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## Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed: An Interview with Saraciea J. Fennell, Mark Oshiro, and Ibi Zoboi

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## Introduction

Editor Saraciea J. Fennell states in the opening of her anthology, *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed: 15 Voices from the Latinx Diaspora* (2021), “Too often individuals from the Latinx diaspora are placed into a box, into stereotypes, that society deems necessary to define us. But we are so much more [...]” (11). This young adult anthology includes fifteen nonfiction writings from an array of authors challenging and changing the way that the Latinx diaspora is understood and discussed. Arizona State University graduate student Sandra Saco met virtually with Fennell, Mark Oshiro, and Ibi Zoboi to discuss the anthology for the National Council of Teachers of English, 2021 Virtual Convention: *Equity, Justice, and Anti-racist Teaching*. In her introduction to *Wild Tongues*, Fennell asserts, “These writers don’t hold back their opinions, their experiences, or their truths” (11). The experiences of these writer’s guide and explore the concepts of the Latinx diaspora as well as the fluidity that exists when constructing one’s identity.<sup>1</sup>

**Sandra Saco:** All the stories in this anthology are not only representative of the complexity and stereotypes surrounding the Latinx diaspora, but they examine and discuss issues within it. Why is it important to recognize these complexities and stereotypes? And to recognize the nuance that exists within the diaspora?

**Saraciea J. Fennell:** It was very intentional for me to make sure that we not only help dismantle what the stereotypical Latinx individual is for people; but, also to talk about what goes on in our communities, because it is so vast and so diverse. And there are lots of things that we don’t talk about that need to be talked about. I feel like *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed* [gives] a nice

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<sup>1</sup> This interview transcript has been edited for clarity.

balance of that. You get a little bit of something from each of the essays, and really tackling topics like mental health, identity, sobriety. Just several things that we've been told in our homes or from our elders that, "This is just the way it is. We're not going to talk about it, we're not going to have a conversation about it. Don't question anything, just sort of go with it."

But I feel like Ibi's and Mark's pieces are sort of tackling those things. I'm really interested to see what each of you have to say. Mark, you're talking about identity and religion and discovering your roots. And the same for you Ibi. You're talking about what it was like to first be labeled as like a Hispanic and then Latinx—an Afro Latinx. And then just, "I'm going to be Haitian." I feel like there's just so much nuance in both of your essays, as well. So, I would love to hear what you think.

**Mark Oshiro:** One thing that was very intentional from the start was [that] I wanted to title it with a word that isn't quite a slur, but it can be very derogatory. And it is a word that's used in many contexts, by people in the diaspora [that] can be very painful, but just analyzing it in a one-dimensional sense. Because I think it would have been very easy to write an essay that was, "Maybe we shouldn't say this word," but to actually delve into why is it that this word is leveled against people who are Latinx, who grow up speaking English, or who look a certain way? Or behave a certain way? And is there a deeper truth in why that happens?

And so, for me, I think what I wanted to do from the very beginning was to just make space for those of us who are transracial adoptees, those of us who were adopted out of our cultures, out of our heritage, out of our community. It's so interesting to think about, because I often do have this sort of thought: what would it have been like to have been in community with my people? What would it have been like if I wasn't separated from them? It's hard to imagine. I don't know what

my life would be like. So, this piece is really examining those of us who were adopted away, who were taken away, who didn't have the choice. After I was adopted, I lived in Boise, Idaho, and it was me, my twin brother, one Southeast Asian kid and one Black girl. That's it. So, four people of color out of eight or nine hundred students. When you live in that kind of environment, there's no choice to think, "I'm going to get involved with my culture. I'm going to learn this language. I'm going to learn these cultural traditions and practices." You don't have that option. So then, what identity forms instead? And what are the things that you take as your cultural cues? And the things that you come to love or hate or dislike, or whatnot. For me, that's where I wanted to start. And I think there are other issues we can talk about. But I wanted to start from this place of "There are people like us who are these weird exceptions to the rule." And, where do we fit in with a greater community?

**Ibi Zoboi:** I want to thank you, Saraciea, for inviting me. I didn't have to be part of this anthology. Because if I think some people will see the title and be like, Haitian? Latinx? What?! I feel like I always have to throw in the disclaimer that technically, for those who don't know, technically Haiti is a Latin American country because it was colonized by the French. And France is part of that Latin speaking world, the Romance languages, etcetera, along with Brazil and Italy. Although, Italy did not colonize the new world. But Portuguese is part of that Latinx community.

So, thank you for including me. And my journey is similar to Mark's. I was going to use a slur as part of my title. But I did not want to invoke those negative feelings. I was going to name it 'Haitian Booty Scratcher' because that's what I was called in elementary school. This was other immigrant kids [and] other Latinx kids in my community. I grew up in Bushwick, which was

very Puerto Rican and Dominican. And there was a hierarchy. So, thank you again for allowing us to investigate the diversity within the diversity. Like all the nuances of being immigrant, for the most part, we're all immigrant in this country. And for me, I always want to address the fact that I am black and trilingual. And I don't always speak on the fact that my first language is not English. And that even within being Caribbean, even within a Latinx colonized country, there is a social hierarchy. And, while this is not the same as being a transracial adoptee, but similarly for me, I was outside of my Haitian community in a mostly Spanish speaking neighborhood. In Brooklyn, New York, most of the Haitians were in Flatbush, and I was in Bushwick. And I connected to the Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in my neighborhood. And I did not connect with the Jamaicans and Trinidadians because of the language barrier. I connected to the merengue and the salsa. I connected to Santeria. I didn't know that I technically was Latinx. I didn't identify as that. But there are cultural markers that connect Spanish speaking countries to Haiti because of that romance language. I really struggled with that as a kid. I'm like, I don't know about hip hop, but I could get with freestyle. I loved me that fast paced Latin hip hop. I love that, more so than I love that hardcore hip hop. And I didn't realize that I was connected to that Latin experience, that Latin aesthetic.

So, thank you again for just letting me speak to that. And then within that Latin experience, there was still "Ooh, you Haitian." And just growing up during the HIV/AIDS epidemic with the four H's and I go into that in my essay. There's still so much that I'm grappling with. With being a Black immigrant and within the Caribbean identity. And now if Haiti is on the news and people are wondering, "How the heck did Haitians get to the Mexican border?" And there is a story. There is a story behind that. And I don't get to speak to that very often because there is within anti-blackness, I believe, that there is anti-Haitian-ness and anything that is close to African

based countries. The closest you are to that sort of route blackness, the more marginalization that we experience on so many levels.

**Mark Oshiro:** If you don't mind, I want to also jump in because you brought up something really interesting, Ibi, about geography and where you sort of end up and how that affects who you are. Because I think that's huge—not just marker of identity. Especially when you're younger, when you're a teenager and who you're around and where you pick up your cultural cues from. When I was eight, we moved from Boise, Idaho to Southern California. And so, it was the first time I was around other kids with brown skin and dark features and who had black hair. And it was this interesting split, where I was viewed with suspicion by half, like about half of the kids, because they're like, "We don't get you and your accent's weird." But then the other half of the kids are like, "Oh, you're just one of us." And so, when I think of my cultural cues, a lot of them, most of my peers at the time, they were either [from the] lower half of Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. And so, the foods that I eat, the things that I love, tend to come from those places.

There was a long period of time, because I lived in Southern California, identified as Chicano, which is a very political term and is mostly reserved or used by Mexican Americans in California. I have seen it in other places. There's a big Chicano influence in Chicago, but when I was living in New York, I would mention this period of my life, and I would meet so many Latinx people who are like, "I've literally never heard that word my entire life. What? Who uses that word?" And it's because geographically it never quite made it to certain parts of the East Coast. And now I don't use that word, because I don't know that I count as Mexican American, even though that's where my biological father is from. Because was I raised as that? No, not

really. Even though I have very specific cultural traditions that are rooted in [Mexican culture] because of the kids around me. And so, I think that's a nuance that is really interesting to explore through this anthology.

**Sandra Saco:** Tell us a little bit about the story that each of you contributed to this anthology. How do your stories really challenge these stereotypes that exist and that define what it means to be Latinx?

**Saracicia J. Fennell:** I think for me, it actually started with identity. I talked about that very pivotal moment when I ended up in foster care. And lots of people started to ask "What are you? Where are you from? Like, where do you come from?" And I just didn't know as a kid. And honestly there weren't any white kids who were being asked that [question] at eight or nine years old, but because I was this Black girl in this environment, they're like, "Oh, you stand out, you're different." And for me, I need[ed] to know where I come from. And I need[ed] to know my own history, so that I can start to define how I want to be identified in the world. And I think that's what's most important about this anthology. I want young people to know that [they] may not want to use the term Latinx. [They] may not want to use the term Chicanx. You can decide how you want to identify, but first, you really do need to know the history because society will force that on to you.

I ended up in foster care, left Brooklyn, landed in the Bronx, and the Bronx was heavy with Puerto Ricans. That was like the Latinx group that mainly dominated in the 90s'. And, so, when I was asked, "What are you?" I'm just dumbfounded and my cousin's like, "She's the same thing as me—Puerto Rican and, you know, Honduran." Someone has finally answered this question for me; that is what I identify as. And then a couple years later, I [was] chatting with my mom

and she's like, "You're not Puerto Rican. You got the Honduran part right. Your cousin is half Puerto Rican. That has nothing to do with you." And so, it was just this awakening for me. At first, I felt empowered because I thought, "Okay, now I'm Puerto Rican and Honduran [and] this is what I'm going to tell everyone when they ask." Because for me, I was just like, "I'm Black." Like what you see here, that's what I am. There is no question about it. But you know, the reason why I titled my essay "Half In, Half Out: Orbiting a World Full of People of Color" is because I'm not Latinx enough for certain groups [and] I'm not Black enough for certain groups. And as a kid, I was always being influenced by other people around me: my elders, by my older siblings, by my friends. You want to emulate the person who you think is a good representation for you. And for me, I just struggled a lot, because I'm like, "Wait, I thought I was this [ethnicity]?" But then I found out I wasn't. Where do I fit in? Who am I? How can I define myself? And so, it was important for me to write about that, but to also do my own research and to actually ask questions, because what seemed to be a theme in my life was people were telling me who I was, and where I came from.

I had a Honduran friend who just looked at me, and she said, "I bet you're Garifuna." And I was like, "What is that?!" I have never heard of this term. I go straight to my mom. And I'm like, "I have questions. Have you ever heard of [Garifuna]? And my mom's like, "Oh, yeah, that's what we are actually" and she starts to just download all of this history and I'm like, "Why am I just hearing about this now? Why did someone who I'm friends with, outside my family connection, see this in me just by looking at me and having a conversation, knowing that I was connected to this indigenous group?" And so, I just found it to be really fascinating that the way I grew up, it was like, all of these things were there. I couldn't actually name them. And then outside sources, naming them for me and me still feeling like the joke's on me. Everyone knows and I know

nothing. And so, I've kind of forced myself to really do the research to find out what is this family history about? Why do we do certain things? And having those answers kind of empowers me because now I can actually educate other people when they try and tell me [my identity]. I could say "I'm Honduran. And this is where we are on the map." Because people just seem to not know where Hondurans come from, which is always a very painful point, because [many] don't recognize any other Latin countries.

**Ibi Zoboi:** So, you know, I never got to answer the question, "Who are you?" I think that I feel like Haitian was written across my forehead. And I spent most part of my childhood getting away from it because of how Haiti was portrayed in the media. My Haiti, the Haiti that I remembered. I left Haiti, at four years old. My mother's Haiti, my father's Haiti was never shown on TV. And I don't even have to explain that because Haiti is still on the news. And it's still the same images that permeated my entire life watching my home country. So, at that time, this is pre-Wyclef, pre-Fugees when Haiti did get a bad rap. And, again, I identified with Dominican girls in my school and because they looked like Saraciea. I had a little color, I have a little yellow color. So, I felt like I could be like, "Okay, I'm Dominican." If I laid my hair a little certain way. But I know that the Dominicans have like the blowout that they could just get the naps out. But that skill, they have a skill for getting the "African" out. And without knowing the history between Haiti and Dominican Republic, I needed to be somewhere safe in terms of identity marker. And safety for me was not being Haitian because I got the other brunt of that. And I know so many kids are dealing with that and other identity markers, other nationalities where you just don't want to be that because of how it's portrayed on the news. You know, we had Haitian boat people and then we had the HIV/AIDS epidemic. And I did not want to identify with that as a child. And I want to say that that is normal until you learn your history, until you

get more information. And the only information I was getting at home was that people were ashamed. My family was ashamed, frustrated, and so sad about what was happening in our country. And I didn't want to identify with that sadness either.

Until 1997, when the Fugees dropped their first album, and everybody secretly pulled out their Haitian flag, and it was a moment of just cultural pride, because their presence was counteracting the negative stereotypes that we were seeing on TV. Here was this renowned rapper; they had the biggest rap album that came out that year. And I was so proud. And that wasn't until it felt like it was too late. By college, it was too late. I tried on different identities like most kids do. I wasn't Haitian, I was Dominican. And then I went to an all-white Catholic school and me identifying with other Hispanic groups did not help me at all. So now I was Black, right? I am Black. But I'm like, "Okay, I can be a little hood. I could, you know, date the boys with the Timbs," or what have you. And then, I found out about Haiti's contribution to the world [such as] the Haitian Revolution. I attended my first Voodoo ceremony after hearing all the negative aspects of Voodoo in the media. When I first [attended] my first ceremony, I was like, "It's been a lie. All this has been a lie. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced." And doing my research into how African cultural retention stayed alive in Haiti, then I feel like I can connect to that true part of Haiti, which is African cultural retentions, Pan Africanism.

And that is what I see in a lot of the Latinx countries, even the Garifuna in Dominican Republic, in Cuba, in Mexico, African Black presence in Mexico. And what's his name? Henry Louis Gates did a documentary of Black and Latinx America. And I think that is a great documentary to pair with *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed*. Excellent. And it is about the Latin countries, but it is about the Black presence and what the colonizers have done to eradicate the Black presence

and bring in Europeans and eradicate the natives as well. So, my journey has been because of how my home country has been portrayed; because of what is done, continually being done in Haiti. As a child, I pushed back against that. I know so many kids are doing that. But with more information [and] with seeing myself in the media, through Wyclef and the Fugees, through reading more books, to just being around other Haitians who knew their history, I was able to proudly identify with the human positive, liberating aspects of my culture.

**Mark Oshiro:** Yeah, and I think one thing that's also makes this anthology so strong is [it] feels like an intra-community conversation versus us sort of talking to external groups. It's sort of us talking to each other. And even listening now to Saraciea and Ibi, I'm sitting here thinking [about] my answer, and it's more or less the same thing, which is that we just need more information. And there's such a lack of teaching [of this] history, but even in our communities, there can be shame around what the history is and there can be misinformation. There is all this stuff that contributes to basically people assigning narratives to us without getting to know us at all and getting to know our own personal history. And here's just a few lines [from] "Eres un pocho:"

They will still call you this.

You still won't get it.

Even though you know what it literally means: you gave up your culture. You assimilated. You threw away everything so that you could fit in here, in a country that wants monotony. You try to explain that you didn't give up anything, that it

was taken from you, but this doesn't matter to them. You betrayed who you were.  
(Oshiro 19).

And it was a thing that was so difficult to grapple with as a kid because the narrative was that there's only two options: One, you either keep your culture when you come here, when you immigrate or you were born here, and two, you gave it up. And I met so many people who would assign the second narrative to me. I didn't. I was taken. I was not born here in the way that you think I was. I didn't get a choice in terms of getting to be a part of my culture. And it was so hard, because I also understood why some of these kids felt the way that they did and why they said things about me. And one of the things I track in the story is what imperialism does to countries and what it does to cultures. And the way it destroys them and changes, literally, changes history. Or at least this story that is told about history. Now I know why people were reacting this way when they saw me. Now I get why they call me [pocho] because they were actually so desperate to preserve who they were, preserve who their families were, and not let this place that they had either moved to or emigrated to change their core sense of self and change their families. And so, you know, from a very personal place, I want this to be about grappling with history. We all have to do it, but also to leave that space to say that history is so deeply complex. And as hard as it may be, we actually need to examine the complexity and the nuance to get a better sense of who we are, especially as a larger Latinx community.

**Sandra Saco:** What message do you hope to convey to the Latinx kid who picks up this book and reads these stories? What do you hope that they really take from coming across this anthology? What message do you want them to take away?

**Saraciea J. Fennell:** You know, I love this question because I think they can take away so many different things. I think it depends on the individual and where they are in their community, where they are in life right now. But I would love for this anthology to be used as a conversation starter. I think the one theme that seems to be consistent within our community is we don't talk enough about things. Whether that's our histories or ancestry, etcetera. It's just not happening. We're an oral community. Oral storytellers. And we do hear those stories, but it's always like certain ones that the elders want to share with us. It's not the one that we're like, "No, give us the tea." Give us the stuff that's really terrible, that we need to know about or the stuff that we're scared to talk about. Let's talk about those family secrets. I want this anthology to be used as a conversation starter. And I want young people to reflect and talk about what's going on within [their] own family group, within [their] own friendship group. Because I think with having so many powerful writers, we have so many award-winning writers [and] we have new voices. And I really thought it was very intentional to make this non-fiction and not a fiction [text] because I wanted the people to know [that] your favorite author had challenging things happen to them in their lives. They survived it. And here's how they are currently living today. Here's how they identify today. And I think that that is going to be such a powerful thing for readers.

So that's really my hope. But I really truly believe there's something in here for everyone, especially if you come from our community. And it was very intentional that I started the collection with Mark's essay and ended with Elizabeth Acevedo's essay on agency because I wanted people to see this art of figuring [it] out. But at the end, you are still the agent of your own life. You still are able to, even as a young person, figure things out and work with the older people in your life, to kind of say like, "This is who I am. Please see me." So that's what I hope for my essay. I hope you don't let society tell you who you are. That's the main thing I want

them to take away. Don't let people tell you who you are. Because nine times out of ten, they're wrong. If you have questions, go ask your parents, or anyone else who knows the information in your family. But those are the two things I would say as for the collection and then for my essay.

**Ibi Zoboi:** This *is* a conversation starter, where there's so much that we haven't talked among ourselves. Intracommunity wise, I want to [say], "what's up with the anti-Haitian [attitudes], everywhere?" I hope this essay just sparked that conversation. What does anti-blackness look like in the Latin community? What does colorism look like? What does classism look like in a poor country, like Haiti? And it's there. We are confined to the conversation, like the race wars, "us against them." But I remember someone saying a controversial quote, but I truly agree with it: that if we were to erase all white people from the planet, white supremacy will still exist. And I would want students to unpack that. How? How and why? And in what ways does it show up in a community full of people of color? And it's not on us. It's not on the people of color, it is the remnants of colonization and imperialism. And what those systems; those oppressive systems leave behind in [countries] like Haiti and Dominican Republic [and] on the island itself, Hispaniola, that causes the tension between the two countries and Haitians in South and Central America. What does that look like? When you have part of the Latinx community seeking refuge in certain countries and how are they treated there? There's so much [to discuss] and it could [start at] grade levels. It could start at middle school, high school, and you have the deeper conversations at a 400-college level course. That's what I love about this collection. You can revisit those essays at every grade, grade level and come out with something different each time. You gain new information.

**Mark Oshiro:** I would also add that what I hope, particularly thinking of my [writing] piece is to make space for being confused. And because there's just so much we don't know, because of the communities we grow up in and because of white supremacy. And instead say, that it is actually okay to have these moments where you're not sure how to identify. You don't know what to call yourself and in my case for just so, so long, just literally not knowing where I came from at all and what that means. And it's how is it in my essay, that you can have this confusion; you can have the sense of trying to find out who you are. But what it also involves is work for the rest of your life. Not like labor work, but you have to do the unpacking. You have to do the research. You have to have the tough conversations. So, take your confusion and turn it into something that can be an active quest and do something about it, rather than just be confused your whole life. But I really want to make that space for kids who just aren't sure or don't know or don't have the information.

## **Conclusion**

Fennell, Oshiro, and Zoboi shared their unique stories further demonstrating that the identity of any Latinx individual cannot be determined through simple answers. The complexities that exist surrounding the concept of identity that communities face when not considered part of the “dominant culture” are damaging and can result in individual journeys to discover a sense of self. These authors and *Wild Tongues* establish how identities have the capacity to shift and change in response to the contexts and environments, “pushing against whatever it is you think is the ideal Latinx individual” (11). Fennell encourages individuals to “read with an open mind and think critically about the topics discussed” (11). These essays are a

starting point for conversations that reflect the various issues important to the Latinx community  
– conversations that are imperative to have.

Work Cited

Fennell, Saraciea J., editor. *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed: 15 Voices from the Latinx Diaspora*. Flatiron Books, 2021.