

10-8-2021

Book Review: *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*

Charles C. Weisbecker
Gratz College, Melrose Park, PA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Weisbecker, Charles C. (2021) "Book Review: *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2: 61–65.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.2.1852>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol15/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Book Review: *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*

Charles C. Weisbecker

*Gratz College
Melrose Park, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.*

The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas

Monica Muñoz Martinez

Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018

400 Pages; Price: \$36.00 Hardcover

Reviewed by Charles C. Weisbecker

Gratz College

In her 2018 book *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*, historian Monica Muñoz Martinez examines anti-Mexican violence in the Texas-Mexico border region of the United States between 1910 and 1920. Muñoz explores the role of the Texas Rangers who, in collusion with Anglo mobs, local and state law enforcement, and the United States military, have created extralegal regimes of lethal violence intended to incite terror in the ethnic Mexican population and forcibly displace them from their homes. The book focuses on the role of state administrations and institutions as well as historians in celebrating this culture of violence, offering a mythologized official narrative of the Texas Rangers as heroes protecting the Anglo population in the face of menacing Mexican “bandits” and “criminals.” The book also illustrates how this celebrated culture of violence coexisted with lynchings of Black Texans during this period. Muñoz highlights the work of descendants of the victims of anti-Mexican violence, politicians, civil rights advocates, and historians who challenged official narratives. Local ethnic Mexican survivors, descendants, and other residents of the region engaged in what Muñoz calls vernacular history-making, which is “an effort to participate in shaping popular understandings of the past by making histories of racial violence, preserved in community memory, available to the public.”¹ Through personal and family archives, blogs, poetry, historical essays, websites, digitized archives, and documentaries, residents have not only contested and challenged official narratives of the Texas Rangers, but also have engaged in anamnesis, or a praxis against forgetting Texas’s violent anti-Mexican past.²

Each of Muñoz’s first three chapters highlights a different instance of anti-Mexican violence in the Texas border region. In Chapter One, Muñoz recounts the November 2, 1910 lynching in Rocksprings of Antonio Rodriguez, a Mexican national accused of murdering an Anglo woman. A dominant narrative surrounding the event was fixed in which mob violence was justified, and English-language newspapers framed the murders of Rodriguez and other Mexicans as a necessary defense of Anglo property. Additionally, there was a gendered character to the reporting of the Rodriguez lynching, wherein ethnic Mexican men were cast not only as dangerous foreign elements, but also a particular threat to Anglo women. This was contrasted by Spanish-language newspapers and cross-border and transnational activists which framed the event as symbolic of a long history of colonial violence and racism in America and abroad, which helped to counter hegemonic Anglo narratives as well as mainstream celebrations of the lynchings of Mexicans. More importantly, local residents remembered the violence not through any official mechanisms or historical archives, but rather through a communal tradition of oral storytelling which “functioned as a political act of resisting

¹ Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 27.

² *Ibid.*, 294.

dominant historical narratives and provided solace to those left with the sting of injustice.”³ This private remembering became important due to the lack of official memorialization of the murder. Ultimately, on November 4, 2010, a public memorial to Antonio Rodriguez was held at Sacred Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Rocksprings, and local citizens recounted stories they heard about Antonio Rodriguez and the history of anti-Mexican violence in the region.

In Chapter Two, Muñoz relates the lynching of ranch owner Jesus Bazán and his son-in-law Antonio Longoria who were shot in the back on September 27, 1915 by Rangers Captain Henry Ransom of Ranger Company D and two armed civilians. This double murder occurred during a period nicknamed by local residents as the *matanza* (massacre), wherein between 100–300 ethnic Mexicans were indiscriminately murdered between August 1915 and June 1916. During this period of anti-Mexican violence, numerous ethnic Mexicans fled their communities to find refuge in Mexico, which was in the throes of a civil war. There was a particular pattern to the violence against Mexicans wherein Rangers and other Anglo vigilantes employed a revenge-by-proxy technique, killing ethnic Mexicans regardless of evidence of guilt for crimes such as looting, merely for being in the vicinity where a crime took place. They profiled ethnic Mexicans as bandits, made arrests, and then left prisoners vulnerable to mob violence; or they used *la ley de fuga* (law of flight) to kill fleeing Mexicans usually by shooting them in the back. This anti-Mexican violence served as ethnic cleansing, an attempt to remove ethnic Mexicans from Texas.⁴ There was very little official or historical documentation of the Bazán and Longoria murders; however, some local efforts preserved the memory of the oral history of these murders. Kirby Warnock, Anglo grandson of Roland Warnock who helped bury the bodies of Bazán and Longoria, published an oral memoir of his grandfather titled *Texas Cowboy* (1992) and created a documentary *Border Bandits* (2004). The documentary was not only a retelling of the lynchings, but also a reminder of how these events continue to be felt in the present, and the long-lasting consequences for survivors and descendants. Additionally, Norma Longoria Rodriguez, the great-granddaughter and granddaughter of Bazán and Longoria respectively, created a private archive of documents, photographs, and interviews of family members which eventually were published in online historical essays and local newspapers. Because of Warnock and Longoria Rodriguez’s work, memorials were proposed to commemorate the murders, and initiatives were created to commemorate Tejano history in Texas schools, all of which served to initiate a discussion about the violence of Texas’s history. As with other initiatives discussed later in this review, their work disrupted official historical narratives that justified and celebrated anti-Mexican violence, and helped encourage a public dialogue about the history of state violence and injustice in Texas.”⁵

Chapter Three examines the January 28, 1918 massacre in Porvenir, a rural ranching community in the Big Bend region of West Texas, wherein Company B of the Texas Rangers and four local Anglo ranchmen massacred fifteen ethnic Mexican men and boys. After the massacre, the women and children survivors fled the town and ran to the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. Although there were criminal legal proceedings against Captain James Monroe Fox and other Rangers for the murders, they were never prosecuted, and some Rangers involved such as Fox were able to re-enlist with the Ranger forces. As with the Bazán and Longoria lynchings, Muñoz argues that, “[t]he epitome of this violence was the lethal force used to displace and downing ethnic Mexican families” which in turn “provided opportunities for Anglo ranchers.”⁶ Indeed, during investigations into the murders, the Rangers characterized residents of Porvenir as “thieves, informers, spies, and murderers.”⁷ These statements, along with the celebration of Fox’s killing of Mexicans before, during, and after Porvenir, helped to bolster the mythical heroic narrative of the Texas Rangers. However, Porvenir survivors and other community

³ Ibid., 55.

⁴ Ibid., 89–90.

⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁷ Ibid., 132–133.

members, Mexican and Anglo, were able to resist and contest this narrative through testimony at international claims commissions and through vernacular history-making and personal archives. These archives and vernacular histories formed the foundation for several forms of knowledge production such as United States Cavalry soldier Robert Kiel's memoir *Bosque Bonito*, Gode Davis's documentary *American Lynching: Strange and Bitter Fruit*, and documentation and interviews that are now part of the archives at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas.

Muñoz's fourth chapter is aptly titled "Cultures of Violence," and places anti-Mexican violence in the broader context of anti-Black violence in Texas. Muñoz explains how the ideologies of White supremacy that condoned violence against both Black and Mexican communities in Texas, which was built by conquest and slavery, "mutually informed and justified one another" which in turn "helped state authorities justify extralegal violence."⁸ This became evident in state congressional hearings in 1919 which investigated abuses by Texas Rangers. Defense witnesses and some state representatives repeated racist tropes and argued that extrajudicial killings of ethnic Mexicans were justified as they posed a threat to Anglo women and property, in much the same way that lynchings of Blacks were countenanced. Ultimately, the commission issued its report which did not recommend criminal charges against Rangers, local police, or civilians, and concluded that anti-Mexican violence was necessary. The commission's conclusion should not be surprising, as Muñoz succinctly points out that the "white supremacist ideologies that condoned anti-black vigilantism helped justify the documented anti-Mexican violence at the hands of state agents."⁹ These racial ideologies that embraced violence would preserve racial hierarchies, which "would continue to mark the bodies of racial and ethnic minorities as available for violence at the hands of mobs or law enforcement officers."¹⁰

Chapter Five, "Idols," analyzes the ways in which the "Texas creation myth" is narrated as a racial triumph. In this mythologized history taught through public school lesson plans, museum exhibitions, and public memorials and celebrations, Anglo settlers are revered as pioneers who rescued Texas from threatening indigenous nations and criminal Mexicans. Architects of this memory, such as journalists, politicians, historians, historical commissions, and museums, promoted this mythic narrative which served to erase the violence of conquest and colonialization as well as exclude Mexicans and other racial minorities from the community.¹¹ For example, local historians such as Walter Prescott Webb who was a member of the University of Texas at Austin's History Department 1918–1946 and later president of American Historical Association in 1958, lauded the Texas Rangers as heroic, courageous, and mentally and morally superior, while demonizing indigenous people as savages and Mexicans as corrupt. This heroic narrative is reinforced through Western films, a Junior Ranger program for children to become honorary Texas Rangers, and the celebratory Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco which opened in 1968.

Muñoz's sixth chapter, "Reckoning with Violence," serves as a counterpoint to this mythologized history of Texas by documenting vernacular history-making efforts calling for an honest dialogue about Texas's racist and violent past. Several Tejanos, including descendants of survivors of anti-Mexican violence, created digital spaces through websites, blogs, and online memorials which contest the glorified images of the Texas Rangers and celebration of state violence. For instance, Hernan Contreras's website *Los Tejanos* contains interviews of witnesses to violence as well as histories written by Norma Longoria Rodriguez, the great-granddaughter and granddaughter of Jesus Bazán and Antonio Longoria. Additionally, Muñoz recounts the efforts of her and other scholars in their application to the Texas Historical Commission to memorialize state-sanctioned racial violence. One of the outcomes was a 2016 temporary

⁸ Ibid., 174.

⁹ Ibid., 215.

¹⁰ Ibid., 215–216.

¹¹ Ibid., 230–231.

exhibition titled *Life and Death on the Border 1910–1920* housed at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. Aided by artifacts from families and descendants of murdered Mexicans, the exhibit was divided into three sections. The first section, “Life,” displayed the economic and cultural diversity of ethnic Mexicans living in the border region and gave a historical overview of economic changes and Mexican land dispossession at the hands of railroad companies and Anglo real estate developers. The second section, “Death,” offered an overview of the deadly decade of anti-Mexican violence which is the subject of this book, in large part describing the role of the Texas Rangers. This section centered state violence which had been heretofore obscured from public reckoning, and created space for survivors and life in the aftermath of state violence. The third section of the exhibit, titled “Legacies,” highlighted the history of racism and Juan Crow segregation, as well as the work of various civil rights activists in the state who resisted racism. The significance of this exhibition was evident at its opening in January 2016, when the audience commented on the necessity of teaching this history in schools, and initiated a public discussion calling for a more honest acknowledgement of the anti-Mexican racial violence of Texas’s past.

The importance and timeliness of *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* cannot be understated, particularly when considering Monica Muñoz Martinez’s epilogue. For students of United States history, this book articulates the ways in which dominant historical memory in the United States continues to be shaped by official White supremacist narratives that erase violence wrought by conquest, colonialization, and segregation, and also offers examples of resistance and critique to these hegemonic narratives. Muñoz’s work should also be of interest to genocide scholars, particularly those who study the United States and our history of genocidal violence during conquest, colonialization, and ethnic cleansing, and the legacies of same which continue today through violent policing at the militarized southern border, mass incarceration, and the immigrant detention industrial complex.

As Muñoz explains in her epilogue, state agents who created the conditions for the period of anti-Mexican violence studied in her book went on to become architects of the United States Border Patrol and incarceration systems in the United States, as current federal and state policing regimes have “deep roots in the violence of the borderlands”¹² Muñoz’s book contributes to a growing conversation on Critical Genocide Studies and the United States.¹³ The book is a substantive addition to our knowledge about how dominant historical memory in the United States not only silences and redacts White supremacist violence, but also presents this violence as something that has contributed positively to the construction of democratic institutions.¹⁴ In this regard, we are reminded of Raphaël Lemkin’s early discussions of genocide as something that was seen as heroic or good by those who committed genocide or benefited from it.¹⁵ Moreover, Muñoz’s research reminds us of Lemkin’s formulation of genocide as a colonial crime with the goal of “destroy[ing] the national way of life of peoples under colonial rule because of economic and political interests, not national hatred—even though the protagonists spoke about the conflict and rationalized the violence in these terms.”¹⁶ Euro-Americans waged this colonial crime against ethnic Mexicans in the United States through the imposition of institutions of governance such as the criminal justice system, direct extralegal violence such as lynchings, and ethnic cleansing. *The Injustice Never Leaves You* furthermore

¹² Ibid., 296.

¹³ See Alexander Laban Hinton, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

¹⁴ See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); Douglas Irvin-Erickson et al., “Introduction: Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory,” in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 1–18; Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Douglas Irvin-Erickson, *Raphaël Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 242.

establishes the important role played by the criminal justice regime in Texas and the wider United States, criminalizing forms of social identities, presenting ethnic and racial minorities as criminal elements deserving of elimination, and thus legitimizing and normalizing state and state-sanctioned violence towards oppressed and marginalized groups.¹⁷

Moreover, the criminalization of ethnic Mexicans along the southern border during the 1910s echoes the discourse regarding migrants in our country today, and has the potential to become part of a campaign of even more widespread violence against them culminating in genocide. In that regard, Muñoz's study parallels Carole Nagengast's research which illustrates the ways in which the United States government and its agencies, particularly Customs and Border Patrol agents, employ both symbolic and physical violence against Latinx migrants and citizens in the border region. The discourse of criminalization of predominantly Latinx persons, and acts of everyday violence, figures into this analysis of symbolic violence. Nagengast argues that it is necessary to examine the symbolic violence inflicted on a marginalized group perceived as outsiders and which the dominant group has defined as less than human, in order to see the potential for more widespread genocidal violence.¹⁸ Symbolic violence also lends to Nagengast's notion of "inoculations of evil," whereby actions such as raiding Latinx neighborhoods, discrimination against people who speak Spanish, and extrajudicial killings are justified due to the ways in which the "collective imagination is immunized" through these acts of everyday violence because of the alleged threat these populations present.¹⁹ These inoculations are important because they function to normalize and justify present-day violence committed against migrant populations and those who look like them, just as they did during the 1910s in Texas.

¹⁷ Irvin-Erickson, *Raphaël Lemkin*, 85. See also Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2020); Tony Gaskew, "The Policing of the Black American Male: Transforming Humiliation into Humility in Pursuit of Truth and Reconciliation," in *Crimes Against Humanity in the Land of the Free: Can a Truth and Reconciliation Process Heal Racial Conflict in America?*, ed. Imani Michelle Scott (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 219–240; Lissa Skitolsky, "The 'Criminal' and the Crime of Genocide," in *Logics of Genocide: The Structures of Violence in the Contemporary World*, eds. Anne O'Byrne and Martin Shuster (New York: Routledge, 2020), 57–76.

¹⁸ Carole Nagengast, "Inoculations of Evil in the U.S.-Mexican Border Region: Reflections on the Genocidal Potential of Symbolic Violence," in *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 325.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 339.