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# “A Revolution Capable of Healing Our Wounds:” An Interview with Aurora Levíns Morales

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Tala Khanmalek

Eager to finally meet Aurora Levíns Morales and ask her all my pent-up questions, I found my way to her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts on a hot summer day. As with master teachers of old, Morales knew exactly what to ask of me instead. We talked story, laughed, and nearly cried for hours, remembering the answers are already within us and revealed through the journey rather than the destination. Now an elder to many, Morales continues to write and launch new creative projects as well as mentor others. Her latest book, *Kindling: Writings on the Body*, will be published this year.

I first read Morales' work in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Shortly after, I read *Remedíos: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* (1998), *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity* (1998), and *Getting Home Alive* (1986), co-authored with her mother, Rosario Morales. Her work, which she calls “homeopathic activism,” has had a critical impact on the way her readers think about healing, and especially the medicinal uses of history. Homeopaths treat disease with minute doses of natural substances that cause disease symptoms, activating powerful healing responses in our bodies. Like homeopathic remedies, “a revolution capable of healing our wounds” activates our lived experiences to transform the world. The following collaborative interview expands on related topics that Morales has written about for years. For more information and to support her work, please visit: [www.auroralevinsmorales.com](http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com).

Tala Khanmalek: In both *Remedios* and *Medicine Stories*, you explain that the journey of healing individual and collective wounds is the same. How can this interconnected understanding of wounds and healing, that situates the political squarely within the personal, help us advance critiques of self-care and foreground communities of care instead?

Aurora Levíns Morales: Here in the United States, we live at the epicenter of individualism, where the notion of individual responsibility has been distorted to mean that our society has minimal obligations to its members, that individual needs burden the group, that poverty, illness, unhappiness, are personal failings, and overcoming societal oppression is a matter for personal heroism, not collective action.

But we exist in a deeply intertwined, ecological relationship to one another. Oppression is made up of millions of small stories, individual threads in the systemic weave of dehumanization for power and profit; and our individual suffering is composed of systemic forces acting on our unique selves, an interaction between organism and environment, including our social and historical environment. The stories we tell about our suffering define what we can imagine doing about it.

I was in my teens when the Second Wave of feminism exploded in this country. I was a new immigrant, a survivor of extreme abuse, already facing health problems that would be magnified over time. The single most important thing I learned in that euphoric time of collective outrage and action was that in telling each other about the fabric of our daily lives, we could see how our strands were part of something much larger, that the struggles we faced in our relationships, our sexuality, our work and educational lives, our sense of self and purpose—none of them were isolated problems caused by personal defects of character, as we'd been told. Once we understood them and framed them to each other and ourselves as societal, outrage took the place of shame.

When we understand our pain as collective, as stemming from our particular social web of power relations, as the constriction of our humanity by irrational systems of human behavior, we can stand free of self-blame, which is enormously liberating. I find the concept of "communities of care" a little artificial. I was born into a much more communally oriented culture, and have also experienced the fusion of Caribbean culture and socialist values, which is Cuba. I think we need to be building collective responses to everything—climate change and the corporate control of food, the disintegration of health and health care, the looting of the poor by the rich. We need communities of resistance. And resistance must include mutual care, a shared responsibility for each other's survival and thrival.

As a chronically ill woman, I've paid a very high cost, in isolation and poverty and stress, for the cult of self-sufficiency. Disabled people are framed as burdens on society, because productivity and contribution are framed in the narrowest, profit driven sense. The reality is that society is a burden on the disabled. The resources that should be guaranteeing the well being of every individual have been siphoned into offshore bank accounts to maintain the 1% in useless luxury. During many years in which my writing was fueling the activism of

others, I lived in severe isolation, alone in my bed. So yes, we definitely need to craft survival/thrival strategies we can enact communally, practices and resource pools that not only enhance our ability to make it, and with our humanity more intact, but also create windows into the possible. There is nothing more subversive than catalyzing the belief that we don't have to settle for what we have.

TK: In *Medicine Stories*, you write about "raicism," or rootedness, "the practice of rooting ourselves in the real, concrete histories of our people" (75). How does raicism offer a radical genealogy against the grain of the historical archive? How can those of us who have been uprooted enact rootedness "in the real?" What is the role of storytelling in this enactment?

ALM: I would say that its not so much against the grain of the archive, though archives have to be seen as the heavily biased sources they are, but rather against the grain of the kind of genealogy that is concerned with what begat who but not what they did while they lived, and tends to have a romanticized biological determinism at its core—inherited character traits and a sense of destiny. The archives are full of people trying to prove they descend from Mary, Queen of Scots. What interests me is helping people to research the social histories of their own families, to understand the inheritance of social relationships that have been bequeathed to them, and to take responsibility for that inheritance. For a while, I taught a workshop I called Bonework, in which people explored core family stories and then together probed them for what might be missing, for possible reinterpretations. And also for actions they might take to heal the social relations passed on to them. I'm working, very slowly, on a workbook people can use to explore the places their ancestors occupied in their social worlds, not just so we know, but so we can use that information to do our ancestral accounts—to see what debts we owe, what wounds were passed down to us, and then to do the work of healing our web.

As far as uprootedness, all of us have that at some point in our histories. When we can no longer stand on the soil or in the company of those who give us roots, we root ourselves in our stories. The story of what has been broken is a whole. Not the one we wanted, but a whole nevertheless. I am rooted in the diasporas of my peoples. I carry my own longings and those of my ancestors for faraway places. That is part of my name. Radical genealogy would add flesh to the bony structure of the family tree, give it sinews and blood and skin and struggles. Very few of us live on the land our ancestors were indigenous to. So whose land are we on? Whose labor sustained our families, and whose families did our labor sustain? How did our people take part in the conquest of others, in the destruction of some ecosystem? Most of our lineages are full of movement up and down the ladders of class. Radical genealogy deprives us of self-righteousness and gives us complexity in exchange.

TK: How has framing oppression in terms of trauma been useful to your work and how does the traumatic allow you to understand oppression differently? What is significant about framing oneself as a subject of history (and the historical present) who has been traumatized?

ALM: Framing ourselves as traumatized does several things. First it acknowledges that op-

pression causes harm. That it impacts our bodies, minds, emotions, souls, communities, relationships, environment...everything. The costs of oppression are meant to be hidden. We're meant to accept them as unavoidable or a natural result of being who we are. Saying that attempted genocide or slavery or millennia of sexual violence has left us individually and collectively traumatized brings the "cost of doing business" in oppressive societies into view, and helps us resist the idea that there's nothing we can do.

Secondly, it grounds our work toward ending oppression in our own experience, and takes it out of the abstract. We need the understanding that our suffering is systemic, part of huge, impersonal machinery intent on generating power and wealth for the few. But we also need to understand it as personal, intimate, impacting every aspect of our daily lives. We need to be consciously undoing its effects on our consciousness, to be putting out the fires we stand in the middle of, so we can imagine a world outside its repeating cycles. When the fight against oppression doesn't acknowledge the grief and fear and rage and wounded selfhood, the terrible burdens of internalized lies about who we are and what we're worth, then we become loose canons, vulnerable to terrible mistakes of strategy, to mistreating each other in the name of liberation.

In order to build the movements capable of transforming our world, we have to do our best to live with one foot in the world we have not yet created. I believe unhealed trauma is the most dangerous force on earth. It's the mechanism through which violence and cruelty and greed reproduce. Just as battered children have a higher likelihood of growing up to be battered or battering adults, oppressed people who have not had the opportunity to do the work of collective healing can end up assuming oppressor roles to others, and the pattern of feeling victimized, and believing that therefore the world owes us more than it owes other people, is particularly deadly. One response to having felt helpless in the face of horrific abuses is getting stuck in trying to prevent what's already happened. This can lead to militarization, to extreme nationalism, to the kind of opportunism that's willing to win some kind of sovereignty or security for our own group at the expense of others—which of course only continues the cycle, create new groups of desperate people.

TK: You have written, in almost all of your writings, about how the source of healing from collective oppression and individual abuse are one and the same. You often weave imperial history with your own experiences of sexual abuse to show their interconnections. How does this kind of contextualization politicize healing?

ALM: I'll give you an example from my own life. Every form of oppression in some way ruptures our sense of connection to the larger web. A few years ago, I set out to better understand the relationship of my chronic illnesses to environmental degradation. I surveyed each of the health struggles I face, and asked myself what environmental factors might be involved. In the case of environmental illness, what is oppressively known as Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, the connection is obvious. But what about epilepsy, diabetes, Lyme disease? Lyme is directly connected to the deforestation of large tracts of land for agriculture and then its partial reforestation for suburban housing, which brings deer, and their ticks, into closer contact with humans, so it can definitely be seen as an effect of bad land use practices.

When I started looking at epilepsy, just searching the internet with the key words "epilepsy" and "toxins," I quickly discovered that Dieldrin, a pesticide used on the farm I grew up on, is used to "kindle" epilepsy in lab rats, in order to test anti-seizure medications. The process involves low, irregular exposures, similar to what I experienced as a very young child. I was also exposed to parathione, another known kindler.

The minute you start exploring context, asking "How is this healing process I'm trying to create in my own life connected to everything else?" you politicize that healing. So now my epilepsy is related to the huge vested interests of the agricultural chemicals industry, the colonial status of Puerto Rico which includes the imposition of "modern" farming methods, and the blacklisting of communists that forced my urban parents to take up farming in the 1950s in order to survive a long spell of unemployment. Then I started exploring the connection between chemical warfare research during WWII and its repurposing into peacetime commercial products. In *Kindling* I write:

"Parathion is an organophosphate, one of the most dangerous of that highly dangerous class of chemicals. It is 30 times more toxic than DDT, and was used for mosquito eradication during my childhood. It was invented by German chemist Gerhard Schrader, who worked for IG Farber. While researching organophosphate pesticides for agriculture, he and his team discovered tabun, sarin, and two other nerve gasses classified as weapons of mass destruction. Twenty-four IG Farber executives were tried for war crimes at Nuremberg (and later reinstated as directors of chemical companies.) The company set up a chemical plant next to Auschwitz that at its peak used 83,000 enslaved laborers, and one of its subsidiaries, Degesch, made Zyklon B, the substance used to murder people in gas chambers."

So now my epilepsy is connected to war crimes, to imperial dreams of conquest, to weapons of mass destruction, and how the same attitudes that made such an idea possible are mobilized against the insect world in the interests of reckless development and maximized short-term profit. Epilepsy advocacy is primarily organized around supporting research into medical treatment and fighting discrimination. The condition is framed as genetic or caused by physical trauma to the brain. But once we start asking about the larger context, we inevitably politicize the question. Any form of suffering that is portrayed as individual tragedy has been decontextualized. The question, "What is this connected to?" always leads us back into the complex web of interconnected causes.

TK: In *Medicine Stories* you propose that we move away from intersectionality, which still treats oppressions categorically, to a theory of internalized oppression. Why is a theory of internalized oppression useful for developing a politics of inclusion and understanding how my liberation is bound up to another's, to all "others?"

ALM: Yeah, I really hate the term "intersectionality." Oppressions don't intersect. They coexist, and in a much more complex and organic way than two lines or planes crossing one another. Using the term "intersection" makes it sound like we can meet at the corner of gen-

der and class, two distinct avenues that only sometimes occupy the same space. All oppressions always interact. All people are affected by every one of them. I had a student once, a white woman, who said she didn't have any experience of racism growing up, because she'd lived in an all-white town in rural Minnesota. She didn't realize that there is nothing natural about an all-white town, and that in fact she lived immersed in racism every day of her childhood. It's equally true that every single person on earth is impacted by disability oppression, whether they are direct targets, living in acute, minute-to-minute awareness of it, conscious perpetrators, or completely oblivious participants and accomplices.

What's useful about studying internalized oppression is that we can become laboratories for figuring out how these knots of collective trauma distort our thinking, obscure aspects of reality from us, and also how the experience of struggling with them gives us specific sets of insights. It gives us our best shot at maximizing human intelligence toward the dismantling of societal abuse. When we know where our ability to think clearly is likely to have been affected, we can draw on the expertise of people with a different set of struggles. We can forge far more effective alliances, based on our real strengths and weaknesses, on how our particular histories have shaped us.

TK: What role do you think connection to spirit has with sustainable activism?

ALM: For me, the roots of an ethical life lay in an ecological awareness our interdependence, of being part of a symbiotic whole. The spiritual practices of most indigenous peoples seem rooted in this kind of understanding, expressed through metaphors, through stories of sacred beings, magical animals, vengeful winds. My connection to spirit is a heightened awareness of the inherent value of what exists—all living things, but also the sources of life—earth, water, sunlight, air, the dust of distant stars that resides in our cells, the cycles of living, reproducing and dying. Rituals, ceremony, prayer, are tools that people have developed to access that awareness.

Activism, or as I tend to think of it, revolutionary practice, is about aligning our societies with those values, so that all lives are cherished and we structure all our relationships to support that. But not all revolutionaries practice what we would recognize as spirituality. I was raised by two atheist communists whose love and respect for the world has roots every bit as deep as those of us who use ritual. What matters is to have deep roots, to be anchored in an ethical sense of relationship that helps us withstand the destructive forces of violence, isolation, discouragement. In the short run, we'll always face defeats. For our lives, as people dedicated to transforming our world, to be sustainable, we need to be resilient in the face of those defeats, in the face of frustration and long-deferred dreams. In my experience, resilience comes from connection through time and space—a firm grasp on the long view, the slow movements of history, and a strong web of connection, first to those closest to us, but extending out beyond the people we know well, beyond our own subcultures, our ethnicities and nationalities and other identities, our own species, toward our wild kin, beyond what we think of as alive, to the rocks and rivers and oceans and sky of our planet, so that as we struggle with big, difficult projects, with all the things that make it hard for us to work together, with mountains of bad news, we remember that our strength comes from

being mutually accountable parts of a shared universe.

TK: In 2007, you had a stroke and in 2011 you choreographed a dance for a remote control wheelchair to a recording of a poem you wrote about it, which you performed with the Bay Area Company Sins Invalid. Why was it important to perform this work in writing but also through dance and on stage?

AML: Actually, these were two different pieces—a poem about my wheelchair that was choreographed by Patty Berne, with John Benson remote-controlling the chair, and a different poem that I wrote about my stroke and about the lack of attention to sexuality as part of healing. My rehab process in Cuba was intense and difficult, and I promised myself the reward of a summer intensive with Axis Dance Company. I hadn't ever performed dance, and had been too sick to dance for fun in years, so it was very exciting and liberating—a great source of joy. From the start I had in mind creating something I could perform with Sins Invalid, and I wanted to dance it myself, to reclaim my own language of movement, to speak in that voice. The play of meanings in the word "stroke" was my starting point, and I used some of the movements of the rehab process itself. I wanted to show the experience of the stroke, and then how my sexuality was invisible in the healing process, that it should have included my whole self, been openly about restoring all my sensations. Performing it, using my body to tell my story in such an intensely personal way, was such a high! I spend a lot of time with concepts and words, and to live in a world of gestures was deeply centering.

TK: How did the stroke affect your perception of healing and its relationship to disability justice? How do you see the interactions of ablesim and other oppressions, and how does this impact the work of healing justice?

AML: The stroke made me visible as a disabled person. The truth is that I was disabled by environmental illness and chronic fatigue, for many, many years before I had the stroke. The first poem, the one for my wheelchair, talks about how the stroke gave me access to resources I hadn't been able to get before because a stroke is an authorized illness, whereas the exhaustion and chronic pain brought on by pesticides and trauma are not. The stroke entitled me to help. My student loans were cancelled, and I got a power wheelchair and was able to leave my apartment. Most importantly, I became visible to other disabled people, entered the organized disability community, and found allies, which is much harder to do when you're alone in bed for months on end.

So the first way my perceptions shifted was being in contact with a diverse community of disabled and chronically ill people, and freed up from the stifling isolation I'd been living with—I had room to think in new ways about all these issues. I find the language interesting. There was disability rights, with a narrow civil rights and access focus and little or no analysis of other oppressions, and now there's disability justice, which does incorporate multiple oppressions—and I think that beyond both is disability liberation, entirely new ways of understanding human bodies in all their wild difference and figuring out what that means for the societies we want to build.



I don't know that the stroke changed how I think about body and society, healing and disability justice—but it gave me community, which sharpened my thinking.

In terms of ableism and all the other oppressions—our bodies, and our forced alienation from them, are an essential component of all oppressions. To the extent that ableism is ignored by other social movements, not only do they participate in injustice, they also fail to reach their full potential as liberation movements. Ableism is the idea that people whose bodies are structurally and/or functionally outside a fairly narrowly defined spectrum of “rightness” are not fully human, and don't deserve the full benefits of human society, or even, to exist at all. It is based in part on a very narrow, capitalist understanding of productivity, seeing human value in terms of how much surplus value, or profit, we can produce for the accumulators of wealth. Ableism became much more powerfully institutionalized, certainly in Europe, as work became standardized, where the quest for greater profit through industrialization required everyone to work at the same pace. Capitalism wanted workers to be uniform, and those outside the standardized measures of speed and strength and form, who had formerly been integrated into communities, were seen as valueless.

Taking on ableism allows us to rethink our whole understanding of bodies and the ridiculous and deadly standards oppression imposes—on women, on people of color, on queer people, on working class people, but also on men, white people, heterosexual people, wealthy people. All of our bodies are distorted by the requirements of oppression. Fighting ableism brings a powerful new set of tools into the fights against all the other oppressions.

It's also interesting that the disabled and ill are a constituency anyone can join, or be drafted into, at any time. In fact most of us pass through it multiple times in our lives. The myth that health and ablebodiedness are the default condition of humanity helps divert us from the degree to which our bodies suffer from oppression. A practice of full and empowered inclusion around disability and illness forces us all into a greater awareness of our bodies as sites of struggle. Liberation requires a return to our bodies, with honor and respect. Honoring the bodies of those who can't or won't comply with the conditions of our oppressive society, instead of cooperating with ableist standards of usefulness and value, lays the groundwork for a deeper, more integrated activism, rooted in our physical experience of aliveness, and not just in our intellectual visions of what's possible.

TK: I want to ask you about the land and how our healing is also bound up with that of the earth. The “stories of earth and iron” in *Remedios* is such a beautiful enactment of this in writing. The book itself is, ingeniously, in the form of a botanica so that remedy is not just a metaphor but also a literal resource. The text is an herbal handbook and guide to medicinal plants that correspond to medicinal stories. Can you share more about these two dimensions of *remedios* and the organization of the book?

AML: The herbal pieces in *Remedios* are mostly metaphoric in nature...I take the real properties of a plant, say the way mullein is used for respiratory ailments, and attach it to the story of Luisa Capetillo's death from tuberculosis. I place *Calendula*, which is used for burns, beside a story on the burning of Jews by the inquisition. So although the poetic use I make

of plants is related to their medicinal uses, I am extended those qualities into a realm of consciousness. To say, let's learn from the adaptogenic characteristics of milk thistle to think differently about our lives. Let's learn from the common peppermint to value the hardworking lives of so-called "ordinary" women.

The underlying metaphor for the whole book is that history itself can be medicinal, that collecting and sharing the stories of our past, of the vast and complex story of our resistance to being dehumanized, exploited, oppressed, that these stories are medicine. In "The Historian as Curandera" I talk about the imperial versions of history, the ones in which rulers matter and the rest of us don't, in which conquest is noble and war inevitable, how they serve to make us give up, to believe that our suffering is natural. But not only does medicinal history have to reverse these lies, it has to be digestible, accessible. So I use the metaphor of herbal medicine, to say that we don't need to rely on professional history makers, that the folk arts of healing can also be applied to historical knowledge.

This is not to say that we can just make things up that please us. Herbal medicine requires expertise, and people can be poisoned by careless herbal practices as surely as they can by the reckless use of pharmaceuticals. I am a firm believer in research, and there is a proud tradition of radical professional historians, but we need to all have a stake in how we understand our past, to feel ownership of the project, to excavate our collective memories and share what we discover. How we understand our past shapes what we can imagine for our futures. For me, the metaphor of herbal medicine captures what I want popular history to be. It requires skill and knowledge, but you can grow what you need in an old cracker can on your porch.