

Healing the Hurricane in Our Chest

NYLCA J. MUÑOZ SOSA

Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 246 pages, \$22.95, paperback.

“Then, this was the hurricane stationed in our chest.”¹ This was the expression used on social media by Puerto Rican writer and journalist Ana Teresa Toro to explain the massive protests that took place on the island demanding the resignation of the governor, Ricardo Rosselló.

Puerto Rico, an archipelago in the Caribbean and a de facto colony of the United States, has been struggling for more than a decade with a deep economic recession and a public debt of \$74 billion. To deal with the colonial debt and the fiscal crisis, the U.S. Congress approved and President Barack Obama signed into law the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act of 2016 (PROMESA), imposing a Financial Oversight and Management Board. This board is primarily composed of corporate-sector representatives unelected by the Puerto Rican people. The board’s principal task is balancing the island’s budget by adopting a series of austerity measures.

To make things worse, in September 2017 hurricanes Irma and María hit Puerto Rico. María was considered the second most destructive hurricane in the archipelago since San Felipe in 1928.² But almost two years later, another momentous and unexpected event hit the island – this time, from the inside out.

The Puerto Rican people took to the streets, unleashing the “hurricane stationed in our chest” since María, provoked by the almost nine hundred pages of chats between Rosselló, his closest advisors, and other nonpublic servants.³ The chats were full of misogynist, racist, mocking, and violent messages about public employees, poor people, artists, and even those killed by Hurricane María. After twelve days of intense protests, which grew larger each day, both in numbers and in international support from artists, politicians, and concerned people on social media, the governor finally resigned and a new episode in the country’s history began. It was the dawn of a collective healing process.

Healing through the stories we rescue and the history we make is what Aurora Levins Morales’s *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* is about. The

NYLCA J. MUÑOZ SOSA is a doctoral candidate in public health specializing in social determinants of health at the Graduate School of Public Health, University of Puerto Rico. She also is a lawyer and an activist focused on improving health access through a single-payer system.

author, a historian *curandera*, compiled a series of twenty-eight essays in this second edition, published twenty years after the first. Levins Morales theorizes movements for social justice and how to overcome challenges faced by activists and all those fighting and resisting oppression. She does this through accounts of her studies, personal experiences, and social conditions as a light-skinned, Puerto Rican, Ashkenazi Jewish, disabled, chronically ill, migrant, mixed-class, single mother, artist, and intellectual. She provides a view of the world that allows collective healing and encourages it in others through a comprehensive understanding of history.

Those who have participated in the process of rising collectively against oppression have experienced that, despite outrage, the experience is also restorative. In Puerto Rico, people challenged state repression during the demonstrations with their bodies, protesting day after day, night after night, in face of the tear gas, rubber bullets, and police batons. Through songs, banging pots, artistic performances, yoga classes, and riding horses, motorcycles, and even water jet skis, people in unity won not only the governor's resignation but also the shared vow to carry out an audit of the debt, a revocation of PROMESA, and a departure of the "Junta" comprising the Financial Oversight and Management Board. Another future for Puerto Rico is in the making.

Levins Morales's book is an excellent tool for understanding some of the dynamics of social justice movements and should be part of activists' survival kits against despair. The essays fall under six titles: "The Ground on Which I Stand"; "The Historian as *Curandera*"; "Speaking in Tongues"; "Tribes"; "Privileges and Loss"; and "The Long Haul." As the author points out, some repetition occurs throughout the essays, but this is intended. Levins Morales understands repetition as a "rhythm of meaning that must be maintained," and that is how it feels. The book is directed not only at radicals and activists, but also at anyone interested in healing social and collective trauma. The language used is accessible to the general public and the stories shared are compelling to anyone who has ever faced oppression.

The objective of theory, as Noel Castree highlights, is to understand the most significant relationships operating within an object of study.⁴ Castree employs four categories for evaluating the work of a critical theorist, all of which are useful for considering Levins Morales's contributions: 1) epistemological activism, 2) vision of the whole, 3) ideology, and 4) political practice.

In *Medicine Stories*, Levins Morales engages in *epistemological activism* – that is, she conceives the production of knowledge as a political project irreversibly tied to the organization of power in society. Knowledge is not considered a mere representation of the material world that is re-

corded without major problems and conflicts in the human mind. Instead, knowledge is put at the service of particular groups with distinct interests by virtue of their social positions.⁵

For Levins Morales, the importance of constructing stories of liberation is to help people organize. She encourages us to listen, analyze, create, and disseminate stories with the purpose of changing human consciousness toward justice. In the essay “The Power of Story,” she provides specific ways to continue creating stories even in times of political repression and manipulation.

As a critical theorist, Levins Morales also shares a vision of the whole. Since reality is not easy to perceive, since it is never what it seems, knowledge focuses on the whole. Reality is a structured totality; its movement is not random but follows a certain pattern, up to a certain predictable point. Therefore, if we know how the totality works, we can understand where it is going. Levins Morales encourages readers to think big when establishing goals, because that broader perspective allows us to fight more forcefully. Making small conscious choices is not enough. To move toward real change, we must instead strive to transform greater structures. Activists should aim for higher goals, to inspire other people and perceive the world in its connectedness:

My father, Richard Levins, said that any time progressive causes seem to be in conflict, it's because neither group is asking enough. Because no one has been able to imagine a solution big enough to meet everyone's needs – as when, for example, the employment of loggers and the preservation of forests are pitted against each other in a bitter struggle over which unsatisfactory solution to opt for. But the creation of an economy that preserves both people and the trees is outside the parameters of the debate.⁶

This encouragement of a broader vision is accompanied by specific advice on how to take care of ourselves. The experience of injustice is traumatic and long-term goals require preparation for challenging work that lasts a lifetime. Our bodies tell stories of environmental contamination, inequalities, and injustices.⁷ It is important to identify ways of maintaining our health and well-being while in the struggle.

The identification of ideology is another component of Levins Morales's contribution, and it comes along with an invitation to question privilege and understand how to work for the benefit of all. Ideology legitimizes the power of a socially dominant group or class while representing class relations illusively.⁸ This process involves various strategies, including: 1) promoting beliefs and values related to the dominant ideas; 2) naturalizing those beliefs until they become obvious and seemingly inevitable; 3) universalizing ideas and beliefs; 4) degrading those

ideas that may be in conflict; 5) excluding contrary forms of thinking, under a silent but systematized logic; and 6) darkening social reality in convenient ways.⁹ This type of mystification often masks or suppresses social conflicts, from which the conception of ideology emerges as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions.¹⁰ The critical theorist must not only be an epistemological activist with a vision of the whole, but also identify the underlying ideology of the object of study.

Levins Morales proposes a different way to address ideology and the privilege it masks. She argues that systems of privilege are built on disregard for human need: the “insatiable hunger for more wealth, more power, more imaginary guarantees...[depends] on the ability of the privileged to ignore the people destroyed by the pursuit of excess.”¹¹ Against these systems, people should take responsibility for the place they hold in society, with the purpose of identifying and unmasking the structures of inequality.

With a compassionate approach, Levins Morales invites social justice activists to broaden their understanding by questioning current movements and arguing for the necessity of lasting initiatives. For example, she notes that ecoactivist initiatives with a narrow focus on wildlife and wilderness, which do not take into account the unequal impacts of ecological destruction on different populations or the different relationships they may have to the environment, may perpetuate injustices. By the same token, Levins Morales questions liberal environmentalism that promotes corporate responsibility and individualistic lifestyle politics without attempting to change the fundamental social relations inherent in the capitalist economy. She points to the Standing Rock Lakota water protectors as an example of resistance – fighters for the preservation of the most basic human right, the right to exist, because water is life.

All of Levins Morales’s work and reflections are directed to political practice. The production of knowledge is not neutral. It is not only a political project organized by and that in turn reproduces power relations, but it is also the basis for resistance. Levins Morales’s political practice is present throughout the book. The section on the “Historian as *Curandera*” addresses the importance of storytelling in the process of collective healing. It includes what she calls “the *curandera*’s handbook,” a set of instructions to perform that work for the purpose of developing a medicinal use from the study and research of history. The healing stories that history provides, she believes, can help overcome collective traumas. Her poems are sublime, honest, and beautifully drafted, making us connect our emotions to the political practice she is advocating.

Standing out in the instructions for radicals is the importance of centering women in the landscape of stories. Levins Morales provides spe-

cific examples on how to do research under this framework, what to look for, and what questions should be raised to explore the role of women in any particular object of study. Just as sociologist María Mies calls capitalism the new patriarchy and women the last colony, Levins Morales's feminism fights against patriarchy, racism, poverty, and colonialism.¹² It is only through that fight "that humankind can transition to the planetary culture of solidarity."¹³

This culture of solidarity is what people are starting to imagine in Puerto Rico. It is time to rescue those healing stories about solidarity, about a different society. Now is not about letting out the hurricane stationed in our chests, but about letting ourselves become active agents against oppression and injustice and build a world in which there will be space for all. As Levins Morales states: "the most useful theory will be that which teaches us to use the particular, to frame big and inclusive questions, to integrate seemingly conflicting needs and sacrifice no one."¹⁴

Levins Morales has achieved what she set out to do. I have begun to heal, not only by the experiences of solidarity and purposefulness lived during this summer in Puerto Rico, but also by reading her book during these times. It is honest, entertaining, compassionate, and, most of all, healing. There is no doubt that she is a historian *curandera* and a revolutionary.

Notes

1. Ana Teresa Toro, Instagram post, July 19, 2019. Translation from Spanish by the author.
2. Joan Benach et al., "What the Puerto Rican Hurricanes Make Visible: Chronicle of a Public Health Disaster Foretold," *Social Science & Medicine* 238 (2019).
3. Luis J. Valentin and Carla Minet, "Las 889 Páginas del Chat de Telegram Entre Rosselló Nevares y Sus Allegados," *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*, July 13, 2019.
4. Noel Castree, "The Detour of Critical Theory," in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Noel Castree (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 247-69.
5. Castree, "The Detour of Critical Theory."
6. Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 213.
7. Nancy Krieger and George Davey Smith, "'Bodies Count,' and Body Counts: Social Epidemiology and Embodying Inequality," *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 26, no. 1 (July 2004): 92-103.
8. John B. Thompson, *Ideología y Cultura Moderna* (Xochimilco, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2002).
9. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991).
10. Eagleton, *Ideology*.
11. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 177.
12. María Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed, 1986).
13. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 23.
14. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 214.