

# **The Historian as Curandera**

*by Aurora Levins Morales*  
*Institute for Cultural Activism*  
*Berkeley, California*

**Working Paper No. 40**  
*March 1998*

# **The Historian as Curandera**

*by Aurora Levins Morales*  
*Institute for Cultural Activism*  
*Berkeley, California*

**Working Paper No. 40**  
*March 1998*

*Until lions write books, history will always glorify the hunter.* – South African proverb.

## **About the Author:** Aurora Levins Morales

Aurora Levins Morales is the Director of the Institute for Cultural Activism in Berkeley, Calif. She also writes fiction, essays, poetry, documentary scripts, and plays and is a public lecturer on such topics as multiculturalism, women of color, and women's history. Formerly a news reporter and documentary producer, her writings have been featured in many books and anthologies including *MS. magazine*, *Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the U.S.A.* (1991), and *Reconstructed American Literature* (1990).

Other research and teaching areas include Jewish History and Contemporary Issues, Caribbean Women, U.S. Latina/o Politics, History, and Culture, and Cross-Cultural Organizing.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Levins Morales, Aurora, *The Historian as Curandera*, JSRI Working Paper #40, The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1997.

The Julian Samora Research Institute is committed to the generation, transmission, and application of knowledge to serve the needs of Latino communities in the Midwest. To this end, it has organized a number of publication initiatives to facilitate the timely dissemination of current research and information relevant to Latinos.

- \* *Research Reports*: JSRI's flagship publications for scholars who want a quality publication with more detail than usually allowed in mainstream journals. These are edited and reviewed in-house. Research Reports are selected for their significant contribution to the knowledge base of Latinos.
- \* *Working Papers*: for scholars who want to share their preliminary findings and obtain feedback from others in Latino studies. Some editing provided by JSRI.
- \* *Statistical Briefs/CIFRAS*: for the Institute's dissemination of "facts and figures" on Latino issues and conditions. Also designed to address policy questions and to highlight important topics.
- \* *Occasional Papers*: for the dissemination of speeches and papers of value to the Latino community which are not necessarily based on a research project. Examples include historical accounts of people or events, "oral histories," motivational talks, poetry, speeches, and related presentations.

# The Historian as Curandera

## *Table of Contents*

<b>Tell Untold or Undertold Histories</b> .....	2
<b>Centering Women Changes the Landscape</b> .....	2
<b>Identify Strategic Pieces of Misinformation and Contradict Them</b> .....	3
<b>Make Absences Visible</b> .....	3
<b>Asking Questions Can Be As Good As Answering Them</b> .....	3
<b>What Constitutes Evidence?</b> .....	4
<b>Show Agency</b> .....	4
<b>Show Complexity and Embrace Ambiguity and Contradiction</b> .....	4
<b>Reveal Hidden Power Relationships</b> .....	5
<b>Personalize</b> .....	6
<b>Show Connection and Context</b> .....	7
<b>Restore Global Context</b> .....	7
<b>Access and Digestibility</b> .....	8
<b>Show Yourself in Your Work</b> .....	8
<b>Cross Borders</b> .....	9

# The Historian as Curandera

One of the first things a colonizing power or repressive regime does is to attack the sense of history of those they wish to dominate and attempt to take over and control people's relationships to their own past. When the invading English rounded up the harpist's of Ireland and burned their harps, it was partly for their function in carrying news and expressing public opinion, for their role as opposition media; but it was also because they were repositories of collective cultural memory. When the Mayan codices were burned, it was the Mayan sense of identity, rooted in a culture with a past, that was assaulted. The prohibitions against slaves speaking their native languages, reading, writing and playing drums all had obvious functions in attempting to prevent organized resistance, but there were also ways of trying to control the story of who the slaves thought they were.

Another important way that colonial powers seek to disrupt the sense of historical identity in the colonized is by taking over the transmission of culture to the young. Native American and Australian aboriginal children were taken from their families by force and required to abandon the language, dress, customs, and spirituality of their own people. Irish and Welsh children in British controlled schools and Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Chinese children in U.S. public schools have been punished and ridiculed for speaking their home languages.

Invading the historical identities of the subjugated is one more part of the task, accomplished through the destruction of records, oral traditions, cultural forms, and through interfering with the education of the young. Its corollary is the creation of an alternative, imperial version of our lives. When a controlling elite of any kind comes to power, it requires some kind of a replacement origin myth, a story that explains the new imbalances of power as natural, inevitable, and permanent, as somehow inherent to the natures of master and slave, invader and invaded, and therefore unchangeable. This becomes a substitute for the memories of the colonized. Official history is designed to make sense of oppression, to say that the oppressed are oppressed because it is their nature to be oppressed. A strong sense of their own history among the oppressed undermines the project of domination, because it provides an alternative story, one in which oppression is the result of events and choices, not natural law.

Imperial histories also fulfill a vital role for those who rule. Those who dominate must justify themselves and find ways to see their own dominance as not only

legitimate but the only acceptable option. Thus the founding fathers of the United States spoke of the need to control democracy so that only those fitted for rule by the experience of managing wealth would have the opportunity to hold public office; some slaveholders framed the kidnapping and enslavement of West Africans as beneficial to the enslaved, offering them the blessings of a higher state of civilization; misogynist patriarchs speak of protecting woman from her own weak nature, and the colonized everywhere are defined as in need of improvement, which only a better management of their labor and resources can offer.

In his 1976 essay "Defensa de la palabra" Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano wrote: "What process of change can move a people that does not know who it is, nor where it came from? If it doesn't know who it is, how can it know what it deserves to be?" The role of a socially committed historian is to use history, not some much to document the past as to restore to the dehistoricized a sense of identity and possibility. Such "medicinal" histories seek to re-establish the connections between peoples and their histories, to reveal the mechanisms of power, the steps by which their current condition of oppression was achieved, through a series of decisions made by real people to dispossess them; but also to reveal the multiplicity, creativity and persistence of resistance among the oppressed.

History is the story we tell ourselves about how the past explains our present, and the ways in which we tell the story are shaped by contemporary needs. When debates raged in 1992 about the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the Americas, what was most significant about all the voices in the controversy (the official pomp and ceremony, the outraged protests of indigenous and other colonized peoples of the Americas, and the counter-attacking official responses) is that each of the positions had something vital to say about the nature of our contemporary lives and relationships, which our conflicting interpretations of events of 1492 simply highlighted.

All historians have points of view. All of us use some process of selection through which we choose which stories we consider important and interesting. We construct history from some perspective, within some particular world view. Storytelling is not neutral. *Curandera* historians make this explicit, openly naming our partisanship, our intent to influence how people think.

Between 1991 and 1996 I researched and wrote *Remedios*, a medicinal version of Puerto Rican history, told through the lives of women not so much because the pasts of Puerto Rican women were inherently important to talk about, but because I wanted to change the way Puerto Rican women think of ourselves historically. As a result, I did not attempt to write a comprehensive general history, but rather to frame historic events in ways that would contribute both to decolonizing the historical identities and imaginations of Puerto Rican women, and to the creation of a culture of resistance.

*Remedios* is *testimonio*, both in the sense of a life story, an autobiography of my relationship to my past, and - like the *testimonios* of Latin American torture survivors - in bearing witness to a much larger history of abuse and resistance in which many women and men participated. One of the most significant ways in which *Remedios* differs from conventional historical writing is in how explicitly I proclaim that my interest in history lies in its medicinal uses, in the power of history to provide those healing stories that can restore the humanity of the traumatized, and not for any inherent interest in the past for its own sake. *Remedios* does not so much tell history as it interrogates it. It seeks to be provocative rather than comprehensive, looking for potency, not just the accumulation of information.

In the process of writing, I chose to make myself visible as a historian with an agenda, but also as a subject of this history, and one of the traumatized seeking to recover herself. My own work became less about creating a reconstructed historical record and more about my own relationship to history, my questions and challenges, my mapping of ignorance and contradiction, my anger, sorrow and exhilaration. To testify, through my personal responses to them, to how the official and renegade stories of the past impact Puerto Rican women. To explore by sharing how I had done so in my own life, the ways that recaptured history could be used as a tool of recovery from a multitude of blows. In writing *Remedios*, I made myself the site of experimentation, and engaged in a process of decolonizing my own relationship to history as one model of what was possible.

As I did so, I evolved a set of understandings or instructions to myself about how to do this kind of work, a kind of curandera's handbook of historical practice. The rest of this essay is that handbook

## **Tell Untold or Undertold Histories**

The first and most obvious choice is to seek out and tell those histories that have not been told or have not been told enough. If history books looked like the population of the world they would be full of women, poor people, workers, children, people of color, slaves, and the colonized. In the case of *Remedios*, where I had already chosen to tell Puerto Rican history through the lives of women, this meant continually seeking out and emphasizing the stories of women who were poor, African, indigenous, mestiza and mulatta, women enslaved and indentured, rural women, and emigrant women in the United States.

## **Centering Women Changes the Landscape**

Making truly medicinal history requires that we do more than just add women (or any other “disappeared” group of people) to the existing frame works. We need to ask: If women are assumed to be the most important people in this story, how will that change the questions we ask? How will it change our view of what events and processes are most important? How will it change the answers to questions that have already been asked?

For example, if you ask: “Until what point did the indigenous Arawak people of Puerto Rico have a significant impact on the society?” most Puerto Rican historians say that the Arawaks stopped playing a major part by around 1550 because they no longer existed as a people. But what no longer existed in 1550 were organized lowland villages, caciques, war bands — in other words, those aspects of social organization that European men would consider most important and most likely to recognize. If we ask the same question centered on women, we would need to look at those areas of life in which women had the most influence. Evidence from other parts of the Americas shows that traditional cultures survived longest in those areas controlled by non-elite women. If we put women at the center, it may be that Arawak culture continued to have a strong influence on rural Puerto Ricans until much later, particularly in the practices of agriculture and medicine, certain kinds of spirituality, child rearing, food preparation, and in the production of cloth and pottery.

Similarly, in exploring when Puerto Ricans first began to have a distinct sense of nationality other than as Spanish colonial settlers, the usual evidence considered is the publication of newspapers or the formation of patriotic societies — activities dominated by men. How did women experience nationality? If, as Jose Luis Gonzalez

asserts, the first people to see themselves as Puerto Rican were Black because they lacked mobility and were, by force, committed to Puerto Rico, what about the impact of women's mobility or lack of it? Did women experience a commitment to Puerto Rican identity as a result of childbearing and extended family ties? Did they feel Puerto Rican earlier or later than men? If women are at the center, what is the significance, what were the gains and losses of the strongly feminist Puerto Rican labor movement of the early 20th Century? Medicinal history does not just look for ways to "fit in" more biographies of people from underrepresented groups. It shifts the landscape of the questions asked.

### **Identify Strategic Pieces of Misinformation and Contradict Them**

In challenging imperial histories, some kinds of misinformation have more of an impact than others. Part of the task of curandera historian is diagnosis. We need to ask ourselves what aspects of imperial history do the most harm, and which lies are at the foundations of our colonized sense of the culture. Some of these strategic pieces of misinformation will be the same for all projects, and I name several below. Some will be of central importance only to specific histories. In the case of Puerto Rican history, a few of the specific lies I decided were important to debunk were the absence or downplaying of Africa and African people from official histories, the idea that there was such a thing as "pure" Spanish culture in 1492 or at any time since, and the invisibility of Puerto Ricans' relations with people from the other islands, especially the French, English, and Dutch colonies. The first case is about erasure, the other two deal with ideas of national or cultural purity.

### **Make Absences Visible**

The next three points deal with the nature and availability of historical evidence. When you are investigating and telling the history of disenfranchised people, you can't always find the kind and amount of written material you want. But in medicinal history the goal is as much to generate questions and show inconsistencies as it is to document people's lives.

For example, tracing absences can balance a picture, even when you are unable to fill in the blanks. Lack of evidence doesn't mean you can't name and describe what is missing. Tracing the outlines of a women-shaped hole in the record, and talking about the existence of women about whom we know only general information, can be a powerful way of correcting imperialist history. I wrote

one piece about the indigenous women known to have been brought to Puerto Rico from other parts of Central, South, and North America who have little trace of their real names, and even less of what nations they came from:

"We are your Indian grandmothers from Eastern America, stolen from our homes and shipped to wherever they needed our work. From Tierra Firme to the islands. From one island to another. From this side to that, each colony raiding for it's own supply... They have passenger lists with the names of those who came west over the ocean to take our lands, but our names are not recorded... Some of us died so far from home we couldn't even imagine the way back: Cherokee in Italy, Tupi in Portugal, Inuit in Denmark. Many of us were fed into the insatiable gold mines of el imperio alongside the people of your island, and they called us simply indias. But we were as different from one another as Kongo from Wolof, Italian from Dane... We are the ancestors of whom no record has been kept. We are trace elements in your bodies, minerals coloring your eyes, residue in your fingernails. You were not named for us. You don't know the places where our bones are, but we are in your bones. Because of us, you have relatives among the many tribes. You have cousins on the reservations..."

It is also possible to use fictitious characters to highlight an absence, as Virginia Woolf does in "A Room of One's Own" when she speaks of Shakespeare's talented, fictitious sister, for whom no opportunities were open. I wrote a similar piece about the invented sister of a Spanish chronicler who visited Puerto Rico in the 18th Century to make visible the absence of women chroniclers during that period.

### **Asking Questions Can Be As Good As Answering Them**

Another way of dealing with lost history is to ask speculative questions. "What if" is a legitimate tool of investigation, and the question can be as valuable as answers. Proposing a radically different possible interpretation is a way of opening up how we think about events, even when there is no way to prove anything. It is useful to ask, "What would have to be different for us to understand this story in this other way?"

The chronicles of the Spanish conquest of Puerto Rico have relatively little to say about the *cacica* Guanina and her liaison with the Spaniard Cristobal Sotomayor. The popularized version I grew up on goes something like this: Innocent Indian Maiden sees the most handsome man she's ever laid eyes on, far surpassing anyone in her whole culture. She falls in love with him, even though he has enslaved her community, who are dying like flies. She becomes his lover, and when her people plot an uprising, she runs to warn him. He doesn't take her seriously, not because he's arrogant, but because he's brave, and promptly rides into an ambush and dies. Guanina is beside herself with grief. Her brother the chief finds her dead body lying across her slain lover, the two are buried side by side and the lilies of Spain entwine with the wildflowers of Puerto Rico upon their graves. On the face of it this is an extremely unlikely tale. Guanina was the niece of the high cacique of Puerto Rico, in a matrilineal society in which sister's children inherited. At eighteen she would have been considered a full adult, and a woman of influence and prestige. Puerto Rico, called *Boriken* by the Arawaks, was not settled by European colonists until 1508. By the time Guanina and Sotomayor became lovers, the Arawaks of *Boriken* had had eighteen years of the news from Hispaniola and had a pretty good idea of what was likely to happen to them. According to Beth Brant, in an article on Pocahontas, indigenous women sometimes sought out liaisons with European men as a way of creating ties of kinship, in the hope that such a bond would help them fend off the worst of the consequences of invasion. If all we do is assume, for a moment, that Guanina was not naive but an intelligent woman used to seeing herself as important and conscious of what she was doing, the colonialist story becomes completely implausible. My reinterpretation of Guanina's story is based on that implausibility and simply proposes another possible set of motives and understandings that could explain the known facts of her life and death and leave us with a sense of her dignity and purpose. It is speculative, and without hard evidence, but it opens up important questions about how to understand the actions of intelligent people in intolerable conditions.

### What Constitutes Evidence?

Another issue to keep in mind is that biases are built into historical standards of evidence. Although there is an increasing acceptance of other forms of documentation, we still rely heavily on the written. This means that we accept an immense body of experience as unavailable for

historical discussion. The fact that something was written down does not make it true, as any critical consumer of contemporary media knows. It simply means that someone with sufficient skill and authority to write things down recorded their version of events or transactions while someone else did not. Such records are evidence of some of what they did, some of what they wanted others to think they did, and some of what they thought about it. No more, no less. Of course, even documents as partial as these are a treasure trove, but when we rely on written records we need to continually ask ourselves what might be missing, what might have been recorded in order to manipulate events and in what manner, and in what ways we are allowing ourselves to assume objectivity is in any way connected with literacy. We need to remind ourselves that much of what we want to know wasn't written about and also think about ways to expand what we will consider as contributing to evidence. Is the oral tradition of a small town, handed down over fourteen generations, about the mass exodus of local men to the gold mines of Brazil really less reliable than what women tobacco workers charged with civil offenses deposed before a judge whose relatives owned tobacco fields? As historians of the under-represented we need to question the invalidation of non-literate mechanisms of memory.

### Show Agency

One of the great lies of imperial history is that only members of the elite act, and everyone else is acted upon. In our attempts to expose the cruelty of oppression, we sometimes portray oppressed communities as nothing more than victims, and are therefore unable to see the full range of responses that people always make to their circumstances. People who are being mistreated are always trying to figure out a strategy. Those strategies may be shortsighted, opportunistic, ineffective, or involve the betrayal of others, but they nevertheless represent a form of resistance. Politically, its essential that we learn to develop strategies that hold out for real transformation whenever possible and take everyone's well-being into account. But in telling the history of our struggles with each other over time, it's important to recognize that resistance takes many forms. We need to dismantle the idea of passive victimization, which leaves us feeling ashamed and undeserving of freedom. Even under the most brutal conditions, people find ways to assert their humanity. Medicinal history must find ways to show the continual exercise of choice by people who appear powerless.



## Show Complexity and Embrace Ambiguity and Contradiction

In order to do this, we must also give up the idea that people are 100% heroic or villainous. In searching out a history of resistance, the temptation is to find heroic figures and either overlook their failings or feel betrayed when we find that they have some. Human beings are not all resistance, or collaboration and complicity. Popular imperial history tends to be ahistorical and simplistic, focused on exceptional personalities instead of complex social processes. If we ignore what is contradictory about our own impulses toward solidarity or betrayal in an attempt to simplify history into good and evil, we will sacrifice some of the most important lessons to be gained.

We need more than just the heroic stories of militant resistance. Stories of accommodation, collaboration, and outright defeat are just as important because they give us ways to understand our position as caused rather than just existing. If we want to give people a sense of agency, of having always been actors as well as acted upon, we must be willing to tell stories full of contradiction that show the real complexity and causes of their current conditions.

For example, Nzinga, born in 1585, was a queen among the Mbundu of what is now Angola. She was a fierce anti-colonial warrior, a militant fighter, a woman holding power in a male dominated society, and she laid the basis for successful Angolan resistance to Portuguese colonialism all the way into the 20th Century. She was also an elite woman living from the labor of others, who murdered her brother and his children, fought other African people on behalf of the Portuguese, and collaborated in the slave trade.

I tell her story in two different ways: once at the end of her life, celebrating her anti-colonial militancy and the power of her memory for Black women, and once from the point of view of the woman on whose back she literally sat as she negotiated with the Portuguese governor. It is in many ways more empowering when we tell the stories of our heroic figures as contradictory characters full of weakness and failures of insight. It enables us to see our own choices more clearly and to understand that imperfect people can have a powerful, liberating impact on the world.

## Reveal Hidden Power Relationships

Imperial history obscures the power relations that underlie our daily lives. This is one of the ways in which immense imbalances of power and resources are made to seem natural. In telling the history of an oppressed community, we need to expose those relationships of unequal power whether they come from outside our group or lie within it. Liberal Puerto Rican feminists of the late 19th Century who became “firsts” in the arts and education, came primarily from an hacendado and merchant class made affluent by slave produced profits of the sugar industry. Most of the leaders of the 1868 Lares uprising against Spain were coffee planters angered by their growing dependence on newly arrived merchants and the credit they offered.

Another way to expose unequal power is to reveal hidden economic relationships. I did this in part by following the products of Puerto Rican women’s labor to their destinations, and tracing the objects of their daily use to their sources. This shows both the degree of control exerted on their lives by the profit seeking of the wealthy and uncovers relationships we have with working people in other parts of the world. In the 1600’s ginger grown by Puerto Rican women and men was sold to English smugglers from Jamaica and ended up spicing the daily gingerbread of London’s working poor. One of the main items imported in exchange was used clothing made in the mills of England and the Low Countries. This reveals a different relationship between Puerto Ricans and English people than the “great civilization vs. insignificant primitive colony” story told in the 1923 Encyclopedia Britannica we had in my home, which described Puerto Rico as a small island with no natural resources. Telling Puerto Rican community college students that the stage hands for Shakespeare’s productions probably ate Puerto Rican food on their lunch breaks changes their relationship to that body of “high culture.”

Similarly, Puerto Rican women and children picked and processed coffee that was considered the best in the world at the turn of the century. *Yauco* coffee was served in the wealthiest homes of New York, Paris and Vienna. Mrs. J.P. Morgan bought her personal supply from *Yauco*, and many of the philosophers, poets, and painters of the time drank it at their salons. Juxtaposing photographs of coffee workers who earned pennies for their labor with the silver coffeepots and reclining gentry who consumed the coffee restores Puerto Rican women’s labor to its place in an international web of trade and profit.

I wrote one piece in which I described the lunch preparations of a rural Puerto Rican neighbor and showed how the food she set on the table was a map of the world, revealing to her connections to people in Malaysia, Ethiopia, Portugal, and many other places. I described the vegetables grown and canned in the Imperial and Salinas Valleys of California by Mexican and Filipina women which were promoted as the “modern” replacement for fresh produce to Puerto Rican housewives of the late 40’s and 50’s. I read this piece as part of a talk I gave at a small college in Michigan, including a section about *bacalao*, the dry salt cod that is a staple protein of Puerto Rican cuisine:

“The bacalao is the fin-tip of a vast movement in which the shadows of small fishing boats skim across the Grand Banks of Nova Scotia hauling cod from immense schools of feeding fish, salt it down in their holds and return with rumors of great lands to fourteenth century Basque fishing villages and Portuguese port towns. Return to Iceland, to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, to build up the great shipping fortunes of Massachusetts. The flaking yellow flesh makes her part of a wide Atlantic net of people who live from the cod: catch the cod, salt the cod, pack and ship the cod, sell the cod, import and export the cod, stretch a piece of it into food for a family for a week.”

After the talk, a man came up to me, deeply moved, to tell me that he had grown up in a Nova Scotia fishing village and his family had packed cod. I thanked him and told him we had eaten it for breakfast. “So did we!” he exclaimed. “We ate it with green bananas” I told him. “We ate it with potatoes” he replied, and we embraced. The last place he had expected to hear about his own life was in a talk on Puerto Rican women’s history. Revealing this kind of connection increases a sense of our common interests and uncovers the importance of our labor in the international scheme of things.

### **Personalize**

The majority of historical figures who are known by name are members of elite groups, while everyone else tends to be known en-masse. However, there are quite a few places where the names of individual people who are poor, female, dark, etc., can be found in written records.

Using the names of individual real people and any details of their lives we have, to dramatize and personalize the social condition of group makes those conditions far more real. When the disenfranchised appear only in crowd scenes, it reinforces a sense of relative unimportance.

In writing about the lives of recently freed slave women in Puerto Rico, I used footnoted names of real women and details of their work contracts found in a book on slavery in San Juan. This has an entirely different impact than writing, “many freed women sought out their relatives and contracted to work for them.”

The best documented Arawak women are *cacicas*, members of the indigenous ruling class known as *nitainos*. Most of the stories about Arawak women focus on *cacicas* like Guanina, Loiza, or Anacaona. But we know that the majority of Arawak women belonged to the *naboria* laborer class. I found a list of indigenous women both from Borikén and from the smaller islands of the Eastern Caribbean who were being branded as slaves on one particular day in 1515. Many were given two names in the record, on Spanish and one Arawak or Carib and many others simply renamed Maria or Catalina. By using names that were at least imposed on real women, and the few facts recorded about them, their anonymity in the imperial records is at least made visible and the realities of their lives during the conquest become more tangible:

#### **From 1515: Naborias**

They were not *cacicas*.

They were not heirs to yuca fields.

They were no concessions made to their status.

They were not “queens.”

Their names are recorded in the lists of work gangs sent to the mines, the *conucos*, the kitchens, the laundries of the Spanish invaders.

Mancaney, field hand.

Francisquilla, cook.

Ana, baker.

Catalina, pig woman.

They were the working women of Borikén.

They were called out of their names.

Casually recorded under the names of Catholic saints, or the queens of the myriad kingdoms of Spain, renamed after little sisters

or mothers left behind in Estremadura,

Navarra, Castilla, Sevilla, León

or a favorite prostitute from a port town,

or a beauty out of some ballad of the old land.  
They were not born Catalina, Ana, Francisquilla...

The account books of the governor say herrose--  
branded on this day — was Elvira Arumaita  
from the island of Guadalupe  
with a son they called Juanico.  
herrose, a Carib called Beatriz, and her son, Juanico.  
herrose, a Carib, Juana Cabarotaxa, from  
the island of Santa Cruz, and  
herrose, a little girl called Anita, Carib,  
from the aforementioned island  
which we now call Guadalupe, and herrose,  
also from Guadalupe, Magdalena Guavrama  
Carib, and her child.  
They were already here, enslaved, escaped,  
and to their great misfortune, recaptured  
and branded this day by Captain Juan Ponce de León,  
Ana Taguas, Violante Ateyba  
Leonor Yayguana written down as belonging  
to the rebel cacique Abey,  
and Isabel Guayuca with her son, once again Juanico,  
once owing loyalty to the collaborator Cayey.  
They were women under two masters,  
the crumbling authority of the caciques  
and the new and violent usage of the señores...

In cases where we really don't have names, documented elements in the lives of a social group can still be personalized by writing a personal narrative that conveys the reality of such a life. Using figures on average wages of women working and process of shelter and essential foods, I wrote an internal monologue about the kinds of choices a single mother of several children has to make during the dead season of the sugar cane industry when there is little work and a lot of illness. Details like the difference between feeding your children unbroken rice, broken rice or cornmeal make the actual struggles of such women visible and felt in a way that lists of numbers alone cannot.

### Show Connection and Context

One element of imperial history is that events tend to be seen as caused by extraordinary personalities acting on one another without showing us the social context. For example, many of the great discoveries and inventions we are taught about in elementary and high school were being pursued by many people at once, but the individual who received the patent is described as a "lone explorer" rather than part of a group effort. Rosa Parks didn't "get tired" one day and start the Montgomery bus boycott.

She was a trained organizer, and her role — as well as the time and place of the boycott — was the result of careful planning by a group of civil rights activists. Just as medicinal history must restore individuality to anonymous masses of people, it must also restore social context to individuals singled out as the actors of history.

### Restore Global Context

One element of imperial history that is particularly strong in the United States is a sense that the rest of the world is irrelevant. Few U.S.er's are knowledgeable about the geography, politics, culture, and history of other countries. In 1968, when I was fourteen, I spent a summer in Cuba. One of the most striking things for me was opening the paper each day to find regular ongoing coverage of dozens of countries I had only heard of before as occasional "hot spots" or tourist destinations. Imperial history tends to talk about the world outside of imperial headquarters episodically, as if it existed only when the attention of the empire was upon it.

The way I was taught ancient history left me with an impression of a darkened world in which nothing happened until the lights of civilization were turned on, first in Mesopotamia, then in Ancient Greece, then Rome, then spreading north-westward into Europe. Only then, as European expansion took off, did the Americas, Asia, and Africa appear. It was at home, from my father, that I learned of Chinese merchants trading with East Africa in the 12th Century, and the vast expanse and intellectual achievements of the Islamic empire.

Therefore, one of the tasks of medicinal history is to show that all parts of the world co-exist and always have. (Contrary to popular expression like "Stone Age people" or "just entering the 20th Century," all people now alive are living at the same time, whatever our technologies or forms of social organization). We also need to show that complexity and change exist and always have existed in all parts of the world.

One of my current projects is a curriculum which starts form Shakespeare's England and connects his life and writings to events and people in the rest of the world. How many of us are ever asked to think about what was happening in China, Peru, and Mali while Hamlet was being written? In my Puerto Rican history project, I included an ancient and a medieval section in which I showed the diversity and vitality of people's lives in the three regions from which Puerto Ricans originate: West Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Caribbean. I wanted

to create a sense of balance between the regions long before 1492.

As a discipline, history is taught by regions and time periods in ways that often make it difficult to focus on linkages. Medicinal history can restore a sense of the global to fragmented colonial histories. The arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean is closely connected with the expulsions of Jews and Moslems from Spain, linking the history of San Juan with that of Constantinople and Marrakech. The upheavals that the slave trade brought to West Africa, and the conflicts between and within African nations have a direct bearing on who showed up in the slave markets of the island. The fact that General Nelson Miles, who led the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, was also the most prominent military commander of the wars against the Plains Indians is not just biographical information about Miles' career. It connects the stories of peoples affected by U.S. expansion from Puerto Rico to the Dakotas, from Idaho and Arizona to Hawaii and the Philippines. Reestablishing a sense of the connectedness of world events to one another is a critical piece of the work of the activist historian.

### **Access and Digestibility**

If the purpose of medicinal history is to transform the way we see ourselves historically, to change our sense of what is possible, then making history available to those who need it most is not a separate process from the researching and interpreting. The task of the curandera historian includes delivery.

To do exciting, empowering research and leave it in academic journals and university libraries is like manufacturing unaffordable medicines for deadly diseases. We need to take responsibility for sharing our work in ways that people can assimilate, not in the private languages and forms of scholars. This is the difference between curanderas and pharmaceutical companies. Pharmaceuticals are going into indigenous and other people of color communities worldwide, and stealing and patenting traditional science, technology and even the plants themselves and producing medicines that are completely out of reach of the people who invented them. We need to be careful, in doing historical research about oppressed communities, to see that the active ingredients get back to the people whose ancestors generated our work.

A good medicine also includes a delivery system, something that transports it to the parts of your body that need it. Those who are hungriest for what we dig up don't read scholarly journals and shouldn't have to. As historians we need to either be artists and community educators, or we need to find people who are and figure out how to collaborate with them. We can work with community groups to create original public history projects that really involve people. We can see to it that our work gets into at least the local popular culture through theater, music, historical novels, posters, films, children's books, or any of a hundred other accessible art forms. We can work with elementary and highschool teachers to create curricula. Medicinal history is a form of healing and its purposes are conscious and overt.

### **Show Yourself in Your Work**

One of the pretenses of history is that being rigorous about research is the same as being objective. Since history is a collection of stories about people in conflict, and all our families were involved, it seems a ridiculous claim. Objectivity isn't all it's cracked up to be anyway. Being objective is often understood to mean not taking sides; but failing to take sides when someone is being hurt is immoral. In writing about the past we are choosing to bear witness to the impact of that past on the people around us. We don't stand apart from history. We are in the midst of it right this minute and stances we take matter. A committed moral stance does not mean that we cannot be rigorous. While the agenda of the activist historian is to rescue a sense of worth for the oppressed, our ability to see worth in the contradictory and ambiguous means we welcome the full picture. We don't, in the narrow sense, have an ax to grind.

Part to what oppression tries to teach us is that as intellectuals we need not involve ourselves and that it is undignified to do so. Certainly to talk and write openly about our personal and emotional stakes as well as our intellectual ones in our work is frowned on, and sets us up for ridicule and disrespect. Nevertheless, it's important for people's historians not to hide ourselves. Part of what keeps our work honest is acknowledging why we care about it and who we are in relationship to it. We often write the books we most need to read, and do research that in some way touches on core issues in our lives. Revealing this is a way of shedding the cloak of "apartness" and exposing our humanity.

## Cross Borders

At a lecture I gave on my historical research, someone asked how I found all these myriad connections between seemingly unrelated topics. I realized, as I answered her, that my central research strategy had been allowing myself to be widely curious, across all boundaries of discipline, geography, and time. Academic training and the workings of the higher education marketplace exert powerful pressures on us to narrow our interests and not cross into unfamiliar territory. A commitment to the study of connections requires us to continually disregard these pressures and the conventions they uphold. The categories of discipline, geography, and historical period are themselves constructed in obedience to certain priorities that don't necessarily serve the projects of medicinal history. Borders are generally established in order to exercise control, and when we center our attention on the historical empowerment of the oppressed, we inevitably swim rivers, lift barbed wire, and violate no trespassing signs.