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MAKING THE MOST OF NON-GENDERED LANGUAGE

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1 Marco Katz Montiel (ell@/l@/su) writes in Spanish, English, and musical notes. Marco's essay, "In Praise of José Watanabe," appears in the Fall 2022 issue of *Ploughshares*. Recent stories include "El disco 45" in *Cartas de desamor y otras adicciones*, "Bobby Discovers Salsa" in *English Studies in Latin America*, and "Tony and Sal Get Even" in *Jerry Jazz Music*. Upcoming publications will feature Marco's poem, "EEUU – 20I17" in the Chilean journal *Copihue* and two short stories: "Mourning Doves Come Back to Me" in a Canadian anthology titled *There's No Place* and "La reina potente," due to appear in *Camino Real*, a journal published in Spain. For their help with the development of this essay, Marco expresses heartfelt gratitude to the peer reviewers and editors at *ESLA*, MacEwan University President-Emeritus David Atkinson, Williams College Professor Gene Bell-Villada, writer Ryan T. Jenkins, and University of Alberta Professor M. Elizabeth "Betsy" Boone.

For those uninterested in learning too much about the American nations that extend from Chile to Mexico, Latinx provides a cool new way to lump them all together. "According to the Pew Research Center, a thimble-sized portion of people with Latin American ancestry use the term," reports *BU Today* Associate Editor Sophie Yarin, who observes how it was meant to supersede 'Hispanic' as a meta-term for people who often refer to themselves as Argentinian, Peruvian, Costa Rican, or citizens of one of the many other countries in Central and South America or the Caribbean. In 2018, Latinx entered the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, which defines it as a term "originally formed in the early aughts as a word for those of Latin American descent who do not identify as being of the male or female gender or who simply don't want to be identified by gender." Contrary to usual practice, the dictionary provides no definitive pronunciation for this neologism, stating, "More than likely, there was little consideration for how it was supposed to be pronounced when it was created." While the term has gained traction in English departments on university campuses, according to Yarin, a 2021 Gallup found that most of those supposedly falling under its umbrella preferred Hispanic over Latino or Latinx and "the overwhelming majority—57 percent—put down, 'Does not matter.'" In spite of this, those of us who engage in any form of Latin American studies on campus can be excused for considering the term ubiquitous.

X Marks the Spot, an English Tradition

In addition to dealing with national identification, Latinx proponents have joined a long tradition of scholars seeking non-gendered alternatives in the English language. "In 1808, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested 'it,' which flopped," reports Ezra Marcus, who has researched "more than 200 gender-neutral pronouns proposed between the 19th century and the 1970s" (D1). The University of Wisconsin bandied about *xe* and *hir* for a while, and that would have worked fine even though I favored something that would have combined well with the Spanish *su*, a word that

means *his* or *hers* or even its when referring to the possession of one object by another. But I will have more to say a bit later about what English speakers could learn from their Spanish-speaking counterparts.

Meanwhile, those who presume authority over our employment of words, mainly dictionary publishers and the professors who run the Modern Language Association, have judged *they*, *them*, and *theirs* as the correct alternatives for *he*, *she*, *his*, *hers*, and *zie* or any other previously proposed terms for trans people or anyone else who might fall through the cracks. Welcoming this recognition of those, myself included, who do not fit comfortably into masculine and feminine bifurcations, I consider these efforts long overdue.

The likelihood of chaos resulting from not knowing someone's gender concerns me not at all; English-speaking society will, I feel sure, benefit from a healthy dose of confusion caused by the deprivation of *she* and *he* as we progress toward times when our language will have helped us appreciate humanity without suffering from persistent anxieties about sexuality. Still, this syntactical remedy causes grammatical problems that should concern any group of people endeavoring a beautiful use of meaningful language.

In a fine tradition that replaced Miss and Missus with Ms, firemen with firefighters, postmen with postal carriers, and sidemen with side musicians, *xe* looked like a good bet. Vocalized with the sweet pronunciation heard in some Spanish-speaking regions, this could have resurrected X as a phoneme with as much beauty as utility. Also, although Spanish causes gender issues of its own, possessive pronouns in that language do not create gender anxiety around the ownership of objects; *su libro* lets readers know that a book belongs to a person without tangling them up with irrelevant issues of whether that object belongs to someone who self-references with a cis, trans, or any other among the proliferation of identities. In cases where property requires restitution, the

individual identification (a name, for example) of the owner will suffice; restitutive agents have no need to add categorization to their duties.

My concern about the decision to repurpose third-person plural pronouns involves not qualities of gender but quantities of people. Sometimes, one really should know how many students showed up for class on a given day or if more than one of them read the assigned book. If someone tells me that *they* read *their* book, I can understand from the singular noun that this utterance refers to one person. What shall I do, though, when that same report goes on to inform me that *they* read *their* books every day? Does this concern the rest of the students in the class? Do I now assume that one of them has multiple books or that multiple people have made sure to stick their noses into a book on a daily basis? What if one of them reads one book regularly? In that case, the reporter should now inform me that *they* <u>reads</u> *their* book every day.

Having made it this far, you might have guessed that my word processing program has alarmed me with a double underlining of the properly conjugated verb (according to the new rules) in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph. Clearly, Silicon Valley has not gotten on board with the program, so apparently now we cannot trust autocorrect settings to do anything more than continue changing words that we want into words that we don't want. Similarly, dictionaries and the esteemed Modern Language Association have failed to provide useful guidance. From the former, I would not expect this, of course, as they need to deal with definitions, not conjugations, but the latter could have offered a great deal more than the suddenly 'woke' assertion that, after all these years, they now get it. So far, they have done nothing more than parrot the party line about using *they*, *them*, and *theirs* to replace *he*, *she*, *his*, and *hers*—a bit of grammatical advice that most people who care about language had seen years earlier in popular press accounts.

Other possibilities exist. As a visiting artist in schools, I talked with high school students about changing beloved folk songs in ways that would deal with gendered lyrics without ruining rhythms. Using the example of "Passing Through," an evocative song composed by Dick Blakeslee, I studied the phrase "men will suffer, fight, even die for what is right" and then, staying faithful to the way the line fit with the melody, converted it to "people suffer, fight, even die for what is right." Similarly, in the verse that includes "Yankee, Russian, white, or tan" and then follows up with "Lord a man is just a man / we're all brothers and we're only passing through," I changed the second part into "We're all people and we can / get together even though we're passing through." All of these new lyrics fit with the musical structure while changing the meaning only in the sense that it made it more inclusive. Music shows us how, with some creativity and imagination, we can transform our speech without destroying its elegance.

What We Could Learn from Spanish, for Example

Instead of learning from Spanish-speaking counterparts, some speakers of English have decided, all too characteristically, to teach them a lesson. Having mangled their own tongue in a lazy effort devoid of study or imagination, they have decided to wreak destruction on a language they do not even know. In addition to betraying colonial arrogance, those putative correctors bring to this endeavor stereotypes so barely concealed that they must be the only ones not on to themselves.

"Unilingualism is like sitting at a dinner party where you're doing all the talking and you talk about nothing but yourself," declares Canadian Cree author Tomson Highway in a televised interview with Ken Rockburn. "It means that you're not listening to what others have to say. It means you're not interested. And that is not only rude, but dangerous, to close your mind like that." Misguided placements of the letter X bear out the ignorance, arrogance, and danger in the award-winning author's cautionary statement. Dominant English speakers demonstrate their inability to listen—and perhaps learn—when they insist on correcting what they see as central flaws of Spanish,

a language that some of them eagerly associate with machismo and other culturally backward behaviors.

Putatively exalting Spanish (which has lately been all the rage), English speakers lace their discourse with comments that reify and then lacerate those who speak it. Without realizing how much they reveal, well-intentioned speakers engaged in these corrections demonstrate the superiority they feel in comparison to those stuck with what they regard as second-class languages. Ultimately, the losers of these interactions include not only Those-Being-Helped, who probably do not really need this additional marginalization, but also the eager Helpers, who lose a valuable opportunity to learn lessons that would improve their own language.

Insidiously, these attitudes can cause children of Spanish-speaking immigrants in Canada and the United States to adopt stereotypical views of their own ancestors. A telling example of this appears in a September 20, 2019 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, in which Natalia Sylvester, identified as a Peruvian American writer, discusses her use of her parents' language. In addition to the quotidian benefits of ordering food or speaking with servants in their own tongue, Sylvester states, "I'm most thankful that I can speak Spanish because it has allowed me to help others." For Sylvester, and far too many other speakers, the ongoing proliferation of treasured Hispanic literature has less importance than does the opportunity to show other people how to get their lives together. These statements of noblesse oblige bring to mind famed Columbia University professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who describes herself as "very critical of people who come forward to help without any idea of what it requires to be able to understand."

Without any understanding of how gender functions in romance languages, or even how it once functioned in their own language, helpful English speakers only need to hear the terms masculine and feminine to recoil in horror and demand change. Never mind that a *guitarrista*

could be a man, woman, or any other gender playing a guitar or that the feminized *mesa* (table) will probably not suffer oppression perpetrated by the masculinized *suelo* (floor), in the view of these presumptive correctors, the Popish language has remained gendered too long and urgently needs fixing. These ignorant writers of monolingual English thus find their way to X marks the spot, that iniquitous den of their imagination in which the words of over-passionate macho men oppress helpless hyper-feminine women. It does not matter, of course, that Spain produced films with trans protagonists long before the trend hit Hollywood or that the Iberian nation legalized marriage between all human beings on July 3, 2005, ahead of every country in the world except for Belgium and the Netherlands (both former Spanish territories). Scholars bent on helping already know everything they need to know about *those* people and, having found those gendered cases, need not bother changing their views.

My recitation of Spain's positive actions should not indicate a belief that the Spanish language has solved the problems caused by harmful gendered utterances; the language does indeed prove perilous at times, but those concerns will be best dealt with by people who actually know how to speak, read, and write in the language bequeathed to us by Teresa de Ávila, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and thousands of other writers who dealt with gender issues centuries before the English arrived in North America.

In Madrid, many of my friends have long employed the *arroba* (what English speakers call the "at" sign) in place of gender-revealing vowels. During a demonstration in favor of public schools, by everyone and for everyone, I purchased a T-shirt emblazoned with that motto: "Escuela publica: de tod@s, para tod@s." Whether or not this trend endures, the use of this sign sure has livened up the look of the written language, and it serves as a variably pronounceable reminder of linguistic work that requires attention.

In Buenos Aires, reports *La Nación*, "teenagers are rewriting the rules of Spanish, eliminating traces of gender for words referring to people. In meetings, classrooms, and everyday conversations, young people are changing their forms of speaking and writing, substituting O masculine and A feminine vowels with the neutral E to break with what they consider a profoundly male chauvinist culture"[1] (Schmidt). To be sure, many in Argentina, along with commentators in other Spanish-speaking countries, disagree with these efforts and recommend other ways to deal with language problems. Still, none have proposed turning to North American English departments for guidance on this issue. And none urge hasty pastings of ugly and unpronounceable consonants as a means of correcting operatic vowels.

English speakers terrified by vowel endings have other options. They could simply stop using the terms feminine and masculine, substituting them with a formulation such as *Type A* and *Type O*. Traditionally, bilingual scholars have employed the A or the O that correspond to Spanish usages, for example, writing Latina literature (*literatura latina*) or Latino feminism (*feminismo latino*). Alternatively, monolingual English speakers can stop pretending to speak Spanish and refer to Latin, a word that still appears in English dictionaries. *Latin New York Magazine*, the chronicler of *salsa dura* during the 1970s, employed the term on its pages as well as in its title, with musical ensembles often referred to as Latin bands. For those who might confuse these usages and start thinking that the musicians had come from the Roman empire, the phrase "Latin American band" works just as well. The English words exist and if that is the only language one has, *they* might as well use that language's existing vocabulary.

Tellingly, Anglophones concerned about the sins of Spanish do not muck up their own language in this fashion. So far, reporters do not generally refer to the Dukex of Suffix, professors

1 My translation

of literature avoid mentioning any godx as a mythological or sexual entity, and we have yet to see references to actx for a thespian or, for that matter, poetx or Jewx. These last three adjectival uses have been taken over by the masculine forms, a case in which so-called language transformations have merely accepted the old rationalization that masculine formulations refer to all people; this does not differ substantially from employing the term he as a universal for all humans. Sadly, given time and sufficient forgetting of his-story, employments of manly forms might indeed become universally accepted as normative. Still, English speakers could refuse to acquiesce in this oppressive takeover and instead contribute to the flourish of well-crafted language that recognizes gender fluidity. In this endeavor, English speakers could learn a great deal from Spanish.

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