

11 Latinx Identity

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Who am I? How should I understand myself in relation to the categories of which I am a member, including my culture, citizenship, race, gender, age, and so on? How do I want others to see me, understand me, and value me? What if I do not neatly fit into the available categories that exist in my society? These questions constitute a series of rich philosophical discussions that have been posed by U.S. Latinx philosophers. While identity, in one way or another, has long held the fascination of Latin American philosophers, Latinx theorists in the United States have attempted to address a subset of identity-related questions over the last several decades, including questions on the metaphysical status of the self (e.g. “Am I one or many?” or “How does existence of the self remain continuous over time?”), on how the identities of U.S. communities descended from differing parts of Latin America bear cultural, familial, and/or nationalist ties to the diverse nations, cultures, and peoples of Latin America, and, finally, questions regarding the relationships between differing identity categories such as race, ethnicity, and gender.

This chapter examines a few contemporary philosophical debates regarding the status of U.S. Latinx identities. There are a number of philosophical facets of identity worth exploring, including a number of themes not addressed in this chapter such as existential approaches to authenticity and alienation, political conceptions of subjecthood/citizenship, and historical/genealogical approaches to the formation of identity.¹ Here, we focus on a small subset of the available philosophical discussions regarding identity. One set of questions within these debates focuses on whether Latinx identities are racial or ethnic identities. A related set of questions concerns how gender functions as a constituting feature or aspect of U.S. Latinx identities. This chapter addresses these two sets of questions in an effort to highlight several possibilities for developing a multidimensional and historically engaged conception of identity. In this vein, the chapter seeks to explore a conception of identity that maintains a pluralistic approach to the varied forms of meaningful group- and self-identifications that comprise U.S. Latinx identity categories. While there are many topics not explored here, it is useful to begin with these few debates to help frame the terms and

features that may shape our senses of ourselves, our senses of one another, and our understandings of the social worlds we inhabit.

To address these concerns, the first section of the chapter focuses on the question of whether Latinx identity is a racial or ethnic identity, looking closely at the writings of Jorge J. E. Gracia and Linda Martín Alcoff. These two theorists have been pivotal in addressing questions of race and ethnicity for areas of philosophical analysis including studies of political philosophy, metaphysics, language, structural oppression, and resistance. The second section of the chapter analyzes how gender functions within Latinx identities. Accordingly, this section considers several formative philosophical discussions among Latin American feminist theorists who have debated the use of *el género*/gender as a category of analysis within philosophical projects since the 1990s. Finally, this chapter aims to bring readers into dialogue with several multidimensional and pluralistic understandings of Latinx identity by addressing a recent debate, beginning in the mid-2010s, regarding the use of the term “Latinx.” The final section ties together the race/ethnicity debate and the debate regarding *el género*/gender, thus expanding on some ethical and political considerations that are important for researchers to address when engaging in discussions of Latinx identity.

The Race-Ethnicity Debate

First, consider how people identify as members of particular racial or ethnic groups. Many organizations, political movements, educational curricula, music, art, and public discourse honor, draw from, and sometimes criticize how we embody our specific racial or ethnic identities. For example, a young person, the child of Puerto Rican parents, born and raised in New York, might ask themselves or be questioned by others regarding how they identify: as Puerto Rican? as Boricua? as Black? as Latinx? as white? as Caribbean? as American? Moreover, a lot might hang on one’s answer to such questions. Depending on the answer, this person might be, for example, considered authorized to speak on a given topic, or worthy of recognition for a specific award, or considered particularly attractive, even “exotic,” or denied entry into a local social organization, or questioned about their citizenship, or monitored closely while walking through a convenience store. These kinds of everyday experiences for a number of people of color raise philosophical questions regarding whether people of Latin American descent actually share a common identity. On the one hand, some people claim that Latin Americans share cultural, linguistic, and/or political features that demonstrate a more or less unified ethnic identity that they continue to share in the United States. Other people argue that something other than, or more than, ethnicity defines the lived concrete experiences of U.S. Latinxs. For example, some theorists point to perceivable morphological features (e.g. skin color, accent, facial structure, hair color and texture, etc.) as the basis of systemic patterns of discrimination, marginalization, and violence that

Latinxs experience in the United States. According to this view, Latinx identities are more akin to racial identities, wherein morphological characteristics are thought to be the means by which systemic forms of harm operate. Yet, there are objections that one can raise to both positions, and this section of the chapter will examine some of the complexities of Latinx identities in terms of ethnicity and race categories.

One place to begin outlining this debate is the work of Jorge J. E. Gracia (Cuban American) who has been analyzing identity and Latin American philosophy since at least the mid-1970s.² Gracia's work, which has been pivotal in developing Latin American philosophy in the Anglophone United States academy, has focused extensively on whether Hispanic identities should be considered racial or ethnic categorizations.³ In *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective*, Gracia frames the question by asking, "what we should call ourselves?" Gracia explores a number of terms used to describe peoples of Latin American descent. For example, he analyzes the differences between "Hispanic" and "Latino," and initially makes a case against the use of "Hispanic" (although Gracia will eventually accept the use of this term for reasons outlined below). Put briefly, he argues that the term "Hispanic" does not pick out a set of properties that are common to all peoples potentially referred to as "Hispanic." Even a language such as Castilian Spanish cannot usefully demarcate who should properly be considered "Hispanic." For example, consider a monolingual Guatemalan citizen whose native language is K'iche'. Upon migrating to the United States this person may be categorized as "Hispanic" even if they do not speak Spanish. As such, the use of Castilian Spanish across Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean cannot clearly demarcate persons who may become categorized as people of Latin American descent in the United States.

Gracia is also concerned with the relationship between racial and ethnic identities, and argues that Latinx identity is not a racial identity. If race is meant to pick out members of a group who share specific physical features or a common genealogy, then Latinxs do not neatly fit this category either. He writes in this regard:

Many of the people who are called Hispanic belong to different races. What would be the characteristics of a Hispanic race? Even the Iberian Peninsula itself, or even within what we know today as Spain, there is no uniformity of looks or physical make-up. There are even physiological differences between some Iberian groups (for example, the blood profile of Basques is different from that of other Iberians in some important respects). The inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula are perhaps one of the most mixed people in Europe. Apart from the Celts, Iberians, Basques, Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Berbers, Romans, Vandels, Suebi, and Visigoths, the peninsula had a large infusion of Moors beginning in the eighth century and of Jews at various points in its history, and descendants of Amerindians have often moved

to it and lived and mixed with other members of the population. Indeed, there are even Africans, Indians (from India), and Asians who have settled (voluntarily or by force) in Iberia at various times, and who have mixed with the population in Spain and Portugal.⁴

Gracia aims to demonstrate that descent from the Iberian Peninsula does not entail a single set of morphological features that might be categorized in racial terms. Accordingly, countries, cultures, and languages in the Americas that descend from the Iberian Peninsula fail to fall into any specific racial categories.

Gracia also points out that genetic lineage is similarly problematic because it leads to a circular argument. He writes: “If I am Hispanic because I can trace my lineage to my grandparents, what makes them Hispanics?” (*HLL*, 13). Unless there is some prior criterion of membership that determines who is or is not properly considered a member of the group, then there remains no good reason to support genetic lineage as a way of conceiving Latinx identity.

More generally, then, Gracia is largely critical of the idea that Latinxs should be considered members of racial groups, and he thereby turns to the question of whether they share an ethnic identity. For Gracia, to qualify as an ethnic identity, at least four conditions could be proposed:

- 1 There must be a social group (individual persons by themselves are not ethnic unless they belong to an ethnic group).
- 2 The group must have distinct and identifiable cultural or social traits.
- 3 The cultural and social traits that distinguish the group must come from outside the country where the group resides.
- 4 Those traits must be considered alien to those accepted as mainstream in the country of residence. (*HLL*, 41)

According to these criteria, Gracia concludes, however, that Hispanics/Latinxs in the United States do not constitute an ethnic group. Many Latinxs residing in the U.S. Southwest do not meet conditions (2) and (4) since they are not alien to the territory in which they reside. As the Chicana saying goes, “we did not cross the border, the border crossed us.” Conversely, since all Anglo Americans are immigrants, they would be considered a unified ethnic group. As these conclusions are deeply counterintuitive, Gracia rejects the (2)–(4) of the above account, and argues that a conception of ethnicity need not rely directly on national boundaries. The current political occupations of indigenous territories in what is now North America (i.e., the continued occupation of indigenous territories by Canada, the United States, and Mexico) need not determine what constitutes an ethnic identity. Rather, Gracia seeks a conception of identity that captures the complicated histories of migration, the drawing of political boundaries, and the specific practices of communities to shape the contours of ethnicity.

One danger with using ethnic labels, Gracia argues, is that they may dangerously and inaccurately homogenize groups of diverse peoples (*HLL*, 45). Thus, his proposal for identifying Hispanics as an ethnic group is to pay particular attention to three aspects of identification that avoid pernicious forms of homogenization and inaccuracy:

- 1 those who do the naming and set the concomitantly required conditions;
- 2 the positive or negative character of those conditions; and
- 3 the breadth and rigidity with which the conditions are understood. (*HLL*, 45)

Gracia defends the first consideration because “to adopt a name and define one’s identity is both a sign of power and an act of empowerment” (*HLL*, 46). How one is situated vis-à-vis others determines the resources and forms of authority that are necessary for one to name oneself or others. Gracia also claims that adopting a name and defining oneself is “an act of empowerment because it limits the power of others to name and identify us” (*HLL*, 46). Citing the Judeo-Christian conception of the divine, he writes: “Indeed, it is not surprising that Yahweh (‘I am who I am’) is the name God chose for himself in the Bible” (*HLL*, 46), since Yahweh, conceived as the supremely authoritative being, has the ultimate power to delimit itself. Conversely, if a person requests to be referred to by a particular name and no one respects their wishes, then that person has been marginalized or denied a minimal amount of autonomy or authority.

Additionally, Gracia states that whether a specific name bears harmful or beneficial connotations is important. This is relevant to keep in mind regarding how and whether a particular ethnic group name supports the peoples it intends to categorize. Gracia proposes that, in cases of empowering practices of self-naming, a number of groups can find ways to develop new forms of shared meaning and connection that often exceed the derogatory connotations that previous terms may have. For example, Gracia notes that the term “Jew” previously carried negative connotations for Jewish people, yet due to the intentional use and revaluation of the term by members of the Jewish community, this term now “has become a sign of power and pride” (*HLL*, 46).

Lastly, for Gracia, whether a term is broadly used to refer to a group or whether the meaning of a term is rigidly controlled are also relevant factors regarding how practices of defining ethnicity occur. For example, consider the possibility that “Latinx” refers *only* to persons of Latin American descent who speak Spanish. This criterion would exclude a number of non-Spanish speaking persons of Latin American descent, and additionally, one might ask *how* one would have to speak Spanish in order to be considered “Latinx” on this account. If the criterion is rigidly enforced, then many people who have never received a formal education in Castilian Spanish would be excluded. Along similar lines, forms of exclusionary and rigid linguistic categorizations prompted Chicana essayist and poet Gloria E. Anzaldúa to explore identity

through the use of hybrid, non-standard languages. Drawing from her experiences growing up on the Texas-Mexico border, she writes:

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.⁵

Anzaldúa's emphasis and revaluation of hybrid, patois languages such as *Pachuco*, Tex-Mex, and other variations of Spanish and English demonstrates her rejection of rigid forms of linguistic identification for Chicanxs.⁶ She writes that because Chicanxs are “a complex and heterogeneous people, we speak many languages” (B, 77). In this vein, Anzaldúa's work expands Gracia's third point regarding the potential breadth and rigidity of a given condition for inclusion within an ethnic identity category, including, for example, as linguistic conditions for inclusion. Namely, if the conditions are too narrow, people may bear the brunt of exclusion and denigration. Gracia's own work thereby attempts to preserve the breadth and heterogeneity of Hispanic identities by drawing from the varied and rich histories of persons of Latin American descent.

Gracia's central argument for the use of “Hispanic” represents a “familial-historical” approach (HLI, 50). Drawing, in part, from the work of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gracia argues that terms like “Hispanic” must name some common underlying property of members of a group. However, rather than assuming that some property unifies or subsists among members of a given group, a family-resemblance model draws from the historical relationships between members of a given group. He writes:

[M]y thesis is that the concept of Hispanic should be understood historically, that is, as a concept that involves historical relations. Hispanics are the group of people comprised of the inhabitants of the countries of the Iberian Peninsula after 1492 and what were to become the colonies of those countries after the encounter between Iberia and America took place, and by descendants of these people who live in other countries (e.g. the United States) but preserve some link to those people. (HLI, 28)

Moreover, the historical relations to which he refers do not require members of the group to identify themselves as “Hispanic.” He states:

Some of them may in fact consider themselves Hispanic and even have a consciousness of their identity as a group, but it is not necessary that all of them do. Knowledge does not determine being. What ties them together, and separates them from others, is history and the particular events of that history rather than the consciousness of that history; a unique web of changing historical relations supplies their unity. (*HLLI*, 49)

The family resemblance model, then, serves to capture those “changing historical relations.” Like a family, Hispanic identity is formed by historically situated relationships among members, including legal relationships, genetic relationships, financial relationships, relationships whereby members share living arrangements, and so on. On this view, no one feature unites all and only members of a family or Hispanic identity, and their borders are often shifting and flexible. That is, while there may be genetic, legal, financial, and geographic relationships, no one of these features unifies all members who may be considered Hispanic.

Instead, Gracia claims that 1492, the beginning of the conquest of the Americas by Iberian colonizers (*HLLI*, 50–51), is the starting point for the formation of “Hispanics” as a group. Accordingly, the historical events that follow are those that unite persons by their relationship to this event. He writes:

[M]y proposal is to adopt ‘Hispanic’ to refer to us: the people of Iberia, Latin America, and some segments of the population in the United States, after 1492, and to the descendants of these peoples anywhere in the world as long as they preserve close ties to them. (*HLLI*, 52)

Thus, Gracia might consider Latinxs an ethnic group that is best characterized by their relationships to the history of the Iberian Peninsula and the conquest of the Americas, and, moreover, to the social, genetic, and cultural ties that relate persons living in Latin America, the United States, and elsewhere in the world who retain relationships to those historical events. As such, Gracia provides an account of identity for Latin American descended peoples that attempts to preserve the complexity, heterogeneity, and diversity of the group. Moreover, his account attempts to track the metaphysical question regarding what is said to be “true” or “false” regarding this complex group identity.

Despite the many virtues of Gracia’s account, other facets of his account might give us pause. Notably, the stakes of what it feels like to be identified in one way rather than another seem to slip out of view. Moreover, Gracia’s approach does not appear to engage directly with how structural oppressions might shape or impact forms of self- and other- identification. For an account that takes up these concerns specifically, let us now turn to the work of Linda Martín Alcoff (Panamanian American).

In her paper “Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?” Alcoff considers whether Latino identity is a racial identity. She frames her concern specifically with the “experience, ideology, and meaning” of identity rather than whether the category of analysis under question bears a strict logical relation to truth/falsity.⁷ Recall that Gracia wants to resist homogenization and conceptual inaccuracy, and he argues that one is Hispanic whether or not one identifies as such. While Alcoff also wants to resist homogenization, she attends particularly to the lived experience of Latinxs, the way identity is socially constructed, and she remains committed to analyzing the material consequences that result from how we identify and are identified.

With respect to race and Latinx identity, in particular, she claims “we simply don’t fit.” Agreeing with Gracia, she argues that race in the United States has long been thought to refer to groups that share relatively homogeneous, visible identifying features that result from biological inheritance (*LRI*, 24). Given that persons who descend from various parts of Latin America do not share any such racialized, biological features, this description of race will not work for this group. That is, Latinxs can have a number of racialized identities that include Black, white, Asian, Indigenous, or any mixture of these racial categories. Even within a given national boundary there is no racial unity that picks out one specific racialized set of features that distinguishes the dominant race in one country from that of another. For example, both Cuban Americans and Puerto Ricans share a wide variety of racialized features.

Alcoff also points out that racial identities often change based on where one is. While anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms persist in different forms across the Americas, there are differences in how people are categorized racially across the Caribbean, and North, Central, and South America. For example, official documents may ask about race or not, people may use different terms for different racial categories, and the histories of legal framings of race often differ significantly. She writes:

[T]hese differences are why many of us find our identity as well as our social status changing when we step off the plane or cross the river: race suddenly becomes an all-important aspect of our identity, and sometimes our racial identity dramatically changes in ways over which it feels as if we have no control. (*LRI*, 24)

The argument that Alcoff eventually proposes suggests that we think of Latinx identity as an ethnic identity. However, as we will see, given what she describes as the “racial realities” of people living in the United States, she also claims that ethnicity is not sufficient to capture the experience of Latinxs in the U.S. Namely, given the persistent forms of racial oppression that mark the lives of people of color, including, for example, state surveillance and policing, patterned employment, interpersonal, and housing discrimination, and forms of epistemic injustice (i.e. denials of credibility or

knowledge based on assumptions about one's competence or reliability), Alcoff argues that ethnicity is not able to clearly show how these forms of harm operate. Before directly discussing race, however, let's explore her defense of a conception of ethnicity.

The first argument in favor of ethnicity is that it points to the shared *cultural* features of Latinx identity, such as language, political histories, religious traditions, institutional structures, etc., which have given rise to unique forms of ethnic identities across Latin America, and which cannot be subsumed under any one racial paradigm. For example, Afro-Cubans, English-speaking West Indians, and Afro-Brazilians are all considered "Black" in the United States, but this racial designation overlooks the significant cultural differences that separate these groups of people, including most obviously, that they do not share a primary language. In order to capture the plurality of peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, some might prefer ethnic designations over racial ones. Secondly, another argument in favor of the ethnicity paradigm draws from the function of the term "African American" as an ethnic label, rather than a racial one. For example, Jesse Jackson's campaign to use the term "African American" rather than "Black" may set a useful precedent for Latinxs. The hope here is that ethnic labels can bring more specificity to the shared practices and historical circumstances of a given group. Third, Alcoff examines whether identifying as an ethnic group may reduce the harmful patterns of discrimination and systemic disadvantage caused by racism. The goal here is to promote the positive cultural and historical contributions and historical ties of ethnic groups, such as African Americans, by referring to their significant cultural contributions and avoiding the negative stigmas associated with racial categories. Finally, with regard to the metaphysics of group identity, echoing Gracia, Alcoff claims that "ethnicity more accurately identifies what really holds groups together and how they self-identify, and ethnicity is simply closer to the truth of Latina/o identity, given its racial heterogeneity" (*LRI*, 36).

Yet, despite these compelling arguments, Alcoff does not conceive of Latinx identity *solely* as an ethnic identity, since, despite efforts to the contrary, "perceived racial identity often does trump ethnic or cultural identity" (*LRI*, 37). To elaborate this point, she discusses the history of Cuban migration to the United States. While a number of Cuban Americans have enjoyed a measure of economic and political success in the U.S., there are significant ways in which Afro-Cubans, as opposed to white or light-skinned Cubans, have fared quite differently:

[O]ne cannot argue ... that Cubans' strong ethnic identification is the main reason for their success; most important has been their ability to play an ideological (and at times military) role for the United States in the cold war. The enormous government assistances provided to the Cubans who fled the Cuban Revolution [largely in the 1960s] was simply unprecedented in U.S. immigration history: they received language training,

educational and business loans, job placement assistance, and housing allocations, and their professional degrees from Cuban institutions were legally recognized to an extent other Third World immigrants still envy ... The Cubans who came in the 1960s were overwhelmingly white or light-skinned. They were generally from the top strata of Cuban society. It is an interesting question whether Haitians would ever have been treated the same way. The Cubans who left Cuba after 1980, known as the Marielitos, were from lower strata of Cuban society, and a large number were Afro-Cubans and mulattos. These Cubans found a decidedly colder welcome. They were left penned in refugee camps for months on end, and those who were not sent back to Cuba were released into U. S. society with little or no assistances, joining the labor ranks at the level of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. (*LRI*, 36)

Part of what this example illustrates is that race often plays a significant role in the United States, especially in terms of political and economic success. As such, while Afro-Cuban persons might self-identify as Cuban American in the United States, this identification does not change the material obstacles that the Marielitos or other Afro-Latinx communities confront in the United States.⁸

In the end, Alcoff argues that the category “Latina/o often operates as a racialized category” (*LRI*, 27). That is, unlike Irish Americans and Jews, who were able to transition from essentialist and racialized forms of identification to ethnic identities, many ethnic groups continue to confront obstacles to deracializing their identities, including the fact that “race, unlike ethnicity, has historically worked through visible markers on the body that trump dress, speech, and cultural practices” (*LRI*, 38). Thus, even though an Afro-Cuban person speaks Spanish, was largely educated in Cuba, and engages in religious and cultural traditions of Cuba, this person will nevertheless likely be categorized as “Black” in the United States. This form of racial categorization effectively erases ethnic differences among people of African descent, regardless of culture or geographical differences. She proposes that perceptual practices of labeling and categorizing people by race tends to dominate identification practices in the United States. For ethnic groups of Anglo-European descent, this means, however, that while they may be racialized as white, they are often thought to be capable of retaining an ethnic identity. Thus, Jewish Americans and Irish Americans, for example, are now prominent *ethnic* labels for people racialized as white.

Further, there are also political obstacles to shifting from a model of race to a model of ethnicity for many people of color. Alcoff states:

[A]ssertions of group solidarity among African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinas/os in the United States provoke resistance among many whites because they invoke the history of colonialism, slavery, and genocide. Thus, their acceptances as full players within U.S. society

comes at much greater cost than the acceptance of previously vilified groups such as the Irish and Jews—groups that suffered terrible discrimination and violence including genocide but whose history is not a thorn in the side of “pilgrim’s progress,” “manifest destiny,” “leader of the free world,” and other such mythic narratives that legitimize U.S. world dominance and provide white Americans with a strong sense of pride. (*LRI*, 39)

Dominant U.S. narratives of the state, including the nation’s aspirations toward democratic ideals such as freedom and equality, are called into question when we recall the unjust, immoral, and continuous forms of systemic discrimination, violence, and marginalization that Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinxs experience. Notably, the “systemic” nature of these harms stems from the long histories of abuse that these groups have experienced at the hands of peoples of Anglo-European descent. With respect to Latinxs, in particular, patterns of U.S. military, political, and economic interventionism mark the landscapes of Latin America and the Caribbean (see chapter 2). In addition, Latinxs in the U.S. South and Southwest have also suffered a number of forms of racial violence, segregation, and disenfranchisement. Today, many recent Latin American migrants across the country continue to face daily harassment, political vilification, and discrimination.

In response to these negative aspects of racial categories, a number of authors and activists have also proposed positive forms of racial identification by reclaiming, for instance, Blackness as an important social and political reality of persons living in the U.S. Citing the work of Paul Gilroy, Alcoff states:

For Gilroy, there is a “blackness” that transcends and survives the differences of U.K., Caribbean, and U.S. nationalities, a blackness that can be seen in culture and narrative focus. Blackness is a social location, shared history, and a shared perception about the world. (*LRI*, 40)

While this approach, Alcoff proposes, works well for revaluations of Blackness, she doubts whether such an approach could work for Latinxs and notes that Gilroy’s work does not address Black Latinx communities, leaving this question unresolved in his own work.

Given the inability to overcome the reality of race, Alcoff suggests instead that a concept introduced by David Theo Goldberg, “ethnorace,” may be more productive. She writes:

Ethnorace might have the advantage of bringing into play the elements of both human agency and subjectivity involved in ethnicity—that is, an identity that is the product of self-creation—at the same time that it acknowledges the uncontrolled racializing aspects associated with the

visible body. And the term would remind us that there are at least two concepts, rather than one, that are vitally necessary to the understanding of Latina/o identity in the United States: ethnicity and race. (*LRI*, 42)

Accordingly, ethnorace also captures the fact that some Latinxs who appear phenotypically white will likely not experience the same degrees of racialized violence and marginalization as those appearing more indigenous, Black, Arab, Asian, or mixed. While ethnicity by itself does not capture the historical and everyday forms of visible identifications that are used to systematically advantage or disadvantage particular groups, race by itself homogenizes Latinxs and suggests that visible features such as hair color and texture, skin color, and face shape somehow tell us something about a person or group's culture, which they do not. As such, ethnorace seems particularly helpful in our effort to capture the complexity of self- and other-given forms of identification that impact group identities.

We will return to the race/ethnicity debate at the close of this chapter. For now, let's focus on related philosophical aspect of Latinx identity, namely, the multiplicitous nature of identity, which includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, age, ability/disability, and so on.

The Debate Regarding “*el género-gender*”

For many, our lives are often intertwined with confusing, painful, complicated, and sometimes enlivening experiences regarding the facets of our bodies and selves that seem to cut across dominant differences. Perhaps, as María Lugones describes, you are one of the “green-eyed Blacks, never-been-taught-my-culture Asian Americans, émigrés, immigrants and migrants, mixed-bloods and mixed-cultures, solid core, community bred, folk of color” who are her audience for her analysis of self-perception and structural racism/colonialism.⁹ Or perhaps you are what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as “una de las otras” (*one of the others*) one who is “a mestiza queer person [who has and lives] in a lot of worlds, some of which overlap.”¹⁰ Lugones and Anzaldúa, along with a number of other U.S. Latinx and Chicana feminist theorists such as Norma Alarcón, Jacqueline Martinez, Cherríe Moraga, Paula Moya, Emma Pérez, Laura Pérez, Mariana Ortega, and Ofelia Schutte, are among the U.S. Latina authors in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s who have engaged in a series of rich discussions regarding the plurality of identity and the overlapping forms of social and political power that shape our lives. Notably, these theorists, often drawing from their own socio-political circumstances, articulate the tense, conflicting, and yet sometimes productive relationships in their own embodied identities. For example, Ofelia Schutte (Cuban American) notes in *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* that while her analysis is not focused on Cuba, her interests in cultural identity stem from her reflections on her own identity as Cuban and the political history of Cuba.¹¹ Likewise,

Mariana Ortega writes in *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* that the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979 significantly impacted her life and philosophical interests. In this vein, analyses of lived experience are common across much U.S. Latinx and Chicana feminist theory.

Building on the previous discussion regarding Latinx identity as a racial/ethnic identity, a number of authors have examined the relationship between race, ethnicity, and gender, in particular. As such, this section of the chapter examines a few arguments regarding gender as a facet of identity. Notably, a number of authors in the United States have adopted a conception of gender to articulate their positionality (one's social location) as bearing significant political, cultural, and embodied content. For instance, Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the forms of sexual and intimate partner violence that many women of color experience (B, 34–35), and links this violence to the patterns of gender-based violence that women have experienced due to colonial conquest and imperial expansion (B, 44). As early as 1981, Anzaldúa used the category of gender to analyze the power relations that shaped her experiences as a Chicana.

However, as Schutte and María Luisa Femenías have argued, the use of “gender” within the context of Latin America is significantly different from how it has been used among U.S. feminist movements, and they describe why some Latin Americans have resisted using gender as a category of analysis.¹² For instance, they state that many Latin American feminist social movements in the 1960s used terms like “patriarchy” (*patriarcado*) and “capitalist patriarchy” (*patriarcado capitalista*) to name the “socioeconomic and ideological conditions legitimating the power of men and of male-dominant institutions over women.”¹³ The use of these specific terms, they argue, named power and economic relations that the more general term “gender” overlooks or renders invisible.

In fact, it was not until the 1990s that the term *género*, as in *los estudios de género* (gender studies) and *el enfoque de género* (gender focus) came to prominence. But even here feminist critics pointed out that it was being euphemistically. That is, by using gender as a category of analysis, theorists and policy analysts risked losing the more radical connotations associated with a term like capitalist patriarchy, which referred to systemic harms. In this vein, Francesca Gargallo (Italian-Mexican) writes:

At the beginning of the nineties, they [feminists in Latin America] launched the transition from feminism of social activism to feminism of public policy within the realm of national and international institutions: fighting for quotas in the parties, women's councils, participation in the activities of the United Nations, obtaining offices for women's affairs in the majority of Latin American nations.¹⁴

The concept of gender, Gargallo argues, served significant purposes during this period of transition. Gargallo traces the work of Latin American

feminists such as Eli Bartra (Mexico), Norma Mogrovejo (Peru), Margarita Pisano (Chile), Amalia Fischer (Brazil), and Urania Ungo (Panama) to chart the criticism and political stakes of using a term such as *género*, rather than naming women, women's specific contributions, or the systems of hierarchical power that violate and marginalize women in the Global South.

Another concern raised by feminist critics of this period was that the Spanish term *género* did not carry the same connotations in Spanish as it did in English. The term “*género*” in Spanish, Femenías and Schutte write, “usually meant ‘species’ or ‘kind’ (as in ‘*el género humano*,’ humankind), or, if referring to masculine/feminine differences, its domain was grammar (gendered nouns, pronouns, and adjectives).”¹⁵ In this sense, gender as a category of analysis may be considered an imposition and a tactic from Anglo-dominant spaces to depoliticize the efforts of feminist critics in Latin America. (As I suggest in the third section, we find interesting parallels between this debate and those of contemporary critics of the term “Latinx.”) Since the use of gender is meant to be more neutral and universal, it has the potential of erasing the specificity of the positionalities of women, the constructive work undertaken by women, and of dislocating the concreteness of feminist engagement.

Lastly, regarding critical discourses of gender, the work of María Lugones (Argentine) has been groundbreaking in this vein. Her 2007 article “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” has sparked a series of conversations in Anglophone and Hispanophone feminist communities regarding the desire to universalize the notion of gender. Drawing specifically from Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, Laguna Pueblo feminist scholar Paula Gunn Allen, and Peruvian Marxist sociologist Aníbal Quijano, Lugones argues that the binary gender system of man-woman is a product of modern/colonial Eurocentrism. By examining the structures of pre-conquest indigenous social and kinship relations, she argues that a binary gender system, including the reproductive labor associated with women, is a facet of colonial violence. Within this organizing structure, she states:

Beginning with the colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean, a hierarchical, dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonized in the service of Western man. It was accompanied by other dichotomous hierarchical distinctions, among them that between men and women. This distinction became a mark of the human and a mark of civilization. Only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species—as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild. The European, bourgeois, colonial, modern man became a subject/agent, fit for rule, for public life and ruling, a being of civilization, heterosexual, Christian, a being of mind and reason. The European bourgeois woman was not understood as his complement, but as someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity,

passivity, and being home-bound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man. The imposition of these dichotomous hierarchies became woven into the historicity of relations, including intimate relations.¹⁶

Lugones traces the Eurocentric conception of being a “modern” and “civilized” human being as importantly connected to relations of power between colonized peoples and colonizing nation-states. Namely, colonizers were invested in marking and utilizing gender categories such as “man” and “woman” as an exercise of colonial power. One facet of the “civilizing mission,” she argues, is to replace and transform the desires, embodiments, labor roles, and societal structures of colonized and enslaved peoples to reproduce the gender norms of the Western world. To combat this, Lugones turns to the work of Aymaran, Yoruban, and Cherokee cosmologies, which cannot be reduced to the Eurocentric binary of man-woman. Moreover, her call to future scholarship on the modern/colonial gender system is to continue to find those points of rupture and inadequacy among colonized and enslaved peoples who have challenged the impositions of a binary Eurocentric framing. Such a move, she proposes, highlights the “historicity of the oppressing \leftrightarrow resisting relation and thus [emphasizes] concrete, lived resistances to the coloniality of gender.”¹⁷ As such, European forms of domination, including gender domination, can be considered neither totalizing nor complete.¹⁸

Accordingly, Lugones’s work, as well as that of Schutte, Femenías, Gargallo, and a number of other feminist scholars, indicates the limitations of the use of gender as a category of analysis. In the following section, we conclude by turning to a recent debate regarding further categories of analysis impacting Latinxs that raise philosophical questions regarding identity.

The Debate Regarding “Latinx-Latino/a”

The term “Latinx” began being used on social media, academic publications, and in popular online newspapers in the mid-2010s. The term has circulated across queer, transgender, and non-binary communities to offer a gender-neutral term for people of Latin American descent. While a number of people advocating for the term see the shift away from binary-gendered terms like “Latina” or “Latino” as a positive step toward recognizing and affirming the identities of transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer Latinxs, critics of the term consider its use an imposition and a problematic shift away from common orthographic features of the Castilian Spanish language. Regarding this debate, Catalina M. de Onís conducted interviews with five Latina/o/x scholars. Throughout the interview, we see several proponents of the term stating that:

[T]he use of the “x” goes beyond the issue of gender because it attempts to be inclusive of all those who identify as part of the super diverse

Latinx population and to embrace our uniqueness within the Latinx community. This includes gender, sexual preferences, and transnationality, among many others.¹⁹

In addition, another proponent states that “Latinx” can be a kind of “reclamation of all kinds of erasure. By using the ‘x’ we expose erasure and refuse it at the same time” (X, 86). Accordingly, one unifying thread among these views is the opening of linguistic and interpretive space within Latin American-descended communities through the use of the term.

Other proponents of the term point to the importance of the use and pronunciation of terms with the letter “x” in Nahuatl, an indigenous language of Mesoamerica. The “x” in words like “Xicana” (pronounced CHEE- or SHEE-cana) have been defended along similar lines. For example, Cherríe Moraga writes, “Throughout this text, I spell Xicana and Xicano (Chicana and Chicano) 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.”²⁰ For Moraga and others, the linguistic shift to integrate Nahuatl sounds and graphemes represents an attempt to practice and emphasize the communicative pluralism that many peoples descended from various geopolitical contexts of the Americas experience. Moreover, her emphasis on indigeneity becomes a “política,” a politics, that seeks to reject Eurocentric and Anglocentric linguistic norms, including naming practices for oneself and others.

Yet, critics of “Xicana/o” or “Xicanx” point out that Nahuatl was an alphabetic language imposed on Mexica (often called “Aztec”) peoples during conquest. Notably, Nahuatl became used to represent, in a linear and phonetic fashion, the complex pictographs that constituted pre-conquest forms of story-telling, record-keeping, and the writing of history. One critic, Dominick Ortiz writes that terms like “Xicanx” simply refer back to a colonially imposed alphabetic language, and, thus, do not honor indigenous roots.²¹

Other critics argue that terms like “Latinx” impose constraints on Spanish-dominant audiences, and thus serve as a further layer of imperial expansion that should be resisted by Latin American communities. In this vein, one interviewee, Eric César Morales, writes:

Using “x” and “lxs” in Spanish is extensively difficult, for while they seem manageable when written, in pronunciation they read more as “ex” and “lexes.” Try saying the phrase, “Mis amigexes en Indiana son lexes Latinexes.” The use of “x” interrupts one of the beautiful things about language—that its speakers give it a natural flow. This might sound like a minor issue to bilingual individuals established in the United States, but when Spanish is the only language a person speaks and they’re already operating on the margins of society in this country, it’s clear that “Latinx” was not meant to be inclusive of their spoken

realities ... The “x” termination is not about inclusivity but about making a public and political statement, which comes at the cost of further marginalizing recent immigrants who are increasingly vulnerable in this country. (X, 84–86)

As such, Morales offers another reason to reject the claim that the use of terms like “Latinx” actually further support efforts to critique Euro- and Anglocentrism.

In response to some of these concerns, people defending the use of “Latinx” and “Xicanx” reject forms of linguistic purity that seek to find modes of engagement that are “untouched” by colonial and imperial history and continuing domination. Rather, echoing Roy Pérez, “Language offers ... fluidity and we should take advantage of it” by seeking ways to honor the multiplicity, plurality, and lived experiences of Latin Americans and Latin American-descended peoples today, including our ongoing struggles with imperialism, assimilation, and the harms of colonialism (X, 11).

Pilar Melero, defending the term, also states that the term “Latinx” is not meant to serve as an imposition on others. Rather, she writes regarding Morales’ claims:

This [view] assumes all recent immigrants reject the use of the term, and it even implies that they are all heteronormative. On the contrary, I believe new immigrants, like other people, will make their own decisions on the use of the term, depending on their own socio-cultural background and identity needs. However, I think the option of having a gender-neutral pronoun liberates those immigrants who belong to non-gender conforming communities and feel the need to identify as gender-queer. I think the point is not should we use the x or not, but let it be an option. *El uso o desuso de la palabra va a dictar su futuro* [Whether or not the word is used will determine its future]. (X, 87, italics added)

Melero’s point is that “Latinx” may serve as a form of play or a way to augment linguistic practices among Latin American-descended communities in Anglo-dominant spaces. As such, the benefits for creating conceptual space for gender non-conforming, trans, and non-binary people of Latin American descent should remain a significant concern, and if the term “Latinx” is able to help support such efforts, then it ought to remain among the available options for naming and theorizing about the diverse groups of peoples that comprise the geopolitical sites of Latin America. Moreover, as several of the other interviewees state, within Hispanophone contexts, the ending -e may also serve as a useful practice that affirms and includes transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming peoples. For example, “Elle está cansade” can be used instead of “Ella está cansada/Él está cansado.”²²

From this charged set of concerns, we can glean that there are notable parallels between the cautions by 1990s feminists in Latin America about forms of political dominance that may stem from the use of the term *género*. Notably, the interviewee above who challenges the use of “Latinx” appears to be concerned that the term “Latinx” is a political move among English-dominant speakers to control and regulate the aesthetic and political features of how the Spanish language is spoken, read, and used.

Yet, if we examine the history of the term *género* across differing sites in Latin America, rather than serving as merely a severe form of depoliticization or censure, as Schutte notes, we actually see a much broader set of responses from within feminist social organizing and academic writing in Latin America. Schutte states that there are roughly four senses of *género*:

- 1 *género* as a strictly logical category marking the distinction between women and men as conventionally accepted by various societies ...
- 2 *género* as a collective term useful for speaking about women of about issues concerning women ...
- 3 *género* as a designator of elements of group identities or kindred relations among women, useful for speaking about women or women’s issues from an involved standpoint ...
- 4 *género* as a power-laden concept used to regulate the sexual identities of women and men.²³

In this vein, Schutte’s work on the *género*-gender debate indicates explicit ways in which the term has traveled across different sites of analysis and critique, and has created a variety of interpretative lenses for feminist theory in Latin America. Along similar lines, Sandra L. Soto-Santiago, another interviewee in the M. de Onís piece states:

Communication and how we engage in it is an everyday practice and that cannot be predetermined by any group because it is an organic process that is ongoing. I also believe that the untranslatability of the term [“Latinx”] is what makes it more empowering. It does not seek to create a new rule but rather to dismantle what exists and invites us to re-think how individuals with different ideologies, perspectives, and identities are included or rejected from different spaces or communities through language. (X, 91)

The point here echoes the multiplicity of ways in which a term of identification, critique, or analysis becomes part of our ongoing processes of contestation and meaning-making. Thus, the political or moral value of a given term cannot be delineated in advance.

Claudia de Lima Costa (Brazilian) also proposes that the uses and abuses of terms like “*género*” and “gender” must remain open to analysis and critique, despite their multiplicity. Sharing in a critical vein of scholarship

against the universalizing tendency to frame gender as a primary tool of analysis, Lima Costa notes that identities are never fixed, and that we must theorize them as “physical and discursive spaces structured by the operations of power.”²⁴ Within Latina feminism, conceptions of the continued nature of struggle, the plurality of the experiential lives of Latin American-descended peoples, and the ongoing interpretive processes that allow us to make sense of our worlds are all hallmarks of U.S. Latinx philosophy.

We can thus find a core trajectory among the theorists we have explored in this chapter. Namely, Latinx identities are neither stable nor uncontested sites of philosophical investigation. Because they strike at the core of our lived experiences, often serving as the places from which we speak, think, write, and act, identities are a crucial site of Latinx and Latin American philosophy. While we have only reviewed a few questions in this chapter, our hope is that these discussions encourage further study, analysis, and exploration into what our identities are, what they ought to be, and why they continue to matter to us.

Notes

- 1 For important work on these themes, see these sources from Latin American and U.S. Latinx philosophy: Barvosa, *Wealth of Selves*; Blackwell, Boj Lopez, and Urrieta, “Critical Latinx Indigenities”; Cisneros “‘Alien’ Sexuality”; Martí, *José Martí Reader*; Martínez, *Phenomenology of Chicana Experience and Identity*; Méndez, “Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology”; Mendoza, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of Immigration*; Ortega, *In-Between*; Paccacerqua, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s Affective Logic of Volverse Una”; Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*; Rivera Berruz, “Extending into Space”; Rodó, *Ariel*; Ruíz, “Linguistic Alterity and the Multiplicitous Self”; Velásquez, “States of Violence and the Right to Exclude”; Zea, *The Latin-American Mind*.
- 2 See, for example, Gracia, “Frondizi’s Theory of the Self as a Dynamic Gestalt.”
- 3 Note that I will be using the terms “Hispanic,” “Latina/o,” and “Latinx” somewhat interchangeably in this section. While there are a number of debates regarding the origins and differences between these terms, some of which I address in the chapter, for now I will simply use them to stand in for another. In some places, I do so to preserve an author’s specific language (e.g. Gracia explicitly chooses to use the term “Hispanic”), in other places, I refer to the general category of “Latinxs” to refer to Latin American descended peoples.
- 4 Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, 11–12. Cited in text using the abbreviation *HII* and page number.
- 5 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 77. Cited in text using the abbreviation *B* and page number.
- 6 Given that the term had not become popularized during her lifetime, Anzaldúa did not use the term “Chicanx” in her writings.
- 7 Alcoff, “Is Latina/o a Racial Identity,” 23. Cited in text using abbreviation *LRI* and page number.
- 8 “The Marielitos” is a term given to the roughly 125,000 migrants traveling by boat from the Mariel harbor in Cuba to the United States in 1980.
- 9 Lugones, *Pilgrimages*, 151.
- 10 Anzaldúa, *Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 141.
- 11 Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation*, 1.

- 12 Schutte and Fermeñas, "Feminist Philosophy," 403.
- 13 Ibid., 403.
- 14 Gargallo, "Multiple Feminisms," 83.
- 15 Schutte and Fermeñas, "Feminist Philosophy," 404.
- 16 Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 743.
- 17 Ibid., 748.
- 18 The oppressing \longleftrightarrow resisting relation in Lugones's work refers to her conception of subjectivity. Namely, rather than assuming that persons or groups are either wholly resistant subjects or wholly complicit subject to forms of domination, the oppressing \longleftrightarrow resisting relationship marks the tensions within individuals and collectivities between structures of subjugation and patterns of liberatory responses to structural harms. Moreover, resistance and oppression are processes, not properties or features that someone or some group holds/maintains.
- 19 De Onís, "What's in an 'x'?", 85. Cited in text using abbreviation X and page number.
- 20 Moraga, *Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*, xxi.
- 21 Ortiz, "Why You Might Want to Stop Using the Terms 'Xicana'."
- 22 For more on this discussion, see Diz Pico, "Le último jedi y otros usos del neutro"; Alvarez Melledo, "Todas, tod@s, todxs, todes."
- 23 Schutte, "Latin America," 91.
- 24 Lima Costa, "Unthinking Gender," 182.

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