

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

AURORA LEVINS MORALES

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

SEPTEMBER 28 and 30, 2005
Northampton, MA

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Narrator

Aurora Levins Morales was born in Indiera, Puerto Rico in 1954 to a Puerto Rican mother and Jewish father. Raised on the island and then in Chicago, Levins Morales was surrounded by political debate and intellectual engagement. The youngest member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, Levins Morales became an activist at an early age. Levins Morales relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-70s where she immediately connected with movement organizations like the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and New Jewish Agenda and radical cultural groups like La Peña and the Berkeley Women's Center. A poet and writer, Levins Morales work has been widely recognized among both North American feminist and Puerto Rican literary traditions. She was a contributor to *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) and in 1986 published *Getting Home Alive* in collaboration with her mother, Rosario Morales.

Levins Morales has written a prose poetry book on the history of Puerto Rican and related women and a collection of essays. Her fiction, poetry and non-fiction have been widely anthologized. She is recognized as an important contemporary Puerto Rican writer. As a historian, she has focused on documenting the history of Puerto Ricans in California through oral histories, collection of archival materials, and an exhibit. Levins Morales is active in Middle east peace work and the disability/chronic illness liberation movement. She is currently working on a novel and lives in Berkeley, California.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. history at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this oral history, Levins Morales details her family heritage and describes her childhood in Puerto Rico, particularly in relation to her parents' political activism and Communist party membership. The majority of the interview focuses on Levins Morales activism, her experiences as a woman of color in both male-led nationalist organizations and the predominantly white, middle-class feminist movement, and her work as a writer and educator.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Five 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Audited for accuracy by Kate Mitchell and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Aurora Levins Morales.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Levins Morales, Aurora. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, September 28 and 30, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Aurora Levins Morales, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, September 28, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Levins Morales, Aurora. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, September 28 and 30, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Aurora Levins Morales, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, September 28, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted September 28 & 30, 2005 with:

AURORA LEVINS MORALES

at: Smith College

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: We are on. OK. This is Kelly Anderson and Aurora Levins Morales, on Wednesday, September 26th –

MORALES: Twenty-eighth.

ANDERSON: – twenty-eighth, here at Smith College, and we're doing a taping of Aurora's life story for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project at the Sophia Smith Collection. This is the first day of our taping and we're going to start by going through your life chronologically. And as I mentioned to you, we'd love to hear anything that you can recollect about your family as far back as you know, whether — I don't know if that's your great grandparents or if it begins with your grandparents — but what their life was like in Puerto Rico and in New York or Eastern Europe, and what stories you would like to share about them.

MORALES: Well I think, actually, as we talked about earlier, I want to start by saying something about the context for the interview.

ANDERSON: Great. OK.

MORALES: Because I did feel some ambivalence about doing this and I guess what I want to say is that for the lives of women of color, artists and intellectuals to be documented, given that we don't, in general, own the resources and have the institutional backing to do it ourselves, requires that we enter into alliances, at least temporarily, with the people who do. And how those alliances go, how well they play out for all the participants partly depends on the degree to which the people who are in possession of that privilege are exquisitely aware of the implications of that for the relationship and of the ways in which that difference in privilege can distort the relationship.

I experienced an interaction with Smith College around setting up this interview that I'm sure, on the other end of it, people who participated from Smith's side see as a logistical snafu but it's part of my ongoing experience as a woman of color trying to move in and out

of circles in which I don't have privilege — that what looks like logistics from one end, looks like politics from the other. There was a problem with housing for me in which the original housing that was set up for me was inadequate and I found myself without housing and essentially being told I was on my own to figure the problem out. And you know, I understand that from the institutional end, it's a matter of seeing it as, you know, There was no way to get funding, it wasn't what we planned, et cetera, et cetera. But from a larger picture of who holds resources and who doesn't and what the impact of that is on our relationships with one another, there is a longstanding tradition of women of color's stories and intellectual products and memorabilia sometimes having a value separate from the value that we ourselves are given, that sometimes our stories can have a trophy value separate from a relationship of respect.

Eventually, by making enough fuss myself and by mobilizing other people to make a fuss, housing was found for me and I was taken care of, but I shouldn't have had to battle in that way. And in order to feel comfortable going ahead with this project, I felt like I needed to talk about that, that it's particularly painful when that kind of interaction happens with white feminists who have been able to create institutional spaces for themselves and aren't always necessarily accountable to the relationship. My problem is not that there was a logistical tangle but the way that I was treated in the course of that left me feeling that my story was of value to the institution but my life was not.

And yes, as we go through our story and talk about what my relationship has been to academic institutions, you'll see that there are other instances in which I've had that same struggle and it never looks to the people in privilege like it's more than a logistical problem, a scheduling problem, an allocation of resources that's purely neutral — but that's not what it looks like from the other end. So I felt that that was important to say, given that this — and to acknowledge that there is a built-in inequity in this process. It's not a full power-sharing relationship. So having said that, I'm now ready and put my story into this process, but —

ANDERSON: Can I just ask one question about that then?

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: Why did you decide then that you wanted to go forward with it, when you certainly would have reason to not [do so]?

MORALES: Because if women of color want our stories recorded, as I said, we don't in general have the resources to do that. I certainly don't want this archive to just be of white women's stories. I had a conversation with my father about it and, you know, if I don't participate, my voice disappears entirely. I think this is a wonderful project. I don't have a problem with the project, but I thought it was important to insert some

critique in it — that, you know, there wasn't housing and there wasn't money allocated for that, and that was something that obviously people couldn't pull out of a hat and yet, you know, money was eventually found for it. It's more about how I was treated in the process, the contrast with how I got treated last night in the Puerto Rican community— people were saying, Oh, we would not have let you, you know. I mean, somebody would have found a home for me and, and there would have been no question that I was entitled to that, and there was a question about my entitlement to that here. So that's something I just felt needed to be said. So we don't need to take any more time on that, but I wanted to put it on the record.

ANDERSON: Yes. So does that seem like a good place to start then with your story, is to start about your grandparents?

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: Do you want to start with — which side, your mom's or your dad's side?

MORALES: Well, I have to warn you. As you know, I'm the family genealogist, and so my knowledge of my family goes back many, many generations. Actually, I think I want to start with a story from my father's side of the family which is about my great grandmothers' grandmother, because the tradition in my family is, is that she's the first known feminist. We don't know what her name was. She was the wife of a rabbi in the town of Kremenchug in the Ukraine. Supposedly she was a better scholar than her husband and was a feminist. This would have probably been around the 1860s and she agitated for a right to participate to a greater degree, and when she was told that's God's law, she supposedly stood up in temple and said, "Your God is a man," and walked out. She was also a local wise woman, an arbiter of disputes, clearly somebody of great presence.

And my great grandmother Leah Sakhnin, actually Leah Shevelev by birth, Sakhnin by marriage, wrote a short memoir, a little autobiographical piece in the 1930s as part of the unemployed circles that she organized — I don't remember what they were called, but circles of unemployed women — they did some kind of writing project together. And she has a piece that starts, "It was my grandmother who planted the revolutionary spark in me," and taught her to fight for herself and advocate for herself and for social justice in general. So that's an important tradition to me, and –

ANDERSON: And that story was passed down?

MORALES: That story was passed down through — my father told me that story. I knew Leah as a child. She died when I was 14 but we lived in Puerto Rico and she lived in New York and so we would see her on summer

trips to the States. And you know, now, I really wish, of course, that she had talked more. There was a lot of silence in that family about the past. There wasn't a tremendous amount of storytelling but I do remember sitting on her floor, the kitchen floor, playing with a set of jacks — I probably was about ten — and her getting this odd look in her eyes and saying, "You know, there was a game like that that we used to play where you take river pebbles and you turn them back and forth on your hands and don't let them drop back [on the ground.]"

And it was the first time I thought, Village, river? You know, I knew that they had a way of speaking and accents that were not from Spanish, that it was this other language, but I didn't really have a sense of what their life was like before they immigrated. And she came as a young, married woman so she certainly had stories to tell about *shtetl* life in Europe that I didn't ever get to hear. She was a strong personality — really the matriarch of this extended family home.

My father grew up in that house. His grandparents lived upstairs and his parents and he lived downstairs with his brother and my great grandma, Mom — Mom and Pop— Mom ran the household and I know my father could appeal all judgments of his parents upstairs, so I don't think my grandmother really felt like she got to be a full adult in her own home. She lived with her mom, you know, until her mother died. She was middle aged.

ANDERSON: And you didn't know her, did you, your great grandmother?

MORALES: No, I did — Leah was the one I was talking about.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I did know her, yes.

ANDERSON: Until you were 14.

MORALES: She was somebody who had worked with Margaret Sanger. She had done birth control education and distributed information. She supposedly had an abortion during the 1920s — she was one of those stoic women who doesn't make a fuss, so she went and had an abortion in the morning, went shopping, came home. She also had breast cancer. She died in her eighties — had had, I guess a very slow form of breast cancer for a couple of decades. It's hard to get a clear story about this from the family but there's a possibility that she took her own life at the end. I don't remember the details. She may have organized, you know, an overdose of medication in order to not deal with the pain anymore.

She was very close to my father and taught him a lot about political activism, taught him to ask, Is it good for the Jews? He's written some about his relationship with her. He got sent out at the age of six to collect money for — you know, a little can, go around the neighborhood collecting money for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the international

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brigades. So there is a tradition on my father's side of the family of a very strong feminist activist woman taking leadership in that family and, you know, I think it has a lot to do with my father's feminism. I asked him on a recent visit to me whether he had any regrets in his life and his answer kind of blew me away, which was that he regretted not having grasped sooner the personal implications of feminism. I thought, That's my dad. So you know, some of that certainly has to do with his grandmother, and –

ANDERSON: So do you think she –

MORALES: – her politics.

ANDERSON: – confided in him about the abortion, or how did he hear that story and you hear that story?

MORALES: I can't — I'm trying to remember who –

ANDERSON: Because that seems like something people usually are pretty silent about.

MORALES: Yes, although, I mean, she would have been silent about it more I think out of not wanting to make a fuss than out of feeling it was shameful, because she was an advocate for birth control and abortion.

ANDERSON: Yes, that's true.

MORALES: So I don't know that it was that. It was just there was a very strong culture in that family about not making a fuss about anything. My grandmother, I think partly because she grew up with such an overpowering mom and, and you know, she was strong, she was a very strong personality, my grandmother, in many ways, was not particularly political, was not a feminist, was caught up in — she had a love of luxurious things, kind of hankering after certain kinds of class privilege, you know, liked to go on cruises and have pretty things.

I think [she] had a combination of pride and embarrassment about my father's politics, sort of at arm's length — having radicalism encouraged in the family was something to be proud of but, you know, she didn't want it too close, didn't want her friends disapproving and so on. As my father tells it, it was a much more radical community prewar, and then postwar, there was a huge wave of conformity and assimilation, increased concern with assimilation to middle-class values and upward mobility — he talks about his cousins being raised to be popular rather than smart. So there was a real shift in the culture of that community. But my father had left home by then, I mean, shortly after the war. He left home at 17, in '47, so –

ANDERSON: And what was her husband like, your dad's father?

MORALES: My grandfather died young. I never knew him. He died at the age of 46. He was an organizer of the Communist Youth movement. He was an attorney. [He and] his brother, Ben, went to law school — I think took night classes and worked in a deli that was run by the Jewish mob. He always had 20 concerns going. He was running a little publishing venture. He was doing various different kinds of things. I think he worked himself to death getting his family into the middle class. He had some kind of a heart condition, I think, from childhood and then died of salmonella poisoning. He was spending winters in Florida because the cold weather was hard on his heart, and somehow was exposed to salmonella and died of that when my father was 16.

ANDERSON: What did that do to the finances of that family?

MORALES: I don't know. They continued to live in that family home, and he knew he was ill and I think to some extent provided — you know, one of those ironies: because he was sick he worked harder. As far as I — I mean, there's no story about there being any financial crash. My grandmother remarried very quickly but I don't think the reasons were primarily financial. I think that she had an emotional need to be taken care of by a man. And that had certainly, I think, something to do with my father moving out. Then he finished high school young. He was doing really well academically, and went off to college.

My sense of my grandfather — the stories that I've heard about my grandfather is that he was a man of tremendous integrity, very honorable, and had a silly sense of humor. There are a lot of stories about the practical jokes. My grandmother was one of four and there are two boys in the middle and a younger girl, and they all lived there together, either in that house or nearby. So there was a lot of extended family stories, and my uncles Lou and Fidd were mischievous and always playing pranks and jokes, and my grandfather was in on some of that. A lot of the stories I heard growing up were about his silliness, but he was involved, in some way, in the defense of the Scottsboro boys. He took on political cases as well as bread-and-butter work.

ANDERSON: What was your —

MORALES: And I wish I had known him.

ANDERSON: Yes. What was your relationship with your grandmother like, your dad's mom?

MORALES: I just wrote a piece about that. My grandmother had a tremendous hunger for somebody famous to be descended from her — kept wanting my father to win the Nobel Prize, could not be satisfied with his actual accomplishments, you know, was always hankering after something that I think would legitimate her in some way. And she was racist. When my

father told her about my mom, she tried to find out how dark she was, without asking — like, Are there many dark people in Puerto Rico? — and did actually threaten — they were underage — threaten to withhold permission for them to get married. And my father said, “Well then, we’ll just live together,” and so she did sign, but she didn’t want Puerto Rican grandchildren.

So she showered us with gifts and she acted like a loving grandmother but she was constantly trying to wean us from Puerto Rico: Wouldn’t you rather live here? Wouldn’t you rather be a ballerina? Wouldn’t you like to go to the movies? Why do you want to live on that mountainside? She had a hard time using our Spanish names. I remember particularly with when my younger brother was born, Alejandro. She kept acting like she couldn’t pronounce the name and she’d say, Well, why don’t you call him Alyosha? Why don’t you call him Alexi? Let’s call him Alex.

There was an incident a few years ago, after her death, where some letter that she had written to one of my dad’s cousins, she found it and sent it to my dad. And there was something — I don’t remember the exact details of it — there was something in there about my grandmother having run into my father’s high school girlfriend, whom she was furious [at] because when they broke up she didn’t give him back his medals — but having run into her and saying, you know, “She’s divorced now. I can’t help but think about what could have been.” Now this is at a point where my parents have been married for 17 years, had three kids, you know — she never really reconciled to the fact that he was married to a Puerto Rican woman and that we were Puerto Rican. So that complicated the relationship.

ANDERSON: And did you feel a lot of that as a child or is it as an adult looking back on it that you read that into it?

MORALES: I felt that my mother was not comfortable or accepted there. This is complicated by the fact that my father’s younger brother molested me, so there were other things about that house that creped me out. He wasn’t there a lot of the time after I was quite young. He left. When I was six he went to Europe to study medicine and so he wasn’t around, but the creepiness of the experience was around, and there was just — in general there was an air of secrecy, of denial and secrecy, in that home. There was also a contrast in terms of her actual level of comfort with us. My parents, when I was just — let’s see, I was ten going on eleven — they went to Cuba for a month and two weeks of that we spent with our grandparents, one week with each set. And partway through the week with my father’s mother, I arranged for us to go back to my other grandmother. She [my father’s mother] paid for us to go do some kind of program at the Y with lots of classes. She would buy activities, but she didn’t know how to relate to us at all. At my other grandmother’s house we might get dragged to Mass, where my grandmother prayed for the family’s safety in that Communist country,

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but they adored us and we were lavished with affection. And, you know, whatever their quirks, in terms of discipline and rules and whatever it was that we had to deal with, with them, they were engaged with us and she wasn't really engaged with us. So it was always somewhat uncomfortable.

There was a period when she and I got closer and corresponded a bunch, when I was in college. Oh, she was always trying to fix me up with the kids of friends of hers, and she — I was interested briefly in pre-med, and I think that got her pretty excited. Actually, there was a period in which she was corresponding with me, but then when I blew the whistle on my uncle, she chose to believe him. There was a point where she said to my dad, "You believe your child and I believe mine," which, you know, I could live with that, but she kept trying to get me to renege. She put all this pressure on me. They keep sending me these weird letters. Like, my uncle is a pathologist — he had some doctor friend say that maybe it was the result of a head injury that I thought he'd molested me. And, you know, If you renege we'll forgive you. Probably your therapist made you say this. And even on her death bed, she wrote me these awful letters with, like, you know, "I want peace before I die, and if you'll just admit that you made it up, Michael's prepared to forgive you."

I finally wrote to her and I said, "I'm not willing to have this conversation anymore. I love you. I'd like to have contact with you, but you need to stop — you know, if we can leave this topic to the side, I'm willing to leave it to the side and we can relate to each other on another basis, but I need you to stop writing me these letters in which you're asking me to lie about my experience. And if you persist in doing that I'm going to cut off relations with you." She immediately fired back another letter about how on her death bed all she wanted was peace of mind. So I wrote her a letter telling her everything I had appreciated about our relationship and said goodbye and didn't have any further contact with her. My uncle sent me an email after she died telling me that her last breath had been to curse me, which I actually doubt is true, but he's quite a character.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: So you know, it was a very ambivalent relationship.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: You know, now that she's gone, and as I'm writing about the family history and working my way through some of that, and trying to understand some of the things that led her to be as she was —

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: I don't think it helped that she was infantilized in her home for most of her life. She didn't really have any authority in her own home.

ANDERSON: Typical for –

MORALES: But she's –

ANDERSON: – many women of that generation, unfortunately.

MORALES: Yes, although the authority that overrode her was her mother.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: It's not a husband's or –

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: – father's. She's, I think, the grandparent that I have the least connection with.

ANDERSON: So let's talk about your mother's family then.

MORALES: Yes, let's. I was very close to my grandmother Lola. My early memory of her is of our family arriving from Puerto Rico, riding the elevator up 11 stories, and as the elevator door opened, way down the end of the corridor a door would fly open and my grandmother would [scream] Aaaahhhhhh. She was a very dramatic, gorgeous woman, and knew it. There are pictures of my two grandmothers together, and my Jewish grandmother, in middle age, was kind of dowdy, was a little bit plump and dressing like the standard for middle aged women at that time — and then there's my glamorous grandmother with these tight-fitted things and, you know, the makeup and the jewelry. Her bathroom was a shrine to the cosmetics industry — millions of gold-topped bottles and things, just the opposite of my mom, [who is] you know, very basic.

ANDERSON: A little moisturizer and she's good to go.

MORALES: Right. A couple of cotton balls, a little bit — you know, the, the generic raw-ingredient stuff.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: [My grandmother was] super femme and, you know, as is often the case, she had a very difficult relationship with my mother. You know, she would tell me these stories. She'd say, Don't tell your mother. This is a big thing in my grandma's family, it's like, Don't tell so and so. There's always someone who shouldn't be told the story. And then the story comes out. So she told me a lot of things about her life and about my

mother's early life that she wouldn't tell my mom, and I, of course, passed everything on to my mother, because my mom and I were close.

My grandparents both came from minor aristocracy in a small town in Puerto Rico. My grandfather's family was of the town elite. His ancestors had founded the town. My grandmother referred to them as *la alta sociedad*, which is a pun because *alta sociedad* is high society. *Suciedad* is high filth. So yes, they think they're so great and they've got all these scandals going on. She was a little resentful of their attitude toward her, because they didn't really think she was good enough.

But her own family were also landholders and slaveholders and had inherited land as a result of fighting the English invasion in 1797. So they were part of the small-town elite and they carried that attitude. She had been in love with someone else whose family didn't approve of her and he got packed off to New York and apparently buzzed around for years. My grandfather Manolin had been away, had come back, noticed that the neighbor girl had grown up to be gorgeous, and asked for her hand. Her father was an alcoholic and a gambler, and had gambled away the family store and essentially [kicked her out] — and she was her daddy's darling. She was — backtrack a little bit.

Her father had had an affair with a servant named Aurora and his wife had found out when she got pregnant, had actually on her death bed confessed that she had wanted to kill the young woman, had taken her out to the back part of the farm thinking that she was going to push her off a cliff, and said, "Have you had something to do with my husband?" The young woman burst into tears. She gave her money and said, "Don't set foot in my house again." Apparently the baby died either in utero or shortly after, so there wasn't a line of cousins on the other side of town. But in revenge, when his own daughter was born, he named her after the mistress.

So my grandmother's name was Aurora. Her nickname was Lola, which is more like a nickname of her father's name. Her mother and her were not very close. She was her daddy's girl. She went with him to the casino to dance with the boys. Suddenly her dad says, "We can't afford you anymore. You have to get married." I think that was a big betrayal. And she was given to my grandfather, and they got on a boat to New York the same day that they were married, spent their wedding night on a steamboat to New York. This was September of 1929.

ANDERSON: How old was she then?

MORALES: Nineteen. And they arrived in New York in time for the stock market crash. So their early married life was a real come-down, in class terms. There had already been a decline in the family fortunes. My grandfather's father had died young, and there were 13 kids in the family. They took in sewing and there was a whole scramble to survive and many of the kids in that family had working-class jobs but they still had an elite class attitude, and it certainly is true of my grandfather.

There was a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things and he referred to people as *títeres*, which is hoodlums.

ANDERSON: Did she talk about that time with great sadness then, having to leave Puerto Rico and her family?

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MORALES: No.

ANDERSON: No.

MORALES: She was — dying to get out of Puerto Rico. She took a look at the setup of my father's family. There were 12 boys in that family — 11 boys — one girl that had died young and then one girl who survived, and all these boys. And all their wives were being brought into the house under the absolutely iron-fisted rule of my great grandma and put to work sewing nurses uniforms. The place was nicknamed *el convento* by the neighbors, because the women were under such strong discipline. She was like, Unh uh, I'm not doing that.

So she was — she loved New York. It was my grandfather who was sad and who always daydreamed about going back and who filled the apartment with tropical plants, so it was a jungle. They had huge philodendrons climbing up the walls and hanging across the ceilings and he really wanted to go back. And when they retired they did go back and my grandma got locked up in one of those housing projects that abound around San Juan, where there's wrought-iron gates. My mom said, "Yes, it's to lock women in." Lost her mobility. Loved — she loved New York. She loved the anonymity. She loved the variety of people. She would talk to strangers — it mortified my mother, by telling intimate details to total strangers all the time. Loved the bustle. Really didn't want to go back, I don't think, and —

ANDERSON: What kind of work did they do in the city?

MORALES: Initially, whatever they could get. There was a story about my grandfather, shortly after my mother's birth, their having nothing to eat, and my grandfather being picked out by a group of Puerto Rican men when one of them got promoted to maintenance supervisor. They needed a janitor and he took my grandpa down to learn how to use this industrial machine at night so that he could apply for the job in the morning. This is a story my grandmother told me that she hadn't told my mom. My mother was two months old at the time and he took his first paycheck and went and — I think they gave him some money that day, and he went and bought some eggs and butter and scrambled some eggs for her and she was too weak to hold the spoon. He had to feed her, and she told me — this was when I was in my early twenties — she said, "I've never forgotten the taste of those eggs. Nothing else has ever tasted as good." She was nursing and was not eating so she was very weak and depleted. So he did janitorial work. He was a stock clerk in a

school and brought food home from there in the Depression. I think the supervisor turned a blind eye.

And my mom remembers these institutional ham-in-a-can things and five-gallon jars of strawberry jam and stuff like that. Eventually, when World War II started, he got a job as an electrician in the Brooklyn shipyards. And I think there's a story about that, in particular, the electricians' union, which is a progressive union, was looking to recruit people of color, partly because of the anti-labor climate of the war years. That's my understanding. But that was his step up, and then he was a professional electrician thereafter. He loved gadgets. He taught my mother how to do electrical wiring. He was always giving us little transistor radios and things like that and sending us care packages of like special kinds of rope and things that were "good quality."

My grandmother did some garment work. She worked at a hospital laundry. My grandfather didn't want her working when the kids were young, and so I think she worked before and then after they left. So they had very working-class jobs but still had a kind of attitude about being from good families.

ANDERSON: It sounds like a home that you always loved being in.

MORALES: I really did enjoy being there. I got into problems with my grandfather because he was dictatorial. You must have your ice cream next to your cake instead of on top of your cake — no, on top. He wanted me to have it on top because that's the way it's done and I didn't want it on top because it made it soggy. But that's the way it's done — very bossy. There was a right way and a wrong way to do everything and he knew the right way. And my mom has some story about asking him if he thought he was perfect and he said, Yeah, and he was serious. So he taught me how to make *tostones*, which is fried plantain squashed very thin and then fried again. And for hours taught me the correct way to smash the *tostones*, which I'm now grateful for but it was definitely a rite of initiation. He was very perfectionist, in that manner, authoritarian, and I spent more time with grandma, although my grandfather had a deep conviction that it was a human right of children to eat candy. He would smuggle candy under the table to us. He would sneak it into our rooms. He was the sugar addict in the family.

So yeah, I really loved visiting them. I enjoyed my visits to the other home too, but it was more fraught. It was mysterious. It was this other culture I knew nothing about.

ANDERSON: And dangerous.

MORALES: And dangerous, yes. I loved sitting with my grandmother. She would absentmindedly scratch my skin. It was like her affectionate thing. She'd just [scratch] — and tell me these stories for hours.

ANDERSON: So you can already see how you're going to become the historian and the activist, from the tales of both sides, that that's going to –

MORALES: Well my father told me history stories for bedtime stories. I was fascinated with history from a very early age. So that's my grandparents.

ANDERSON: Let's talk about your early life in Puerto Rico, then. That's where you were born in 1954. Tell me about how your parents talked about their decision to go there, so, sort of the origins of the Levins Morales family in Puerto Rico.

MORALES: There was a park bench in Ithaca which you probably have on tape from my mother's interview.

ANDERSON: I don't think so.

MORALES: No. They sat on a park bench in Ithaca. I have an idea that it was in the spring, and they were trying to figure out what to do next. My father had graduated from Cornell, and as a member of the Communist Party, it was being made clear to him that he was not going to get a job. The Korean War had started. My dad was draftable. They were pacifists. There wasn't an organized movement against the draft. They had to figure out what to do and they decided to try living in Puerto for a while, just to check out my mom's [country]— which wasn't going to protect my dad from the draft, but they wanted to try living in Puerto Rico for a while and see what it was like. They didn't know what was going to happen in terms of my father. They said, Let's try it for a year.

The contacts that they had were with Jane Speed and Cesar Andreu Iglesias, who were in the Community Party. Cesar who was a labor organizer and a journalist. Jane had come from Birmingham, Alabama, from an elite family in Birmingham, and had met Cesar at a Communist Party leadership school, and she and her mother had moved to Puerto Rico. So they were my parents' contacts and my parents got in touch with them. They became very close friends, all of them. But my dad would go around looking for work and the FBI would be two steps behind him, and so Jane said, "Buy land, you won't go hungry."

I grew up on that land. The land was in the Indiera Baja in Maricao. It was in the highest part of the mountains of western Puerto Rico — coffee-growing region, rainforest. It was originally 90 acres. They sold off a lot of it by the time I was born. I think it was probably less than half of that. I was born — I mean, that's my story about how they got there — I was born in a hospital that was run by pacifists who were conscientious objectors.

Harold Leppink from Minnesota was a doctor and a healthcare organizer, had organized health cooperatives in Minnesota and had come and started this hospital, Castañer. He was a World War II conscientious objector. I'm not sure when exactly he came to Puerto

Rico. I don't think it was in World War II. I think it was later but there was this itty-bitty little hospital that had, I think, six beds, and they rigged equipment out of spare parts. It was on a shoestring but that's where I was born. The Leppinks were pacifists and part of a whole network of U.S. liberals who were living in Puerto Rico at the time. I was born on February 24th, '54.

March 1st was when the nationalists attacked Congress, and there were roundups. So when I was two weeks old, my father was arrested. There was a climate of political repression and the Leppinks — my parents made out a document so that if they were in prison for any length of time, I would be taken care of by the Leppinks, that they would have custody of me. They did not want me being raised by my grandparents. And I actually went and spoke to Harold Leppink a few years ago and he thought he might still have that document somewhere in his files and I'm hoping he does. So that was the climate I was born into.

My father was taken away and brought back within the same day. He wasn't held for any length of time, but Cesar and Jane were in jail for six months. I'm told I went to my first Communist Party meeting as a two-week-old baby. I don't remember the first period of living in Puerto Rico. We lived there until I was two and a half. I remember the flight from Puerto Rico to New York when I was two and a half. I remember there was a baby in my mother's lap and that I didn't get to sit in her lap and by the window because of the baby, and I remember it being a really noisy prop plane and you couldn't hear yourself think, and it felt like it took forever.

I do remember living in New York City, and we lived there between when I was two and a half and six and a half, while my father was going to grad school at Columbia. I remember being fascinated with the urban landscape, with the mica in the sidewalks and the subways and all of that. I refused to speak Spanish in New York and I think — it was 1956 — the big Puerto Rican migration.

I have some allergic thing in my eyes here. My eyes are burning a little, which is why I'm blinking so much.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I think that the climate was — I think I picked up the vibe of the attitude toward people who spoke Spanish. I went to a nursery school with a teacher who I think was from Columbia or Peru or someplace and would have been happy to speak Spanish with me, and I refused.

ANDERSON: What did your parents want you to speak at home?

42:09

MORALES: They mostly spoke English. I don't think they had a desire about it. They spoke Spanish and English kind of mixed up, but they noted that I refused to speak Spanish. I had to learn it again when we went back to Puerto Rico. I remember sitting in Riverside Park with my dad. Well, he

was sitting. I was running around, and he was reading a book about Jim Crow. Obviously I couldn't read at the time but I remember asking what the book was about and he said Jim Crow and I wanted to know who that was. I remember him trying to explain to me and I remember going with him and picketing a Woolworth's lunch counter where there were some Columbia students who were sitting in. He also used to take me to the lab at Columbia and there were a number of Russian scientists there who made a big fuss over me, and it was a really big deal to me. One of them was a woman and it was a really big deal to me that there was this immensely tall — I was like down here — this tall woman in a white coat who looked in microscopes and did science. And my dad — you know, they'd hoist me up on a stool and I'd get to look through the microscope. I remember the smell of ether has a really positive association for me, with this fascinating stuff that was happening and being treated in some degree like I mattered. I don't think they gave me candy and did stuff that they usually did with kids, but they showed me microscopes. I was a little girl and it was the late '50s.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: So that was important to me. My mom was going to school part of the time. She was taking art classes. I remember watching her sketching a lot. I remember her telling me, In five minutes I'll pay attention to you, and five minutes seeming like an unbelievably long amount of time. She was studying art.

ANDERSON: And one of your brothers was born at this time, right?

MORALES: Well, the baby on the plane —

ANDERSON: Was Ricardo?

MORALES: — was Ricardo.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And he turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. He turned out to be — my brother and I both say we learned solidarity with each other. You know, there was all this stuff which infuriated my mother. The women on the island were like, you know, You're going to lose your momma's lap and you won't have the good stuff any more — which is partly [about] what girls are taught to expect, to be displaced. First of all, I considered him my personal toy. You know, I could bounce him, I could push him around, but we just had, I guess, a profound sense of recognition of each other from the beginning. I was his interpreter. He spoke an arcane baby language that nobody but me understood. He was an artist from very young. He drew pictures and I wrote poems from really, really young. We stood up for each other.

And also — this is getting a little bit ahead, but in terms of my relationship with him, my parents' attitude was, they expected us to be allies to each other against their authority. You know, there was a sense in which they understood us as an oppressed class of people who would be defending our interests, and they were very laissez faire parents. You know, they weren't very deliberate about their parenting. They saw it as a policy of benign neglect. It wasn't always so benign, particularly in our adolescence, but as a result of a combination of those things, my brother and I were very, very close allies to each other throughout our childhood and continue to be. And that was really important to me.

The other really significant thing that happened to me during that period was, we spent one year in Rochester, New York, and I went to first grade there, and I had the great good fortune of having Eleanor Jane West as my teacher. She was a woman who had been a medical secretary, I think, and had decided to go traveling in Europe on her own right after World War II, was very independent, and came back and said she wanted to be a teacher. Took the training, became a teacher and was passionately dedicated to being a good teacher. She loved poetry and she thought every child was a poet. And I already knew how to read, and there were two of us who did. So we got sent to the library during *Dick and Jane*. I was spared that. But she took time out of the curriculum every day to have us all write poetry. She just created a climate in which writing poetry was normal and natural and something everybody did, not some rarified thing that a few talented people could do. She had a special relationship with me.

I found her after years of looking for her. She's since died but I found her when she was like 82 or something. I actually went to a Berks conference in Rochester and she lived there, and I had called her up ahead of time and I was saying, you know, "I'm a former student of yours and our family moved away and I just wanted to tell you that I turned out to be a writer." Suddenly she said, "Wait a minute. You're not Lori Levins, are you?" I said, "Yes, I am," and she said, "Oh my dear" — I had written to her when I was in my teens — "I felt so bad. I lost your letter and I never wrote back." And she starts reciting a poem that I wrote in first grade. She had just given a talk about her career as a teacher and its rewards. She said, "You were my star pupil." So I had been important to her as well.

She told me that when I first arrived, she said, "Before you got situated" — in her formal clipped speech, I used to hold her hand in the corner of the playground and recite poetry that I had memorized. My family read lots of poetry aloud. My parents recited a lot of thing aloud, and my parents would quote things all the time. Something becomes part of family language, some snippet of a poem. And satires — they had a whole book of satires of poetry and weird limericks and cartoon captions and things that got incorporated into our family speech. But I knew a bunch of poetry as a six-year-old and I would stand there reciting things, and she would encourage me and listen to me.

And so, she took special care of me and she really encouraged me to write. Published a little book of children's poems at the end of the year. And I was already fascinated with language and with writing. My mother had taught me to read, and I actually do remember the moment at which three symbols on a page suddenly became a word. It was "cat." And I thought, You can put these on a piece of paper and send them to the other side of the world and somebody can pick it up, and they'll think about a cat because of that. This is amazing. I want to do this forever.

So I was already started on that path, but Miss West really got me started with that. She read lots of poems to us. She really loved Robert Louis Stevenson's poetry and read that aloud to us a lot. So she got me started on that track and then the public schools in Puerto Rico did no writing at all. So I didn't get red-penciled until high school, by which time it was too late. I had my own language, my own way of doing things.

ANDERSON: Yes. Can we back up to the Rochester just for one second?

49:59

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: Do you have any consciousness at that time of the racial makeup of the town or the school — coming from New York, going from Puerto Rico to New York to Rochester.

MORALES: So white.

ANDERSON: So you're really aware of that as a six-year-old in that environment?

MORALES: I'm not sure how — I'm trying to think. What was I aware of? Well, what I do remember is there were a lot of Jews and that I got both sets of holidays off and that that was a bonus. I don't think that I was necessarily so aware. You know, what I was more aware of is that we were lefties in a time of repression. What I remember is on the school bus — it was the Kennedy/Nixon election — people yelling at each other about which side they were on. They didn't know — it was their parents' political positions.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: But that was the debate, and that we were for neither made us real oddities. I don't know if it was '58 or '59 that my father was called up in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, but I remember standing with my mother, who was sitting on the bed by the phone waiting to hear what would happen — and her fear, and her communicating that fear. You know, probably talking aloud about her anxieties about it. I know that I was pretty wound up. He ended up taking the Fifth and then walking out. And he said, "If you ask me that

again, I'll leave." And apparently the reporters weren't expecting that and made him go back in and come out again so they could get a picture of him walking out. But I remember the phone call coming, and at that time I called him Dick instead of Papi. I remember jumping up and down, "Dick got the committee, Dick got" — I didn't know who the committee was, but I knew they were bad and scary, and my mom had confronted an FBI agent at the door of our apartment at one point.

So there was that sense of threat about politics, which at that point, I think was more present to me than the racism. That changed later on when I went to summer camp in the States, but I don't think at six I was as much aware of that. I do remember driving around Rochester looking for a place to live and my mother crying because the places they looked at were so grim and depressing, and we ended up living in this brand-new development at the edge of town which was more expensive but it was an OK place to live.

ANDERSON: Yes. Yes.

MORALES: And my brother and I had a great time there. We made friends with these two boys [Scott and Bruce Montgomery] and built a little village of kid houses. It was right at the edge of the woods and we could play, you know. So I remember more of that.

ANDERSON: So how did you feel leaving and going back to Puerto Rico? Were you excited? Did you understand?

MORALES: Yes. I was excited about it. We had gone, I think, for the summer when I was six and I'd enjoyed being there. Yes, I was excited about it. So we went back when I was seven. I didn't speak Spanish any more and the next couple of years were really about finding our place with local kids. The kids across the road we initially threw stones with and then figured out some kind of pidgin language with which we could negotiate what games to play. [Their names were Tita and Tito Cruz, Iris and Manuel really, but everyone used nicknames. They were our best friends for the rest of our time in Puerto Rico, especially Tita.] They had fragments of bad English that they were learning in school and we had actually figured out how to play with each other. It didn't take very long. The second grade teacher there did speak some English, but her son was the class bully and he was in the class with me and I had to fight a lot. I was small.

ANDERSON: Was your education only in English in Puerto Rico?

MORALES: No. It was in Spanish.

ANDERSON: In Spanish.

MORALES: Except for English class.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And so she put labels on everything in the classroom since I knew how to read well and I learned by immersion and by defending myself against the kids who wanted to beat me up after school, which was partly — I mean, a lot of that was about class resentment. So here's a community in which — my father, at this point, has a job at the University of Puerto Rico. He's an Associate Professor, 1961-'62 school year. He's got a salary of maybe six thousand dollars at that period. My friend's families are living on eight hundred dollars a year. These are mostly coffee laborers. Some of them have their own land to farm, some of them are just picking coffee on other people's land, growing a few vegetables around their house. Maricao is the poorest municipality in Puerto Rico.

So although our life would not have looked middle class to anybody from the States or even probably urban Puerto Ricans, in the context of that community it was aristocracy. We had running water inside our house. You know, it was an electrical pump and when the tank got too low, the rainwater — it didn't rain, then we had to pull it out with buckets, but we had an electrical pump and faucets. We had a shower at one point, not initially but, you know, we'd heat up water in buckets on the stove and we had a tub, but eventually we installed a shower. We had an indoor toilet. These things were not part of the lives of people around us. They had latrines and many of them still had outdoor cooking sheds.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And they cooked on wood or kerosene. All my friends had to go down to the spring to fetch water in buckets and carry it up the hill to their houses or there was no water. They had, I guess, rainwater drums where they'd collect water for washing but for cooking you had to go get it from the spring.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: There was a really significant class difference there, and it was very bizarre to have that and then go in the summers to New York, where my middle-class cousins on the Jewish side lived a very different lifestyle than what I did, and where we were kind of — we weren't the poor relatives, but we lived a very different kind of lifestyle than they did. So it was kind of confusing.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: But I got beat up, I think, partly because I had stuff and people didn't know what to do with it.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: I loved living there. It's an exquisitely beautiful place. I loved being in nature. My father would take me out sometimes on the farm collecting fruit flies and, you know, showing me about the lizards and the frogs and different things that were on the farm. Taught me how to cross-pollinate hibiscus plants and exper[iment] — he did a lot of science stuff with me. There was always a microscope on the kitchen table. My mom did a lot of craft stuff with us. We learned how to do wood cuts and make clay things. She was sending away for little kits from some place or other. We made little tile ashtrays even though nobody in the house smoked. We made these leather loop belts and, you know, the plastic things that you braided into useless neck chains, but she always honored our artistry. My brother was a visual artist and so they did a lot of art stuff together, but I remember her teaching me the names of all the colors of her paints, and they sounded like an incantation: rose madder and cobalt blue.

She took children's intellectual interests seriously — both of them did. They got us tons of books. My brother had a limitless supply of paper available to him because he loved to draw. We belonged to a children's book club and they subscribed to book packages from the New York Public Library. We had this thing where a box would come we'd have three weeks, and then we'd send it back. Once a year or so we'd order books from the Blackwell's catalog from England. [I remember my mother teaching me to calculate English currency.] So books were taken very, very seriously in our home as a need, and we got to each pick a certain number of titles. I became really interested in Japanese culture and Japanese dolls. My mother helped me make a Japanese dollhouse to scale, with tiny little kimonos. We went shopping for a fabric that would be to scale for tiny dolls. She took that stuff very seriously. So there was a very rich creative life in that house.

And my parents talked about politics all the time. One of the things that I'm really deeply appreciative of is, when we asked questions, they gave us complex answers. They didn't brush us off. Sometimes there would be a meeting and we wouldn't be told what was going on while it was happening, but afterwards we'd say, Well, what was that about? And they would tell us what it was about. My father would leave on Monday morning at four o'clock in the morning to get to his eight o'clock class in Rio Piedras and would stay until Wednesday evening usually, unless he had a field trip out to the islands and then he would be at home. So he'd come back from the city with groceries from the big supermarkets and we'd just get bread and milk and stuff at the local store, and news from the outside world, but we mostly lived on the farm.

ANDERSON: Yes.

59:10

MORALES: Once a year we would venture out and we'd go to the States.

ANDERSON: Sounds idyllic.

MORALES: In some ways it was. Now there's the other side of that, which is the non-idyllic side. My mother was drinking, I think had probably started drinking in New York, was drinking more. My mother was not the kind of alcoholic who got drunk. She just sipped constantly and so she was not entirely sober and it meant that she had a very unpredictable temper and there were violent outbursts. I particularly drew her fire. You know, there were dynamics between us that I think partly were her carryovers from her relationship with her sister, which was not a very good one, and I was a feisty kid and we butted heads a lot. So I got targeted a lot by her. My brother Ricardo was much — he was very quiet. She told me at one point that she didn't hit him because she didn't think he could take it. Well neither could I, and that was part of the not-idyllic part of my childhood.

Also, when I was nine years old I was inducted into a child abuse circle, which my fourth grade teacher was a leader of. My parents had no idea that it was going on. I was told that my family would be killed if I told. So I was intermittently very violently abused for about three to four years. I think that it probably stopped about a year before we left. I have mentioned that teacher's name to some of my friends who were in school with me and their eyes go glassy. I don't know if any — you know, I don't — I only remember one other girl actually being there and being abused at the same time, and she died in the aftermath of a car accident, so I never got to talk to her about it. But he was eventually kicked out of the school system for ripping a girl's blouse off in a rage. He had bizarre punishments in the classroom which everybody got to see, and he would keep some of the girls in at lunchtime and lock the doors and close the blinds and was doing sexual stuff with kids.

That was the horrific secret that I couldn't tell my family. I was trying to protect them. I had grown up in a culture of, you know, in some ways this is a burden for a child but it was actually was very pro-survival for me. We read *Tricontinental* magazine, which comes out of Cuba, which talked about guerilla movements and all these places. I knew about torture. I knew about people not talking under torture and protecting the people they loved. I had a model for what I was undergoing that was politicized in my mind, which I think saved me, because I had a sense of what I was doing as deliberately heroic rather than just victimized.

And years later, after I had told my parents about it, I remember saying "You know, I did all that heroic stuff thinking you were really in danger. And now, in retrospect, as an adult, it doesn't seem that they could have carried out that threat. It seems like it was an empty threat, and so I feel like I should have gotten a medal for that." But — they got me a medal — it says something like, For a little girl who was very

brave for a long time to protect her family — which hangs up in my hallway. So it was –

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: It was a life that was very rich, in some ways, very terrifying — there was the terror of the abuse that was going on. There was the political fear. We were constantly getting visits from –

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: – various kinds of intelligence folks, letting us know that we were still being watched.

ANDERSON: Let's pause the tape and we'll continue to talk about the politics piece of it in a minute.

MORALES: OK.

1:03:38

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: OK let's just, let's pick up where we left off and try to wrap up Puerto Rico a bit. I want to talk about your parents' politics, and you were ending with a comment about that. So I'm interested to know what you understood as a child about their politics, how they talked to you about it, and how you talked about communism in particular and their membership in the Party.

MORALES: Well, by the time that I remember, you know, that my memory begins, they were already out of the Party, but we talked about politics a lot in our house. I understood that we were part of a movement of people that reached back and forward in history. I had a sense of long-term commitment. My parents didn't necessarily expect to see the fruits of their political labors in their lifetime. That we were committed to creating a society in which resources were equally available to everybody, and that was very graphically in my face on a daily basis, what colonialism and capitalism meant to the people around me. But you know, it was integrated into everything. It wasn't — we talked politics sometimes explicitly but it was integrated into everything, into the comments that they made about things they saw around them. It was really clear to me that their politics was integrated for them. It wasn't something they did out here. It was something that was very much part of how they looked at the world, how they experienced things emotionally. There are all these ways in which Marxist perspectives on complexity and dialectics and stuff saturated all kinds of things that don't necessarily seem directly related to politics: the way my father did science, the way my mother talked about — anything that she talked about.

ANDERSON: Even the way you survived sex abuse, you used that language and framework to help keep —

MORALES: Well, there was a sense of struggle in that you can face difficult things, but there are malevolent forces out there that you survive. But you know, I want to say that one of the things my father said to me as a child that was most important to me, and I have written about this some, is that there are no bad people, only bad choices. There was a real sense of materialism in that both my parents would talk in terms of what are the material causes of what's going on. Ideas don't come out of the air. There are reasons people think in certain ways and it has to do with what their material conditions are. Everything has a history, everything is rooted, you know, whether we were talking about why some kid in school was bullying me or what was happening in national politics, whatever it was. So there was a kind of a philosophical approach to life that came out of their radical politics. It was much broader than just political positions.

We were also very — we were aware — you know, I grew up within the anti-colonial movements of that period. I knew about the Algerian revolution. My father has this amazing mind for history and politics and would tell stories all the time. I knew about the Algerian revolution. I knew about Vietnam. We received *Peking Review*. I read children's stories from China, stories from the Cuban Revolution. I had a sense of us being part of a global movement of people with whom I felt a tremendous sense of kinship. I also thought all radicals were Jewish. I was really shocked to discover that Pete Seeger was not Jewish.

ANDERSON: Because their network didn't include locals when you were on the island of –

MORALES: No. You know it did.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And I don't know why I thought that, except that my father's family were radicals –

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: – and my mother's family was not, and so I figured good politics and Jewishness kind of went together.

ANDERSON: That's generally true.

MORALES: It was shocking to find out that there were right-wing Jews and that there were so many people who were not Jews who were radicals. I think I probably thought Fidel [Castro] was Jewish. He had the beard, like my dad. There are moments that stand out for me. When I was ten, I think — it was when the U.S. invaded the Dominican Republic — the planes that were bombing the rebels there were taking off from air bases in Puerto Rico and flying over our house. And at one point my dad was in the city teaching and my mother picked up rebel radio on our radio. We were listening to broadcasts of the students and workers and peasants who were fighting back — probably being broadcast from a truck somewhere, a van or something. And at one point I actually heard the fighting over the radio and then the radio went dead, and not long after that we were told that the peace had been restored. I had a very visceral sense of connection to all of that.

In '65, also, the year that my youngest brother was born, there was a huge strike at the university where there were sit-ins and teach-ins against the war and the antiwar movement in Puerto Rico included much, much larger draft resistance, draft-card burning activity than in the States, and we heard about that. You know, my dad would come home and then like, [he would tell us,] This is what happened. This is who got arrested. It was a living drama for us. He'd participate at a

teach-in in which the speakers were not allowed on campus and so they propped ladders against the fences and spoke from the outside, and then started a newspaper, a magazine called *La Escalera*, the ladder, for which my dad wrote. [He was also one of the editors.]

People made pilgrimage up to our farm — men, mostly, would sit at my father's feet and ignore my mother and the rest of us — to talk about the politics of the independence movement. My dad was a leader in that movement, the FUPI [Federación Universitaria Pro Independencia], the student organization, a lot of the young leaders in that would come and talk politics with him. Many of them came out of a more nationalist perspective. My dad had the old left stuff to contribute, a sense of history and Marxist thinking. My mother had been in the CP — didn't participate in formal political stuff after that, I think, largely because the sexism was so thick. She was a feminist without a movement, that's the way that she described it.

ANDERSON: How did that mean she raised you as a girl, then? Are there any differences between how you and Ricardo were treated?

MORALES: Well, she found me personally more challenging, because of family reasons, and certainly that has to do with patriarchy and the mother-daughter inheritance of pain in my family line. But there was also this alliance between us, which when we get to my teens is going to show up more, but I didn't really — I mean, aside from that piece where the violence was more directed to me, I didn't feel like I was limited in what I could do or what I was encouraged to do. My mom told me she had wanted to be a physicist when she was in high school. We were both equally encouraged to go for whatever we wanted.

My mother, there was one year where she home schooled — I don't know if it was both of us or was it just me, actually. I can't remember — but I got skipped a grade and she did some home schooling. The local school was only half a day, so she supplemented what we were getting, and there was this period where she was trying to teach me French and had these flash cards. She read to us all the time. My dad was away a lot and she would read aloud to us, with lots of voices. She was also really into theater, so she got to play that out with us. And my mother and I both learned a lot of history from novels, and she would talk about what we were learning in the novels and make comments about the class attitudes of people in the books and stuff like that.

So, my mother has very sharp critical thinking. She has a nose for pretense and fakery that is unerring, and so she would nail stuff. And you know, as a child I perceived my father as being a source of broad-picture, you know, historical sweep, and also a sense of faith in humankind. He really thought, and continues to think, and taught me, that human creativity is enough to solve any of the problems that we have on our plate, that we'll get around to it — very broad compassionate radicalism. My mom had the incisive critique. Things

didn't get past her. She'd go, That doesn't smell right. And she would trust her sense of smell [enough.]

ANDERSON: So what did they tell you about the Communist Party?

10:21

MORALES: Well, my father grew up in it. He grew up in a family in which it made sense to do that. It was a sense of, we have an obligation to history and to the world to participate in these things and change them — and you know, [he] had a passion for it. He grew up, as I did, in political discussions of all kinds. My mother didn't. She encountered Marxism through a philosophy course and talks about this moment of finding this thing that made sense out of her experience and the exhilaration intellectually of that, the excitement of having a theoretical explanation for the world that she saw. So she talked about that. She talked about loving that about it, and laughs about joining the CP when everyone else was leaving it, and also about her Catholicism, actually. She had a feeling that some of her radicalism was rooted in some of Catholic culture as well.

And she talks about being in the little CP group up in the mountains, which is a handful of people, and struggling with the sexism, struggling with the — you know, places where they would disagree with the Party line but Cesar would uphold it anyway publicly, even though privately he might agree with them. Jane was very outspoken in her critiques also. I don't know that the Communist Party part of it was that [much of a story] — it was more about it being a lifetime commitment. I know at one point my mom — I went to my mom in maybe my teens. Somebody mentioned the name Beria, who was the head of the secret police under Stalin, and my body went cold, and I had no idea who it was. I just heard the word and I freaked out. So I went to my mom and was like, Who is this? And she was like, Oh, you must have heard us talking and picked up the vibe. Their leaving the Communist Party didn't have to do with the revelations about Stalin, it had to do with local political struggles, but certainly I must have picked up the horror of some of the stories that were coming out and —

ANDERSON: Did you —

MORALES: But they weren't — their view was long term. They didn't take the particular failings of the Soviet Union as an indictment of their belief system. They didn't become cynical as a result of it. So I learned — you know, I was too young to really remember those conversations, but I certainly acquired a sense that people have vision far beyond their capacity to carry it out, and that that doesn't invalidate the vision.

ANDERSON: And around the fear, I mean, with your dad being called before HUAC, do you remember ever censoring yourself around mentioning your parents' involvement, or using that kind of language?

MORALES: I remember when we came to the States in '67, we came through Syracuse for some scientific conference and we blithely told the babysitter that we were communists and she quit. My parents were pissed, because they had to find someone else to take care of us. She was horrified that she was babysitting communist children. You know, on the countryside everyone knew we were *comunistas*. It was like, my dad would drive around and people would shout, Fidel! — probably because he had the beard. People would ask him if it was a religious *promesa* to grow a beard — you know, in exchange for something from a saint. But yes, it was partly that, but people knew, and the thing is that, you know, in our barrio people resented the police coming around asking questions. There was some cop who came around posing as a cousin of my mother's and from that point on, that became the community slang for the police. It was like, Oh, your cousins have been around again. There, there was a kind of solidarity with us that was independent of people's political positions.

I know that when my father was arrested in '54 — there was a couple that they were close to, Gregorio Plá and his wife, Angelica, and he was an agricultural extension agent and she was a public nurse. And they were, I think, probably politically liberal but they all were concerned with the well being of the community and were collaborating on various things — trying to organize a coffee farm cooperative and stuff. And [although] Angelica told the police, well, they don't like the national anthem, or something — told them something, when they were taking my father away, Gregorio Plá came and shook his hand in front of everybody, which, in 1954, in the climate of what was going on, was a very brave act. And I recently met his daughter and we were at a gathering where I was reading and I told that story and it was very emotional for both of us. So even though there was fear, it wasn't at the level of not mentioning that to our neighbors. Everybody knew.

ANDERSON: And by the time you got to the States it was so much a part of their distant past –

16:00

MORALES: Sixty-seven.

ANDERSON: – and it was a different climate, I guess, in the U.S., so it didn't –

MORALES: It was a very different climate, yes. But as I was saying to you before, the words still sticks in my mouth sometimes to say “communist,” because I do have a childhood feeling of fear about that word, and that was probably more from the New York period than from the period on the island.

ANDERSON: So do you want to talk about moving to Chicago, then –

MORALES: Yes, let's do,

ANDERSON: – as a teenager?

MORALES: – because that was an intense period of time and I want to do it justice.

ANDERSON: Tell me again why you guys came back.

MORALES: My father was denied tenure at the University of Puerto Rico for a number of reasons — his participation in the antiwar movement, the fact that he and my mother had been to Cuba in '64 to help redesign — something is making my eyes burn.

ANDERSON: Do you want to pause and rinse them out or something?

MORALES: No. I don't think it's going to go away.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: To help organize the new biology department at the University of Havana, and also I think because he was an innovative and popular teacher and biology was still being taught in an old-fashioned, memorize-a-million-species kind of way and he was doing island ecology and stuff and it was very interesting. I think probably all of those things contributed, but he was denied tenure. My mom wanted to go to graduate school in anthropology and that wasn't really available on the island, and I didn't find out until fairly recently that another reason was my friends were getting pregnant in rural Puerto Rico and my mom wanted me out of there. She did not want me to go into my adolescence in a climate in which the options for women were so limited. She had a terror of my ending up, you know, a young mother in a dead-end situation. So she wanted me out of there. The last year that we were in Puerto Rico we did home schooling, correspondence school stuff. You know, to prepare to be in school in English.

And in the summer of 1967 we moved to Chicago and for my brother and I it was really — my youngest brother I don't think remembers. He was a year and a half. Puerto Rico is not really part of his remembered experience. But for Ricardo and I it very much was. I was 13 and a half. He was 11. Just changing from a rural environment to an urban one was a huge shock for us and we had loved the countryside so passionately that being in Hyde Park in Chicago with a tree here and there, that's what it felt like to us, was in itself a physical shock. You know, winters and smog and all of that stuff was really hard.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: But we also moved into a city that was — Chicago at the time was the most segregated city in the United States. This was two or three years after King's march through Cicero. We lived in Hyde Park, the university community, which was maybe ten by ten blocks of mixed

middle-class and working-class and integrated community, surrounded on three sides by ghetto, with a lake on the fourth side — very clearly delineated borders. This side of 59th Street is Hyde Park, that side is the ghetto. You don't cross that line. In a place that was very polarized black/white.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And there we were, Puerto Rican. My brother had a — it wasn't really an Afro, it was more of an Isro, because the kinky hair's on the Jewish side of the family, but he was able to pass, in a sense. I mean, he never said he was anything about what he was, but he was invited to join the black student union at one point in one of the high schools were at, whereas I was seen as white. And both that and gender determined who we hung out with. I hung out with white, middle-class girls. He hung in the streets in a way that wasn't safe for me as a girl. So he had more of a variety in terms of who he hung out with and knew more working-class people and took a more working-class path. The places I found shelter were with families much wealthier than us and I hung out at their houses and those were my friends through a lot of high school. We found the Unitarian Church youth group early on, which really helped me survive the early period of adjustment to being in the States.

ANDERSON: You were —

MORALES: You know, I'm going inarticulate, partly because I was stunned. Sometimes I feel like I didn't come to for a couple years. It was a very brutal transition for me. That's when I began filling a journal every three months. I wrote to save my life. My parents also pretty much abdicated from parenting at that point. My father had a much more demanding job. My mom was in grad school and they didn't help us with the transition. We were pretty much left on our own. They weren't paying attention. My brother and I were put into the University of Chicago High School, which is a very elite school. Subjected to a lot of racism. I had been going to tell you about summer camp earlier, just briefly.

ANDERSON: Oh yes.

MORALES: That was a place where my grandmother had a — there was a camp that a lot of my cousins went to. A lot of Jewish kids, almost no kids of color. I was paired up, against my will, with a Cuban boy. It's like, You two must be a pair. I ended up spending a lot of time in the kitchen with an African American cook who I adored, but I had a very rough time at summer camp. And that was really the first place that I encountered overt racism, the first time I think I heard the word "spic."

Got to Chicago, got to this high school. People actually sang the song from *West Side Story*, "Puerto Rico, my heart's devotion, let it sink

22:02

into the ocean,” at me in the halls of the school. I thought I was privileged to come from where I came from. It was made clear to me very quickly that it was an embarrassing thing I shouldn’t talk about, and I saw the distinction between the children of South American engineers and the daughter of a working-class Puerto Rican woman. I hated being in school. I’m trying to remember the sequence of things. We lived in Chicago from 1967 to 1972 and when I sat down with my brother — we’re trying to work on a joint memoir of that period because we were both activists and we were young.

The story of those years has mostly been told by people who were in their twenties and thirties at the time and when we made the list of all the things that happened during that five-year period, we couldn’t figure out how to fit in that, because there — OK, there’s the school track. There’s the youth group that we were a part of. The summer of 1968 our family went to Cuba. My father had been invited back to teach at the university. My mother had been offered the possibility of doing anthropological work, which they really didn’t come through on what they had offered her, and the sexism of that was a drag, but my brother and I were brought along. And you know, there was an agreement we would take care of our little brother, and in exchange we would get to go on this amazing trip and live in Cuba for a summer.

I was a 14-year-old girl coming into a society where 14-year-olds got to make life choices, who were part of the militia, were assumed to be politically engaged in the life of their country. We made friends with a young guy named Boris, who we met at a movie theater someplace and we would go hang out with him sometimes, and he wanted to know what I thought about LBJ’s position on something. Nobody ever asked me what my opinion was on these things. Some of the young students who were working with my father basically said, You’re exploiting them. They each need to get a visit to a Young Pioneers’ camp. They’re not just here to take care of the baby.

So they arranged for us each to go for ten days and be at a Young Pioneers’ camp and be with Cuban children of our age for, you know, this camp situation. We spent a lot of time going to Cuban movies, meeting people from all over the world. The daily newspaper was a revelation. In the United States, the third world appears as a hot spot now and then. Most of the world appears as an occasional hot spot. It’s very self-absorbed.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: The Cuban press, every day there were articles about Africa and Latin America and Asia, and people were educated. They knew what the political struggles in different African countries were. They knew about — you know, you’d go through the Daily International page and it was like, in Chad, this is happening. In Burundi, this is happening. In Costa Rica — it was like somebody had pulled back the veils and there was a whole world out there. I was reading all kinds of Cuban books. I was

starting to participate politically. It was the summer of '68 — all hell was breaking loose in Europe.

My parents had chosen a return route through Spain instead of Czechoslovakia because they had done Czechoslovakia the last time which was fortunate. There were Czechs and Russians working side by side in Cuba and a lot of tension around that. The day that Fidel actually made a speech about what was going on in Czechoslovakia, my brother and I were walking home from the swimming pool and every house along the way, the TVs and radios were on so you didn't miss anything walking down the street. You could hear the whole speech. So there was a tremendous sense of political engagement.

We go back to Chicago and we're put in homeroom where you have to raise your hand and get a note to go to the bathroom, and we were beyond that. Cuba was deeply transformative to both of us. It was the point at which we stopped being the children of activists and became activists, both of us.

ANDERSON: And your peers must have been even more unrecognizable to you, the white upper-class girls that you'd been hanging out with before. They must have felt even more —

MORALES: Well, particularly the ones in school.

ANDERSON: — alien, yes.

MORALES: It was like, What are you talking about and why do you care? So we became involved in the Black Panther Defense Committee. My parents were doing various kinds of support activities for the Panthers. They lent them the car for the breakfast program and various things. My dad was teaching history class to the Young Lords (cell phone; pause in recording).

ANDERSON: OK, back to your political activities as teens in Chicago — the Black Panther Defense Fund. You were talking about —

MORALES: The Defense Committee, yes.

ANDERSON: The Defense Committee.

MORALES: And then the antiwar movement was exploding around us, and less and less of my life was happening in school. I donated some books that I had gotten in Cuba to the school library and they promptly hid them in the archives — probably threw them away, actually. I was still very active in the youth group, in the Unitarian youth group. It's where I got my emotional support. The activity with the Panthers and other groups — I was a girl.

ANDERSON: What kind of work were you guys doing with them? What role could young people like yourselves play?

MORALES: Well, you know, the Panthers themselves were very young. They were teenagers. I'm trying to remember — Bobby Rush — Fred Hampton was 21 when he was killed. You know, they were all very young and so they were kind of, you know, these strutting, macho boys who were coming into a kind of political power that they had not had access to before. So there were all kinds of dynamics that were icky about it, but you know, I don't remember the details of what we did with them, as it wasn't for that long of a period. We probably did leafleting. We helped at events and stuff like that, helped to try to raise money for defense fund stuff.

ANDERSON: What was it like being a female in that environment?

MORALES: Well, obviously I didn't stay very long. I think it was boring. I didn't get to engage politically in anything.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And I had been engaged politically from a very young age. There were other things going on that were more interesting to me. There was tumult all around us. OK, really — but the next year was when things took off, in '69. I'm trying to remember. OK, in the fall of '69 my mother and I joined the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, which had been around in some form for a couple of years. I was talking with Sara Evans. By then she was gone — I think '67 was the beginning of the group and then by '69 she had moved elsewhere and there were other people involved in that, but that was when my mom and I joined.

29:45

And you know, at home we were fighting all the time and we would walk out the door and we were political allies. She was the oldest and I was the youngest. I think I was probably the youngest member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. I was 15. We both joined consciousness-raising groups. I was with a bunch of 26 year-olds who were trying to impart their cynicism about sex to me, gave me advice about birth control. I was a member of Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell. We did guerilla theater actions of various kinds.

And I remember researching medical articles, being part of a group that was trying to find out — you know, it was the very beginning of the self-help stuff. God, I don't remember what year *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the first newsprint copy came out, but I do remember poring over it in fascination, and you know, we had people who were medical students who were trying to find things out so that we could do our own self-exams.

We were also very aware of women in Vietnam, of women in China, of women in Cuba, of the kinds of challenges internationally that women were posing within their movements. And there was a literary

explosion of women's writing. So this women's group, which I was in, I don't know, '69 to '71 –

ANDERSON: You're talking about the Women's Liberation CR group?

MORALES: The CR group within the Chicago Women's Union.

ANDERSON: OK. And your mom's in a different group?

MORALES: She was in a different one.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: We knew enough not to be in the same group.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I was in a group with — I think Estelle Carol was in that group with me. I moved in with some of the women from that and Estelle was part of the Chicago Women's Graphics Union. So when I walked into the Archives the other day I saw the poster "Sisterhood is Blooming, Springtime Will Never be the Same," well, I remember watching that being hand screened on the silkscreen in that apartment. I got kicked out of home when I was 16. I had come home, my mother had thrown a glass at me and injured my foot, and although this wasn't communicated to me at the time, I think she was scared that she was going to hurt me more, and they agreed I should move out. I felt that I was being labeled as the problem and being exiled. It was very painful for me but they paid for me to live elsewhere, paid my expenses.

And I moved around a lot over the next couple of years, but I did live, for a very important period of time, with this group of women who were part of that CR group. And it was so exhilarating. One of them went to California and brought back a book of women's poetry, which I still have. This was in the period where it was like politically incorrect to put your name on your own poem because we're all collectively creating everything, but Judy Grahn, Alta, Susan Griffin, all kinds of folks were in this anthology. People were writing about housework and having their periods and, you know, things that were not supposed to be the content of literature. So it was a tremendous permission for me to write about what my life was actually like.

Some time in that period also I discovered the writing of Nicolás Guillén from Cuba and there was a permission to write the way my neighbors spoke. So it was a period in which my writing — I got permission to have my voice by the existence of social movements around me, of the radical poetry of Latin America, of the women's movement poetry, which was mostly white women, and then a few years after that, starting to get exposed to women of color writers. So it was an explosive time around my writing.

ANDERSON: Can you talk a little bit about the racial makeup of all of the different groups that you're involved with from the Black Panther piece, in terms of whether other Puerto Ricans are involved in that, and then the Women's Liberation pieces: were there other women of color, what that felt like.

34:36

MORALES: It was a very disjointed life. I was not politically active with other women of color except my mother. We were living in Hyde Park. The Young Lords was on the North Side. It was not really accessible to me. I went, I think, a couple of times with my dad when he went to teach history up with the Young Lords. The women's union was white. They were doing organizing on the basis of class issues and labor issues and solidarity work, you know — but women of color in Chicago were in other organizations and I didn't have the pathways to get there and in Puerto Rico, I had been called *americana*. In the States I was being called "spic." It was very confusing to figure out — you know, I didn't necessarily feel any more comfortable in the black organizations than I did in the white ones. I would — there wasn't a Puerto Rican space. So most of my activism there was with white folks and then I had this experience in Cuba which was with Latinas and Latinos where I was treated with so much respect. So it was a very mixed, mixed bag of stuff, but what I got out of it was a sense of — both my brother and I really came through that with some sense of authority about our own thinking.

In 1970 there was — my parents were part of this thing called New University Conference and I went along and spent a summer — it was an outgrowth somewhat of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society.] It was of people in academia who were leftists. And we were incorporated into some of the political stuff that was going on and I ended up being part of some caucus and helping write some position papers. Also got hit on by all of these kind of obnoxious, arrogant men, and made some connections through that that when I moved out of home the following fall, also helped me.

There was a woman named Ruth Mahaney who had been part of that network of folks and lived in Bloomington, Indiana, in a women's house down there by about a year later, and I used to hitchhike weekends and go down. And I think they were some of the first out lesbians that I knew. My mom had a friend who was the mother of one of my little brother's friends and I just remember gazing at these women: There's these other ways to live — isn't this amazing! You know, the main feeling from that time was this intoxicating sense of possibility opening up out of the constriction of the life of the '50s and early '60s. We'd sit in these women's groups and talk about — somebody would say, Well, I feel this thing, and somebody else would say, Well, so do I. And then we'd like — OK, they're telling us it means this but what do we think it means and how do we hold up our experience against these outside interpretations and come to an understanding of what we believe about

our own experiences that seems true to us and in the face of how terrifying it had historically been to do that? So there's just a real sense of intoxication about that whole period.

There was also the Chicago Women's Liberation rock band and I was a groupie. [Recently I reconnected with Susan Abod, who, at 19, was maybe the second youngest member of the CWLU, and was a member of that band. Actually, it was at Ruth Mahaney's 60th birthday party.] But there was not — in that period of my life I did not have a community of women of color activists. That was something that happened when I came to California.

ANDERSON: Even if there was the absence, what do you remember about the conversations around race, if there were any, in those groups?

MORALES: I know that there were and, you know, my mother and I were talking about the fact that we often have a better memory for how we felt than what we did and that we did amazing things and said things and were perceived as outspoken and courageous at times, when mostly what we remember is feeling queasy. I know there must have been arguments about race. A couple years ago I was at the Berks again and somebody who was an editor of the *Women's Review of Books* [Ellen Cantarow] and who had been in that community at that time made some kind of sneering comment about how me and my mom were cultural feminists, you know, which I understand to be a lack of a class analysis. I was going, My mother's a communist, a Marxist. We're socialists. What are you talking about? I think what she was talking about is that we brought up issues about race.

ANDERSON: Oh.

MORALES: And that one of the ways in which white women invalidated that was like. Well, you know, you have to be socialist feminists. We don't talk about race, we talk about class stuff and, you know, it's divisive and self-indulgent or whatever. I don't remember the conversations we had, but I know that we must have had them.

ANDERSON: And that you participated in them.

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: And you would have been one of the only —

MORALES: I was vocal.

ANDERSON: — representatives from the other side I guess, right? I mean, if there were no other women of color in that group, did you feel that you had to stand in for —

MORALES: I don't remember. I mean, there probably were a few but I don't remember them. Mostly I participated in my own [little CR group.] There were gatherings. I remember some meeting on the university campus. You know, I participated in larger group things and there were occasional black women. There were a couple of women of color at that summer institute and certainly race was talked about there.

ANDERSON: Is the racism of the women's movement dominant in your recollection and experience of the women's movement?

MORALES: Yes, but my own ability to think about it clearly didn't emerge until there were other women of color around. I was a new immigrant as well, and the strangeness of the United States, period, overwhelmed some of the other things that I was thinking about. And I was a teenager who had just been kicked out of my house. I was still recovering from the sexual abuse. I was raped when I was 16 as well. There were a lot of things going on for me that — and I was being hit with racism, you know, certainly as a Puerto Rican, as a colonial subject, in an international sense I experienced racism, but to be personally targeted was a new experience for me. And so I think I had to in some sense fully become a person of color. I write about acquiring social color as I came to the States, being seen as a spic when I had been *la rubia* and really needed to come to terms with that and understand what it was. It was a new thing for me.

ANDERSON: How did you survive your teenage years, given all that was going on? Was it the writing? Was it —

MORALES: I buried myself in books. Reading had always been important. The writing, certainly. Like I said, I filled a thick, hard-bound notebook every three months. Stacks and stacks of journals. The Unitarian youth group LRY [Liberal Religious Youth], very tight group, not particularly political but in a vague sort of way liberal. We got together every Sunday in a church basement, talked about our lives. We had weekends with two hundred kids together on a regular basis. I had tight friends. I'm still friends with many of the people that I was in that group with. It was a survive-your-teens group. As a new immigrant, I am so grateful that that group was available to me, to the extent that I took *Remedios* to Beacon Press out of a misplaced sense of gratitude. It was not that great of an experience, "But the Unitarians, they did so well by me!"

ANDERSON: What about the faith piece of that? I mean, were you raised with Catholicism or with Juda — no. You were raised in —

MORALES: That's a whole different conversation.

ANDERSON: It is. OK, but so how did you find — was the Unitarian —

MORALES: No religion at all.

ANDERSON: OK. So you didn't come away with that?

MORALES: We sometimes did — there was sometimes youth-led worship services.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I remember doing something based on the *Velveteen Rabbit*. You know, we did poetry that was meaningful to us. They were not big on religion.

ANDERSON: So you weren't also finding sort of a faith-based home or spiritual home through that?

43:30

MORALES: Not at all.

ANDERSON: It was about the peer support and –

MORALES: No, that happened in my twenties in California.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And when we get to that, I will talk about spirituality.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: Because I was raised in an atheist home and in a community that was full of *espiritistas* and *curanderas* and nominally Catholic but there was not a Catholic church in our community. It was Episcopalian and Pentecostal and some Seventh Day Adventist folks who came through. But a lot of people practiced rural magic. You know, there was a mixture of African and indigenous and working-class European spiritism. And I absorbed both my parents' atheism and the magic of the countryside.

ANDERSON: We have about 15 minutes left, so let's just maybe spend the next 15 minutes continuing to talk about the women's movement and those early, early days for you.

MORALES: OK.

ANDERSON: What were the ideas of the women's movement that were so exciting to you? I mean, one thing that's unique about your experience in particular is that you came from a home where both your parents call themselves feminists and in a lot of ways interacted with you based out of feminist principles, and you weren't — I mean, so some of the ideas of the women's movement, I am thinking, weren't that new to you, but –

MORALES: Although — you know, as I —

ANDERSON: — so what did draw you in? What was the most exciting to you? What did you learn that was eye-opening to you?

MORALES: Well I was going to say, you know, what my father said about regretting that he hadn't understood earlier the personal implications. He was a feminist, and yet there was a lot of fighting in our house at this period, because feminism was coming home to roost and it was starting to have implications for how things got done in our family that it hadn't necessarily had before.

But you know, I think — in my own life, I think the things that had the most impact had to do with writing and claiming voice, and they had to do with sex. I was coming into being sexually active. I had just been raped, which I blocked from memory very rapidly and didn't pay attention to until much later, but I was coming into fertility pre-*Roe v. Wade* in a movement that was struggling for access to birth control, that was trying to wrest control of that from male medical authority. That was certainly very critical to my own life and I felt passionately about that.

And I was in the midst of trying to negotiate my sexuality with girls and boys and trying to deal with the aggressiveness of men in my life, trying to deal with what I felt like exploring my sexuality with women. And I was with a group of ten years older than me feminist women who said, You don't have to do a damn thing you don't feel like doing, who were talking about their own experiences in mostly heterosexual relationships. I think there may have been one lesbian in that group. We were talking about sexual autonomy. I was a child. I had been molested by my uncle. I had been molested in this cult. I had been raped by a sort of friend/acquaintance when I was 16. I didn't have an experience of sexual autonomy. And you know, I think on a personal level that was probably one of the most powerful things, to be linking that to the larger political struggles that I had been part of for my whole life.

And then in the midst of this to have this eruption of poetry, to stop being a consumer of literature and begin crafting it on my own, to start writing about being an immigrant Puerto Rican girl, a Jewish girl, in the United States, claiming my own body. It was a combination of those things, I think, were probably the things that had the most impact on me, because the larger social ideas weren't new to me. It was their application to my personal life that was new. And even larger social ideas of feminism, of women's equality and — you know, my parents' first date was a lecture on the woman question, as they quaintly called it in those days.

So, yes. I mean, as I was just saying, it was a unique way of entering into that. It wasn't the revelation that our lives were political. It was the revelation that my life could be impacted in this way by this movement, and it affected my relationship with my high school boyfriend and my insistence on going slow about sex and having, you know, certain things

I would and would not consider for birth control. My becoming a birth control counselor. I also did a radio program with another young woman and we were doing stuff about rape. We were doing stuff about Vietnam. We were doing stuff — linking, you know, Vietnamese women being raped by GIs to our own experiences.

ANDERSON: And you're still in high school?

MORALES: I was still in high — well, I had dropped out of high school.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I dropped out at the end of my junior year. But I'm a teenager producing a radio program, getting to be part — you know, do guerilla theater at the Chicago Seven trial, being profoundly affected also by what was happening. You know, this is a period of COINTELPRO attacks. We're seeing young men of color in the leadership of our movements being assassinated, imprisoned for life. There's an atmosphere of high danger and great grimness. You know, people who are just nostalgic for the '60s make me angry. Yes, it was an exhilarating time. It was a terrifying time. It was a brutal time. I woke up one morning in, I guess it would have been my sophomore year, my father had just come home from — Fred Hampton had been assassinated in the night. My father was one of the people who was called early on. They had lots of people going through the apartment and witnessing it but he had gone early in the morning and had come home, you know, when I was having breakfast and getting ready to go to school. I got an eyewitness account of a bullet-riddled door and a blood-soaked bed, and these were people we had some relationship with. My father's car was used to take his widow to the hospital to give birth to his child. So that was surrounding this, the stuff that was happening within the women's movement. It was not separate for me.

49:26

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: You know, seeing Bobby Seale in chains and gagged — the presence of slavery in that room — it was all very integrated for me. I didn't fully learn how to articulate that stuff until I was in my twenties. And I got an IUD. My mother refused to let me go on the pill because the pill had been tested in Puerto Rico and we knew that it was dangerous, and she had a hearty suspicion of the medical profession. You know, the challenging of authority was not new to me, but the challenging of authority so intimately involved in my life was far more heady.

ANDERSON: I also imagine that because of your background with your family in politics that you brought a lot to the women's movement that was pretty unique. Maybe the questions about racial identity and racism you voiced a little bit later on, but in those early days you had a Marxist and

materialist analysis that was really largely absent. So how — what was it like, in terms of those kinds of analyses that you would bring: was there openness to them or did you find resistance to your way of thinking that was —

MORALES: Actually, you know, in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union there were a lot of people who were socialist feminists.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: There were people who were coming out of the antiwar movement, heterosexual women whose husbands were honchos in the antiwar movement. So that wasn't challenging necessarily to that group. I think that our being Puerto Rican was and I don't remember how directly we confronted that. I have a much clearer memory of that once I was in my twenties and involved in feminist stuff in California. [Racism was something that there was a theoretical knowledge of, as part of the "military-industrial complex," but it was not something the white women I was around knew anything about dealing with in their daily lives, and for the most part they didn't see that it had any impact on how we operated as a movement, within the women's movement. It was on the agenda for some people—people who'd come out of the civil rights movement had seen it up close, but that didn't necessarily lead to them taking seriously the kinds of challenges that individual women of color tried to raise.]

ANDERSON: So how did you — we have just about ten minutes left — how did you then continue — I mean, you've dropped out of high school. You're no longer living at home. How do the teens sort of tie up there? Have you made peace with your parents? Have you finished your diploma?

MORALES: We talked on the phone. I didn't see them all that much initially and then I did. Sometimes I house-sat for them when they were out of town. They were supporting me financially. I was involved in all kinds of political stuff. You know, when I left high school was when Cambodia was invaded. There were mass demonstrations. The buildings were being occupied. There was nothing going on in my high school that compared to that. I went and, you know, slept in occupied buildings and [went to] mass meetings. My mother chaired one of those big mass meetings. She was a shy person but she managed this huge crowd.

So I did political stuff. I wrote and I hung out with my friends, and then Chicago had these great benefits for college. They would pay for my tuition anywhere in the U.S. up to their tuition, which was pretty high. One of my friends was going to Franconia College in New Hampshire. My boyfriend was going to Goddard in Vermont. I wanted to get out of Chicago. I wanted to experience something else.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And you know, so I ended up going — and my parents never, they never talked to us about college, either of us. I went to them and said, “I want to apply. You have to fill out these papers.” And they said OK. My college expenses were mostly covered by the university, so it was a tremendous privilege that I was able to choose a college without it being a financial struggle. I think their costs were like five hundred dollars a year on top of what they got from the university.

ANDERSON: So where did you go?

MORALES: I went to Franconia College in northern New Hampshire, which is a tiny liberal arts college. There were three Latinos and six African Americans out of four hundred students. It was in one of the poorest counties in the United States — very poor, white population up there. Probably there were native people hidden in the nooks and crannies, but I wasn’t aware of them. But class was very much in my face. And that’s — it’s more than a five minute story. I think we should probably save it for next time.

ANDERSON: Sure.

MORALES: Because I — there was a whole new phase of my activism in Franconia.

ANDERSON: Great. OK. So that means that you finished high school or you got the G.E.D. to go –

MORALES: I never finished high school. I didn’t do a G.E.D.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: This was an alternative hippy school.

ANDERSON: Oh, OK.

MORALES: They asked me to send a sample of my writing. I sent a poem. Franconia was the kind of school people joked that they would take anyone who was not a danger to themselves or someone else, and it was not yet accredited, so most of the people who were there were either very poor and they’re on scholarship or very wealthy and they were the troubled children of their families and they were doing drugs. The semester before I got there, some kid had ridden a bicycle around the roof of a four-story building on acid. It was a very odd place. I was one of a handful of middle-class kids there.

ANDERSON: OK. All right. So, we’ll talk –

MORALES: So we should go into that more next time.

ANDERSON: OK. And going into that, is your relationship with your parents sort of stabilized at this point, so that –

MORALES: Yes. Before I left Chicago things had more or less stabilized. I was out of the house. You know, I'd visit, I'd go over there sometimes. When I got picked up for curfew violation, I would always give their address and then my mom would sign for me and deliver me back to my place later. They were certainly still our allies against the law. At that point, if you were under 18 you couldn't be out after ten o'clock, which was pretty ridiculous, or before six o'clock.

ANDERSON: And how did that impact your relationship with your brothers, being out of the house?

MORALES: My brother [Ricardo] left home about a year after.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And actually ended up inheriting the apartment that I lived in, and we were part of a circle of young people and hung out with each other.

ANDERSON: And Alejandro, what did that mean for the two of you?

MORALES: Alejandro was five when I left home. So I went and visited and I saw him but we weren't living together after that point.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And that was hard for me because in a lot of ways he was my child. I took care of him a lot. My parents were very busy. Suddenly — actually I left and part of what propelled my brother [Ricardo] to leave was that he was the lone babysitter and was feeling exploited in that role. Yes so, Alejandro got left on his own.

ANDERSON: Yes. Yes. OK. Well, I guess we'll just pick up with the college story then tomorrow, and call it a day.

MORALES: OK.

57:28

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

[September 28, 2005]

ANDERSON: All right. We're rolling. So it's Kelly and Aurora back together on Friday, maybe the last day of September, I don't know. And we're going to wrap up our taping of Aurora's oral history today. When we last talked on Wednesday, it was sort of the end of Chicago and you were heading off to college in New Hampshire. So do you want to talk about how you made that decision and transition there?

MORALES: Well, it was 1972. I had dropped out of high school at the end of 1970, around the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. I had been hanging out doing various kinds of things but trying to figure out what I wanted to do next. My high school boyfriend was going to college at Goddard and one of my close friends who I was living with had found out about Franconia College in New Hampshire. And in the spring of '72 I had gone to Paris as part of an antiwar delegation to the Paris Peace Talks. There was all this political activity, but I didn't have a sense of direction in terms of what I was doing locally. All the people I knew were going off to college or going to work or I had one friend who had gone into the military. We were scattering and I had the tremendous privilege of having my college tuition covered by the University of Chicago anywhere I chose to go in the country. So I picked Franconia, which was this little hippie school up in the mountains of northern New Hampshire and which was going to be covered for me. Mostly I wanted to get out of Chicago. I didn't want to spend another winter in that city, and two people I was close to were going to that part of the country.

So I was kind of — I never made a visit there before I went. I just applied and got in on the basis of a poem. I was a high school dropout. I didn't have any academic records, but I didn't — in 1972 at a hippie school they didn't care. So I suddenly found myself living in Franconia, New Hampshire, which was a town of, gosh, maybe a thousand people in Grafton County, which is a very poor county, in a place where there was a major split between — not only between the college folks and the local people who had lived there but people who were transplants from Boston and from other urban areas who came, with class privilege, to settle in a beautiful place and people who had lived there for a long time and who had working-class jobs, and survived off of the tourist industry. Where I lived, not so much manufacturing. Farther south there was some manufacturing but you know, people lived off a lot of different kinds of seasonal things. So there I was in this school, and the teaching was very innovative. The classes were really small. The population was extremely white. There were —

ANDERSON: Probably no Jews either, right?

MORALES: Hmm?

ANDERSON: No Jews either, I imagine.

MORALES: Among the students there were Jews.

ANDERSON: Yes. Yes.

MORALES: But I do remember going into Kelly's Grocery Store and asking for matzo and they had no idea what I was talking about. And they had green bagels for St. Patrick's Day. So this was another culture shock. But there was three Latinos. The student body was about four hundred. There were three Latinos — me, a Cuban girl and this really obnoxious Puerto Rican guy. My housemates included Dawnel White, who was from a farmworker family, I think, you know, white farmworker family from — transplanted probably from Arkansas, Oklahoma or some place, I'm not sure, but living in Modesto, California in a trailer, whose scholarship had had to include air fare to get there, and Chip Rockefeller who, you know was certainly a member of the family even if he wasn't at the core of the family fortune. There were a lot of people there who were troubled kids of very wealthy families and then very poor kids and very few middle-class kids.

So it was a very odd environment to land in and I guess the first year the big thing that happened was my roommate, who I was in the process of falling in love with, was killed in a car accident. And that really knocked me for a loop for awhile, but as I got to my feet after that, I became involved with a women's group. There were people who were mostly, I think, either on staff at the college and had friends in town. It was not primarily a student group. A few older students were involved in it and we were reading books and discussing them and some of the people from that group with additional folks from town formed a women's center in Littleton, which was ten minutes away. It was a town of about ten thousand. It was not connected with the college at all. And we did a lot of birth control counseling and abortion referral. This was 1973.

ANDERSON: Just as *Roe* was happening.

MORALES: Just as *Roe* was happening. So some of it was before *Roe*. The local doctors in Littleton, New Hampshire — Doctors Lewis and Bishop — would not give birth control to anyone except married women who had notes from their husbands. It wasn't even enough to just be married and want it. You had to have permission in writing from your husband and that was the only medical option locally. So we were doing birth control counseling out of our little offices in downtown Littleton, and then referring people to a clinic in Concord, New Hampshire.

But it was an outrageous situation and we were in constant struggle with these doctors. There were rumors spread that we were actually performing abortions in the bathroom of this place. We also did some radio programming at a local station. One of our members, Genelle Grant, had a radio program and we started doing little shows. So radio

continued to be a theme in my activism, having already done some in high school.

ANDERSON: Was this all volunteer-run or did you guys write grants and get some funding or how did you do that?

MORALES: We must have had a grant from somewhere for the office.

ANDERSON: Because you had a space that you were paying rent on.

MORALES: We had a space. I don't really remember. I was not part of that process. I was like 18 and 19 and I didn't know anything about grant writing.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: What I remember most vividly, though, the political lesson out of that that was most striking for me, was the divide within our group between — because the constituency making use of the center was primarily working-class women from the community, it was not primarily folks from the college. And there were two really different attitudes about what we were doing, and one was a social service provider attitude and one was an organizer attitude. Our group included people like myself and Natalie Woodruff, who was one of my closest allies in that group and a number of other people who really had a feminist organizing perspective, and then a lot of women who were social workers, MFCCs [Marriage, Family and Child Counselors], people who were doing service provision and wanted to expand that but who had a very patronizing attitude toward local women and, you know, "local women" was a euphemism for working-class women and there was a lot of, you know, Teach them how to live their lives correctly.

And so that was a lot of the point of struggle within our organization. I was the only person of color there. This was a place where my hunger for community was extreme enough that when I saw a car parked on Main Street in Littleton one day, a van with little bobbles around the window and a Virgin Mary on the dashboard, I waited 45 minutes for the owner of the car to come back and sure enough, it was a bunch of Dominican dishwashers from one of the local luxury hotels and I got them to give me a ride back to Franconia, just so I could speak Spanish with them.

So it was a very, very white community but the class stuff was very, very intense and, and there was an underclass that was also partly French Canadian. That was one of the groups that was targeted a lot. So, struggling around those class issues was an important piece of that period in my political work. I became one of the speakers for the NOW Speakers' Bureau for New Hampshire. We would go down to Concord and meet with folks down there, and so I went around — they would pair me up with somebody else usually, somebody a lot older than me, and we would go around the state speaking to women's church groups,

different kinds of groups about the ERA, about access to birth control, about pretty basic, very common-denominator broad issues in terms of the women's movement. It was a really empowering experience for me — that young, to be going out and representing in that way.

ANDERSON: What kind of reception did you get across New Hampshire? It's considered such a conservative state, so –

10:28

MORALES: Really mixed.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: You know, and having to confront women who did not think that women should have control over their own fertility, women who did not think that the ERA should be passed. Sometimes we would be on panels that were debating the issue. It was a very educational experience.

ANDERSON: How did that sit with you also, working for an organization like NOW?

MORALES: Well, I didn't see myself as working for them. And this is one of the things — I was talking last night to my brother about my political work, overview of my political work kind of over my lifetime, that every organization that I've been part of, I have been in a minority position of some sort, that I have struggled from within organizations where — and my brother was saying, "So in some ways it didn't make you a team player," and I said, "Well yes, it did, only my team was a lot bigger than the organization" — you know, that I saw myself as part of a broad women's movement and I didn't have a problem working in collaboration with people who had far more liberal politics than I did as a radical. You know, I could happily get on a podium with them and talk about access to birth control and then argue with them within our meetings about class politics and sovereignty and power sharing within the organization — seeing to it that working-class women from the community had decision making in the organization. You know, I didn't see myself as working for NOW. I saw myself as working beside them.

ANDERSON: And you didn't feel silenced by NOW, in terms of your perspective or what you brought to those conversations?

MORALES: I think there probably were a couple of occasions where the person I was with tried to tone me down a little bit. I wasn't very tone-downable, so it didn't really bother me. You know, it was such a — the struggle around access to birth control was so potent. In Chicago before I had left, we'd had the newsprint version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. I think that the actual published version came out, I think, around '73. I felt like I was walking in the steps of my great grandmother who had tried to distribute that kind of information to immigrant women in the early

twentieth century and that there was a very broad coalition of people who were doing that work.

Now, I was not doing it around women of color and so some of the big debates that were happening about the nature of reproductive rights work were not happening around me. It was stuff that I didn't encounter until I was in California that, you know, including the struggle against sterilization abuse and all those other things. I was aware that that was also going on, because Puerto Rico was one of the big cases that people were talking about in terms of sterilization abuse. And in 1974 I went to a huge gathering of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, a pro-independence gathering in Madison Square Garden that was the first time I had actually been around a large population of U.S. Puerto Ricans. So I was aware about the struggle against sterilization abuse, but no one around me was working directly on it when I was in New Hampshire. That stuff came later.

I had also — I don't know if I mentioned I had also been, you know, part of a network of people who were referring folks to the Jane Collective in Chicago.

ANDERSON: Oh, no. OK.

MORALES: I didn't know people — I now know people who were then in it, but I didn't at the time know who the Jane folks were but, you know, I was part of the network sending people that way. So I was in New Hampshire until 1976, the beginning of 1976.

ANDERSON: Did you graduate?

MORALES: I did not graduate. The school was in a lot of turmoil. There were all kinds of political struggles within the college about what direction it should take and a lot of things fell apart. There was a period of struggle that kind of immobilized the school completely. I had done the first two years and gotten my AA and the whole second two years was supposed to be a project, so it was hard to transfer those credits. But I dropped out in '75. I had done three and a half years of school but I didn't have — I was not close to graduating because I kept changing my project. I learned a lot but none of it was really toward a degree, and I was in a bad relationship and I knew that the only way I was going to get out of that relationship was to get out of the state.

And I had absolutely reached the limit of my tolerance both for winter and for whiteness. I was like, I can't do this any more. So I packed up my backpack and I hitch-hiked cross-country and got rides from ride boards and landed in Berkeley, California, in February of 1976.

ANDERSON: Now, did you know anybody out there? I mean, why Berkeley?

MORALES: I actually was headed for Seattle. I had this idea that Seattle was where I was going to end up, but I got a ride to Berkeley with some people I actually knew. No, I got a ride as far as Boulder with people I knew and then I hooked up with some other people and they got me to Berkeley.

ANDERSON: (cell phone) We'll pause. (pause in tape) We're back on. So, you ended up in Berkeley because you got a ride to Berkeley. And what were you looking for?

MORALES: Other — well, I was looking for people of color. I was looking for warm weather. I was looking for something different and I didn't really know. There were friends in my family who lived in Berkeley and I just called them up and said, "Can I crash with you?" I was out of money and I got myself a temp job and before I knew it, I was living in Berkeley, in North Oakland.

ANDERSON: And what was Berkeley like in the mid '70s? What did you find there?

MORALES: Well, on one of my first — within the first couple of weeks I was walking down a street when I heard a woman's voice coming out of a building singing revolutionary Latin American music. I stopped in my tracks, went into the building. It was La Peña Cultural Center and the singer was Suni Paz, and I went in and introduced myself to people and started going to La Peña a lot.

It took me, disgracefully, six months to track down the Puerto Rican Socialist Party [PSP]. I was leaving messages everywhere trying to find them. Like OK, you're not acting like the vanguard of my people's revolution if I have to look this hard to find you. I had not been a member before, my father had been. So I joined the PSP. I found the Berkeley Women's Center, which had a writing group going on, and joined that group. I think I probably didn't find them until '77. I got there, yes, early in '76. I think I found them the next year. I joined the PSP in '76 and it happened to coincide with a small group of people of color who were working with Pacifica Radio, had established the Third World News Bureau in East Oakland in one little room at East 14th and Fruitvale, the heart of the Latino community there.

They had approached the different radical organizations of people of color — the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the Filipino organization, the KDP [Union of Democratic Filipinos], a number of African American organizations — and said, We want to train somebody from your organization in how to use radio. So having just landed — I was 22 at the time — just landed in the Bay Area, I think it was probably the best orientation I could have gotten to what was going on around me. I got into this essentially apprenticeship program. There was another woman, Christina Medina, who was from the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. Don Foster — I don't remember what organization he worked with, but an African American man. Isabel Alegría, whose work is in a lot of NPR [National Public Radio] stuff and you know, is national at this point,

was one of the people there and her brother Andrés. Norman Jayo. Tarabu Betserai. And some of them had a lot of radio experience and were training us, and we were producing documentaries. We were doing news broadcasts.

We didn't have the resources to do national news, but we did local news that no one else was covering and international news. We had people from Ethiopia, from Zimbabwe, who were also working with the group. I don't remember everyone's name. There was Yafet Tekle, who was from Ethiopia. There was a man who was from Zimbabwe, which was still Rhodesia at the time. So we had people who could phone someone in a guerilla organization, you know, behind the lines in these countries — in Nicaragua, for example. Some of these folks would go back to their countries and would feed us stories. We were having a level of access that the white reporters at the station didn't have.

There was a tremendous struggle with the station. They were afraid of us. They tried to control what we were doing. They tried to own what we were doing. We had to constantly fight over resources but for about a year I did that work and having to condense something I was thinking about into a 45-second news story was excellent for my writing, and I got to jump into the activist community in the Bay Area and get a very quick orientation to who was who and what people were doing.

ANDERSON: And what issues were you covering, or what stories were you covering more?

21:07

MORALES: Well, one of the stories that I covered was mercury contamination in Puerto Rico. Bechtel was throwing broken thermometers from their factory there into the river and there was an outbreak of Minamata disease. There were, you know, children being born with birth defects from mercury poisoning.

Also, the birth control pills that were being manufactured in Puerto Rico, the workers were not being protected in any way from the hormones. They didn't even have basic facemasks to protect them from breathing the dust. So large amounts of synthetic estrogen were going into their systems and the men who were working there, they were developing breasts. They were going home and estrogen dust was getting all over their families and little girls were getting their periods at the age of six. Little boys were developing breasts. It was massive contamination. So we were covering that story.

Locally, the International Hotel in San Francisco was one of the stories we were very involved with, and that was a residence hotel of elderly, mostly Filipino people who had come as immigrants to work and were living there, and the property was targeted for development by Four Seas Corporation. I think they wanted to turn it into a parking lot, and there was a massive community mobilization. The building would be repeatedly surrounded by people so that the attempts to evict would not be successful. At one point the sheriff even went to jail rather than evict. And so, I remember hanging off of a balcony outside that building

trying to think of something articulate to say and looking down and seeing this mass of people around the building — ten deep, arms' linked, refusing to let the sheriffs come in and evict these people. And I was a little nervous about improvising on the air. I remember just saying, "It's amazing, it's amazing," not really knowing what to say that was incisive and brilliant about it.

But there was also a tremendous explosion of radical art around all of these movements. Norman Jayo, who was a Filipino man who had a lot of connections within the I-Hotel community, was also a poet, and I think maybe he was doing theater as well, I'm not sure. There was all kinds of artistic stuff going on. La Peña had been founded in the aftermath of the coup in Chile and there were all kinds of exiled Chilean singers and poets and artists, and then people who were doing solidarity work with Latin America were creating art in relationship to that. There were also local artists responding to what was going on in their own communities — just a vibrant artistic community.

I had joined the writing group at the Berkeley Women's Center, which was mostly white but not exclusively, and the day after I got there, they had a reading at Cody's Bookstore and I was invited to be part of it. The leader of the group was impressed with my work. This was, again, a place where I ended up fighting from within because some of the writing assignments that we got seemed really irrelevant and silly to me and there was so much going on outside that I wanted to write about, you know, so the battle about the appropriateness of political art took place in there.

But suddenly I was visible as a poet. From that first reading I had like a following, almost immediately, which is very disconcerting. One of my first readings with someone else was with Luz Guerra, who I've just recently reconnected with, who is Dominican and Puerto Rican and Scottish, I think. But there were a million little cafés where emerging writers were reading — many, many of us reading political work. I did not like what came at me as a designated poet. I didn't like the kind of glorification of — you know, people would come up to me and say, I love your work. I could never do anything like that, and I found that deeply disturbing. And I actually stopped reading for a couple of years until I could figure out how to teach writing and how to refuse the pedestal of the poet. I would do things like read a work in progress and say, I'm stuck on this poem; here's how far I've gotten — and expose the mechanism of what I was doing, because I knew that I didn't want to be set apart that way.

And this is something I was thinking about last night as I was preparing for this interview, that you know, I was a poet from the time I was a very young child, but I became a public poet very much in the context of social movements — both the decolonization movements that were happening in the third world, and particularly the radical poetry of Latin America that I had been learning about, and then the white feminist writers I'd been exposed to in Chicago, and then this explosion

of writing by people of color within the United States, and particularly the writing by women of color within that.

I became a poet lifted up within a whole movement of poets and singers and muralists and theater people who were trying to create a culture of resistance. And you know, we were talking about this just before the interview started, that all of us were doing some other kind of activism as well but that the artistic work we were doing was about creating spaces. It was about clearing enough ground on which to stand — that there was such denial of our existence, of our perspectives, that using poetry, using music, using our art, we could push back the walls enough to create a clearing in which we could say, This is who I am. This is what I have lived. This is what I know to be true about the world from my own body and from the bodies of my kin, and that's the ground from which I'm organizing. And it was happening in every community I was part of.

ANDERSON: Can I ask you a couple questions –

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: OK. Just to backtrack into jumping into this new and really exciting and very different world from New Hampshire — what was it like for you to be the one and only, or one amongst few in so many different cases in New Hampshire, to going to a really multiracial coalition and working in a group that was really quite so different, that was all people of color but also multiracial, multiethnic? What was that experience like for you?

MORALES: It was amazing. It was like being in a candy shop. I mean, it was both working with people with whom I did not [have to] explain a whole lot of stuff, and where a lot of times I felt naïve on many counts, partly because I was younger than anybody else there, but where certain things were understood between us and just you didn't have to spend time and energy fighting it. And there were other things I had to fight about. I had to fight about sexism within that group. There were other issues, but it was a different set of battles and I just remember walking around and — you know, in New Hampshire, if there was one event I wanted to go to in a three-month period, that was a big deal.

28:10

Everywhere you looked there were flyers for things. Any one night there were two hundred things to go to that I could have been interested in. So there was this — it was overwhelming initially to figure out, Well what do I want to do, which of these million things do I want to be part of? You know, it's interesting looking back over this to see how — I was talking to my brother about the fact that I didn't ever become a one-issue person and, you know, even people who have — I didn't even focus on a particular set of issues. I really, I think, worked as — I brought particular perspectives to every issue that I touched. You know, I'm not somebody who just worked within the women's reproductive

rights and health movement. I didn't just work within the Latin American solidarity movements. I worked in all of those things, constantly building coalitions, constantly trying to meet the needs of the complexity of my life and also having the perspective that I never went for the whole argument about which was the most important struggle. And that's probably the legacy of my family and of having a deep comfort with complexity. I figured it was a lifelong struggle and it didn't really matter which particular issue you were working on as much as it mattered what kinds of relationships you were building and what perspective you brought to them and that you were continually seeing the big picture and helping to move the movement as a whole forward.

So in this period I was doing stuff, I don't remember what the group was but I was doing something with the Berkeley Women's Health Collective. I remember distinctly a speculum party, a group of women lying around on a carpet with little cushions under our butts and speculum mirrors, gazing at our cervixes. You know, I was trying to explain to my daughter, who's 17, recently how exhilarating that was and she was like, Yuck! But you know, it's hard for her to conceive, given the kinds of women's health services available to us now, how many of us had never looked at our own sexual organs. What's it like to be — many men had peered down a speculum at our cervix and commented and told us what to do with them but to take that into our own hands, the power of looking, really was extraordinary. There was a shift in the world when we were able to do that.

So I was doing that. I was hanging from balconies covering the I-Hotel struggle. I was in women's writing groups. I was producing all this radio stuff. I was in the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, which was a very frustrating experience for me.

ANDERSON: Yes. How did gender and, and sex get worked out in that kind of a group?

MORALES: Well it was actually — it was mostly women.

ANDERSON: Oh.

MORALES: With a few male leaders. A lot of my frustration — the sexism of course was frustrating, but a lot of my frustration was that we were out on this fringe of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, basically taking orders from a central office, you know, from people in Puerto Rico and in New York who had no understanding of what the conditions were in California. Basically we were like selling the Party newspaper. We weren't doing any organizing. And yet, you know, there was this mystique about us being this vanguard party and we were this revolutionary organization, and there was attack going on. There were grand jury investigations. The organization as a whole certainly was seen as a threat by the FBI, by the government, but we weren't doing anything locally. You know, we would issue statements on revolutionary holidays.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: We would write solidarity speeches for the Vietnamese or for, you know, the Filipinos or somebody else. There was a lot of posturing. And then some guy from the East Coast would come through and, you know, give us the latest on what our various positions were and things, and hit on all the women and then go home. And I remember being outraged because one of the men in the group, one of the leaders, was telling me I had to dress — I had to wear like little flimsy see-through blouses in order to blend in and be part of like working-class Puerto Rican women. First of all I wasn't working class, and second of all defining working class as wearing this sexualized clothing — but within that, there was a woman named Myrtha Chabrán, who was older than the rest of us, who pulled together a women's group. And let's see, this group included Laura Brainin-Rodriguez, who is Helen Rodriguez' daughter; Wilma Bonet, who is an actress/director/playwright; Myrna Flores, who is from a family who had been there since like the '40s or early '50s; Myrtha Chabrán herself. I was in the group. Aixa Gannon was somebody I had known through my father, actually. I can't remember. Oh, Christina Medina, who was with me on the radio work.

And we actually sat down — we were doing some studying of Puerto Rican women's history and as the writer in the group, I began trying to draft a play about the history of Puerto Rican women which, in many ways, is the precursor to the book I eventually did write, and that was the most satisfying part of being in that organization, was being with those women. And we talked about a lot of different things that were going on in our lives in relationship to the Party and what we thought should be going on. Eventually I left the PSP because they weren't doing anything and because the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee, which was mostly white folks, were the people actually doing the organizing. At the time that it happened, I was summoned in and told that one does not quit a vanguard party without permission. What are they going to do about it? And it was really a kind of parody of a Stalinist interrogation. They wanted to know if I had possibly been influenced by an agent.

ANDERSON: Wow.

MORALES: Had anyone talked to me about the Party and said bad things about it — the implication being, I couldn't think for myself. So I left the PSP. It was kind of an identity crisis for me, because I had grown up within the Puerto Rican left and it was important for me to maintain contact with that, but I was able to work much more effectively from outside of it. And I was involved in the birth control stuff —

ANDERSON: Right.

- MORALES: – that was ongoing, women’s health stuff that was ongoing. Was in various kinds of support groups at the Berkeley Women’s Health Collective.
- ANDERSON: Can I ask a question about –
- MORALES: Sure.
- ANDERSON: – language and identity and how that’s shifting for you over the decade of the ’70s. We haven’t talked about it at all, so I’m going to make some assumptions here. You should correct me if I’m wrong that when you were in Chicago and in New Hampshire, you perhaps saw yourself as Puerto Rican, as Puerto Rican and Jewish, and then when you went to California, were you encountering a new language that’s part California, part 1970s, of women of color, third world women. And how are you sort of fitting within these new ways of speaking about racial identity and where are you fitting in that? Does that challenge some of your thoughts about how to call yourself?
- MORALES: It was pretty seamless, actually. I think that in Chicago I placed myself within a more international context. I saw myself as a Latin American from a colonized country, part of these movements that my family had been linked to, with a relationship to Cuba. I was reading the writing of South American writers, Central American writers, other Caribbean writers, and seeing the link between that and local struggles.
- ANDERSON: So you –
- MORALES: Understood the Black Panthers as a movement similar to these movements in Angola and other places and was experiencing racism and trying to integrate that. Understanding the difference between how Latin Americans were seen and how my mother as a Puerto Rican immigrant was seen. But I hadn’t been in a U.S. Puerto Rican community or really any U.S. community of color. And then I went to New Hampshire and it was like kind of being bonked on the head.
- ANDERSON: And were folks — were you using the term Latina at that time when you were in New Hampshire? Was that the –
- MORALES: Not even.
- ANDERSON: It wasn’t a way of des –
- MORALES: In New Hampshire, it was still Spanish.
- ANDERSON: Spanish. OK.
- MORALES: Not even Hispanics, Spanish.

ANDERSON: But did you use that word to describe yourself?

MORALES: No. No. I flinched at that word. But you know, there wasn't even a context to speak about myself as a woman of color there. You know, I would go to like Madison Square Garden and be around all these Puerto Ricans, have this sense of community and then go back to this place where nobody had the language to under[stand] — nobody would have understood me had I spoken about it. It was very much a we-are-women-together-sisterhood-is-universal thing. And I have to say, well, some more universal than others, but there wasn't really a space for the conversation to happen. When I got to the Bay Area, I remember walking into the Third World News Bureau and because I'm light, you know, at this meeting, the first time I walked in, somebody going, This is for people of color. And I went, I know. And they were, Oh, oh, OK. You know, I think we're starting to move to — well actually no, there's a couple of important things I have to do before we leave the '70s, but —

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: But it was a highly contested membership for a lot of people. You know, the thinking about people who were mixed was not very sophisticated. There was the same — I belong to two categories in which I was considered a potential traitor, that I was racially mixed and that I was bisexual. And in that period from the mid-'70s into the mid-'80s, there was intense struggle around those boundary definitions all the time, wherever I went.

In 1978 I got a summer job with — and this is part of the answer to your question about this, this framing of identity and becoming part of something called women of color, which is a political not an ethnic one — I got hired on to Diana Russell's study of the incidence of rape in San Francisco, which was a groundbreaking study. It was the first study about the prevalence, and a randomized study in the city and I was one of a group of women of color who were hired to do the interviewing in communities of color.

So there was the sensitivity to understand that you couldn't send white interviewers into all of those places, but there was also a certain kind of tokenizing that went on within that as well, and it was a who's who of women of color writers that were emerging over the next ten years into much more prominence. That's where I met Cherríe Moraga, Luisah Teish, Kitty Tsui, who was certainly known locally. Luz Guerra was in that group. I can't remember, because I knew them both in many different contexts at the time, either Genny Lim or Nelly Wong. I don't think both of them were in that group. I think it was only one and I can't remember which one of them was in that group. I knew them also in various women of color writing circles, but I remember sitting around. We called ourselves Dial-A-Token. We were like joking about how we

were all finding ourselves on stage at all these events organized by white women's organizations who wanted one of each of different categories of women of color and that maybe we should just start an agency called Dial-A-Token. And then we were going out into our respective communities and knocking on random doors and asking people if there was sexual violence in their lives, which was a very intense experience.

ANDERSON: Did you question the methodology of her approach? Was there room for you guys to have input there?

41:40

MORALES: I think mostly what we — what I remember struggling around was some of the details of the questionnaire and of — no. I don't think we necessarily questioned the methodology. You know, there was so little information available that to do something randomized like this —

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: We understood that it needed to be done in that way in order to legitimate the research at that point — that from there, there were other things we could do. But I don't think there was really a debate about that. Certainly there was tension in the air around some of the assumptions about who rapists are, about what rapists deserve, about, you know, the targeting of men of color within this. I don't think that there were — the thing was structured as it was structured and we were going out and interviewing. I think that we fought about some of those racist assumptions but I don't think it was about basic design of the study.

But I hooked up with all these women, and so Cherríe and I and two white women got together and talked about starting a press. That fell apart rather quickly. Cherríe and I — for about, I don't know, a year or two — were a two-woman writing support group. We just got together and shared our work, which was wonderful. So that I was somebody who was in her life when she and Gloria [Anzaldúa] got together and talked about putting out *This Bridge Called My Back*. Check my notes. OK — '79 or so I started working at La Peña.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And from '79 to '81, I started out working in the kitchen, I think, but we founded this thing called the Cultural Productions Group. And the race and gender dynamics of that were really fascinating because it was primarily composed of men of color who were in exile from their countries in one way or another — some who were not in exile, but Latin American men, and then white women, and there was I, in between.

ANDERSON: How did you get the white women — through La Peña?

MORALES:

These were women who were involved in solidarity work with Latin America, some of whom had come in because they were in relationships with Latino men who were doing the political work. Many, many I think — you know, some came out of other political activism and were a little more sophisticated. There was certainly people there whose hearts had been opened and then their intellects, you know, who had been personally impacted by the stories of people coming out of Chile or Central America who were in their lives and then had been mobilized into political activity. I was asked to read a script. They tried to put together this show about Violetta Parra in which these Chilean men would like sing a song and then they'd — somebody would show a slide. They would show a slide of Violetta Parra and then somebody would read this political text about Chile. You know, so they'd like song, song, song, statistics.

I went, Oh, come on, you, you can do better than that. And so I got involved in trying to rewrite some of the scripting that was going on with the music. And other people got involved, and this group of 13 people ended up coming together and for a couple of years creating these amazing shows where we would draw on performance groups from the community. We'd only have maybe one or two rehearsals that everybody was part of. These different groups would work on things. We didn't need money. We'd all assemble, run through it together once and then perform it six or seven times as a benefit for some revolutionary organization. They were very complex, rich projects that included acting. They included solo singers. They included small musical ensembles, La Peña's choir, all kinds of dramatic monologues, which I was instrumental in writing, complex slide shows going on in the background. And I was helping to move it toward a more sophisticated understanding of how to use art, so that instead of somebody reading statistics about homeless people in Chile occupying land, we played a Victor Jara song about a young girl who was killed when an occupied *población* was invaded by the military. We did a slide show and there were pictures of young children in the *poblaciones* and people would cry. People would relate emotionally to the content of this in a way that the statistics about landlessness just left them cold.

Let's see. Helene Lorenz and Kathleen Vickery were the two other script writers. The three of us were the main script writers. I shared the responsibility for political education for the group with a Chilean man [Quique Cruz.] Tons of sexism, which I fought more vocally and ferociously, I think, than anybody else. I was positioned better to do so by being a Latina woman. There was also all kinds of sectarian stuff. The revolu[tionary] — the group in Chile with which La Peña was aligned was the Mir. There were other groups that were seen as not as revolutionary and tended to be more working class. There were refugees, you know, exiles from those organizations as well who were showing up at La Peña and working and were being disrespected in some of the interactions and so, you know.

I said earlier, I think, that we tend to remember our — my mother and I both tend to remember our emotions more than our activity. I reconnected with somebody recently who was a working-class Italian American woman who was married to a Chilean guy who was very working class who had come from one of the other organizations, not the Mir. They were treated atrociously. And she said, “What I remember about you is how fiercely you fought all the time.” And you know, it’s hard for me to remember that but apparently I did, and the guys couldn’t dismiss me quite as easily because — first of all because I was Latina, but secondly because I belonged to this vanguard party. I had credentials as a revolutionary and I knew how to speak their language.

So it was a very interesting period politically and artistically deeply satisfying to be able to write poetic scripts and to weave together poetry and music and visual images and tell a story about what was going on in Latin America that reached people very differently. The final show that we worked on caused a lot of splits because we were trying to talk about work and so there were much — a larger group of white people in the choir who were participating in it and who really objected to a lot of the talk about race and wanted to say, you know, Working-class people here and working-class people there are all united. And it was like, Well, there’s imperialism. They didn’t want to talk about that. They didn’t want to talk about — they wanted a solidarity of the working class that overlooked that, which was not that different from the solidarity of women that overlooked that –

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: – I was encountering in other places.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: It was very interesting struggling through that with them.

ANDERSON: What about questions of sexuality in any of these different groups. As you said, you were seen as a potential threat because of bisexuality. Was that –

MORALES: That was slightly later.

ANDERSON: OK. And is that within a gay and lesbian context, or within a women’s –

MORALES: Well, no.

ANDERSON: – group context?

MORALES: You know, the most exciting work happening in the Bay Area, as in most places, was lesbian-led, and there was an assumption that good politics and lesbian identity went together. And this is starting to move a

little bit toward the '80s, because that's more of when that happened, but certainly there was a sense that if I was still relating sexually to men, I had not fully committed to radicalism. And this is something my mother and I talk about is, you know, her as a heterosexual and myself as a bisexual and how difficult that period was, to be politically radical and to be marginalized — you know, the most radical stuff was coming from lesbians, in many cases, and then within those groups to be marginalized.

I mean, this was the period where, you know, boy children were considered a threat and where, you know, we were supposed to be angry at our babies and little brothers. There was a kind of rigidity as that space was being fought for. And certainly there was massive homophobia still going on. We were definitely aligned mostly with lesbian feminist thinkers, but in the process of fighting the homophobia and creating that space, then there was a kind of lesbian nationalism that developed that made it very, very difficult for people like us to find a home base, because we certainly were not wanting to align ourselves with the heterosexual women who were resisting the challenges.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: But in terms of having a sense of safe home base, it was really hard.

ANDERSON: So did that impact who you slept with? Did you then choose out of expediency to partner with women more often than men — no?

MORALES: No. You know, I'm coming out of a history of sexual abuse, so partnering with anybody was really loaded. No, I actually went through a long dry spell during that period. I was doing a lot of yours-for-the-night, bye-bye stuff, mostly with men from other countries who weren't going to be around very long — but you know, some women too. But I tend to take my relationships with women more seriously, so the one-night stand thing didn't work as well with the girls, and I was definitely not doing a committed relationship during that period — having also come out of that terrible relationship in New Hampshire.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: So it was not a period of partnering throughout the rest of the '70s.

ANDERSON: Was bisexuality an identity that you claimed for yourself then?

52:14

MORALES: I always thought of myself — I mean, I had simultaneous crushes on a girl and a boy in nursery school and, you know, I was aware. I mean, I had begun experimenting sexually with girls before boys in Puerto Rico but, you know, I had a crush on the sister and the brother of the family. It was clearly — you know, as soon as I had a name for it I knew that was me, but there wasn't a bisexual political presence yet.

ANDERSON: Not until the '80s, late '80s.

MORALES: Not until the '80s, yeah.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And so I was at the edges of these groups of women of color who had a certain amount of disdain for my choices, who saw it as a lack of political development. And you know, there was also — and the other way that I ended up feeling naïve was being middle class among a lot of very working-class women of color and having come out of — on the one hand, and on the other hand having a political comprehension of class and how it impacted politics and a lot of other middle-class people around me didn't, and having come from living around very poor people in a colonized country.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: It was kind of a mix of having international sophistication but not local comprehension of all of what it meant to be a working-class person of color in the United States. That was my experience.

ANDERSON: So how did that trip you up, when you say you were naïve?

MORALES: I was aware that there were places of obliviousness in me. I had not come into my politics by the same road that working-class Chicanas I was hanging out with had. I hadn't come to my feminism by the same road. I had inherited my feminism. I had not had to fight within a patriarchal family for that space. I had a different relationship with men, partly because my earliest experiences of solidarity were from my father and my brother. I remember trying to communicate that to Cherríe and she was going, I don't care. I was like, you know, trying to find a way to get in closer into these communities of women I had tremendous respect for and be seen as a peer and finding that challenging.

So I was an insider/outsider in a lot of the communities that I participated in, and that, I think you know, has a certain amount to do with the fact that, in addition to the political reasons I gave earlier, that in a lot of ways I was a solitary activist. I moved in and out of organizations but wasn't of them — and also because I was an artist to the core and that's solitary work even though you go into collaboration with people. I was a solitary artist in the context of a collective movement that was producing culture, you know, so all of these things — there were lots of things that were marginalizing me. As a Jew in organizations of color, as a person of color — this is more into the '80s, but in Jewish organizations as a bisexual woman between a rock and a hard place in the women's communities and movements. Being an immigrant who was middle class from a revolutionary family which is

different than who most of the other immigrants were. There were a few people like that. Judy Moschkovich, who was a contributor to *This Bridge*, was a close friend of mine, you know — came from a progressive Jewish Argentinean family. How close are we to the end of this tape?

ANDERSON: About a minute or two.

MORALES: OK. Because we're getting to the '80s.

ANDERSON: OK. Do you want to pause here or is there something that you want to say, following up on that that will take a minute or so?

MORALES: I'm just scanning my list of the '70s to see if there's anything else. I think were done with the '70s here.

ANDERSON: OK. We'll turn it off then.

END TAPE 3

56:14

TAPE 4

ANDERSON: I just want to ask one quick question before we move into [the '80s], which is that — I remember that yesterday you just briefly were telling a story about childhood, and the teacher called you Lori Levins.

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: So could you just comment a little bit on your name.

MORALES: Names. Yes. Lori was a nickname in my family and, I don't know, my parents — I mean, there I was named Aurora and they called me Lori Bori Oreo as a nickname, and Lori became my family nickname, which was Dori in the neighborhood in Puerto Rico. So in Chicago I was called Lori. When I went to school, Lori Levins, pronounced that way, became a very white Ashkenazi way that people saw me. When I went away to college I started using my full name. I put the Morales back on and I used Aurora, and so there's this split between people who knew me from the Lori period and from the Aurora period, because I saw that what was Lori [soft "L" as said in Spanish] in Puerto Rico was Lori (flat accent, indicating non-Spanish speaking—ed.) in Chicago and then it had a really different connotation.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: So I've used Aurora ever since.

ANDERSON: And the three of you were given Levins Morales as your two last names, or you made a choice about that yourself?

MORALES: In Latin America that's what you do. You have two last names, you know, so all of us are Levins Morales.

ANDERSON: Your parents named you that way.

MORALES: Well, I don't know if they made a conscious decision about it but it's just what everybody in Latin America does. They ask what's your father's *apellido* and what's your mother's *apellido* and that's how you're registered. I mean, my mother just uses Morales. She doesn't use her second, her maternal last name is Moure, but she lived in the States growing up.

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

MORALES: So it was different. Everybody had two last names growing up.

ANDERSON: And your brother's the same way?

MORALES: Mm-hmm. And my youngest brother doesn't use the second last name a lot of the time. I think he mostly goes by Alejandro Levins, but again, he grew up in the States and Ricardo and I grew up on the island so we both use both.

ANDERSON: OK. So how do you want to begin the '80s — with what topic or question?

MORALES: 1981, June. The group at La Peña had fallen apart, partly over the internal politics of trying to talk about the stuff I was talking about, about class and imperialism, but also there was a shift politically. Some Chileans went back to rejoin the struggle within Chile and there was a male coup, is really what happened. Helene and Kathleen and I, who had been doing the script writing, and particularly Helene and I, and were very involved in the political content of the work, were suddenly relegated to making coffee and doing photocopying for Grupo Raiz, which was a mostly male — one woman singer was in it — but this Chilean singing ensemble whose home base was La Peña.

And it was a profound betrayal. We had been political colleagues and I had been in leadership and so had Helene and we were suddenly being shoved into the secretarial role. At the same time I had started corresponding with [Osvaldo Torres] the brother of one of the men in the group, who was a singer who was living in Chile. We brought him to the States and that's how I met him and we talked politics and had this very strong connection. There was certainly an attraction but I understood that he was married and I didn't touch him — against the rules for me. And he went back to Chile and started writing to me, and we mostly wrote about politics.

I started writing pieces that were being published in an underground publication there. I was doing temp work, which was great for the pens you could steal, the IBM Selectrics you could use on lunch break and all the free photocopying you could do. So I was reducing the articles and cutting them into little pieces and putting them in envelopes inside of greeting cards and sending them to accommodation addresses and stuff like that, doing writing for this journal. And he was writing me love letters and saying, you know, "I married young. She's not political. I'm leaving her. I'm looking for a relationship with somebody who is really political" — blah, blah, blah. You know, I was very clear I wasn't going to mess with it until it was really clearly resolved, but right about that same time he was prepared to come again on tour and we were going to get to see each other again. He was going to perform at the Clearwater Festival in New York. I got pulled in to be an interpreter. He did a lot of folk tales as well and when he had come before I had done some interpreting. So I went out to New York and the woman who was the organizer there said, "There's this woman in D.C. and there's this woman in this town — he's writing to five different women in the United States saying the same thing to each of them. And he has a wife,

and he has a long-time lover on the side who's coming with him on this tour."

So within a short space of time I experienced two really profound betrayals by Latino men and my sense of my ability to keep working with my — you know, that it was so close to home. It was coming from the men in my own community in that way. It wasn't the first time I encountered it but I got really slammed. I confronted — I told his partner. I confronted — we confronted him together. They both quickly decided that my personal feelings should not get in the way of my doing work for them. I ended up going on tour with the two of them, saw a lot of horrifying opportunism on both of their parts, ended up at the end of that really done with working in that organization, working in La Peña, and on the rebound from that experience — you know, having grown up with men who were very supportive of me, ended up in a marriage to a white apolitical guy who seemed to at least have emotional backing to offer me.

However, the other thing that happened in June of 1981 was that *This Bridge* was released and this was a real turning point moment in my life. I was in Boston. Because of this music gig I was in the area. So I went to Boston and the reading to celebrate the publication happened at Arlington Street Church. There were ten of us present. JEB [Joan Biren] has a photograph of that reading that I got a copy of through Minnie Bruce [Pratt]. We spent the day transforming the space, draping fabrics from our various cultures over the statues of dead white men, putting altars full of tropical fruits and musical instruments all over everything, making it our space.

It was a church that held about eight hundred people and there were 1,200 people there. People were sitting on the backs of the pews crowding the corridors. The word was out. We had not expected the book to do what it did. You know, it was a good book and we put a lot of work into it and then the first edition sold out in three weeks, and we were really taken by surprise by that, I think, all of us. I know Cherríe was a little — and Cherríe was the one I had more contact with than Gloria. I remember that there was some resentment about the success of the book.

ANDERSON: From?

MORALES: Women of color.

ANDERSON: Who were not in the book or you mean [who were] included?

MORALES: Who saw publishing with a white women's press or publishing and becoming famous in itself is a sort of abandonment. It was an internalization of, you know, what our place is that really made us pretty furious but we walked out onto the stage of that church and we got a standing ovation before we opened our mouths, and at that moment I understood more clearly than I had up to that point. It wasn't a new idea

to me but I got it in my bones that it wasn't personal. We were not being applauded because of our individual talents. We were being applauded because for whatever reason, we had been capable of being the tongues of an immense body. We had spoken something that everybody in that room felt. They were applauding themselves as much as they were applauding us and when I understood that I had a capacity to draw from, from my community, give voice to something, put it out and feed that community its own stories, having digested it through my body, I was clear that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. You know, standing there on that stage and reading the pieces and getting this immense flow of energy coming back from the 1,200 women sitting there, it was a religious experience. It was an amazing thing.

On the strength of what happened with *This Bridge*, I was suddenly credentialed. Suddenly I had the authority to speak about my own life and get paid a lot of money by a university to do so. Because that book had broken into — had been picked up by women's studies all over the country and was being taught. As a high school dropout I suddenly was an authority, I was an expert, and I was getting called up and asked to come speak about being both Jewish and Puerto Rican, about being an immigrant, about the particular position that I held. And it was a very odd experience to go from complete outsider to academia to being brought in as a lecturer and being paid hundreds of dollars. The first speaking gig I had was in '83.

ANDERSON: You're still living in California, right?

11:20

MORALES: Still living in California.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And my brother was getting married in Minneapolis. So I called up the University of Minnesota and said, "I'm a contributor to *This Bridge Called My Back* and I'll come speak if you pay my airfare." I didn't even know I was entitled to a fee and of course they were like, Yes. As a result, somebody who heard me speak there called me up and was — and had gone off to school in Portland and was at Lewis and Clark and said, "We're putting together this symposium. We'd like to have you come. And sorry, we can only pay you six hundred dollars." And I'm like trying to act cool over the phone.

ANDERSON: You're like, That's a month's rent.

MORALES: Nobody had ever paid me to talk about my life.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: And I was living off of pretty crappy jobs.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: You know, I was getting food stamps and I was working doing restaurant work and temp work and suddenly my life was worth something in academic circles — now, with all kinds of odd things attached to that because there was a kind of tokenism and commodification of the story and so on, but people were hungry for something. White women were hungry for something — that the challenge we were posing was exciting. It was terrifying but it was exciting.

ANDERSON: Did you tend to do most of the speaking gigs in those years by yourself or would they pair you with other contributors — what kind of shape did those engagements take?

MORALES: Some of each. There was a lot of these panel presentations — let's have one of each. So I started meeting the same group of women on the podium over and over again. Certainly other women who were in *This Bridge* were getting invited to speak a lot, but there were a lot of diversity-panel things happening.

ANDERSON: And were you reading your poetry or were you more giving talks about your life?

MORALES: I was reading my poetry and I was doing a combination of poetry and speaking, and we'll get to how that developed in a minute.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: But the other thing that happened in 1983 — there was a couple of other things that were really important. My mother did a reading in Ithaca, New York, and Nancy Bereano of Firebrand Books heard her, and my mother read some of my work and some of her work. We were really becoming writers together. We did that simultaneously. We were reading our own work to each other. We were telling each other about the women of color writers we were discovering. There was a lot of literary back and forth. Nancy wrote my mother a letter and said, "Would you and your daughter be interested in doing a book?"

So we started working on *Getting Home Alive* and she had a list of all these things, and it was everything we wanted to write about. So we were like, Wow, a book. We hadn't even thought of doing that. So she was facilitating us doing that, and we were about to sign a contract with her in '83 when I had a head injury in a car accident. Because of that, when she left Crossing Press and started Firebrand — we were not yet contracted, so we could go with her, and we were one of the first books she signed as Firebrand. The Jewish Feminist Conference happened in San Francisco in '83. This is where I met Judy Moschkovich. This is where I started finding more of the community where I could feel at

home. There were a group of — they kept having caucuses. You know, they had Jews, white gentiles, women of color who were not Jews, all meeting in separate caucuses at the same time, and there was a little group of women I kept meeting in the hallway, going, OK, where am I going to go?

So we became a group and, you know, started talking about multiple identities and about what it did to us to be fractured this way. The other thing that happened at that conference was that somebody called a bisexual caucus meeting. I arrived a little bit late. I opened the door and there was this room that was packed, and all the people in the room went, Yeah, you are in the right place. And I'm looking around and there's a bunch of women there who had been identifying as lesbians and never, you know, a peep about the guys in their lives, [which was], given the political climate, understandable. You know, there's all these women I thought were heterosexual and we're all going, You're here?

It was the beginning, for me, and I think for a lot of people that was a key moment, but the beginning of a space where bisexual identity was legitimate. That's the first time I remember being in a room like that. I had joined a group — Judy Moschkovich had invited me to join a group which we now refer to as the Hate Group. It was a group of very serious lesbian activists who were going to talk about class and race and anti-Semitism, and we were going to chew on those topics. Well, I got invited to join. A whole bunch of women felt deeply and personally betrayed that a bisexual woman had been invited to join and, you know, it wasn't a safe space if I was there — blah, blah, blah. Well, they spent four months debating that in my presence. I don't know why I stayed for it except that I was hungry for a group like that and I kept hoping it would be resolved in a way that would allow me to talk with these women who I shared a lot with politically. But the whole issue of separatism, you know, was being hashed out on me. So when bisexual spaces started appearing even minimally, [it] was tremendously exciting.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: So '83 was a really packed year. The other thing was that Women's Voices Writing Workshop was happening in Santa Cruz and I went the summer of '83. Gloria Anzaldúa was one of the teachers. Irena Klepfisz was on the staff [also teaching.] Other people were being brought in as speakers. I went twice so I can't remember now who came which year, but they would also bring women writers in to speak. And I know Susan Griffin came. I know Audre Lorde came. I don't remember if Adrienne came — I think Adrienne Rich came. And it was two weeks of living on the Santa Cruz campus and doing writing workshops half the day, writing in our rooms, doing readings, connecting with other women writers, and there were a significant number of women of color. So I was starting to find more local — I was part of the network of the

women who were in *This Bridge Called My Back* but increasingly there were solid groups of women writers with whom –

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: – I felt a strong base of connection, and that was also when I met the man I married, still off of the betrayal of the work with the [Latino] men. I didn't work in organizations with men for a really, really long time after that, or at least only with organizations that had just one or two and were really outnumbered by women.

ANDERSON: Do you want to say anything about the marriage?

MORALES: Oh, well, yes, as I go –

ANDERSON: Oh, OK. OK.

MORALES: I'll weave that through.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I think I was looking for shelter, which didn't end up being what I got. I think in a lot of ways it was not a marriage I should have gotten into. Although I remember Helene talking to me about the man who was the father of her kids and saying, you know, when I was getting ready to have a kid, I picked someone who really wasn't that great of a husband but who was a good father and, you know, as spouses, my partner and I didn't do all that well. As parents we've done really very well, considering how different we are, how different our perspectives are. I felt battered by what I'd gone through. I felt exhausted, demoralized.

He was somebody who was apolitical but also hungry for something and who, when he heard a reading of women from *This Bridge Called My Back*, wept at the poignancy of what people were saying for him. It was cracking open his world. And so, just to the point where I didn't want to go to La Peña anymore, he wanted to go to everything on the calendar. He wanted to find out what was going on in the world and it was new for him. So there were ways that was very nurturing for me and, you know, he was into meditation. He was a chiropractor, did alternative healing, took care of me a lot.

Part of what happened was I had the head injury four months into that relationship. We'd actually talked about cooling it a little bit and then there I was helpless and he was an alternative medicine practitioner and he started studying all these things about head injury and cranial work within chiropractic and doing all this work on me. And essentially it shifted our relationship and in some ways was part of the problem, was that there was a caretaker/patient thing going on there. And I was with him until 1995.

ANDERSON: So it's roughly a ten, ten-plus-year marriage. OK.

20:43

MORALES: Twelve years, total. The other thing that happened in '84 was that I became aware of my history of incest and there was a movement — there were people who — there were incest support groups. There were people talking about it and writing about it and organizing around sexual abuse within families, and I was part of that. I was starting to write about what had happened. And in that year I also met Ricky Sherover-Marcuse, who was a very, very important teacher of mine. She had been married to Herbert Marcuse. She was involved with Reevaluation Counseling, co-counseling, but I had met her because her partner had a friend who was a friend of a colleague of my dad's, and my dad came out and they hooked up and he met me and he said, "Will you tutor me in writing?" And he was a delightful man, Kosta Bagakis.

And I started teaching him writing and my technique for teaching writing was very much imbedded in my politics. It wasn't about craft. It was about where have you been socially silenced, what do you need to strip away in order to be able to speak your truth? So he constructed this writing class around me and had, you know, this group of people, all of whom it turned out were involved in co-counseling, so it was kind of a surround-and-capture maneuver. Ricky and I kept ending up on panels together and she'd be sitting near me and some little subtle piece of racism would go by and she'd lean over and say, "I saw that." I was like, Who is this woman and, you know, why is she following me around? But she kept being a good ally and saying smart things.

And then she said, "I know this way of doing social change work that doesn't involve going to meetings." And she courted me for two years, trying to get me into co-counseling and eventually did a class that was specifically for Jews and people of color. Now she was within co-counseling but was also taking some of the ideas of co-counseling that had to do with not only emotional healing techniques but understanding in detail how internalized oppression functioned in people's lives, that you could map out patterns of trauma in whole communities and then work individually on that and free up your intelligence to be doing the social change work. [Many people use co-counseling in this way, and the organization has sent delegations to major gatherings like the conference on racism in Durban, South Africa and so on. At the time, it seemed that Ricky was taking these tools farther out into the world than other people, doing workshops and trainings. She also created a camp for young people—with other people—and some of what she did that was based on co-counseling was controversial within the organization at that time, though I'm not sure on what basis.]

So she was doing very cutting-edge alliance building work and I studied with her, and essentially was a little bit apprenticed to her. That was coinciding with me getting these invitations to speak on campuses and this explosion of campuses realizing they had to do something about racism and didn't have a clue what. So they were looking for anybody they could credential to keep the natives quiet. And so, partly because I

had published in *This Bridge Called My Back* and partly because I was doing the work with Ricky, you know, who was fearless — she would go in and do workshops with children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazi officers and get them talking to each other and crying together about what had happened — I was now starting to do diversity trainings based on my long activist history and common sense, more than anything. I hadn't really learned that much how to do it. I watched Ricky and I saw what she did that worked, and I just jumped in.

So a lot of what I was doing was getting invited to go around and do workshops on eliminating racism and anti-Semitism and building alliances and what it took to be a good ally — working with terrified white people about, you know, What do I do with all these angry people of color in my life? Helping to foster, you know, when I went into colleges, talking to the small groups of isolated people of color — because most of the places that could afford to bring me were private schools — and say, OK, you need to take care of each other. This is how you need to take care of each other. You need to organize. You need to be doing more than just coming and telling me how bad it is. So I was organizing among students of color and I was trying to do some antiracism 101 on the campuses, and I started making a living at it, and that really got launched around '84 or '85.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm. Could you just say, for those people listening to the tape who don't know much about Reevaluation Counseling, what it is?

MORALES: Yeah. Another organization that I'm an insider/outsider in that I am both deeply grateful for and ambivalent about. It was started by a man named Harvey Jackins, oh gosh, in the '60s, I think, [or maybe even the '50s] and it's a system of peer counseling with a very explicit anti-oppression content, with a theory about natural healing processes. You know, that if we're allowed to cry, shake, rage, do the things our bodies do to relieve stress, that we can clean up past hurts. That's not, to me, the most original part of it. There's lots of systems with healing from emotional trauma, but it's very embedded in a political understanding of the world. You know, it's a one-point program for recovering human intelligence and eliminating all forms of humans harming humans.

So, you know, the work that's developed within that, there's a lot of constituency work that's developed within co-counseling, a tremendous sophistication and understanding the nature of internalized oppression, which to me has always been a very, very important, exciting theoretical point. It's like, What is it that's most keeping us from stopping our own mistreatment? The places in which we've internalized a sense of disempowerment are not able to effectively organize ourselves and end up fighting each other, instead of dismantling what's on top of us. You know, so we were — all the people of color constituencies and sometimes meeting together as groups, class constituencies, sexuality — strong work happening around Jewish liberation and a core perspective that all people are essentially good and that we have been shaped by

social forces that, you know, people who end up in oppressive positions don't get born that way. They get trained that way, based on what's being handed down within their families and cultures. To me, that was really exciting and it brought my work as an artist and my work as an activist and my work as a historian all kind of bound up together.

ANDERSON: Was it a tool in healing from the sex abuse, as an incest survivor?

MORALES: Not that much, because most people couldn't stand to hear about it, particularly couldn't stand to hear about the ritual abuse, the group perpetration stuff that had happened to me. Much more useful in other ways. I mostly wrote my way through the incest stuff. Yes.

ANDERSON: But it sounds like with feminism, too, in terms of the incest survivor's movement and all of that, also was a source of healing.

MORALES: Wherever I have been able to politicize my personal pain and find collective voices, that's where I've moved forward, and I've done that a lot through writing.

ANDERSON: Yes. Do you want to talk about the book you did with your mom now? Is that where we're —

MORALES: We're coming up on it.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: OK. So 1985. This was a very, very [packed] — and then it gets a lot less dense because I had a young child. But it's very, very packed, up to '88 — [In 1983 I went to] *Women's Voices*. I went again in 1985. Laura Davis was there and she interviewed me for *Courage to Heal*. We became friends. That was where I began, you know, or I publicly wrote about the incest and deepened my connections with some of the other writers and teachers there. And then I went to the Latin American and Caribbean Conference, Encuentro, in Brazil. I think Judy Moschkovich and Carmen Vazquez were on the same plane down with me. One of the things that most struck me about that experience, it was a very different style of organizing, that they had these tracks of topics that were going to be discussed. There would be a room and a label that said "racism" on the door and, you know, a hundred and something women jammed into this room. No facilitation — kind of go at it, you have the day, which is kind of horrifying to me. Also because of some of the resentment that Brazilian women had towards Spanish speakers, [towards our habit of] assuming that Spanish would be the common language, they didn't do any interpretation for a while at the sessions.

So I had to kind of wing it with trying to figure out understanding the Portuguese, but the first shock was that OK, in Puerto Rico I had been seen as, within the Puerto Rican context, white, which means a

different thing in a lot of ways, but I was a *blanquita*, I was a *rubia*. It was partly about class, it was partly about my color. Then I came to the States and became a spic and a woman of color within a movement. And then I show up in Brazil and it dawns on me that Latina is not a category of oppressed people in Latin America, that the people of color caucuses are, you know, native people, African people, Asian people. I'm going, Huh.

And then we're in these conversations where I see black Brazilian women are trying to talk about racism, white Brazilian women are blowing them off, and the group of women of color from the States who range in color but who have a political identification as women of color are saying things, backing up the black Brazilian women. And the white Brazilian women would listen to us and not to them, so that we start becoming interpreters in that context. You know, so I'm saying things about racism and the black women are looking at me and going, How do you know that? And we're having to explain that as Latin American immigrants to the United States, we become targeted by racism and are therefore savvy about it. I wasn't savvy about racism in Puerto Rico. I didn't have to be. I became savvy as I got targeted by it. I changed social color when I moved to the States and then I got to carry that social color back to Latin America and have a perspective on racism that white Brazilian women didn't have, by and large.

So that was a fascinating discovery to me, and part of my ongoing thinking about how changeable these categories that we think are cast in iron are by context and, you know, of course differently for me as a light-skinned woman than for somebody dark, but it made me more interested in the history of racism and in the ways that the specific agendas of racism change in response to economic needs at the moment in the different situations.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: The book my mother and I had written came out in '86 — and again, I think we didn't expect the response that we got. When we wrote it there was just a handful of books on the shelves that had anything to do with the U.S.–Puerto Rican experience, and they were mostly by men. There was Nicolasa Mohr's novels, young adult novels about growing up in New York City in the '40s. There was *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas. There was like a handful of stuff, not very much by women, and people started coming up to us at readings with these tattered copies that they took everywhere with them because it was a form of medicine for them to be able to open the book and go, Here I am on this page. One of my proudest credentials as a writer is to know that my poem "Child of the Americas" was plastered on bathroom walls in a small school in Michigan as graffiti, in an attempt to get people thinking about racism.

32:23

Rina Benmayor, a Sephardic Jew working in the Puerto Rican community, working at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, wrote a

beautiful review of our book and contacted us directly to say — I'm trying to think. Maybe it was later, actually. [I had known her in the early '80s when we worked together on bringing two Cuban artists to the Bay Area, and then we'd lost touch.] When I got to know her again she said, "That book got me through my day over and over again." You know, somebody who was Jewish and Latina-identified, you know, was Sephardic and lived in Mexico and was, again, in an in-between category — that I wrote about being both Jewish and Latina opened up space for other people. I think it was the combi[nation] — the experience of what *Getting Home Alive* meant to people, and there were reviews that were coming in saying, This is a landmark in Puerto Rican literature. It's changed the conversation. It was a new genre thing that we were doing, which a lot of women of color were doing, but you know, we were mixing poetry and prose, autobiography and fiction. We were shaking it up and making a collage.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: Which came totally naturally to us but was not a legitimated form of writing. I was the one who assembled the manuscript. We had all these pieces and I was like the quilter, and I found that if I did it at home, worked on it at home, there was this spirit of the English professor that would come into my head, this arrogant white guy with a pipe and a tweed jacket with little leather patches on his elbows. And I would find myself putting things in these very rigid, chronological weird orders and so I would go to the public library and spread out on a table where every time I looked up, I saw working-class people. I saw a lot of women. I saw a lot of people of color. I saw readers instead of some prof in my head, and I was able to create a much more fluid structure for the book that was more call and response.

ANDERSON: What did you leave out of the book?

MORALES: What did I leave out of the book?

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm. I mean, were there choices that you made about topics or subject matter that you decided shouldn't be included?

MORALES: Well, my conflict with my mother. We were having a horrible time with each other as we were writing this book. I think there was a six-month period in there we weren't even speaking to each other. If we hadn't lived on other ends of the country, we wouldn't have been able to do this book together.

ANDERSON: So the book then brought up more tensions between you, or what was it — what did it do to your relationship, the book?

MORALES: I don't know that it was the book.

ANDERSON: Did it bring you together, in the end?

MORALES: Yes. Well, I mean, it didn't change our relationship that much.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: Because we had the combination of a very difficult personal relationship and close alliance around writing and politics, and that continued, and our close alliance started including doing readings together, calling each other up and talking about the reviews that we had gotten, about how people were responding to the work. We had a fictitious character called Margarita Rexach, the Puerto Rican feminist poet we were not, who was somebody from the island with a you know, middle-class Puerto Rican elite cultural training who had written a book called *Poemario*. You know, we had this whole — we started creating little pieces in her voice and stuff, to talk about what our identity as writers was, because we didn't really have a model and because we could tell that sometimes people wanted to see us that way. So it intensified our collaboration.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: But you know, the tensions within our personal relationship didn't disappear. So it wasn't a lot — I mean, I didn't write about her alcoholism or having been kicked out of home. The stuff that was most loaded between us I didn't write about, but I didn't feel like I needed to. That's not what the book was for.

ANDERSON: Yes. So after the book came out, you found yourself having a lot of contact with one another too because you would go on readings together, right, or —

MORALES: She wasn't into traveling.

ANDERSON: Oh, OK.

MORALES: So if I came to the East Coast we read together.

ANDERSON: So you mostly represented the book —

MORALES: She did around New England and may have done a couple readings in New York, I think, but she just doesn't like traveling all that much and I love traveling. And I was doing the university circuit anyway.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And this boosted that tremendously. There were all kinds of people using the book in their courses. So first I had become suddenly an

expert by virtue of *This Bridge Called My Back* on women of color feminism and identity politics. [And then when *Getting Home Alive* came out,] I remember opening that box of books and seeing my face on the back and my name on the front and having this odd dissociation going like, What is my name doing on someone's book? And I kept pulling them out and they all had my name and my picture on them. It was a strange experience. And suddenly I was validated as a writer, and not only as a writer but as a cutting-edge writer. Again, I had written something people were really hungry for. I was getting letters from people, all these different places. It took awhile for it — Nancy knew how to distribute it in feminist circles — it took a while for it to really penetrate into Puerto Rican communities and into teaching.

So there were a couple of waves of reaction to it, but over and over what happened was that people said, You have held up a mirror and I've never seen myself on the printed page before until you wrote this. You know, this was really pre-email in my life but I would get people coming up to me at readings a lot and saying, When I first found this — this just happened to me recently. I did a reading at City College in San Francisco, and a young woman came up to me and said, "I have loved you since I was 14." She said that her mother was Puerto Rican, was a drug addict, they had a very difficult relationship. She said, "The only thing we ever did together was read your book." You know, so I understood it was, again, this sense of vast appreciation for something that was beyond the personal qualities of my craft. It was not about, Oh, aren't I the hot poet. It was this profound sense of gratitude that I knew how to express something people were so hungry for and it's what propelled me toward my work as a historian.

And here's where the '80s get a lot slower, because I got pregnant in 1987 and my daughter, Alicia, was born in the summer of '88. Most of my friends were not parents. Many of them disappeared from my life. They did not know how to relate to the way my life had changed. I was very sick. I had an emergency C-section. It was a very difficult birth. I was sick for a long time after. I became quite isolated in a lot of ways for a couple years. In 1989 — I guess she was six months old — I decided to go back to school, having not been in school since I left Franconia, mostly because I didn't want my entire life to be taken up with thinking about diapers. I wanted a place — I wanted a safe space for intellectual life.

ANDERSON: Were you still writing?

MORALES: Actually, this is a very interesting — one of my biggest fears about becoming a mother was that it would devour my writing. What happened instead was that — I had gone to travel agent school. I decided to be a travel agent and organize like socially relevant tours in the Caribbean. The minute I got pregnant, I couldn't sit in front of a VDT [video display terminal] any more. I had gotten a job with a travel

agency and I had to resign. I said, “Sorry, I’m pregnant. I’m not sitting in front of that thing.”

I had this image of my child’s eyes looking at me with this amazing clarity and I thought, I can’t look back if I’m not writing. I can’t live a life in which I’m not doing everything that I’m capable of doing. And if I’m not writing, my life is going to be a lie. And the period of my pregnancy and early motherhood were actually tremendously productive. I was driven to write. And when Alicia was a baby — I mean, one of the things that — for me, having a baby eliminated writer’s block from my life because it was a luxury I could not afford. OK, I’ve got fifteen minutes before the child is likely to — you know, I’ve got a window here. I’m going to sit down and I’m going to pour this out onto the page and then, you know, when she naps later I might have a little bit of time to edit it before I crash out.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: My partner, Jim, was working out of the house, he had a chiropractic practice in our home, so he was available a lot but he was seeing patients and I was taking care of her and writing. So I went to Mills College and I signed up for — I just was going to take one or two classes and I took a class with Gabriel Melendez, who was in ethnic studies there. Pretty high turnover of faculty of color at Mills but he was doing a class on I think it was Mexican and Chicana writing, women’s writing, I’m pretty sure, and his office became my refuge. I would go in there to rage about racism. I was also taking a writing course. I can’t remember if it was — I think it was a fiction course, and I kept getting the feedback in that class, feedback that was entirely related to be being a mostly white class. I would come in with a story and be told that it was too collective of a story, that I needed to be inside the angst of an individual person, that that’s how creative writing was done.

Well, you know, and then I was going to the ethnic studies course and I was reading, you know, a novel in which the protagonist was an entire village, and I’m going, That’s what I come from, is a collective sense of identity, and my story is about relationships between people, not somebody’s internal “oh my God,” which I found really tedious. I was also being told things like, There’s no audience for bilingual writing, take out the words of Spanish in your writing because there’s no audience for it. And I’m going, This is California: what are you talking about?

ANDERSON: And you’re published already.

MORALES: And I had already done it, and it wasn’t like it was half and half. I had sprinklings of Spanish phrases. So I was going into his office and going, Oh my God, and tearing my hair out. And he was the one who said to me, “Why are you wasting your time on a BA? You’re a nationally known author, you’re doing graduate level work in my class. Find a

program that is going to give you credit for life experience and leap frog over all of this. You're going to save yourself years. You're going to save yourself tens of thousands of dollars. See if you can find a program." And because of his support, I ended up finding out about Union Institute. I wrote them an essay saying that I thought I had a Masters in cultural activism. And they wrote back and said, You're the person, the kind of person we created this loophole for. We agree. So having only an AA in terms of actual credits and not having graduated from anything, I was able to go straight into a doctoral program, which I started in '91.

ANDERSON: OK. How did your — you talk about how your writing changed in terms of its ferocity and how your process was different with Alicia, but how did the content change now that you became a mother? I mean, that's one of the things that is so noticeable about, you know, Cherríe's writing, for example — you know, when she writes that wonderful book about her son. And so, how does she [Alicia] seep into what you're writing about, or does she?

MORALES: It was more a change of quality. I remember — and this is something I'm kind of getting ahead of myself, but I remember in the Latina feminist group that I was in starting in '93, talking about how different it was that most of us experienced our children as a force that kept us honest and how, you know, my expectation within the white feminist movement was, you know, there was this sense of like, the children get in your way, that motherhood and a powerful life as a woman intellectual were a contradiction and you had to choose.

ANDERSON: That's been the tradition in this country for white women for two hundred years, right? That's the old — yes.

MORALES: That it wasn't the tradition among women of color. It was an assumption that part of your work as an activist was to raise the next generation, to some degree. I mean, we struggled with some of the same issues about how to you accommodate it time-wise and, you know, in terms of resources. But we were also used to it being a collective project. You know, even though certainly many of us had mothers who struggled alone, there was still a tradition within sight, of communities raising kids. Where I grew up, kids were in and out of everybody's houses. Lots of people were raising, you know, relatives, cousins, neighbors' children. There wasn't so much of an individual, isolated family structure.

I feel that what it did more than anything was deepen my work. I went deeper. Not that I lied before but I became more honest in the sense that if there were nuances, if what I was saying was simplistic, I couldn't tolerate it — that the nuance needed to be there, that the depth and the complexity needed to be there. I felt that I owed it to her. There were a lot of times — you know, I was writing my dissertation most of

47:22

her early childhood — there were lots of times when she wanted me to be with her and where it was really painful to have her crying outside my study door for her mother and yet I thought, I'm opening a space for her to choose for herself, to choose to put her own passions ahead of taking care of others. If she sees me doing this, it's going to make it possible for her as a girl to do the same.

And, you know, I spent as much time with her as I could, but she understood very young that I was doing something really important. When she was like five or six she would stop people in grocery stores and say, My mom wrote a book, it's really good, you should read it. You know, she would pass these little wistful notes as she began to learn how to write, stick a note under my door that says, "Will you play with me? Yes, No, check one." And I'd be in there going, Oh my God, but going I have to finish this page. I have to finish this section.

I had a partner who financially supported me through part of that which, you know, made it possible to do that. It's different when you're a single parent and you don't have anybody to take care of your child or you have to pay a fortune for childcare but it was an important part of my motherhood to keep my writing central and it made me not resent her needs, and when I was with her, I was really with her. And motherhood takes you beyond what you think you can do. It increases your capacity in every area, I think. You know, labor stretched me beyond my limit, early — going for months without sleep stretched me beyond my limit. I toughened. I learned about my own capacity. I adored being a mother.

I think, you know, my daughter is one of my favorite creative projects that I've undertaken, and she's now emerging as a poet herself, as a spoken-word artist, as a singer, as a theatrical performer, and she's able to claim a voice of her own and be the feisty young woman that she is, partly because I did not give myself over to mothering. I maintained that tension. And it was difficult to do. My marriage did not last through her childhood or through the completion of graduate school and it became more challenging when I was doing the divorced co-parent thing and when I was no longer being supported.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: But for me, motherhood enriched my intellectual life to no end and continues to keep me in integrity. There are things that — you know, I write with my daughter in mind all the time. I think that a lot of what I do is a conversation with her.

ANDERSON: What role models did you have for mothering and how closely do you — did you find yourself mothering in the same way that Rosario mothered you?

MORALES: I'm a very different mother in a lot of ways. I'm not ambivalent about motherhood, and my mom was. You know, my daughter and I snuggle

all the time and take showers together. She'd be mortified that I'm saying this in public but we have a much more intimate, daily, personal relationship than my mom and I were able to do. But not long ago my daughter came home and told me that she had told her high school counselor that I was her best friend, and I called my mom up and I told her that and I said that she had started our family on a road, that she had begun to break the vicious mother-daughter lineage in our family. She said, "Now, you wouldn't say that about me, would you?" And I said no, but we carved out areas in which we were each other's best allies. That was a step on that road. She and her mother had a ferociously antagonistic relationship in a lot of ways. Her mother was brutally critical of her. My mother was brutally critical of me but less so, and I'm critical of my daughter but much less so.

You know, each generation — and it's not evolution, it's a conscious feminist choice to try to break something that was going on in our lineage. So I told my mom that was her victory too, and it was a very emotional moment. It's like it took a couple generations. And you know, I wrote in *This Bridge Called My Back* in the third generation, the daughters are free. Don't know that she's free but she has a self-confidence and a political sophistication and ability to go after what she wants at 17 that I didn't have in my thirties. We've managed between us to cut years off of her struggle. She's starting way ahead of where I started and way ahead of where my mom started. Each of us has moved something forward in this feminine line in our family.

I learned a lot of parenting from co-counseling. I assistant taught a baby's class because co-counseling philosophy about parenting was one of the other most important — the two most important things I got were the really detailed sophisticated thinking about internalized oppression and the philosophy of parenting, which understood that a lot of how oppression gets passed on begins in how we treat children, that the ways in which children are disempowered early makes them fertile ground to be trained into other kinds of social relationships that are destructive and that a lot of it happens with the hushing of — you know, that you're not allowed to cry. You're not allowed to rage. You're not allowed to express what it's really like to be a baby and heal from it as it's going on. And so, you know, co-counseling parents hold their kids when they're crying and say, Tell me all about it, rather than jiggling them up and down and trying to get them to be quiet. And I had a couple years of practice doing that before I was a mom. It was very hard to remember in the moment when your child is sobbing their heart out that they might be trying to tell you a story rather than be in immediate need or having something shoved in their mouth. You know, it's a revolutionary approach to parenting.

And when I had a baby who was waking up at night — my friends were walking the floor desperately trying to silence their children so they could get back to sleep, we slept with our daughter — I would turn to her and say you know, You can tell me all about it, and just, you know, Let me be here with you while you cry. So much easier. I wasn't,

you know, shaking her and walking around the house and going, How can I — and she wasn't in some other room and — and so I was very, very grateful that I had those tools. It really made a huge difference. And I was lucky that I lived in a place where there was a strong community of co-counseling parents of young children who — I had a mother's support group of people who had babies. There were workshops in which babies and adults were, you know, together for a weekend, everybody was helping pay attention to the child and there was a lot of support, a lot of resources. I was very, very lucky. There's no — we don't get training in parenthood at all. We jump into it with this idea that we're just going to know what to do and then there we are like, Oh my God.

ANDERSON: And especially, like you were saying, when you want to make interventions in that way, you don't just want to continue to recreate, and so, where are the tools? Some of them can come from feminism but some of them can come from other places, but like you said, it has to be a very conscious thought through process of how you're going to do it. Otherwise, you will continue the legacy.

MORALES: And some of it was my own sense of both what I had valued and what had been hard for me in my own parenting. The places in which I felt neglected, particularly my pains trying to pay more attention to basic needs and also the thing I was saying earlier, about making a commitment not to give her simplistic answers to her questions, that I was consciously growing an activist. I wanted somebody who, confronted with the kind of world that we live in, could ask complex questions and think her way through things. So, you know, it was consciously creating an intellectual partnership with this child so we'd be able to think about things together.

ANDERSON: All right. I'm going to pause there.

58:29

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

ANDERSON: [For the] last hour we have identified three priorities: one is your work as a historian — maybe we'll begin with that.

MORALES: OK.

ANDERSON: Unless you feel like those questions of spirituality and faith sort of predates it. Is that something you want to tackle first?

MORALES: Yes, why don't I tackle that first.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: I just did another oral history interview on that so it's fresh in my mind.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: Well, I think I said on the earlier tape that I grew up in an atheist household –

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: – in a spiritual community with the subversive spirituality of the colonized, and always had a private spiritual practice that had much more to do with traditional, people of color's spiritual traditions than the official religions. I grew up learning cures and spells and interpretation of dreams and a sense of spiritual guidance and purpose. But I didn't have any way to practice that with other people. Well, actually, with my best friend growing up, we sometimes did little charms and things. In Chicago, as I said, the experience of being in the Unitarian church youth group was not particularly a spiritual one. It was more of a cultural and emotional one.

I got to the Bay Area and I think that my entry into collective spiritual life was really through Jewish feminist stuff because we hadn't grown up celebrating the holidays particularly, but suddenly I was in a community of Jewish women who had been raised traditionally who were trying to remake the rituals to serve their needs. And so, at this point I don't remember the names of most of the people involved but there was a very active group of people who had been raised, some even orthodox, conservative, reform, whatever, putting together women's Passover seders, putting together — you know, that was the initial place but then claiming other kinds of rituals, trying to come up with Jewish lesbian wedding ceremonies, different kinds of blessings and namings for babies and a fusion of prayer and liberation work.

I was aware of liberation theology in Latin America but I was not myself from a Catholic tradition. So before I was excited about it as a political development, it had personal resonance for me in the same way

that the Jewish stuff did, and I ended up being asked to write a Haggadah for La Peña. They said, Let's do a liberation seder. We did this amazing thing. We had audio footage of people in El Salvador who had escaped from the areas of the army occupation into guerilla-held territory and were being received by a priest who was talking about the Exodus story, which we played over the sound system as we were telling — you know, interweaving it with the story of the Exodus in Egypt.

So I started participating in Jewish ritual and then coming in contact with more and more groups of people who were trying to reclaim different aspects of spiritual traditions and integrate them into their lives. Lots of people I knew — I had always made little altars and sacred spaces around me but I started meeting women who were consciously creating altars in their homes that drew on the Yoruba tradition, that drew on indigenous traditions — women who were writing about goddesses in different cultures. You know, some of it was silly. There was a lot of appropriation, a lot of people taking on particularly Native American names as a way to feel more spiritual, a lot of that racist stuff tied up in it, but it resonated with my childhood and it resonated with my always strongly held, very private sense of spiritual connection. I always felt a sense of guidance and a sense of that dreams were meaningful, that there was communications from the universe and there were these healing traditions around me as I was growing up that I knew little bits of.

So I started participating in more of that. I did become involved at one point in Reclaiming Collective. It had a multicultural group. This was Starhawk's organization. Had a multicultural group that met for about a year I was with them, ended up designing a public ritual that was about all the different cultures from which we were drawing — understanding the uses of public rituals in activist work as well as energy-based healing and visioning as an important part of our own sustainability as activists. And I started moving more and more into organized practice.

And at this point, my two practices are the Yoruba tradition and Judaism. I am a member of a reconstructionist synagogue. Mostly what I can get to because of having difficulty with mobility but mostly what I get to are the High Holy Day rituals, but the services for High Holy Days are a central point of my year where I really make use of the ritual for stock taking and reaching into the next phase of my growth as a human being and I love that it draws on both radical politics and mystical stuff and that there's tons and tons of singing and chanting and dancing. It's quite an ecstatic kind of ceremony.

And then for a period of a couple of years I studied with Luisah Teish and began learning in more detail about a religion that was around me all the time as a child that I knew little bits about. I find that over the years I've picked up a great deal and that I have a spiritual practice that is quite rich. I was just interviewed by Irene Lara from San Diego for something she's doing on Latinas and spirituality and activism and

healing. And one of the things we discussed was the identification — and Cherríe and some other people who you've interviewed have also been interviewed for that project. The traditions of *brujería* and *curanderismo* in Latin America and that it's much easier to identify publicly as a *curandera*. It's a nice feminine occupation of healing and it's a very powerful tradition which I do claim, but that the tradition of *bruja* to me is about claiming a larger power, claiming a right to influence events. I don't identify it with manipulation and, you know, nasty behavior but a willingness to be fully empowered and to use whatever tools are at hand and so I do identify with that tradition of magical activism, the uses of ritual and prayer and ceremony to draw energy when we need it.

So it's very interesting being in that identity, coming from an atheist Marxist family. No, it's not the opiate of the masses actually, and it's quite integrated into all of my life at this point and something that my daughter is also familiar with and makes use of. So that's mostly what I want to say about that.

ANDERSON:

So let's talk about your work as a historian. You began the graduate program at the Union Institute, as you've mentioned, and that takes you into the '90s, and –

8:54

MORALES:

I started that program in '91. I had always been fascinated with history. My father had told history bedtime stories when I was a kid. I came from a household with historical consciousness. My parents saw themselves rooted in traditions, saw their work in a big historical span, and so I was always fascinated with it. And as somebody who was this mixed heritage, immigrant mix of things, I was always being asked to explain myself, and history was the answer to the questions I was being asked. But you know, as I was saying a little earlier, when people kept coming up to me with copies of *Getting Home Alive* and saying, I haven't seen myself before, I kept thinking about how legitimating it is to people to be in books and on the walls of museums and in exhibits and how restricted a space that is, and I thought of going into history as a way of learning to tell deeper, broader stories. For me, being a poet and historian are not actually different jobs at all. I'm seeking ways to tell those stories. And it's not distinct from magic. The story you tell shapes the world you see. As a poet, as a spiritual practitioner, as a historian, my job is to create stories and tell stories that help people shift the reality of what's possible.

And so, as a historian, I wanted to create a telling of Puerto Rican women's history that allowed Puerto Rican women to imagine a much greater significance for themselves, a much great impact on the history to come, and so I set out to research — my graduate school project was to research a history that reconnected — that looked at the landscape of pretty much the Atlantic world, you know, all the rims of the Atlantic — to look at that world and say, How would the story of this part of the planet be told differently with Puerto Rican women at the center of it? If

you assume Puerto Ricans were the most important players. And, you know, what if you follow the threads of connection out from that and recon — because the study of history is so chopped up by area, you know, the relational nets get hacked up.

And I wanted to tell a history that was explicitly medicinal, having come through the co-counseling perspective on internalized oppression. In co-counseling language you talk about things being a contradiction to the distress, as something that goes against the internalized messages. And I began to explore, partly out of my own experience of healing from the sexual violence, started looking at how do you draw from what we've learned from the incest survivor's movement, the anti-rape movement, the domestic violence movements about that process that individual women have to go through in retelling the story of what happened to them that makes them agents in their own lives, not simply victims of these dreadful circumstances. There's the process by which, in doing collective healing or therapeutic work or whatever — the violence itself writes a story on us that says you're someone to whom this gets done, that the healing seems to come from making a different meaning out of those events. How do we translate those lessons onto collective traumas? How do we look at a colonized people like mine, one of the earliest colonized peoples of the Americas, five hundred years of occupation, all kinds of colonial brutalities and then the migration experience and the brutalities of racism in the United States, and all of the traditions of the different patriarchal processes that have landed on us? How do I tell a version of history that rewrites who we are in the story?

And I wasn't interested in just writing a series of heroic portraits, the add-women-and-stir approach. I didn't just want to find my equivalent brown women to put in a portrait gallery. I wanted to examine traditions of survival and resistance, and look at the full range of what that meant, that there were people whose survival had been based on sacrificing other people and doing things that were short-sighted in the long run and yet they were still acts of resistance — you know, it was an act of resistance if an enslaved woman dawdled on the way to do something she'd been told to do and have her own thoughts for a few minutes — that I wanted to talk about the whole range of that in order for contemporary Puerto Rican women and other women who could draw from this story to feel that they were standing on a ground of pride, and that that was my job.

And so I went about researching this history in a very different way than traditional history projects. You know, I would look at other people's dissertations and there'd be like, you know, the price of bread in a French village on Thursdays in this decade — you know, like really narrow kinds of things. I chose a nontraditional school so that I'd have the freedom to explore widely. You know, I had people say, That's not a dissertation: you have to pick a narrower topic. And I was like, No, my story starts 200,000 years ago and ends in the year of my birth.

And because I was looking for what was potent and not necessarily a comprehensive story, I could do that. I could go into the archives and follow some thread and go, Nelson Miles, who led the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico, was also the military commander in a lot of wars against the people of the Northern Great Plains. That's a tie between the people of the Great Plains and the people of Puerto Rico. Let me follow that story back. And so I have the story of Lost Bird who is a, I think a Lakota child found on the battlefield, adopted by this military officer whose wife is a white feminist off with the Pankhursts, you know, fighting for women's right to vote, while he's sexually abusing this native girl in the home — and looking at all the contradictions of the different kinds of struggles that we faced and saying, That is a story related to the Puerto Rican story because it's the same guy leading the invasions. It's part of a larger history of imperialism.

So I spent seven years writing *Remedios* and crafting for myself an identity as a historian that was not like that of any other historians I knew. I felt very strongly that my history needed to be written in a language that was assimilable. The metaphor in my head — I used a lot of metaphors from medicinal healing in the work. I kept thinking that the history that I wanted to tell bore the same relationship to the history that mostly was available, that healing traditions in the community bore to the pharmaceutical corporations' products and that also that researching and writing this history in academic language and sticking it in a university library somewhere was the equivalent of discovering AZT [azidothymidine, an anti-HIV drug] and then making it cost a million bucks — you know, that it had to be available to people, and that literary language made the stories available.

And so I chose to write this not as an academic narrative with a lot of analytical stuff out in the open. The analysis is embedded in the poetry and I wrote it in short poetic vignettes that I collaged together so that the full complexity and contradictoriness of the story emerged, that I could put this story and this story next to each other and go, Yes but, Yes but, Yes but, all the way through. And the essay that I wrote that's been most circulated about that process is called "The Historian As *Curandera*."

During that time — toward the end of the graduate school time I also began doing community history projects in the Bay Area. It started with an undergraduate student who was just finishing up an honors thesis on the Puerto Rican migration to the Bay Area. Nitza Medina contacted me or I contacted her, I don't remember. Somehow we got in touch by email and I had been fascinated with the snippets that I had learned in researching this story about Puerto Rican migration to California. A very dramatic story of people being packed onto these special trains under armed guard. People dying on the trains, their bodies being left at depots in the middle of the night. Virtual slavery conditions, both in transit and in the sugar camps. A very powerful story. And she helped hook me up with Puerto Rican organizations that were interested in funding some kind of historical work. We're talking about very small

amounts of funding, but at this point I was once again partnered with somebody who was a professional photographer, Barry Kleider, and they came up with, I think it was seven thousand dollars to do collective oral histories and do professional portraits of elders in the community. That project has now been going — well, counting the initial stuff — for almost ten years.

ANDERSON: Wow.

MORALES: I've collected a couple dozen oral histories. Many, many photographs that I scanned from people's personal collections, and created an exhibit called "California Century: Puerto Ricans in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1900 to 2000." And that was mounted in the community and people came from hours away to see themselves on the walls. And you know, people would go, That's my great aunt, because all these families had been — it's a small community, and a lot of them are related to each other. Or you know, My grandma told me about that — to see something your grandma told you about on the walls of a historical society or museum is a profoundly empowering experience. So that's an ongoing project, and I've been —

ANDERSON: How did you train yourself for the oral history component of that? Did you just jump in?

20:22

MORALES: You know, I just jumped in. I knew that I knew how to listen to people and I knew I knew how to ask potent questions, and I read things as I went. I am a self-trained — most things that I am, I'm self-trained. I didn't really get any mentoring in that. I just jumped in. I had no funding. I couldn't afford to go to oral history summer programs at the institutions that do that. I didn't have the money to do that but I had done radio interviewing. I had co-counseling expertise. I knew how to listen and validate and draw out, and I had a passion for story. So I had what it took to do it.

ANDERSON: Did you find, as a methodology, that it was something that you were really drawn to? Compared to the work that you did for your dissertation and your book, it was —

MORALES: I love both.

ANDERSON: Different kind of research, yes.

MORALES: Yes.

ANDERSON: You like both.

MORALES: I love digging in archives for fragments of story that are just packed with emotional, you know, significance and are, you know, buried in

dry stuff. You know, I have a project ongoing in Puerto Rico in which I'm looking at land ownership and gender and class and stuff up in the mountains of Puerto Rico, and I read through these land deeds. And you can see incredible drama in, you know, here's somebody — a woman inherits land from a husband or father and then acre at a time it's being traded off for groceries over a period of years until they don't own it any more. That's not a dry story even though it may be written in dry form. So, I love doing both but, you know, sitting and drawing out a story from someone who doesn't think their life is important and having them say astonishing things, and then being able to show it back to them, to put it on a wall — there is this one elderly gentleman who comes every time the exhibit is hung and stands casually near his portrait. Brings friends and then stands casually until they notice that it's him. You know, he'll go off, he'll come back with another group of friends and just kind of be there until they notice. You know, it's exciting when the young people get to come and see that and think about their grandparents and great grandparent's stories in a different way.

ANDERSON: How did it — is this when you begin to get particularly interested in your own family history and doing the family —

MORALES: No.

ANDERSON: No?

MORALES: That had been way earlier.

ANDERSON: OK, so —

MORALES: I had always been fascinated with my own family story.

ANDERSON: OK.

MORALES: And I'm still — you know, I'm working on — I would like to use research into my own family story as a way of talking about race and class in Puerto Rico. Like I said, it has really not been talked about very much and because it's my own family, I get to expose the realities of slave holding and racism within the family and what class meant over many, many generations. I'm still researching a lot of the details of that but I think it's really important and doing it about my own family lets me say things that if I were trying to say them as generalizations would be more contested. So it's very interesting working on this as this kind of a historian. I've been struggling recently with an article I've been asked to write about my research and realizing that I have to write it as a poet and that it's going to be a different kind of article than the journal in question is usually used to getting.

ANDERSON: With the degree did you think that you would go into history in any more formalized way or did you think about it as continuing your life as a writer, post degree, or what did you expect out of that?

MORALES: I expected — well, OK. This is a good segue into the next topic because I expected that I would be possibly teaching although I knew I had some ambivalence about being in an academic institution and in grad school I began doing some adjunct teaching to try it out and realized that I didn't actually like it very much. Mostly I loved dealing with students but I didn't like dealing with the bureaucracy at all. I just could not tolerate the petty politics of competing for scarce resources within the institutions and how nasty people got to each other and the false world that gets constructed in academic institutions where people think that they're the planet. You know, I just didn't want to — I was part of a working-class, non-academic intellectual tradition and it just didn't feel like home to me at all.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: I did enjoy teaching at San Francisco State, where I had a lot of working-class students and people of all ages and it was a really different experience. But it was still horrifying dealing with the departmental politics and the administration. I thought I would also be able to have better access to research grants, be part of community history projects. It was pretty clear that that was the direction I was going to end up going. And I did end up doing some work with the Oakland Museum for three years and really loved doing that. The grant expired and also my health intervened.

I had had health challenges from very young. I now think, as our family discusses these issues and thinks through my own health and also my mother's and how various members of my family have had different physical struggles, that the pesticides my parents used on the farm in the 1950s when they were blacklisted and that's how they survived, you know, they were city kids learning to farm from books. It was the age of the chemical miracle and they used heavy amounts of extremely toxic stuff and my liver was harmed by that. I think it's probably a contributing factor to my epilepsy. I had my first epileptic seizure in '77 when I was 23. Didn't have one again for ten years until I was in labor, but as I've gotten towards middle age and into middle age, I've started having many, many more seizures, partly, I think, because of an accumulation of stresses and toxins, partly because of hormonal changes, but starting — I'd had issues with fatigue from my teens — starting about a year after my daughter was born they got much, much more serious.

I became also chemically sensitive. During the pregnancy we moved into an apartment with brand new carpeting and all kinds of chemicals and suddenly I couldn't be in a room with a gas appliance. I couldn't be in rooms with new carpet. I couldn't be around paint. I was getting

horrible symptoms from chemical exposure and I had increasingly severe episodes of very, very bad fatigue. There was a period where I would turn white from the effort of lifting a glass of water to drink from it. I spent a lot of time in the alternative healthcare systems as well as the medical establishment trying to find ways to work with that. I had a second head injury in 2000. Between all of these things I ended up taking several medical leaves during graduate school.

When I finished graduate school, I tried to move into various kinds of teaching jobs and other kinds of work and I could not do it, partly because the head injury. You know, the earlier one had made certain kinds of detail work very, very difficult to track for me. It was kind of like a combination of dyslexia and attention deficit. I could not keep track of assignments and if I did courses that were all experiential I could handle them but when I had to assign readings on this date to be read on this date and discussed on — you know, I just couldn't do it, couldn't manage it. And my energy levels fluctuated so much that I wasn't able to sustain the schedule. I ended up collapsing in one of my jobs and not being able to finish out the semester.

That's when I went into museum work. The first year I was the only historian on the project. Then they hired an assistant to help pick up some of what I wasn't being able to do. By the third year I had to phase out of the project. I also had a very bad breakup of my second marriage and that was a contributing factor. But my health has been deteriorating more and more, and it's very much a political fact, not only that I was exposed to this stuff as a child but that the medical system — you know, that our whole society is — we've created a toxic world or the people who are committed to profit above all else have created a toxic world and I'm one of those people whose bodies is more quickly responsive to that than others. I think all of us are [to some degree.]

Some of us won't know until 50 or 60 years from now when we have cancer. Some of us are sick all the time. I have been living in poverty my entire adult life. You know, partly I did not take career tracks that were high income but also I would not have been able to sustain them physically if I had. So I'm actually in a state of financial and physical crisis now, at 51. I have no savings, no retirement plan. My family is helping me with health insurance and with some basic expenses and you know, fortunately I'm in a position where my family can do that. My father teaches at Harvard and there is enough money for my parents to be able to partially support me, but it's not enough for me to live on. And I'm not able to travel as much as I used to, and the medical system is in crisis and accessible healthcare is being slashed budgetarily. You know, as we speak, clinics are closing.

And so, part of what I've been struggling with for the past couple of years is, How do I integrate my health into my public work? How do I become a public chronically ill person? The disability rights movement has done a tremendous amount in making us pay attention to our bodies but the struggles of people who are disabled and the people who are chronically ill are distinct. Most people who are disabled are not

necessarily tired. You know, somebody who is partially paralyzed and has mobility issues doesn't necessarily have an impediment to working a full-time job, as long as the right accommodations are available. People with chronic illness –

ANDERSON: Are invisible.

MORALES: – are largely invisible, and our illnesses — you know, most chronic illnesses that are epidemic right now are a direct result of twentieth-century industrial capitalism and they cannot be solved without challenging the system as a whole. So it's more difficult for people to think about. It's frightening for people to think about, as is disability, but I think in a different way. And we're chronically in pain. We're chronically exhausted. We can't reliably do things. There's much less consciousness about the nature of the illness. Also, disability tends to have a single cause. You know, you had this illness or this accident, you know when it happened. Most chronic illness has multiple causes and is, therefore, suspect to the medical establishment, so that there's a great deal of blaming chronically ill people for being ill. It's an area of political thinking that's underdeveloped and that I think is starting to emerge more.

31:35

And there are a number of people — Susan Abod is one of the people I'm in contact with who has done a film about multiple chemical sensitivities. I'm trying to think about how to write about all of this, because again, as I politicize my own experiences of suffering, I find them more tolerable and any struggle goes better if it's collectivized. So I'm both attempting to figure out how to have a viable life and be able to survive economically, given that I spend a great deal of time in bed and that when I make a commitment to a speaking engagement I never know if I can keep it — trying to turn that into also part of my public expertise. My whole life story has been one of my writing credentialing me to speak about what I know and then finding ways to get paid for my organizing.

I am now working on a book about Latinas and health in which I'm trying to weave together the stories — the story of my own body and those of other individual women I have known whose paths have crossed mine or who I've read about and felt moved by in some way, and the larger issues of health and illness. For Latinas because I wanted to draw a circle that made it a manageable project and made it very much about me, and there's been more written about health issues for other groups. I mean, certainly African American women — there's a lot more that's been written.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: And I'm doing it as a poet, as I did in *Remedios*, weaving together — you know, the fact that Gloria Anzaldúa died of diabetes and that Helen Rodriguez died of lung cancer: sugar, tobacco, coffee are the products

that are grown on the land that I came from and in a lot of colonized Latin America and certainly in the Caribbean, parts of South America and Central America. And the poisons that were used to grow that, the slave labor behind it — you know, there's a whole complicated legacy there. Sugar is involved in — diabetes is epidemic in the Latino community, particularly in Latina women. It's higher on the list of top ten causes of death than it is for other constituencies. So there's something we need to talk about in how we nourish ourselves and how our nourishment is interfered with. You know, basically, sickness comes from oppression and health comes from liberation is the core message there, but I want to talk about the details.

So I'm in the process of integrating my illness into my work more because I've spent years struggling to work in spite of — and it's not viable. My writing over and over and over again leads me to make all of who I am the subject of the story. So that's, you know, one of my two major projects right now, the other being a work about the relationship between the Mississippi River and the Caribbean Islands, which just became a whole lot more dramatic with Hurricane Katrina. But I spent a month in New Orleans in the spring doing research about the history of — about race — environmental racism really, about the history of ecology and racism on that whole stretch of the great river and the islands and in the sea.

ANDERSON: Picking up on your dad's tradition.

MORALES: Yes. And my father and I are collaborating a lot more, both in terms of talking about ecology and public health, because he's in the school of public health —

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: — and does a lot of research on health disparities and health in oppressed communities and a lot of work on Cuban ecology and public health.

ANDERSON: Right. Right.

MORALES: So having collaborated a lot with my mother earlier in my work life, I'm now getting to do more work with my dad, and that's very exciting and stimulating.

ANDERSON: And then you're also doing the *Other Rican Anthology*. What's that?

MORALES: I was a member of the founding executive board of the Puerto Rican Studies Association in '92, and at that point was a grad student representative but I was the far west member. There was Norma Carr in Hawaii who came to some of the conferences, but in terms of the active day-to-day work of the organization, I became an advocate for people outside of the center of the Diaspora. Well, it actually turns out that 75

percent of Puerto Ricans live outside of New York now but with the history project that I was doing and as I went around traveling, I became aware that there were Puerto Rican communities in all kinds of places whose experience was not the Nuyoricans' experience, and yet if you look at the printed word, you would never know that there were Puerto Ricans anywhere else except New York City.

And I started thinking about both the marvelous poets that I was coming to know in different communities, particularly in Minneapolis and in the Bay Area, which were places that I was spending a lot of time, but also the need in terms of curriculum. If 75 percent of our population lives somewhere else, we need a textbook, we need literature that teachers can use in a classroom in Ohio or in Texas or in San Diego, where they have Puerto Ricans in their classes and they can talk about a Puerto Rican experience that is recognizable. You know, it's *Getting Home Alive* all over again. And I was at an event with a young poet from Minneapolis, Emanuel Ortiz. We were talking about this. So he grew up in Indiana — what it was like to grow up in a place where there weren't other Puerto Ricans around. I didn't grow up that way, but — my adult life has been largely lived in California.

I said, "Let's do an anthology." And so we have been putting out the — it's really an organizing project, because there are not easy avenues for finding people, but it's called *Other Ricans: Writings from the Greater Puerto Rican Diaspora*. And we're asking for poetry and for personal narratives, because in communities that haven't developed a critical mass, autobiography and poetry come first. Fiction and theater and other literary forms tend to follow when you've built up enough cultural capital, but the first testimonial wave of literature that just says, I'm here, is autobiography and poetry. It's been a fascinating process and we've discovered some marvelous writers all over the country. I wanted to do the gathering first before looking for a publisher because I wanted to know what kind of book I would have. So we're now in the stage of looking for a publisher.

ANDERSON: How do you juggle so many projects at one time? I mean, logistically, how do you organize your time around — do you devote certain days or months to different things or you just kind of have all the balls going at once and?

39:38

MORALES: It's a 12-burner stove.

ANDERSON: Yes. (laughs)

MORALES: You know, I turn that one down because I've got to unstick this one and then I simmer that and add a little water and I turn this one up and it's like I've got a restaurant going. And you know, one of the problems with that approach is I don't finish things, because I'm working on 12 different things. So I'm trying this year — I'm really trying to finish *Silt*, which is the river and islands book, because it's so relevant to

what's going on in New Orleans and the rest of the South right now, and Haiti. You know, it's very topical, and because I'm trying to make a living, having a book that is that topical, if I can get it completed and out, I have a potential for getting a commercial press interested and getting more money than I do at the small presses –

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: – that I've published with. Up until now and I'm continuing actively working on the Latina health one because I need it for morale, because I spend so much time feeling so sick and kind of helpless about my health.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: And you know, I've got half a dozen other projects and they're just — I'm having to do them slowly. I'm actually planning to go home and organize a strategic summit on my life and try to get the people who love me and support my work to come together and think about how to make this more viable. You know, I'm not really so much in need, although I love going to writing retreats and have had astonishing experiences, particularly the — I've been to the women's writing retreats Hedgebrook and Norcroft, and that's been wonderful. It's not the primary need I have. I have a writing space in my house and my daughter's gone most of the day. I have the room to write. What I don't have is the economic freedom to write. The room of my own I've got, it's the 50 pounds I don't have, or the guineas or whatever it was that Virginia Woolf writes about. And so I'm trying to figure out how to make it viable for me. I have so little energy, I can't do a day job and do my writing at the same time, and the writing is my purpose.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: So I'm trying to figure out how do I finance a writing life and I can't do what most writers do to support their habit. I'm not going to be able to do a teaching job or a — we've been talking about the need for an endowed bed. So I don't juggle them. I let them compel me.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: Poems wake me up in the night sometimes. Something just grabs me and I have to write about it. The other morning I woke up feeling depressed and a phrase came into my head, tropical depression, and I went online and I looked up what a tropical depression is. I know that it's the precursor to a hurricane, which immediately turned into — you know, metaphor is my scientific method. And actually I wrote an essay I loved when I was in New Orleans — about it, which is about artists and scientists tackling the environment, and I talked about metaphor as

my method and said I'm — you know, it's not less of a scientific process of research. Well, I started thinking about tropical depressions turning into hurricanes and what are the conditions that are required from them to go from just a vague swirling unease on the surface of the water to a force of nature. Well, it turns out you've got to get a bunch of thunderstorms lined up together. It's about organizing, you know, it's about how do you go from depression to purpose. And so, looking at meteorological weather sites online started giving me the material for a piece that's probably going to go into the Latina health book about hurricanes, you know, which links to the tradition of hurricane wind goddesses, of Oyá in the Yoruba tradition, Guabancex in the Caribbean indigenous tradition. It's about unleashing women's anger and power out of internalized rage, which is depression.

ANDERSON: Right.

MORALES: You know so, so I'm constantly — something will grab me and I'll just scribble something down about it. The other thing I wanted to say about my writing life is that I have a relationship with Pacifica Radio — that radio continues to be very important to me. When 9/11 happened I was at Norcroft and the most shocking thing to me about it was not that it happened but that people in the United States were so surprised, that the outrage was not that such things happen in the world but they happen to us. And I went to a town meeting and heard outrageous, racist things and woke up the next day at five o'clock in the morning with the first stanzas of a poem ringing in my head and wrote for five hours and wrote a 2,500 word poem called *Shema* from the Hebrew prayer. It means listen. Hear, hear, oh people. And that poem I read as soon as I got back to Minneapolis, St. Paul at a public reading.

43:51

And then I distributed it on the internet and people were reading it all over the country at demonstrations, and it got broadcast on KPFA and I established a relationship with the programmer there, Dennis Bernstein, who produces a program called *Flashpoints*. And he created the title of “poet on assignment,” and I began writing poetry responsive to the news, which for about three glorious months I got paid for, right after the war started in Iraq officially. During that period I had to write two poems a week responding to what was going on, and you know, it was one of the more exhilarating jobs I've ever had. It was extremely challenging and I had to put out work that was not polished. I didn't have the time to make them perfectly accurate. They were messy poems but they were like columns. I was commenting on what was going on as it was happening and in each case, I was trying to find a way to take a headline story that was numbing in its horror, bring it to a human place. I needed a human face and I needed some aspect of hope.

So the day that the bombing was starting, the story that I found was of Iraqi women in Baghdad going into hospitals inducing labor so they wouldn't be in labor as the bombs were falling. I ended up writing a poem that talks about how someday a thousand of children of Baghdad

will ask why they have the same birthday — talking about these women in labor as the planes are taking off, their contractions and the children crowning as the moon is rising over the river and the city, and the hospitals are preparing for the influx of wounded that are going to be coming. It puts a human face on the city of Baghdad waiting for this to happen, where the numbers didn't reach people.

So I was getting to do research on the context of these stories. Find a human face for them. Put them into poetry. Put an aspect of hope and empowerment into them — wzippp — read it on the air, go home and do it again. I don't do it at that pace any more, but I do continue to — I have done a couple broadcasts of Katrina poems and I continue to have a relationship to that kind of immediate poetry, which is rough and dirty, but people stop me in the grocery store. People tell me — I'll run into them, they won't call me up — I'll run into them and they'll say, You know that poem, I was driving and I had to pull over because I was crying.

I went to get — you know, when I turned 50 I went to get a colonoscopy and as I was waiting in the recovery room waiting to get picked up and go home, a different doctor I hadn't met comes in holding my chart. He looks at the name and he looks at me and he said, "Do you have something to do with KPFA?" And he was a Middle Eastern man, I don't know from what country but an Arab man, and I had been doing a lot of poetry about Palestine. And I started the sentence, I said, "Yes, I read poetry on" — and he dropped his papers and he threw his arms around me and was like, Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. Nobody talks about what's happening to our people.

It has an immediacy that publishing doesn't, and so I love doing — you know, there's this long history of radio as one of the threads running through my activist life and one of the million pots I have stirring on my stove is a collection of these radio poems with some essays about radio.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: And about the role of radio in my life over the years.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: That's me today.

ANDERSON: We do have just a few minutes left, so is there anything else that you would like to say before we close this out?

MORALES: Having my art be the center of my activism has allowed me — I have an image of myself in relationship to people who are building organizations that they're laying brick on mortar and creating structures within which certain things can happen and that I go around from building site to building site with a pitcher of water, that my job

48:39

involves holding a certain really broad perspective of history and complexity and something I could find harder to maintain if I was in an office struggling day to day. And I have tremendous respect and honor for the people who are doing that work and I get to come from the outside and say, Look, let me refresh you as you go back to slogging in the trenches in this way. You know, I go around to campuses where the people who bring me — the job turnover rate is extremely high, because if they're doing a good job they get fired and they open these little windows of possibility for people. They hold them open like straining with all their muscles and I come and I say, Bless you, and be aware that what you're doing matters in the big sweep of history, and here's a poem that you can put on your wall and it will help you on the bad days.

I love what I get to do and I have continued to be an insider/outsider in all of the work that I do, and it's not so bad. It's a good way to work. I organize on the basis of everything. There isn't an issue I won't respond to. I have a great sweep of what I get to do, and you know, a lot of our sense of what activism is is still very bound by traditional left parties and organization and so I apply for grants that are for activists who want to take a sabbatical or whatever in different kinds of things. And I'm not seen by those organizations as an activist. I don't have a grassroots organization that I am a member of. I feed hundreds of grassroots organizations.

I did a reading on Tuesday, a community literacy program in the Puerto Community in Holyoke. For me, the research that I've done and the poetry I've done I can bring to them and it does something very important, and I'm donating a box of *Remedios* for them to use in the literacy program. That my relationship to grassroots organizations, is I provide a very specific kind of resource that is really about hope.

ANDERSON: Speaking of insider/outsider, since you have been an oral historian, what's it like to be on the other side of doing oral history. I mean, could you comment for a second about being on the other side of the questions?

MORALES: Oh my God. There's a really important thing I didn't talk about –

ANDERSON: Oh yeah, what?

MORALES: – which is about that.

ANDERSON: OK. A couple minutes. What is it?

MORALES: Well, first of all, the answer is I love it and I'm also aware of your role and my role at the same time, but a very important thing that I was part of is a Latina feminist group. In graduate school a group of women was convened. It ended up being 18 Latina women who initially had a grant to talk about comparative research on U.S. Latinas that we were doing, sat down and went around the room saying, Let's do our intellectual

biography as an intro, found that far more interesting than what we had set out to do and went through a seven-year process of going back and forth in our roles. We would get in small groups, do life histories with each other, come back in a large group and apply our expertise to a critical analysis of what we had just said, and then go back and do another layer of interviewing and then do critical analysis. And we ended up creating a collective book of feminist *testimonio* that includes our own essays about the significance of the stories and methodological and epistemological theorizing about our work.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: So I've had a delicious experience of doing that, and we collectively edited *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* out of that process. So I love switching hats. It's important for us to get to do both.

ANDERSON: Yes.

MORALES: To be the subjects of our own stories and to collect and be collected.

ANDERSON: Well, thank you for your participating in this project.

MORALES: Thank you.

ANDERSON: I'm going to shut off the tape now.

END OF INTERVIEW

52:58

transcribed by Susan Kurka, October 2005
audited for accuracy by Kate Mitchell, March 2006
edited for clarity by Revan Schendler, March 2006

Postscript

The same week of this interview, which was late September, 2005, I had a physical collapse and when I got home, decided to stop going on tour, and that I needed to concentrate exclusively on my writing. I did ritual asking for help to do that. I cancelled all my engagements, including a teaching job. I cleared space. It felt like a very powerful choice, to back myself to do the core work of my life. On November 5, 2005, a month after that decision, I had a seizure and landed on my head on concrete. I had another head injury. There are two months or so that I still don't remember. But this time I had amazing support. Somehow I managed to send out a couple of email SOS letters. Once was local and asked for help with basic needs. My daughter Alicia was trying to finish high school, and was missing school to take care of me. I was very confused, had serious vertigo, couldn't cook for myself, and basically couldn't be left alone. Two people stepped up to organize a network of help. Raffie Cohn was pretty much an acquaintance at that time and she coordinated volunteers. I had people coming in shifts and taking care of me everyday so Alicia could go to school and not be overwhelmed. Some people stayed overnight to give her time away, to do social things or be able to concentrate better on her schoolwork. The support lasted for many months. Steve Freedkin, who was a friend, coordinated rides for me. The other letter went out nationally as well as locally, asking for donations to help pay for attendant care long term, and to replace lost income, and also asking people to forward to everyone they knew. I was blown away by the response. I got donations ranging from \$20 to \$1200, and most in the \$50-\$100 range, totaling around \$14,000!

But one of the first things I said after the injury was "This is a promotion." The injury finished clearing the decks, and I would sleep a lot and dream the poetry, the books I was writing. Poetry came back before any capacity to talk on the phone or remember anything I did. I couldn't write things down for awhile, but the writing was growing and changing in me underground. I hired helpers and even when I became capable of doing housework again, or as capable as I've been before, I kept them on because one of the things that had interfered with my writing before was my exhaustion after doing even the most basic housework. I'm writing this on July 2, 2006. For the last 4-5 months I've been writing very productively. My daughter has decided to give me a large insurance settlement she got, to help me transition to full time writing. At first I couldn't keep track of the kind of writing required by *Silt*, and after consulting with my family, I decided to pick up a historical murder mystery I'd stopped work on a few years earlier, since it seemed likely to be the most immediately lucrative work to do. I'm close to halfway finished with the first draft, and loving the process. It's the first novel I've done, and it's yet another way to get history into the hands of people who don't read history books. Back to my own early experience of learning from historical fiction. So the head injury neatly did turn out to be a promotion. It moved me into the life I wanted. Right now I'm sitting in a little restaurant in Maricao, Puerto Rico, resting a lot, immersing myself in my home culture, researching some background for the novel. Thanks to the outpouring of support I received, I've begun to really do full time writing, and I've healed much faster from this head injury than from the last one. It's a new stage. My glorious middle age.

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