Lina Maria Murillo interview

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez.

Avigail: And I'm Avigail Oren.

Lisa: And we are your hosts for Scholar Strategy Network's No Jargon. Every other week, we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon.

Avigail: So Lisa, you are part of SSNs policy team, and you actually are the person who works with all of our scholars of reproductive health and rights. And so I think, you know probably better than anyone just how under attack reproductive health policy is in this country right now.

Lisa: I mean, if we look at all of the bads, all of the restrictions, definitely see a lot of folks grappling with trying to find access to care and also trying to see what is happening next within the reproductive health space. Like how do we move forward? How do we deal with all of the restrictions that are in place? And mainly how are people experiencing the restrictions themselves? It's really important to keep in mind that marginalized communities are mainly the people who are affected by these issues as well.

Avigail: Yeah. And there's a really long history in this country of women's rights and women's reproduction being a tool for population control and particularly white supremacist, towards white supremacist ends. I'm so curious to hear this week's conversation that looks at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and think about how this country in the past has put marginalized people under the policy microscope, if you will, and force them to advocate for themselves in order to create the families that they want.

Lisa: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's really great that we had an expert come on and help us talk about the history and tie it into the present and future of reproductive care. So for this episode, I spoke to Lina-Maria Murillo, an associate professor of

women's gender and sexuality studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a historian who studies how we think about and talk about reproductive justice and is the author of *Fighting for Control: Power, Reproductive Care and Race in the US Mexico Borderlands*. Here's our conversation.

Lisa: Dr. Murillo, thanks so much for coming on No Jargon.

Lina: Thank you so much for having me, Lisa. I'm excited to engage in no jargon conversation.

Lisa: Absolutely. Well, I'm really excited to talk about your book with you, your book titled *Fighting for Control.* And I wanted to first ask you what sparked your interest into this history of reproductive health in the borderlands, and why did you feel like it was a story that needed to be told?

Lina: It was serendipitous. I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at El Paso, focusing on the history of women in the border region. That was my initial interest. And really, my curiosity was sparked by the femicides that were going on along the US-Mexico border, in particular in the area of Juarez.

I went to UTEP with the intention of studying what was going on with that, a phenomenon that really rocked, I think not just Mexico, but people that live along the U.S.-Mexico border and also I think in Latin America. This is a very horrifying period of Mexican history where groups of women, as young as 10, 12 years old and as old as in their 80s, were found buried in the desert. This began in the 1990s. And so I was really curious about this and I'd seen people writing about it, but I was thinking about doing it through a sort of historical lens. When I got to El Paso, people said to me, you absolutely cannot do this research because this is still happening. Violence against women at this magnitude is still occurring in Juarez. And this is a very delicate subject. And so it's not something you can study at this time.

So I was puttering around the library trying to figure out what I was gonna do. I had a colleague in the library, one of the archivists, said, we just randomly got the Planned Parenthood of El Paso archives. They are closing. And that was also a

huge shock to the community. It was an organization that had been around since 1937, that it's the first birth control clinic, established along the U.S.-Mexico border. From that moment on, I started, you know, over a decade's worth of work looking at the history of Planned Parenthood along the U.S.-Mexico border. That then kind of had me go in different directions looking at the history of women's activism in the border region and the history of activism around what I, you know, considered to be really reproductive justice work.

And by that I mean that the people involved in the movement were not necessarily concerned with fighting for legal rights to access abortion or contraception, but rather that they were interested in how do we either control birth? On the one hand, those were the women who started the Planned Parenthood organization, mostly white women. And their concern, beginning in the 1930s, was how do we address rising infant mortality rates, and how do we address a burgeon Mexican-origin community. And then as their organization changed over time and began to grow and Mexican-origin women did go to the clinic, many of those women began to kind of question some of the rationales for why that clinic existed in the first place.

And also then began to say, well, you know, what can we build that is our own? A clinic that is dedicated to one of the Chicana activists who I feature in the book, Amelia Castillo, says like a totality of care, right? What does actually offering access to not just contraception and birth control, but also prenatal care, postnatal care, what does that look like?

So for me, the question was about this framework of reproductive justice, because reproductive justice is much more expansive than a discussion of simply civil rights. It is a framework that grounds us in also, not just human rights in the way that have been discussed internationally, but in an innate right?

Because you are a human being, because you are a breathing, living person, you should be granted, regardless of whether or not you are a citizen of a particular country or state, you should be granted fundamental access to your body and your body should be respected. That really for me opened up the door to think critically about the documents that I was looking at.

I did a lot of oral histories for this book, and it was really wonderful, because it provided me with a lot of information that I don't think I would've otherwise. They weren't, you know, voices of community members whose papers are not at the library, whose archives are not protected by an institution like the University of Texas El Paso. And so that's really what got me involved and invested in this history, and also put me on a path, as an activist in my own right, to defend reproductive justice in the U.S. and in the border region.

Lisa: Thank you so much for sharing that. I think one of the things that I found interesting about your book, and as I was reading about all of the information that you collected was the term of like reproductive care and reproductive justice and that framework sort of describe how these activists managed to get themselves into this framework almost in response to population control in response to like some of the eugenics mindset that a lot of their care was originally delivered with. And now that you mentioned your original interest in femicide, it makes perfect sense why you would then go from that to talking about things like population control and the history of the eugenesis movement within reproductive care. And I'm wondering if you can expand a little bit for those who are maybe not familiar with the involvement of population control mentality, and like white supremacists mindset that influenced that reproductive innovation early on within the movement.

Lina: Part of what my book was trying to do also is to connect in ways that often we don't see in histories, the reproductive control side of the movement with the reproductive justice and reproductive liberation aspect of the movement, they are not that far away from each other. And sometimes in the case of organizations like Planned Parenthood, their existence can span these various movements and are very much influenced by them. But in order to talk a little bit about the history of eugenics, I have to go a little bit into the 19th century, so the 1800s, and talk about the fact that the idea of eugenics really comes from the development of evolution and evolutionary thinking.

So it's trying to take the work of Darwin and use that to think about society and to think about human beings, not just animals, but also how do human beings evolve? And If we do evolve, is there a way for us to engineer that evolution? Is there a way for us to be able to manipulate how we are able to evolve, right? And so, this

was the science of the day. I know I have colleagues who will say, oh, it's pseudoscience. But I pushed back on that because, at the time it wasn't pseudoscience, it was just science. It was how some of the greatest thinkers, frighteningly so, believed that we could in fact reproduce quote unquote better people.

Now, what is the problem with that? That these ideas are coming out of, like I said, the end of the 19th century. And there are other things, and this is what historians try to do, there are other things that are happening at that particular time. One is the end of slavery and the incorporation of Black people into the U.S. There's also massive amounts of empire building across the globe. So you have what some historians call the quote unquote scramble for Africa. So when European nations begin to divide up the African continent in order to extract resources. And in order to justify these moves, right, in order to justify things like Jim Crow within the United States, they had to develop a set of thinking, a way of thinking, that essentially placed people on a hierarchy of humanity. That there were certain groups that were inherently right, they were just born higher up on that ladder of humanity.

And then there were other groups of people who were placed lower on that rung of humanity, and those folks were on a progressive march towards reaching that higher status. Now the people that were in charge of constructing these ladders of humanity were overwhelmingly white. They were overwhelmingly male, Euro-descended thinkers. These are physicians and scientists in places like Harvard, Yale, Oxford University in England, who were coming up with these very sophisticated hierarchies of humanity. And they were divided by racial groups. So at the end of the 19th century, there were hundreds of various racial groups. Even white people were placed on this, right? So if you were Irish, you were lower on the scale of human evolution. This begins to shift and change into the early parts of the 20th century. A lot of this is impacted in the U.S. by segregation.

Segregation, the history of segregation, the history of Jim Crow, is deeply aligned with eugenic thinking, right? That you need to separate the races out as a way to protect and preserve the good hereditary traits of white people. Jim Crow not only affects African Americans in the United States, but it is part of you know, Mexican

American history, as Mexican Americans were also segregated throughout the Southwest and as well as in the south. This is the history of Native Americans, Asian Americans. That segregation was kind of at the base level very deeply tied to eugenic thinking, that we need to keep people separate as a way to preserve some sort of racial purity and hereditary standards, especially for whites.

And so people have different ideas about how you do that. How do you preserve this? One of those people was Margaret Sanger, who becomes really involved in the birth control movement. She becomes friends with Emma Goldman in the 19 teens. Emma Goldman is a radical anarchist, she is a labor organizer. And she's thinking about birth control as a way for labor for workers, for women workers to take what she would call the means of reproduction into their own hands. So not just having control of factories and having control of their physical labor, but also their reproductive labor, right? The ability to reproduce a new generation of workers. And that was what Emma Goldman was like fighting for.

Emma Goldman, in many similar ways to what's going on now, was speaking out very publicly against the government. And so she's deported and before she's deported, she kind of hands off the reins of the work that she was doing. She hands it off to Margaret Sanger, who's a nurse, who's working in New York City with impoverished communities in New York. And Margaret Sanger definitely has a little bit of that vision about owning the means of reproduction. But she's also deeply influenced by eugenic thinking.

She also has to leave the country. So she goes to Europe and befriends all these other eugenics. And they say like, really birth control, if it's going to do anything meaningful in the world, is that it's going to end poverty. It's going to end disease because it's going to be the most important tool that we can have to help weed out people who are poor and people who are diseased. And in the U.S. in particular, within this sort of racial system that we have, this racial caste system that we have in the U.S., it becomes a way to target specific populations.

My book is predominantly on how it was focused against Mexican origin, people along the U.S.-Mexico border. So I have some chapters that look at the work that people like Margaret Sanger were doing, then she'd befriend very wealthy people

like Clarence Gamble, who is the son of the, and scion of the Proctor and Gamble corporation. And he's a millionaire and he is deeply distressed by what he believes are certain populations whose fertility is out of control.

Clarence Gamble, in the early 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, becomes really one of the primary funders of eugenic population control campaigns. Now, population control comes into play after the end of World War II. Once the discoveries are made around the Holocaust and people are, rightfully so, completely disgusted and shocked by that eugenic. I mean, that really is, kind of the most extreme version of eugenics that we've seen in world history. And it makes a lot of these eugenic sort of like, you know, have to crawl back into their shell.

Now, mind you, part of the work that I'm doing in my book and the work that I'm continuing to do in my research is to say, these people didn't die. They didn't stop being eugenicists. They just realized that that was not a position they could take given the history of the Holocaust. And so what I argue is that in the late 1940s, they begin to rebrand. And rather than saying we need to focus on better breeding, they begin to talk about population control. And that there are certain populations that are out of control. They tend to be populations in the global south. But really this is about, this is an environmental issue. So they take on this mantra of environmentalism.

So for folks who are listening who are like, oh, but environmentalists are so great. I'm like, I'm sorry. I'm here to crush your dreams. They are eugenics, right? Like the fundamental history of a lot of these groups that we consider to be quote unquote progressive or on the left, their history is deeply tied to eugenic thinking. And that's, so that's part of the work that I'm doing in my book is to kind of unravel that. Now other historians have done it before me. I'm not the first one, but I'm, I am one of the first people who's looking at that history along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Lisa: You know, I appreciate you bringing up so much of the history behind the shift from labeling yourself as a eugenics to now sort of taking a different approach in order to make still eugenics thinking more saleable to different audiences. As maybe the listeners know, I don't know, I'm Puerto Rican, so I knew a lot of the

history behind birth control innovation within Puerto Rico, and especially with the birth control trials and, definitely like a lot of experimentation with people's bodies on the island. And a lot of the things that you talk about within your book were really, I was familiar with just because of that history. But I am really interested in what inspired you to focus on the region between the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, what can that region tell us about how race or geography and citizenship can shape access to reproductive health?

Lina: I really appreciate you bringing up the history of Puerto Rico because one of the things that I found interesting, and it just revealed so much about the depth and the breadth of these eugenics in the 1930s and 40s. So, Clarence Gamble is one of those people who really helps to usher in the trials of birth control pills in Puerto Rico. Some of the documents I found is that he is kind of in awe of the work that these white women are doing in El Paso because they are writing a lot of their material in English and in Spanish. So they are really innovating a bilingual approach to the birth control movement in El Paso. And he is like, I mean, this is revolutionary to him.

Margaret Singer's organization is getting started. Planned Parenthood is beginning to expand. They are starting to create regional organizations. And so Clarence Campbell was in charge of that quote unquote, sort of Southwest one, but the women in El Paso didn't like him. They wanted to only work with Margaret Sanger. But so he could try and he would send people to go and do, kind of routine check-ins with the women at the birth control clinic in El Paso and eventually says to them like, can you send me some of the bilingual material that you have? It's really fascinating. A year after he gets that material for them is when he starts to travel for the first time ever to Puerto Rico. So part of what I'm suggesting is that he really begins to think about how to engage communities in Latin America. First by starting along the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso. And then that information travels back to Puerto Rico.

And then, in another chapter, I have discovered some of the work that he does. He's an entrepreneur, he's from Missouri, and he develops this spermicidal foam. The first place to go and do the trials for the spermicidal foam is in Puerto Rico. They don't really get much uptick there. And in fact, a lot of the activists and folks on the

ground in Puerto Rico are like, no, thank you. We're like, we don't want this. And so they're left with all of this foam that actually does work. It is a good contraceptive. And then they reach out to the women in El Paso at Planned Parenthood. And the women in El Paso are like, well, will you pay us to use this and they're like, yes.

And then it, like, proliferates in El Paso and it becomes so big in El Paso, like through Planned Parenthood, that this company essentially goes and creates a documentary that to this day I have not found, I would pay money to see this, right? Because it happens in the 1960s, where they're essentially sending women going door, door to door to sell this stuff.

There's a lot of connection between the border region, what's going on in Mexico and in Puerto Rico. And I think that to me is one of those things that extends the border, what I call the sort of the U.S. colonial border beyond the physical demarcation of the U.S.-Mexico border and how Puerto Rico is critical to understanding what the U.S. borderlands look like.

So that's one way of answering your question. And that the other way also shows the degree to which the border region itself is a very porous area and how often people would travel from Mexico to El Paso to get access to contraception because they could. I don't focus that much on the history of abortion in my book, but I have written extensively about the history of abortion. You know, people before Roe v Wade were constantly traveling to Mexico, northern Mexico, to get access to abortion care. There were reputable physicians who, even though abortion was also illegal in Mexico, offered abortion services to women.

So for me, it was important to bring that history to light, despite our current conversations about the increased militarization of the border, and so for me, the border region, there's so much to unpack, as to why I think it should be a place that we understand. Reproductive justice, like where we can, there are just so many examples for unpacking and digging deeper into reproductive justice.

Lisa: I always have trouble grappling with the past of reproductive health and innovation around reproductive health, understanding that so much of the

innovation around reproductive health was through the eyes of restricted restrictions and control around people's bodies. And then now we are in a present in which there's a lack of innovation and there is an attack on reproductive health access through control on people's bodies. Like, I guess what are lessons with how people dealt with, like grappling with the issues around like, okay, we used to promote reproductive health in order to sort of control populations, and now we are not promoting reproductive health in order to control populations.

So I'm just a little bit at a loss here of how to move forward and what kind of framing would be helpful, when yes, acknowledging the past, but also recognizing that currently we are still dealing with reproductive control, but just in a different font, if you will.

Lina: So, in my book, I coin a term, and I know this is No Jargon, so I'm gonna try to explain why I coined the term. But I call it population control ideology. And the ideology is that there should be people in charge of deciding what our global population looks like. So not just national population, but global population should look like. This desire to control is one that again spans much of the 19th century and goes throughout the 20th century and now into the 21st century.

And it is a white supremacist desire, right? The idea that ideology, population control ideologies is deeply framed, created, shaped by white supremacists, intentions that the people that should be in charge that get to decide when we need more people, when we need less people, are Euro-descended, and that they be male. I often am asked to speak on the sort of prenatal movement in the United States currently, how the federal government is, on the one hand, taking away access internationally, to let you know, ending USAID, which also was deeply connected to population control campaigns when it first started in the 1970s. That was deeply connected to contraceptive and family planning campaigns. So these things are connected.

And then at the same time, the U.S. federal government is, also, trying to shore up births, right? So we're gonna end access to abortion. We're gonna probably end access to contraception. What is it telling us? If we begin to connect their actions and their words, what we begin to see is that in the 20th century, the idea that

people should have access to contraceptives and that people should be, quote unquote, taught how to use contraceptives, how to use abortion as a means of birth control. People themselves, in particular communities of color themselves, began to use these tools for their own liberation, for their own uplift.

When they actually begin to use these on their own terms, that is when it becomes a problem because it is no longer about the control of populations. But what we begin to see, especially in the global south, is that people begin to take the notion of bodily autonomy to its next conclusion, which is that you should also have community autonomy. That maybe we don't need foreign powers trying to control our governments, that maybe we should be in charge of our own politics. And these, a lot of these movements are led by women, are led by feminists who are bringing their own cultural understanding and norms of what it is, their own bodily autonomy.

And yeah, they've siphoned off money from these population control campaigns, right, that are funded by people like the Rockefellers and the Ford Foundation, right? They're like, okay, sure, if you're gonna give us money for this stuff, but we're also going to begin to use this money for our own liberation. One of those starts, you know, at literally in our bodies, our ability to control our reproduction. That means that now that we can, we're gonna demand more access to education, we're gonna begin to demand more access to our human right to exist.

And that is a problem, right? And so we've seen 50, 60 years of that. And now you begin to see folks pushing back. Who are the people pushing back? The same community of billionaires that decided it was incumbent upon them to start a population control movement to curb population. Now you see folks like the Elon Musks, like the Peter Thiels, who are like, we are seeing population decline. But really our concern is that population decline is happening at the worst levels. And what we really should be worried about is Euro descendant people's population decline. So how do we prevent those people from having less children, right? So let's get rid of access to birth control. Let's get rid of access to abortion care.

Maybe that will make it so that other, especially communities of color, have more children, but we're gonna deny them access to healthcare. So they're not gonna live

that long. We're going to start to say things like, vaccines are actually bad for you, even though we know that they literally have extended the life expectancy of humanity overall. But we're gonna deny access to vaccines to some of the poorest people and specifically to people of color. And so those folks will just die off. They'll just die young. And of course, if you're rich, you'll always have access to vaccines. You'll always have access to good healthcare 'cause you can just buy it, right? Whereas the poor do not. This is eugenics on steroids.

In our federal government, in the last, you know, nine months or whatever, that is the vision that they have put forward. And this is not to mention, you know, the Big Beautiful Bill which will strip millions of people from the healthcare rolls, right? And so I think people need to understand that these eugenic ideas are just being repurposed and reimagined. And now the eugenicists are in control, right? And it's not just eugenicists, but it's also Christian nationalists and Christian fundamentalists who are also in control, who similarly have ideas about who God has chosen to rule the earth.

So these spaces, these communities are coming together. They see alliances. I'm starting to call them the techno trads. So trad, the traditionalists, the trad wives, the trad whatever movement, and the tech folks who are also deeply concerned about, white population decline,

Lisa: As we are talking about the folks behind population control, I would love for you as we close our conversation out to expand on those that fight against population control. So within your book, you talk a lot about Chicana activists who took on that reproductive justice framework and continued to fight for things that are more centered around community or bodily autonomy, like centering other issues within that reproductive justice framework and how things are interconnected. It's not just about whether you have access to birth control, it's whether you have access to have children, in a place that feels safe for them or, have like a safe environment to grow up in.

So I would love for you to talk a little bit about maybe something that can bring us some inspiration right now. Where do you see the glimmers of progress or possibilities in the fight for reproductive justice?

Lina: What I have found so inspiring about some of the activists that I'm writing about is that they were imagining a world. And this is a really hard time to imagine things, but we have to, that is that the number one thing we can't let them take from us is our imagination. A lot of people wanna feel really sad and bummed out and nihilistic about what's happening. That is letting those other folks, who want to be cruel and want to destroy and want to deny people care and empathy and compassion that is allowing them to win on so many levels.

And so there is something really beautiful about looking at the past and looking at people who have lived through some incredibly horrific and dystopic moments in history, right? And oftentimes, again, they are women of color, these are communities of color who have lived through the worst parts of U.S. history. And who dared to imagine that things would be better, maybe not for them, but certainly for their children and their children's children. That is key to reproductive justice, right?

So the work that we need to engage in today isn't necessarily about us. It's about the people that come after us and believing that they deserve an opportunity to dream too. Like the people who are opposed to egalitarianism, who are opposed to creating equitable and just spaces in which we can all thrive, they imagine wild stuff all the time. They imagined the end of Roe and they fought until they got it, right? They imagined that we would have Christian nationalists at the helm of our federal government and they have it, right? So if they can dare to dream, we should dare to dream. So I will.

That's one thing. The other is that people organize outside of major institutions, they organize within institutions, but they also organize outside of major institutions. So I know a lot of folks are keeping an eye on the justice system, right? They're worried about what the Supreme Court is gonna do or not gonna do, or what they're gonna protect or not protect. They're looking at universities and K through 12 education as an institution, you know, that will quote unquote hold the line. They're looking at our medical system, right? Will hospitals really begin to deny people access to care if the federal government ordains it so, right? If they pass policies, those are important things to look at and important things to watch

out for, but what are the spaces that are not these older institutions where we still need to be working and organizing in.

There are lots of groups that have been organizing, you know, networks of support. One of those is abortion funds. Abortion funds across the country have been working, even before the Dobbs decision, but certainly after the Dobbs decision to get people access to healthcare in places like the U.S.-Mexico border region. Some of these groups helped migrant folks who were being detained, so they would divert their funds for abortion to help people get outta detention and then back to abortion funds, because again, it is about reproductive justice. That justice, what has to be underscored if you are separating families at the U.S.-Mexico border, if you are leaving children to be funneled through the foster care system in this country, that is a reproductive violence on the folks who are attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border for access to safety and care.

And that should be just as important to us as getting access to abortion. That has not been talked about in community, it has to be, right? And so people are like, no, we need to keep our eye on. We constantly wanna silo these conversations when they are not right. They're part of a broader fabric of access to our bodies, and access to our human right to family and human right to community. And we need to bring those conversations together. And so I would urge the folks that are listening now, if you are feeling despondent, if you are feeling sad, if you are feeling nervous, seek out organizations that already exist, like these organizations already exist, doing incredible work to bring communities together.

If you are interested in the issues around migrant detention, there are organizations in your state that are likely already organizing around this. Join them, work with them. If you are interested in helping people get access to abortion care across state lines, look at abortion funds, join them, work with them. If you wanna help students who are fighting for access to reproductive healthcare on college campuses, there are student unions who are doing this work today. And they could use folks who are in the community that are not students, to tether them between their institution and the broader community in which they live and work.

And so that is what I would say. Like there are folks doing work on the ground. People are getting burned out, and so we need more, right? We need folks to be able to step into roles when other folks are like, I need a minute. I need to step out. and that is normal and that we need to be able to be there for each other and create moments of joy and for dreaming and imagination. And oftentimes it can happen while you're listening to a podcast as you're washing dishes or walking your dog or doing the laundry. You ask people to listen to this podcast and then afterwards you say, okay, what did you gain from this? The defiant act of talking about empathy and care and community and love and joy in the face of so much monstrosity is the thing we need to keep doing.

Lisa: Thank you so much for sharing so much about control and the playbook around control and also while doing that, encouraging us to think forward and to use our imagination. I think people's imagination is definitely the most powerful tool that we have. So it's important to encourage folks to think about what is possible, what kind of future can be ahead of us. So I really appreciate you doing that and encouraging that today. And thank you so much for coming on No jargon and sharing your expertise with us, Dr. Murillo.

Lina: Thank you, Lisa. It was an absolute pleasure, and I look forward to more conversations with folks, as we get deeper into this administration.

Lisa: And thanks for listening. For more on Dr. Murillo's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/nojargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policymakers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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