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X-ing out LatinX:  
An Exploration on Debates Over Banning Latinx/X

*Check which best describes you.* Whether it be taking a standardized exam or checking off paperwork, we often find ourselves having to identify who we are in one word. For members of Latin or Hispanic descent, however, the plight for a collective identity hasn't been straightforward, and a more recent word has been created to identify members of this community— Latinx/X. This term is one individuals who don't feel the gendered markers in the Spanish language or don't resonate with the term Latino/Latina have opted to use to capture their identities. However, the term has sparked serious controversy, including a series of bills and legislations moving to outlaw the term entirely. While these changes are ones embraced by both right and left leaning political actors, as well as some scholars, some Latino/a/x authors and activists combat the term's disbursement. This paper seeks to examine the debates over the banning of the term Latinx/X. After critically analyzing the reasoning for both argument's side, I propose that debates over the outlawing of racialized *and* gender neutral terms like Latinx/X can act as the impetus for social change, where said "social change" stems not from the outcome of enacted legislation, but rather from the actual discourse instigated on the term — where the discussion on the different interpretations of what Latinx/X represents is the catalyst in cultivating a radical, linguistic and political movement. Before diving into the analysis, I would like to preface my positionality in this research. As a first-generation immigrant from Colombia, my stakes in these debates are ones that directly affect my community as well as the options I

have in terms of identification. Despite this, I will use the term that each side opts to use in the respective analysis, whether it be Latino/a/e/x/X/@, so as to not misattribute the span of what each side's reasoning is. Additionally, I will not be taking a "side" in this argument, I seek to only investigate a few reasons from each side's debate to present the potential that exists in discourses on racialized and gendered terms for social change.

### **Political Figures Behind the Legislation**

I start by looking first at the perspective of right leaning representatives and legislators, who have pushed for bills and acts banning the term Latinx/X from government utterances. These actors view the term Latinx/X as a byproduct of "woke-ism" — where they claim new terms are being created as a means of liberal ideological indoctrination. Texas Senator Ted Cruz comes into light after his retweet on Twitter, now known as "X", where he responds to two celebrities pushing for a TV show about a "modern Latinx family."

**Ted Cruz**

@tedcruz

No actual Latino uses the woke made-up term "Latinx."

The pairing of words like "actual" and "Latino" seems to evoke Jacobs-Huey's work on authenticity, race and gender. While her work aims to highlight specifically African American authenticity via comedy and hair, I find that the framework of her analysis is applicable, specifically wherein she parallels how hair and head coverings emerged as signifiers for "authentic" racial and gendered consciousness (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 72). Analyzing from the perspective of Cruz, I find that the usage of the "o" in Latino, the gendered male term, in conjunction with the word "actual" creates questions of authenticity that idealize and interrogate "realness" as a cultural value (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 72). To use the masculine version, or the gendered version of the term, is a cultural signifier where the realness of the Latin identity stems

from the cultural ideal that the only term that should be used to denote the “collective identity” per se is the gendered version. Similarly, Florida Senator Marco Rubio is working in tandem with Cruz to pass the “Respect for Hispanic Americans Act,” where he advocates for ban in a press release:

*“Hispanic Americans overwhelmingly oppose the term ‘Latinx,’ and I want to make sure our government does not bow to woke activists in our federal departments or agencies by insisting on ridiculous terminology like this.”*

I find Rubio’s usage of “Hispanic Americans,” here interesting. While his claim is that Latinx is a “bow” to “wokeism” in the plight for a collective identity, he uses the term “Hispanic Americans,” as a seeming alternative. Does this mean he rejects the notion of “Latino/a” overall? One is left to question the interplay between seemingly “on the same” side politicians, who appear to stand on different pages in terms of the alternative term they use to address the same collective. Rubio’s slight alteration juxtaposes the rules of authenticity Cruz seems to propose in his tweet, yet simultaneously constructs a different prescribed model of authenticity, (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 78) where to be “Latino” is to reject the notion of it at all and use “Hispanic American” as the term to receive membership to a community that doesn’t “bow” to “ridiculous terminology.”

### **Scholars opposing LatinX**

While legislators have their own reasoning for the terms exclusivity, the debate goes beyond the political scope. Scholars in the Latine community stand in opposition to the term for its supposed homogenizing tendencies across race, gender and sexuality. Author and activist Nicole Trujillo-Pagán notes in her piece “Crossed out by LatinX: Gender Neutrality and Gender Blind Sexism” how the gendered terms in Spanish, like “Latino” and “Latina,” work to

acknowledge the turmoils the patriarchal system has on Latina's — and, that LatinX promotes what she coins as gender blind sexism. “When we're all LatinX, we render gender identity choices as meaningless [...] we assert we've moved beyond recognizing gender because it no longer troubles *most* of us.” (Trujillo-Pagán 2018, 5). I find Trujillo-Pagán's use of “LatinX” instead of the “Latinx” aforementioned political figures have used in their reasoning, noteworthy. “Latinx” is, as she describes, a chosen identity and experience of gender fluidity, one that must be distinguished from “LatinX” (Trujillo-Pagán 2018, 2). This synonymous use of “Latinx” and “LatinX” in the following examples, renders a reflection of Irvine's work with informality and formality. Irvine details that the definitions of formality are often interlinked, causing an interdependence that social actors can exploit by altering their behavior to bring about a redefinition of situation and identities relevant to it (Irvine 2009, 183). Each actor's interpretation of Latinx or LatinX redefines the very situations it should or shouldn't be used in. For politicians, the lowercase “x” is indicative of a fake, or inauthentic Hispanic/Latine membership, while for some scholars the “x” is tied to the queer identity and it is the capitalized “X” that should be eschewed. Here, one wonders if the synonymous use of the term, despite its differing interpretations, alters the effectiveness of the proposed ban — or potentially opens the floodgates to new debates on the term and its place in linguistic legislation.

### **The Fight to Keep Latinx/X Alive**

There are members in the community who have fought for Latinx/X's inclusion, claiming it is not only inclusive for members of the LGBTQIA+ community who wish to identify with a gender neutral term amid a gendered language, but also works as a visual image of the experiences within the LatinX community. Alan Pelaez Lopez draws on the image of the “X” in

his piece “The X in Latinx is a Wound Not A Trend.” He proposes the “X” is a scar exposing four wounds in the LatinX experience signified by each corner of the X, these wounds being settlement/colonization, anti-blackness, femicides and inarticulation (Lopez 2020, 3). Lopez also contests the “nonsensicalness” others point out about Latinx/X’s linguistically or grammatically, claiming the terms very nonsensicalness parallels the exact nonsensical experiences of individuals who live at the intersections of these four wounds — an experience of liminality that simply can not be portrayed using “sensical” terminology (Lopez 2020, 9). This visual imagery is not limited to the X as a wound and is something author Tatiana Flores draws on in her piece “Latinida is Canceled: Confronting an Anti-Black Construct.” Acknowledging “Latinx’s” controversial position, Flores says she uses Latinx as an “operative construct”, visualizing the term “Latin” with an X over it, as in X-ing out the term Latin itself (Flores 2021, 64). One is reminded of Ahearn, who calls into play Pierces' work with icons, indexes and symbols when viewing the “X” as a semiotic resource. “X” for Lopez, falls under the category of an index where each of the four points mirrors an “object,” here being the specific wounds detailed, via a dynamical connection with both the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign on the other hand (Pierce 1955, 107). For Flores, the “X” aligns closer with the icon which is a visual representation via means of similarity like sketches or a diagram (Pierce 1955, 102-115) — here, Flores asks readers to view the X as an actual image or diagram in where Latin is crossed out, or X-ed out. Both of these images intend to show how this term makes a dual move, where it equally calls for a deeper look into the politics of experience as well as a visual metaphorical interpretation of identity.

### **Discourse as a Game for Social Change**

The outlawing of Latinx/X has already taken effect in states like Arkansas and moving

into Connecticut. Despite this, social change isn't something magically starting from the effects of bills and legislation. It starts behind the scenes of political actors and from the discussions and discourses themselves — regardless of whether in printed scholarship or in conversation happening around the dinner table. In all ways, the discourse and interplay between the arguments allows light to be shed on the issues of race, gender and sexuality that often are left on the backburner of politics and day to day discussions. I find that Duranti's work on speech as social action is critical in understanding the power of discourse on the different interpretations Latinx/X has. Duranti draws from philosopher Wittgenstein's "game metaphor" to stress that the different uses of language are like different games, where they may share some features but some language activities might not always share the same set of properties." (Duranti 1997, 239). Debates on Latinx/X, then, allows users to play this language game with one another, where the term at face value shares some of the same features the other players interpret, but all in all, forces players to engage in the different interpretations and possibilities of their own utterances. This game brings about the typical "competition" that comes with just about any game: the discussion between players, the reasoning behind thoughts and even personal anecdotes as a form of reasoning. It is in moments like these, where this "game" of discourse on Latinx/X offers up a space, an open-ended enterprise that helps us not only learn (Duranti 1997, 243) about fraught matters like race, gender and sexuality but engage in social change via our own discussions.

## **Conclusion**

I have sought to investigate the debates for the inclusion and exclusion of Latinx/X across legislation and academia, while simultaneously offering how the discourse on these terms instigate critical social change. Politicians and scholars in favor of banning the word ask readers

what it means to be a “real Latino” as well as addressing how keeping gendered terms may empower individuals whose voices are suppressed by the patriarchy. Others, who are against the banning of Latinx/X note how the politics of experience can be played into a word's meaning and its image. Regardless of which position was taken, the arguments themselves offered insight into how language acts as a “game” where players interact with one another, and within these very interactions, social change is created. While language regarding identity in a racialized and gendered context can be ambiguous territory depending on individual's positionality, the infinite interpretations of our utterances, and the way we choose to discuss them with those around us, create a space where social change can be enacted— where topics society leaves in the past are brought to the foreground of our realities.

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