

From the X Collection

September 2018

ColorBlok

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The X in Latinx is a Wound, Not a Trend

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Tienes que tener cuidado, o te mataran”[1] my mother advises in 2014 as my nine-year-old brother hugs my torso while I mourn the death of [Zoraida Reyes](#), an undocumented trans friend whose body was found murdered behind a parking lot at a Dairy Queen in Anaheim, California.

My mother’s advice to “tener cuidado” and the death of a trans sister represent the wound that trans and gender-nonconforming Latin Americans wear as we navigate a Latinidad that has yet to love us. By “us” I refer to those who are too queer, too Black, too foreign, too NDN, too femme, too angry to be Latin American. For this reason, an essay on what the “x” in Latinx really means is not only useful, but necessary.

In July of 2016, HuffPost’s Latino Voices Editor, Tanisha Love Ramirez and HuffPost’s Senior Culture Writer, Zeba Blay engage a [wonderful discussion](#) of the emergence of “Latinx,” where they point out that according to [Google Trends](#), “Latinx” was first searched in 2004 and experienced its highest increase in searches in 2015.

While one of the arguments across Latin American and Latinx millennial media is that the “x” is supposed to [neutralize](#) the Spanish language and everyone should adopt it, I argue that the “x” is not for everyone. Transgender and gender-nonconforming people of Latin American descent living in the U.S. have used the “x” as a reminder that their bodies are still experiencing a colonization invested in disciplining them to fit a standard gender identity, gender presentation, sexual orientation, and a particular sexual performance. For this reason, it is important for us to not normalize “Latinx,” but to engage in critical reflection of how violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Asexual + (LGBTQIA+) Latin Americans has been accepted by Latin American people to the point that LGBTQIA+ Latinxs have had to create a linguistic intervention in the hopes that they can live a livable life.

Conversations around the practical use of the “x” have also been contested by trans and gender-nonconforming communities, cisgender Latin Americans, and by people who are not of Latin American descent. However, what I am interested in is the visible wound that the “x” forces the Latin American diaspora to confront. I am proposing that we think of the “x” as a scar that exposes four wounds signified by each corner of the “x”, an image that Nigerian storyteller, Kemi Bello, has helped me patch out in a recent conversation when she inquired about the “x” in Latinx. The four wounds that I propose are settlement, anti-Blackness, femicides, and inarticulation.

I. The Wound of Settlement

First, we have to face the reality that the emergence of a Latinx identity is facilitated through settler-colonialism. Professor of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, [Juana María Rodríguez](#) explains that Latinidad is a geo-specific term that speaks to the experiences of people of Latin American descent living in the United States. Although Latinidad attempts to be an all-inclusive identity, Rodríguez warns us that “this definition immediately invokes cartographic debates about the precise borders of Latin America”[2]. This debate on where the borders of Latin America start and end is what I am referring to as the first wound of the Latinx experience.

Latinidad is an identity born out of the violences of Indigenous dispossession exercised by Spanish (Ex: Nueva España now Mexico), English (Ex: British Honduras now Belize), Dutch (Ex: Dutch Guiana now Suriname) and Portuguese (ex: Terra de Santa Cruz now Brazil) conquistadors. Indigenous dispossession is the act of outsiders (non-Indigenous people) entering a territory, occupying that territory, killing and hunting the Indigenous people of that territory, claiming ownership over that territory, renaming it, and policing the language, culture, food, spirituality and worldviews of anyone standing in that territory.

The wound has existed for over 500 years in Latin America, which started with the Spanish expedition spearheaded by Italian conquistador, Christopher Columbus in the island of [Hispaniola](#), now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where the first Indigenous people of the island to be killed via settler-colonial violence in the Americas were the [Taínos](#).

I argue that in order to begin addressing the wound of settlement, the Latinx community must learn about the indigenous community and culture that existed in the land they currently live on and reposition themselves as visitors as opposed to “from” that land. A land acknowledgement is important because it de-centers a unifying Latinidad and centers the Indigenous lives that coexisted with the land prior to the violence of settler colonialism. This positionality is not going to be easy, as it forces people of the Latinx community to confront their romanticization of both Indigeneity and Latinidad.

II. The Wound of Anti-Blackness

Paired with the wound of settlement is the wound of anti-Blackness. The largest population of Black people outside of Africa lives in Latin America. The “X” in Latinx reminds me of the “X” on a map, as in “X marks the spot” [3]. For me, the “X” in Latinx marks the spot in which my African ancestors arrived after they were kidnapped, chained, transported and enslaved throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The “X” is an everyday reminder of the historical “[thingification](#)” of Black people during the process of slavery. To be enslaved meant to not be human, so the “X” in Latinx literally serves as a reminder of the erasure of Black Latinxs.

Black Latinxs are constantly policed and forced to prove their Latinidad, while White Latinxs are rarely questioned, and once they reveal they have roots in Latin America, the doubts end. When I make this argument, non-Black Latinxs try to call me divisive. However, as Quinn Smith-Matta eloquently explained in a recent [article](#) on Racebaitr, “After the abolition of plantation-based

chattel slavery and the exit of European colonizers in Central and South American countries, there was a societal push to whiten these countries by diluting the presence of Black populations.” Smith-Matta even cites the policies passed in Central and South America to encourage European migration to Latin America to [whiten](#) the race, which produced generations of White Latinxs with no ancestral roots in Latin America. Simply put, the agenda to eradicate Blackness in Latin America was executed by inviting Europeans to settle in Latin America and claim them as Latinx, while Black people whose ancestors arrived to the continent via enslavement are still not claimed as Latinx.

The wounding of Latinidad via anti-Blackness is a wound that any Latinx of color experiences. I say this because racism against people of color is informed by the idea that dark-skinned people are backwards and savage. Racism necessitates anti-Blackness, as Blackness was marked “unhuman” during slavery. This mark of unhuman facilitates racism and colorism, which people of color experience. However, non-Black people of color do not experience anti-Blackness. In fact, they may perpetuate anti-Blackness, which maintains the controlled image of Blackness and melanin as “bad.” Because people of color have melanin and live as racialized subjects, an investment in anti-Blackness is an investment in the very root of why they experience racism and colorism. Therefore, the liberation of all Latinx people of color necessitates the liberation of Black Latinxs. If this does not happen, systems of racism, colorism, and anti-Blackness will prevail in the Latinx community.

III. The Wound of Femicides

I started this article with one of the most painful experiences that I’ve had in my short life: the murder of a trans sibling. Unfortunately, this was not the first femicide in my life that I have experienced, the first was my younger sisters’ femicide before I migrated to the United States. A femicide is the act of killing a woman or femme, particularly on the basis of their gender and presentation.

By women, I am referring to those who are identified as women by Western society (not just self-identified women), which includes cisgender women, trans women, trans men experiencing intentional targeted violence from transphobic cultures, gender nonconforming people who have their nonconformity questioned and erased and identifies as “women,” butch women who some families —like the one I grew up in— will violently identify as “women who don’t want to grow up,” and third, fourth and fifth gendered NDNs who the state will not recognize. By femmes, I am referring to the sissies, the cry babies, those of us who chose adornment as a reminder that we are worthy, the quiet ones whose introvertness is taken as “passive” and therefore feminine, those who perform taken-for-granted labor, those of us who must hold the world before we can hold ourselves, and those of us whose gender is just that: femme.

Last November in *Noticias de América Latina y el Caribe*, Mexican journalist, Andrea Gonzalez wrote an [impactful article](#) titled, “América Latina, la región más violenta para las mujeres: hay al menos 12 femicidios diarios,” which translates to “Latin America, the most violent region for women: there are at least 12 femicides a day.” In the article, Gonzalez uses statistics from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and Amnesty

International, to explain that out of the 33 countries that represent Latin America and the Latinx Caribbean, 24 countries have laws against domestic violence, but only 9 of those countries consider violence targeted against women and femmes as a form of gendered violence that they will not tolerate. Here, I use women and femmes to signify the fact that gendering is a violence that we learned and inherited through colonialism. However, what pains me the most is that Gonzalez's article is not groundbreaking because femicides have been present in the Latin American community since the beginning of settler-colonialism and transAtlantic slavery.

During the colonization of Latin America and the Caribbean, Indigenous women were [raped](#) by European colonizers as a way for them to conquer their bodies and by extension the land. In tribes that celebrated and uplifted third, fourth and fifth genders, religion was used by European colonizers as a tool of control, where Indigenous communities were [taught that only two binary genders existed](#), man and woman, and anything outside of the binary was bad.

Later, Africans were brought to the shores of Latin America and the Caribbean as slaves, where similar tools of controlling gender were enacted. Plantation owners often [raped Black women](#) as a means to produce more slaves for the plantation, as the child of the enslaved women and the plantation owner would be born into chattel slavery.

Femicides are not new to Latin America, they are a technology of settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness, which together, enact the third wound of Latinidad.

To address this wound, the Latinx community must first learn how to respect, value and honor women and femmes. However, respecting, valuing and honoring women and femmes must include Black and Indigenous women and femmes while centering trans and nonbinary experiences. Simply put, this wound can't be addressed without addressing the wound of settlement and anti-Blackness.

I know this to be true because my sister would not have died if society valued Black and Indigenous people, and Zoraida Reyes would not have died if this world respected and valued women and femmes.

IV. The Wound of Inarticulation

I began this article speaking of my mother's advice to "tener cuidado," which is one of the most articulate ways in which I have come to understand my life. Often, the ways in which I experience the world cannot be articulated because there is no language in place that contextualizes living through colonialism, anti-Blackness and femicides. Because of our history of colonization as people of Latin America, many of us only have the language of our colonizers to articulate our embodied experiences and truths. However, because we inherited the colonizers language paired with the silence from many of our elders, many Latinxs aren't able to articulate their stories. Therefore, the fourth wound (inarticulation) is the inability to articulate violence and denounce it.

The "X" in Latinx represents the exact inarticulation of the Latin American experience.

People often tell me that “Latinx” doesn’t make sense grammatically or linguistically. My reply is that it does because the nonsensical nature of the “X” is the same nonsensical nature of living at the intersections of settlement, anti-Blackness and femicides.

However, I want to remind us that the “X” in Latinx is one of the interventions that queer, trans, feminist, Black and Indigenous Latinx subcultures have developed to begin addressing the four wounds of Latinidad and force us to see ourselves in all of our complexity, history, and to hopefully, imagine a future.

For these reasons, I argue that the “X” in Latinx is a wound as opposed to a trend that speaks to a collective history. The “X” is attempting to speak to the violences of colonization, slavery, against women and femmes, and the fact that many of us experience such an intense displacement and silence that we have no language in which to articulate who we are. Therefore, if you are using “Latinx,” I encourage you to ask yourself at the end of everyday: “what have I done to show up for Black, Indigenous, women and femmes of the Latin American diaspora today?” And second, “why?” Here, you’ll be crafting your own vision of a Latinx liberation that doesn’t leave the most marginalized behind. However, this is no easy task and it will require both a desire and an everyday commitment.

Footnotes:

1. “You have to be careful or you will be killed”
2. Rodríguez, Juana María. “Latino, Latina, Latin@.” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* by Burgett Bruce and Glenn Hendler. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014..
3. An image that Peruvian scholar, Giancarlo Cornejo, fully patches out in the unpublished essay, “The Urgent Problem of a Travesti Nosotrx.”