Funded project:
Thick Press is a micropress born out of the desire to intersect design with care-giving, justice-seeking and community-building. Our founder Erin Segal (MS/PhD Social Work) has been interested in grounding social work text in the arts and humanities instead of traditional mainstream social science and academia. On the design side, my studio, Omnivore, and I have been interested in the premise of a partnership-based collaboration where the development of “design” and “content” is emergent and celebrates a more dialogic approach to making. It is also a platform for practitioners in these disciplines to think about what it means to “practice” their chosen craft and the space of “maintenance” that both practices entail.

The Otis faculty grant has greatly contributed to the design, development and production of our first title, Recuerdos de Nuestro Pasado, a multi-vocal memoir about growing up in El Salvador and growing old in Washington, DC. Part oral history, part artist’s book, Recuerdos emerged unexpectedly from a storytelling group at Mary’s Center’s Bernice Fonteneau Senior Wellness Center. Using alternating English-language stanzas, the book expresses the life stories of four senior citizens, who were part of a four-month storytelling group facilitated by Erin Segal. The group members and authors are Angela Celaya, Sergio Guzmán, Jose Lovos, and Gloria Revelo, retired senior citizens who live in Washington D.C., and often spend their days enjoying lunch, exercise, and other wellness-oriented activities at the Bernice Fonteneau Senior Wellness Center. The text is based on Spanish-language transcripts of individual storytelling sessions that occurred at the end of the group. The five authors worked together and in small groups to tweak the text and choose photos and mementos to include in the book. In collaboration with Erin, with final approval from the other authors, I designed the manuscript into a structure that celebrates the seniors’ stories and the collaborative process that resulted in the book. Playing on the multi-vocal nature of the manuscript, I designed a structure that allows the book to be read as both individual voices as well as a collective whole. Interstitial images were created as a reflection on the words and stories of the authors. Eight narrow pages at the end contain reflections by Erin, referencing the collaborative practices that this book engenders. These pages also become the visual identity for the press as the intention is to replicate this reflective space in future publications.
Angela: A mi hijo, Juan José Celaya.

Sergio: A quienes les interese, es regalado.

Jose: A la comunidad entera.

Gloria: A mis hijos, nietos, bisnietos, y a toda mi familia Revelo.

DEDICATORIAS

Erica: A nuestro Grupo de Cuentos y Memorias.
GLORIA:

I was born on July 28th, 1935 in Las Lomitas in San Miguel, El Salvador. And that’s where we grew up, all ten of us.

My parents never married and they lived their whole lives together until my mama died when she was 100.

They lived a long, long time, maybe because they ate organic foods, fruits, chickens and eggs. There was none of that fear of thieves, those gangs that go around making trouble these days.

I was the very first girl, born after five boys. They named me Gloria. Gloria Enelina Revele is my name.

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JOSE:

Jose Lomas is my name. I was raised in El Salvador by a mother and a father but I always wanted to be outdoors, up in the hills.

We lived in the village, but I had no playmates. I didn’t go to school. I never danced. I never danced.

That’s because I spent my days on a hilltop called La Pagona where there were lions, tigers, and all sorts of mountain animals.
ANGELA:

My name is Angela Celaya Cabrera. I grew up in El Salvador near the city, but back then there was only primary school. It was horrible, the teachers were horrible, not like today.

My mother had lots of children. She said, “I’m sending all my children to school,” but some of them never learned anything; they never knew what was A and what was B.

I went to school, but I ignored the teachers. I played with the boys, my cousins. There was a long bench in the schoolroom and we pushed and grabbed each other until the one on the end tumbled off.

SERGIO:

My name is Sergio Guzmán Foley. Guzmán from my mother, Foley from my father. My father is Irish, my mother Honduran.

I was born in the Republic of Honduras, raised in the Republic of El Salvador. And I traveled to Honduras from time to time.

My parents never married. My father left when I was two. My mother raised me.

People ask “Why didn’t you put the Foley first?” I reply “Because my mother didn’t marry him.”

Time passed, and I wanted to know everything. I was itching to learn and learn and learn.
In late 2016, at Mary’s Center’s Senior Resident Writer’s Group held at Washington, DC, I facilitated our Monday morning Grupos de Dadores de Memorias. The four of you—José, Gloria, Sergio, and Angela—formed the group’s core. Other participants drifted in and out.

The focus of our first meeting this year, when I came to the Center to facilitate a workshop group about well-being, was a social worker who always tries to think about my practice in terms of groups and communities, not just individually. At the time, I hoped our discussions about well-being might result in community organizing. But whenever I mentioned activism, you told me you wanted to relax. You had worked hard for many years. The time had come to enjoy your old age, you said. You visited the Centre socializas. To survive. To see companions. To make handcrafts.

I know nothing about handcrafts, but I have experiences with interviewing and writing, so the Center staff suggested I offer a memoir-ending group. The next group I offered was our Grupo de Grupos de Memorias.

It was important to me that I offer a memoir group, not a memoir class. Being a group worker means that I evoke group process and social support. I wanted our group to be more about sharing stories and memories, less about producing a text. I reasoned that the memoir-writing part should come later, in individual sessions with me, after we’d all had a chance to tell our stories aloud. The Center liked that plan, and you all did, too.

During our group sessions, I sometimes shared my own stories. But mostly I listened, straining to understand your words, as Spanish is not my first language. I offered prompts, I tried to encourage. I kept time. I offered reminders about respecting differences. I also tried to make sure everybody had space to talk. These are the kinds of things group workers do.

ANGEL
You know since I’ve been

Even though I used group work skills, it never felt like I was practicing social work on you. We were group members, sharing stories, and my role was to keep us on task.

After six months passed, I sat down individually with each of you and recorded thirty minutes of storytelling.

During those individual sessions, we started with childhood and ended with the present day. Sometimes, I asked questions. Sometimes, I invited you to add a story I remembered from group sessions.

I sent the recordings to a professional bilingual transcriptionist who transcribed them. Reading the transcripts was helpful for me because I read Spanish better than I understand spoken Spanish.

I turned the transcripts into written Spanish-language memoirs. I read them some of the sentences, but I was very careful not to change your words. We met again, each of you individually with me, and I read the edited transcripts aloud to make sure everything was just right. I think you liked hearing your words read back to you. You listened very carefully. Sometimes you interrupted me, expanding on a story. You often used the very same words that appeared later in the transcript. People tend to tell the same stories over and over again.

You showed me photos, too. With my phone, I snapped photos of your photos as we could include them in your memoirs.

After spending hours editing the transcripts, I understand your stories much better than I had during the group sessions. It makes me wish I could transcribe everything everybody ever told me. Conversations often pass me by.

I tried to translate your memories into English, but my translations never sounded right. They never sounded like you. I knew other people would be interested in hearing your stories, but the translated memoirs were very long. It seemed to me that when I presented them individually, your stories lost the power of being grouped with other stories.

One day, I had a scheduled appointment with Sergio.

ERIN

When I called to confirm, he told me the Center was closed for Emancipation Day, a DC holiday. My kids were in school. Suddenly, I had nothing to do, nowhere to be.

I sat down on the rug and began to write.

For me, this was unusual. I aspire to sit down to write, but most days I don’t. The tug of my to-do list is very powerful.

I started with José’s description of La Papiro. Without thinking, I knew Gloria’s story should begin next, then Sergio’s, then Angela’s, and I constantly referenced back to your words, reading them until I had practically memorized them. I wasn’t exactly translating the text. This multilingual English-language text came from your words and your experiences, but it was mine, too. I chose the pieces I liked best. I decided how to arrange them. I tried not to stay faithful to your stories, but in the end, I tended to emphasize the things that interest me most: family relationships, farm life, identity, and how people meet their material needs. I lingered on parts that delighted me because they were so familiar or hard to believe. I tried not to shy away from scenes that were upsetting. I ordered events chronologically. I didn’t always seek parallels between experiences, but each section emerged in relation to the other sections.

The emerging text moved me, to my ears, it sounded gorgeous. Even though it was in English, it sounded so much like the José, Gloria, Sergio, and Angela I know. I spoke to me; it spoke for itself. I thought we might turn it into a performance or a book that others could hold and read and learn from. But then I started about taking your stories and making them into something I valued. That’s what colorists do, and I wanted to be sure I was doing something different.

I stopped worrying when I remembered that we are always borrowing from each other, absorbing each other, taking each other in. You have given me voice, and I have found a forum for you to share pieces of your lives, and, as Gloria says, we’re shared so much together.