



How Flores Is Reclaiming the Borderlands Narrative

The R&B singer's new EP, *The Lives They Left*, is an homage to her indigenous roots, her childhood on the U.S.-Mexico border and the strength of women. Flores talks about the message behind the music, the importance of people with these lived experiences telling these stories, and the relationship of indigeneity to Latinidad.

Alicia Menendez: Hey, you're listening to *Latina to Latina*, and this episode is brought to you by Maui Moisture.

Menendez: Flores, the singer songwriter, has a story to tell and she is fierce in her commitment to making sure that she is the one who tells it. Her new EP, *The Lives They Left*, weaves together Flores's experiences growing up in the Tigua Indian Reservation, being raised by an activist mom who started the Ni Una Menos movement, dedicated to preventing violence against women in Mexico and South America. Flores and I talk about making music about the U.S. from her home in Norway and how she's using the privilege she has to make space for other Indigenous artists.

Menendez: I am so happy to be here with you today.

Flores: Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: I do want to talk about you and your growing up, because my understanding is you were born in El Paso, but then you're raised on the Tigua Indian Reservation. Can you talk to me a little bit about where that is and what it was like to grow up there?

Flores: Where I live is one of the first settlements of Spanish colonials dating back to 1509 or so. And where I live, the church that they built is there still. It's refurbished due to flooding. But it's quite unique because there's a lot of displaced Pueblo people that were moved along the border because of colonization. And there was a lot that either were absorbed into Mexican identity or their whole tribal affiliations have been lost. The languages were lost, they no longer exist. And the Tigua population actually managed to stay, but they were considered the poorest people, unworthy of being a part of Texas. So the area that my family is from is from this region called Ysleta, which is actually a Pueblo name and it wasn't allowed to be a part of El Paso because it had so many poor, indigenous people. So for at least a hundred years ago, that's when they allowed it to be a part of El Paso again. But in actuality, the land belongs to a lot of tribes, including the Rarámuri people because that land actually outstretch is like all into Mexico. And most of the new immigrants that are coming from Mexico from the south, they're coming to Ysleta. So now it's this beautiful, like robust brown community. It might be very poor, but it's very beautiful, in my opinion.

Menendez: No one else in your family is musical. You are completely self taught on the piano. Was there music around though? What is the music you consider your primary influence?

Flores: I would suppose my mom, she was a bit of a dichotomy, I guess. She loved Mexican music, traditional regional Mexican music, but she also loved rock and roll. Because I guess in her day, it was considered rebellious to like rock and roll. So there was a lot of Motown and soul and Dinah Washington. And I grew up on a lot of that as well.

Menendez: So then, tell me how do you go from wanting to be a microbiologist to a singer songwriter?

Flores: I suppose I was a very strange child. We spent a lot of time-

Menendez: Tell me more.

Flores: I spent a lot of time kicking rocks outside and studying insects and scorpions and things and I really loved very small things. I felt like there was another world that we never see that we always take for granted. But then in high school and college, I joined theater and I loved musical theater and I loved performative arts and also spoken word. Nowadays I see, I read a book called Braiding Sweet Grass, which was marrying these two indigenous culture and also science. She's a botanist as well. And I thought, what a beautiful way to tell oral stories.

Menendez: There's something that happens with people whose fame is burgeoning, which is I read all the profiles of you and they basically all sort of start to sound the same, right? There are certain through lines. And then all of a sudden I went deeper into my research and I was like, "Oh, wait, Norway? She's doing half of these interviews from Norway?" How did you end up, tell me the story of how you ended up in Norway?

Flores: Probably a funny story, but I met a Norwegian man in the American base that's located in El Paso, Texas. And he was doing like a year course and we ended up meeting serendipitously and clicking, surprisingly. And I fell in love. I moved to Norway and it's been really nice here. So it's hard to leave sometimes. It's such a different life to what I'm used to. The values of the country are so much more for the people than for private interest. I'm also a mother and I don't worry about the things that I was once terrified of and my mother was terrified of. Unfortunately, I don't fit in here so it's quite difficult for me to integrate in the way that I suppose Norwegians would like me to.

Menendez: The entire time that you're there, you've been working on this new EP, *The Lives They Left*, for a while now. How long have you been working on this?

Flores: We started working probably around 2019. Some of the songs are as old as 2018. And just, you write a bunch of songs and I knew what I wanted to talk about and then it was just about narrowing down which was the most poignant and powerful and how I kind of wanted to piece everything together.

Menendez: Which is the first song you write?

Flores: Mayahuel actually was the first one that I wrote. That was in 2018.

Menendez: Why did that song have staying power?

Flores: I was emotionally attached to it, probably was the driving factor. And also, I don't know if how anybody else interprets it, but for me it had a meaning that I wanted to carry into this project about women are always so forgiving of men who are perpetrating against us. And femicide is quite a big issue on the border and in Mexico and South America. And I thought of what it would be like to have retribution sort of. Women don't seek revenge, we just want to know the name of our daughter or our son. Where did they go missing and just tell us where they are? They never ask for more than that. And I feel like if women came together, the women, the Adelitas from the past, and came guns blazing and militias, I think it would change the tone of how men see us.

Menendez: 2019, you're visiting El Paso. And about a week after you leave, the El Paso massacre unfolds. What was it like for you watching that from afar?

Flores: My brother actually was in town when I left. He came in with his wife and he was staying with my mom. And he had called me and said, "There's an active shooter. And we don't know where mom is. We can't get ahold of her." And we were just sitting on needles and pens because we didn't know at the time where she was, because that's a Walmart everybody goes to. It's very common to just walk in there. And they didn't know, they said that there were multiple shooters. And also that they could have been in the Cielo Vista Mall, which is the one main mall in El Paso. So we were definitely in the dark because the media wasn't covering it accurately. It was chaos at the time. So it was very personal for me.

Flores: It's devastating. I think going back, I went back this past summer, and Walmart had created, they erected this like big monument for them, for the victims. And it's difficult to go into that Walmart and feel this like people here were murdered and we're all acting like it's just another day. Thankfully in the time that we were there, they actually did have a proper memorial service for the victims, for the 23 people that were shot and killed that day, which was quite beautiful. But they put it right next to an oil refinery, so the oil refinery right by the border. The memorial was beautiful, but the only spot they could find was in one of the poorest districts. Right over the border, you can see it. And on the other side of it is this big, ugly, midnight oil burning oil refinery that pollutes our whole area, both sides of the border. And I suppose myself is like, you couldn't find a better place for these people, for our people but here? I was just a bit disappointed.

Menendez: This experience of the El Paso massacre, this experience of feeling that a place has been historically under invested in, how does all of that show up in *The Lives They Left*?

Flores: It definitely, I think it wears it pretty viscerally through the project itself. I had a lot of things that I think needed to be said and to sort of provoke these questions. And as an artist, I do think it's my duty. I do see my job as a public servant, all the same as anyone else. And oftentimes as a Latina, so to speak, it feels like you have to write a song that everyone's going to like and you have to make things that are neutral. But I feel like because of the way I look and that there isn't very many women like me with my experience that get this type of platform, because in this industry, we don't talk about it either. But you do have to have a level of privilege, and I don't have those things. Now I do, fortunately. But my early beginnings, I didn't.

Flores: So I just felt using my privilege, I speak English, I can read, I can write, I can use English as a sword to yield against colonialism. What was imposed on me and my family, we can use it to our benefit. And that's what I intend to do. I always hope that no matter where I go, I'll always be able to speak my truth. But it does bring me back to the book, *American Dirt*, which was one of the reasons why I called my song, *American Dirt*.

Flores: In that book, she says, Jeanine Cummins writes, "I wish someone browner could have written this book," in her introduction, or I think it was maybe the forward. But it was sad to me because a lot of us don't use our voices to tell our stories and that's exactly how we sort of notate our experience. And then hopefully someone is going to give us the privilege or publishing maybe to be able to platform our stories written and told by us. So I kind of bear that in mind as a writer, as not a novelist, but I still write my own music. So I just feel it's my obligation.

Menendez: Can you pull some experiences for us, those early days of not having that level of support in the industry and what that looks like for a young artist? And contrast that for me with where you are now and the support that is around you now.

Flores: I would definitely say when I was much younger, the industry was very different. The industry was closed. It was not what it is today with Spotify and streaming services, how now things are sort of, they make their way on the internet and they go viral and they blow up. I mean, back then, it was basically you got to know somebody that knows somebody. It still is this way. But back then, it was definitely 10 years ago plus, it was a different ballgame. And if you didn't know someone in the industry, you weren't going to get into it.

Flores: So now, because these disruptor sites like early Spotify was, now it's a bit different. There's another place I'm trying to think of right now and it was basically like a blog that would blog your music and it would get points. And then the more blogs that picked it up, it would go to the top of the list and everyone would see it. And we made a bit of a ruckus on these sites with my earlier songs when we came out. That allowed me to be on all these different platforms, Pigeons and Planes and Complex and Notion and all these different music platforms. It was pretty wild actually, but the internet is what made my career really. And also meeting my producer, he used a lot of his and today he uses a lot of his privilege to help me. So it's really this like siphoning of help.

Menendez: You were saying as a Latina artist and what our listeners cannot see is you putting Latina in air quotes. And when I was talking to your PR people about you, I said, "I would love to interview Flores." I was like, "I noticed that in a lot of her interviews she's very intentional about identifying herself as Mexican American and as indigenous. And I want to honor that if she doesn't identify as Latina." And so I'd love to hear sort of how you landed on this. If the term Latina feels like it fits and where it doesn't fit, where that misalignment comes from?

Flores: I think it's important to proclaim or reclaim our indigenous heritage. Even though I think the idea of race and genetics is really stupid in the context of blood quantum and these things that have no bearing on your indigeneity and with respect to actual people who are tribalized, their experiences are very different from mine. And a lot of this has actually been discussing with other first nations kids who are actually living on the reservations and they don't identify as Latina or Latino, even though they may have Spanish aliases. And I kind of see it as a sort of privilege to be able for myself to be Mexican American, to sit in those spaces where that space isn't made for Diné people or Navajo people.

Flores: I want to work on projects with other indigenous creators who don't have the platform that I have, even though mine is quite small. I have a lot of friends who are first nations, where their life is even harder than mine and they need support and help and getting the word out for their creative businesses. Because really a lot of this boils down to money, investment, who's going to invest in you? Money is freedom. And if you don't have generational wealth, which is a lot of the times has been stripped of indigenous peoples, there's a lack of that. And they should be able to share the same dreams also. For me to be able to sit in a Latina space is really, it's a privilege. I think if we're going to change what colonialism has done to us, which is likely due to my upbringing because I was raised on a Tigua Reservation, I get to see a lot more than maybe somebody does in an area where you're not exposed to indigenous people's way of life or their belief systems.

Flores: And so I think that it's important for us to sort of ... I'm trying to find the right way to put it because there's a lot of people's feelings and people's identities are so personal. But I

know that as a person who also speaks terrible Spanish, but Spanish, I get to sit in that space. And so I'm using it at the moment because it seems to be very black and white in music. It's like either you're a Latin artist or you are an American artist, you have to choose. So it feels like the industry needs catching on in that way, because we're more than that and more than just that.

Menendez: Flores, thank you so much for making the time to do this.

Flores: Thank you for having me really.

Menendez: Thank you. As always for listening. Latina to Latina is Executive Produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our Producer. Manuela Bedoya is our Marketing Lead. Kojin Tashiro is our Associate Sound Designer and mixed this episode.

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