Latin American Studies," 2.
28. Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 35.
29. Miller, *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race*; Wade, "Repensando el mestizaje"; Wade, "Rethinking Mestizaje"; Wade, "Race, Ethnicity, and Technologies of Belonging"; Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation."
30. Covarrubias, "Letting Go of Mestizaje," 5.
31. Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 24.
32. De la Cadena, "Are Mestizos Hybrids?" 261.
33. De la Cadena, "Are Mestizos Hybrids?" 262.
34. The complexities of Latinidad relate in a variety of ways to the drawing of racial lines, which can play out very differently given changes in context. There is the familiar black/white binary. There is also a (i) black/non-black binary, as well as a (ii) white/non-white binary. All three can make sense as the explanatory framework for understanding a given context. Furthermore, again central to the subject of Latin America and Latinidad, (i) indigenous people are distinct from black people, and not all mestizos are black. In (ii) some mestizos are white, but certainly all indigenous people aren't white. Lastly, of course, these different ways of carving up the racial polarities of a given situation can come into conflict. A fuller articulation of these different binaries is not possible here.
35. De la Cadena, "Are Mestizos Hybrids?" 261.
36. Rivera Cusicanqui *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa*, 65.
37. Rivera Cusicanqui *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa*, 65.
38. Rivera Cusicanqui *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa*, 66.
39. Similar to Rivera Cusicanqui's notion of *ch'ixi* is Fernando Ortiz' argument that *ajiaco*—a stew-like dish that receives different names across the Caribbean—offers a rich analogy for understanding the diverse composition of the Cuban people. He writes, "Being an ajiaco, its people is not a finished stew, but rather a constant cooking. From the dawn of its history until the hours that now scurry by, the pot of Cuba has always known the renewing entrance of exogenous roots, fruits, and meats, an incessant gush of heterogeneous substances. This is why the composition is changed and cubanidad has a different flavor and consistency depending on whether it is scooped from the bottom, from the fat belly of the pot, or from its mouth, where the vegetables are still raw and the clear broth bubbles." See Ortiz, "The Human Factors of Cubanidad," 463. We thank Sergio Gallegos for this suggestion.
40. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 134.
41. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 136.
42. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 144.
43. Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," 89.
44. Bayrums García, "Afro-Latinx, Hispanic and Latinx Identity."
45. In our view, social identities are embodied pragmatic realities to be investigated in actual social life, where historical and political dimensions are central and in which lived experience is listened to, without reducing social identities to those experiences. This is a deflationary view open to the plasticity and multidimensionality of social identities. Our broader view on social identities, including those under the umbrella of Latinidad, is articulated using the notion of social affordances: a possibility for action or interaction within a given social niche, where such possibility is prompted and constrained (but not fully defined) by the objective, perceivable reality of a thing (a person, a ritual, etc.), while also being partly defined by the properties of the thing relative to the perceiver or agent (for a fuller sense of our view of both social identities in general and of Latinidad in particular see Arango and Burgos, "Neither Race nor Ethnicity"; "The Social Identity Affordance View: A Theory of Social Identities."
46. There are many studies exploring the African-descended contributions to the culture of the region. Those attempts have been well documented, focusing "on black religion, dance, linguistics, and other cultural forms, or on community studies" (de la Fuente and Andrews, "The Making of a Field: Afro-Latin American Studies," 6). See, e.g., Juncker, *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts*; Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru*; Abreu, *Rhythms of Race*; Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*. One example that the reader



may find illustrative is the history of tango. Its connections with African rhythms and its long path to being adopted by many as a symbol of Argentinidad are explored by Marylin Grace Miller, *Tango in Black and White*. According to Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, historically these studies largely "left aside questions of racial inequality or discrimination, largely accepting the argument that Latin America's historical experience of racial and cultural mixture had eliminated racism and prejudice and produced societies that offered equal opportunity to all" (de la Fuente and Andrews, "The Making of a Field: Afro-Latin American Studies," 6).

47. Jones, "Blackness, Latinidad, and Minority Linked Fate," 425.

48. Young Lords Party, *Palante: Young Lords Party*, 68.

49. Our central group identity concept is that of *social identity*. See Arango and Burgos, "The Social Identity Affordance View: A Theory of Social Identities," for a detailed presentation. A few relevant points from our approach at this point are the following: first, social identities encompass both a subjective and a public aspect, and as such they carry elements of both self-conception and identification by others. Second, both aspects are contextual. The public meaning of a social identity is a function of a given social, cultural and historical situation. On the subjective side, different persons can interpret the subjective aspects of a social identity differently, even in the same social context. Third, there is a feedback loop between the subjective and the public aspects. Public understandings shape self-understanding, and a person can influence (to a limited extent) the way they are perceived by others. It is worth noting that our view aims at providing criteria for determining who counts or does not count as Afro-Latinx. An important reason is that, consistent with our view of social identities, social identification is fluid, multifaceted, and context-dependent. Additionally, our treatment of Afro-Latinidad is also about the category itself, not only about the individuals.

50. This does not entail that Latinidad is "colorblind," that there are no racial dynamics at play, just that Latinx itself is not a race or an ethnicity. A critical approach to Afro-Latinidad must distance itself from the trend that Ian Haney López has theorized as *reactionary colorblindness*, which would reject the social reality of race, in some cases replaced by a multiplicity of ethnicities. See López, "A Nation of Minorities': Race, Ethnicity, and Reactionary Colorblindness," 990.

51. Hordge-Freeman and Veras, "Out of the Shadows, into the Dark: Ethnoracial Dissonance and Identity Formation among Afro-Latinxs."

52. Negrón-Muntaner, "Celia's Shoes," 67.

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