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Espacio Creación/Creation Space

Janel Pineda

Photo by Luz María Castillo

Honoring the Past / Feeling the Present: Janel Pineda and New Perspectives in Central American and Diaspora Poetry

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Janel Pineda is a Los Angeles-born Salvadoran poet, educator, and author of *Lineage of Rain* (Haymarket Books, 2021). She has performed her poetry internationally in both English and Spanish, and been published in *LitHub*, *PANK, The BreakBeat Poets, Vol. 4: LatiNext,* and *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the U.S.*, among others. Since her involvement with the 2018 Radical Roots Delegation, Pineda has also been a member of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). After earning a BA in English from Dickinson College, she graduated as a Marshall Scholar from Goldsmiths, University of London, with an MA in Creative Writing. Janel will be pursuing an MPhil in Latin American Studies at Cambridge.

I met with Janel Pineda on a breezy May afternoon in downtown Culver City, California. With the sounds of local laughter and music coming from the nearby restaurant, Janel Pineda shared memories, thoughts, and stories about her life and her book, *Lineage of Rain*. I first met her at a virtual poetry reading this April, organized and hosted by Professor Ana Patricia Rodríguez at the University of Maryland. Her work and performances are powerful and haunting. Her words pierce and transport you to a world of poetic possibilities, and her warmth nourishes those looking for alternative modes and links to the past, self, and each other.

Maria Cecilia Azar: Do you remember the moment when you knew you wanted to be a poet?

Janel Pineda: Absolutely. I knew that I wanted to be a writer from a very young age. When I was six years old, I was telling people "I want to write a book one day!" My passion for writing is connected to storytelling. My love for stories came from my grandmother, who told me so many stories growing up. I would literally beg her over and over to tell me stories again and again. I realized that stories last longer if you write them down, and I started to write. When I really came to poetry specifically was as a teenager. There were so many things I was feeling, learning, and processing, and I needed language to hold that for me. I started to write poems and to see poetry as a liberatory practice that I could carry on.

MCA: Is there a story, book, or poem that you find yourself coming back to? What pulls you back into that story?

JP: I grew up never seeing Central American stories represented in literature, and I really wanted to find them. While doing research for my undergraduate thesis, I came across an anthology of Central American women's writing called *Ixok Amar-Go*, which included a series of poems by Salvadoran women, and the majority of the poems were anonymous. One of the poems that opens a section reads, "we have never had the luxury of being enamored with the moon." It was really stunning to read these lines and to learn about the existence of this group of Salvadoran women writers whose names I do not even know. They saw poetry as a responsibility, not as a luxury. They could not write about the

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moon or write about just anything. To them, poetry needed to carry more weight than that. I included this quote in my poem "Rain," because I want to continue and honor this tradition of women who see poetry as a liberatory practice.

MCA: I love the vibrancy of the image on the cover of *Lineage of Rain*. It pulls you into the world of the book. Can you tell us about the book cover?

JP: There is a beautiful story in this collaboration. The cover artwork is by Kiara Aileen Machado, who is a Central American artist and a friend of mine. We met through Central American community spaces in Los Angeles, and both share a passion for uplifting Central American women's voices and Central American people broadly through our artwork. It was beautiful to get to ask her to create a cover for *Lineage of Rain*. I feel so incredibly lucky to have such a beautiful cover. Machado really responded and interpreted my poetry as someone who resonates with the work herself. She created this beautiful artwork that depicts a lot of the recurring images in *Lineage of Rain*, with a woman and sun as central, with water represented running down the woman's hands. There is so much connection to the content of the book that I really love, and I am glad that this image is the first thing people see when they see my book.

MCA: Like the cafetales and mameys on the cover and in your poems, food is a recurring theme in *Lineage of Rain*. How do you see food showing up in the book?

JP: Food is something that connects all of us, that brings us together. To me as a diasporic Salvadoran, food has been a really important way that I've connected to my culture and to the people in my family. Because we are talking about a context of poverty and food insecurity, I wanted to counteract that by writing a book that creates abundance through food imagery. I love that the cover represents the abundance of joy in being able to eat, to nourish your body, and to enjoy the food that you are eating. My connection to my family in El Salvador was very much tied to the foods that we ate growing up. When I visited El Salvador as a child, I remember trying all these new fruits and being so excited by them— that was the thing that I remembered the most and that I love the most. So, when I started to write about El Salvador, I wanted to let food be that connection and to have food appear in ways that nourish the people in the poems. In "In Another Life," specifically, the language of violence is turned from disappearing people to "disappearing food" into our bellies. Language of violence is repurposed to demonstrate scenes that actually depict the opposite—scenes that depict bodies being nourished through food, through the joy of biting into a fruit or filling up with Salvadoran pastelitos.

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MCA: Can you speak about the complexity and tension surrounding water in your poetry?

JP: Water recurs and shifts throughout the book. Water can be a thing that warns, that is associated with flight, with needing to leave, with survival—and yet water is also something that we need in order to live, in order to have a thriving world, to have plants, nature, wildlife. Having water recur throughout the book was not premeditated; it was just something that naturally happened. As I was looking at the poems I thought, "This needs to be the title," because this is the thread of questions that runs through many of my poems: How do we learn from rain? How do we learn from water? How do we allow it to be something that waters us too and that helps us grow?

MCA: Can you talk a little bit about how the concept of "post-memory" informs *Lineage of Rain*?

JP: Post-memory is a theoretical framework that focuses on how the generation after a particular event, typically a trauma, remembers it and relates to it. It was first introduced in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors. Post-memory thinks about the generations that do not have direct memories of the event, but still feel the impact of the event. When I first came across post-memory as a student, I studied it in relation to how people of color in particular have made sense of the traumas that have happened to us, and how we have moved forward in the generations that follow. As a diasporic person, that was really fascinating to me, because there were so many stories that never directly happened to me, but that I have internalized and that feel important to how I understand myself and move through the world. There are complex histories of my body, my family, and my people that I tried to understand through poetry. When I was researching post-memory, I looked at contemporary Salvadoran diasporic poets and how they were telling the stories of the Salvadoran Civil War. For example, I looked at Javier Zamora's poems where he is recounting events in the voices of family members. I realized there is this need to recover those stories, and I wanted to understand that for myself. It is something that I am still grappling with—how do we recover the stories that have been silenced?

MCA: There are phrases in some of your poems that cut deep. For instance, you write: "We learned that crops are only seasonal / for those who have to grow them / knew the elite could spare / what we couldn't afford." And "Inglés la conquistó a pura paja / stuck its tongue down her throat / then bewitched her feet to follow it." It cuts. It cuts through oppression, feeling, language, and through these stories that have been silenced. It opens festering wounds and pulls out new worlds from deep in the flesh. How do these lines cut you when you are writing them?

JP: There are definitely poems and lines that have shocked me as I am writing them. Some of the earliest poems in this collection are "How English Came to Grandma" and "How English Came to Me." I wrote those while a college student majoring in English and trying to make sense of my relationship to language and the power language carries. I wrote those poems in one sitting, and I sat back and thought, "Is English in this room laughing at me?" I didn't sleep that night. It can be a very visceral process to write in these ways and to write things that haunt me. Something that a lot of poets

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that I am in dialogue with talk about is that the poems are smarter than we are. Sometimes we will say something in a poem that we might not have realized ourselves at the conscious level, but you go back, and you see it, and things become clearer. I wrote a lot of the poems in this book as I started to learn about Salvadoran history and while navigating the violence of academia and elite spaces. A lot of these poems are how I processed and made sense of what is happening—to understand what is going on, to name what I am feeling, how I am understanding the world, and allowing that to come to fruition as a poem.

MCA: In the second part of the book, we find a series of poems about the speaker's experience with school, from applying for a fellowship to the moment before the interview, and when the acceptance call finally comes. Toward the end of the collection, the speaker arrives at a sense of ownership, as if to say, "I can use this language to write. This language also belongs to me now." Can you talk a little bit more about arriving at this empowerment in relationship to institutional experience?

JP: When I think about my journey through academia, I think about trying to fight the impostor syndrome that many people from underrepresented backgrounds feel in these spaces, to fight the institutional violence, the micro and macro aggressions. Academia can be a very isolating experience. Poetry for me has always been a space where I come back home to family, to community. I am able to access my family and culture through language in a way that sometimes can feel hard or distant. Poetry has allowed me to reclaim my stories, to reclaim my experiences, to assert that our stories matter, that people want to hear them, and that I have just as much of a right to this language—to the spaces that I am in—as anyone else does. I really wanted the second part of the book to be a celebration of family and an honoring of how they have actually been a part of my journey the whole time.

MCA: Now, I am just going to ask you for the real talk: what was the UK like for you as a Latinx person?

JP: My father has always worked for an elite British clientele, so growing up, my idea of the "American Dream" was actually very British. From a very young age I wanted to go to Oxford, and when I had the opportunity, I applied. Because I was accessing these spaces through very elite ways, through elite fellowships, there was a sense of "I did it. I made it." My father's clients were like, "How come your daughter can go there, and my children did not get accepted?" I knew that meant a lot to my father and to my family. I think that was one aspect of the journey. The other aspect was actually being in the UK and immersing myself in its diasporic communities, Latin American and otherwise! I went out of my way to find pupusas in London! I have been so happy to find community there, to find other British Latinx writers, to connect with people who, just like me, have a diasporic experience in another place, another relationship to these nation states and language. It has expanded my sense of how I am in the world, to build community in this transatlantic way in the UK.

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MCA: Your poems tell us about your experience with poetry in academia. What was your experience with poetry before university?

JP: I feel very lucky to have come to poetry through spoken word, through open mics and community spaces, because my introduction to poetry was through predominantly Black, Brown, Latinx voices in Los Angeles. I learned pretty quickly that poetry is about truth telling, and it does not have to be this Shakespearean sonnet, or that Walt Whitman poem that I am being assigned in class. Part of the reason that poetry is not accessible to a lot of youth of color is because the poetry being taught isn't relatable to us. You need to be reading work that you connect with and that makes you feel seen, especially as a teenager. There is so much power in that, and I have seen that firsthand in my experience as an educator. By the time I went to college and began taking more formal workshop classes, I already carried the knowledge that the point of poetry is to get free, not necessarily to have the most well-crafted poem in the world. That isn't to say that craft isn't important. I think craft can be such a powerful part of our experiences as poets, but I'm a firm believer that the most important thing *is* that the poem is liberatory for you, whatever that means to you personally.

MCA: I want to talk about writing Central American diaspora poetry in the US. We hear the word "regional" in poetry often. What do you think "regional" means in the context of Central American and diaspora poetry?

JP: I am very excited by all the Central American poetry being published right now and all the work that is on its way. The beautiful thing about having more poets out there is that you have more opportunities to see yourself represented as a younger poet or aspiring artist. That, I think, can give one permission to say, "I can do this too." I feel that there is a really beautiful solidarity among Central American communities, and there is also work that needs to be done in that regard. There needs to be more visibility of Belize, Panama, Nicaragua in poetry and the arts. Salvadoran narratives are very dominant in these conversations. As a Salvadoran poet, I am aware of that privilege. I spend time thinking, "How do I use the space of access I have to help uplift and support writers from other diasporas?" The important thing, to me, is to consider how we can see this as a point of solidarity and community building, and collectively care for each other, so our stories are told, represented, and seen.

MCA: Where do you see young Salvadoran and Central American diaspora poets at large taking poetry in the coming years?

JP: There is exciting work happening in Central American poetry and artwork across multiple disciplines. I am very hopeful and excited. Future generations are much sharper, knowledgeable, and aware of all the complexities of this moment that we are living, because they have had so much thrust upon them very early on. I feel upcoming generations will need to keep doing the work of

documenting, learning, and uplifting our stories and experiences—the hardships, the challenges, the pain that needs to be told and seen—while also not forgetting the joy and the positive aspects of our experience. I am really hopeful that we can move to a place where there is no need to write about all these painful histories, that instead there can be a politics of joy in our work.

MCA: Something that I find really interesting is how certain Central American poets, like Maya Chinchilla and Leticia Hernández-Linares, articulate their identity as Central Americans through other Latinx identities—like, for example, Chicana identity. I think that your poetry challenges that approach, because it puts the emphasis on the story, on the transnational. Could talk a bit more about having a transnational approach?

JP: My journey with writing these poems, and the research that went into that process felt like it *had* to be transnational, because I wanted to go to the origin. I wanted to see it for myself. I wanted to understand that history and really connect to El Salvador in a way that I did not feel connected to growing up. Just, as you mentioned, with Maya Chinchilla and Leticia Hernández-Linares, there is a need to define oneself in a new way. Growing up in L.A., the predominant Latinx narrative is Mexican, so it was important for me to find a new entry point and to define myself not in opposition to Mexicanness, but on my own. For me, doing that required interviewing family members, going to El Salvador, seeing the museums, talking to people, and letting that inform my work to help carve out a space for Central America identity, poetics, and solidarities.

MCA: Where can people find you in the coming months? Where should we be looking for more Janel Pineda?

JP: You can go to my website http://www.janelpineda.com/, or follow me on Twitter @Pineda_Janel.

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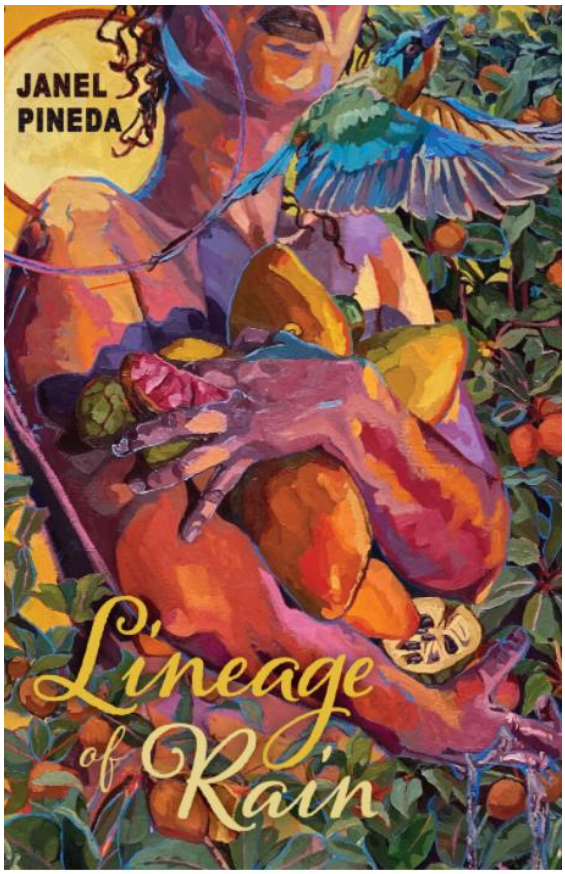
Janel Pineda



Cover Artwork by Kiara Aileen Machado

Selection of poems from *Lineage of Rain* (Haymarket Books, 2021)

In Another Life

The war never happened but somehow you and I
still exist. Like obsidian,
we know only the memory of lava
and not the explosion that created

us. Forget the gunned-down church, the burning

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flesh, the cabbage soup.
There is no bus. There is no border. There is no blood.
There are

only sweet corn fields and mango skins. The turquoise
house and clotheslines.
A heaping plate of pasteles and curtido waiting to be
disappeared into our bellies.

In this life, our people are not things of silences
but whole worlds bursting
into breath. Everywhere, there are children. Playing
freely, clothed and clean.

Mozote does not mean massacre and flowers bloom
in every place shoes are
left behind. My name still means truth, this time
in a language my mouth recognizes,

in a language I know how to speak. My grandmother is
still a storyteller although I am
not a poet. In this life, I do not have to be. This poem
somehow still exists. It is told

in my mother's voice and she makes hurt dissolve like honey
in hot water, manzanilla
warming the throat. You and I do not find each other
on another continent, grasping

at each other's necks in search of home. We meet in a mercado,
my arms overflowing
with mamey and anonas, and together we wash them
in riverwater. We watch sunset fall over

a land we call our own and do not fear its taking.
I bite into the fruit, mouth sucking
seed from substance, pulling its veins from between my teeth.
Our laughter echoes

from inside the cave, one we are free to step outside of.
We do not have to hide here.

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We do not have to hide anywhere. A torogoz flies past my face
and I do not fear its flapping.

How English Came to Grandma

Beatles songs blared
from the small radio in her kitchen

& twenty-something-year-old Elba
danced to "A Hard Day's Night,"
singing English into existence in
a place it never should have arrived.

Like a work of brujería, English
enamored her
into thinking the US perfect.

For grandma, everything americano
was soaked in English and she
wanted to bathe in that language's
ocean, no matter how bloody
she pretended it didn't look.

Inglés la conquistó a pura paja
stuck its tongue down her throat
then bewitched her feet to follow it.

Grandma tells me she fled
in search of it, traced
its footprints up the isthmus
to Los Estados Unidos
the obvious place to go
the place where everybody ended
up, whether they wanted to or not

'cause, come on!
where else would they go
but to the place to which they all
belonged? No,

I don't mean they belonged there
I mean they belonged *to*.

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All This to Tell You: Grandma Still Does Not Speak English

She tried wrestling it once
but it twisted her tongue.

So instead she clings
to "Grandma"
and never "Abuela"

her *ay lob jus* instead of *te quiero*

her Beatles lyrics

her thick *jes mahm*'s
and *rright agüey, mahm*

from her jobs cleaning houses
in *wudlahn Heel* *paz á Dina*

sometimes even *beh-ver-lé Heel*

her Spanglish

and her *ay so sori*'s.

Because if she knows anything about English,

it's how much that language demands
her to apologize.

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How English Came to Me

It made its home
hovering
around my body
the first four years of my life.
Sometimes, it tired
and rested
in my shadow
trailed slimy red and sticky but
always waited
knew my hatred would pass
that I'd find my way to its lap.
Soon
I'd rest my head on its shoulder
curl up against fragmented bone
and let it dig its hands around my spine.

English was patient because it knew
it would win in this country
I wouldn't
be able to resist much longer.

Sometimes I can still hear
English's cackle
when at four years old
I proclaimed:

¡No me hable así!
¡Yo no hablo inglés y nunca lo hablaré!

Weeks later in kindergarten
I let English reign over
my body
let myself soak in its liquid power.

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*

I dizzied myself in this winding river made its waters the
language I tell stories in
built a home in its classes declared a major in its body
chased it up the Thames to the world's oldest English-speaking
university tossed away spanish
reserved it for Saturdays sometimes
or visits to grandma's and even now the only spanish that
lives in this poem is faint memory
the words of a younger braver self

*

and I'm afraid
'cause I bet
English is sitting
somewhere in this room
clutching its stomach

rolling over in laughter
at how I typed these words
sometimes first in spanish
then backspaced my return to English.

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Because Papi Drove Lincolns

For our living, we had:
signed Beatles records
leftover eggplant parmesan
from the Beverly Hills restaurants
winter fruit baskets
& the blessings of a hundred-dollar tip.

When Papi's clients left behind their belongings in the car, we had:
a Nikon D300 brand new Beats $675 Armani flats
& Coach wallets too small
to hold the song of centavos in our pockets.

We kids knew what each client preferred—whether it was
Essentia or Core Perfect pH alkaline water
a supply of Red Vines lemon slices or Diet Coke
ready in the armrest.

We longed for the days when Papi's clients departed
from their holiday homes & housekeepers emptied fridges
into the trunk of Papi's town car:
a whole aisle of Whole Foods leftovers Tetris-packed inside.

We learned that crops are only seasonal
for those who have to grow them
knew the elite could spare
what we couldn't afford

Still, when I left LA, I knew to order the Sicilian Pistachio flavor
of Van Leeuwen Artisan Ice Cream
knew to talk Stones or Springsteen with my white friends' parents
knew to mention the Huntington Gardens at my first Oxford dinner
where a professor asked me why the libraries in LA
allow such "unseemly" people to enter them

where he wondered aloud how I "managed"
to be sitting at the same table as him.

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Instead of Producing

papaya needed peeling
needed its skin slit

along its sides, to release
the bitter of its milk

needed to spend hours
sweetening in the sun

needed to be cut open
for its seeds needed saving

to turn salve for the stomach
and its flesh needed time

to turn a deeper orange
which needed to be served

into bowl and be bitten
needed to nourish

the body whose hair
needed braiding and

the body whose song
needed listening to and

the body who had not had
a thing to eat yet and

the body who had spent
all day tending

to patients, the body
whose legs needed

stretching, whose feet
needed another's fingers

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to walk along their soles
until the aching stopped,

the body whose arms
kneaded flour, water, salt

because bread needed
to become

needed to rest
so it could rise

and bake
and once ready

bread needed
to be centered

needed the company
of other foods

needed a family
to gather around

and behold its being,
bowing their heads

in thanks
for this blessing

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"To Be a Latina Woman on a College Campus" by Janel Pineda, Exiled Poetry Society

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=385EzrLq6pE

If you are interested in reviewing or teaching *Lineage of Rain,* please feel free to contact the author directly through her website or Twitter.

We thank Janel Pineda for granting MARLAS permission to use her poems and images.