

Introduction: Explico Algunas Cosas

This book has come into being as I enter the fourth year of my rematriation, my return to the mountain farm my parents bought in 1951 in the highlands of western Puerto Rico, and where I spent most of my childhood. Rematriation is a much richer and more entangled thing than relocation. It's an act of recovery and reinvention, a countercolonial migration, swimming upstream against the currents of departure, and to be honestly undertaken, requires more than joy at a deep longing fulfilled.

After half a century, I have left a rich country at the center of world domination, which, for all its abundant and beautiful legacies of resistance and mutual care, is inundated in lavish overconsumption, 24–7 glittery distractions, and the increasingly ruthless privatization of pain. I found so much and so many to love in the United States, but in all my years there, I never felt settled, and my writing was a product of and response to that displacement.

Now I am back in the exact place I longed for, a wild mountain farm in a looted colonial homeland, deeply impoverished, in the front lines of climate disaster, being relentlessly drained of its wealth. I wake up every morning in a subtropical rainforest, in the presence of trees and birds, fungi and insects, lizards and frogs, water and soil that form the ecosystem that made me, within a Caribbean culture that in spite of all the harm done to us and all the harmful ways we carry those scars, remains life-affirming and communally oriented. There are muscles I never knew were tensed that loosen here.

But what does it mean for me, a writer since the age of seven, and why has it led to this book?

A week after my tiny house and I landed on this mountaintop, the earth began to shake constantly. A 6.4 quake followed by thousands of aftershocks kept me and my neighbors awake for weeks, unable to trust the ground beneath us enough to fall asleep. Those shocks continue into the present, but the worst of it died down exactly as the pandemic dawned on us. Even without disaster, moving here meant letting go of First World comforts and conveniences. Disaster underlined this. For more than two years I had

no running water in my home, and my toilet is a bucket with sawdust. If it rains for days on end, I lose my electricity. I bathe by pouring a bucket of warm water over my head. I can't believe people call this a "simple" life. It's a life full of logistical complication. But it's changed my relationship to water, to weather, to the red clay soil that gets into all my clothing, to time. Physical effort and rural quiet declutter my senses. My mind is more like the empty bowl I always keep in my writing space to invite the words that want me to speak them.

While I am relearning rural Puerto Rican culture, I am also in some ways replicating the world my parents made for us, a world of books and microscopes, art materials and political discussions.

I am shedding fifty-two years of painfully imposed assimilation, the constant pressure to be someone else, to be quieter, more polite, less angry, less lush, less collectively oriented, more isolated, more market hungry, less border-defying, less colorful, more beige. To care more than I ever have about honors/bribes/privileges/titles/awards/conventions/literary analyses/trends/influences. I'm freer to care more about liberation, about finding the readers who most need what I create, to think of my words as medicine and magic, navigation and prophecy, not stepping stones in a career but honed imagination to energize and expand our capacity for the Great Turning of our human societies that the biosphere needs. I am trying to recover from the exhaustion of having to constantly explain myself to skeptics and fight for my own voice, because even when you win, it's unbelievably tiring.

I am engaged in a reclamation of self that inevitably shifts how I write. So it's also inevitably a time to look back over what I've done, why I've done it, and how it's changed over time.

WHAT CHANGED

What I write about, and how I bring myself to the telling, has in many ways stayed the same since I moved into the world as a writer in my early twenties. What has changed is the depth and nuance that comes with living an engaged life, in conversation with lots of people, places, and movements, for a long time. I have always been a revolutionary writer, a writer creating within the streams of people trying to make livable lives for all of us. Being an embedded writer within social movements and radical communities, I have honed not only my craft, my facility with language, my truth telling, but also my understanding of the complexities of the world.

Take, for example, my writings about Israel/Palestine and the politics of Jewish identity. Raised far from any Jewish institutions other than summer camp, in an internationalist communist family, I identified strongly with Palestinians and not at all with Israel. In my twenties I was a member of New Jewish Agenda but was woefully ignorant about Jewish politics as a whole, and knew almost nothing about Israel. I had good instincts but no nuance. And yet the work I do today springs from the same place as my early, less complex writings. I come from Jews who rejected Zionism as a solution to antisemitism even as pogroms raged around them, and who, in the wake of genocide, saw no reason to change their minds. I am a Latin American, Caribbean anti-imperialist and so I am against settler colonialism, no matter who does it. I have spent decades delving into the political implications of collective trauma, and how oppression is internalized and reenacted upon others. So now I have nuance. I know more. I can articulate my perspective, transparently grounded in my own life and the history that made me. I write liturgical poetry consciously aimed at shifting the ways that trauma has impacted Jews, holding the historical differences in how that has come about. I write essays about why Palestine solidarity is both the only moral stance and the best way forward for us as Jews. I have more subtlety, but I haven't changed my mind.

My most reproduced poem, "Child of the Americas," which proclaims my wholeness as a person of multiple heritages "born at a crossroads," underlies far more sophisticated work on what it means to claim Indigenous heritage but not membership, to grieve the losses of forced migration and also embrace its gifts, to proudly uplift diasporic Puerto Rican culture and history, and consciously resist Acquired US Superiority Syndrome, which sometimes leads returnees to think we know what's best for Borikén.

Heritage, membership, identity. I grew up knowing that the polished axe heads and shards that lay in the creek bed were akin to me, that my roots in the land that birthed me went seven thousand years deep, that my mother's cheekbones set into my face proclaimed an Indigeneity rarely spoken of, complicated and messy in this hacked-up Caribbean world of colonized national borders, of tourist souvenirs scratched with petroglyphs, and self-proclaimed caciques digging through priestly chronicles for remnants of beliefs filtered through a savage Christianity. And yet here we are, 530 years later, emerging from shadows, our lineages ragged, hanging by a thread, but still. In 1998 I wrote in mockery about "The Tribe of Guarayamín" (you have to say it out loud), believing the myth of my own extinction, that any continuity was wishful thinking and a trespass on the lives of Native people

raised tribal, raised with elders, with at least the possibility of a language. That we were wannabes.

But there is a world of nuance I couldn't grasp back then, a deep historical difference between survivors of wars fought in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the way delicate-seeming strands persist as wiry roots in the soil of five centuries. What it means to be born in a place called Indiera, to speak words of ancestral tongues without even knowing it, *bejuco*, *guares*, *nagua*, *coa*, *colibrí*, to know to the absolute core of my being that I am part of something hidden and unnamed, without a *rez*, a tribal council, even an accurate name, Taíno being a misunderstanding by invaders who spoke to us in Hebrew and Latin and thought the word for the Arawak aristocracy was the name of our people. In 1998 I had not witnessed the phenomenon of "pretendians," explored how blood quantum meets tribal sovereignty meets reclaiming lost children, had not been welcomed as kin at Standing Rock. Today Guarayamín has evolved into *Daca*, *I am*. *Guakía*, *we are*. *Yahabo*, *still here*.

"Sugar Poem," written in 1979, is a declaration about the uses of poetry, echoed, expanded, and made explicit in "a poet on assignment" some thirty-odd years later, while "Listen, Speak," written in 2011, expands the earlier statement that my poems "come from the earth, common and brown" into a passionate summoning of stories that come from our bodies, especially sick and disabled bodies like my own:

Come beloveds from your narrow places, from your iron beds, from your lonely perches, come warm and sweaty from the arms of lovers, we who invent a world each morning, and speak in fiery tongues. . . . We are striking sparks of spirit, we are speaking from our flesh, we are stacking up our stories, we are kindling our future.

Listen with your body. Let your body speak.

My work is deeper, broader, and more subtle and leans more into what my body knows, not only my conscious, intellectual mind.

A WORD ON GENRE

Many years ago, a feminist historian at a conference asked me what my "period" was. I replied, "Yes." I was writing a doctoral dissertation in prose poetry that retold the history of Boricua women beginning with our deep

ancestry 200,000 years ago and ending, in that first edition, with the year of my birth. My “period” was everything relevant to my purpose.

When I am asked about the genres in which I write, I have a similar response. I grew up being read a wide range of poetry and prose, learning cadence, rhythm, grammar, form, not by studying them but by absorbing sound. I was equally intoxicated, and in the same way, by Dylan Thomas’s poems and Sean O’Casey’s memoirs with his multipage run-on sentences. By Pablo Neruda’s poetry and Eduardo Galeano’s prose. Are Toni Morrison’s novels prose? I hear them as poetry. Judy Grahn’s *Common Woman* poems could be essays. You can dance to Nicolás Guillén. I don’t presume to decide the shapes of other people’s words, but very few boundaries of art seem impermeable to me. I can stretch toward straight-up creative prose on one side and poems with line breaks on the other, but I love best the intertidal zone between them. I had the good fortune to be taught early on that language was mine, and no one has been able to uproot my conviction that I can do with it whatever pleases me.

Over the course of my writing life, there have been quite a few people who told me what I was doing was against the rules. The college professor who said there was no audience for bilingual literature when I sprinkled some Spanish into an English-language story. The students in an advanced fiction class who parroted the Eurocentric assumptions of their teachers, telling me I had too many people in my stories and needed to devote myself to the individual angst inside one character’s head. The editor who, having asked me to write about Latina authors, thought referring to the group as “we” was unprofessional, and told me my writing style was “not English.” The agent who saw an early draft of *Filigree* and said, as if it were a natural law of the universe, “Mysteries end when you know who committed the crime.” I continue to mix genres and languages, populate my imaginary worlds with crowds, and the story ends when I say it does.

SHAPING THIS BOOK

This collection is not really an anthology. It’s a kind of memoir of a writing life embedded in the social movements of my time. At this writing, I am sixty-eight years old, in the beginning of a new life stage. I am deep in the renewal of my relationship with the ecosystem that made me, and so I do a lot of sifting and sorting—of seeds, of leaf litter, of compost—and a lot of listening, to birds, to weather, to my own aging body, to my desires. I am

listening, as well, to what I mean to *be* as a female elder artist, someone in the prime of her writing life.

The pieces included here come from many places—works published in books and journals, pieces I wrote on assignment for the radio, or in rapid-response blog posts, or as part of my current project to create radical Jewish liturgy. They are doors into those spaces where I wrote them. Those of you who know my work well have been in some of those rooms with me, have encountered me within some of the big conversations of our times. This book allows old friends and new ones to encounter me in many ways, and directs you to the books and blogs where you can read more, follow a thread, continue an argument, discover a new place where we can intersect.

There is work taken from my seven books, *Getting Home Alive* (1986), *Remedios* (1998), *Medicine Stories* (1st ed., 1998), *Kindling: Writings on the Body* (2013), *Cosecha and Other Stories* (2014), and *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (rev. ed.) and *Silt: Prose Poems*, both released in 2019.

There are also pieces that have appeared only in anthologies assembled by others, books pulled together to address US Jewish grappling with Israel, Palestine, Zionism, and antisemitism. Books tackling feminism and the ecological crisis of the world. Books of rebellious ritual, and my own collaborative project, *Rimonim*, in which I engage the body of traditional Jewish prayer as a radical, raised secular, Puerto Rican Ashkenazi poet. You can follow any of these pieces home and find more ways to connect. And there are pieces that appeared only on my web page, in online showcases, or have not yet been published anywhere.

As for the shaping of this book itself, the pieces I have gathered are not ordered chronologically, by genre, or by theme. They are arranged by purpose, by the work each set of words does in the world. Because I am first and foremost a writer of connections, of multiplicities, symbioses, and interwoven stories, it would be impossible to sort my writings by subject matter. Chronology seems dull and inorganic. My themes constantly cross, loop back, tangle together, and repeat.

As I wrote in the introduction of *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*, I come from peoples who know how to use call-and-response, communal chorus, refrain, rhythm, and repetition to make a point. Perhaps because of the rich tapestry of identities I wear, the languages and countries and sexualities I claim, I have always been a collagist, carefully matching the colors and shapes of torn edges to make a new whole, and joyfully transgressing borders of genre and discipline. This book is shaped like torn pages of magazines, matched by color, shape, resonance, and is rich with repetition.

WHO I AM

When people ask me who I am, I always begin with my parents because, more than most people I know, my life was shaped by their decisions and our enduring comradeship. My mother, Rosario, was a working-class Harlem child of small-town landed gentry from Puerto Rico who'd fallen on hard times, raised in the Depression, a lover of books, with a clear, critical mind, who said Marx made sense of her life. My father, Dick, was a first-generation Brooklyn Ukrainian Jew, fifth-generation radical, the middle-class grandchild of garment workers, and he knew he was a scientist when he was eight. They met at eighteen at a communist youth event and got engaged two weeks later, after a lecture by Black Trinidadian communist feminist Claudia Jones on "the woman question." They were married a year later, in 1950, just as the Korean War broke out, and decided to go to Puerto Rico until they were parted, expecting that my father's refusal to fight would land him in jail.

It didn't. But the blacklist blocked my biologist father from any work in his own field, so they bought an abandoned coffee farm in the western highlands, and I was mostly raised here until the age of thirteen, when, for layered reasons, all of them political, my family moved to Chicago. Growing up the child of communists in the 1950s and early 1960s was scary in many ways, but when I talk about it now with friends who grew up in a US culture saturated with anticommunism, I say this: I wouldn't trade it for anything.

My parents were not the grim, humorless caricatures of US popular culture. They were joyful, fun, intellectually curious, creative people who taught us that living a revolutionary life, aimed toward universal justice, was the most satisfying way to be. My father was a groundbreaking mathematical biologist/ecologist who also created hilarious illustrated stories. My mother was a multifaceted feminist artist-intellectual who studied anthropology, botany, philosophy of science, and women's fiber arts, a painter and print-maker, poet, essayist, and fiction writer. I was raised at the confluence of art, ecology, and social justice, in a subtropical rainforest house full of books.

MY LIFE OF WRITING

I began writing in first grade. I read voraciously, memorized and wrote poems, and kept a diary. I learned the names of plants, lizards, and birds, trapped fruit flies for my father and looked at them through his microscope,

climbed trees to bring my mother orchids and bromeliads, and learned from her the names of a hundred colors—those in her palette of oil paints, threads, yarns, and fabrics and the ones she pointed out to me in the lush landscape and ever-changing sky.

I learned the acerbic poems of Bertolt Brecht, found the ruby heart of Nazim Hikmet, and the impassioned Spanish Civil War poems of Pablo Neruda, including his manifesto on writing overtly political poetry, “Explico algunas cosas,” and when my family moved to Chicago, writing, filling stacks of grey lab notebooks, was how I navigated the ecological and cultural shock of migration.

At thirteen I found one poem by Nicolás Guillén in an anthology as I was scouring my Chicago high school library for anything Latin American, and I memorized it on the spot.

Quemaste la madrugada
con fuego de tu guitarra:
zumo de caña en la jícara
de tu carne prieta y viva,
bajo luna muerta y blanca.

He taught me that if he could write in the language and to the rhythms of Afro-Cuban music, then the voices of my rural Puerto Rican neighbor women were also entitled to a place in poetry. I could write in any language and style I loved.

In 1968, at the age of fourteen, I spent the summer in Cuba with my family and came back changed. I had discovered the lyrical journalism of Raúl Valdés Vivó writing from South Vietnam, saw Cuban historical sagas on film, and immersed myself in the lively range of revolutionary storytelling. By the end of the summer, my horizons had become vastly bigger and I’d lost my tolerance for the mind-numbing restrictions of high school. I recited Guillén, now national poet of Cuba, sang anti-war and feminist songs, and skipped class to go to demonstrations.

I had landed in the university neighborhood of Hyde Park just as the women’s liberation movement was exploding into vibrant life. At fifteen I joined the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union and a consciousness-raising group of women six to ten years older than me, and one day in 1970, one of them brought me back a handmade book of poetry by feminist writers in California—Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, Alta—and I read Judy Grahn’s *Common Woman* poems and learned that women’s everyday lives were wor-

thy subjects of literature. This series of literary encounters opened up my sense of the possible and gave me permission to speak out, wholeheartedly, about everything I cared about.

At sixteen I coproduced a feminist radio show, left home, and took part in sit-ins and guerrilla theater. I read and kept writing my way through all the turmoil of those years.

In 1972 I went to Franconia College in northern New Hampshire, where I first fell in love with a North American landscape. By the ice-cold waters of the Pemigewassit and the Gale, among forests of birch and maple and fir, I had the great good fortune to be reunited with Donald Sheehan, one of the adults who helped me survive my teens, who came to Franconia as an English professor and director of the Robert Frost Place and was my poetic godfather. Under his tutelage I translated Neruda, delved deep into Shakespeare's sonnets, and learned to trust myself in new ways.

It would be a few more years before I found the Black women who were breaking into print and making a way for the rest of us. Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Jamaica Kincaid burst upon me and my mother at the same time. We were constantly calling each other up to read lines aloud. We began reading our writings at events, becoming known. But the heart of this story is that we both found our way into published visibility through the collective raising of voice.

MOVEMENTS

I describe myself as a writer embedded in social movements, but the truth is that I have refined the art of speaking from the margins.

In 1976, in my early twenties, I moved to the Bay Area and became part of the cultural ferment of that time and place. I began working at La Peña Cultural Center, founded after the Chilean coup of 1973 as a focal point for solidarity with the Chilean resistance and more broadly with Latin American movements against the death squads and dictatorships that gripped the continent. There I met poets and musicians from all over Latin America and discovered the poet-songwriters of the Nueva Canción/Nueva Trova movements: Violeta Parra, Mercedes Sosa, Silvio Rodríguez, Sara González, Pablo Milanés, Isabel Parra, Daniel Viglietti, Inti Illimani, and Quilapayún, and Puerto Ricans Roy Brown, Andrés Jiménez, Zoraida Santiago, and many others. In their music I found multitudes of declarations about what

it means to be a socially committed artist. They gave me context and support and new kinds of lyrical inspiration.

And there I met exiled Chilean men with low tolerance for female leadership, still less for outright feminism, and wielding vicious antisemitic tropes, who, first chance they got, demoted the core group of women in our project from political education and scriptwriting to photocopying and making coffee, and whose dishonorable sexual conduct tore its way through the hearts of women, many of them newly on fire with a passion for justice, sowing bitterness instead.

Still, I read Mario Benedetti's "Soy un caso perdido," in which he agrees with his critics that he is not impartial and that to pretend to be in these times is immoral. Heard Violeta Parra singing:

Yo no tomo la guitarra
por conseguir un aplauso.
Yo canto la diferencia
que hay de lo cierto a lo falso,
De lo contrario, no canto.

[I don't take up the guitar
to get applause.
I sing the difference
between what's true and what's false.
Otherwise I don't sing.]

For the first time, I was part of a community of radical artists. I joined the women's writing workshops at the Berkeley Women's Center. Through my membership in the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, I was invited to a training in radio work at the Third World News Bureau of KPFA and began producing short news bulletins and longer feature pieces. At La Peña, we started crafting large, multimedia performances about Latin American history, politics, and culture, for which I was a scriptwriter, and I wrote the Haggadah for a solidarity Passover seder. I was a member of New Jewish Agenda, my first community of progressive Jews outside of my own family, and lived within a constantly evolving eruption of radical culture, with poets, singers, actors, dancers, and graphic artists from all over the world.

And I was bisexual at the edges of Latina and women of color lesbian circles, when bi women were presumed to be closeted lesbians or straight girls slumming it for thrills, where my politics and poetry won me partial

acceptance, but one group I joined spent four months debating whether inviting me into a discussion of race, class, and antisemitism had been a betrayal of lesbian sisterhood, and I hung in because I was that hungry for comradeship.

I was a Boricua among white feminists who tokenized me, a Caribbean Jew among white Ashkenazim who could not even wrap their minds around the idea that Jews of Color existed, seeking ways into Jewish ritual as a radical raised with no relationship to Judaism itself or to Israel, and Palestine solidarity posters from Cuba on the walls. It was the totality of movements that added up to home.

TURNING POINTS: BRIDGE AND BEYOND

In the summer of 1978 I was hired as an interviewer for a study by white South African feminist Diana Russell on the incidence of rape and other forms of sexual violence. No one had ever done a randomized study to find out how common sexual violence actually was. Estimates based on police reports were useless, given the devastating ordeal of the legal process that kept most women from reporting rape and the rape culture that kept many of us confused about our right to boundaries and consent.

The directors had recruited an interviewing team made up of underemployed women of color (woc) writers and activists, many of whom became well known in the years that followed. Among them was Cherríe Moraga. We became friends and writing buddies, and in 1981 I stood on the dais at Arlington Street Church in Boston with nine other women, including my mother, Rosario, for the first public reading from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, the book that changed so many lives. Suddenly I was credentialed. I began speaking at colleges and universities, while my mother, less of a traveler, worked New York, Boston, Vermont, and Western Mass.

Each of us began reading some of the other's words when we performed, and in 1983, after my mother read both of our works in Ithaca, New York, we were approached by Nancy Bereano, then an editor at Crossing Press, to do a book together. Nancy left Crossing to start Firebrand Books, and we were among the first authors to sign with her. *Getting Home Alive* was a breakthrough book for us, and something new in Puerto Rican diaspora literature. But not just in the way of novelty. People would come up to us after readings with battered copies they carried everywhere, asking us to

sign the crumpled pages. They said they had never seen themselves between the covers of a book before. We had held up a mirror capable of holding our contradictions.

We were two Puerto Rican women, mother and daughter, with different migration stories. My mother was born in New York in 1930 and migrated to Puerto Rico as an adult, when that was still a rare journey. I was born in Puerto Rico in 1954 to a Nuyorican mother and migrated to Chicago. The book, published in 1986, broke rules, mixed genres, and expressed love and critique for both our countries. We also both wrote about Jews, I as a Puerto Rican Jew, my mother as someone who had found her deepest early alliances with Jews. The pieces from that book are still the most widely anthologized of my work.

During the early 1980s, as I entered my thirties, I began connecting with more of the Jewish left, specifically Jewish feminists, and those who were taking just stands around Palestine. I contributed frequently to the Jewish feminist journal *Bridges*, attended Jewish feminist conferences in San Francisco, and began finding other Jews of Color, though it would be a long time before Jews of Color organizing reached enough of a critical mass to become a home base for me. For the moment, community was finding each other in the hallways of feminist conferences trying to decide between Jewish and WOC caucuses. But it was a start.

**MAKING MEDICINE: REMEDIOS, MEDICINE STORIES,
AND TELLING TO LIVE**

Between 1986 and 1998 I didn't publish any books. In 1988 I gave birth to my daughter, and when she was six months old, to build something other than diapers into my daily life, I started taking a class or two at Mills College. Mills made me fight for the right to study Latina literature, and one of my professors, Gabriel Melendez, encouraged me to skip finishing my BA and apply to graduate schools that would give credit for life experience. In 1990 I began graduate school at the Union Institute, an outgrowth of the 1970s University Without Walls experiments. I had told them I thought I had a master's in cultural organizing, and they agreed.

I felt called to rewrite the history of Puerto Rican women and our ancestors into something medicinal, to extract the active ingredients that would strengthen us and lift us up, knowing whose shoulders we stood upon, from whose hands we could receive the tools, remedies, and lessons we needed. The ones I needed.

I started therapy with a feminist trauma specialist within two weeks of starting grad school, moving between vast histories of harm and resistance, and my own struggle to heal, crafting a kind of survivors' support group across time. Facing my own history of sexual exploitation as part of a global system, and specifically a Caribbean system of imperialism, Indigenous genocide, and slavery, helped me truly understand how impersonal it had been, not about me at all.

In 1995 my marriage ended and I maxed out my student loans to finish grad school, knowing if I stopped I would never start again—and I single parented in poor health while grappling with complex PTSD, as nightmare fragments coalesced into memory, barely keeping my head above water, raising a beloved daughter with one hand tied behind my back, desperately under-resourced and trying with limited success to shield my child from the storms raging inside me.

In the early 1990s a group of eighteen Latina feminist scholars got a grant, originally to explore and compare the work we were doing on US Latinas. But at our first gathering, when we went around the room sharing our intellectual autobiographies, we realized that this was the story we really wanted to tell. So we rewrote the grant agreement and went to a retreat center in the Rockies where we spent two weeks turning the tools of our disciplines onto our own lives, and wrote a kind of collective social memoir about what it was like to be who we were, highlighting the Latin American tradition of “testimonio,” in which life stories illuminate larger social realities. So many of us had lived a split between public lives of apparent success for which we paid in excruciating private struggles carried on in secrecy and isolation. So we told the truth, asking each other the questions no one had asked us, and entered a rich and nourishing collaborative process that continued throughout my graduate school years, giving me sisters, elders, comadres. That collaboration continues to this day.

I spent five years researching and writing my doctoral dissertation, which became two books. *Remedios* is a prose poetry retelling of the history of the Atlantic world through the lives of Puerto Rican women and our kinfolk in the Indigenous Americas, North and West Africa, and mostly southern Europe. I told the story in a collage of short poetic vignettes, inspired by the work of Susan Griffin and Eduardo Galeano, both of whom had brilliantly tackled vast historical landscapes with a similar structure.

I imagined the book as medicinal history, antidotes to the dominant and dominating versions of the past designed to justify oppression and keep us hopeless. I saw myself as a curandera, bearing witness to our wounding and

also our survival, drawing on ancestral human voices and the voices of the plants that had fed and healed us on our journeys.

The core of the first edition of *Medicine Stories* was the theoretical portion of my dissertation, examining how we heal from collective trauma, drawing from the work of feminist therapists and the movements to heal from and eliminate rape and incest. It also included essays based on talks I was giving about a wide range of liberation issues, from the politics of childhood to the ways Puerto Ricans claim Indigenous identity.

When I was approached by South End Press to do an essay collection, I was hesitant because I was in the throes of finishing *Remedios*. I called my mother for advice and she said I should do it, but as a B– book, not an A+ one. That I had to not be perfectionist about it. I learned that the difference between A+ and B– was mostly worry. *Medicine Stories* then surprised me by becoming my best-selling book. Both books were published in 1998, and in 2001 my comadres and I produced *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*.

BODY SPEAKS

The twenty-first century has held my middle years, from forty-six to sixty-eight, during which I matured into much greater power and reach and faced immense challenges. I wrote and published books, won wider recognition, and was called into bigger work. I was part of the emergence of the Disability Justice movement and Healing Justice framework and a rapid expansion of Jews of Color organizing, all of which created spaces in which I could be much more fully and complexly myself.

At the same I spent a huge amount of my energy and time managing my health, being my own advocate, researcher, health coordinator—an entire Ministry of Health, if truth be told. Which is why between 2001 and 2013—although I published pieces in anthologies and journals, my audience grew in leaps and bounds, and I did public speaking in Puerto Rico and Cuba and all over the US—there were no new books. I started a mystery novel and wrote poetry at Hedgebrook in 2000, wrote “Shema” at Norcroft in 2001, started my prose poetry collection *Silt* at A Studio in the Woods in 2005, but I didn’t finish any of them.

My intellectual life was in motion, maybe even flourishing, but my health was unstable, and there was not yet a collective emergence of the chronically ill as a political force. Disability justice had not yet widely challenged the narrow premises of the disability rights movement, and people like me

remained largely invisible, writing from our beds, absent from conferences, meetings, marches that should have been about us, too, grappling with loneliness, isolation, and the deep dangers of a profit-based medical-industrial system incapable of meeting us where we lived, in the complex chronic illnesses that are signatures of our times.

I spent a lot of insomniac nights dealing with toxicities from poor digestion, a sluggish liver, inflamed gallbladder, and intense environmental illness that had left me unable to tolerate the buildings in which I lived, the pesticides with which my neighbors casually drenched their backyard, or the fragrances permeating public spaces. I lived with crushing fatigue, too tired, many days, to walk as far as the corner to mail a letter.

I had multiple major health crises and just years of feeling miserably sick with amorphous, complicated ailments. These realities—the lives of my mind and body—often seemed like parallel tracks in different universes. Who puts brain injury–induced aphasia or the repetitive strain injury (RSI) that made me dictate a whole book with rudimentary speech recognition software—events that changed my relationship to language—into their writing resumes? The reams I was writing about being sick and disabled did not yet have anywhere to go, especially since I didn't have the capacity to go looking for public landing places for them.

Throughout the next two decades, the realities of wounded body and wounded earth, ecology and disability, chronic illness, the medical industrial complex, and the searing battles of single parenthood while sick and poor dominated much of my life. I was living the physical consequences of ecological and sexual violence, digging into the shared roots of inflammation and oppression, bodily and systemic toxicities, just trying to get through my days and especially nights.

We don't talk of such things as part of a writing life, as if the language centers of our brains had nothing to do with the rest of our bodies, with aching backs or bloated bellies. Or even as if our creativity and intellect hovered ethereally over our desks. Unless we decide to, unless we push against the currents of disembodied mind and root ourselves defiantly in our flesh.

I had had my first epileptic seizures as a child, small interruptions and changes of consciousness nobody noticed, and I didn't know to tell anyone about, because as children the strangeness of life is still new and often inexplicable. But in my late teens and early twenties I began to have tonic-clonic seizures, colloquially called grand mal. I started to fall and crack my head on hard surfaces, which led to many of the brain injuries usually called MTBIS. M stands for mild, as compared to crushed skulls and brain bleeds. They

are not mild in their consequences, though. One of those, in late 2005, left me in need of personal attendant care, with life-altering struggles that lasted for many months.

I had just returned from my first stay at A Studio in the Woods, a remarkable writing residency in New Orleans, on the west bank of the Mississippi River. I had been working on an early version of *Silt*, an exploration of the interwoven natural and social histories of the Mississippi River system and the Caribbean Sea. It was just months before Katrina unleashed disaster on the Gulf Coast, but it was my own inner storms that forced me to lay the book aside for what became thirteen years.

In 2007 I had a stroke, which I sometimes refer to as my best bad thing. After a year of minimal and largely ineffective treatment, I was told I was done and given half the cost of a power wheelchair. The resources that my debilitating chronic illnesses, routinely dismissed by the medical establishment, could not get me, the stroke did. I had reliable mobility for the first time in years, and zooming around in my bright-yellow chair, my struggles became visible to others for the first time. I had been carrying massive student debt, unable to pay and trying month to month to avoid the worst consequences of default. The stroke allowed me to cancel that debt.

I could enter the disability community and had the great good fortune to go to a show by Sins Invalid, the brilliant disability justice performance and organizing project, into which I leapt. Suddenly there was a place where my body's voice was treasured, and in the company of other beloved crip artists, we cleared a public space for all the fury and laughter and vision we had been holding alone. As a commissioned artist for Sins Invalid, I wrote a wide variety of pieces that I and others performed, some of which are included in this collection. So I had a web of people, a network, a huge Facebook group of the sick, disabled, and queer, people who were awake in some time zone when I needed an answering presence.

TRANSITIONS

Then in March 2011 my beloved mother and closest collaborator died of multiple myeloma, a blood cancer closely associated with dieldrin, a pesticide my parents used on our farm in the early 1950s. She and I had been in political and artistic conversation for forty years, and I didn't understand being in a world where I could not reach her on the phone to read her my latest draft, to talk politics, fabric, and recipes.

My parents had been together since the age of eighteen, which meant my father had never been a single adult. In the fall of that year I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to live with him and help him adjust to the loss of my mother. I ended up staying for the rest of his life, which was five years.

I moved into my mother's room, slept where she had slept, wrote where she wrote. I was in deep grief, living three thousand miles away from most of my friends, and managing my father's support system and frequent medical emergencies mostly by myself, and the health gains of the previous year evaporated. Even when I insisted we hire a personal care attendant for him, and the marvelous RayRay Ferrales joined the team, the work was exhausting. But, for the first time since I was sixteen, I was living with my father, a kind, affectionate, brilliant, and funny man who would lie on the couch and as I walked by, snag me into hours-long, wide-ranging speculative conversations that crackled and sparked in my mind long after.

My father paid for the necessary upgrades to make the house healthy for me, and for the first time I had rent-free housing that was both secure and safe, and enough financial support to ease my long-standing money panic. In spite of a major back injury that left me bedridden and immobilized for months, and figuring out how to get off opioid painkillers and then suffering intense withdrawal and several seizures, I still became prolific. During my time there I wrote and published two books, *Kindling* (on a computer suspended over my bed) and *Cosecha and Other Stories*, and achieved my dream of designing and building a sustainable and healthy mobile tiny house, where I now live.¹

I was also writer in residence with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, initiating and writing a first draft of a groundbreaking left analysis of antisemitism, in conversation with many people, including their Jews of Color and Mizrahi caucuses. Along with other members of Jewish Voice for Peace, I helped form a Jews of Color, Sephardi, and Mizrahi (JOCSM) Caucus, began producing the blog Unruly.org, and attended the first Jews of Color National Convening.

All these projects contributed to much greater visibility and impact by Jews of Color, and white-dominated Jewish organizations began reaching out to us for help addressing racism among Jews, sometimes thoughtfully, sometimes in tokenizing ways, but I am now part of a rich web of BIJOCSM organizing that has generated many new discussions, projects, and organizations and I have the privilege of sitting on the steering committee of the Jewish Liberation Fund and helping fund them.²

In January 2016 my father died of congestive heart failure while we sang him the revolutionary songs we'd grown up on. Grief upon grief, and suddenly

I was the oldest of our mishpucha-familia. That summer I finished my tiny house and began making my way west, via a berry farm in Ashfield, Massachusetts, a week at Standing Rock, blizzards, floods, parking lots, and gorgeous public lands, until I came to rest in Tomales, California, at True Grass, a “restorative grazing” cattle ranch where I lived for two and a half years. The land was beautiful, quiet, easy on my heart, a place of grassy hills and live oaks, raptors and water birds, creeks and fog, blackberries and California poppies, and the lowing of cattle.

In the peace of that place I completed a new edition of *Medicine Stories*, with twenty new or deeply revised essays. A poem I had written in 2016, in response to the massacre of mostly Puerto Rican LGBTQ youth at the Pulse nightclub in Florida, went viral. It was based on one of the core prayers in Judaism, the V’ahavta, and spoke to the power of imagining winning the world we want, in which such acts as these are ancient, barely imaginable barbarities of an age that is past. It suddenly and vastly accelerated the use of my poetry in Jewish ritual and organizing, and led to a flood of requests for more from rabbis and revolutionaries (and people who are both), leading to the collectively supported Rimomim Project, soon to enter the world as a richly illustrated collection of Jewish liberation theology poetry.

But first came the devastating autumn of 2017. On September 20, Hurricane Maria slammed into Puerto Rico as a Category 5 storm and tore my country up by the roots, but what killed the roughly five thousand people who died in its wake was neither wind nor water but unabashedly racist neglect, genocidal in its scope. Crouched at my computer desk in California, I scanned message boards of the diaspora, people desperately trying to locate friends and family. It took us a month to get any news at all of our home community. On September 30, I delivered my synagogue’s Yom Kippur morning sermon, filled with hurricane metaphors, about joy as the only reliable fuel source for a lifetime of audacious action.

On October 9, I woke up to strange white powder covering my car. It took a moment to realize the sky was full of ash. Santa Rosa, only twenty-five miles away, was burning. Caught between two apocalyptic landscapes, both of them climate emergencies, I was locked down with my air filter and my burning lungs. A few months later I began having heart symptoms and in May 2018 had surgery to place a stent in a coronary artery that was 99 percent blocked—by grief and rage, my cardiologist said.

But I had been offered a second residency at A Studio in the Woods to complete the project about the river and the sea, which I’d had to set aside in 2005. The residency came with enough funding to cover the cost of a

road trip along the Mississippi River from Minneapolis to the Gulf Coast, a journey I took with Naomi Robles, a young Puerto Rican community historian, writer, and activist from Holyoke. I finished the second version of *Silt* in six months. *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* was released by Duke University Press in April 2019, and I published *Silt: Prose Poems* through Palabrera Press in August 2019.

My two 2019 books came off the presses during another major upheaval in my life. As an aging woman of color with chronic illness and disabilities, I was struggling with the level of isolation and individualism I faced in rural Northern California, and thinking about how to set up a better web of community support for myself. I was also thinking about where I could best sink roots and take a stand around the climate emergency.

Spending time in New Orleans reminded me that there are more communally oriented cultures, but much as I love New Orleans, Louisiana is a dangerously toxic ecosystem, and I knew my health could not withstand it. Then I went on my first post-Maria trip to Puerto Rico with my friend Susan Raffo, and on the first day was deeply called to move back to the land I grew up on. In October 2019, I left California forty-three years after I arrived and made my way across the US and into the Caribbean. I landed on the farm where I grew up on December 20, a week before earthquakes ravaged the already hurricane-demolished country. A few months later, as we were still clearing rubble, the pandemic struck. Let's just say it's been a tumultuous reentry.

I am writing these words in the winter of 2022–23 as we continue to clear the rubble of Hurricane Fiona, more than three years into my new life in the land of my birth. I am writing new words with a clear mind, a passionate heart, and a firm hand, rooting into the tiny world that made me, scattering seed on the wind. I am drawing on a whole lifetime of wrestling with how to story the lives we want into existence, honing ideas and words to a fine, sharp edge. This is what it is to be in my prime, primed.

I'm crafting a new edition of *Remedios*, weaving in new threads pulled from research done by people who thirty years ago had no access to the tools and money they needed, and who have challenged and changed so much of what we thought we knew. I am finding my way through the thicket of Rimonim, a practice of coming home again and again to what it is that I long for, what spiritual tools I need in my own hands. I completed the historical mystery I started half a life ago, am blogging on my Patreon page, recording podcasts and my first audiobook, while I plant food and talk with agroecology farmers and climate organizers, artists and teachers, finding the people with whom to work, and thinking about how I, as a disabled elder artist,

can best contribute to our collective fight for human societies that nourish rather than extract.

As I lean into the future, I am looking back over my writing life, and this is what I see. I've rewritten Puerto Rican women's history and the story of my sick and disabled flesh, written about Jews living in the tension of oppressed oppressor and how Jews of Color hold one way of cracking that story open, how Indigenous and Jewish genocides weave and fray through my family tree, about the movement of water and people through the natural and historical landscapes of the Mississippi River and the Caribbean Sea, and a million facets of how to imagine and build a better world.

Most of that writing was done in Northern California, where I worked in a web of interconnected, often quarrelsome movements: Latin American exiles and radical Jews, feminist agitators and researchers, lesbian publishers and producers, disability justice pioneers, women of color writers and scholars, Indigenous grandmother climate activists, and every kind of artist.

But no matter what I do, the common currents have been the same: art, ecology and justice, my mother's colors and questions, my father's love of complexity, knowing that "the truth is the whole," the expansive vision of the possible my parents gifted me, and all those generations of radical people, centuries of them, reaching for a bigger, brighter common good, a rainforest house full of books, and the voices of the earth itself and all its burgeoning, endangered life.

Now all those streams have brought me back to where I began, to where my young parents planted ideas, vegetables, and children in this red clay, where I live in a frontline island colony disaster zone, in homestead conditions, hauling water, growing food, and writing, and all I can say is, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

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Notes

- 1 Aurora Levins Morales, *Kindling: Writings on the Body* (Palabrera Press, 2013); Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, *Cosecha and Other Stories* (Palabrera Press, 2014).
- 2 Black, Indigenous, Jews of Color, Sephardim, and Mizrahim (BIJOCISM) addresses the problem of the unique historical experiences of Indigenous and Black people being merged into an amorphous category of People of Color and applies that to Jews, adding Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, complex identities in themselves.