EDITED BY ALAN PELAEZ LOPEZ

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

When Language Broke Open

WHEN LANGUAGE BROKE OPEN

Camino del Sol

A Latinx Literary Series

Rigoberto González, Series Editor

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FOREWORD

THE IMPRESSIVE book you hold in your hands is not only a labor of love, but an empowering act of self-love. Poet and scholar Alan Pelaez Lopez has graced us with this pioneering project: a community of Black trans and queer voices of Latin American descent that amplify their lived experiences and realities. But that summation doesn't do justice to the range of landscapes—intellectual, linguistic, political, and emotional—journeyed in these pages. Indeed, so much ground is covered because the gallery of entries is substantive and expansive, enriching and affective. Pelaez Lopez draws from talents across generations, identities, and nationalities to shape a startling and diverse portrait of what it means to be Black and of Latin American descent. One thing is clear, however: that these creative energies are in service to their own agency. They will be heard, especially by those who will see themselves in the language, imagery, and storytelling of *When Language Broke Open*.

Pelaez Lopez's excellent introduction provides a complete context of the anthology's scope and mission, its parameters and literary framework. It's an incisive and learned essay about a literature that has become even more urgent and necessary in this beleaguered social climate that is particularly hostile toward Black and trans people. For that reason, the University of Arizona Press and the Camino del Sol Latinx literary series are particularly proud to be a home for such a timely publication.

When Language Broke Open will no doubt be recognized for its significant literary contribution to Latinx letters, but it's important to acknowledge that the wait has been too long. Public conversations about the role and place of Black literature of the Americas have been mostly peripheral, relegated to short-lived exchanges on social media. Yet they have been happening consistently, just as Black writers and artists of Latin American descent have been exercising their creativity all along, as evidenced by this anthology. The fact of the matter is that race, gender, and sexuality challenge dialogues to become more nuanced and inclusive—expectations that even Latinx literature and scholarship have yet to catch up to. I hope that this anthology, as well as a few other recent projects showcasing Black voices of Latin American descent, signals an important change in how we perceive and engage identity when we say "Latinx."

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't congratulate our astute and visionary editor Alan Pelaez Lopez once more. Their care and attention in curating the selections, their determination to achieve cohesion while simultaneously envisioning a panoramic compilation, and their knowledgeable introduction elevate this project to another level of literary activism and importance. In short, Alan Pelaez Lopez is brilliant—and because of that, *When Language Broke Open* dazzles with their light.

—Rigoberto González

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEN LANGUAGE BROKE OPEN was conceptualized and edited during a difficult and transformative time in my life. In the introduction to my chapbook *to love and mourn in the age of displacement*, I narrate my first visit to the emergency room and being bed-bound for nearly a month. Naïvely, I thought my story with hospitals and illness had ended with that poetry collection. Shortly after I began conceptualizing the call for submissions to *When Language Broke Open*, I got the sickest I have ever been. After too many doctor visits, inconclusive exams, and X-rays that revealed growing scars in my lungs, I realized I could no longer afford to be sick in the United States and moved back to my birth country. I was living in a small one-bedroom apartment in Mexico City and began an experimental treatment that consisted of about fifteen injections a month, two different inhalers, nasal sprays, dissolvable nausea pills, and vertigo medications. Some days were dreadful, and some days were decent. On decent days, I read submissions, contacted potential contributors, and met with some on Zoom to provide feedback. At the sickest moment of my life, it was the cultural production of queer and trans* Black writers of Latin American descent that energized me to make my medical appointments and administer my own injections. In other words, working on this volume offered me an escape from my material reality.

It is lonely to be trans* and disabled. Disability has offered me the opportunity to be more daring, intentional, and precise with my feelings, words, and political visions.

When Language Broke Open would not have been a possibility if it weren't for those who extended care to me when I needed it the most: Lorn Kategaya, Jaselia Gratini, Ra Malika Imhotep, Beth H. Piatote, Valeria Suarez, Ebony Bailey, Ashley Ngozi Agbasoga, Ariana Brown, Jess X. Snow, Jennif(f)er Tamayo, and my family members.

Thank you to the faculty who introduced me to the world of queer and trans* studies when I was a doctoral student at Berkeley: Juana María Rodríguez and Laura Elisa Pérez. And to Leigh Raiford for guiding me through Black studies.

As someone who had never edited a volume, I was often overwhelmed. Each contributor played a crucial role in the production of this work. They answered my questions, and when they couldn't they were honest and we troubleshot together, and some trusted me enough to consider line-by-line edits. Thank you for teaching me how to be part of a collective.

I also want to thank the team at the University of Arizona Press: Thank you for the ongoing communication throughout the entire publishing process. Thank you to Elizabeth Wilder, Leigh McDonald, Julia Balestracci, Amanda Krause, and Matt Gleeson. Rigoberto González, thank you for your commitment to the volume and for utilizing your personal research funds at Rutgers University–Newark to make sure that contributors to *When Language Broke Open* received an honorarium.

Without the scholarly and financial support of The Latinx Project at New York University, I would not have been able to finish this volume. The Miriam Jiménez Román Fellowship gave me the finances necessary to pay consultants and lift the financial burden attached to my new medications and treatment options.

While working on this manuscript, I was an assistant professor of queer and trans* ethnic studies at San Francisco State University, a program housed under the Department of Race and Resistance Studies. Thank you for your warm and life-giving affirmations Leora (Lee) Kava, Falu Bakrania, and Jaimy Mann.

And now, thank you to my current colleagues at the University of California, Davis.

INTRODUCTION

THE 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.[1] 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.[2] 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 monstrua, 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.[3] 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."[4] 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?"[5] 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.[6]

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

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).

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

WHEN LANGUAGE BROKE OPEN

Another Diaspora Poem

IRENE VÁZQUEZ

Diaspora Poem speaks of beaches
I have never
set a single foot on, says sprinkle
in some words in Spanish so they know
you have something to remember;
Diaspora Poem says watch
me, says you must be proof
the subaltern can speak,
says always yell, says stay
yelling; Diaspora Poem says
wandering is better than any home
you could settle into, says you were denied
the past so keep pushing
toward the future, says yearn,
says drink up though you will never
be filled; Diaspora Poem says lie down
for me, cuts out my tongue
so I know
what it means to lack, says isn't it glamorous?
Isn't the loneliness worth it?
Says let them see you cry in public
so they know you're a poet, says
anyone who calls you cliché is an anti-
immigrant bigot; Diaspora Poem calls me baby,
sings me to sleep
at night since no one else will,
Ella canta las mañanitas
que cantaba el Rey David;
Diaspora Poem never says

sorry,
calls me bitch and queen
out the same mouth,
says I am your home now, says this
is your home now, says die
a martyr like Selena, says
you were born for this,
but all I can muster is
no landscape
is forever, I can only stand
where my feet are, even when I'm dying
of thirst, even when there are too many
maps to make sense of,
and I'm too turned around to find
the place I've never had the words
to call home,
so I call collect,
ask my Abuelita to keep pushing pesos
into the booth,
ask her to stay on the line until
I can form sentences in my mother tongue,
tell her,
te quiero
tanto, te extraño,
vamos a ir a México pa' mis vacaciones
de invierno,
but all I can manage is *I'm sorry*,
and not even in Spanish either,
so I pray to nuestra virgen that I'll
survive another winter,
in the meantime,
I dream of the last time
I felt fluent
in any language,
of the last year I didn't need a passport
to cross the border,
of all the nights
walking home from the circus
when I'd make it to the front gate,

right where the buganvilla
bloomed and she'd call me
hijita de mi vida,
and I wake up gasping,
wondering if I will pass on
all this longing to my daughter's
daughter too, if she will remember the taste
of limonada in the summertime,
or if she too will be trapped
in this world without end,
because I can't help myself,
my body was born
for warmer climates, but I didn't know that
until I moved up North,
until I felt my chapped lips
burn when the cold
sets in
no matter how much coconut oil
I rub on,
so when it keeps snowing
into April,
I get on my knees at Easter
service sobbing *I will pay*
any price to evoke
the unnameable,
and all the voices
in my head
speak of beaches, speak of deserts, speak
of homelands, then at once
go silent,
or maybe speak
all as one, saying
we knew it,
we were right
all along.