

# Extremely Latin, XOXO: Notes on LatinX

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## Abstract

This special issue on Theorizing LatinX explores the cultural and political representations of the LatinX category and its widespread dissemination. The forum's range of interlocutors—Russell Contreras, María DeGuzmán, Patricia Engel, R. Galvan, Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, Claudia Milian, Richard T. Rodríguez, and Antonio Viego—differently approach and account for the exteriority, variability, and visibility of the X. There is no consensus or general theory on this critical contemporary matter, but the contributors' in-depth reflections and inquiries provide a provocative intellectual background for this term through conceptual exploration, fiction, the American headline, art, and the literary imagination.

## Keywords

LatinX, Latina/o, Latino/a, Latin@, Latino/a studies, ethnicity, identity

On 15 September 2016—the official day that ushers in National Hispanic Heritage Month in the United States—a status update came up in my Facebook newsfeed, sparking my interest. Richard T. Rodríguez, an Associate Professor of Media and Cultural Studies and English at the University of California, Riverside, and a friend on the social network, looked into the cultural and political representation of the unexpected boost behind the far-reaching dissemination of the “LatinX” category. This denomination's provenance is different than the “Latin” ethnoracial classifications of the not-too-distant past, the Latino/a (or Latina/o) and Latin@ limping toward senectitude. Whereas Latina/o and Latin@ put forth the ethical inclusion of gender within the Latino and Latina landscape, individuals and networks challenging the exclusion produced by rigid gender assignment and ethnoracial expectations have gravitated toward the LatinX configuration. “I'm curious,” Rodríguez broached the topic in a way that encouraged participation, “as to what people think about the use of ‘Latinx’ to account for those individuals and communities who do not identify as such or whose histories emerged prior to the coinage of that term.”

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It reminds me of an excellent essay by Pat Zavella (1993) about the difficulties of using ‘Chicana’ to identify informants who do not embrace that category.”

A myriad of comments followed, but literary scholar Nicole Guidotti-Hernández’s suggestion left a digital mark—on- and off-line—about the existential and ontological connections to this descriptor. She wrote at 12:51 p.m.: “I’m struggling with the easy and uncritical transition in discourse with the term.” Days later—still mulling over this electronic interaction as well as pursuing my philosophical puzzlement and dissatisfaction, yet again, with the imprecision, contradictions, and the proliferation of different ethnoracial labels for assemblages that never quite take the implications of the “Latin” to task as rigorously as the gendered nouns affixed to the Romance languages—I emailed the two aforementioned figures. Could we trouble that Facebook virtual status further, deepening the discussion of that cranked up and not terribly attractive X? What came next is this encounter in *Cultural Dynamics* on “Theorizing LatinX.”

Our shared purpose is to engage in a broader conversation by interlocutors who bring Latinoness and Latinaness to life via theory, fiction, the American headline, art, and the literary imagination. To be clear, this meditation is not merely about semantics. Our scholarly and creative energies are far from attempting to get the X “straight.” The intent is not to undermine or dismiss the usefulness and political logic of the X for transgender and other queer-identified individuals. A cadre of activists and news outlets has weighed in on the impetus for ungendering Spanish and the relationship among language, subjectivity, and inclusion (cf., Latino USA, 2016, 29 January). “The use of the ‘x’ is really important to me,” Chicana performance artist Artemisa Clark told one venue. “The ‘x’ shows a development of broader Latinx movements, one more actively concerned with issues of gender and queerness” (Padilla, 2016). Alba Onofrio, a North Carolina activist, stressed in teleSUR’s electronic pages that Latinx parallels the political use of queer, releasing a disposition such as “‘We are queer and we have a critique of the system, and we want to be entirely different and not just let in.’ That’s the same thing I hear happening with Latinx.” Onofrio gets across: “Having the ‘x’ is a way of acknowledging that politicization, even in writing it. It’s like, ‘Fuck the binary, I won’t participate in that.’ I’m not gonna take part in your ‘o’ or ‘a,’ you can’t make me choose” (Jamal, 2017). Isa Noyola, a program director at the Transgender Law Center, emphasizes that LatinX “is the remedy to the binary, to ignorance and limiting possibilities. It’s what’s on the other side of basicness” (Rivas, 2017). Given its ascendancy, it behooves self-identified LatinXs and pundits, in and out of the academy, to delve into its workings from theoretical, ethnographic, and policy vantage points.

This collection’s focus endeavors to get a good reflective hold on the matter: what the X is signifying; what it is inhabiting; what it is entrusted to tell (or not); what it is replacing or supplementing; what its investments are, given its dissonances and gestures. The eight contributors—Russell Contreras, María DeGuzmán, Patricia Engel, R. Galvan, Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, Claudia Milian, Richard T. Rodríguez, and Antonio Viego—received some core ideas to see where talking about LatinX would take us. This volume’s impulse notes illustrate that X is a matter for mathematicians, theorists, popular culture practitioners, the medical profession, artists, activists, and ever so many more. Terry Moore, polymath and director of the nonprofit organization the Radius Foundation, delivered a popular 2012 TED talk viewed 3,066,220 times (and counting), titled “Why Is ‘X’ the Unknown?” The conceit of his thesis is that medieval Spanish scholars could

not translate certain Arabic sounds such as the letter sheen (or shin). X is the mathematical unknown “because you can’t say ‘sh’ in Spanish.” The X is not self-evident, as there is already some mathematical problem at work that must be solved empirically. And yet the X as praxis, as Moore notes, is “everywhere in our culture,” underscoring that there is no burden of proof in forging a nexus with the X in everyday contexts.

Recall, for brevity’s sake, this storehouse charting some material culture clues: the X Prize; the X Games; the Xbox; X’s and O’s (or tic-tac-toe); the X and O wings of “the infamous maximum security cell blocks in which [prison activist and Black Panther Party member] George Jackson and others had been incarcerated” (Treviño, 2001: 183); the epistolary tradition of ending love letters with XOXO for hugs and kisses; an X as a sign for college admission, or the likelihood of acceptance, such as the one uncovered, in a postcard from Princeton, by a young Sonia Sotomayor (2013), prior to being appointed US Supreme Court Justice (p. 118); the X street markings approximating where, in 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas’ Dealey Plaza; the Roman numeral X; the Los Angeles punk rock group known as X; the English band the xx (and while jamming to their music, imbibing on Dos Equis lagers); XXXX as a substitute for a four-letter swear word; a shady X rating for material to be viewed by adults only; an acne cleanser branded as X Out; XS or XL to abbreviate garment size specifications; X-rays and, as one may say for extraordinary human eyesight, X-ray vision; the X chromosome; SpaceX, the American aerospace manufacturer; “Desert X,” the outdoor art exhibition in the Coachella Valley; Marvel’s X-Men mutant superheroes; *The X Files*; *Project X*; *The X Factor*; *American History X*; TEDx; Generation X, that body of individuals, who, in author Kurt Vonnegut’s (1994) ready wit, is “two clicks away from the very end of the alphabet”; and, as US Latino and Latina sociopolitical identities evince nowadays, LatinX.

Unlike Latino/a, the linguistic details of LatinX intimate that they are echoes reflecting everywhere. Hence my reason for capitalizing the X at the term’s end: LatinX synchs up, not so sotto voce, with a multitude of discourses and signifiers already in the public eye. The dual-directional semiotics demand a double process of disentanglement for Latin and the X. To step into LatinX being and LatinX spaces means to be as much Latin as the X, for as Roland Barthes might put it, X is the sign of our social and ethnoracial world and marks our behavior in it. The LatinX horizon hits up against so many daily uses in a way that Latino/a does—or did—not. There is almost nothing to breakdown: Latin is occupying a plethora of things in this munificent “X” gathering. One could not, as a case in point, readily “see” the terms Latino and Latina in, say, the Xbox (or, “LatinXbox,” if you wish). The X also stands for anonymity, as when indigenous groups “signed over” their property and land rights to colonizing Europeans, or when Malcolm X claimed the symbol as an interpellative action to be admitted into American society. LatinX conveniently appears to slide in as it moves “the” Latino and Latina out of the way.

But is it a sticky term? Is it a theoretical breakthrough? Does the X turn into our “common” language? And what does it mean when social and political problems with gender are not enunciated—when they are somehow not being attended through LatinX, even as gender served as the catalyst for the move toward LatinX? Previously, the distinction of the o/a in Latino/a was being forced into English discourse. Replacing the o/a in Latin with an X pushes these subjectivities far-off. Both transgender and cis-gender individuals are now, on the face of it, equally LatinX when this label becomes all-encompassing

for Latinos and Latinas. And yet this is the uncertainty and excitement for a term like LatinX. It is restive, hard to pin down, and pushes against those things we thought we knew and understood.

The very appellation of Latino/a—Latina/o, Latin@, LatinX—Studies speaks to the field's open-endedness. The intellectual language that frames Latino/a Studies at the institutional level enunciates and references the tensions and instability of Latino and Latina embodiments in its multiple iterations. Ironically, the one static "thing" that stands "there"—unasked—is another term, centuries-old, with its own problematic conundrum: "Latin." The approaches to the queries just raised—what LatinX is (or can be)—indeed vary and are evolving. They are the substance that motivates and keeps open a sense of intellectual curiosity, or "the philosophy of curiosity," as Ilhan Inan (2012) has it. My conceptual exploration raises a host of questions along the way. This introduction is a thinking piece that rhetorically performs attempts at coming to know something. I delve into the instability of the matter: to feel the pulse on the open X-ness of it all as well as the abstractions and *mélange* of connections that are happening with this new signifier. My recurrent concerns are a way of going about something larger, a philosophical unknown where the interrelated questions being asked could be approached differently and reworked, well beyond the scope of these pages. Scrutiny admits discursive engagement: it is a method of contemplation that encourages people to be a part of the conversation because they are, after all, a part of this analytic endeavor. Building on questions, as translator Edith Grossman (2010) postulates, peg "the almost impenetrable difficulty of a subject" (pp. 5–6).

Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández starts us off with "Affective Communities and Millennial Desires: Latinx, or Why My Computer Won't Recognize Latina/o." Her scrutiny works through a Latino/a Studies map and how we come to know "it"—meaning, the "X" in different intellectual iterations and across generations of scholarship. Revisiting her initial appraisal, Guidotti-Hernández writes, "What I once thought was 'easy and uncritical transition in discourse with the term,' which I stated in September of 2016, I now read as public, millennial-led, well-documented, public usage that has forced a reluctant academy to recognize the legitimacy of Latinx in light of the embattled nature of Ethnic national struggles that founded Chicano, Puerto Rican and Cuban American Studies in the first place." She analyses how pan-ethnic terms such as LatinX bear the load of recognition and diversity. "Affectively and sonically acting improperly, defying gender, ethnic national, generational, and sexual norms in the field and in relationship to whiteness," she contends, "the X in Latinx uses language to register and make meaning of these categories in their difference. The x in Latinx carries the affective overload for that which is not recognized fully, fully articulated, or that defies static ethnic national conceptions of being."

Antonio Viego's contribution, "LatinX and the Neurologization of Self," follows with an interrogation of LatinX's "explosive emergence"—a predominance that "is taking place concurrently with the ascendance of the neurosciences." Viego pushes us to consider notions of self and subjectivity that are inferred by LatinX, an unfinished configuration. "There is an element of the Lacanian Real in the 'X,'" he submits, "it cannot be made to make sense and it dissembles attempts at fixed meaning; it is the trauma that cannot be delivered in speech. I don't think it makes much sense for us to fail to consider that 'LatinX's' ascendance is taking place concurrently with the ascendance of the

neurosciences. I don't want to suggest some causal relation between the two, although I think the notion of the 'neurological self' currently circulating and the emergence and circulation of a term like 'LatinX' are both signs of the general indeterminacy that marks the moment with respect to conceptualizations of the human subject." Confidence on this far from settled X matter should be defied: LatinX plugs into an incompatibility of being. Viego prompts, "Rather than think 'LatinX' has got it right—made a space for every subject—we should understand it as the impossibility of doing so, even in the very attempt to do so."

Our next interlocutor, Russell Contreras, a reporter with The Associated Press in New Mexico, offers an intellectually useful account for anyone interested in the standardization of language and the representation of marginalized populations in public discourse. "The X Factor: The struggle to Get Latinos in US News Stories amid a LatinX Push and a Changing Journalism Landscape" provides a trajectory of what Latino and Latina populations in news organizations have been called, and notably through the parameters of the *Associated Press Stylebook*. "There are many media stylebooks, but the one issued by The AP carries considerable weight because of the news organization's history," he informs us. "The AP is a non-profit news cooperative that began in 1846 when a group of New York newspapers bankrolled a pony express from Alabama to spread news of the US-Mexican War. It remains one of the world's largest newsgathering organizations." Contreras regards the entrance of LatinX happening at a moment of media transformations, alongside business models and pressures that "accurately cover communities where Latinos reside." His essay is published here without citations, per journalistic practice, and just as it would appear in broader popular venues for general audiences. Journalists attend to accessibility, fluency, accuracy, and, of course, well-researched articles. These strands are comprehensively woven together in Contreras' tackling of the LatinX topic from the perspective of someone in the profession and in the context of "breaking news"—Latino and Latina news stories—with global implications.

"EE/UU: Exquisite Expression/Unsettling Utterance" is a reflective essay with visual pieces by artist R. Galvan. He builds on the Spanish abbreviation for the United States—EE.UU.—to signify and mirror the exquisite expressions and unsettling utterances of "you" and "you." The second person singular or plural that are being addressed are Latins at the crossroads of the "correct" pronunciation of LatinX ("La-teen-ex") and its conjoined "mispronunciation," LatinX ("La-tinks"). Seen as such, the question is not so much what does LatinX mean, but as Galvan frames it, "What does Latinks mean?" To understand La-teen-ex demands engagement with Latinks, too. "Latinx will continue to do what words do," he acknowledges, and the ongoing "Latinx chain of meaning" will not be exhausted. Galvan's superbly brilliant images invite readers to step in and fill in those X's of meaning. The "LatinX/Latinks" visual imaginary—Galvan's "Latinx-ray vision"—nudges the public "to see the disruptions of sound on the body."

Patricia Engel, a fiction writer, recalls some formative "X" moments in "On Naming Ourselves, Or: When I Was a Spic." Her contribution is propelled by eight "episodes"—textual junctures that reveal rich, analytic snapshots of LatinX being. Our narrator, a "Latin" from 1980s suburban New Jersey, learned, as an 8-year-old, that she was a "spic," but with some adjustment: she was "one of the good ones." This "spic" moment, one might say, gives rise to the author trying to come up with her own language to

“speak” its meaning across geographies as well as institutions. The “Latina writer” configuration is not exempt, and neither is the author’s relationship to it. LatinX is “a way to claim our identity,” she states, “rather than accept what has been served to us on a platter or shoved down our throats.” Engel also highlights the tensions in this new new: “As a writer who travels often within Latin American literary circles, while issues of gender inclusivity are receiving enormous attention, the idea of a replacement term like Latinx is almost entirely ignored. This may have to do with the North American tendency to lump ourselves and all our Latin American-descended counterparts into one safe sack so that our non-Latinx peers know how to view us, while in Latin America, national and/or cultural identity holds precedence. Even so, there is no rush to self-identify as Colombianx, Bolivianx or Argentinx. And among Latin American writers seeking gender equality, there is no call to be known as escritorex.”

The penultimate article, Richard T. Rodríguez’s “X Marks the Spot,” is a critical rumination of how the X in LatinX (and by extension ChicanX and XicanX) “crosses out or eliminates from consideration when we traffic in contemporary identity politics.” The author traces his personal trajectory as a student—the formation of his early intellectual language—which, as he so well puts it, “can only hope to add to the important conversations currently being carried out in the name of Latinx and signal the high stakes of identity at a historical moment in which it cannot not matter.” Rodríguez points out that X is a fleeting signifier, even among those X practitioners who claim this letter as a means to be “more inclusive of identities that go beyond the every day gender and racial norms that are rapidly shifting and being redefined in today’s culture.” X may appear as stable and solidly grounded—“X marks the spot” indeed—one that does not begin to capture the sheer velocity through which “every day gender and racial norms [...] are rapidly shifting.” The questions thus become: How does “X” capture passages and constant articulations of identities? Does it permanently “mark” one X state of ontological being? Does it unsettle and cross through multiple states and shifting landscapes at multiple moments? The multiplicity of the potential meanings embedded within it gives an idea of how the X moves and alters over and over again—even against itself, and even against the marked subject position of a LatinX trying to come to terms with a language by which to frame the “rapidly shifting” speed of one’s X-ness. Rodríguez takes the X to the closing decades of the 20th century and to a pop genealogy. His X comes from across the Atlantic. It is the X of English singer and musician Adam Ant: the B-sides of vinyl, the other side of commercialism, the record’s margins (or, an album’s “bonus”). Rodríguez’s flip side of provocation is where the X, perhaps, has always been a do-it-yourself (DIY) spontaneous venture, an individual form of on-the-spot expression.

The final work, María DeGuzmán’s “Latinx: ¡Estamos aquí!, Or Being ‘Latinx’ at UNC-Chapel Hill” is an indispensable discussion on Southeast campus politics, new terms of emergence, and “new” southern demographics. DeGuzmán carefully analyzes a local situation at the University of North Carolina (UNC), where the use of LatinX is potent and relevant. LatinX arose in early 2016, when the North Carolina legislature passed “House Bill 2: The Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act” (or “HB2”), “a sweeping law that blatantly discriminates against transgender people, requiring them to use public restrooms based on their biological sex at birth (or on their birth certificate) and not on their perceived gender identity.” The X at UNC operates “as a marker of

presence, of here-ness,” she tells us, concentrating on the coalitional valences of LatinX and how students navigate LatinX life. DeGuzmán’s writing, in this sense, is also a pedagogical essay casting light on forms of subjective and intellectual field formation.

Moving forward, this brief exposition probes the revelations and occlusions of LatinX through evolving terrain of differences.

## **X-bodies: Symbolic locations of the X**

Long before the extant materialization of LatinX, Chicana and Chicano ethnoracial articulations of “X-bodies”—to borrow from cultural theorist Scott Bukatman (1994)—attest that the X has been a significant precursor to the exploration of self-naming and of going from being an “un-identified” group to new political subjects. An abridged tally of Chicano and Chicana orientations toward the X illuminates, as historian Arturo F. Rosales (1997) summarizes, that the category “derived from the ancient Nahuatl word *mexicano* with the ‘x’ being pronounced as a ‘shh’ sound” (p. 261). Feminist activist and playwright Cherríe Moraga makes known that she motions toward “Xicana and Xicano with an X (the Nahuatl spelling of the ‘ch’ sound) to indicate a re-emerging política, especially among young people, grounded in Indigenous American belief systems and identities” (p. xxi). Together with those denominations, the distinction of MeXicanas and MeXicanos arises in Moraga’s (2011) *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, a collection of essays and poems. In it, the X “reflects the Indian identity that has been robbed from us through colonization, akin to Malcolm X’s use of the letter in place of his ‘slave’ name [...] As many Raza may not know their specific indigenous nation of origin, the X links us as Native people in diaspora” (Moraga, 2011). Per critic Juan Velasco, this symbol has fashioned “a performative model of subjectivity through the recuperation and reconstruction of ‘X’ as a signifier of the Indian” (p. 226).

Poet and novelist Sandra Cisneros (1984) ascribed the X to the young Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, who desires to begin afresh through an alias. Therein, Esperanza christens herself as “Zeze the X”: “a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (p. 13). Hers is not a perfect designation, but “something” that “will do.” The “Zeze”/see see alliteration carves out a moniker with a personal value, an X identifiable to—and voiced by—the self, and perhaps mirrored by “the other,” the reader who must pronounce Zeze the X’s “funny” name. Writer Ana Castillo (2014 [1994]: 161, 6) proposed, in 1994, the term Xicanisma as an approach to Chicana feminism that would “allow for self-evaluation” through one’s “indigenous connection to the Americas” and perspectives. Xicanisma—or “Xicanista,” as Roberto Rodríguez, author of the syndicated “Column of the Americas” for Universal Press Syndicate, speaks of it—is “a fusion between Chicanas, feministas, and activistas” (p. 7). Castillo’s Xicanisma strives “to understand ourselves in the world, it may also help others who are not of Mexican background or women. It is yielding and based on integration, not dualisms” (p. 166). Her frame of reference aspired to be “carried out to our work places, social gatherings, kitchens, bedrooms, and the public sphere” (p. 21).

Rodríguez (1996), the columnist just mentioned, self-published *The X in La Raza: An Anti-Book*. He uses the X to “rewrite problems of representation around new notions of difference” (Velasco, 1996: 220). Rodríguez’s X elicits Xicano participation “in

indigenous networks throughout the Americas, particularly in support of the Zapatistas,” thus forming the “X generation” (pp. 6, 8). On the Mexican literary front, author, philosopher, and diplomat Alfonso Reyes penned, in 1951, *La X en la frente* (or, “X on the Forehead”) alluding to the enigmatic homeland and national challenges as an X. “Once you bring up the question of the X,” Reyes remarked, “you open the problem. The word Mexico: should it be written with an x or a j?” (p. 129; my translation). Philological concerns aside, Reyes’ (1993) X functions as a crossing of planes and roads. He deems it “as a historical relic, a discreet sign” that allows Mexicans “to recognize each other thanks to that X on the forehead” as a cultural identifier (Molina, 2012; my translation). The X on the forehead potentially evokes the popular expression, or even indictment, by Mexicans to Mexicans of having “*el nopal en la frente*,” or “a cactus on the forehead.” This negative saying, a projection of origins and value, is uttered when someone does not recognize or denies one’s “authentic” Mexicanness. While we all understand what a cactus is, the cultural meaning of it is not shared. If the forehead’s X designates a symbolic location, it depends on others to confirm that it is there, as no one can see what is on their forehead. The correlative to the cultural meaning of cactus is that otherness, rather than the self, determines it. The self is minimized in this transaction because the X on the forehead is mutable.

To quote journalist Socorro Carrillo (2016), “Latinx is equal parts social-media firestorm, social movement, and social divider.” The millennial-targeted website Fusion—or a digital space the *Atlantic* calls “the corporate ‘Frankenbaby’ of ABC and Univision” (Meyer, 2015)—“allows and champions the use of Latinx, but if an individual identifies as Latino or Latina, we honor that preference and identify them as such” (Rivas, 2017). The *Huffington Post* employs “Latinx” as a term to collectively denote Latinos and Latinas, “rather than only those who identify as genderqueer” (Carrillo, 2016). LatinX communicates gender disruption, veers toward gender neutrality, embraces fluidity, multiple geographies, and speaks to “a mix of different ‘latin-esque races’” (Reichard, 2015). The magazine *American Theatre* devoted a special section in 2016 to “Latinx Theatre in the US.” This edition explained that while Latino/a has “never taken hold as a style in most publications,” including *American Theatre*, LatinX “has emerged as the most inclusive adjective for people of all gender expressions” (Weinert-Kendt, 2016).

Still, *American Theatre* pointed out that “Latinx makes a poor noun; though we’ve certainly heard people try, ‘Latinx-es’ doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue. What’s more, the indeterminacy of ‘x,’ which can sound inclusive in an adjective, feels somehow inhuman in a noun (person=x?).” With this interrogation in mind and in a context where undocumented migrants are dehumanized, the X does not necessarily present an option for liberation or self-realization in the American theater of our daily lives. Recall the X utilized for railroad crossings, and the different meanings and unnamable hauntings this dangerous mode of transportation may connote for unauthorized Central American migrants (cf. Martínez, 2014). They board the freight trains known as the Beast en route to the United States from Mexico. The X-ing here is not really a crossing. It is an X-out, a crossing-out, a continuous embodiment of X: X as expulsion, expendable, expunged. X can mean, as well, the unfamiliar—X as a blank—as not having a crossing, or many points in common. The “alienation or dislocation” that “los otros dreamers” find upon being deported—or returning—to some Latin American nations, signal that “many of

these young people have no childhood memories of Mexico, no immediate family in Mexico” (Anderson and Solis, 2014: 13, 1). Scholar Jorge Huerta joked in *American Theatre* that “‘Latinx’ sounds like the name of a laxative (‘Latinx—get all the shit out!’).” Writer, director, and performer Raquel Amalzan told this same venue: “Latinx is a rejection of stereotypical representation and the limitations of the colonial past, and an attempt to move us into the future.”

The deeper reaches of LatinX are found, too, in the Ford Foundation’s recent philanthropic work. The Foundation partnered in September 2016 with acclaimed Cuban American conceptual artist Teresita Fernández to host the US LatinX Arts Futures Symposium at its Manhattan headquarters, bringing together leading visual artists, museum directors, curators, educators, and academics. The LatinX qualifier was used, Fernández punctuated, to avoid the “default term [that] often becomes masculine: ‘Latino’” (Morton, 2016). LatinX is part of “a ‘linguistic revolution’ that [...] is inclusive of the intersecting identities of Latin American descendants living in the US.” Fernández gives attention to how “the term implies a new conversation, one that purposefully seeks to address the intersectionalities that Latinxs represent across race, class, and nonbinary gender. As an inclusive term, it also gives a very specific space to young Latinxs. [...] It was important [...] to frame the day’s conversation around the future, which will be defined by this younger generation that relates more to the term ‘Latinx’ than to ‘Latino/a’” (Morton, 2016).

Per *Inside Higher Ed*, LatinX is increasingly prevalent in university settings: “Google trend data show it began to appear in Internet searches” in 2015 and the label suddenly soared in November of that same year. “Experts say it first began to spread in academic literature about two years ago” (Logue, 2015). Fusion quotes Elizabeth Horan, a professor of English at Arizona State University, in elucidating that LatinX “started in online chat rooms and listservs in the 1990s” (Rivas, 2017). Horan is cited “as being the first to use the word” in a Fall 2004 volume of the journal *Feministas Unidas*, where the category “Latinx/@” surfaces (Horan, 2004: 25; Rivas, 2017). The University of Denver offers a Certificate Program in Latinx Studies. The Yale University Library research guide highlights “the principal library resources for Latinx Studies” ([guides.library.yale.edu](http://guides.library.yale.edu)). LatinX is also “seen on protest signs and in names of student groups that ha[ve] historically included Latino in their names. Seattle University now has a Latinx Law Student Association, and Yale University’s Divinity School has a Latinx and Latin American Christianity program. San Jose State University has a Chicanax/Latinx Student Success Task Force” (Rivas, 2017).

Academic publications attest to the unfolding of a canonical lexicon for 21st century Latinos and Latinas. Historian Gary Y Okihiro (2016) explicates in *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation* that he subscribes to LatinX as a “nongendered form of Latina/o that implicates race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation and their intersections” (p. 173). Guest editors Macarena Gómez-Barris and Licia Fiol-Matta employed LatinX in their 2014 special issue of *Las Américas Quarterly* “to signal a route out of gender binaries and normativities we can no longer rehearse. From the South and in the borderlands, the ‘x’ turns away from the dichotomous, toward a void, an unknown, a wrestling with plurality, vectors of multi-intentionality, and the transitional meanings of what has yet to be seen” (p. 504). And consult, as a brief illustration, these titular LatinXs in Frederick Luis Aldama’s (2016) edited volume, *Latinx Comic Book Storytelling: An Odyssey by Interview*; Ed Morales’ (2017) *Latinx: The New Force of American Politics*; Antonio

(Jay) Pastrana's, Juan Battle's, and Angelique Harris' (2017) study, *An Examination of Latinx LGBT Populations across the United States: Intersections of Race and Sexuality*; and Iris D. Ruiz's and Raúl Sánchez's (2016) edited collection, *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*. Just a short while ago, the University of California, Riverside announced an open-rank faculty search for "Greater Mexico and US Latinx Perspectives," with preference given to candidates focusing on such areas of expertise as "Latinx/barrio urbanism," "Latinx literature," "Latinx performance, culture, and the visual arts," and "Latinx education and equity" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016).

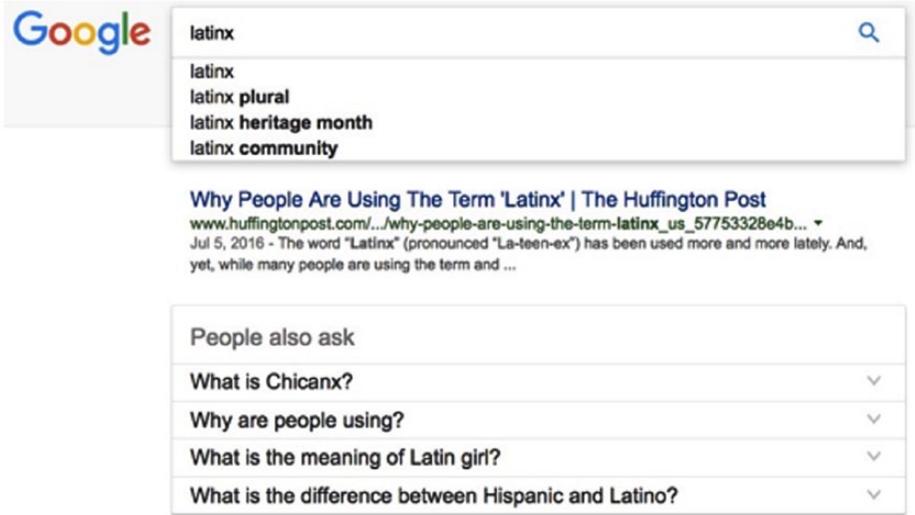
These groupings are all provocative. The notion of LatinX urbanity is engrossing and merits a revisit. LatinX as a mode of being—as a designation of self—has been propagated by the outside. Things, all kinds of things external to the LatinX self, have now taken on that identifier: LatinX *is* LatinX because of the things encompassed by this panorama. As one approaches the world with critical LatinX eyes, in the contemporary sense of the word, one seeks precision on the term's performance. One might ask, What is a LatinX barrio? This is not a frivolous query on LatinX syntax. Urban planners and housing activists must take up this exploration on the structuring of social reality too, for how is a LatinX barrio different than a Latino and Latina barrio? A US barrio—*el barrio*—that houses so many constituents who would fall (and not) under LatinX subject positions, should be modified, for stylistic and conceptual consistency, to "barriX." A LatinX space may demand, as philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1992) posits, "x-dimensional spaces [...] spaces of configuration, abstract spaces, spaces defined by deformation and transformation" (p. 2). A LatinX barriX is, as Lefebvre may put it, "a space of spaces" with different cultural systems that are not collapsible to Latino/a embodiment. Such a crowded, transitory barriX is a harbinger of numerous Latins and incomputable X's.

It is, in performance studies scholar Alexandra T. Vazquez's (2016) phraseology, a "mezclapolis," a sonic landscape with "mega mixxxxxes" (p. 111). Vazquez devices five lowercase and lingering x's, as each one imitates, echoes, and intensifies the other, not unlike an intense assembly of dispersed and unavoidable LatinX urbanities. Different self-imaginings dissolve and are put together again in this mixxxxx-and-match (or, perhaps even mixxxxx-and-patch). Ways of living and being alive are invigorated: X's are activated through sensorial experiences, chaotic sounds, wandering melodies, and visualities. These mega mixxxxxes have "a way of subverting narrow tales of genres—of creating the new sounds it needs for itself and for us" (p. 117). A sensory experience behind a LatinX sound may not come neatly and clearly in "Latin." Groundbreaking singer, actor, and supermodel Grace Jones (2015), for instance, concretizes this LatinX mode of being in any barriX—meaning, urbanities in the world at large. The Jamaican-born iconic artist admits in *I'll Never Write My Memoirs* that she had "studied to be a Spanish teacher," and so she "had the Latin already" (p. 115). Likewise, this observation imparts that Jones is already Latin, especially when she acknowledges that "I live in four or five time zones simultaneously, and I have four or five accents blended into one, a kind of French-Scandi-Latin-Jamerican" (p. 341). If Jones' case is extravagant, let's pore over her reflection on the characteristics and the kinds of groups that make a barriX possible. Jones comments that it is "the nobodies, the real damaged weirdoes, obscure hipsters, gay, blacks, Latinos" that shape "the city itself" due to its "erratic, heady energy" (p. 95).

The widespread mention of—and yearning for—“LatinX food” is another example of the seemingly coherent transference of the politics and social behavior of the “real world” to cookery and nutrition. If we return to Huerta’s richly symbolic assertion above on the laxativeness of LatinX, the consumption of LatinX food by the LatinX body becomes less appealing. LatinX *is* what it says it eats. But what, once again, is LatinX food? How do sounds, smell, taste, inspiration, rebelliousness, and pleasure fit in the longing of a particular kind of LatinX gastronomic package that, in all probability, may alter and break the traditional mold of abuelita’s “true” recipes? What are the main dishes that give this cuisine its “Latin” and “X” character as well as thrilling flavors? Renowned Mexican chef Enrique Olvera proffers some insights on how “food is a way of communicating,” in his case, the Mesoamerican nation’s “old and mystical foodways and techniques, its unknown flavors, its seductive botanical diversity” (Adler, 2015). I do not advocate edible excess, elaborate food adventures, or haute dining experiences. I am trying to get a sense of the textures of how Latin taste is being adjusted in movement, not unlike the amorphous LatinX body. Consider Argentine-American-Korean photographer Michael Vince Kim’s project chronicling Korean-Mexican communities who relocated to this nation dating back to 1905, as Korea was under Japanese rule. Kim shows that one of the most memorable cultural elements is that Korean-Mexicans have retained kimchi, altering their recipes to use local ingredients, and gravitating toward Korean-Yucatec cultural and ethnic identifications (Gear, 2017).

And give attention to Guatemalan American feinschmecker and North Carolina resident Sandra Gutierrez (2016), who has given form to “Latin foodways, a tradition with twenty-one different cuisines” in the American South. This heterogeneity has opened an array of opportunities for the author of *The New Southern Latino Table* (2011). Gutierrez dubs her fusion the “New Southern-Latino Movement,” an homage to a new regional way of life. Her recipes, Gutierrez states, are “happening naturally and by chance. Southerners and Latinos share similar culinary histories, ingredients, and cooking techniques, but we interpret them in very different ways. I find it exciting that, having found themselves in the same territory, these culinary traditions are correlating and intermingling” (The University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Are “we” ready to embrace unrestricted LatinX creativity on a plate, and go beyond dyads of authenticity and inauthenticity? And just as individuals of all ages “are reimagining their identities on platforms like Tumblr and Instagram [via] hashtags for Salvadoreñx, Argentinx, and Colombianx,” will emendations be made to “our” food and eating vocabulary: arepX, arrXs con habichuelXs, biscochX, buñuelXs, chicharrXn, gazpachX, mofongX, plátanXs, picX de gallX, pupusXs, quinoX, tacXs, tortillXs, and so on (Rivas, 2017)?

A partial screenshot of Google’s search box results shows that curious minds are surfing and tracking the comings and goings of LatinX. Precisely or imprecisely, Google’s suggestions reveal and rank information about Latinos and Latinas. They point to preoccupations about the world that are ostensibly giving cohesion to LatinX being. Google exhibits the temporal qualities and transitions of LatinX. From practical questions such as what is “Latinx plural” and “why are people using [it]” to how this logic extends to other ethnoracial groups—“what is Chicax”—these public keystrokes are crammed with many X’s as the center of attention shaping the story of LatinX online.



Take note of how the vexed concern of Latina portrayals—“what is the meaning of Latin girl,” as Google indicates—is still hanging around. As is well known, the pantheon of this erotic, made in Hollywood Latin tradition, is traced to Italian American actor and sex symbol Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926). The female counterpart to this Latin twinning spans a racialized and promiscuous sexuality, a hot-blooded disposition, a spitfire, or a tittuping figure like the Portuguese-born Brazilian performer Carmen Miranda (1909–1955). Her millennial representation is actualized at this moment in time through Sofia Vergara’s impersonation of Gloria Delgado-Pritchett—a curvy trophy wife with a heavy accent whose televised biography scripts an underdeveloped and rural nationality, Colombian—in the hit ABC sitcom *Modern Family*. Vergara and Delgado-Pritchett coalesce into one Latin body. A segment of the 2017 Golden Globes Awards ceremony, to cite an instance, had the actor—the highest paid television performer five years running—pretend “her accent prevented her from being able to pronounce the word ‘annual’” (Butler, 2017). The words “anal” and “anus” were enunciated instead. In this sense, a “Latin girl”—a recurring *LatinX girl*, let us say somewhat incompatibly—becomes, in a manner of speaking, the “X-rated material” that gives LatinX a particular urgency around groupings that evoke degrees of uncontrolled pleasure and explicitness.

Latin, needless to add, has a vast and porous genealogy, extending long before the United States existed as a nation, or Spain claimed the Hispanic borderlands as part of its empire. Latin has culturally and ethnoracially jelled to Latino and Latina bodies in the American hemisphere, largely in stereotypical ways that collapse these subjects as foreign and exotic to the US landscape. Renowned scholar Américo Paredes (1989) sketched “little Latins” in *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* to highlight assimilatory struggles by Mexican Americans in Texas and the Southwest, a terrain that was annexed during western expansion and the 1846–1848 US-Mexican War. This war’s final stage brought a formal agreement, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, legally incorporating Mexicans who lived in the present-day states of Arizona,

California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Texas into the United States. Despite their US citizenship, Mexicans became a conquered population through a new racial and class structural order. The “Mexicotexan” rubric captures the unhyphenated quiddity of a national and regional subjectivity straddling a monumental American history. Paredes’ category for Latin Americans—abridged to “little Latins” or “little things”—illustrates “a polite term” that conceals the violence of a pejorative lexicology uniting skin color with animal fat and fatty oils, as is the case with “Greaser,” or a racialized nationality like “Mexican” (pp. 149, 118). Under Paredes’ pen, “little Latins,” inured to US racism since elementary school, learn English. But they invariably think as Americans, in English, despite feeling “infinitely dirty” (pp. 148–149). Dirt can be read as the grimy substance, the matter that matters in the historical narration of people who have been scaled down to a Latinness-cum-Mexicanness presumably voicing its abjection in a “Latin” tongue (vide, Milian, 2016). It is so “Latin” and “out there,” outside the “new” Texas, it might as well be LatinX.

This analytic uncertainty and fluctuation of the Latin and otherwise—Latin(X)—pushes us to continually rework our tools of engagement with these categories. The letter X, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* enumerates it, is “the twenty-fourth letter of the modern and the twenty-first of the ancient Roman alphabet. [...] X was adopted by the Latins with the value /ks/ from the Greek alphabet introduced into Italy.” The value of LatinX, as it were, is X-squared, or Latin Latin. Put another way, Latin=X and X=Latin. Yet we somehow end up at square one, as both the Latin and the X remain indeterminate: what is Latin? And what is X?

An account of LatinX warrants a frame for all the other objects, like the phalanx of material culture items mentioned earlier that arrange and give other forms of “kinship” to Latins and their environments. If, as actor John Leguizamo (2007) has expressed, the Latinness conjured up by Tinseltown has offered “a parody of bad, flashy Latin taste,” especially when it is given concrete form through a “really oily Latin accent,” the material world of the LatinX takes us to another level of mass consumption and the presence of objects advancing Latin “personhood” (p. 53). To search for LatinX—to find meaning in LatinX—we also have to step into, as sociocultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1988) has signaled, “the social life of things.” Such an approach takes into consideration all things that are tagged with “X”: who’s buying, who’s keying into and using the X, and how do X things speak for “us”? X is limitless. X can be whatever it wants to be. How far can we stretch it?

## The X of the Latin, the X of our lives

LatinX takes us to the X’s of the Latin, and what they are hauling with them. What kind of X am I—as in: Central AmericanX-AmericanX (consult Arias, 2003; and Arias and Milian, 2013)? The X is unconventional. The X is multiplying. The X is complicated. The X is funky. I like the X. I don’t like the X. I loathe sounding so namby-pamby.

For the time being, I want to give thought to how we may keep up to pace with LatinX, how it emerges, and its interpretive routes. To get to the long and short of the hermeneutic matter, how is LatinX speaking X? LatinX pops up, in part, through hyper commodification in transnational markets as well as through the quest for intimacy.

Allow me to peruse two vignettes. The first is about family ties. This kinship is the product of non-heteronormative arrangements relying on biological links that remain anonymous. The second sketch is about anonymity, discovery, and leaving some kind of imprint, however elusive. Taken together, these installments are about coming to terms with reconfigurations of the self that afford an exploration of a LatinXness of the moment.

In the spring of 2013, Mikayla Stern-Ellis, from San Diego, surfed the Tulane University website in search of a suitable college roommate. Stern-Ellis stumbled upon another Californian, Emily Nappi, of San Francisco, who “had a similar build and long, wavy brown hair, just like she did.” They “both also had lesbian parents and were passionate about theater” (Reckdahl, 2014). Considering the similarities and compatibilities, Stern-Ellis queried Nappi about rooming together. But Nappi had already signed up with someone else. Still, they went on to become Facebook friends, with Stern-Ellis posting an autobiographical social media revelation on Father’s Day: “Thank you Colombian sperm donor, for one of my X chromosomes.” Nappi found it “odd,” as she, too, had parents who had selected an unnamed Colombian sperm donor. Once at Tulane, the coincidences kept stacking up (including sleeptalking and sleepwalking), until, voilà, discovering that they shared the same four-digit sperm-donor numbers. They are, in a word, half-sisters.

The Tulane undergraduates detail their parents’ motivations for in vitro fertilization (IVF) in this manner: Nappi “said her mother, a scientist, chose the 19-year-old Colombian sperm donor because he was handsome, tall, smart, athletic—he played tennis—and because he was interested in ecology, saying he wanted to save the world from global warming” (Reckdahl, 2014). Stern-Ellis’ parents selected this South American donor “for most of the same reasons, though his Colombian heritage was especially appealing to her because she has very light skin and thought it would be nice if her child didn’t have to slather on an entire bottle of sunscreen every time she headed outside” (Reckdahl, 2014). Theirs is an undisclosed donor—a “Colombian X,” so to speak—from California Cryobank, which is “known for its stringent selection process and its highly educated, young donors” (Reckdahl, 2014). Since the 1970s, California Cryobank has helped create an estimated 40,000–50,000 babies. Stern-Ellis’ mother relayed to a newspaper that this finding “is just one of the many amazing gifts” her daughter has “gotten from going to Tulane already” (Manz, 2014).

To put it less formally, there’s a lot going on in this story. We encounter gay family units, their rights for procreation, and the emergence of a technology a few years prior to the Reagan-Bush era’s emphasis on family values and traditional mores. IVF evinces a “rapid evolution into established forms of parenthood” (Franklin, 2013: 33). And, one should add, this IVF moment sheds some insights on desire through what becomes erotic Latin—or, LatinX—sperm. Concerns about environmental degradation simultaneously spring up vis-à-vis an embryonic LatinXness, one that is located now in New Orleans, site of this city’s catastrophic 2005 flooding by Hurricane Katrina. This tropical cyclone foreshadows the long-term impacts that are coming in a warmer world. Not only this, but the reproductive quest for a different skin color-scheme also turns up through a longing for biological untanned brownish skin. Facebook’s online social environment makes an appearance for the Tulane millennials as well. But this conduit exceeded, for the

half-sisters, random content, as it led to a larger mutually constituted reality facilitated by digital consumer technology.

To précis this fateful event, a nascent LatinXness acts out a shared affect (the two siblings, as noted, sleeptalk and sleepwalk) in a geography Kirsten Silva Gruesz (2006) frames as “the ‘Latinness’ of New Orleans.” This port city, with its British, French, Spanish, and American influences, is in a “liminal zone between the Anglo and the Latin worlds” (p. 469). The LatinXness of these two women is manifested, for now, through affect. It resonates with how Latin is arranged in sensorial terms. Think, for a second, of how aural Latinness shapes popular music discourses and consumption. The Latin Grammy Awards is a prototype where particular sounds, forms of expression, and performers amalgamate into “Latin” acts, “Latin” rhythms, and a generic “Latin” genre. The inherited Colombian Latinness of the two women—the fragments and traces of their “Latin” personality—acts out its somnambulance, a LatinXness that has yet to “fully” come into view and assume a representative pattern for a Latino and Latina “collectivity.”

I do not know how these half-sisters choose to politically claim their Colombianness (or ColombianXness) and, by extension, their general take on LatinXness. The sisters have a shared public Facebook page and announced in 2015 that they found another sibling, a brother named Greg. Their post almost conveyed excitement in the unknown and in waiting for future family members. This case broadly highlights what I am attempting to disentangle: the politics of Latino and Latina bodies, the cobbling together of ethnoracial identity, the anticipation of the loose memberships that inform it, and the narratives of corporeal and conceptual passing into a flux of LatinXness.

Notions of Latin completeness come undone through Rafael Antonio Lozano, Jr., a computer programmer who majored in philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin and goes by the sobriquet of “Winter.” The subject of the 2006 documentary *Starbucking*, Winter’s raison d’être into existence, since 1997, hints incredulity: to visit every Starbucks in the world. The objective of his “Starbucks Everywhere” project is to patronize five to twenty shops on a given day and sample coffee from each location.

Winter concedes that he does not promote the colossal Seattle-based company. Yet his gobbling up of Starbucks-branded caffeine yokes him to the unevenly developed coffee-producing nations that blend with the US Latin. Return to another inveterate Latinness—a “Columbianness” constituted over time—through the iconic Juan Valdez, the mythical coffee picker and brand character made-up by the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia in 1958. As journalist Juan Forero (2001) abridged it in the *New York Times*, Valdez is “one of advertising’s most successful fictional characters—the mustachioed farmer, a poncho over his shoulder and [a] trusty mule” named Conchita at his side, helping “make Colombian coffee world famous.” Becoming a “gentle and wholesome rural symbol,” Valdez, in geographer Ian Maclachlan’s (2012) words, represented and certified “100% Colombian Coffee” (p. 407). Winter—who is paying a great homage to the global north’s cold season without much reverence for the “natural” ambiance attributed to the “tropical” Latin—takes coffee as the stage that gives rise to another articulation of allegiance and cultural belonging.

Just as memoirist and novelist Brando Skyhorse (2014) acknowledges that even though his mother “had been born to Mexican parents, she spoke—and would

learn—nothing beyond fast-food Spanish,” Winter, too, hints at how the linguistically “luxurious” Latin becomes manifest by expressing the “instant” pleasures of the senses that are acquired through the emergent environments of the new American “home” (p. 22). The excess that shapes all-American meals informs this junk food Spanish, an ordinary and omnipresent vernacular. Its stylized repetition may be scanty, limited, and occasionally tripping up, but it improvises and communicates the Latin’s trajectory. Winter’s “coffeehouse Spanish” is an outlet to how Latins, as “common” but undefinable people, operate in the world. The frequency of their jargon—regular, extra shot, “skinny” latte, light roast/dark roast, single-origin, sugar/no sugar, extra hot—insinuates how a Latin “supply” is permuted, a residual X that may break the mood or muddle up the conversation, for they are expressing the (Latin) inexpressible and its characterization of an un-American life. The coffeehouse yields a different way of being “at home,” a social life that can be the “same,” if you will, anywhere.

Winter told a Delaware newscast that Starbucks Everywhere was “a random idea that popped into my mind, while I was at a Starbucks talking about how quickly this company was growing. Everywhere you turned, there’d be a new store in the Dallas area, and I thought what if I could visit them all? And what if I could be the only person? So about a year later, I hit the road, and I just fell in love with the process. I mean, just driving cross-country, trying to find these places, which is sometimes easier said than done, meeting new people, getting to see things that I’d never seen before. [...] The thing is they keep building stores, [...] so it’s a never-ending quest” (*Starbucking*, 2007). The brown subject—or, pardon the unavoidable pun, the coffee-colored Winter—expands the self through corporate growth, frequenting, at last count, 13,392 Starbucks in the United States and Canada, and 2,995 stores in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Latinoness is intangible, as Winter casts light on “something”—coffee, the crop, and the commodity—that is “singularly unique” to him. He stands apart from the business people, the professors, and the crowds who walk in and out of their daily routines. Just as coffee can be ubiquitous, so can the Latin with its mixxxxxtures.

Since 2012, Winter has revamped his mission with the task he now dubs as “Anywhere but Starbucks.” His everywhere and anywhere venture captures a restless energy by being connected to—and “reformatted” by—an elsewhere: “hot spots” of unclear, Latin genealogies tinkered with along the way. His LatinXness is experienced through deleterious affect—nausea, stomach pain, and hyperactivity, taking into account his constant hits of caffeine—a Latin spectacle walking alongside the locations of Latinos and Latinas in popular imaginations. Winter embodies a new site: he is a localized “foreign” import.

In the realm of the popular culture canon, Winter—our rather “strange” Winter, or, by now, our rather familiar stranger, making a name for himself, making noise in the world—may be deemed as unserious, forgettable, even “trash” reality TV material. But what are the aesthetics of LatinX, and should its cultural ranges always be of “great quality”? What attracts and demands my involvement, alas, are the snapshots of the “fake” and/or improper comings and goings of the Latin, and the “public” personality that may be attributed to it. Which is to say that X is a series of ongoing differences. The coffeehouse facilitates these ersatz and fidgety performances of Winter’s being—a “foreignness” in origin that is always “here.” Winter epitomizes questions about new ways of consumption and communication, paired with the supplemental identifications of

LatinXs, which move away from recognizable modes of Latinoness and Latinaness. Can we catch up to Winter's deracinated and unpredictable LatinXness on a global scale?

## Sincerely yours, XOXO

The life of X is passing through the realities of our American and Latin lives. I have taken this occasion to investigate and insist that there's mandatory work to be done with the plexus of entangled X's that are being passed around. X's are not a single body of ethnoracial, cultural, or gendered identification, but an expressive and communicative semiotic with an array of participants and observers. In ending with the epistolary rhetorical practice of signing one's name with the parting phrase "sincerely yours," I am, in a way, reimagining the "rules" of correspondence. This essay presents a different "agreement." It is an ending and an opening. It is, sincerely, an attempt to bring to life the friend, the reader, the critic, as a set of individuals—an evolving political family—an unassigned bounty of X's.

The X can be ordinary. The X can be rich. Kaleidoscopic. Transplantable. The X is flourishing, present, and living. Will you pass it up, or pass it on?

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