

Chapter 1

THE MAKING OF A CURANDERA HISTORIAN

Aurora Levins Morales

Aurora Levins Morales began graduate school and therapy within two weeks of each other. In her collection of essays, *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*, she explains that while she was digging through the histories of Puerto Rican women for her dissertation work, she simultaneously dug through her own personal experiences of abuse and subsequent trauma. This led her to find commonalities between personal abuse at the hands of individual victimizers and the collective abuse of oppression at the hands of a racist, sexist, and classist society. As a result, she creates a unique brand of historical methodology that serves to document and heal the traumas of historical oppression and silence. Through this methodology she (re)defines the role of Puerto Rican historians, in particular, to not only document the consistently silenced history of Puerto Ricans in the United States, but also to create healing narratives.

Evoking the tradition of Puerto Rican and Latina women's roles as spiritual and medicinal healers, Levins Morales creates a culturally grounded historical methodology to heal the wounds of historical oppression and silence. Olivia Espín in "Spiritual Power and the Mundane World: Hispanic Female Healers in Urban U.S. Communities," has investigated the "prominence of women healers" in Latino communities. She argues that the role of the healer allows these women to cross gendered barriers and not be limited to traditional gender roles. Because her powers are perceived as supernatural, healers are able to move beyond some of the gender constraints Latinas endure within their cultures. The role of healer "constitutes, for some, the expression of a sense of self that is strong and competent but cannot be fully communicated in all spheres of life without breaking cultural norms" (162). Thus, Levins Morales defining her historical methodology as medicinal and calling the practitioner of this methodology a "curandera" is significant both for its cultural grounding but also for its specific gendered qualities. Levins Morales documents Puerto Rican women's experiences, accounting for their cultural hybridity and multiplicity of experiences along race, class, and gender lines.¹ Her methodology heals not just the traumas of silence, exclusion, and marginalization but also of disconnection and division by illustrating the fluidity of Puerto Rican identity, documenting the multifaceted experience of being Puerto Rican from various racial, class-based, and gendered perspectives. Levins Morales's concerns with histories of the oppressed and, in particular, that of Puerto Rican women from both the island and the diaspora can be traced to her earliest writings, beginning with her contribution to the groundbreaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa), entitled "And Even Fidel Can't Change That . . ." In this chapter, I will explain her "medicinal history" methods and trace the making of this curandera historian throughout her literary works. As we will see, Levins Morales's writing defies linearity, consisting of collections of poems, essays, and short creative nonfiction. Instead of focusing on a particular plot narrative, her work takes on a variety of themes including but not limited to culture, gender, language, race, and sexuality. In my analysis, I pull particular themes from her narratives to demonstrate how she employs curandera tactics throughout her work. I employ Tey Diana Rebolledo's approach to literary criticism, where my role as literary critic is "to make the writers known" and "remember our literary history" (349). As she states, "our literature and our cultural production does not need legitimization from the

academy . . . it already is legitimate in itself” (354). As Levins Morales states, “[i]n the market place of ideas, we are pushed toward the supermarket chains that are replacing the tiny rural colmado” (*Medicine Stories* 67). I therefore, shop in Levins Morales’s own intellectual colmado for my theoretical grounding in this analysis of her work.

The Curandera Handbook

In her essay, “The Historian as Curandera,” Levins Morales provides what she calls a “curandera handbook” listing fifteen steps the curandera historian follows in order to produce a medicinal history. These can be condensed into the following five key areas which appear repeatedly throughout her work: a) giving agency and voice; b) questioning and challenging definitions of historical evidence; c) showing multiple historical perspectives; d) local and global contextualizing; and e) crossing borders. Through these steps, Levins Morales offers a concrete process for the type of postmodernist history theorized by scholars like Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, and Beverly Southgate. As I discuss in a previous article, postmodernist theorists of history have challenged historians to account for the “subjectivity, interpretation, and power dynamics” involved in the production of historical narratives (Garcia, “Medicinal Histories” 254). In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White discussed the interpretive methods used by historians of archival evidence and thus challenged claims to objectivity. Furthermore, Keith Jenkins argued “history remains inevitably a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian’s perspective as a ‘narrator’” (12). While these theorists challenge historical methodologies and raise provocative questions, they stop short of offering a methodology that can be used to create historical narratives that are consciously and overtly revealing the historian’s subjectivity while making visible the many power dynamics across race, class, and gender lines that are always present in historical events.² Levins Morales’s curandera handbook offers such a methodology.

In the curandera handbook, Levins Morales is first and foremost concerned with giving agency and voice to those who have been historically silenced. This requires “telling untold or undertold stories,” (*Medicine Stories* 26), particularly those of women. Once you change the focus of the lens of history, the methodology forcibly changes. For instance, Levins Morales explains, by centering women in her historical narrative, the kinds of questions asked must also change. “We need to ask, [i]f women are assumed to be the most important people in this

story, how will that change the questions we ask? How will it change the answers to questions that have already been asked” (*Medicine Stories* 26). In trying to represent the experiences of the oppressed, some narratives end up victimizing their subjects, by focusing on the many injustices and abuses experienced by these groups. Part of giving agency and voice to those that have been excluded from historical narratives entails also illustrating the ways in which the marginalized resist and revolt against their oppressions. “People who are being mistreated are always trying to figure out a strategy. Those strategies may be shortsighted, opportunistic, ineffective or involve the betrayal of others, but they nevertheless represent a form of resistance” (*Medicine Stories* 30). The strategies used for resistance are clearly diverse and complex. Therefore, an added element in giving agency to those marginalized is to “personalize” as much as possible. Levins Morales explains that, at times, the experiences of marginalized groups are summarized into general statements and therefore fail to convey to the full extent the ways certain events are experienced and individualized. Therefore, she argues, historians should personalize their historical narratives by naming individuals. “Using the names of individual real people, and any details we know about their lives, to dramatize and personalize the social condition of a group makes those conditions far more real. When the disenfranchised appear only in crowd scenes, it reinforces a sense of relative unimportance” (*Medicine Stories* 33). Her goal here is to empower women who at times have been portrayed as merely victims. Throughout her work she illustrates and asserts the everyday ways in which Puerto Rican women empower themselves.

Creating a healing history requires that the curandera historian question and challenge definitions of historical evidence. She does this by using alternative sources to written documentation, relying on oral histories, myths, and stories. Yet there are still those moments where very little evidence, whether traditional or alternative, is available on the history of Puerto Rican women. In these cases, the curandera historian must make these absences and gaps visible in her narrative, instead of simply excluding the experiences of these women. One technique Levins Morales suggests is using “what if” questions. For example, she discusses the story of the Taína cacica Guanina, whose life story resembles that of Pocahontas. She falls in love with a colonizer and dies beside him after her people kill him in battle. “The two are buried side by side and the lilies of Spain entwine with the wildflowers of Puerto Rico upon their graves” (*Medicine Stories* 29).

Levins Morales wonders what was most likely to have happened given the historical context of Guanina's time period. She asks what would the story be if we assume that Guanina was not a naive woman and her liaison with the colonizer was intelligent and strategic. Levins Morales's reinterpretation "proposes another possible set of motives and understandings that could explain the known facts of her life and death and leave us with a sense of her dignity and purpose" (*Medicine Stories* 29).

The third key element to the curandera historical methodology is to show the multiple perspectives and angles to particular historical experiences. In addition to addressing the multiple racial, class-based, and gendered experiences of Puerto Ricans, illustrating a multifaceted Puerto Rican history also means showing the various sides or perspectives of a particular historical event. For instance, representations of Puerto Rican militant resistance, particularly through historical figures, such as Pedro Albizu Campos. Although these figures are significant to the history of Puerto Ricans both on the island and the diaspora, one should be wary of romanticizing these movements. Although there is the leftist and perhaps politically correct perspective of the independence movement, there are also other sides to the history of Puerto Rico's status. "Stories of accommodation, collaboration and outright defeat are just as important because they give us ways to understand our position as caused rather than just existing" (*Medicine Stories* 31). Another way of illustrating various historical perspectives is to reveal hidden power relations. For instance, "Puerto Rican liberal feminists of the late 19th century, all those 'firsts' in the arts and education, came primarily from an hacendado class made affluent by the slave-produced profits of the sugar industry" (*Medicine Stories* 31). In other words, we shouldn't let the feminist accomplishments and contributions of these women overshadow the economic privileges, which allowed them, at times, to exploit other women.

Levins Morales has also made it a point to show connections between Puerto Ricans and their experiences and other peoples both locally and globally, by contextualizing Puerto Rican history more broadly. As a Jewish Puerto Rican woman, she consistently makes connections between Jewish and Puerto Rican historical experiences. She also illustrates the ways that race, class, and gender relate Puerto Ricans to other ethnic/racial groups in the United States and in other locations globally. "The fact that General Nelson Miles, who led the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, was also the most prominent military commander

of the wars against the Plains Indians is not just biographical information about Miles's career. It connects the stories of peoples affected by U.S. expansion from Puerto Rico to the Dakotas, from Idaho and Arizona to Hawaii and the Philippines" (*Medicine Stories* 36). This also requires contextualizing historical figures within a larger historical framework. She specifically gives the example of Rosa Parks, who has come to symbolize the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Yet these individual historical contributions are part of a larger context, involving a broader group of people. As Levins Morales explains, "Rosa Parks didn't 'get tired' one day and start the Montgomery bus boycott. She was a trained organizer, and her role, as well as the time and place of the boycott, was the result of careful planning by a group of civil rights activists. Just as medicinal history must restore individuality to anonymous masses of people, it must also restore social context to individuals singled out as the actors of history" (*Medicine Stories* 35). Through such contextualization, we heal the divisions and silences that focusing on national heroes produces. In this manner, the many Puerto Ricans who were instrumental in the everyday practices and/or support of the ideas and movements embodied by such historical figures can also come to the fore.

Finally, the curandera historian is concerned with crossing multiple borders. Related to the fourth point of contextualizing and making connections, this fifth and final component of the curandera handbook requires that we cross racial, classed, and gendered borders so that Puerto Ricans can also gain a better understanding of their multifaceted experiences and heal some of the divisions caused by these differences. Crossing borders also means crossing those geographical borders as well, where we can see those connections between Puerto Ricans and Africans, Latin Americans, Asians, and Europeans. Maria Lugones has defined this kind of border crossing as "world'-travelling," where women of color are able to constantly shift between "worlds" (i.e., through mainstream culture and their own various cultures) and find ways to function in all of these. Another way of building this capability of crossing borders into the medicinal historian's narrative is to make sure that the narrative is accessible to large audiences. "If the purpose of medicinal history is to transform the way we see ourselves historically, to change our sense of what's possible, then making history available to those who need it most is not a separate process from the researching and interpreting. The task of the curandera historian includes delivery. To do exciting, empowering research and leave it in academic journals and university libraries is like manu-

facturing unaffordable medicines for deadly diseases” (*Medicine Stories* 37). The role of the curandera historian is not just to heal others but also to heal herself. So, an additional aspect of crossing borders and making the work accessible is to personalize the historical narrative. This means not just naming individuals but also including her own individual voice and experience as part of the collective. The curandera historian, therefore, is a socially committed one, who uses “history, not so much to document the past as to restore to the dehistoricized a sense of identity and possibility” (*Medicine Stories* 24). In essence, Levins Morales is posing a challenging (re)definition of Puerto Rican historiography where our roles as historians is not just to document the history of Puerto Ricans, but to create narratives that heal the traumatic effects of historical oppression and silence.

The Birth of the Curandera Historian

The origins of Aurora Levins Morales’s “medicinal history” can be traced to her contributing piece “And Even Fidel Can’t Change That . . .,” published in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*.³ This collection arose from a need felt by women of color to give voice to their experiences as historical and multiply identified subjects. “*This Bridge* documents particular rites of passage. Coming of age and coming to terms with community—race, group, class, gender, self—its expectations, supports, and lessons. And coming to grips with its perversions—racism, prejudice, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, and murder” (Cade Bambara vii). The contributors used creative methods of voicing the many concerns and issues that had been brewing for so many years. In this collection are poems, essays, letters, and dialogues in which women of color address their anger and frustration at the historical invisibility of their experiences. They speak about the agonies as well as pleasures involved in negotiating and navigating one’s identity through the axis of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Their concerns shape many of the methodologies listed in the curandera historian’s handbook. They center on women and focus on untold stories. They challenge traditional notions of what is historical evidence through subjective accounts of their experiences. And they cross borders by making their work readable and accessible to a wide audience.

The writings in *This Bridge Called My Back* were also intended to heal the damage caused by sexist, racist, homophobic, and classist oppressions. The contributors, in particular, address white women and the Anglo-American dominat-

ed women's movement for its exclusion of their experiences. The rejection many of them experienced by women in a movement based only on "sisterhood" or gender further contributed to the societal traumas they had suffered as women of color. They are therefore rejecting their usual role as the bridge between white women and women of color and are instead reclaiming a bridge back to themselves, as expressed in "The Bridge Poem" by Donna Kate Rushin, "I must be the bridge to nowhere/But my true self/and then/ I will be useful" and therefore, healed of racist and classist trauma (xxii).

In her earlier works, Levins Morales first addresses the healing of her divided self along racial, class-based, and gendered lines. However, throughout these works we can see evidence of her application of some of the curandera historian's methods. In "And Even Fidel Can't Change That . . ." she begins by addressing the distance she feels from Nuyoricans. She describes the aspects that separate her from her Nuyorican family history as her "points of terror, points of denial" (54), identifying how race, class, and gender are more specifically those "points" that separate her as a middle-class, light-skinned Puerto Rican-Jew who was born and raised until the age of thirteen on the island, from the rest of her Puerto Rican past. "Where I grew up, I fought battles to prove I was Puerto Rican with the kids who called me 'Americanita,' but I stayed on the safe side of that line: Caribbean island, not Portah Ricah; exotic tropical blossom, not spic—living halfway in the skin and separating myself from the dark, bad city kids in Nueva York" ("And Even Fidel" 53).

However, as she goes on to describe those "points of terror, points of denial" she begins to find connections between their differences. The Nuyorican women in her family and their apparent excess (such as their loud clothes, heavy make-up, and contradictory sex talk) are at first some of those elements that she fears within herself. Their contradictory messages about women's bodies, sexuality, and relations with men—on the one hand, her female relatives point out prospective suitors for her, while on the other, warn her of men's evil ways—led her to question how as a feminist she could claim alliances and connections to these women. Yet as she proclaims, "I love these women for facing up to the ugliness there" ("And Even Fidel" 54). Although they appeared to be passing on patriarchal ideologies to the younger women in the room, through these "bitch sessions" they were able to "pool common knowledge," creating community for themselves, offering support and strategies on how to negotiate what they seemed

to accept as the limitations of their gender. Here, she practices some of the elements of the medicinal historian as she gives voice and agency to these otherwise silenced women. Even though she cannot claim the experiences of these other Puerto Rican women in her family as her own she still recognizes her connection to these women, who belonged to older generations, her ancestors. As she states, “behind me lies my grandmother,” and these stories are also her stories, as part of a collective Puerto Rican experience and history (“And Even Fidel” 55).

This first realization of connection with multiple Puerto Rican experiences spills over into other points of terror and denial across race and class difference. After reading Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*, which chronicles his sordid street life as a Black Puerto Rican man in Harlem in the 1940s and 1950s, she acknowledges that although her middle-class background and light skin privilege have afforded her many advantages, circumstance has basically saved her from experiencing firsthand the racial discrimination and poverty that so many of her Puerto Rican peers have endured. “The junkies could be my younger brothers. The prisoners could be them. I could be the prostitute, the welfare mother, the sister and lover of junkies, the child of alcoholics. There is nothing but circumstance and good English . . . between me and that life” (“And Even Fidel” 55). Any slight change of path or circumstance such as her mother marrying someone other than her middle-class Jewish father, could have greatly affected her own racialized, class-based, and gendered experience. Because she sees how much of her fate as a Puerto Rican woman is related to her circumstances of class and different skin color, she is able to recognize herself in the experiences of Puerto Ricans, such as her Nuyorican female relatives or Piri Thomas, and connect her past to theirs. “Behind me stands my grandmother. Behind me lie the mean streets. Behind me my little brother is nothing but skin and skeleton” (“And Even Fidel” 55). Through this written piece she practices facing those points of terror and denial and sees the ultimate connections of all of her various parts, linking her past to a broader Puerto Rican community. She further applies the curandera historian’s tools as she makes connections and contextualizes the multiple experiences of Puerto Ricans in the United States.

At the end, she returns to the issue of gender focusing primarily on the relationship between mothers and daughters. She argues that one way in which to begin to heal is to repair the relationships between mothers and daughters, where not only mothers can change the experiences of the next generation of women by

teaching their past, but also altering the messages the younger generation receives about their infinite possibilities as “world-travelers.” She calls for at the end, “a revolution capable of healing our wounds. If we’re the ones who can imagine it, if we’re the ones who dream about it, if we’re the ones who need it most, then no one else can do it. . . . We’re the ones” (“And Even Fidel” 56). Part of the process of healing and breaking the silence means writing those stories that once distanced her from her own identity. In this preliminary piece she does this not just by addressing the cultural hybridity and multiplicity of her self and by extension Puerto Ricans in general, but the way in which she invokes her own individual and communal healing, previews what she later names as medicinal history. She uses curandera tools such as giving agency and voice to the voiceless, contextualizing and making connections, and thus as a result she crosses borders. By using her skills as a creative writer to document her experiences, she challenges the idea of historical evidence, expanding the definition to include her own subjective experiences. And finally, she provides a history that is communal through her own personal voice and experience, producing a personalized historical narrative. In her next project, *Getting Home Alive*, which she coauthors with her mother, Rosario Morales, she picks up on her own suggestion about the healing and revolutionary potential of the mother/daughter relationship.

In Search of a Healing “Home”

Aurora Levins Morales continues her own search for a sense of a healed completed self, in *Getting Home Alive*. The text is a testimonial written in prose and poetry, in which the coauthors bear witness to their collective history across time and place. The collection includes pieces written by both mother and daughter although the specific writer of each individual piece is not identified within the text. The only marker differentiating the pieces are the very similar type of font used, allowing for a flow between mother and daughter’s writing, thinking, and experience—a fluidity and experiential continuity which is directly addressed by the authors through their representations of racialized, class-based, and gendered Puerto Rican identities.

Although *Getting Home Alive* was published in 1986, following the phase of Nuyorican movement poetry of the 1970s and preceding the surge in the publication of Puerto Rican and Latina women’s novels in the 1990s, many of which are dismissed by literary critics as assimilationist, this particular text is conspic-

uously absent from the literary histories of Puerto Rican diaspora literature. As Lara-Bonilla explains, Puerto Rican literary criticism tends to follow a trend of defining diaspora literature in two particular ways, either as oppositional and anticolonial in spirit as in “the nuyorican texts of the 1960s and 1970s, while others establish polarizing distinctions between those earlier works and the literary production of subsequent generations, often considered less political, more in keeping with the commercial expectations attributed to multicultural projects” (1). This type of periodization excludes certain texts, on the one hand, for not fitting into a particular type of aesthetic, “that associated with the early nuyorican movement, which favored portrayals of the ‘barrio,’ of marginality, of filth and violence . . .” (Lara-Bonilla 1). On the other hand, “it reproduces polarized categories and confines the focus of textual analysis to political intent,” dismissing those that do not fit a leftist working-class politics (1).⁴ In *Getting Home Alive*, the authors portray a more complex and nuanced experience of Puerto Rican migration and identity that doesn’t centralize the Nuyorican barrio nor the island itself as the space of belonging. As the title suggests, home is an allusive place, the journey to which isn’t straightforward or always uplifting, but one that will inevitably include dangerous encounters. Borrowing Donna Haraway’s term, Jacqueline Stefanko argues, these writers “create hybrid texts in order to ‘survive in diaspora,’ . . . seeking to heal the fractures and ruptures resulting from exile and dispersal” (50). While Levins Morales and Morales align themselves with leftist revolutionary feminist politics, they do so in critical ways without romanticizing or essentializing any one political identity as inherently Puerto Rican. In this sense, *Getting Home Alive* fails to fit into the periodizing trends of Puerto Rican literary criticism and thus ends up being erased from the literary history of the diaspora. Ironically, while the authors aim to create a text that tells stories that have been silenced and marginalized, their unwillingness to fit into a particular essentialist (and, I would argue, a patriarchal nationalist framework) results in the text itself to be silenced and marginalized by Puerto Rican literary scholars. In order to gain a more complete understanding of the complex nature of Puerto Rican migrant history, one that includes the voices of women, we must return to some of these earlier works with a feminist historical lens.

The text opens with the piece “Wolf” written by Levins Morales.⁵ She imagines an encounter with a shape-shifting wolf, symbolic of her true self. “It is changing shape to protect itself from extinction”(Levins Morales and Morales

16). His presence is a warning to the potential dangers that multiple, hybrid beings such as herself may encounter. In the wolf's case the danger lurking overhead is extinction, in her case it is erasure from history. The urgent need to avoid this erasure or extinction drives her to tell her story. "For their survival and mine and the world's, I must make them see the wolf's nature. I must tell them this story" (Levins Morales and Morales 16). The stories she tells are those that follow in the rest of the text.

Throughout the text the two authors document the dangers of extinction and loss as they discuss their cultural transformations and migrations from New York City to the island and back to the mainland for the mother, and from the island to Chicago to California for the daughter. As Rina Benmayor states, "the authors tangle the linear view of the immigrant trajectory" (109). Although their migrations do not follow the expected linear migration between the island and New York City, they do show historical continuity between the island and the diaspora and across generations, in particular gendered ways. In "Kitchens," Levins Morales links her cultural history through her own cooking, to women from the island that she remembers from her childhood in the town of Indiera. "Mine is a California Kitchen, full of fresh vegetables and whole grains, bottled spring water and yogurt in plastic pints, but when I lift the lid from that big black pot, my kitchen fills with the hands of women who came before me, washing rice, washing beans, picking through them so deftly, so swiftly, that I could never see what the defects were in the beans they threw quickly over one shoulder out the window" (Levins Morales and Morales 37). She uses a specifically gendered space such as the kitchen through which to connect her own history to those of other women in her family. As Consuelo Lopez Springfield notes, the kitchen and food are both metaphors that represent a space and a tool used by many women to transfer their culture. But the kitchen is also significant "not only because it has been conceived as a traditionally feminine space—the 'womb' of a feminine culture based on story-telling, female control, and domesticity—but also because the kitchen is where one brews new concoctions, mixing various ingredients to produce a desirable blend," (Bost 201) or healing potion. As a curandera historian in the making, she also brews in her pot healing recipes mixing together the ingredients of Puerto Rican women's lives with her medicinal tools.

Throughout Levins Morales's pieces in *Getting Home Alive*, we repeatedly see an urgent preoccupation with telling untold and undertold histories while always

making local and global connections. In “Immigrants” she reminds herself that as someone who left Puerto Rico at the age of thirteen to move to Chicago, she shares certain aspects of the immigrant experience, not only the sense of displacement and the difficulties of adjusting to a new place and culture, but also a deep desire to remember where she came from. “For years after we left Puerto Rico for the last time, I would wake from a dream of something unbearably precious melting away from my memory as I struggled desperately to hold on, or at least to remember that I had forgotten. I am an immigrant, and I forget to feel what it means to have left. What it means to have arrived” (Levins Morales and Morales 22). Given current debates around immigration reform and the consistent attacks on undocumented people, this piece is particularly significant since it problematizes media’s assumption that only particular Latin American immigrants, namely Mexicans, are impacted or concerned with these issues. As American citizens, Puerto Ricans are presumed not to have any connections to the debate around immigration. But as Levins Morales’s piece attests, the immigration experience isn’t just about legal status, nor does one’s status necessarily protect one from the anti-immigrant repression and violence. As she describes her own experience adjusting as a new immigrant in the United States, “Learning fast not to talk about it, learning excruciatingly slowly how to dress, how to act, what to say, where to hide” (Levins Morales and Morales 25). Any sense of safety her American citizenship status was supposed to grant was clearly elusive.

In the “Class Poem” Levins Morales once again addresses her class difference but here she takes ownership of her class-based identity as a middle-class Puerto Rican woman. She therefore critiques those who define Puerto Rican identity in essentialist terms where one must be from “the barrio,” and of the working class in order to be considered authentically Puerto Rican. She embraces her middle-class identity as an homage to her ancestors who struggled so that her generation could have a better chance at a more comfortable life. She dedicates the poem to the hunger endured by her mother not only physically but intellectually, not having easy access to books and an education, as Rosario Morales herself describes in such pieces as “Destitution” and “Dairy Queen.” She also dedicates the poem to her “great-grandfather Abe Sackman/who worked in Bridgeport making nurses’ uniforms/and came home only on weekends, for years” (Levins Morales and Morales 215). She engages medicinal tools here as she shows the connections between her Puerto Rican and Jewish pasts. She also dedicates the

poem to others like Norma, a young child who suffered the consequences of poverty, dying from inadequate healthcare. Levins Morales deromanticizes popular notions of “the people” or “the community” as only being those who live in poverty.

This is a poem to say
My choosing to suffer gives nothing
to Tita and Norma and Angelica
and that not to use the tongue, the self-confidence, the training
my privilege bought me
is to die again for people who are already dead
and who wanted to live (Levins Morales and Morales 47).

Instead of holding on to some working-class identity, she acknowledges and represents those Puerto Ricans who no longer live in the barrio and who have achieved access through education to a middle-class lifestyle. Yet, she uses her middle-class privilege to give voice and agency to those less fortunate who have not for example, achieved access to publishing houses. She documents their stories along with her own.

In the now classic piece, “I am what I am,” Rosario Morales clearly illustrates the multiplicity and cultural hybridity of Puerto Ricans while contextualizing and connecting her own historical experiences locally and globally, demonstrating that the curandera methods her daughter identifies and uses had early roots in her mother’s teachings. In this piece, Morales reclaims her position as a subject of United States’ history and challenges hegemonic constructions of history and culture in this country. She states, “I am what I am and I am US American” (Levins Morales and Morales 138). She had not claimed this part of her identity before because, in the context of U.S. hegemonic culture, this affirmation would have meant a denial of her Puerto Rican heritage. She reclaims her identity as a “US American” along with her Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Latin American identities as she “croon[s] sentimental tangos in my sleep and Afro-Cuban beats in my blood” (Levins Morales and Morales 138). She continues to challenge hegemonic constructions of identity by also claiming her many languages; English, Spanish, and Spanglish. She also claims all those cultures and histories that shaped her identity construction, including Irish and Jewish, representing

those groups with whom early migrant Puerto Ricans shared neighborhoods in the 1930s and 1940s. She makes no apologies for this hybridity that avoids easy compartmentalization into neat and essentialist labels such as Latino, Hispanic, or even Nuyorican. As she states at the end of her piece, “I am what I am Take it or Leave me alone” (Levins Morales and Morales 139).

This defiant tone is found in their overt discussion of the challenges of working in solidarity. Presaging the curandera historian’s tenet of showing multiple perspectives and not romanticizing movements or heroes, Levins Morales and Morales present bold pieces where they reveal the hidden power dynamics of solidarity work. In “Letter to a Compañero,” Levins Morales challenges those men in leftist movements who use the argument for solidarity in their pursuit of female conquests. She addresses her critique to a particular *compañero*, who simultaneously pursues three different women, including the author. The damage this behavior causes to leftist movements is at times long lasting and results in the loss of potential women leaders. “There are women who were leaders, who worked night and day, defeated not by foreign policy, but by the sexual politics of solidarity, bitter now, unable to work anywhere near you” (Levins Morales and Morales 155). Similarly, in “I am the Reasonable One,” Morales proclaims her voice among white women, confessing to her role in enabling her own silence. “You know me to be reasonable, to be rational. You know me to be almost white, almost middle class, almost acceptable . . . I am the Puerto Rican you can ask, ‘Why don’t they learn English?’” (Levins Morales and Morales 147). She was allowed among white women because she was perceived as non-threatening, as the exceptional “minority” that won’t be offended nor will she offend in her responses to their ignorance. In this piece, however, she calls an end to her silence. “But now I tell you reasonably, for the last time, reasonably, that I am through. That I am not reasonable anymore, that I was always angry, that I am angry now” (Levins Morales and Morales 148). This piece reveals the traumatic effects of always being the “reasonable one.” Her consistent accommodation of her voice and repressing of her anger in her interactions with white women in the name of solidarity, have taken a toll on her psyche to the point where she can no longer remain silent and finally uses her writing to speak back to those people that would have her continue to subvert her own voice for their comfort.

In “The Ending Poem,” the two authors bring together the many elements of the medicinal historian continuing to make those necessary historical contextu-

alizations through their poetically personalized historical narrative. The authors clearly depict the multiplicity they are claiming as their historical and cultural identity. They reiterate their different migrant trajectories as they claim geographical identifications with Puerto Rico, New York, and California. They position Puerto Rican history in a broader global context as they define themselves as Caribeña and also of Latinoamerica, “rooted in the history of my continent” (Levins Morales and Morales 212). They reclaim their racial hybridity composed of African, European, and Taino descent further contextualizing in the larger global history of conquest and diasporic displacement. They also centralize women in their narrative. “I am a child of many mothers/They have kept it all going/ All the civilizations erected on their backs. All the dinner parties given with their labor” (Levins Morales and Morales 213). As they close the poem and their hybrid text they claim their “newness,” a direct result of the global history they portray. “We are new . . . born at a crossroads” (Levins Morales and Morales 213). However, their hybridity is not fragmentary or divisive. They refuse to choose a particular side or to melt into the hegemonic cultural pot. Empowered in their multiplicity they assert, “And we are whole” (Levins Morales and Morales 213). “Getting home alive” means surviving the many barriers and struggles en route to this home they have found at the crossroads of their multiplicity.⁶

The Curandera Historian’s Healing Narratives

It is not until her most recently published works, *Medicine Stories* and *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puerторriqueñas*, that Levins Morales names the methodology she has been using in her works all along and directly defines her work as medicinal history. As mentioned earlier, the catalyst for this work was her own personal search for healing from her traumatic experiences of sexual abuse. The first part of the collection of essays, *Medicine Stories*, includes those where she defines and describes the curandera historians’ handbook. The essays that follow continue to address her earlier concerns with the cultural hybridity and multiplicity of the Puerto Rican experience, but more directly implement the curandera historians’ methods.

For instance, in “The Tribe of Guarayamín,” she discusses the pitfalls of binary constructions between oppressor and oppressed which do not allow alternative visions of being to flourish. She argues that people of color, in their zeal to overcome their status as oppressed, end up adopting the behavior and ideologies

of the oppressor. In this essay, she discusses the recent trend among some Puerto Ricans who have claimed to be direct descendants of Taino natives. She explains, how the quest for nationalist self-affirmation has resulted in the construction of a historical heritage that perpetuates the same hierarchies of dominant society. In this particular case, most of those who are leading the movement toward the adaptation of Taino lineage, are men who have all claimed themselves to be caciques.⁷ Where are the Tainas, and the descendants of the rest of the Tainos who were not caciques? This kind of self-affirmation also ignores the more complex history of racial mixture, appearing as a denial of both African and European ancestries.

She further solidifies her point on the complexities of Puerto Rican history through her series of essays on language and its function as a tool of silence. “On Not Writing English,” discusses how her works have been subjected to editorial abuse as female editors of various journals have critiqued her use of language. Some have criticized her for using grammatically incorrect English. Others have complained about her use of Spanish. Both uphold claims to some kind of “pure” language, which ignores the natural changes and evolution of languages as more people come into contact and share the nuances of their respective languages, such as dialects and accents. “Forked Tongue: On Not Speaking Spanish,” addresses the other side of the purity debates on language. Here she addresses islanders who criticize diaspora Puerto Ricans of supposedly corrupting their pure Spanish. She offers more complex understandings of culture and language from both the island and the diaspora.

Her vision of an alternative method of doing history and healing trauma comes full circle in her last section where she offers a sense of wholeness found in the life of the activist. In “Circle Unbroken: The Politics of Inclusion,” she addresses the need to commit to justice for everyone, not just the victimized. She believes that part of understanding how issues such as race, class, and gender affect those victimized by the oppressions perpetrated along these axes of power, is to offer healing to those who participate as perpetrators. As she explains, “it is a call for a politics of inclusion that abandons no-one, and begins with those it is hardest for us to think about with compassion—the professional perpetrators of atrocities” (*Medicine Stories* 8). She brings this collection to a close, affirming her vision for healing both at a personal and collective level. This vision led to her creation of what she calls a radical history, a medicinal history, which has

widened the possibilities for historiographical work, producing empowering narratives not only for the excluded, but for those who have blindly accepted the exclusions and their subsequent positions of privilege.

Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas serves as an in-depth example of a curandera historian's narrative. While following a chronological historical order, she does not present a singular narrative of history. The narrative consists of a collection of brief pieces, each focusing on a particular historical figure, event, or moment. As Julie Fiandt explains, she shares "untold and 'undertold' stories, individual and collective, of women in history" (573). The historical narrative becomes a global story as she connects the history of Puerto Rican women to women throughout the world, across time and space. Although she continues to address issues of race, class, and gender; in this text, her priorities shift. Whereas before these issues were her primary concern as she strove to heal her multiple identities along these axes while indirectly applying her medicinal tools; here, her conscious use and goal of presenting a curandera's history of Puerto Rican women takes center stage. As she explains in the preface, her goal in this text is "to unearth the names of women deemed unimportant by the writers of official histories" (*Remedios* xvii). Interspersed throughout the episodic historical narratives are short pieces where she describes different medicinal herbs and foods, which are symbolic of the healing properties of the narratives that follow those sections. In this manner she treats historical erasure and hegemony as diseases, which a curandera historian can heal through her "home-grown" herbal history. For instance, the preface to the text is entitled "Yerba Bruja": "Its common name 'witch,' refers to its resistance to even the most cruel treatment that can be inflicted on it" (*Remedios* xxiii). In her essay, "Nightflying: Transforming Traumatic History," Levins Morales laments the lack of scholarly work on the history of the persecution of "witches," most of whom have been women healers of some sort. The persecution continues in our contemporary culture where the term "witch" still appears as a derogatory term hurled at women for all manner of supposed "deviant" behavior. "Popular culture continually reinforces the image of the dangerous old woman dressed in dark peasant clothing and a medieval peaked hat who wants to kidnap, torment and eat children, while the few 'good witches' are invariably young, beautiful and richly dressed. We are taught to fear women elders, and 'witch' is still an epithet of contempt for a strong-minded assertive woman" (*Medicine Stories* 48). Not to mention the "good witch" and "bad

witch” are usually racialized, the former depicted as usually white while the latter always signifies a person of darker skin (i.e., Wizard of Oz). Among the many evils “witches” were accused of during their persecution was the act of nightflying, “the ability to change shape or endow a household object, a pot or a broom, with magical powers and soar above the landscape of daily life, with eyes that can penetrate the darkness and see what we are not supposed to see” (*Medicine Stories* 49). Yet it is exactly this kind of power that we must reclaim and hone. As Irene Lara argues, we must assert what she calls a “bruja positionality,” where Latinas reclaim their own “spiritual conocimiento, re-membling and creating powerful knowledges for personal and community healing” (26). For Levins Morales, this means that the curandera historian engages in the willingness required of nightflying. “Nightflying requires a willingness to leave the familiar ground and see what is meant to be hidden, a willingness to be transformed. If we are to know and understand the landscape of our history, we must be willing to do this: not only to look upon the horrific, the night shadowed, and bear witness to it” (*Medicine Stories* 49). It is no surprise then that she opens *Remedios* with “yerba bruja” as the guiding medicinal herb to her curandera historical narrative. The histories that she portrays in the rest of the text demonstrate the strength and resistance of Puerto Rican women and their ancestors, just like yerba bruja.

Keeping to the tenets of a curandera historian, Levins Morales incorporates her own personal history into the text. While writing the narrative she engages in two tasks: “digging up the histories of Puerto Rican and related women and their responses to the often brutal conditions of their lives; and recovering the buried memories of my own experience of, and responses to, brutality” (*Remedios* xxv). Following the traditions of Jesus Colón and Bernardo Vega she writes a communal, collective historical autobiography. Efraín Barradas has discussed the autobiographical nature of Colón and Vega’s texts arguing that these sought to represent a collective “I.” In other words these texts are actually communal autobiographies as the authors represented not only their individual lives but also that of their communities.⁸ Yet Levins Morales’s goal is not just to represent the untold histories of Puerto Rican women and their communities. Her community also includes the larger human race, indicating a universal usefulness of her medicinal history and methodology. “I am moved by an urgent sense that in order to find those paths that lead to the continuation of life on earth, we must come to understand the nature of these blows: how and why they fell, what was

lost, what was hidden away and sacred, and, most of all, what we, the majority of humans, have learned from the long process of resisting, surrendering, accommodating, and transforming ourselves so that we could live" (*Remedios*, xxvii). By including her personal experiences, contextualizing these along with the histories of Puerto Rican women and positioning these within a broader universal context, she employs the curandera tenets of both personalizing and local/global contextualizing.

In the introduction, entitled "Revision," she establishes her own revision of Puerto Rican history by refuting the hegemonic constructions of Puerto Rican historiography from both the island and the diaspora. She centralizes women by arguing "Puerto Rico was a women's country" (*Remedios* xxi). She also asserts Puerto Rico as both a multiracial society, and one where the majority of the people were poor. She immediately repositions the historical lens away from narratives that have privileged the experiences of those who had access to power (i.e., the Creole elite, the Europeans, and men). Instead, she centralizes the experiences of multiracial, poor and/or working-class women. She establishes a continuity with her earlier works as she defines the particular untold story she here sets out to tell along race, class, and gender lines. However, as we move throughout the text it becomes clear how conscious she is about demonstrating the curandera historians' method.

Beginning with the section she calls "Bisabuelas," or great-grandmothers, she employs the first key element of the curandera historian, centralizing women and giving them agency and voice. She begins Puerto Rican women's history in the year –200,000, with the African mother of all humanity. She relies on the mitochondrial DNA research resulting in the "Eve theory," which argued that all human beings have one common female ancestor, living in Sub-Saharan Africa 200,000 years ago (*Remedios* 3). She continues reclaiming Puerto Rican women's great-grandmothers throughout the world. "Women of the Yams," refers to the African great-grandmothers. She re-imagines these women's lives creating place and home around fire, and centralizing their key roles as those in charge of finding "medicines in the trees and herbs" (*Remedios* 5). She establishes her own medicinal role as a historian as a trait passed on from her female ancestors. "Women of Bread" covers the Mediterranean female ancestors of Puerto Rican women. She reclaims these European foremothers along with her African and Native foremothers in order to heal the wounds of self-hatred. "How do we love

what is pale-skinned in us? Listen, daughters of Spain, inheritors of ancient Europe: once there was a time before war. Once upon a time, it was Europe that was free and flowering, Europe that was indigenous, Europe where women were honored, nature respected, the hoop unbroken" (*Remedios* 10). Finally, "Women of the Yuca," are the native female ancestors of the Americas. Here we see how she establishes continuity across time and space, in the piece "City Girls-Teotihuacan, Mexico." She compares the "city girls" of Teotihuacan, their experiences and interests, with contemporary ones from Los Angeles and New York City. "All you big city girls with hearts that sing to the bustle of crowds, let me tell you, it didn't begin in Manhattan, didn't start in L.A. Teotihuacan may not have had subways or Central Park, but you could walk for hours around the rim of that lake. . . . There were no department stores, but who needed them with all the crafts people's quarters where you could shop for obsidian mirrors, jade jewelry, feather garments, and polished beads?" (*Remedios* 25). Contemporary metropolises like New York City and Los Angeles are not the only ones in the world nor have they been the only ones in history. She debunks western hegemonic notions of "Third World" societies and their histories as backward and uncivilized. She demonstrates that our present conditions are part of a larger and broader context, across space and time, employing the additional elements of contextualization and crossing borders of the curandera historian's methods.

We see an example of how she deals with the issue of questioning accepted forms of evidence when she addresses the unavailability of documentation of Native American women's lives. Instead of perpetuating their silencing by not writing about them, she documents the absence and self-reflexively discusses the limitations of the historian's task. "Here I sit, a storyteller looking back across places that have been altered beyond recognition, looking for the lives of women in a splinter of bone, a single hair, a shard of pottery. The bone suggests the graceful movements of an arm, the hair the sound of someone breathing in their sleep, the shard, the curve of a vanished bowl. But perhaps the arm was clenched in anger, the hair shaved from an enemy's head, the shard from a chamber pot" (*Remedios* 34). Echoing postmodernist theorist arguments about the historian's subjective role as interpreter, she makes "reading" an obvious part of the historian's task, as she suggests the many possible interpretations of the evidence she finds. Similarly, in "1515: Naborias—The Names of the Captives" she reveals the limitations of archival evidence, describing a roster filled with the supposed

names of indigenous women, yet, as she explains, the names were those given to these women by their Spanish captors and thus do not adequately represent anything other than these women's position as slaves, their subjectivity and agency completely buried. In her piece, the author employs the curandera tactic of asking speculative questions in order to balance the archival "evidence": "At night, after the work was done, what did they say among themselves speaking the soft sounding languages of the islands? How did they find consolation? What did they hope for sitting in the warm evening, watching the stars fall into the sea?" (*Remedios* 86). In this section, she gives examples of the medicinal historian's methodologies such as self-reflexivity, showing agency, questioning evidence, and making absences visible.

Another one of the methodological rules of the curandera historian she employs is illustrating power dynamics and not romanticizing historical heroes or heroines. For instance, she depicts the history of María Bibiana who was a poet in Puerto Rico, in 1833. She first praises her as "the first published poet to speak in a Puerto Rican voice, a criolla voice" (*Remedios* 149). However, she also illustrates her privilege as a slaveholding woman. "Sitting at her desk, she reaches absently for the cup of coffee handed to her by her slave and never sees the woman's shadow fall, leaving no trace, across the page" (*Remedios* 150). Although she is one of the first poets to write as a Puerto Rican woman, the experiences of her slave women are not part of her imaginary, and hence remain in the shadows. Similarly, in her two pieces depicting Queen Nzinga of Angola, she aims to strike a balance between acknowledging the significance of this historical figure, as a woman leader who successfully kept Portuguese conquerors at bay for many years, while simultaneously demonstrating the Queen's ruthless disregard for her slaves, as made evident in the piece "1618: Nzinga's Stool—Angola," told from the perspective of the slave woman. "Queen Nzinga sends musicians playing instruments before her and walks in surrounded by her servants. She sees that solitary seat of power and she is angry, but anger never interferes with her cunning. She summons me with a gesture, and before the astonished eyes of the Portuguese officials I fall upon hands and knees, making of my body a throne for Nzinga. Balanced on my ribs, she meets the governor face to face, as his equal" (*Remedios* 108–9). She simultaneously captures the intimidating power of the Queen against her would be oppressors and her complete disregard for her own oppressive actions against her slave, overtly turning her body into an object, a throne.

A clear depiction of personalizing historical narratives appears in the section entitled, “Discovery” which serves as the transition between the historical period prior to 1492 and the history that ensues as a result of conquest. In this piece, she juxtaposes her own personal history of violence and physical conquest with the history of her Native American female ancestors who also were victims of violence and oppression as a result of “discovery”: “In the violated places of my body I find the voices of the conquered of my island. When I seek their voices among the yellowed manuscripts, I find my own bad dreams. In a time of personal nightmares and hours spent in archives I wrote these words to break both silences and embarked on the work of a people’s historian, a wounded healer. I thank the spirits of the invaded who accompanied me” (*Remedios* 55). The simultaneous experiencing of digging through both personal and collective histories are blended here for the curandera historian who because of her methods is able to see the connections between the exploitations of her body and those of native women.

In the section that follows, “Huracán: 1492–1600,” she documents the terrors experienced as a result of “discovery” and prefaces the section with the herb “Bitters.” “Eat bitterness and speak bitterness and share bitter herbs upon your bread, for in bitterness we empty ourselves of poison. . . . But if you take these stories as bitters, your own pain will dissolve into the larger stream of pain and you will find comfort with these women, for the poison they suffered and died from is the same poison, and if you eat bitters, drink bitters, speak bitterness with them, you will be cleansed. You will be healed” (*Remedios* 64). Here the author makes explicit not only the connection between these women’s experiences of oppression and violence and our own in contemporary times, but also the potential healing power that knowing these stories has on the reader. These stories of discovery are bitter ones, but keeping them in silence is just as poisonous as that which they died from. Speaking, or in other words, documenting and narrating these histories is the path toward healing.

In “1513: Flames-Puerto Rico,” she continues to contextualize while personalizing her historical narrative as she documents the presence of Jews in Puerto Rico. Specifically, she documents the repression of Jews in Christian Puerto Rico, where a woman and her brother by the name of Morales were hung from a cross on the wall and whipped when they were suspected of being secret Jews. “No one remembers her name or the exact date of her death. Only that under torture she confessed what they asked her to confess” (*Remedios* 101). In a chill-

ing connection between past and present she illustrates why we must remember those who came before us. “I am a Jew. . . . If I had been there, if someone had told on me, I would have burned. You would never have known my name” (*Remedios* 102). She points to our own vulnerability to the dangers of historical erasure. If we do not actively participate in documenting our own experiences and bear witness to the terrors and atrocities of our own lifetime, these too can be erased by those who hold the power to dictate what constitutes national history. Bearing witness to traumatic histories recalls the work of scholars like Rothberg, Laub, and Feldman, who in their studies of the Holocaust grapple with the simultaneous limitation and necessity of representing the Holocaust. Michael Rothberg in particular argues for the need for “traumatic realist texts,” which “search for a form of documentation beyond direct reference and coherent narrative but do not fully abandon the possibility for some kind of reference and some kind of narrative” (100–101). The necessity to bear witness to the experiences of these Jewish people in Puerto Rico is more important to Levins Morales than any limitations she may have to be able to fully represent this event. Creating “some kind of narrative” is significant if we are to avoid complete historical erasure.

Included in her curandera narrative, she fills gaps in the national historical narrative, documenting little known historical moments or contributions made to significant historical events by Puerto Rican migrant women. For instance, she discusses one of the earliest histories of migration of Puerto Ricans to Hawaii as sugar workers for plantation owners. In “1901: The Death Train,” she not only depicts the arduous journey that began on ships from Puerto Rico to the Southeast, continued on trains along the southwest until they reached the West Coast, where they once again boarded ships to Hawaii, but along that journey illustrates the connections made with other marginalized groups, such as the African American men working on the trains. These men notice the harsh traveling conditions endured by these migrants on the trains where, “[b]y day they sit, doors shut in the desert, guarded by armed men. Inside the stifling iron boxes of the freight cars, people die of the heat, and infections pass from breath to breath” (*Remedios* 166). The men witness this abuse and upon arriving in Los Angeles report the death of a young boy, “leaving the only official news of the passing of this train” (*Remedios* 166). Because of these African American men daring to speak up and report this incident, a historical record exists for her to discover and be able to narrate a little known historical moment in the broader migration

history of Puerto Ricans. Thus, she not only fills a historical gap in migration history, but also crosses racial borders connecting the histories of Puerto Rican migrants to that of African Americans.

The contribution of Puerto Rican women to the needle trade industry both in Puerto Rico and in the United States has been documented by many historians⁹. In her piece, “1909: Lessons,” however, she fills another historical gap, demonstrating how school girls were exploited through the colonizing educational system in Puerto Rico, where they were socialized into the needle trades industry enduring lessons in school. While the pieces they created were sold by Philadelphia manufacturers, their labor went unpaid. Young women workers were also lured to the garment industries of New York during the 1920s answering the call from ads asking for “[y]oung women wanted to sew ladies’ blouses, to sew dresses and suits” (*Remedios* 176). She thus contributes to the migration historians that have taken a masculinist approach where men’s experiences as migrant laborers are prioritized. Finally, in “1934: Needleworkers,” she connects the histories of these women to other migrant women who have replaced them, “Chinese women, Haitian women, Vietnamese, Salvadoran, and Laotian women,” demonstrating the continuity of experiences among immigrant women workers from different parts of the world (*Remedios* 185).

Levins Morales also fills gaps in our national war histories documenting the unseen ways in which Puerto Rican women have contributed to war efforts of this country. This is a theme that we will later see again in the works by Nicholasa Mohr and Judith Ortiz Cofer. In “1917: War Effort” and “1918: Lavanderas,” she portrays how women supported the war effort through their labor whether they worked washing the uniforms of soldiers in businesses dedicated to this service or distributing homemade guava jelly “for the wounded soldiers returning from the battlefields of France” (*Remedios* 172). She not only highlights their contributions but also documents their forms of resistance. The washerwomen, for instance, organize a strike against their bosses and state in their demands “we, who give our sons for the war, cannot consent to the owners enriching themselves by exploiting our blood” (*Remedios* 173). She also depicts the experiences of migrant women in New York during the Second World War where they experience the impact on their domestic lives of the rationing system of certain goods, like olive oil and sugar (*Remedios* 192). “When the war is over, we inherit distant graves, wounded veterans, in-laws from a dozen countries, and a simmering resentment

just this side of rage” (*Remedios* 193). While historical war narratives tend to focus on the service of the predominant male soldiers and their sacrifices, the impact of these wars on the women they leave behind whether they be wives or mothers is rarely affirmed. By centralizing the focus on women’s perspectives, Levins Morales broadens the meaning of service and sacrifice during wartime to include these women and the impact of war not only during but also after the men return.

In the last piece “1954: Transitions” she celebrates her own births, both physical and intellectual, resisting those who have tried to stop these, telling her “no nascas.” In this piece Levins Morales evokes the governmental population control policies of the 1950s that essentially sent the message “no nascas” to every unborn working-class child. In an effort to control the supposed overpopulation problem of Puerto Rico, an aggressive policy was instituted targeting poor women in particular, encouraging sterilization. By the 1970s one third of the Puerto Rican female population had been sterilized.¹⁰ Therefore, in this context, every birth is a form of resistance. Levins Morales imagines herself on the other side, on the threshold of birth surrounded by her ancestors giving her last-minute advice before she embarks on her journey, in 1954. “Ancestors crowd around me, giving me advice, shouting last minute instructions about life on earth” (*Remedios* 205). Yet the piece also documents other moments of birth. For instance, she experiences rebirth in 1964 during a childhood moment of freedom, stealing tangerines from a neighbor’s yard in Puerto Rico with her friend Tita. She is born again in 1988 when she gives birth to her daughter. Finally, her latest moment of rebirth in 1996 as she comes to the end of her book and to her self-healing, “pushing myself forward through the narrow opening carrying all these voices I have called to me, wrapped in my skirts. Carrying my own voice, leaving behind skins that only hamper me now. I am in transition, pushing myself out of myself” (*Remedios* 207). This final rebirth is also a collective one, symbolic of her broader Puerto Rican community’s continuous rebirth into history. “We are pushing into history, we are coming out of the corners, we are gathering our spirits, we are taking up the challenge, we are living in this heartbeat, we are deciding . . . venga lo que venga, to be born” (*Remedios* 208). She’s not only speaking about those who have already been born but also those future generations that, as they carry this same ancestral history she has gathered in this text, continue the history of resistance and healing of historical trauma.

Conclusion

Aurora Levins Morales's trajectory as a medicinal historian began with her first piece in *This Bridge Called My Back*, where she began her search for a sense of wholeness. Her exploration of using literary forms as a way of telling and documenting Puerto Rican women's history continues in *Getting Home Alive* as she joins her mother Rosario Morales in documenting the hybrid nature of Puerto Rican culture as well as the myriad experiences of migration and struggle along race, class, and gender lines. Although the primary concerns in these earlier works appear to be the search for "home" and an identity that was encompassing of her multiple ways of being Puerto Rican, there is evidence that, whether consciously or not, she was already employing curandera methods in her search for healing. In *Medicine Stories*, after receiving her PhD as a historian, she creates her own empowering methodology steeped in Puerto Rican women's traditions of oral storytelling and *curanderismo*. Levins Morales offers historians a new method that both documents the experiences of many who have thus far been excluded from historical narratives of the United States and heals the consequent traumas of these exclusions. She particularly focuses on centering the lives of women, giving agency and voice to them by telling their untold stories. She expands the definition of historical evidence using alternative sources and when even those are nonexistent, asking "what if" questions making those absences visible. The curandera historian's work contextualizes and shows local and global continuities, crossing not only geographical and cultural borders, but personal ones as well as she must include herself within the (his)stories. Levins Morales uses the educational tools her middle-class privilege has made available to her, to create a historical methodology that gives agency and voice to those who have been oppressed, suffering the traumatic erasure and silencing of historical narratives. With *Remedios* she puts the tools of her curandera medicinal bag to use and demonstrates the rich historical narrative created by using her medicinal historian's methods.

Throughout her body of work, however, we also see common preoccupations found in the works of other women writers of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. She shares with Nicholasa Mohr, an urgent desire to document the experiences of these women who have been invisible in national historical narratives both in the United States and the island and employs the literary space as one in which

to create this documentation. Over and again she discusses the significance of memory in both creating historical narratives and sustaining a healthy sense of self in a context filled with the dangers of forgetting, as we also find in the work of Judith Ortiz Cofer. We see this for instance in the herb she chooses to open the first section, “Bisabuelas,” of *Remedios*, Gingko. “Gingko remembers. Gingko restores, Gingko for stroke, for loss of memory, for bringing back that which is too old, too far gone, too deep in the past to find any other way” (*Remedios* 1). Finally, she shares with Esmeralda Santiago, an identity as a cultural historian, or as she specifically calls herself, a “cultural activist,” responsible for creating narratives that celebrate and pass on Puerto Rican culture to future generations, while using a feminist critical lens that reveals the patriarchal aspects of the culture that must be questioned and redefined in order for Puerto Rican women to be able to reclaim a kind of Pueroricanness that is empowering. In the chapters that follow, I turn to these three writers and their versions of medicinal histories as each focuses their work on these historical preoccupations.