Monica Muñoz Martinez is Confronting Our Past to Change the Future

The MacArthur "Genius" Grant winner is a public historian who interrogates some of the darkest parts of American history, and argues that grappling with our past is vital to developing solutions that address racial injustice.

Alicia Menendez:

If we don't understand our history, how can we build a better future? That question is at the heart of Monica Munoz Martinez's work as an author, educator and public historian. Monica focuses on histories of racial violence and policing on the US, Mexico border, and many other topics that have not gotten their fair share of space in our history textbooks. This work is deeply personal for Monica. We will talk about that. And it has earned her a prestigious MacArthur genius script, awarded to those who are on the precipice of something truly extraordinary. Monica, thank you so much for doing this.

Monica Muñoz Martinez:

Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Tell me, growing up, what were the stories you were told about your own family's history?

Martinez: Well, I grew up hearing stories about Uvalde, the place where I was born and raised.

Menendez: For someone who doesn't know, can you give us a sense of place?

Martinez: Yeah. It's a rural town in Southwest Texas. It's about 80 miles West of San Antonio. And about 60 miles East of the border. Taking trips to San Antonio was something that we grew up doing to go shopping or to go to a baseball game or to visit family. But we also made trips to the border to places like Eagle Pass and Del Rio to go shopping or to go eat or to cross the border to places like Piedras Negras and Acuña, where we also had family. I grew up hearing about Uvalde, the history of Uvalde, the history of the civil rights movement in Uvalde and in South Texas. But I also grew up hearing about the stories of migration, of people moving, building lives in the border region, and also how the region had changed, how the border itself had changed and how the communities on either side of the border had changed as a relation to different kinds of government policies and immigration policies and border policy.

Menendez: Monica, where does this story intersect with those bigger themes?

Martinez: So my parents were students, they were high school students, in 1970 when there was a school walkout in Uvalde. And so they from a very young age were having conversations about discrimination, about inequality and thinking about their roles as students in calling for change. As a student growing up in Uvalde, I saw discrimination and I saw racism and inequality. But we learned about it from our parents as something that had a longer history and that you had a role to play in calling out injustice and in trying to make your town or your community better for people to come behind you. I love to teach. I love being in the

classroom, but I also love the research and I love writing. And I love the contributions that we can make by recovering histories that have been disavowed and bringing them into the classroom and also bringing them to public audiences.

Menendez: What's the biggest challenge that you as a Latina have run into in academia?

Martinez: I went straight from graduating with my bachelor's into a PhD program. So that was nuts to go straight, to not take a break, not do anything else. But it was challenging to essentially give your twenties, to spend your twenties in the library and in archives. I had friends that had jobs after college with real salaries and they could take vacations and take trips. It was stressful.

Menendez: Wow.

Martinez: I was a graduate student at Yale and the department of American studies. And it was a very competitive environment. Thankfully, I had built a community of graduate students, especially graduate students that were working on race, studying race, whether in history or sociology or literature, where we were having conversations and able to support each other, because certainly we were asking hard questions. And in some cases, some of the challenge came down to being interdisciplinary. So that meant finding advisors that understood the importance of my research and were willing to support me going to Texas for six months and just driving around to different, small rural towns and archives and visiting archives in the shed of a police department in Rocksprings, Texas, where they had inquest records from a hundred years ago stacked next to ammunition and lawnmowers. Also, the community memories. And so there were a lot of historians that dismissed the importance of oral history of the stories had been preserved and passed down from generation to generation.

Menendez: So you were doing ethnographies in addition to all of the archival research?

Martinez: That's right. I was conducting oral histories, visiting people in their homes. Actually, some of the most important archives that I consulted for my book, for my dissertation or the archives that people had preserved in their homes. For the victims of racist violence, for example, that I write about, their photographs are not preserved by state archives. They're not preserved by the library of Congress. They were at people's homes.

Menendez: So let's talk about your first book, The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas. I want you to talk me through both pieces of that, both what you unearthed in your research. And then I want to loop back to the second question of how for you, that sense of violence never leaves you.

Martinez: That's a great question. I was really inspired by the people that I met. The families like Norma Longoria Rodriguez. The quote that I have in the introduction of the book, I asked her why she had spent her weekends and her vacation days and so much of her time, her extra time to researching the double murder of her grandfather and great-grandfather, Antonio Longoria and Jesus Bazán. These were two American citizens. They were from elite land owning families in South Texas. Antonio Longoria could trace his belonging to South Texas back to Spanish land grants, the centuries before the early 20th century. So they were prominent residents of hidalgo county and they were murdered by a posse that included a Texas Ranger and local residents in broad daylight with witnesses. There were no prosecutions, no investigations, no death certificates issued even. I asked her why she had spent so much time trying to recover this history and learn what she could about her family and this tragedy. And she said to me, it's an injustice. It never leaves you. It's

inherited loss. So that sentiment of generations of families who had been victims of violence in the early 20th century, of racist violence. Not just at the hands of mobs that committed lynchings or vigilantes that shot people in towns, on their property, on ranches, but also by law enforcement. Not just sheriffs and local law enforcement, but also by the state eight police like Texas Rangers. And also by US soldiers. I learned about hundreds, if not thousands of cases of anti-Mexican violence in the early 20th century in Texas alone. I learned not only about those events, but how those events had shaped the witnesses and the families for generations. But also of Anglo Texans and Anglo US soldiers who witnessed things like massacres or murders and were haunted by those memories for the rest of their lives. That sense of injustice was multiple. It was not only the injustices that took place when people were killed or massacred with impunity. Because the people that participated in these crimes were not prosecuted. That was one sense of injustice. But another sense of injustice for these families and for these witnesses was that these events had actually been celebrated, that some of those Texas Rangers and local law enforcement had long careers in law enforcement, still are celebrated some of them as heroes. And so it was also the way in which the story had been told of this history, that Mexicans were violent, that they were a threat to white people. And as a result, we needed more border security, we needed more policing and that the victims were not victims of racist violence, but actually criminals. So I think for me to study lynchings, to study massacres is deeply unsettling. And actually when I am speaking to graduate students, that's the first question they ask is, how do you just manage the work that you do? My answer to them is, I have to consider a whole range of sources. The hardest sources can be those that are celebrating the violence. So to read a newspaper editorial that is celebrating a lynching, or to read a testimony from a US Congressman saying, "You've got to shoot those Mexicans when you see them" and actually endorsing violence by Texas Rangers. Those are deeply troubling to read and unsettling. In contrast, I think the kinds of sources that give me some hope, and that actually guided me through research too, were the writings by anti-lynching activists, were the writings by journalist Jovita Idár that condemned the violence. Because those voices helped me to see that wasn't just the way things were. That was a history that was made by people in power, making particular lives vulnerable, and also institutions that perpetuated that violence. So now a hundred years later, I continue to think about what is my responsibility as a historian? When I bring these histories to light, how can I do that in a way that doesn't just shine a light on the injustice, but actually helps to promote some healing? Because what has happened is that people will say, "Oh, you shouldn't reopen these old wounds." And my response to that is that these wounds have not healed. And so I think in those moments where I'm having a difficult time just processing the information or processing the histories, I recommit myself to the public history.

Menendez: Draw a line for me from the period that you studied to the border immigration and detention policies that we see today in the United States.

Martinez: If we think about a hundred years ago, this was a period where... it was a period of increasing nativism, of increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, but also specifically a period of anti-Mexican sentiment. As a result of Congressman like Congressman Claude B. Hudspeth who testified in 1919, "You've got to shoot those Mexicans when you see them," he not only called for more violent border policing, but he went on to support the 1924

immigration act and actually added to that piece of legislation, a million dollar writer to create the US border patrol. And he and others invited for example, eugenicists to come and testify before Congress about the importance of things like racial segregation, the importance of limiting immigration from certain nations, and also the need to control the Mexicans that were in the Southwest already that were being used and were being recruited for labor. So people like Claude B. Hudspeth helped to found our federal border policing policies. And those ideas shaped immigration policy throughout the 20th century.

Martinez: And so today, the rhetoric of needing more border security that criminalizes migrants and refugees, that casts them as a threat rather than just people in need or people who have families here, or people who need to work here, that kind of rhetoric, that anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric is recirculating. And that call for policing, that call for suspicion is still with us today. A hundred years ago, people used the rhetoric of describing Mexicans as bandits. And today, we call them potential terrorists or potential cartel members. But the rhetoric of marking the border as a place that is dangerous and at all immigrants, especially from Mexico or Latin America or from the Caribbean as being a threat, is something that is centuries in the making.

Menendez: It's a common refrain now that you hear people say, "I just didn't know America was like this," or "I didn't know that racism was still alive and well." And I think that is frustrating for those of us who have been dialed into that. I cannot imagine how frustrating that is for you as a public historian to not just be, "Have you been paying attention?"

Martinez: Yeah. It's jarring. So I help to co-found a nonprofit called refusing to forget that organized only a set, collaborated with the Texas historical commission to have a, set of historical markers unveils along the US, Mexico border, to collaborate with the Bullock Texas State History Museum to have an exhibit. That was the first time a cultural institution in the state of Texas acknowledged the period of anti-Mexican violence that was sanctioned in the early 20th century. So we've been active to bring this history and make it publicly available.

Menendez: Because you believe that's part of the healing that has to take place?

Martinez: I believe that it's a part of the healing, but I believe that it's also an important history to helping people understand the dangers of the world that we're living in today. What I realize, what history teaches us is that time does not heal all wounds. And in fact, if you don't address injustice, and if you don't stop violence in all its forms, racist violence in all its forms, it continues. It shapes institutions, it shapes societies. The historical markers that we unveiled in places like Cameron county and Hidalgo county and Presidio County, in South and West Texas, in Webb county. These are taking places in counties that are being again heavily militarized by the border patrol. In places like Hidalgo and Cameron county, just huge detention centers in those counties. And so for me, it's jarring when people fight to acknowledge the injustice of the past, but refuse to look at the injustices that are taking place today. And so it isn't enough to just say what happened a hundred years ago was terrible. It was an atrocity. It can't happen again. Because it is, you could say it is happening again in terms of the ways in which racism is circulating and shaping policies. And so when I think about as a society, we have so far to go to think about immigration as a racial justice issue and as a human rights issue.

Menendez: You recently won a MacArthur genius grant. The premise of the grant is this idea that they're giving it to people who they believe are on the precipice of something big, people

for whom this multi-year investment could allow them to sort of unlock something. Do you have a sense of what it is you want to unlock?

Martinez: Certainly. I have been vocal for years about the importance of making sure that public audiences and school children have access to truthful accountings of the past.

Menendez: What a moment to be an advocate for that, my friend.

Martinez: So there's that, that we have a lot of work to do.

Menendez: Especially because the conversation about teaching race properly in the United States often gets posited by people on the right as race through a black and white binary. And the piece that I think even in the national discourse we're having right now around critical race theory, that is not even the totality of the racialized history of the United States.

Martinez: Absolutely. In a place like Texas, the histories of genocidal violence against indigenous people, colonization, conquest, and slavery, they all intersect in Texas. So there is a reality that as a nation, we have these deeply troubling roots in racist violence that targeted different racial and ethnic groups. So in terms of thinking about also studying racist violence in Texas. And I have an ongoing research project called mapping violence that thinks about racial healing and thinks about the kind of work that we have to do to heal some of these old wounds. But that is really difficult to do if you don't actually have a full record of racist violence. And we don't have that. In the United States, the closest thing that we have is a record of lynchings, and primarily of lynchings of African Americans. There are historians and sociologists that have helped to start to collect records of lynchings, of ethnic Mexicans, of indigenous people, of Asian people in the West and in the Southwest. The collecting efforts of lynchings is still ongoing. But when we think about the long history of police violence, for example, and anti-Mexican violence, that so much of it was also by the US military and by local law enforcement and by groups like the Texas Rangers, we realize that we just have a glimpse into the kinds of terror, climates of racial terror that people lived through. And even in academia, those histories have tended to be segregated. People studied either anti-black violence or anti-Mexican violence, but not together. And so I think that to your point about how people think about race in the United States, I also think that historians have a role to play in studying how these histories are deeply interconnected, so that when we learn about the past, we think about them as interconnected. It was such a lift to receive this award because there is so much important work to do here in Texas, that I need all the help I can get. So I'm thrilled.

Menendez: I'm so happy for you, Monica. Thank you so much for your time.

Martinez: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please, to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcasts, GoodPods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Monica Muñoz Martinez is Confronting Our Past to Change the Future." *Latina to Latina,* LWC Studios. January 17, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by: