





an interview with writer and human rights activist marjorie agosin

# Marjorie Agosin

## and the Poetry of Witness

BETH HINCHLIFFE **writer**

**"How many times do I talk with my dead? / And their hands are rough and wrinkled, and I ask them / things and their faces are a memory of sorrows ..."**

▶ from "How many times do I talk with my dead?" in *Circles of Madness*

**the world** Marjorie Agosin has seen for 40 years from her study high in the Gothic tower of Wellesley College is one of beauty, exquisite peace, and freedom of intellect and spirit.

But the world to which her heart and mind belong is an ugly world of political terror, a world in which young activists disappear without a trace, women are brutalized and silenced, and families are dispossessed and killed for their nationality, religion, or thoughts.

For four decades, through 90 books, hundreds of lectures and essays, and above all the revelatory poetry that secured her international reputation and earned her a United Nations Leadership in Human Rights Award, Agosin has reported to the world from its zones of pain.

Recognized as one of the most powerfully influential Latin American women writers of the last half century, this internationally respected and uncompromising warrior for human rights has fought with her powerful words. Her poetry has confronted governments and individu-

als with the reality of the ruthless dictatorships, torture, censorship, and murder which she has found in history and witnessed in daily life in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

**"You ask me / to remember them / so that they will be the / landscape between my hands."**

▶ from "You" in *An Absence of Shadows*

"Sometimes as a poet I doubt myself," she says. "What is the point of poetry, with people dying every day in the Congo, Rwanda, Afghanistan ... But then I say, 'What if there weren't poetry?' Poetry is like prayer. It aims to restore the sacredness of our lives. Poetry is our way to process, to remember. But it is also our hope. All we can do is strive. To be better, to become more noble. We need to try."

As she talks of her work, her face is soft, gentle under a cloud of blonde hair, her eyes delicate and blue. Her voice dances with the musical intonations of her native Spanish. The sweet shyness of her smile is deceptive, for within is pure iron of resolve. Her heart has taken in the brutality and anguish she has witnessed, and holds it deep.

Agosin's moral leadership in human rights has its roots in her childhood in Chile, when she was a tiny and persecuted Jewish girl in a





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country under the toxic thrall of Nazi war criminals who had escaped there at the end of WWII, a few years before she was born. Just as her Jewish grandparents had fled imminent death in war-ravaged Austria and Russia when their entire families were murdered in the camps, so she and her family had to flee the same murderous hatred, intensified by the brutality of Augusto Pinochet's coup and savage dictatorship.

**"And now will they come for you / on a night of glittering bones?"**

► from "Could We Have Been Her?" in *Zones of Pain*

Belonging nowhere, no longer in Chile and certainly not in the prejudiced American South where she came of age, she kept her fears in her own heart, expressed only in the poems she started to write when she was nine. By the time she earned her PhD in Latin American Literature from Indiana University, the girl who had taught herself English from American television had already crafted such a reputation as a poet that Elena Gascón Vera, the longtime chair of the Wellesley College Spanish department, which had already been home to the legendary Spanish poets Pedro Salinas and Nobel Prize nominee Jorge Guillén, offered her a position without even an interview. At Wellesley, where she eventually



COURTESY OF MARJORIE AGOSIN

**above:** A peaceful moment from Marjorie Agosin's childhood in Chile, before the family had to flee the Pinochet regime. Marjorie (front left) stands with sister Cynthia, and behind them their grandmother Sonia (who walked on foot from her home in Odessa, Ukraine to escape the concentration camp where most of her family died, and for whom Agosin's daughter is named), mother Frida, and aunt Josephine.

**left:** In her Wellesley College office in 2015, Marjorie Agosin read from "I Lived in Butterfly Hill," which had just been awarded the prestigious American Library Association's Pura Belpre prize, the Sidney Taylor Notable Book Award, and first prize in the international Latino Literature Award. These prizes joined dozens of others in her career, including the Jeannette Rankin Award for Human Rights, in honor of her role as a moral historian.



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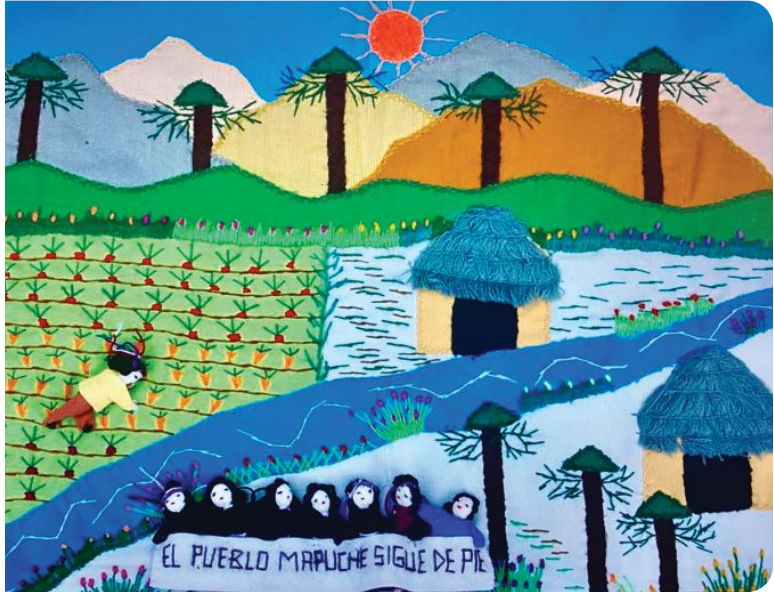
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COURTESY OF MARJORIE AGOSIN

Agosin's first profound impact on the world's conscience was when she risked her own life to smuggle arpilleras from Chile into the United States, and then traveled the world to tell their stories. Crafted by thousands of desperate mothers whose children were "the disappeared," kidnapped, tortured, and killed by Pinochet's brutal dictatorship, arpilleras at first seem to be only brightly colored expressions of primitive folk art. But a closer examination reveals that each tells an individual story of despair and hope—much as Agosin's own poems, tapestries not of fabric but of words, celebrate and mourn specific lives toward her essential goal of remembrance.

barbarous regime, taken away in the night or in the park or on the way to school, without a trace or another word, ever.

This lost generation who haunted by their absence became known as "the disappeared," commemorated in the mutely powerful primitive folk art tapestries called arpilleras, crafted by their anguished mothers using the fabric of their children's clothes and the unique details of their lives. In her first battle for human rights, Agosin brought the arpilleras and their desperate pleas to the conscience of nations.

It was an act of subversive courage for her to stand alone in this confrontation. She risked her freedom and possibly her life by meeting with the mothers, hiding from the secret police, smuggling the tapestries (which she called "sewn postcards to the world") back to the U.S., and then becoming their public face.

**"Mother / I know you are calling me / and that your fingertips / are covering those wounds, open / dead and re-opened / over and over again."**

► from "Disappeared Woman VI" in *An Absence of Shadows*

Agosin took the stories of her homeland to the world. And then the world became her homeland, as she traveled and witnessed first-hand the stories of similar victims in too many other nations. She is now known in many languages as the conduit for the voices of the shadows of many diasporas; for the victims of the Holocaust; for the murdered women of Juarez; for the Sephardic Jews decimated, displaced, and forgotten in WWII; for the Bosnian women during the siege of Sarajevo; for the suppressed Palestinian people; for the victims of Argentina's

became the youngest woman ever to become a full professor, she finally found her home. Four decades later, despite offers from universities in the U.S. and abroad, she has never even considered leaving.

"The college has always been an extraordinary place for poets," she says. "What a unique legacy here—of poets laureate, Pulitzer Prize winners, two Nobel Literature Prize finalists; some of the most remarkable and influential poets of the last 50, 60 years. Not only does Wellesley make poets a priority, but it understands what we need. It's a place where we can be free."

When she arrived in 1982, Agosin's first goal in her career was to bring to the English-speaking public awareness of the extraordinary new generation of Latin American women writers. So she edited groundbreaking anthologies that created this emerging field, including the award winning *These are Not Sweet Girls, What is Secret: Short Stories by Chilean Women*, and *A Necklace of Words*.

And then she found her purpose.

Agosin's poetry of witness began when, on a trip back to Chile, she became enmeshed in the fate of the thousands of young Pinochet opponents who simply ceased to exist; thousands of them vanished by his

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“dirty war”; and now for the Ukrainians dispossessed of their homes, families, culture, identity, and lives. She writes in the voices of these people, and the fact that she lets them tell their own unique, specific stories in words of heartbreaking lyricism makes the agonies of which she writes even more poignant.

“I spent 40 years of my life listening to women who lost their children, who had been in prison, tortured, and that has changed me deeply as a human being,” she says. “I feel that my role is allowing them to speak for themselves, and bringing their tragedies to accountability. I want to be a witness for our world.”

**“I had no witnesses / to my death. / Nobody carried out rituals, wrote epitaphs.”**

► from “Disappeared Woman V” in *Zones of Pain*

As the world’s witness, Agosin has written and traveled exhaustively to immerse herself in the stories and then share them. In her astonishingly prolific and diverse career she has written 63 books (poetry collections, novels, memoirs, young adult novels, and literary criticism); edited 37 anthologies (concentrating on human rights, Latin American literature, and contemporary Jewish women writers); and published hundreds of creative essays, scholarly essays, short stories, poems, and even musical librettos.

“I write about themes of trauma, exile, ethnic identity, and remembrance,” she says. “But



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Soon after receiving the United Nations Leadership Award in Human Rights, poet, professor, human rights activist, and moral historian Marjorie Agosin (left) was honored by the town at the 2010 Wellesley Library's Authors' Evening, here with landscape writer Allyson Hayward.

But the one which perhaps means the most to her is the Dr. Fritz Reidlich Global Mental Health and Human Rights Award (from the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma based at the Harvard Medical School). "Dr. Reidlich was a psychiatrist who believed that poetry played a great role in medicine," she says. "This award was given by physicians who work with refugees and victims of trauma. It is their acknowledgement of how writing can help heal, can be a safe way to go back to the places of pain and then become whole again."

Now Agosin is witnessing another place of pain, another population under attack. Ukraine haunts her, the atrocities reminding her of so many similar evils. It

the unifying truth is an overarching, shared humanity. Humanity in all of its forms—a brutal humanity, a redemptive humanity, a humanity that demands accountability, a humanity that must be nurtured through empathy. Social justice is essential as part of our humanity."

**"As I continue to wonder / How time was measured in Auschwitz, / The answer is simple. / Death was the only clock in Auschwitz."**

► from "The Clocks of Auschwitz" in *Beyond the Time of Words*

Agosin has received an extraordinary 61 major international awards for her role as moral historian. The United Nations validated the role of poetry in bringing about social and political justice when it gave her the United Nations Leadership Award in Human Rights. Spain presented her with its most prestigious literary award, the Letras de Oro Prize. And in an extraordinary act from the country she had fled and then exposed to the world, the Chilean government honored her with the Gabriela Mistral Medal for Lifetime Achievement.

resonates with special power for her because her paternal grandmother Sonia was from Odessa.

"Beloved Odessa," she says, "where she spoke three languages, adored the opera house, was surrounded by her family, and looked to the future. Then she had to leave everything of that world behind as she escaped the pogrom a few paces ahead of the Nazis. She escaped literally on foot. She walked from Odessa through Bulgaria and Romania, to Turkey, and finally sailed to Chile, to what she thought was finally safety. When I see these Ukrainian refugees fleeing, I feel they are my grandparents."

**"She, my grandmother, / taught me to recognize ... / the impenetrable faces / of women, / fleeing, / accused, audacious in their will to live."**

► from "1939" in *At the Threshold of Memory*

So when the numbness of this latest tragedy lifts, she will write about Ukraine, from the sanctuary of her Wellesley eyrie. "I can write about

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these horrors because I am safe in Wellesley's embrace," she says. "Our vocation as poets is respected here—for instance, when you come up for tenure, work as a creative artist counts as much as academic publications. Here you know you're in a special place, and a special place for women. I will be grateful to Wellesley all my life."

Agosin, who holds the prestigious endowed Andrew W. Mellon Professorship in the Humanities, teaches courses that include: Literature of Human Rights, Legacy of Hispanic Women, Nobel Prize Winners of Latin America, Witness for the Persecution, and Jewish Women Writers of Latin America.

For these four decades, she and her husband John Wiggins, an MIT nuclear scientist, have lived in Wellesley, in the shadow of the college. This is where their children Joseph and Sonia grew up, attending town schools from kindergarten through Wellesley High. She says she is "deeply grateful" for the teachers who guided and influenced them,

#### Selected Works for Further Reading

##### BOOKS OF POETRY (35):

- *The Absence of Shadows*
- *Beyond the Time of Words*
- *The White Islands*

##### NOVELS (6):

- *I Lived in Butterfly Hill*
- *The Maps of Memory: Return to Butterfly Hill*

##### MEMOIRS (5):

- *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile*
- *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life*

##### ANTHOLOGIES EDITED (27):

- *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children, and Human Rights in Latin America*
- *These are Not Sweet Girls: Poetry by Latin American Women*

##### BOOKS OF LITERARY CRITICISM AND ESSAYS (17):

- *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The History of the Chilean Arpillera*
- *Invisible Dreamer: Memory, Judaism, and Human Rights*

particularly Joseph's English teacher David McCullough, and all of the Spanish teachers who mentored Sonia.

"I love the town," she says. "It's close to perfection. To me, it's like a paradise."

Because Agosin writes in Spanish ("the sacred language of home"), she works with a translator, Suffolk University's Director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman, PhD, who herself has lived in Wellesley for over 25 years. Her children Adam and Sarah grew up with Joseph and Sonia, and over the decades the two mothers have become close friends as well as literary partners.

Immersing herself in Agosin's world has affected Kostopulos-Cooperman profoundly. "I have found myself having to stop my work because as I read of the anguish she witnessed, the tears wouldn't stop



Marjorie Agosin in 1998, with husband John Wiggins and children Sonia and Joseph. For nearly 40 years the family has lived in Wellesley, where Sonia and Joseph grew up and graduated from Wellesley High. Agosin says that the town is “close to perfection. To me, it’s like a paradise.”

flowing,” she says. “I think her writing aesthetic is firmly grounded in her need to heal the world, and to recover memory.”

**“I only wanted to write about them, / Narrate their fierce audacity.”**

► from “I only wanted to write about them” in *The White Islands*

The legacy of Agosin’s life’s work is that, despite the despairing subjects, she is not a writer of despair. She also writes of the beauty of nature. She celebrates love. She values beyond treasure the significance of every human life. When she writes of suffering, it is to bring something positive out of it—to celebrate what is perhaps, after all, her greatest theme: remembrance.

The arpilleras that began Agosin’s work at first glance seem weighted down in sorrow. Each one shows scenes of horror, torture, or murder. But if you look closely, you see that there is almost always a sun in the sky. That’s the kind of hope she admires and represents, and in her poetry she also puts a sun in the darkest skies.

“I have always read *WellesleyWeston Magazine*, and I am privileged to have this chance to give a message to your readers, particularly to those with young children,” she says. “There is tremendous hope in the world. We must not adhere to the horrors, the darkness, the violence. We must remember that there is always a light. Always kindness. We’ve each had it in our own lives, and now we see it in the scenes of the Poles welcoming Ukrainians.

“It reminds us that as long as we believe in hope, we can move forward. If not, then the world will become a dry well of darkness.

“And we will not let that happen.”

**“On this invisible night, / On this night of memory, / The dead visit me. / They return to me and I listen to them / In a time without time.”**

► from “The Dead Visit Me” in *Beyond the Time of Words* **WW**

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