

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

MILITARIZATION & UVALDE: THE CONTEXT MEDIA COVERAGE OMITTS

LAURA FLANDERS: Whether it's Buffalo, New York, or Uvalde, Texas, or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, we are witnessing a wave of mass shootings, but all mass shootings are not covered the same. Today, our monthly Meet the BIPOC Press takes a look at what media are getting right and what they're getting wrong in the coverage of these tragedies and talk about the context in which they're taking place, not just in Texas, but around the country. How could all of this be done better, different, more? To host the conversation, I welcome Mitra Kalita of "Epicenter NYC" and Sara Lomax-Reese of Philadelphia's WURD Radio, my partners in this round table every month. Together, they are the cofounders of "URL Media," a network of independently owned and operated Black and Brown media outlets from around the country. Joining them is returning guest Michelle García. She recently wrote a searing article for "palabra." about what she was seeing in Uvalde. She's also working on a nonfiction book about her experiences at the border for Viking Books. Sara, Mitra, over to you. I look forward to listening in on your conversation and checking in with you about it at the end.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: So Michelle, why don't we kick things off with you giving us some reflections on the work that you did in the article that you wrote about the Uvalde mass shooting.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: Well, thank you for having me. I did not intend to write about Uvalde. I was on my way in the middle of a move, I had been covering, reporting on a number of really difficult events, incidents, and essentially horrors in Texas for the prior year, and I thought I was gonna sit this one out, right? It became unavoidable, well, it became unavoidable that I had to say something, that I had something to write when I was noticing the sort of carousel of images of law enforcement on national TV news, right? The images that were shown were of people, all types of agencies in this small town, carrying long rifles, semi automatic rifles, right, and it's to basically convey a sense of authority, of power that law and order has been restored. And meanwhile, the speculation from both the pundits and then law enforcement was what had caused this? Was it mental illness, video games? There had been reports that the shooter had been the subject of bullying, and missing in all of this, it was as if everybody was talking about this shooting that left 19 children and two teachers dead, the largest school shooting since Sandy Hook, as if it had all occurred in a green room, in a green screen, as if the background was nothing but, was vacant, to be filled in by images of law enforcement. And what was stunning to me was at no time did anybody sort of consider the fact that of all of the possible contributions, factors that may have continued to this, is the overwhelming climate of violence, vitriol, of intense law enforcement, intense aggressive policing, and the local, state, and national rhetoric about where this occurred. The entire South Texas, is characterized routinely as a war zone. And when you are surrounded, my question was, when you are surrounded by people, the adults, by

the politicians describing your home as a war zone, as unlivable, and peddling images of violence, does it not potentially normalize violence itself?

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Michelle, it's interesting because obviously in Philadelphia, we had a mass shooting on June 4th in one of the most, one of the hot spots, the social hot spots, South Street in Philadelphia, and 11 people were shot, three people were killed in that. And the similar narrative around how the media covers mass shootings when it's within the context of what we call community violence, and I wanted to see if we could talk a little bit about the racial dynamics and the coverage of mass shootings versus how we cover community violence.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: One of the things that we do when we're reporting on these is try to explain a place and look at these shootings as if they're all distinct, right, because details are distinct. And I went to, as I was writing my piece for "URL Media," to the report from the 1960s, the National Commission on the Causes of Violence, that sought to explain the outbreak of what was described as riots. And you look at cities across the country, and it says one of the causes, one of the ways in which the respect for law is lost is when you have an over-sanctioning of a community, where you are just hammering people for everything, and you are seeing that that law, that the law is not applied equally to everybody. Now I'm not here to explain other places necessarily, but what we lose I think in this context is, and in the discussion of these shootings, is this context about how we as a nation create conditions from this sort of glorification of men with guns that actually potentially backfires and erodes a sense of respect for law. And in the case of Uvalde, for example, you see where law enforcement has created new laws. The state of Texas created new laws, the state of Texas colludes with ranchers to take in migrants and charge them with criminal trespass, and they created an entire parallel criminal justice system. What is that telling us about the rule of law, about respect for law? You look at Buffalo, for example, and the great, the motivation, the cause as being the great replacement theory, that racist theory that also inspired El Paso, that also inspired some of the people who arrived in Washington for January 6th. I think what we lose are these connections. You look at Buffalo, you look at El Paso, and then you look at, for example, Texas, which had the largest number of people that were at the insurrection on January 6th, and of all the people from Texas, the largest number of people came from Collin County. That's where the shooter in El Paso came from. So we lose this context, I think is very important, about the general culture of violence and of racism and racial violence and how it pollutes our society.

S. MITRA KALITA: I want to use some of your own words, Michelle, on what you're describing, which is the acceptance of terminology and the perpetuating of it. I think we can say that about January 6th. I think we can certainly bring that back to Texas. But you mentioned replacement theory as a part of the Buffalo shooter's ideology, the Proud Boys, who've even more as a result of these commission hearings come to the fore, espoused what's known as western chauvinism. And so I've seen the word western chauvinism in stories about the

commission hearings and the Proud Boys, and yet to Sara's point, the absence of race is really stark, even though a phrase like western chauvinism is one of the most loaded racist phrases I can think of, right? And so even in the coverage we're seeing right now, there's been this creation of the conditions you're describing and an acceptance of them as the way this country is, where if you're like the three of us and you're reading this and you just, I think, I mean, I read that and I think, are they coming for us? And of course, the answer is yes, right? And so I have to ask you, just back on this issue of a Latino shooter taking action against his own people, is that an act of self-hatred under the conditions that you're describing?

MICHELLE GARCÍA: I can't speculate as to what was going on, I think with him, and we don't know enough about his own interior landscape. What I sought to do with the piece is to characterize the exterior landscape that should call into question, what if you were in the middle of this? What if you were in the middle of, let's just look at the past year. What if you were in the middle of, your mayor is going on Fox News and talking about invasions and the border being wide open, and your congressman is saying that it's hell to live where you live, and 40 miles down the road, you have white ranchers who are colluding with state law enforcement to create a parallel criminal justice system in which Brown and Black men are photographed in these dehumanizing positions and then put into prisons, not county jail, prison, where they are then subjected to inhumane conditions, according to a number of complaints that have been filed with the federal government. What if you see your governor going just a few miles away and unfurling razor wire on the border? What if you see children, what if being literally on their knees in front of law enforcement, what if, as we saw just a few months ago, your own elected officials taking photographs, elected officials and law enforcement, really law enforcement taking photographs of themselves in front of Black migrants who were shoved under a bridge, in just sweltering heat and left there for days, as what happened in Del Rio just a few months ago, and those photographs circulate as if this is some sort of trophy. I mean, imagine anywhere else in this country where that would happen and people would not be enraged of having those images circulated. Here, let me show you what we've done to people, children, women, pregnant women, we've put them under a bridge when it's 90 degrees out. Now, that was the external landscape that was occurring right before this massacre occurred. What was also occurring was that this parallel criminal justice system of apprehending migrants and putting them into these prisons Uvalde County had just adopted, and then you add to that that Uvalde County, like a lot of South Texas, is minority rule, meaning you have a majority, 80% Latino, and yet the county judge, white, the superintendent's white, the mayor's white, and you have to ask yourself, it's not like Latinos don't vote for white people and it's not like white people can't represent Latinos, but there is a history there that cannot be overlooked, and you couple that with the rhetoric and the policy, and — Let me just say this, to really put a fine point on this. When I relocated to the border, I was with a priest, sitting on the Rio Grande, watching the State Police on their boats and the Border Patrol zoom back and forth, and I told him that I wanted to do while I was down there was chronicle how border security was working, right, what was the imagery that was

being created? And the priest looks me in the eye and he says very gently, he said, "Don't let them turn you mean," because he knew what I would come to know, is the more that you stare into this apparatus, the more it hardens your heart.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Michelle, I think that there's so many parallels to what you just described about the border and Uvalde and what we see in Philadelphia with the Black community that has been, Philadelphia is the poorest big city in the country, and there is such deep poverty, and the education system, healthcare, housing, food insecurity, all of these markers that they now call the social determinants of health are in shambles and are disproportionately impacting Black Philadelphians in horrific ways, and that's where the gun violence stems from. So there is a direct correlation in Philadelphia, in a city like Philadelphia, and I would daresay in cities like Chicago, where there's high poverty and there's this huge disparity among people of color and their surrounding communities that have affluence, and you cannot disentangle those things. And so Philly is experiencing this huge wave of violence, of gun violence right now in particular communities, and a lot of it is born out of desperation. It's born out of a lack of opportunity. and these areas of generational poverty. And so if we are not prepared as a country to address these deep inequities that have been established over centuries, then we're not going to be able to, I don't think, come up with real gun control and real policies that have a dramatic impact on, whether they're mass shootings or just collective community violence that are creating incredibly dysfunctional things in our cities. And so I think that there does have to be much more integrated and nuanced conversations in our media organizations and in mainstream media, as well.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: A lot of these cities just came out of some of the, you had disparate and disproportionate, exorbitant number rates of COVID cases and deaths, right? We saw in a lot of these cities two parallel experiences. I mean, it was tracked. When the census did a survey, and you would see the levels of anxiety and worry among Blacks and Latinos at twice the rate as it was for whites, right, during the pandemic. The rates of infection, now, why am I bringing the pandemic into this? Because you're already talking about a lot of, two very different experiences of the past two years that were very hard on everybody, on everybody. But then you add to that who was sent back in to go to those frontline jobs? In the state of Texas, they were like, "You get back to work, we're gonna open up again." And so who starts getting sick? Construction workers, and who are the construction workers? Latinos. I mean, that's what I like to, my sort of, I changed my motto of reporting and I said, "I'm not here to humanize people anymore." So much in journalism's like, "Oh, we need to go and humanize." And you have to ask yourself, why is it only certain people need to be humanized? I'm not here to humanize anybody. I'm here to understand what are these forces that are dehumanizing people and look that in the face. Let's talk about that.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: And I think that media organizations in the URL Network, like Mitra's with "Epicenter" and mine with "WURD" and "palabra." and all the others, it's also about accountability. We have to use the strength of our individual outlets and this national network to hold stakeholders, elected officials, police, all of them accountable to our communities because just like we're seeing with the January 6th hearings, there's got to be accountability, and our interests are often different than the interests of mainstream media or the white majority. And so we have to be strong and we have to be clear and we have to demand that our interests and our humanity, as you said, Michelle, is prioritized and not sidelined, because left to their devices, we will always be sidelined.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: Well, and so to be also scrutinizing the efforts of public manipulation. I mean, I'd like to just bring up again Uvalde. I mean, the "San Antonio Express-News" had an important report out this past week saying that the State Senator Roland Gutierrez had told the "Express-News" that the Department of Public Safety, which is the State Troopers, state police, had told him that 13 of the 19 police that had been standing in the hallway for an hour, standing while people were inside with the gunman, were actually state police. Now, this is after weeks of which the local police had been blamed for not acting, and who didn't blame them, the state police, and who's investigating the crime, the state police, and who's investigating the police response, the state police. Looking at lack of transparency should give us pause about how this massacre is going to be investigated. And so you see this, how are you also, how is the information being used to possibly advance certain political agendas, which is the agenda that the governor of Texas has along South Texas, to further saturate the region with state police, right? So, again, and also, how does that intersect then with minority rule, right? And that's where I think our focus has to be, is how people are, in this case, being led to lose confidence in their own institutions, and that's major.

S. MITRA KALITA: On that note, Michelle, I have to thank you profoundly, not just for the time you've given us today, for your very important work. I mean, it is tremendous. I think you wrote one of the must-read pieces on the Texas massacre. I hope everybody understands the connectivity between what you've just laid out and a culture of violence and mass shootings around the country. I want to thank you. I also want to remind folks that much of what you've described in terms of making sure readers and viewers and audiences know they matter is precisely why the "URL Media" network exists, that our media outlets are in service to our communities and do center our humanity, and I thank Sara for her shout-out to "Epicenter," where we often say we can tell you stories about human life or we can save human life. And that feels the best way to center human life, but it's kind of at the core of all of our work. So I want to thank you for being with us, and keep us posted, this is your second time with us and we hope there'll be many more.

MICHELLE GARCÍA: Thank you all, thank you all very much for creating this space and for this conversation. It's so important, thank you so much.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that was quite the conversation. I could have carried on listening for hours. Thank you for bringing us such a different take on what's been going, but a take that is so, a critique that is so applicable to so much of the coverage that we see. I don't know whether you had any kind of closing conclusions, Mitra?

S. MITRA KALITA: Yeah, I think Michelle laying out the connectivity from the border to January 6th was very powerful for me. I feel like so many questions you have when you read news reports and you think sometimes, am I the only one who has an obvious question, like this shooter is Latino, how does that work, right? And you don't necessarily want mainstream media to answer that question. And so I think one of the most empowering things of what URL is trying to build is the ability to turn to a Michelle García and say, "Can you answer this question for us for a Latino publication?" It's a safe space, can we then amplify that so the rest of the work understands this? And I think, Laura, what we've just heard, for me, was very redeeming in terms of how we work and your role in amplifying a story that is so intimate, but of course has global implications.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah, I do, I think that context matters. I say this a lot, and I think that the conversation with Michelle and what Mitra just said, it just underscores the importance of being able to have conversations that are culturally specific and culturally relevant amongst the communities that you are serving and that are directly impacted. That's what we do at WURD. We, after the shooting in Philadelphia, we convened a round table with the mayor, the police commissioner, the district attorney, the city controller, just an array of people to talk specifically about what gun violence means to the Black community, and what are the key stakeholders doing to address it in our name? And I think that, again, "URL," that's what we're about, is really trying to bring context, bring nuance, bring information within a culturally relevant context that you don't necessarily hear everywhere else. And I'm excited that we're able to have these kind of conversations with you, Laura, as a part of "The Laura Flanders Show."

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I'm very happy about it, too, and thank you for everything that you bring to the program. We'll be back next month. Mitra, Sara, appreciate you, and we'll be seeing you again next month.

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