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## Latinx thoughts: Latinidad with an X

Salvador Vidal-Ortiz<sup>1</sup> · Juliana Martínez<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The term “Latinx” has become a site of contention, like “Latino” once was. Our goal is to propose an articulation of Latina/o/x populations through the term Latinx as a site of possibilities, while clarifying its potential use and the reasoning behind it. Rather than seeing the use of Latinx as a trend, or a rupture, in linguistic usage, we see its use as a continuity of internal shifting group dynamics and disciplinary debates. Complicating the argument that the term Latinx is an imperialist imposition on the Spanish language is possible by reclaiming the “x” history of (racial and ethnic) resistance as a marker of nonwhiteness (for example, in Xicana feminism), while turning to the “x” usage by Latin American and Spanish-speaking activists. Latinx foregrounds tensions among self-naming practices and terms that encompass all members of a diverse and complex ethnoracial group: Latinx acts as a new frame of inclusion, while also posing a challenge for those used to having androcentric terms serve as collective representational proxies.

**Keywords** Latinx · Gender queer · Linguistic purity

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✉ Salvador Vidal-Ortiz  
vidalort@american.edu

Juliana Martínez  
jmartinez@american.edu

<sup>1</sup> American University, Washington, DC, USA



## Is Latinx, the latest iteration of terms that name US Latina/o populations, here to stay?

“Latinx” has become a site of contention, like “Latino” once was.<sup>1</sup> The origin of the term is unclear. It has been traced to online forums in the 1990s (Milian 2017), to the 2004 (Fall) volume of the journal *Feministas Unidas* (ibid.), and to 2004 online forums addressing inclusivity for “left leaning and queer communities” (Salinas and Lozano 2017, p. 3, citing Yesenia Padilla’s *Complex* 2016 blog). Most recently, the term has taken a strong hold of various academic forums, beginning with a special issue in the journal *American Quarterly*, from the American Studies Association, titled *Las Américas Quarterly* (Gómez-Barris and Fiol-Matta 2014). It is not our intention to map a genealogy of the term, nor do we hope to stabilize it with an all-encompassing definition. Instead, we join Milian in her intent to remain “far from attempting to get the X straight” (2017, p. 122).

Rather than dwell on whether newer categories are simply a millennial-inspired trend or engage in a romantic reminiscence of categories that never caught on,<sup>2</sup> we focus on the meanings, possibilities and challenges of the term. Moreover, we seek to explore important, yet unanswered, questions posed by the often unapologetic and/or uncritical use of Latinx. The stakes may be different, but the chance of thinking about a number of issues emerges—among those, we focus on a politics of inclusivity beyond conflation of gender and sexuality, questions of imposition, and debates about linguistic purity.

In this article, we use “Latina/o/x” for the populations (consciously including the “x” as a variant among the gendered/genderless categories); “Latino studies” for the established field; and “Latinx studies” for the emergent category.<sup>3</sup> Our goal is to propose an articulation of Latina/o/x populations through Latinx as a site of possibilities, charged as it may be, but also, to clarify some of the reasons for its potential use, limited as they may be, by a range of scholarly decisions that have political implications. We are aware that we are writing within the *Latino Studies* journal, which will remain titled as such after conversations among its leadership. To change

<sup>1</sup> “Latino” is still resisted by users of the term “Hispanic,” by those who prefer national-based categories (DeGuzmán 2017; Engel 2017) and by those who, according to a recent Pew Hispanic Center report on identity, resist any of these categories and incorporate to a US American “majority” (Lopez et al. 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Terms like Latin@, Latine, and LatinU (Zentella 2017) have been deployed—with less traction—to mobilize Latina/o communities (in personal communications with the authors, some colleagues have suggested Latinex as a new, emergent term). “Brown” has also been used to speak to racialization issues—this, before and while the Latino term became ethnicized (in both the census and popular use; see Urciuoli 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Precision in these cases will support a more nuanced discussion. For us, US Latina/o references immigrants who have arrived decades ago, or young DREAMers, as well as second-generation, and beyond, Latina/o/x people. We recognize that Latina/o might produce a more slippery use: US born Latinas/os have used this category, as have migrants to the US (after a process of racialization and a remaining in the US). Yet, some Latin Americans call themselves Latinas/os as a shorthand, whether living in their countries of origin or in the US, Europe, or elsewhere. Perhaps Latinx (unlike US Latina/o/x) poses a potentially productive challenge, in that some may use it hemispherically (resembling the use of “the Americas” instead of “America” in both English and Spanish).



to the use of the “x” in Latinx studies is, for sure, a political act, but no less are the acts that merit our attention, such as the debates and discussions on the purpose, meaning, reach, temporality, and potential backlash of the terms. Nomenclatures do matter: the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) recently changed its name to UnidosUS, in apparent backlash to a common misreading of “la raza” as part of their name. Unlike NCLR/UnidosUS, we want to sustain an engaged debate with past and current terms, without uncritically eliminating one or interrogating the incorporation of the other.

We come to this question as two faculty members (one Latino, the other Latin American) at a small, urban university campus in the Mid-Atlantic region. One of us comes from the field of sociology, influenced by US Latina/o studies (and scholars) and trans and queer studies (in the US and the rest of the Americas); the other comes from Latin American literature and cultural studies, influenced by the “linguistic turn,” the philosophy of language, and post-structuralism, and by feminism and gender theory. We approach this as academics in settings where the lens of diversity and inclusion is increasingly being foregrounded as the only way to address issues of structural inequality at both student life and academic inquiry levels. Lastly, we are, perhaps, at different places when it comes to our appreciation and use of Latinx, which only adds to the potential layered account we present here. Neither of us are experts on Latino studies; however, our combined perspectives offer—we think—a productive starting point for conversations among peers (be it with students or faculty, staff or administrators) as well as for pedagogical use in this new wave of Latinx studies. We hope to foresee challenges in these discussions where generally good intentions prevail and offer tools to provide a basic set of premises, possibilities, questions and relevant sources for further review.

In what follows, we start with definitions, then provide some history and context to the use of these categories (ranging from Mexican–American or Newyorican to Hispanic to Latina/o to Latinx), and a general placement for where the newer field of Latinx studies may be, given the current publications, dissertations, and online forums. Our second section addresses the meanings and misunderstandings attached to the term Latinx—what the term contains, and how gender and sexuality, and other axes of power, are confounded in a general reading of the term’s use. Then, we untangle the linguistic and regional (Latin American, US Latina/o/x, and the Américas/hemispheric) reach and capital, of Latinx as a category; in this section we also address the shortcomings and ongoing debates about the linguistic implications of the term in both primarily English- and primarily Spanish-speaking contexts. Our conclusion builds on our mapping (incomplete at best) of where the scholarship and academic activism ought to point to in the coming years.

## **Context and (brief) history of these terms**

Until about four decades ago, there was no term with which to speak of this conglomerate of people we now call Latinas/os, with Hispanic being the first term incorporated in the census to encompass Mexican–American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American and South American origin. With the US Census’ establishment



of Hispanic as a pan-ethnic category in the 1980 census, these groups became incorporated into a geopolitical roadmap of government resources and recognition (but let's not forget that "Mexican" enters the 1930 US Census as a racial category, and quickly disappears, until the 1977 incorporation of Hispanic). At least a decade after "Hispanic" becomes institutionalized in the census, in the 1970s (Oboler 1995), "Latino" emerges as a term of resistance to the explicit colonial relations that "Hispanic" sets between Spain and countries in Latin America. "Latino" intends to distance itself from the category "Latin American" through US-born status, and bilingual (mostly English/Spanish) experience—although migration flows complicate this distinction (Aparicio 2016). Latino is also different from both Hispanic and Latin American by virtue of emphasizing not mere difference between Latinas/os and non-Latinos (as the US Census does, by calling Hispanics ethnic, and everyone else racial), but racialization, experiences with colonization, stereotypical social readings, and a general non-White reading (symbolic and actual) in the US American imaginary. The term "Latina/o" is a more recent term that challenges linguistic androcentrism (a topic we turn to shortly).

Latina/o populations have been a difficult topic to address in US media and symbolic landscapes long before Latinx emerged: from the reduction of Latina/o/xs to undocumented immigrants (in spite of the fact that less than half of the US Latina/o/x population are immigrants) to the difficulties on how to portray Sonia Sotomayor (a migrant, not immigrant, with a last name that does not roll off the tongue of most US Americans) to the "mainstream" public. Latina/o has also existed as a malleable umbrella term that increasingly recognizes the mixture of various Latina/o nationalities (Aparicio 2016)—as, for instance, Salvadoran and Mexican, or Puerto Rican and Colombian parents.

In our review of the literature published in peer-reviewed articles in the last few years—a primer of sorts for sure, as more articles are published in and after 2018—we note two key patterns: on the one hand, we found a tendency of simply inserting the "x" in Latina/o, without much of an explanation as to the character (from o, or a/o, to x) shift. The same was found in a search of recent dissertations: a few dozen include the term Latinx in the title or abstract but do not engage the category itself as an object of study. The exceptions to this case were two special issues in recent journals: *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts and Cultures*, and *Cultural Dynamics* (both published in 2017). These special issues may be at the forefront of newer intellectual endeavors devoted to understanding the uses of, limitations of, and possibilities for extending the use of the term and (as important) for the uncertain future of Latinx studies (what are, or would be, the relations and intersections between Latino and Latinx studies, if any at all?). On the other hand, we've noticed the acknowledgement of the new category, Latinx, without an incorporation, in recent book editions (an example is the *Keywords in Latina/o Studies*, from NYU Press), where there is little mention of Latinx (and indeed, no entry to the specific term).<sup>4</sup> The next section moves the discussion beyond these two general usages.

<sup>4</sup> In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, the editors (Vargas et al. 2017) state they look forward to the inclusion of the Latinx term in future editions and other related works. Given the way many university presses operate in terms of deadlines, decisions about language homogeneity/standardization, and other editorial procedures, texts published between 2014 and 2017 may not include Latinx despite the authors' or edi-



## The specificity of Latinx: What Latinx is, and what it is not

Rather than seeing Latinx as a trend or a rupture in linguistic usage, we see it as a continuity of internal shifting group dynamics and disciplinary debates. We've gone from specific, nationality-based categories—some of them political (i.e., Chicano vs Mexican-American), to “Spanish” (in certain regions), to “Latin” (at certain time periods), to more pan-ethnic labels (like “Latino”), to the @, a/o, e, and now “x,” to denote the multiplicity of voices (silenced and invisible) in these umbrella terms (see Guidotti-Hernández 2017).

As a case in point, Russell Contreras (2017a) addresses the tensions produced by this rapidly shifting linguistic landscape, given the various uses of terms like “Spanish speakers”, “Hispanics”, or “Latinos” as more encompassing than Latinx, which he reduces to LGBT populations. He introduces the *Associated Press (AP) Stylebook*, a key document that “standardize[s] language in media” (2017a, p. 181). Contreras argues that journalists may perceive Latinx as another trendy term and, just as Latina/o, or Latin@ were not incorporated in the past, reject its use “outside of academia and the lexicon of left-leaning advocacy groups” (Contreras 2017a, p. 182). He suggests that the AP’s resistance to using “they/them,” and even more so “ze” or “xe,” may parallel their resistance to incorporating Latinx. His discussion of the *AP Stylebook* in relation to LGBTQIA and other categories of identity, along with his illustrating the poverty and drug problems of Mexican-Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans in New Mexico—where he is writing from—inform his closing posture. Contreras notes, “Less of concern to me is which term I should use to describe the subjects of my story. My concern is the story” (Contreras 2017a, p. 184). When Contreras does acknowledge gender and relations of power, he remains closed to non-binary genders, although responsibly gendering trans women and men—should they come into a story. His final resistance is that Latinx may be erasing the struggles and politics of Mexican American and other Latina/o people in aspects such as the long history of segregation laws and efforts against Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Texas. All in all, his openness to gender neutrality is undermined by a hierarchy of oppressions, where being misgendered does not seem as important as facing racism. Finally, Contreras suggests that Latinx ought not be used to describe people in the past—that, just like queer, it may decontextualize a different historical time period and circumstances such as experiences with sexism, or homophobia, or racism.

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Footnote 4 (continued)

tors’ intentions. We have yet to see the how these editorial politics/processes will change, or not, in the coming years.



His position on the use of Latinx is limiting for (at least) two reasons: it often conflates issues in LGBT populations with sexual diversity issues<sup>5</sup> and conflates sexual orientation with gender nonconformity. It also it assumes that foregrounding the “x” as a marker of nonconforming gender and sexual identities silences or erases previous struggles against the systematic and intersectional disenfranchisement of these communities. These premises are flawed. As mentioned above, the “x” in Latinx is used primarily as a way to challenge the gender binary in both language and society and to point out the marginalization and violence it creates. Everyone who wishes to incorporate the use of the “x” in Latinx generally seeks to be inclusive of gender nonconforming Latinx subjects. Yet too often, this Latinx subject requesting—or sometimes demanding (for an example, see Rodríguez 2017)—a gender-neutral term is assumed to also be sexually diverse and/or trans. In other words, there is a tendency to confound sexual orientation with gender identity, by assuming that gender-queer or non-binary folks are necessarily gay, lesbian or bisexual, and that all transgender people think of themselves as gender-fluid or nonconforming. This is not the case. Viviane Namaste (2015) notes in her chapter on pronouns that, oftentimes, the articulation of progressive spaces where activists, college students and staff members foreground the public uttering of preferred pronouns serves as a way to be inclusive and absolve themselves of normative (or cis-) gender privilege. Namaste explains that while some gender-queer people prefer to utilize gender neutral or gender expansive pronouns, not all people who fall within a trans\*/transgender umbrella (which includes gender-queer, non-binary gender, transgender people, and transsexual individuals) automatically do so.<sup>6</sup> Particularly in the case of some trans and transsexual people, the use of gender identity as binary reinforces their transitioning desire and wish to be publicly recognized as the gender they identify with. Disclosures of gender pronouns in those spaces articulate a politics of gender neutrality that, while opening up spaces for a gender-non-binary subject, may restrict the very same spaces for some transgender and transsexual people.

In addition to the challenges arising in (incorrectly) fusing gender and sexuality, there is a second assumption that incorporating Latinx into our jargon erases previous historical struggles—especially around civil rights and Mexican Americans in the Southwest, or Puerto Ricans in the Midwest and the East Coast. This is a valuable lesson in historicity. The term Latinx should not be anachronistically forced onto previous categories of analysis and social identity, as it deforms the historical circumstances of these and other social movements (thus, it is OK to speak to “homosexuality” in

<sup>5</sup> “Gay”, “lesbian”, and “bisexual” are, along with “heterosexuality,” sexual orientation categories; “transgender,” like “cisgender,” references gender identity. Many trans people identify as heterosexual, and countless transgender/transsexual people have, like most cisgender people, a strong investment in the gender binary (only some trans people operate outside a gender binary). Moreover, the LGBT “community” is an artificial political category that, while efficacious, may also limit the understanding of the role discrete categories like sex, gender, and sexuality have in discrimination and (in)equality.

<sup>6</sup> The term “trans” is commonly used as a shorthand for “transgender” and “transsexual.” The term “trans\*” (with an asterisk) signals an openness to a broader spectrum of gender expansiveness. The use of the asterisk comes from search engine language: when doing online searches, the asterisk is used as a wildcard symbol that expands the search to all words that stem from the same root. For example, searching for trans\* may produce such results as **transgender**, but also **transnational**, **transformation**, etc.



the mid-twentieth century, even though that term is seen as pathologizing today). That intent to respect historical context does not mean that categories like Latinx cannot be used, so long as proper context for such terms, and what they stand for, is provided. In other words, it is not about censoring the use of a term or claiming that Latinx can only be used to speak about the present. It is about being intentional and explicit about how such a term is being understood and deployed as an analytical category. Furthermore, this is not a contest about which term is more refined. Some terms have stood the test of time because they effectively encapsulate and mobilize people and politics (often, in a racialized way). For instance, terms like Chicana/o, or Newyorican/Boricua/Puerto Rican, still have as much relevance today as they did when the launch for ethnic studies (particularly through the taking over of university campuses in the 1960s and 1970s) racialized a category of peoples whose identity is not pan-ethnic. Latinx could not stand for the work of the struggles of that era, nor does it speak to the specific regional contexts where some of these populations who are Chicana/o and Puerto Rican still face structural issues of discrimination in housing, employment, health services, and education, to name but a few. Yet Latinx could be used, in our view, as long as the fight against racial discrimination and racism stemming from ethnic studies projects is recognized and reclaimed, and continues to be mobilized.

To be raced or racialized as Latina/o/x is to embody a series of readings, some of which are contradictory—between colonized and liberatory frameworks. The hybridity of languages, sounds, and the mixture of phonetic uses helps stress the ways Latina/o/x is always already marked as non-White. For example, as early as 1951, Alfonso Reyes talks about the tension between the use of the “x” and the “j” when spelling Méj/xico: the former references the Aztec heritage, and the latter reflects Spanish colonization (for further discussion on Reyes’s *La X en la frente: textos sobre México*, see Milian 2017). The “x” as a marker of indigeneity was also used by scholar-activists like Cherrie Moraga, in her spelling of Xicana, as a way to resist symbolic violence and oppression. More recently, the term Chicanx has been adopted to further our understanding of the complex relations of power among race, class, gender, and sexuality (Contreras 2017b). We look forward to seeing more of these types of analyses that interrogate power in the Latinx category beyond gender and sexuality. This would challenge the argument that the “x” in Latinx is an imperial imposition, activating instead a history of resistance to racism and colonialism, in part through language—which we examine in the next section.





## Challenges, criticisms, strengths and linguistic potential for the intervention the “x” provides

A common argument is that “x” is an imposition of the English language that breaks with Spanish grammar and phonology.<sup>7</sup> Hence, instead of being an inclusive move, it is an imperialist one that reaffirms the preponderance of the United States and its more dominant language on a global scale. There are some valid claims in that argument. Discussions about the suffix “x” have gained visibility as the term “Latinx” is increasingly popular—as it becomes either more accepted or more contested—in the United States. There is no denying that this influences both the usage and subsequent debates about the complex relationships among language, power, and the politics of gendered, racialized, and sexual identities in Latin America. However, those arguments commonly disregard the fact that the “x” has been used in activist circles in Latin America (by non-English-speaking people) for quite some time, alongside other efforts to create a more gender-neutral or gender-expansive terminology, such as replacing the “o”/“a” (which typically, but not always, mark the feminine and masculine gender in Spanish in nouns and adjectives utilized to describe people) with an “e.” This is done because, in Spanish, the “e” is often the closest linguistic element to a gender-neutral suffix. For example, if “amigo” is a male friend, and “amiga” is a female friend, “estudiante” is both a male and female student. In these cases, gender is assigned by the article: “la estudiante” or “el estudiante.”<sup>8</sup> Activists in Latin America<sup>9</sup> have taken advantage of this grammatical loophole of sorts to replace or expand the gender binary in nouns that refer to specific populations. For example, in activist circles and at social justice gatherings, it is common to hear greetings like “¡Bienvenidos, bienvenidas y bienvenides!”. The “e” is also the way in which the “x” is often pronounced to avoid the awkwardness of the sound “[ks]” when replacing a vowel in Spanish. Words like “bienvenidxs” o “queridxs”—commonly

<sup>7</sup> Linguistic boundaries are often policed by traditionalists that diminish the effects of inequities in everyday language usage, thus contributing to its systemic reproduction. In Spanish, the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, which is produced by the Real Academia Española de la Lengua (RAE), is the only “official dictionary” of the Spanish language, acting both as the most comprehensive descriptive handbook of the language and as a powerful prescriptive and regulatory document. The RAE is the governing—and notoriously conservative—body that presides over Spanish grammar, syntax and morphology. It is worth noting that the Real Academia has fiercely resisted gender-inclusive language—which is not surprising for an institution that has accepted only eleven women in its more than three hundred years of existence—but has slowly bowed to pressure from intellectuals and activists, and, especially, to the undeniable reality of the rapidly changing linguistic landscape.

<sup>8</sup> As with every rule, there are notable exceptions, determined primarily by usage. For example, the word “presidente” though technically gender-neutral, was primarily operationalized as male because there were no female presidents. When an increased political participation by women made the reference to female presidents necessary, the chosen term was “la presidente” as the word “presidenta” was considered unacceptable—yet recently normalized, to the point of being included in RAE’s *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (in 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Although we are not aware of academic studies that trace and examine this phenomenon in Spanish, we have anecdotal evidence of this usage through our work with LGBT communities, specifically trans. In *Travar el saber* (Martínez and Vidal-Ortiz 2018), we gathered thirty-three personal narratives of trans people regarding their experiences in formal education in Buenos Aires. Many of the them consistently used the “x” as a gender-neutral marker to identify themselves and others.



used in written form in social media platforms, email, and communications of non-governmental organizations devoted to gender and sexual equity, among others—are pronounced as either the more natural-sounding “bienvenides” or as “bienvenid[eks]s,” which is difficult for many speakers.

Beyond linguistic conversations, this history is important because it shows three things. First, that the “x” in Latinx is not—simply or even primarily—functioning as a neocolonial imposition. Despite the symbolic relevance that Latinx carries because of the cultural, economic and political power of the United States, Spanish-speaking communities—within and beyond the United States—have their own history of searching for ways to create more inclusive language by challenging the gender hierarchy and the profound androcentrism of the language<sup>10</sup> and creating gender-neutral or gender-expansive alternatives to the gender binary. More than placing an undue burden on Spanish speakers, Latinx would come to influence, complement, and add layers of geopolitical complexity to these ongoing processes.

Second, the increasing presence of the “x” as a gender-neutral or gender-expansive alternative in Spanish nouns, articles and adjectives is neither a sign of the language’s degradation nor a threat to it. Rather, it signals its plasticity and health, as it illustrates its ability to adapt to shifting cultural and social norms, as well as to incorporate neologisms, and to adjust to patterns that emerge in major contact zones like the United States. Languages that thrive undergo constant changes while remaining cohesive enough to be recognizable as the same linguistic system. The difference between “system” and “norm” is important here. On the one hand, the system is the formal framework that regulates the possibilities for generating words and utterances in a given language. Though it can and does change, it tends to be more fixed, and hence it only varies slightly and slowly over time. The norm, on the other hand, refers to what is considered “correct” or “proper speech” by a community of speakers at a given time. The norm is much more flexible, but changes have a better chance of being successful if they take place within the guidelines provided by the system. For example, the word “médica” [female doctor] was not initially recognized as “correct.” Instead, many people used “la médico” because it was less disruptive. However, because “médica” follows the rule of creating feminine nouns in Spanish (replacing the “o” with the suffix “a”), it was incorporated relatively quickly and without much debate into the linguistic repertoire by both common speakers and the RAE. Reading old texts is a good way to see how these processes play out

<sup>10</sup> In Spanish, as in many other languages, words that refer to men are used to describe universal experiences, while the female iterations of the same expressions refer only to the concrete experiences of women. For example, “la historia del hombre” (“the history of men”) is supposed to name the universal history of both men and women, including events recognized as foundational to Western history like the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and so on; whereas “la historia de la mujer” (“the history of women”) would speak only of the experiences of women addressing issues like reproductive rights, suffragist movements, practices and norms of mothering, and the like. Also, the plural forms of masculine nouns are accepted as the correct all-encompassing term to refer to people of all genders in a given context, whereas the feminine form can be used only if all those present are, or identify as, women. Thus, if in a room of one hundred people there is only one man, the norm would dictate that the masculine plural form “todos”—as opposed to “todas” and, much less, “todes” or “todxs”—be used to describe or address the group.



diachronically because, even though one can still recognize “the system,” one also witnesses how much “the norm” has changed. As mentioned above, the use of the “x” as a marker of gender non-binarity present in Latinx can and is being extended to other nouns, adjectives and articles in Spanish. Spanish speakers—in the United States and beyond—are pushing the linguistic system to challenge its gender norms by replacing the “a” and the “o” with the “x.” This move is bold because it is in between the system and the norm, since the “x” is not an accepted gender marker in Spanish. However, this does not mean that the integrity of the language is at risk. Pointing out and challenging the gender binary and the androcentrism in a language does not mean questioning or seeking to dismantle its grammatical gender system. The mere presence of a gender system in a language does not make it sexist or cis-normative. The “x” is not being used to challenge the assigned gender of nouns that do not refer to specific populations. No one is suggesting that “carro” (“car” which in Spanish is a male noun “el carro”) should be “carrx” instead. That is a caricature, and more importantly, it is a refusal to acknowledge and engage with the very real consequences of denying a community of speakers the right and the means to name themselves by claiming that their lives are a grammatical—and also a biological, social, and legal—error or impossibility. That is to say, an attempt to hold on to power, which takes us to our final point.

Third, the conversation about Latinx, and the use of the “x” more broadly, is not about grammatical correctness or language purity. It is about biopower. It is about how gendered and ethnoracialized bodies are produced and managed partly through language. In other words, it is about the complicity that language has in creating, enforcing, and naturalizing the processes and devices through which ideological apparatuses distribute resources, rights and opportunities unevenly across categories of gender, race, and sexuality, among others; and, especially, it is about the agency that a group of speakers may have in challenging those categories by de-naturalizing them and presenting alternatives, even if they don’t always “stick.” Because one of the most important aspects of the term Latinx—whether it is here to stay or not—is the work the “x” performs in “Latino/a” and when transposed to other nouns. The phonetic stutter and the visual dissonance it produces raises questions about gender (what is the gender of “x”?) and about the plural, which is another way of saying that it raises questions about who is and is not included in a given community or group. By so doing, it effectively de-naturalizes the limited and limiting character of the gender categories available in a linguistic, ideological and sociopolitical system heavily invested in maintaining hetero-cis-normativity, and challenges the androcentrism and unequal power relations embedded in it.

## **Conclusion: Latinx as a renewed site for inclusion and exclusion**

Latinx intends to foreground gender nonconforming, gender expansive, and gender-queer as named (although unspecified) categories, similar to the feminist effort in using Latina/o to counter the androcentrism of Spanish language. There is a difference between a social category (Latina/o/x), which brings forth questions of belonging and community, and the naming of oneself, particularly when deployed in



contexts of a certain class and ethnoracial privilege, as in liberal, progressive universities or certain activist circles where the failure or unwillingness of others to use the term turns into an accusation of sexism and/or hetero/cisnormativity that remains oblivious of the power dynamics at play. Because of this, the use of they/them pronouns is commonly individualized, and offers less of a bridge to articulate a shared politics of non-gendered language. Latinx, in contrast, reflects an individualized gender-neutral term (“I am Latinx”), while mobilizing a group of people (Latinxs) that utilize and incorporate it as a potential pan-ethnic (or ethnoracial) category.

Hence, as mentioned above, the pushback in various forums on the use of Latinx as a colonial imposition may suggest something else: that an explicit incorporation of gender nonconforming people, and sexual minorities (unnamed in terms like Latina/o), produces discomfort among some conservative and normative Latinas/os. It also destabilizes in-group power dynamics, in that the mere plurality of experience can be perceived as a threat to those who have traditionally controlled the narrative. In other words, Latinx is a more encompassing term that invites, say, cisgender straight Latino men; gender-conforming trans Latinas; cis-gender professional Latin American gay men; and feminist Latina women (cis or trans), to conceive themselves as part of a category of collective identification that is rooted neither in a gender binary (Latino/a) nor on an androcentric gendered hierarchy (Latino).

In closing, we would like to pose some questions to further incite the conversation on the possibilities and challenges of Latinx. Can the reach of Latinx engage in the visibility of other social categories often made invisible within Latina/o? Will, for instance, Afro-Latinx inclusivity become an oxymoron, if Latinx is made to instill a greater sense of inclusivity? (And what does that do to the specifically named racial component [Afro-] and the politics behind it?) Will Latinx become a hemispheric term, and will its use and boundaries be more porous than what the tension between “Latino” and “Latin American” have allowed us before? Is Latinx a continuity of the use of Latina/o, or something else altogether? Is it a way to rethink belonging and identity beyond the gender binary/*through the unsettling* of gender binaries? (And is Latinx the only or the most effective way to do this?) Does Latinx have the potential to resignify a communal category—and the politics of belonging—beyond the gender binary that structures both grammar and society?

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**Salvador Vidal-Ortiz** is Associate Professor of sociology at American University. He coedited *The Sexuality of Migration* (2009) and *Queer Brown Voices: Personal Narratives of Latina/o LGBT Activism* (2015), coauthored *Race and Sexuality* (2018), and continues working on his book on Santería, gender, sexuality, and race, in the United States.

**Juliana Martínez** is Assistant Professor in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at American University. She focuses on the intersection of violence and body politics in Latin America. Her two main areas of research are gender and sexuality—particularly transgender studies—and the representation of historical violence in recent cultural production.

