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Davis-Undiano: Welcome to Understanding Oklahoma, a series of conversations looking at the richness but also the complexity of the cultures and histories that contribute to Oklahoma's distinctive identity. I'm so pleased today to have this wonderful guest with us, Dr. Mirelsie Velazquez, an historian of education who deals with race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, Puerto Rican studies, critical race theory, and Latina feminism. Her forthcoming book chronicles the Puerto Rican communities' response in Chicago to the urban decay in which they were forced to work, live, and especially learn. Her work has most recently appeared in the journals, *Latino studies* and *gender and education*. Welcome to this segment, Mellie, wonderful to have you here. Could you give us an overview of Latinas in Oklahoma?

Velazquez: Well, first of all, thank you for having me and I'm really happy to be part of this conversation. Part of what we're talking about Latina, Latino, Latinx communities in Oklahoma, it's important to really think about how, when, where they settled, when they were coming, and who exactly was coming. There's so much work that still needs to be done as part of that conversation, but the little bit that has been done is very gendered. We only look at migration through male-centered migration, we look at who was coming for work, but we don't think about the families that were coming with them, we don't think about the ways in which they were building community, which needs to be unpacked further and we need to reinsert Latinas in particular into that part of the conversation. I always remind my students, think about what home means to you, I ask them what communities were you coming from and really look backwards and think about who really started those spaces that you've really valued? In Oklahoma, sometimes that means church, sometimes that means schools, restaurants, the places that we visit. I look at something like Little Flower Church in Southside, Oklahoma City that this year celebrates 100 years, always has been a Mexican church. So when we think about it, that means for at least 100 years that community has been a Mexican community in Oklahoma, and we don't think about it through that lens. If we want a gender it even further, who were the ones that were bringing those spaces, those celebrations and creating community, it's usually Latinas that build those community spaces and are central to these conversations, even if we don't put them as part of the story.

Davis-Undiano: I see what you mean because so often people talk about men coming and stay, working in the coal mines and on the railroads. Whether Latinas in Oklahoma prior to, I guess throughout the 19th century or at the end of the 19th century.

Velazquez: From the little bit that I've been able to uncover, they're there. You find wedding photos, you find them in the wedding registry. Where exactly they were meeting, we don't know. Access to travel, was it as readily available as it is now? It could have been that they were married the daughters of their coworkers in those spaces, which means that they were also coming with family members in those spaces. The railroad, of course, played a big role in that, the coal mine played a big role in that. They were still centering religious activities as part of their family and community lives. They were here, we just don't put them as part of the conversations. Many of them were opening up restaurants because they were looking to find ways to be able to center themselves as part of the economic base in Oklahoma. They were

here, who are they is part of the conversation and the work that I know, I'm trying to get my students to uncover just a little bit more.

Davis-Undiano: This is important work. My guess is we're talking about mainly people from Mexico at this point, we don't know, it could be Latin America, could be the Caribbean. What do you think everyday life was like for Latinas in Oklahoma in late 19th, early 20th century?

Velazquez: I like to think that it was very familiar to them. We really want to look at history, the Panhandle of Oklahoma was part of what was seated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. When we're thinking about land base, it was very familiar. It's also tied to indigenous communities as well because many of their communities spanned what we now call the border, between the United States and Mexico. They were primarily Mexican until about the mid 20th century is when we see people coming from other countries especially for work, for professional reasons, and also to attend higher education, University of Oklahoma being part of that conversation too, which I've been able to make connections to Puerto Rico, to the University of Oklahoma in the mid-20th century as well. I think it was very familiar if you look at where they were settled. They were settling in rural communities, which when we look at the landscape, is going to look very similar to what they were experiencing. However, what they were probably confronting and dealing with when they came to this space, especially around the racial conflict that existed within this space was probably what's going to shift these relationships and probably moved them into what then became urban communities, especially Tulsa in Oklahoma City.

Davis-Undiano: Could you isolate a few concerns that people would have had at that time, say late 19th early 20th century. I'm not trying to suggest that all Latinos had the same perspective, but there probably were issues that were maybe dealt with or not dealt with that ran across the community. What would those have been?

Velazquez: Language, not familiarity with language in particular spaces. One of my upcoming projects is really historicizing parochial schools in Oklahoma because of the influx of Latina, Latino, Latinx communities within those spaces. They were going to gravitate to parochial schools like they do in larger communities as well, and in those spaces, their language was probably going to be honored and respected a little differently because some of the religious people who were teaching in those spaces tend to be multilingual. So language was not going to be a negative theme within parochial schools in Oklahoma the way that may be in public education spaces in Oklahoma. I think language was probably one of the big issues that they face. Not knowing who this population was going to be another one. What box do we check when we're talking about this community in the early 20th century, which was a conversation that was happening in Texas, in California, in Illinois, in Minnesota as we saw an increase in Spanish-speaking populations in those communities. I don't think there were unique problems in Oklahoma, but we don't center Oklahoma when we're talking about Latina, Latino, Latinx history. So to me, I'm really interested to looking at the same ways that they were facing problems around education, language, how do you even racialize them in these spaces with something that was going to link them to larger communities outside of Oklahoma. I imagine

that those were the conversations that they were having. Those were the issues that they were having. How were they going to view themselves within the already very tense racial conflict that was happening in Oklahoma, how then were Spanish-speaking Latino, Latinx population going to fit within that narrative as well.

Davis-Undiano: I'm not sure that faculty always understand who's coming to the door when they have Latinx students. Could you talk about maybe some of the issues that are really live issues now out of the Latino community and something that really might be helpful for those that haven't really focused on that community enough.

Velazquez: It's sad that the same issues that they're facing in here is what actually reminded me of home, because it was the exact same conversation and issues that I faced as an undergraduate student myself, people not understanding our familial backgrounds, the ways that we engage and we're connected to our communities very differently. They think that language is the number 1 thing that we're dealing with, and for some people, yeah. I didn't speak English until I was seven, eight years old, and so I'm familiar with that background as well, but that's not the only thing that we're dealing with. Our students here are coming from under resourced schools, there's this narrative that Latinos don't care about education, I like to think our parents care too much about education. The way our family is structured and how they centered education in school is something that we're supposed to be working towards. That's not how they're viewed when they enter places of higher education, that they value or understand education in that space, but that's part of our community life. Education has always been part of our community life. When they walk in the doors at the University of Oklahoma, I see myself in a lot of different ways. I would push my colleagues to also think about ways to connect with them, but not look at them through this deficit model because they really want to be part of this community, but they also want to be part of this community under their own terms.

Davis-Undiano: What do they bring not what they don't bring.

Velazquez: Yeah, exactly.

Davis-Undiano: Yeah. I guess generation age, of course, is an obvious factor here. But what I notice a lot is that students who come through the doors of a place like OU, they can't often talk about their education, what's happening with their parent as well, because their parents don't understand English, and maybe we don't know as much about the school's age. What generation they are really is important, isn't it?

Velazquez: It is. A lot of us are familiar with that, not being able to go home and have someone fill out or financial aid records. Where do we look for scholarship? What does office hours mean and not having [LAUGHTER] that narrative of going home and asking these questions? I remind my own daughters, you're at an advantage because your dad and I went through that process, so you can come to us and ask us questions, and we can help you, but that's not the same thing for everybody. Sometimes, there's that generational divide because those parents don't understand

or trying to connect with their kids but there's something missing between what these kids are experiencing or these young adults are now experiencing in higher education, and their parents want them to succeed, but there is almost this sense of loss and not being able to connect with one another. Especially because we come from that center community life, family life as being important. But what happens when there's something dividing us in particular ways. We manage it. We figured out ways to include community and maybe we need to do better as an institution to bring in communities and make them feel like they're part of it and not just the students, but their families have to be part of that conversation as well.

Davis-Undiano: I think University of Oklahoma is doing some of its recruitment in Spanish now, and that really must be very helpful to just get everybody involved on the same page. Also, social class is going to be a big factor. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Velazquez: That's the thing. We assume that all of our students of color are coming from working class backgrounds and that's actually not even the case anymore in a space like this. It doesn't mean that there aren't going to be things dividing us and conversations we have to have, but social class is still an issue that we need to work through and try to understand and talk through. That means that we're going to have to work a little harder to create access and resources for particular communities if we really want education to be meaningful, if we really want education here to be an extension of what we want to do and transform the communities that these students are coming from. We have to have that conversation that there is always going to be a class divide. But how do we engage in conversations in which it isn't going to be the thing that keeps them from succeeding while they are at the University of Oklahoma or anywhere it is that they are getting higher education. How do we bring those conversations together?

Davis-Undiano: It's really needs to be the responsibility of the place to not see any group as monolithic from the same class, having the same issues because they don't. Gender identity. There are going to be a lot of people who are not in a binary gender role, but could have all kinds of different gender identities these days.

Velazquez: Yeah, and I think one of the things I've really enjoyed in the last six years of being at OU is seeing these conversations come out even more in different spaces. I think as an institution, we're doing a really good job at creating inclusive spaces around gender identity. I'm looking at the gender equality center. Even the celebration that they had been doing this month for Women's History Month, they've been looking at Latinx communities. They've been looking at Latinos that are really foundational to the ways that we look at our own identity. They've talked about [inaudible] They are talking about Sonia Sotomayor. They're talking about people that our students, our community, our Latino students can look and see there. They see me I see them, and they understand who I am, at least, at that foundational space. I think, as an institution, we're doing the work. People are asking questions about how to become a little more inclusive, not just through, like you said, this monolithic lens; we looking at people as the same, but understanding the complexity of how our gendered, our racialized, our linguistic and cultural backgrounds need to be part of that conversation as well.

Davis-Undiano: Would you mind speaking just a little more personally about all of this? Maybe you could tell us about some experiences you've had in this state at this university. Good and bad, but really provide a focus, a real distinct look at what it's like.

Velazquez: The one thing that's made me feel like I really found community here and I can build a home in this space is my relationship to really more the Latino students that I've met and have I encountered, and seeing the way in which they're transforming not just their own lives, but the communities that they're coming from. Whenever I see one of them posts on social media of an organization that they're a part of, especially in Southside, Oklahoma City, and looking at the work that they're doing, and also using the language of the conversations I started maybe in my Latino feminism class, I feel like okay, I've done one thing, maybe that one thing is going to mean something to a young person in the community that I now call home. To me, that's meaningful. I've had such positive experiences when I'm working with these students, and when I'm learning from them, and when I'm engaging. Once in a while, I'll get a text message that will say, thank you. I'll say, "Actually, no, thank you because I survive here because of you." They think that we're doing something for them and the whole time I'm thinking, "Oh no, you're doing a lot more for me to be able to call this place home and to be able to feel like I belong in a particular community because of the way that you're growing, because of the way that you're extending the knowledge that we're engaging with you with, and you're extending that and taking that back to your community."

Davis-Undiano: Building community together.

Velazquez: Building community together.

Davis-Undiano: Yeah. Give us, if you wouldn't mind, two or three takeaways from this conversation that would lead people in the right direction.

Velazquez: Ask questions. Don't just assume that students aren't connecting with you, but ask the type of questions of your colleagues, of the staff on campus so that you can build a better place for these communities, for these students to flourish and to create a sense of home and belonging within this institution. I think we say that to students, ask questions, but do we see that to each other? Do we say that to our colleagues to make sure that they're asking the type of questions that'll make sure that's going to be meaningful, and we're going to engage in creating transformative spaces like in this community. Don't be afraid to explore and to learn from people that maybe you're not familiar with. I think right now, more than ever, we really need to be having conversations with one another. We have such a rich and diverse population on this campus that we really should be learning more from, and we think of them as, they're here to learn from us, but really now they're here to add something in terms of how we view ourselves as a larger community. Don't be afraid to ask for help. I think we really do need to learn how to take care of one another. I think if anything the last year has really taught us is that we really need to help one another, and we really need to think about if this is a place that I

value, how do I change it or create it so that someone else coming into this space can also see home, one day look at Oklahoma.

Davis-Undiano: The other thing I heard you say Mirelsie and it just seems so valuable and important to me, I think you said this a couple of different ways, and what you said is, don't be afraid to go to them, be at their events, follow up on their projects. Just don't sit back safe waiting for them to come to you, but with throw yourself out there and get involved. That seems so important to me.

Velazquez: No, it is. A couple of years ago I actually was able to bring a speaker, someone I admire in education work, and I really want an opportunity to engage with him. What do you do? You invite them to campus to give a talk. Instead of showing the film on campus, we actually showed the film at one of the high schools and Southside, Oklahoma City. Because the work is tied to what does it mean to work with Latino families. That's part of what he engages in. We took the film to the school. Parents came, students came, teachers came, and my colleagues came; they all came to support the event as well. It's okay to do that. If we're really thinking about the ways in which we want to work with the larger community, let's not just close yourself off here on campus. What will we be able to do if they see us in those spaces, if we take the film, the resources that we have as an institution to the community themselves? I guarantee they will show up if you invite them. I think that, to me, we need to be willing to do that.

Davis-Undiano: That was a really powerful thought. Doctor Velazquez, thank you so much for being here for this segment today. Thank you for joining us. Please check out other segments of understanding Oklahoma. You take care. [MUSIC]