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# When Language Broke Open

AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER AND TRANS BLACK WRITERS  
OF LATIN AMERICAN DESCENT



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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE **ACT** of writing—for Black queer and trans\* kin of Latin American descent—may be understood as a commitment to exploring multiple formations of the self, a direct opposition to national narratives that have been constructed on behalf of Black life. I claim this following the work of contemporary Black, queer, Latin American literary elders who have encouraged their diasporic kin to commit not only to surviving but also to honoring pleasure, joy, and rage: Ochy Curiel (Dominican Republic), Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (Puerto Rico), and Dr. Gloria D. Wekker (Suriname). Curiel's early activism, which includes co-planning and co-hosting the Primer Encuentro de Mujeres Negras de América Latina y el Caribe (First Meeting of Black Women in Latin America and the Caribbean), left an open invitation to all Black people in the continent: to relate to Blackness, gender, and sexuality not as stagnant identities but as entry points into a politics that can help envision a future where it is easy to live. In her latest poetry collection, *Afrofeministamente*, Arroyo Pizarro suggests that what is most urgent for Black Latin Americans, Black Caribbeans, and Black Latinx people at this moment is not representation or multicultural inclusion. Instead, Arroyo Pizarro proposes that one commit to "afrosanación" (afrohealing) and "afroreparación" (afroreparation) in whatever capacity one might have, because healing and reparations are more apt to ensure a future than representation.<sup>1</sup> To frontload healing and reparations

1. Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, *Afrofeministamente* (San Juan: Editorial EDP University, 2020).

for Black kin is to prioritize care, community, and a toolkit for how to address a Latin American and Caribbean past shaped by settler-colonial conquest and trans-Atlantic slavery. Akin to the work of Curiel and Arroyo Pizarro, Dr. Gloria D. Wekker's writings from an Afro-Surinamese, Dutch, lesbian position argue that gender and countries are never categories that can claim innocence based on their historical and political formations. With such a claim, Dr. Wekker opens a space for Black diasporic writers to name Europe's "nostalgia for empire," which helps us think more critically about the relationship that Europe still has to the Global South and Europe's investment in disciplinary power in Latin America and the Caribbean. When we do the work of thinking with and against nations and gender, larger possibilities of relationality open, activating what Dr. Wekker identifies as a feminism that is transnational, intersectional, interdisciplinary, relational, and reflective.<sup>2</sup> This framework is one that actively denounces ongoing organizing for trans-exclusionary feminist spaces in Latin America, the Caribbean, and their diasporas, and that makes room for a transfeminist future.

Although Curiel's, Arroyo Pizarro's, and Wekker's life-writing and theorization of gender, sexuality, the Black condition, and settler colonialism in Latin America and the Caribbean informed this project's call for submissions, the politics, stories, and testimonies that live in this anthology could never have been planned or mapped out. In fact, the title of this anthology, *When Language Broke Open*, is borrowed from a poem in the collection by Mexican American poet Irene Vázquez. In "Dispatches for a Country Without Name," Vázquez writes, "Somehow, we were most honest / when language split open." The splitting of language is the condition of possibility for finding a form of honesty that might allow us (Black queer and trans\* people of Latin American descent) to construct an alternative world to the one we currently live in. The modification in this volume's title from "split open" to "broke open" declares the rupture that Black articulations manifest in Latin American and Latinx literature. In a way, this anthology breaks epistemological frameworks of race, gender, sex, sexuality, nationality, and heritage. Breaking—as a verb—is loud; sometimes "breaking" may represent an injury, and other times "breaking" signals a fugitive temporal escape from oppression and/or violence. *When Language Broke Open* makes room for us (Black queer and trans\* writers of Latin American descent) to be

2. Gloria Wekker, "Still Crazy After All Those Years . . . : Feminism for the New Millennium," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 11, no. 4 (Nov. 2004): 487–500.

multidimensional beings who inherited and must work with, against, in suspicion of, and through the imagined communities of "Latinidad" and "LGBTQIA+ unity."

Despite Latin America and the Caribbean being home to the largest population of Black people outside the continent of Africa, we are written off as nonexistent. I am careful with my language and say "written off" because Latin Americans know that Black people in Latin America exist. Some non-Black Latin American entities choose to adapt, carry, and retell a narrative of the Americas in which Black life is absent. The experience for people of Latin American descent who were born and grew up in the United States (Latinx) is different because Latinidad in the United States is shaped by U.S. federal immigration law, census data-tracking methodologies, and the ways in which U.S., Latin American, and Caribbean media circulate and narrate "Latinidad."

As a Latin American writer, I know that Black people of Latin American descent have been strategically written out of culture, society, and politics, because, as I edit this anthology from Mexico City, I take breaks to walk down the corridors of my neighborhood. In under a week of editing breaks, I have spotted a costume store named "El Negrito" and a restaurant named "La Morena" depicting a Black woman with lips larger than her face, and on two occasions the police have asked me for my "documentos" because I cannot possibly be a national of the country I was born in. These moments disclose a national consciousness that "negritos" and "morenas" exist in the country, while at the same time the police identify Black diasporic peoples as foreigners and/or irregular migrants in our own countries of birth. Racial profiling across Latin America gives non-Black people in Latin America permission to caricature and exploit narratives, images, and stories about who (or worse, *what*) Black people are. These biases and denials of Black personhood migrate to the United States, strengthening and enforcing already racist and anti-Black tropes about *all* Black people regardless of nationality, Indigenous affiliation, and ethnic and culture-specific identities, which makes growing up a Black person of Latin American descent in the United States an experience that is difficult to articulate and difficult to find a consenting audience to whom to render it.

Black people of Latin American descent know that nation-states do not protect Black people, and therefore the notions of a united "Latin American" and "Latinx" identity fall apart when speaking and thinking about quotidian Black experiences. Ecuadorian poet Andrea Alejandro Freire F. writes, "Todo lo que / escribo, lo escribo / desde la imposibilidad / de

apalabrar mi existencia. / Mi monstrea, negra / y precaria existencia." Cuban American writer Jessica Lanay translates their words as, "All that I / write, I write / from the impossibility / to speak for my existence. / My monstrous, Black / and precarious existence." In their writing, Freire F. teaches us that Latin American countries, just like the United States, surveil language, and that each individual country (with their surveillance technology) determines both socially and legally acceptable gender and racial categories. As a Black, trans\*, and HIV-positive person from Latin America, Freire F. lives as a legal impossibility, since Black trans\* people are not afforded rights parallel to those of cisgender, heterosexual, non-Black citizens. Because a trans\*, Black, HIV-positive person of Latin American descent cannot be legally imagined, the everyday material conditions of someone who lives at the intersection of those realities is often branded as unreal and nonexistent. As a result, language and culture must fall apart for a space of articulation to be carved out and attended to. That articulation manifests in the poetry, essays, fiction, creative nonfiction, and graphic art that live in *When Language Broke Open*.

In "An Offering," Costa Rican–Jamaican poet SA Smythe, almost as if speaking with Freire F., writes, ". . . in case language doesn't express desire, but hides it, / You must remember to reach only for the neither thing, / To be righteously unashamed of this grief until the otherwise comes / Until that time when we may name ourselves whole, if not holy, / And stop eulogizing the project of living long enough to see / That it has yet to come, and so can never die." Writing in both an ancestral and a contemporary voice, Smythe asks Black trans\* kin to invite, reach for, and linger with "the neither thing." This tender reaching for "the neither thing" feels like an attempt to reach that which has been discarded and/or made to feel small in our lives. When engaging in the act of reaching for "the neither thing," Smythe poetically theorizes, we realize that the "project of living . . . has yet to come," but it doesn't mean that we've never lived. As many Black trans\* artists, activists, and trailblazers have taught us, aliveness is temporal, and if we want to be alive every day, we must pledge to reach out and forward to "name ourselves whole, if not holy." Echoing Smythe, Boricua poet Jeydelyn Martinez writes, "There is no such thing as liberation without grief," indexing the fact that liberation is not a utopian concept, but a vision grounded in a material reality that refuses to hold freedom and grief as mutually exclusive. Perhaps we will experience some of our freest moments amid our collective and individual grieving.

Split into three parts—"Memory," "Care," and "Futures"—*When Language Broke Open* practices Smythe's offering of reaching out and forward

and Martinez's attention to grief. In the call for submissions, I asked, "How do queer and/or trans\* Black writers of Latin American descent address memory? What are the textures of caring, being cared for, and accepting care as Black queer and/or trans\* people of Latin American descent? And how do queer and trans\* embodiments help us understand and/or question the past and the present, and construct a Black queer and trans\* future?" Through these interrogations, I sought new engagements with memory, care, and time that centered on Black queer and/or trans\* writers of Latin American descent. While the call for submissions pre-thematized the anthology, the work submitted gave the anthology shape in the form of testimonio (a subgenre of Latin American literature popularized by Miguel Barnet's 1996 text *Biografía de un cimarrón*) and what Costa Rican–Jamaican writer Quince Duncan coined as "afro-realism," which is the practice of living one's own word.<sup>3</sup> For Duncan, afro-realism is the ability to take experience and shape it into fiction without reproducing the expected narratives that non-Black Latin American and Caribbean audiences demand from Black writers. Duncan explains that afro-realism is "a construction and reconstruction of reality, without ceasing to be fiction, without losing the sense of fantasy that makes us feel delight when reading it."<sup>4</sup> Through the lenses of testimonio and afro-realism, the contributors to *When Language Broke Open* allow us to relate to memory, care, and time in ways that are always already seeking accountability, demanding an audience as in a court of law, and plotting alternative visions of Black queer and trans\* futures that do not compete with each other but complement one another.

The logistical process of this manuscript felt like a testimony to itself. When the call for submissions went out on social media, writers were excited, confused, and provoked. Emails with questions about what constituted "Latin American descent" came in. A writer born in Trinidad and Tobago wrote asking if they would be considered Latin American or Latinx as someone whose ancestors migrated from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago. There were numerous Haitian American writers asking if they met the qualifications to submit since they shared the same island

3. See A. Cruz-Malavé, "Testimonio," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, ed. D. R. Vargas, L. La Fountain-Stokes, and N. R. Mirabal (New York: New York University Press, 2017); and Dorothy E. Mosby, *Quince Duncan: Writing Afro-Costa Rican and Caribbean Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014).

4. Translated from the Spanish. Original in Quince Duncan, *Un señor de chocolate: Treinta relatos de la vida de Quince*, 1st ed. (Heredia: Programa de Publicaciones e Impresiones, Universidad Nacional, 1996).

as the Dominican Republic, a clearly canonized Latin American country. I affirmed each email and encouraged submissions. Some submitted; some did not. I outline this process because it speaks to the language of “Latinidad,” “Latin America,” and “Latinx” splitting open, resurrecting an intellectual inquiry posed by (non-Black) Cuban American critic José Esteban Muñoz in 2000: “How is it possible to know Latinidad?”<sup>5</sup> In asking for contributors who self-identify as “Black queer and/or trans\* writers of Latin American descent,” the volume calls for a transnational diasporic community as opposed to a strict U.S., Latin American, or Caribbean Spanish-speaking community. This verbiage makes space for political exiles who may no longer be considered “nationals” of their home countries, transnational adoptees and other writers who grew up without their biological parent(s) or immediate communities, and writers whose everyday life has been shaped by what Frantz Fanon names “l’expérience vécue du Noir” (the lived experience of Blackness)—famously mistranslated as “the fact of Blackness”—and for whom Blackness has therefore become the central analytic through which we see the world, as opposed to an analytic that first thinks in terms of nation, culture, or a deracialized hemispheric lens.<sup>6</sup>

The writing in *When Language Broke Open* reveals the messiness, nuance, and magnitude of Black queer and/or trans\* life. Sometimes, we are there for one another. Other times, we are not. We live, we project, we fuck up, we reflect, we change, we are changed, and we dream of change. Edited and organized as a kitchen-table conversation, *When Language Broke Open* lets go of the constant need to explain who we are. Instead, we entertain who we were, who we are now, and who we may or may not be tomorrow, and all those considerations are of equal importance. In claiming back our narratives, memories, experiences, and imaginations, we defend our right to speak. More specifically, we reject the surrogate storyteller that has been used in the field of Latinx and Latin American poetics, Latinx and Latin American literature, and “Hispanic” literature. We no longer encounter Black queer and trans\* characters written through the gaze of what in some Latin American and Caribbean nations is referred to as a “blanca/o mestiza/o” and “euromestiza/o” who is also cisgender and heterosexual. Here, you encounter those of us who have always been Black, some who actively resist any easy categorization under the binaries of the

LGBTQIA+ alphabet, and those of us who move in and out of identities so that our goals are future-oriented as opposed to identity-centered. Blackness is a condition, a politics, a commitment to a people, and a way of life. Queer and trans\* embodiments may represent feelings, experiences, politically produced statuses, and words that continue to shapeshift as often as the world does. Latin American heritage names a location our ancestors arrived at and/or departed from, and under a white-supremacist world system, acceptance by and legibility to a Latinx and Latin American imagined community is not our destination. Latinidad is a throughway from where we can speak and where we can choose exits that are more liberating than the narratives and roads we have been told to reproduce and follow as Black diasporic peoples, some who may never be able to trace an origin.

*When Language Broke Open* is an invitation to let go of all we have inherited so that we can make space for new inheritances and learn to choose which of our past inheritances speak to our values and visions. *When Language Broke Open* is a dialectical space, a party, a ceremony, a family fight, a room to grieve and laugh in simultaneously, and always a vision for a world-otherwise.

—Alan Pelaez Lopez

5. See José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s ‘The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs),’” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 67–79.

6. See Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

## Coda

ALAN PELAEZ LOPEZ

*Escribo pensando en una venganza. En la traición que colectivamente estamos materializando a esta cultura construida desde la razón hétero-blanca porque a lxs hijxs de las mujeres negras muy pocas veces nos trataron con amor.*

*(I write thinking of revenge. In the betrayal that we are collectively materializing against this culture built from white hetero reason because we, the children of black women, were rarely treated with love.)*

—JOHAN MIJAIL, 2018

*White supremacy . . . tries to kill the imagination. . . . Part of my survival was being able to imagine myself into the future.*

—LADY DANE FIGUEROA EDIDI, 2022

**I**N DECEMBER of 2022, I organized a panel conversation titled “Transing Afro-Latinx Studies and Identity” at New York University, in which Nigerian, Cuban, Indigenous trans\* writer Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi explained that her “survival” depended on “being able to imagine [herself] into the future.” Her words stuck with me for months but I did not know why. Perhaps I had never thought about myself in the future. Before I turned thirty, I published a poem titled “On the occasion that i die before i’m thirty” in the independent digital magazine *Catapult*. That specific poem was written at a time in my life when I felt like I was more acquainted with death than life. Over a Zoom panel conversation, Figueroa Edidi’s words turned all the air molecules around me into a spiritually charged form of oxygen that refilled my lungs and helped me recommit to living. That night, I took out Johan Mijail’s *Manifiesto Antirracista: Escrituras para una biografía inmigrante*, which was the first Spanish-language book I had read written by a Black, trans\*, Caribbean migrant, and I wept with joy. As someone who grew up an “illegal alien” in the United States, books were the only places

where I could escape my reality as a legally undocumented Black Zapotec trans\* person. On the night of the NYU panel, I lay in bed thinking about Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi and Johan Mijail's notion of "venganza" against "la razón hétero-blanca," and I whispered to myself, "I hope that this edited volume is something that makes Mijail proud," meaning, I hope that this volume enacts revenge against the same hetero- and white-supremacist logic that continuously attempts to stop queer and trans\* Black freedom.<sup>1</sup>

*When Language Broke Open* is not just an edited volume; it is an object, an archive, and a document that speaks to different geographic, temporal, and ideological understandings of Black aliveness by people who are queer and/or trans\* of Latin American descent.<sup>2</sup> Documentation is something not all of us have had. Some of us were born in countries where archives of Black Latin American, Afro-Latinx, and/or Afro-Caribbean families, resistance movements, and newspapers were seen as threats and burned, erased, or hidden. Others grew up in geographies where we were told our kind didn't have a history, a story, or a place in the community. And some of us quite literally grew up undocumented: without legal permission to reside in the United States or in the Latin American and Caribbean countries our families saw themselves forced to migrate to. Therefore, this collection does the work of counterdocumenting not only ourselves as queer and trans\* Black writers of Latin American descent, but those who came before us: the ones our grandparents never mention because of shame or to protect their right to opacity, or those who are always mentioned but whose stories are curated to leave out the queer, the trans\*, the agender, the hypersexual, the nonsexual, and our darker-skinned relatives, because, after all, colorism thrives in Black communities.

*Memory* may not be something we all have access to, but memory is something we have made, insisted on, mourned over, and committed to through these pages. No one can tell us that we ain't got no canon. We are not the first, we're just the first to have been able to access each other primarily through social media, WhatsApp messages, and friends of a friend

of a friend. Much like the work of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008), *When Language Broke Open* honors and celebrates first and foremost the fact that we are alive, writing, and speaking even when the language doesn't feel complete, and thus it spills and splashes. I'm not afraid of the spill because, if it isn't obvious, we're willing to clean up, not the fuckery of others, but the fuckery we are identifying and addressing in our own personal lives.

As I put closure to this artifact, the writing of Afro-Venezuelan trans\* artist Iki Yos Piña Narváez Flores rings in my head: "Ningún cuerpox negrx queer sin amor sobrevive la *social death*" (No black queer body without love survives social death).<sup>3</sup> Death is all around us, it is difficult not to think about it, and because of this we need care. *When Language Broke Open* engages care as a methodology precisely because Black aliveness is our terminus. As Puerto Rican trans\* writer Sora Ferri writes in these pages, "quiero llegar al punto de mis tías / and look at death as a portal / to a new relationship." But to do that we need to live in a world that celebrates us, so that death is not something we anticipate due to our race, gender, sexuality, or heritage, but something which comes as an organic process of life. I, like Ferri, want to "look at death as a portal / to a new relationship" because, as Mexican American writer des jackson writes, "i am scared to touch the world but i do anyway." For us to live in a future where death is a portal to rest and renewal, non-Black people need to prioritize trans\* and dark-skinned Black lives. This also means that within our own Black community, we need to betray any approximations some of us may have to whiteness and ideologies of whiteness, cis-heterosexual ideologies, gender binaries, and limited understandings of Black queer and trans\* futures.

The work that has been proposed by writers like Qui Dorian Alexander, Alejandro Heredia, Ariana Brown, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, and Breana Nuñez, for example, encourages our diasporic kin to approach narrativity as a political action that activates what Heredia names a new "universe." These universes require rigorous questions like the ones posed by Dorian Alexander: "What if I got to be me and there was still plenty of space for you? What if we knew that there really was enough for all of us?" When these questions are attended to, we can finally begin to operate not from

1. Johan Mijail, *Manifiesto Antirracista: Escrituras para una biografía inmigrante* (Santiago: Los Libros de la Mujer Rota, 2018).

2. Here, I use "Black aliveness" in reference to the work of Black cultural and literary studies scholar Kevin E. Quashie, who argues that "to behold such aliveness, we have to imagine a black world . . . we have to imagine a black world so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of black death, of blackness that is understood only through such vocabulary." For more, see Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021).

3. Iki Yos Piña Narváez Flores, "Las aves del paraíso," in *La fragilidad del cuerpo amado: Escritos cuir y trans en torno a la politicidad del dolor* (Madrid: Editorial Contina Me Tienes, 2019).

a place of scarcity, but a place of abundance. I am unsure of how many times I can reiterate this sentiment, but I do not believe that this is the first collection of queer and trans\* Black writers of Latin American descent. I want to insist that queer and trans\* Black writers of Latin American descent gathered, wrote, published each other, and self-published in their own private communities. Insisting on this speculative past negates the trope that we have not spoken, written, and/or imagined together. We have gathered, written, and imagined, and we will continue to do so. From this day forward, my hope for all of us is that we take Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's "Decálogo de escritura afrofeminista radical" (Decalogue of Radical Afro-feminist Writing) as a serious guide (/method) of relationality that names and deconstructs the coloniality of race, gender, and sexuality, and that in doing so, we arrive at the doorstep of the future.

In the future, we live. In the future, we live gloriously.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alan Pelaez Lopez** (b. 1993, Mexico) is an interdisciplinary writer, visual artist, and theorist from Oaxaca, México. In their poetic and visual work, Alan attends to questions of Black futures, trans\* kinship, and Zapotec (un)belonging. Their theoretical writing excavates and addresses the intimate relationship between settler colonialism, forced migration, and the global circuit of anti-Black violence. They are the author of *Intergalactic Travels: poems from a fugitive alien* (The Operating System, 2020), which was a finalist for the International Latino Book Award, and *to love and mourn in the age of displacement* (Nomadic Press, 2020). In 2022, Pelaez Lopez was awarded a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation, and a Miriam Jiménez Román Fellowship from New York University's The Latinx Project. Alan's writing can be found in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Teen Vogue*, *Refinery29*, *Best American Experimental Writing*, and other places. Pelaez Lopez earned a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, was an assistant professor of queer and trans\* ethnic studies housed in the Department of Race and Resistance Studies at San Francisco State University, and is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Chicanx/e Studies at the University of California, Davis, where they teach classes on Chicanx, Afro-Latinx, and Caribbean literature and visual culture.