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nineteen sixty nine: an ethnic studies journal

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Book Review

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Journal

nineteen sixty nine: an ethnic studies journal, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2013

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Book Review: Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity by Aurora Levins Morales

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Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity by Aurora Levins Morales, 135 pages. South End Press, Cambridge, 1998. \$17.95 Paperback.

M*edicine Stories* is a collection of essays by Aurora Levins Morales that vary in length, each written with clarity and a depth of vision that allows the reader to begin anywhere in the book and receive invaluable wisdom from Morales. The topics of the book include discussions on trauma, torture, and sexuality; language and racism; reconciliation with our oppressors; and writing to resist our own internalized oppression. Her accessible writing style allows the reader to sit as comfortably as possible with the hard truths and poetry of stories rooted in a twenty-year practice of activism and cultural healing.

In *Medicine Stories*, Morales seeks to argue for what she calls a “politics of integrity, of being whole. A political practice that sacrifices neither the global nor the local, ignores neither the institutional power structures nor their most personal impact on the lives of individual people. That integrates what oppression keeps fracturing. That restores connections not only in what future we dream of, but right here in the gory, tumultuous, hopeful, messy and inconsistent present” (Morales 5). To make her argument, she shares her own histories, opening up a large window into her own pain and healing process. What she creates is a valuable text that captures the essence of the emerging social justice paradigm called healing justice. I am honored and blessed to aspire to do this work on a daily basis.

I am an acupuncturist. Viewing each person through the holistic lens of Traditional East Asian Medicine/Traditional Chinese Medicine I use my hands, herbs, essential oils, needles, questions, and words to facilitate a more complete connection between the body,

mind, emotions and memory.

In 2011 three colleagues and I created a wellness center called Sage Community Health Collective rooted in healing justice. Healing justice, according to Cara Page, co-founder of Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, is “a framework that identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence and bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds.” Through this framework, we and others around the world are dedicated to creating dialogue within the social justice community and with our patients about the face of burnout amongst organizers and the role of wellness in our movements.

Healing justice recognizes the connection between our bodies, minds, emotions, and histories; that we all manage some level of trauma on a daily basis; that our personal and collective traumas intertwine, interact, and manifest on a daily basis through our work, through our struggles, and through our joys. It connects the work of transforming ourselves, our communities and our society without striving to continually transform the culture of our own families, organizations and movements. The work of a healer, therefore, is not just with the individual – it is cultural and collective.

This work is often rooted in the values of and needs of the local community, but there is rarely a clear map of how to do it. *Medicine Stories* serves as guide that encourages us to see our bodies and the stories they tell as our collective map. Morales tells us in her essay, “Historian as Curandera” that “[m]emory, individual and collective, is clearly a significant site of social struggle.” She urges us to see that the process of naming and healing from trauma on an individual level parallels and intertwines with that of healing on a collective level.

Before reading *Medicine Stories*, I had never thought of history as being medicinal even though I yearned to know my own history, feeling lost and formless without it. I grew up in Arizona’s Valley of the Sun in a political and racial atmosphere that regularly affirmed that my brown body was “other.” As my immigrant parents worked to create a comfortable life for my brother and me, their constant forward movement swept us swiftly along the path of our collective history. They made friends, held down jobs, paid their taxes, and did their best to support us and each other. They rarely looked back to reminisce with longing about the country, professions, and lives they left behind. On rare occasions I was given a glimpse into what Guyanese holidays, customs, homes, or schools looked and felt like.

My lack of personal historical context was certainly not remedied by my public education. My elementary and secondary classroom experiences of history all too often consisted of copying down “important” dates in history as prioritized by curricula that centered the dominant and powerful. This kind of history –that makes very little room for the indigenous, people of color, or poor and working classes– failed to name any of my own ancestors, our place of origin, or our place of migration.

What I did learn about history was that it was written for and about other people who were usually white, male, and heroic. I did not see positive representations of my family or other immigrants in the books I read, the TV I watched, the movies I saw, or the ads that loomed over the highways . It created in me what Morales calls “a form of spiritual erasure that leaves us vulnerable to all the assaults a society can commit against those it does not recognize” (61).

However, when I read *Medicine Stories* for the first time, I was awakened to a whole new way of conceiving myself and my own history. It re-kindled my desire to tell my stories and research the stories of my family. As Morales says, "We must struggle to re-create the shattered knowledge of our humanity...The stories of perpetrators are full of lies and justifications...The stories of the abused are full of dangerous, subversive revelations that undermine the whole fabric of inequality" (13).

As I read her words, I felt a strong beckoning to come home – to remember, to be my whole self, and do the healing cultural work that I knew needed to be done. Her straightforward and clear language encourages all of us acknowledge our deeper callings, answer them, and work toward them to expand beyond our own histories to see our connection to our collective histories.

Morales helps us to see that folding our histories into the collective experience is not just healing on an individual level, it is revolutionary cultural work. Making crucial connections between individual and collective experience is not easy or pleasant. This process may be slow, and it may require the loving laying on of hands or insertion of needles or breath and sound work, but it can be done. It may require that we slow our paces down so that we can be as present as possible with our struggles and healing process. It may require that we learn how to sit with each other's raw terror and loneliness, but it can and must be done. As Levins Morales instructs:

The only way to bear the overwhelming pain of oppression is by telling, in all its detail, in the presence of witnesses and in a context of resistance, how unbearable it is...It is part of our task as revolutionary people, people who want deep-rooted, radical change, to be as whole as it is possible for us to be. This can only be done if we face the reality of what oppression really means in our lives, not as abstract systems subject to analysis, but as an avalanche of traumas leaving a wake of devastation in the lives of real people who nevertheless remain human, unquenchable, complex, and full of possibility.

In the healing justice movement we often ask ourselves: what is generational trauma and how do we facilitate healing from it? Morales offers this: "the processes of recovery we have come to understand through the politicized feminist psychology of the anti-rape, anti-battering and incest survivor movements, as well as from war veterans and survivors of political torture, are the same processes needed for collective recovery" (5).

For Morales, sustained activism relies upon a sustained sense of hope and grounding in spirituality. She assures us that "spiritual need not be rooted in religion" but that "the spiritual is whatever allows us to notice the miraculous nature of life, how it keeps coming back, asserting itself in the midst of destruction" (128).

With honest and clear prose, Levins Morales creates a visionary space where we can honor our own healing, spiritual needs, and complexities as we strive to see our own lives more clearly within the context of histories of colonialism and oppression.

I have seen and placed this book in the hands of young people, adult allies, sex workers, storytellers, revolutionaries, and healers who value healing within liberation movements and who seek to reconcile their own traumas as they seek to create a more liberated world.

I recommend this book to activists, organizers, healers, health care practitioners, and anyone seeking to better understand what trauma-informed practice looks like. I also recommend this book to anyone who still sees the work of healing justice as “soft” politics. As Morales says, “Cultural work, the work of infusing people’s imaginations with possibility, with the belief in a bigger future, is the essential fuel of revolutionary fire. (4)”