

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]

Gerry: Hi, my name is Geraldo Cadava, and this is Writing Latinos, a new podcast from Public Books.

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Now, for the show...

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]

Gerry:

I am so delighted to be talking with Natalia Molina today, who is a distinguished professor of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Molina is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and the award-winning author of three books, including *How Race Is Made in America*, *Fit to Be Citizens*, and *Most Recently A Place at the Nayarit*. That's the book we'll be talking about today, plus, uh, lots of other stuff related to Latino writing, politics, and identity.

Thank you for joining us Natalia.

Natalia: It's my pleasure. Jerry, thank you for having me.

Gerry: Yeah, of course. And, uh, thank you for writing such a beautiful book. It was first of all just a wonderful tribute to, um, your family and their kind of extended circle and very wide influence that I knew nothing about.

So it was, uh, really nice for me to someone who's known you professionally for a while to get to know a little bit more about your, your backstory. The first thing I wanna ask you about is just about your grandmother, you know, you. In the very beginning of the book that you never met her. I think she passed maybe in the very late 1960s, early 1970s, and you're born in the early 1970s.

I don't feel like I'm dating you. I feel like you mentioned this in the book, so I'm not, uh, you know, uh, telling any secrets, but, you never met her in person, but obviously she's a, a figure

that loomed large for you in your life. So, I'm wondering, you know, from the stories you collected about her, what are the lessons that she taught you, even though you never met about Latino history, a life well lived, a character, things like that.

Natalia: Well, I think a lot of us grow up hearing about our grandparents. Uh, they passed before we were born. You know, your grandmother always said your grandfather liked. And for me, even without hearing those pieces of history from my relative's mouth, I grew up surrounded by the people that she had immigrated.

She used the restaurant to immigrate people, to provide them, uh, a letter of support in their Visa application that said that they would have a place to live and a place to work if they came to Los Angeles. So I think one of the biggest things I, just through osmosis, was how important community was. That that community, um, would hold you in, in whenever you needed it.

One of the first times I really looked around and noticed that community was at the anniversary of my uncle's death, we had a rosario... we would pray the, you know, pray the rosary for nine days. We would do a novena, and you know, it's not the kind of thing people wanna show up for if people like to show up for parties.

Um, and especially after he had passed so long before, and yet I looked around that room and I thought all these people that work that are here, either worked or went to the Nayarit orare relatives, and most of them, even if they weren't blood relatives I thought of as relatives. Many I called uncle or aunt or thought of as cousins.

I'd grown up playing with the kids of the workers. So one was, um, the importance of family, the family you make as well. I think another thing, and I've been thinking about this a lot, is, sometimes the conditions that we want aren't there. In terms of, you know, for her it was Latino representation, Latino spaces, Mexican food, and so she created her own, I'm not saying that she could just do so completely free of restrictions, you know, she, she, was living in Los Angeles in post-war. World War II where there was racial segregation. Um, but you know, she opened a Mexican restaurant in which the food very much reflected where she was from in Mexico and that she did not try to whitewash for American pallets.

And she didn't try to whitewash her indigenous heritage either. You know, she named the restaurant the Nayarit .

So the Nayarit is an indigenous word from the Huichol people of the state of Nayarit, um, you know, the other Mexican restaurants at the time, you know, El Coyote, El Cholo, wonderful restaurants that are still around, but that very much trade off that kind of Spanish fantasy past, Calmex kind of food, you know? Rhe taco enchilada plate, that kind of thing. And she had some of that for sure. She really wanted a wide clientele, but she always kept food from her state there. And because she named the restaurant after the state of Nayarit and people didn't know what it was or even how to pronounce it, um, she would then have to explain it to them and

the workers would explain it and it would spark a conversation and it would, uh, help form a help form community there.

Gerry: Yeah, I love that. And I have to say that when I was reading, I could feel my taste buds salivating when you would write about the machaca. And I had never heard of tamales with shrimp inside of them... So, I have to ask, I mean, did she kind of, uh, was she very protective of recipes or did she pass down to family members' recipes that your family still uses?

Natalia: She was definitely not protective of recipes because what she did was she trained everybody, uh, to make her food. So, all the people that she helped to immigrate from Mexico, whether they were family members or friends of the family, she would train them at first as a busboy bus girl, then as a waiter waitress, some to work in the kitchen.

And some of these that became her head cooks had never cooked before. And, you know, restaurants are dangerous places. Kitchens are hot, knives are sharp, there are blind corners. Um, it's really hard work. And some of the employees that worked at the Nayarit went on to open their own restaurants, including using some of her recipes.

You know, we just went to, um, Ramon Barragan's 92nd birthday. And for those in LA, you know, one of the restaurants that is beloved, is Barragan's. That has also since closed, but that was also on Sunset Boulevard and Echo Park, like my grandmother's restaurant. And the menu featured his favorite dishes, including, um, these costillas, these ribs, and those were the ribs that my grandmother used to make.

So I, I always feel connected when I go to those places because I know that was the food she cooked at her restaurant, and I know it must taste the same because she was very exacting in her standards and everything had to be done exactly the way that she wanted. So every time I go to those restaurants, that food tastes exactly the same.

Gerry: And Natalia is was your mother's mother, right?

Natalia: Yes, my mom's, uh, my mom's mom who adopted her.

Gerry: Okay. And so your mom could also kind of vouch for the authenticity of Barragan's or something like that? I mean, she could say that this tastes so much like mom's cooking?

Natalia: Oh, can you imagine if it didn't, you know, you'd hear it.

Yeah. You know, latinas, well this isn't like this or so and so makes it better. So, not only could she vouch, but I know all of Echo Park would've spoken about it if it wasn't up to par .

Gerry: Yeah. And one thing I couldn't quite tell, did she, I know that she got sick in 1969 and passed quickly, but did the business fold pretty quickly after her passing, or was there an effort to kind of keep it going for a little bit without her?

Natalia: There was an effort to keep it going for a little bit, but um, my grandmother's strength was that she knew what she was good at. She was a wonderful businesswoman. She knew how to hire people for things she couldn't do. Like she would hire an attorney and that was the attorney that would both write the, the letters of employment to help secure visas.

Um, it was also the attorney that would go and help any of the workers that needed help, such as when my aunt got a speeding ticket, that's a pretty routine thing to go to court for but she actually sent her attorney. She was not going to take any chances that my aunt would be discriminated against.

You know, this is LA at a time where Mexicans couldn't sit on grand juries. So, you know, she hired a real estate broker to make sure that she got the best location for the restaurant, for the price that she could afford. She did a lot of things.

So she knew what she wasn't good at and one of them was, she knew she was not good at working with the public. And so, um, after she passed my mother, who was not as great with the cooking and business part, and also, you know, didn't have the partner, the formidable partner of my grandmother.

And she got married and she had me, and so she ended up selling the restaurant a few years later. But my mother was the front of house person. Even in the interviews that I did, you know, older men as I interviewed them about what it was like to work there or what it was like to be a customer there, would smile and say, that was your mom?

She was quite a looker...

Gerry: You said you could still see the Naite sign on Sunset. Does that mean that there's a new business there that has decided to keep the sign up?

Natalia: Yes. Uh, my mom sold it to a couple of Cuban brothers, and then after that, I think they sold it to, I think, a Guatemalan business owner.

And then it turned into a club over 20 years ago, called the Echo. And that's, you know, part of the kitch is maintaining that kind of sign. And so, yeah, I think for a lot of people, the restaurants... what's been valuable about the book for them is this hidden history of Los Angeles. The way that we don't know the history of spaces like this because our archives don't tell these stories.

These mom and pop restaurants, these little businesses, um, told, you know what I call urban anchors, communities made for the community by the community. And so this allows them to

kind of delve into that history of an immigrant space, of an immigrant urban anchor, as well as gets at the palimpsest of history that Los Angeles can be, right?

Gerry: So it sounds like you grew up kind of immersed in this community. I mean, the feeling I got while reading the book is that the Nayarit was far from just a restaurant. It was almost like this big rollicking community with so many things going on. And it is that how... is that the kind of community that you grew up in as well? I mean did you grow up in a kind of big rollicking community that the Nayarit was a part of?

Natalia: Absolutely. And that was what I wanted the book to convey. I think, um, you know, there, there were many moments where I thought of writing this book or perhaps, not of writing the book, but I thought, that's not my experience when I read somebody else's book or heard somebody else's talk.

I don't think it always reflected the history of, uh, Mexican women who, again, many times their stories aren't in the archive, um, of Latino entrepreneurs as you know, of multiethnic areas. And so I wanted to get at that in the book. And one of those moments was when I went to talk on hometown associations. And hometown associations, many times we start telling that history post-1965 and especially 1980s and beyond. Um, Ana Minian does a beautiful job in, in her book, um, on undocumented lives.

But, it all... home town associations are often led by men. And many of the officers are men, and there's a way in which when we start the narrative there, you don't get all the work that led up to it. And for my grandmother, she was one of those, what I call in the book, a placemaker. Even without an association, she was making community.

She was immigrating people. She was integrating them into the business. If they were young enough, she encouraged them to learn English, and then those folks had the opportunity to then go off and, and work somewhere else if they didn't like the restaurant business. That was the advantage of making sure that they immigrated with their green card.

It wasn't that she was anti undocumented and she did hire undocumented immigrants as well, but she was all about making opportunities and making sure that people had cultural capital as well.

Gerry: So this is how you grew up with a lot of these stories. It's one thing for all of us to kind of hear the stories our ancestors tell us about their families, but then it's another thing to decide to write a book about it.

So was there a moment or series of moments or a slow evolution where you thought, I need to write a book about these things?

Natalia: I can answer this question a couple of different ways and that's because my memory about it, um, sometimes fails me. But luckily I'm a good historian and I have archival evidence.

So I think one moment is me having taught both Latino studies and urban studies for a good 14 years at UC San Diego, and again, appreciating the literature that was out there, but often feeling "I don't think my story is reflected here." I would read about L G B T Q studies and I would read about Latino studies and those two didn't always come together.

And yet I knew through this, rollicking community that you, that you mentioned that there were, a sizable amount of gay men in that community. I knew that most of the histories I've read about in Latino studies took place in ethnic enclaves. And here this restaurant was in what I call a geographic crossroads. Mexicans interacting with Cubans, for example, and what that meant, kind of what it meant to be Pan-Latino before there was the 1965 Immigration Act. And I knew from that then that people could form all kinds of bonds outside of just having a common origin story.

And so that was the main reason I started writing the book. And, and it didn't start as a book, right? I thought maybe it'll be a chapter. I've been invited to give a talk and they, I knew they were gonna publish it, and so I thought, well, it has to be something original. I just finished my last book, how Race is Made in America. I'll try it. And it felt like I was stuffing all this history in there because as I would research one thing, like when people would say, oh, you know, the radio announcer Martin Vecera, he would then announce your grandmother's restaurant when he was at the million dollar theater at events on a Saturday night and everybody from the million dollar theater would then wanna come to the restaurant.

Well then it meant I had to research Martin, I had to research Spanish language radio stations, the million dollar theater. And so it just kept getting bigger. I think the other thing was the response to immediately was just so big. And that's because I also talk about gentrification in the book and how gentrification is not just economic, but cultural. That these stories, once we're gone, who will tell these stories?

They're not written up in books. And so I wrote it in a way that I hope other people can use it to tell their stories

Gerry: It becomes clear so quickly that this is much more than a book that's about a restaurant. I mean, I was amazed by all of the different threads that you follow. There are stories about immigration, sexuality, Latino Hollywood, because people like Rita Moreno were at the restaurant. And I loved all the stuff about Marlon Brando and the Nayarit wallet that he carried with him everywhere. It's amazing. So there are so many different threads and it's clear that the restaurant, I don't know, maybe it's too much to say that the restaurant was at the center of all this, but it certainly pulled together a lot of these threads.

So this is just what the restaurant was, but then what challenges did that pose to you as a writer trying to simultaneously pull lots of different threads together and write a narrative?

Natalia:

Well, that's the other way that I can get into the question about, you know, when did I think about writing the book?

So, I did shy away from it for a long time. Um, I think one reason for several reasons, including that it's a story with no archives... that we don't have any archives on them. Let me write a book about this place without an archive.

So I thought I could at least write a talk and if it's good enough, they'll publish it. And so I had a couple of magazines where, and newspaper articles that had written up the Nayarit. I knew that I could interview the former workers, including family members and some customers, and I thought, that'll get me enough, um, to write this.

But, there's that great quote about like, it's like you're, you're walking with your headlights on and you can only see as far as those headlights reach, but then once you get there, you can see that much further and it kept going.

But what I didn't get for a long time was more voices of the people in that community. And I needed research to also, um, confirm what I was hearing in the oral interviews. And then one day it hit me: oh, I had this image of my aunt, my Tia Chaya sitting on her porch in Echo Park reading El Echo de Nayarit, this newspaper from her home state that she got sent to her.

Um, sometimes in bundles cuz they would get a few and then when she would receive it, you knew not to bother her. And it just kept her tethered to the state of Nayariti, even though she had no plans of ever moving back. And once a year they would publish this anniversary issue, which was like a glossy magazine.

Mm-hmm. . And everyone I knew, and then everyone in my interviews mentioned that they still had those glossy magazines. It was kind of like keeping a yearbook or something. And they kept copies of this newspaper in Mexico. And so I went and did research in 20 years, uh, of looking through these records.

And through it you had all the stories of the Nayaritas and then all of a sudden the project went from being, from having not enough research to having way too much research. And for a while I was like, am I gonna write the history of Nayarit in Los Angeles?

I think one of the things that made it unique was that it did have, uh, you know, the nightlife, but then it could also be a restaurant for your Sunday meal. It was the kind of place that your entire family went to on a Sunday, you would get dressed up. People said you could speak in Spanish, you could make the sign of the cross, and then because it was in the neighborhood and accessible, even for people that didn't have the resources, they could access the Nayarit.

In one of my other interviews, the person said that their family couldn't afford to go there. But their dad would go with, you know, their big pot, uh, just like you do in Mexico and get it filled

with Menudo on Sunday, which was a specialty, and get a big stack of homemade tortillas to take home to his wife and his other children.

And so his wife could still have like the night off from cooking, but have something that felt authentic and nourishing to them.

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Gerry: Are there, are there restaurants like it in LA right now? I remember going to a place called Guelaguetza a few years ago. I remember it being a very big restaurant where a lot of different events could happen. You could have bands, you could have a lot of people eating at the same time. It made me wonder how big Nayarit was, was it big like that and kind of a space where a lot of different things could happen at the same time?

Natalia: Well, it's an honor to be compared to the Guelaguetza restaurant because I, I do think that is the kind of restaurant that it was, that it symbolized, right? The Guelaguetza is a, as we can tell from the name is a Oaxacan restaurant, it's a family restaurant. It's now being run by the daughter and they even have a cookbook. And so I really love that they've been able to put their story out there and their recipes. It's a kind of restaurant that grew with the growth of the Oaxacan community here in Los Angeles. Those kinds of spaces just didn't exist before, and they are rare to find because it, there are other wonderful restaurants that, that still have the, the food.

But you know, it's so hard to start a restaurant nowadays. In terms of the capital and in Los Angeles with the rent, um, and the Guelaguetza offered many things. So yes, it had space.

Gerry: Right? Cause that's the other thing.

Natalia: Yeah. It's like throwback. Yeah. Yeah. You need space. You need space to have your baptismal party there. You need space to have a dance floor. My grandmother got a liquor license and that was this huge thing because, you know, you have to go through so much screening, go to, you know, public meetings and learn what it is to run a bar. They didn't know how to do that. It was her and my mom, and neither of them really drank.

And so my, my, she sent my mom to bartending school, at bartending school owned by another Nayarita, uh, Thomas Lai. And that bartending school, uh, her, her partner was James Earl Ray.

Gerry: Yeah. That was an amazing story.

Natalia: Yeah. It was that time that James, Earl Ray lived in Los Angeles for a short time, and then he left and assassinated MLK. Yeah. And Thomas Lao, um, offered the only picture they had of James Earl Ray, which was when he was graduating and he was getting his bartending certificate.

Gerry: Amazing.

Natalia: Yeah. I mean, the other thing is, you know, the people that started their own restaurants, they had so little capital to start it. You could never do something like that now, you now! Where they would, rent somewhere and start off with a few customers and, you know, all the people from the Nayarit would visit each other's restaurants to try to give each other business.

So also spatially that you could have more than one Mexican restaurant in the area. Right? You know, Barragan's opened a few miles east of the Nayarit. Um, then people went on to open La Via Tasco, El Chavo and Conquistador, and that was just a mile and a mile-and-a-half west from the Nayarit. And they all did something a little bit different.

Barragan's started with more American food because the owner of Ramón Barragan married Grace Barragan, who was Mexican American and had also worked at a café. El Chavo and el Conquistador were urban anchors, gay, Latino urban anchors. They all offered something to make them distinct.

Gerry: Yeah, I was curious about that because your grandmother, um, gave seed money to a lot of these restaurants to open up nearby, and I think you mentioned the book that they all opened on the same street, on Sunset.

So I was thinking like, did she encourage a way of thinking about these new businesses in kind of non-competitive terms? Because you would almost think that like, the people who are opening the restaurants would say, go ahead and open your restaurant, but make sure it's like 2, 3, 4 miles away so that it doesn't compete with mine.

But it sounds like these were all on the same strip. So is that just a different way of thinking about it?

Natalia: I think they were far enough away that it wasn't that much of an issue. Barragan's was the closest. But that was partly why they had an American menu. Even though my grandmother didn't explicitly say like, don't take my entire menu. They wanted to show some things that were different. Um, La Via Tasco, it's at the kind of gateway into Hollywood. And so they were really trying to attract, a white clientele as well. And El Chavo and Conquistador they got their liquor licenses right away and they went for the margarita crowd, and I will say they nailed it.

Gerry: This might be kind of an unfair question cuz I'm asking you to think about restaurants in Florida and Chicago and Arizona, but it, it did strike me that this book could have been written

about so many restaurants. I remember growing up in Tucson and hearing about places like Minidito or El Charro, these family owned restaurants that had been in the city for 50 or 60 years, or Cafe Versailles in Miami or Nuevo Leon here in Chicago. So on the one hand, Nayarit is just really fortunate to have a kick ass historian who's invested in telling their story, and maybe all of these other restaurants, if they had historians like Natalia Molina to tell their story, we would see a much bigger picture of how restaurants were really central to our communities all over the place.

Um, so I don't know how much you know about these individual places, but you know, what of, what you study do you think could be exportable to understanding the role that restaurants played in other communities as well? And maybe what wouldn't?

Natalia: I hope all of it. Um, you know, this isn't my first rodeo, this is my third monograph, and so I really wrote it so that other people could copy that model.

I'm in the process of developing K-12 curriculum because I want people to tell their story. That's the main thing I want out of this book. When you're from California in the fourth grade and in different grades, you have to do your California history.

Gerry: Yeah, the missions.

Natalia: The missions! Like what? And then we don't even have this critical lens. So I would love for one of the exercises that people do for their California history is to tell the story of their urban anchor. It may be a restaurant, it may be a café. In my neighborhood here in Pasadena, there's a large Armenian community.

I wanna tell the, the story of Sam's Cleaners. I love them. I've learned so much about the Armenian diaspora from them. That's the main reason that I wrote the book. I want people to understand that it's important to tell your story and how to do it even if you don't have archives.

I have a newsletter. You could see it on my website, nataliamolinaphd.com. And so I've started to interview people on how they do this. One of the things people always ask me is, are you going to do a tour of Echo Park? I mean I'd love to do that. So I interviewed one of my graduate students, Arabella Delgado, who's amazing and has done tours for the Boyle Heights Museum.

I'm gonna interview Virginia Espino, who is, you know, one of the leading oral historians of our time, Virginia is one of the documentarians who brought us "No Más Bebés," which looks at the forced sterilizations at LA County Hospitals, which we know about through her oral interviews.

And so I'm gonna interview her on how you do an oral interview if you're not a historian. I know not everybody's going to be a historian. I know not everybody's gonna write a book, but maybe they could write a kick ass Instagram post. Maybe they could do something for the website of these businesses. Maybe they could include something on their Yelp page.

Maybe if you have a class of 30 4th graders and they each do this and then they geotag them on Google Maps. And now we have this whole other understanding of the city, not as city planners design it, but as actually people use it: that's what we need. We need to write ourselves into history.

Gerry:

That would be amazing. Natalia. I hope that that happens and I hope that there state legislators and educators who are kind of on board with this program.

I think your work is now in a growing field of food studies that I'm sure, I see it most in Latino history, but I'm sure it's a much broader phenomenon than that. I know Matt Garcia recently edited a book and Lori Florez is working in this field and Mireya Loza is working in this field. So, I guess, when I hear your earlier answers about how you came to the book, it wasn't necessarily through the field of food studies, but nevertheless here you've landed and you're entering conversations about food studies.

So I'm wondering, what do you think food studies is all about right now?

Natalia: One of the things that food studies gives us is joy. To be able to share this part of the culture and show them empowerment of people growing their own food because it's not sold in the markets. Representing themselves, really writing themselves into the story, into the city, being placemakers, all of that brings so much joy.

I was recently a judge for a tortilla contest. At KCRW with the LA Times columnist, Gustavo Arellano and the pmplacable food expert, writer, chef, everything. Evan Kleiman... And as part of that, Gustavo interviewed me for it, ended up writing a little piece, and then the day of the tortilla contest, I thought, okay, well sure this is gonna be fun.

I was so wrong! And I should have known this as a historian and as someone who writes about food, that food was a way for people to, to show their cultural pride, to take joy. To access their memories that they never see represented out there. We make up 4% of speaking roles on the screen.

You don't get a very nuanced examination of Latinos still today, even in 2022. And so for people to be like, Wow, you're centering on the tortilla. And by doing that, you're talking about the history of the places that made it and showing the diversity of Latino culture that some were from Mexico, others were Tex Mex, others were from, you know, Northern Mexico, which then you start seeing the regional difference. People were so excited. To the point where I would go to the food booth and try to get something to eat in between rounds of judging and people I'd never met were just stopping me and just saying, Natalia, let me tell you about, I would have a tortilla after school and how I would prepare it and what it meant to me.

Natalia, let me tell you about making tortillas with my grandmother. So I think that is a big part of it.

Gerry: That... I think that's amazing.

Natalia: Yeah. I think the flip side of it is, heck, we're tired of still not seeing ourselves represented. I think when you mentioned, you know, Matt Garcia, Lori Flores, Mireya, I don't know cuz I've never asked them, but they already wrote these formidable books talking about the way that Latinos suffered and toiled under these conditions to put food on our tables in the fifties, sixties, seventies and wait, we're still doing that today? You know, during the pandemic many of us got to work from home and we talked about essential workers.

And we know that many of those people were undocumented, and then when it came time to giving out vaccines or covid tests or anything like that, were like, oh, no. Undocumented people, they don't get to have those resources like, really, they got to put food on our tables and deliver food to us and be the ones that worked in restaurants in small spaces so that we could go pick it up by, or ordering through our apps on Uber Eats and now they don't get to have a vaccine?

Are you kidding me? And so I think to me, food studies is also a way of saying: all those people out there who like to call themselves foodies and like to take pictures of their food, this is the other side of it. And we need to reckon with this. Absolutely. I think that's part of where the question comes from, because a lot of the people doing the work in food studies now are people who had written first books about labor and agriculture and then have made the move to writing about food and they're closely related things.

But, yes, in some ways food studies is a way to put the labor and exploitation that so many take for granted right in front of you.

The final thing I want to ask is something I want to ask everyone I talk to. We're all in the field of Latino history, but we're also Latinos and have a lot of thoughts about the national conversations about Latinos right now and Latino identity. So I'm wondering, what are some of your thoughts about the state of the national conversation about Latinos right now?

What are some of the things that you're paying attention to and gosh, I'm trying to think of a more elegant way of putting this question: what does Latina, Latino, Latinx identity mean to you? But I think I'll just ask it like that. Cause I can't think of a better way of asking it.

Natalia: I'll tell you what I'm thinking of these days.

I think one of the things that writing this book did for me was focus, not just led me to a focus on food studies, but food justice.

And that has opened up a lot for me in terms of thinking about what it means to be Latino. So I donated the proceeds for this year of the book to an organization called No Us Without You. And I started because as I was launching the book or finishing the book, I forget which, we were in the middle of a pandemic, the press didn't wanna release the book because of that, I was working from home and then we also had these wildfires and so I would see on the news, the way that those agricultural workers, many of whom were Latino, a lot of whom were indigenous, so even when the news was translated to them in Spanish, didn't know what was going on about the pandemic or the wildfires and how they were working in this like cloud of orange smoke.

And even though I don't live near those areas, it drifted down to my part of LA and you couldn't even like walk the dog. And there was this organization called No Us Without You that said for all those workers that are out of work cuz of the pandemic and can't access food relief, we're going to provide food for them and they pivoted very quickly. They started doing food giveaways just like a week or two after it was declared a pandemic. And so I recently went to give them the check, the donation check, and they were having a food drive and also a toy drive, and we just started talking about like how much worse it's gonna get, you know?

Title 42 is gonna be lifted. The moratorium amount on rent here is going to be lifted. And you just start thinking like whether you are Latino or not, whether you do Latino studies or not. We all need to be invested in immigration debates, immigration histories, to understand that better in homelessness and under-housed people, because housing is getting more and more difficult than our cities, and it's disproportionately affecting people of color.

And so to me it's a way of saying we need to put Latino studies, ethnic studies, just front and center and in the middle of conversations to see how all these issues look so differently from the margins. And I think it's a call that ethnic studies has been making since the 1970s, right? That kind of, you can't just add and stir uou actually have to look through this lens, and think about intersectionality.

But it's affecting our daily lives. We're not talking about history, we're not talking about academic issues. And so I think it only makes our work more urgent. Um, and it only makes me more grateful that so many of us are doing much more public facing work, whether it's writing op-eds, doing a podcast, just helping in any way we can so that people understand the urgency of these issues and don't just see history as a run up or a, a backstory to a contemporary issue.

Gerry: Amen to all of that. Thank you so much Natalia, and thank you for the work that you do, and thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," Dos Santos]

Thank you for listening to this episode of Writing Latinos—

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This episode is brought to you by Public Books. It was produced and edited by Tasha Sandoval. Our music is "City of Mirrors" by the Chicago-based band, Dos Santos.
I'm Geraldo Cadava. We'll see you again, right here, in two weeks.