

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRYSTAL RAMIREZ

An Oral History Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White
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PREFACE



Krystal Ramirez provides a thoughtful and introspective look at her life as a Latina growing up in Las Vegas and focuses on her decision to pursue an interdisciplinary study of art.

Krystal was five years old when her immigrant parents relocated to Las Vegas from Texas attracted by work opportunities. Her father went into drywall for residential construction and her mother into casino food services. Krystal was a good student and daughter, though sometimes her parents did not fully embrace her passions. Nonetheless, they gave her room to explore and to eventually flourish.

Within this oral history, she explores her life experiences as a Latina in Las Vegas and in the art scene of the city. She subtly reveals how she has come to explore family and personal history through her art.

Krystal received a Bachelor's in Fine Art in Photography from UNLV (2009) and soon after this meeting began art studies as an MFA candidate at Stanford University,

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in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

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Krystal Ramirez 10-30-19
Signature of Narrator Date

Monserath Hernández 10/30/19
Signature of Interviewer Date

Today is Wednesday, October 30th of 2019. We are in the Oral History Research Center.

My name is Monserrath Hernandez. With me today is...

Barbara Tabach.

And...

Krystal Ramirez.

Krystal, can you spell out your name for me?

Yes. K-R-Y-S-T-A-L, and Ramirez is R-A-M-I-R-E-Z.

Thank you for being here today.

Thank you for having me.

To begin, I always like to ask our narrators how they identify. How would you say you identify, and that can be in any content?

That's such a good question and I feel like I never think about that. I think Mexican American. For a long time, just Mexican. I think growing up my parents just really instilled that in me. "You're Mexican." I was born in Texas, so I'm also—and, also, just from going back to Mexico a lot, every year when I was younger, the people would let me know that I was very American, so Mexican American.

You're always in the hyphen, right? You were never one way or the other?

Yes. Yes, no. I think when I was younger it was a bigger deal to me, always made to feel other. When I would go to Mexico—I grew up going every summer. My parents would send me for a few weeks or sometimes the whole summer. It would really bother me when my cousins or the other kids would just tell me how *bocha/bocho* I was, my accent in Spanish. Then here, coming back also, is that whole conversation about—what's that quote that people always say? That Salina's dad would say? Like, not Mexican enough for the Mexicans and not American enough

for the Americans. I really related to that strongly. But now I don't really think about it too much.

When did you make that transition of not thinking about it too much?

Maybe when I started getting preoccupied with other goals. Now I'm just focused on maybe my career as a teacher or my photography career and I don't have time to think about the ways in which I'm being told I'm other. Maybe it's still part of me and I'm pushing all that to the side for now and just focusing on getting ahead or getting these opportunities. I'm definitely made to think of those things sometimes when I know I'm given opportunities as an artist because they need people of color, and so that doesn't always feel good. I think it's also because the work is good, but then sometimes I know it's because they're trying to meet their quotas. They need to make it diverse. Then it kind of comes back and I'm made aware of all that. Then I just realign or refocus and just try to keep moving forward.

Sometimes you're tokenized.

Oh, yes, I guess. I never thought about it that way, but sure. I mean, it is, yes, of course.

What part of Texas did your family come from?

My family is from Chihuahua, which is in northern Mexico. They moved to El Paso. Now I have family in Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Midland, all over Texas. Originally when they left Mexico they were in El Paso and Midland area, so West Texas.

How long did you there?

I lived in Texas until I was about five years old. Then my parents moved to Las Vegas in the early 1990s.

Is there a reason that they came here?

There was a lot of jobs in Las Vegas in the 90s. I feel like Las Vegas was booming. My dad is a construction worker. My mom at the time, I don't think, had never worked a job, so she got her first job in a casino being a bus person at the Binion's Horseshoe. She was there for maybe ten years and then got hired—until this day she still works there—at Mandalay Bay since it opened, so I don't know, maybe twenty, twenty-five years.

What does she do at the Mandalay Bay?

I think now she's technically a server at the buffet, but she is still a bus person.

Then your dad, what casinos did he help build?

I actually don't know that. I don't think he's ever helped build any casinos. He worked with mostly residential, so a lot of residential housing. During the nineties for sure and all the 2000s—or the aughts, is that how you say it? I don't know. So many houses were being built, so he did a lot of that. He was a drywaller. That's what I remember him doing all the time is always working on a new neighborhood or the next community that was being built, Summerlin and then Anthem—he's retired now—Sun City. Just as the city was growing, they were just building more houses. Then for a while before he retired he was doing repairs. A lot of the casinos, especially downtown, started remodeling because they were getting old, so he did work on some casinos, but not building them from the ground up, just helping remodel the casinos.

What part of Las Vegas did you first arrive at?

The very first house we lived here was downtown on Bonanza and 16th Street. We lived there for maybe two or three years. I went to Halle Hewetson Elementary School down there. Then they moved to the east side on Nellis and Harmon, and I went to Harley Harmon Elementary School.

A quick little story on that. I had a studio visit a week ago, an art studio visit. Heather Harmon, the great-granddaughter of Harley Harmon, she is an art curator and she's involved with...they're going to build the Nevada Art Museum portion here, or the annex.

Extension.

Their extension, yes. She was there during my visit, and I was like, this is so weird. I just had to say something, and I'm like, "You know, I went to Harley Harmon." There were other people there, and they're like, "What is that?" Then she's like, "Oh, that's a school named after my great-grandfather." Then she told a story about her grandfather late in life became an attorney and he was a big proponent of education because he didn't grow up with a very good education. She told us a little back story.

I never would have thought especially growing up, being a little kid in Vegas that I'd be in the same room with this person. I don't know. When you're little, the names you see on buildings, even now that I'm older, the Fertitta Building, or you start familiarizing yourself with these people that these buildings are named after, but it's just so far away, these very rich people, very up somewhere over there. I'm like, *this is strange. You're in my house right now looking at my work.* It was fun.

I totally got sidetracked. I don't even know what we're talking about.

That was really good, though, because it does tie the history, and people don't know the history. Those people weren't necessarily wealthy. There were just here a long time ago. They were pioneers.

And that's what she said. She said her grandfather, I don't think, had a lot of schooling, and then way later in life decided, hey, education's important; let me go back and become an attorney and let me donate the money I can to get more people to be able to learn. That's such an interesting

history about Nevada. I always like to see it still as in so many ways—maybe not so much anymore—but the Wild West. It was a lot of—the origins of this state or maybe even Las Vegas specifically, it's just so new, and a lot of scrappiness, a lot of building, or with the mob being here; it's not like old money; it's just a lot of new wealth, new wealthy pioneers or people just coming. It's interesting.

Yes, the wealth came with the second and third generations, maybe.

Yes, and even now, maybe. This is the first time I was having a conversation with my friend just with the building of the Raiders Stadium and the Golden Knights. It's the first time in my entire time living here in Las Vegas where I have felt, it feels different. As a commercial photographer, usually a lot of the work...I mean, not a lot, but I've done some national work, and there's not a lot of options for people coming in looking—there's not a lot of competition yet—or there wasn't. let's say I shot something for The New York Times. They come in; it's a small pool of people, so they reach out to a few people. But people now with Las Vegas kind of being on the international map in a different way, not just for its casinos, there's people from L.A. that are coming in, or in their resumes or in all these job sites looking for freelance workers; they say they're based out of Las Vegas, so they're lying and then they're getting a lot of that work that some of us were getting. It's starting to just feel like a much larger...

Competition.

Competition. It always still felt small-townish, like you knew people. If you just worked hard enough, you'd make those connections naturally, and now it's like the Gold Rush; people are seeing money signs on Las Vegas, the way I hadn't seen it in a long time, since I was little.

People are rushing in to get part of that.

What are photographers or artists like yourself doing to compete with these people coming in?

Nothing. Just trying to keep above and doing really great. For me, personally, just doing a good job and just trying to keep those connections fresh, just trying to stay a step ahead. Currently nothing other than that. It's a concern. We were getting worried. We were just like, oh my God, we were just on the brink of getting these really amazing, great opportunities, and what if these people come in and swoop them before we get the chance? She's born and raised here, my really good friend that's also a photographer. It's just like, oh man, we were so close. The opportunities are still there, but it's like bubbling, when the stadium gets finished and with the museum coming and with the hockey team. I don't know what else. Everything has always grown so quickly here, but it just feels different this time, maybe because the city also is just getting so big. Even driving anywhere you're stuck in traffic, and I'm like, where I am? I'm not in L.A. Why does it feel like L.A.?

Something that I recently experienced, they expanded the freeway, but it still takes me forty minutes to get home. I'm like, what was the point? It really doesn't feel like there's been any improvement.

No.

It's more people coming in, so it's a high saturation of cars even with the expansion, so it didn't make a difference.

Oh wow. Where do you live? What area?

I live in Centennial, so northwest.

Man, that's a lot of traffic. That's a long time. When I was very young, my dad was always...I need to find a better word to use. I was going to say hustler, and that's not it. He just had a good

hustle; he was a really hard worker, so he was always trying to figure out what to do next. He invested in a lot out by the Santa Fe Station when there was no Centennial High School. I was in seventh grade, so maybe 1997, 1998-ish. It was kind of empty out there and he invested in a lot. He started building with friends, people he knew, connections he had made. He started building a house out there, and we moved from the house on Russell and Harmon. We moved to the house he was building just temporarily because he was going to build that house from scratch and then resell it to make a profit because he had bought an acre of land.

So that we wouldn't have to switch schools, he drove us from out there by the Santa Fe Station to my middle school, which was Thurman White Middle School, and Thurman White Middle School is on Russell and Whitney Ranch. Do you know where that's at? It's kind of by the Galleria Mall. It would take him an hour to bring us to school. He would bring me to school in the mornings, so I would spend that hour with him in the car in the mornings, and there was all that morning traffic. It would take fifty minutes to get to school in the morning. Then in the evening my mom would pick us up. My brother was also going to school out there. This is just so they wouldn't switch the schools. It would be like an hour and a half drive home. I remember it was the worst. It was 1998. Why are we spending two hours in traffic a day? But they're like, "No, we don't want to switch schools because we're going to move back to that side of town when we sell that house." We lived over there for two years. Then they moved back and bought a house in a neighborhood near where we had lived before. I've always lived on that side of town, but then for two years I lived on the west side.

How has Las Vegas grown since you've been here?

Oh my gosh, so much. Even just that alone, when he was building that house, there was nothing past that out there. It was like Craig and the 95. Now it goes all the way to Tule Springs Park.

And they build Centennial and Arbor View, and Arbor View is the biggest high school in the state.

Really?

Yes.

Oh my gosh, I didn't even know that. I used to be able to name every high school that there was in Las Vegas. When I was in high school, I knew all the high schools because I also played sports, so we would play against other teams. You knew every high school. Now I don't even know. My younger cousins, their high schools, I've never even heard of them, like Arbor View. I'm like, what?

Did you like the neighborhood you grew up in? Why was that particular part of the city important to them?

My parents thought at the time Green Valley was the nice part of town. They were like, "We're going to move from downtown and we're going to move where the white people are; we're going to move where the rich people are." But they couldn't afford Green Valley, so they moved right on the border of Green Valley and Henderson and Las Vegas. Now it's not very nice, but they've just out of habit stayed there.

I was actually zoned for Woodbury Middle School after Harley Harmon. I went to Harley Harmon and then Woodbury is—I don't know. I guess it was in my parents' eyes a nice middle school. My dad literally said to me, "I want you to go to school with the kids where their parents are all lawyers and doctors because that's the kids I want you to be around." In his mind, he just wanted me to be around what he thought was a better education. Because if these people have their kids in this school, they're going to have more money and resources, and so I want you to be near that. I don't think that necessarily was the case. I just remember those kids that I was in

middle school with were all wealthier and they were all just doing drugs. I was also so innocent, but I remember them always talking about all these parties they were going to. I'm like, this doesn't really; seem like it's better to me, but just do it. I think that was their mentality. When we moved to the west side temporarily, they're like, "We're going to keep you in this school." Then I would have been zoned for Chaparral High School, but Thurman White kids get fed into Green Valley High School, but then I went to Vo-Tech instead.

Why did you go to Vo-Tech?

Honestly because my two best friends went there. That's the only reason. I wasn't a person of a lot of friends, so I just had two girls I was really close with, and they both went there to study cosmetology. Then my parents were like, "You can go there, but you're not studying cosmetology. We didn't move here to this country for you to do hair." Not that there's anything wrong with doing hair, but that's what they were thinking. Then I did—what was it called at the time?—business, like accounting. We did accounting. We learned how to use all the...I don't even know. I hated it. I never paid attention. The only thing I remembered how to do is how to do my taxes. Right out of high school I knew how to do all the forms and fill out. it was fun filling out because you had to do back then all the ledgers. You had to write it out before all these programs now. I was like, oh this is fun. I went into business school here at UNLV; I did that for a year. Then I took *Beginning Black and White*.

It changed your life.

I was like, oh my God, my life is different; it's never going to be the same. My dad didn't like that. He was like, "Can you do both?" I was double majoring for a while, and then I just...

What was their story? How did they come to this country?

My dad's dad—I don't know this for sure. My dad doesn't know, but I'm assuming it's something similar. He was a farmworker.

This is your grandfather?

My grandfather.

On your dad's side?

Yes, on my dad's side. Because on my mom's side, they're all still in Mexico. It's just my mom and her two sisters who moved here to Las Vegas. But on my dad's side, he was a farmworker. His boss or the farmer—I don't even know exactly the story. He passed away when my dad was young, when my dad was eight. But he was given citizenship through that. It sounds kind of like something similar to the Bracero program, but I don't know. Nobody's been able to ever tell me that. But he was given citizenship through being a farmworker, and then he brought his whole family here. Then he met my mom. That was in El Paso. He met my mom in Mexico because they would still go back. They had a house in Juarez. It was so easy. Back then you would just go for the weekend, spend the weekend in Mexico, walk over. You didn't even need a passport. It was very casual. I think that's how he met my mom. Then my mom moved with him to the U.S. That's how they both ended up in El Paso and then moved here to Vegas.

For them I think it was very easy back then, for my grandfather. Now I think they just give you a work visa if you're a farmworker, sometimes, and then sometimes not even that.

If you're lucky, right.

If you're lucky. But back then his boss was just like, "Yes, come. I'll help you. I'll get you a citizenship." Then he got it and all his kids got citizenships; there's eleven of them. When they became citizens...They were all born in Mexico...that's insane to me that whoever this man was,

was like, “Yes, come. Bring your eleven kids with you and your wife. Come work for me.” But that’s how they ended up here.

But on my mom’s side, all her brothers still live in Mexico, and my cousins and all of them that are my age, just doing different things over there.

You mentioned you played sports in high school. What high school did you play for?

Vo-Tech. Vo-Tech had sports at that time, everything except football. We weren’t very good at anything because that wasn’t the focus of the school. I played volleyball, I was on the swim team, and I did soccer.

You were busy all year.

Yes. And I was in student council. I was in Latino Club, Key Club. My parents wanted me to do all this stuff—well, I did all this stuff because they didn’t let me do anything, like typical, overprotective. They wouldn’t let me spend the night at friends’ houses. They weren’t even religious. I don’t know. They were super strict. The only way I could never be home or get out of the house is doing as many activities as I could.

That was my life, too, in high school. And the other thing is not out late at night; that’s what they always told me. I couldn’t go to parties. I couldn’t hang out with friends. It wasn’t until college where I started pushing those boundaries little by little. That same class is one of those classes that really...

I was like, oh my gosh, I didn’t even know this existed. For me it was that art class, and then I almost joined a sorority on campus. I don’t even remember what it’s called anymore. KDChi.

Are you in KDChi?

No, I almost joined a sorority, too.

But it was because I was experiencing all these new things for the first time. I was in school the year that that one formed, so there was just the first class of the sorority, and so I would have been in the second. But then I was just like, I don't know. It wasn't a bad thing. It was just like, maybe I don't want to do that. It just felt like a lot of commitment. I think my friend who I went to Vo-Tech with, she ended up joining the sorority, but she told me she was going to go study abroad. She's like, "Should I study abroad, or should I join this sorority?" And I'm like, "Oh, I want to do both, too." Then I ended up being like, "I really want to study abroad." Then she ended up joining the sorority and then I went to go study abroad. I don't know how I convinced my parents to let me do that.

Where did you go?

I went to Madrid. I honestly don't know what my parents were thinking. I was good. It was an amazing experience. It's insane that at nineteen or at twenty, I went from them not letting me leave the house alone to I was in a different country. I remember when I was trying to convince them, I had a lot of scholarships. I had the Millennium and the Millennium at the time paid for everything. Your fifteen hundred dollars a month was enough to pay for five classes. My tuition was all paid for through Millennium. Then I had this Wells Fargo scholarship that I got recommended for and that one was two thousand dollars a semester, which at the time was paying for all my books and everything that I needed. My reasoning to my parents with Spain was like, "I'm not costing you any money and I'm getting leftover money to pay for my gas and whatever bills." I'm like, "Please, can you..." Because it's really expensive to study abroad. For me I was always thinking that even though I grew up, I would say, comfortable—I don't know. My parents are not well off at all.

You had what you needed.

Yes, I always had what I needed, but I still felt like I needed to rationalize them for letting me go. For me, I never thought it was dangerous. I was just like, if I explain it to them that financially it's okay because I'm paying for all four years of college through scholarships, I felt like they couldn't say no. It ended up working. When I was over there, I was only going to be there for one semester, and I called. That was like, *oof*. That's when I decided to do art because I took a bunch of art classes over there, art history classes. The art history classes, instead of meeting in the classroom, you would meet at the museum and study the paintings instead of from a textbook, and to me that was such a privilege. I called my dad and said, "I need to stay another semester. You don't understand. This has changed my life. I have to stay another semester. And I'm going to be an artist."

How did he take it?

I don't know. It's so weird because I grew up thinking my parents were a certain way, really strict, which they were, but they never said anything. They just didn't say anything. They were never happy with what I was doing, but they were letting me do it. Even when I played soccer, they were like, "That's a boys' sports. Why are you playing that? You're going to mess up your body. You're going to get bruises." My mom would be like—this is not PC. Maybe I shouldn't say that.—they just said that only certain women played sports. Let's just say that. I was like, "Oh my god, you're terrible. Why are you saying these things?" I would always argue with them. But then they would still let me do it. They would complain and say all these negative things and get mad, but then they would be like, "Okay. How much is it?" For soccer or whatever. I always think my dad is not a feminist. I love my dad, but sometimes he'll say some pretty controversial things. But then I feel like with me it was different. He was a feminist with me. He doesn't

believe women can do everything, or are capable of doing everything, but he believed I could do anything.

Which is feminism in itself, but they don't see that.

No, he would be like, "I'm not a feminist." If you ask him now, he would be like, "Absolutely not."

My parents are exactly the same way. Everything I've ever done in my life they've criticized, but they've never prevented me from doing anything, either. I think it's a Mexican thing.

I don't know. I always think that's so weird. I have friends who their parents didn't support them, both Mexican and non-Latinx. Maybe also...I don't know. It could be. I still think about it all the time.

Mexico is a very patriarchal country. Both women and men have these certain views.

They're not necessarily correct. But then when it comes to children, you can do anything.

They'll complain about it sometimes.

Even before I started teaching here, I was a staff photographer at a magazine for three years.

Which magazine?

Vegas Seven, a weekly. It's not in existence anymore. It was, in many ways, a pretty big accomplishment because everybody that they had as photographers before then had been men, white men, and almost the entire staff there was white men. One in particular, he only hired—I think it doesn't hurt that his wife is a gender studies—what's the name for the college here now?

Gender queer or gender...

Of the college. It's not women's studies anymore. It's like EGL or ethnic gender studies, all that. She's a professor here with that. I feel like there are a lot of important conversations happening,

maybe, between them. He was committed to hiring only POC, preferably women, just helping as many people as he could. I got hired there and people were not happy that I was there. A photographer, one of them refused to work with me. It was all this stuff, drama.

My parents were not that impressed that I had that. But then when I got this job at the university as adjunct, which is lower on the totem pole...I was a staff photographer at a magazine. I was the main photographer. I was part of the art department, career move. But they were like, "She works at a university. She's made it." I'm like, "You know I'm staff, right?" They're telling everybody. I'm like, "What about all these covers I have?" or the work that I did. I'm like, "Look, I shot for The New York Times," or, "Look, I shot for Box News." They're like, "Okay, cool." Maybe they don't understand it.

Their frame of reference is limited in what they can compare it to.

Yes. They're proud of me, but they think, oh now you're doing finally what you went to school for; now you've got to go get your master's so you can be a professor. That's the conversation happening in my house right now. "When are you going to get your master's? When are you going to get your master's? You can never be a professor if you don't get your master's." I'm like, "All right, I'm working on it. Stop."

What was it about this black and white photography class that changed your life? What about it?

I think like most kids, you really love your art classes, but for me I had no reference for how that could ever be to work or a job or anything more than just crafts. Seeing it in a university setting, or you're not just sitting and doing the work, but then you're studying people who have done it before, the canon, and so you see a potential. It's like, oh I can be creative and make a living from it. It just felt really empowering even though everybody I was studying, most of the canon

of photography is white and male. To me I didn't even think of it that way at that time. I was just like, oh they're making a living from it; I can make a living from it. I think that's probably what it was. I had never even thought that I could make art and money at the same time. I didn't even really know how that was going to work because it was just me in a school setting and seeing my professor teaching me how to develop photos in the darkroom. Also, the fact that it was being taught at a university, you're like, oh if this is being taught at a university, then it's important.

Were you aware of other successful women photographers, like Leibovitz or Sally Mann or anybody like that?

Yes. I think in art school there are a few women, Sally Mann for sure and Annie Leibovitz. And then it's Laurie Simmons. There are five, ten percent, then it's all these...mostly. For my students now, I think it's really great. I'm like, "You guys are so lucky," because I give them such diversity. The photographers I show them, I try to find photographers from all over the world. I try to make sure that there are lots of black photographers, queer photographers, Latinx, photographers from Japan and Korea, just everywhere, super diverse. I'm like, "I was not given that at all." Even recently during that studio visit I mentioned earlier where they were talking about references in my work or, "Oh, what work inspires you?" I was talking about minimalism, and I said, "It's always been Karl Andre who inspired me." He's one of the main minimalist artists. But then a few years ago in L.A. at the LACMA they had a show called "Radical Women," and it was all Latinx, female artists from all over the world, Afro Latinas, all the spectrum of Latinas in the United States or from other parts of the world. There is an artist who is Afro Latina; it's Adrian Piper. We studied her in school and I think we saw one thing of hers and it was a few seconds, something you just cover. They had a whole room of her work at the LACMA. I was like, oh my gosh, if I would have seen this when I was twenty in school...I think

that happens to all of us. I was like, oh my gosh, I can't believe. My work would have been so different right now. But it's okay. I'm glad to be discovering her now, amazing.

But to answer your question about Sally Mann and Annie Leibovitz, I did see their work, but I couldn't relate to it because it's through the lens of affluence, especially Sally Mann. Her photos are amazing, beautiful, but she lives on her farm somewhere in the Midwest and she has acres and acres of land and she's photographing her children. That's amazing. That's great. But that's not something that's so...

One of my other favorite photographers was Tina Barney. She does color photography and it's large format as well, like Sally Mann. But it was also the everyday life of a wealthy family that lived in the Hamptons full-time or something like that. I didn't necessarily get mad about it or angry or upset, but I remember not ever feeling a connection. Sometimes I would see myself more as typical young people in the Ernest Hemmingway or Jack Kerouac, like the beat writers, the beat generation, and maybe as a younger person you just relate to that. You're fascinated with just the way they saw the world at that time. Maybe that's more of a youthful way of thinking, which I still love that. Sometimes I relate more to that, I guess.

Did you take up photography and working for magazines while you were in school, or did that happen afterwards?

It happened after. Here at ULNV, they've just in the past maybe—I graduated ten years ago. I took the very first commercial class that they offered.

With Checko [Salgado]?

Yes, with Checko. I was in his first class. They didn't even have strobes because it was just sort of a tester. It was like the beta class. We were just shooting with little flashes and trying to make

it work. I bartending for five years after I graduated. I graduated in 2009. There was nothing. Everything had just crashed.

Yes, recession.

Yes. I was like, people still drink, so I went and bartended for five years.

Where did you work?

My very first job was at Lindo Michoacan on the west side. I was there for a year. I saved up my money and went and backpacked for two months against my parents' wishes.

Where?

Guatemala and Mexico, southern Mexico. It's like once I went and studied abroad and then I started taking art classes, my parents were like, what happened to our daughter? I'm backpacking. I'm doing all this art stuff. I'm hanging out downtown, and back then downtown was like two bars. They were like, "Why? It's so grimy down there." It's just normal, young people things, but my parents were like, "Oh my God, what happened to you? Are you on drugs?" I was like, "No." Nothing against anybody who was doing stuff, but I'm like, no. I was just trying to explore the world.

Then when I came back I got more serious about bartending and did Downtown (Cocturo); I was there and Oscar's Steakhouse at the Plaza. Mundo at the World Market Center when that was open. Inspire Theatre. A lot downtown. I started working a lot with the owner who opened up The Beat Coffee Shop. He owned The Beat Coffee Shop, Downtown Cocturo. He consulted in Oscar's. He just kept hiring me wherever he was opening. This summer, actually, I just spent three months in Marfa, Texas because he opened a restaurant out there. I was like, "Can I go work at your restaurant?" I'm not even doing service anymore, but I was

like, I want to go live in Marfa for three months. He's like, "Oh, God." I've been working for him on and off for ten years. He's been very supportive. He is great.

When did your career finally take off as a photographer? What was the first magazine you worked for?

It was *Seven*. It was such a crazy way how I ended up there. I worked with Michael who owned all the bars and restaurants and did all the consulting. I was like, "I don't want to bartend anymore." My parents were on my case because it had been five years, and they were like, "What are you doing?" I was like a super senior because I started college in 2003 and I didn't graduate until 2009. Partially it's because I studied abroad for a year and I took a bunch of Spanish classes and I wasn't a Spanish major, so the only thing that transferred over were the three art history classes that I took out there. Then when I was in school, I decided to do my BFA, which is an extra year. When I got back from Spain, I was already four years into school and I had one more year to graduate, but then I decided to do the bachelors of fine arts. That year you have a studio and you do a show. It's like you're taking art more seriously. It's like six years that I was in school. Six years that I was in school and five years that I had bartended. My parents were like, "What are you doing with your life? We love you, but come on."

Then I asked Michael. Michael is the former boss, the owner. He's like, "Well, I'm going to be opening up a bunch of these bars. You can do marketing for me." I was doing social media, Instagram, writing press releases, answering emails, kind of like administrative work.

Or social media manager.

Yes. But that was in the beginning days, so I felt like he did not take social media seriously, so he didn't see that as real work because this was...

2013.

I feel maybe further back. Yes, 2013. It was important. Now everybody knows how important it is. Back then let's say only half the people knew how important it was. I got to do all that photography and social media stuff, but I had to do all this other stuff to earn my keep, like the administrative work because that's why I was getting paid in his eyes. The social media stuff was just like, "Sure, if you want to do that I know you're an artist, have fun." I was kind of doing that on my own and he would let me do it.

I worked with him for two years and then he sold the company. I remember being so upset at him at the time. I was mad at him for two years. I don't think I really talked to him. Essentially, when Window Media, which is the media company where I got the job at *Seven*, they bought out Inspire Theatre because that's the last place I had worked for him. He said, "Okay, but I can't afford to pay these two employees anymore." Part of the plan was that they would buy Inspire. Honestly I don't know if they bought it or changed management. I don't know what happened. But part of the contract was that they would bring me and my coworker on to work with them, but at the time I felt betrayed. I was like, "I have worked for you for seven years and you're going to just sell me off to another company." But in his mind he was guaranteeing that I had a job with this new company. But I was so mad.

Then six months later—I remember I didn't talk to him, and he was just like, oh my gosh. It was this thing. Then one of the photographers left, and then through word of mouth in the office they were like, "Oh, she takes photos." My boss who was awesome and he was like, "I refuse to hire another white dude for this job," because it's all men who work there, he was like, "I'm going to interview you." I was so green because I only shot whatever I shot in school and whatever little social media things I did here and there. That's not a portfolio. Or whatever stuff I had shot for marketing for him, so photos of the food or maybe of the performances at the

spaces. I had a little portfolio, but not enough to be a staff photographer of a magazine, to be their main photographer. He interviewed me and he's like, "Do you really want this? You're going to work hard to catch up and to learn everything?" And I was like, "Yes." He gave me the job.

I actually met up with him two months ago after I got back from Marfa, and he's like, "I can't believe you're teaching. That's so amazing. Do you remember how scared you were when I interviewed you?" He was so proud. He was amazing. He doesn't work for the magazine anymore. Obviously it's gone. He has his own business and he does photo illustrations for newspapers and magazines all over the world. I know it sounds so cliché, so fucking cliché, but I think of me, little girl, going to Harley Harmon and I would have never thought I'd be in a studio visit with the granddaughter of the person that the school was named after, or I never thought I'd be the main photographer of the magazine, or teaching now the same thing that was the first class that inspired me to make art.

Full circle.

It's total possible. Not that it was easy, and I'm sure maybe you experience this all the time, it's totally possible, but you just don't see any examples of other people doing it that look like you, or you never maybe get encouraged by the right people. I see that in some of my students now. I have some seniors in my class and they don't know what they're going to do after. I'm like, "You can totally do this. You can totally do commercial photography." It's not going to be maybe what you love. Maybe you'll be shooting some restaurant's food, but you can make a living from that. To them, even though they see me doing it, maybe they don't believe it yet. Even though we're so much further advanced than when I was young, I feel like we lack a lot of

visibility and representation for our young communities of color because they don't see themselves in those positions.

It's hard to imagine yourself doing something when there are no examples to follow.

Yes.

Like you said when you were talking about these female photographers, I totally felt the same way when I was taking (a UNLV photo class) because there were all these white women. I don't relate to them doing the things that they're doing. I forgot her name, but she's the one that shot the Depression pictures, Dorothy...

Dorothea Lange, yes.

I can't relate to being well-off and then taking pictures of poor people. Those were my neighbors. It's just not relatable.

Even now I think a lot of people—when we were doing the photography, the documentary assignment for my class, I said, “Nobody in this class is allowed to go photograph homeless people and call it documentary photography. Nobody in this class is allowed to go photograph people that are struggling unless you know them personally. That is not allowed because that's called exploitation.” That was not something...I remember being in school and a lot of kids going and doing that; shooting homeless people and thinking they're being artsy and stuff like that. You can't even be mad at them. Nobody was telling them that that was wrong. Nobody was telling them, hey, if you're interested in doing that why don't you go and try and have a conversation with them and engaging and just getting to know them, and then you're documenting this person's specific life. You're not just going and snapping a photo of them.

You're not getting consent, either.

Yes, exactly.

The street photography assignment when you say, “Go shoot in the street,” they never taught us about consent or asking people, is it okay if I take your picture? That’s so important.

Yes. I don’t even think I had the language for not understanding these women photographers that I couldn’t relate to. I don’t think I ever was like, oh, they’re white and I’m not. For some reason it didn’t cross my mind. But I do remember being like, well, I can’t shoot this because I don’t live in the Hamptons. I do remember thinking that. Even just ten years ago there were no conversations around white privilege or privilege in general. A lot of this is, oh my gosh, I am so grateful for social media and the internet because all these really amazing conversations are always happening that I don’t think I ever even had any clue about.

Yes, we’re so institutionalized that we internalize it and that’s how we see the world, with these white racial frame. Obviously we don’t need to take a sociology class to understand that because of our skin color we perceive the world differently. It’s just a known fact, right?

Yes. But you’re not even aware of it, right? I got Facebook my senior year of college. The only thing back then was Myspace, but nobody on Myspace was having important conversations. It was like how many friends do you have and how cool does your page look.

And rating your friends.

Exactly. On, who is my top eight? But I’m so grateful for all these conversations happening now because I never thought to take back then what was called Women Studies. I didn’t take any Women Studies classes. I didn’t take anything other than what was required, one sociology class, one psychology class. I took my one art class and that led to me being here now. There is so much more learning that happens now with the internet. Of course, sometimes it’s

misinformation or sometimes it's not accurate information. Sometimes it's opinions, good or bad opinions. But how cares? Even just being aware of this stuff.

That's where media literacy comes in, how it's a tool that our generation uses to decipher what's right and what's wrong. That's another thing that college is teaching now that they didn't teach ten years ago.

Yes. Oh no, when I was walking up to this office, I saw a sign that said, "Decolonizing Wikipedia." I'm like, that's amazing. I feel like such an old person saying things like that, but I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this is so cool." I want to go to all these classes now, but I don't have time for it now, so I have to do my own research on the side. But I see all this stuff and I'm like, "This is so cool."

We're more self-aware of our surroundings now, especially now with I feel like more people of color coming into universities and realizing that they're white establishments that need to change. I feel like there's a wave going on within academia from its students that are acknowledging these kinds of things.

Yes. It's cool to see it happening at UNLV. It's probably happening all across the United States in all institutions at some point, especially maybe with the young people demanding change. But it's fun to see it—fun is maybe not the right word—it's exciting to see it happening in person here at the school I went to.

Another thing is UNLV brands itself as one of the most diverse campuses in the country, but then the staff doesn't represent that. We're a Hispanic-serving institution and an Asia-serving institution, and yet we have all this discrepancies and things going on on campus. What we're branding ourselves isn't how the supportive the university is itself.

Yes. I know the Art Department when I was in school, everybody was white, faculty. The arts tend to have more women, generally, white women though, so there was maybe three or four white women to seven or eight white men. But right now, this new chair we have—I really like him—but our faculty and our staff—there's only so many changes you can make to tenured faculty, but all the new people coming in and all the staff and adjunct, it's so diverse. It's so cool to be a part of that. My classes, for example, oh my gosh, they're so diverse. My beginning Black and White class, I would say there is more people of color in the class than there are white students, and I think that's just the general population of UNLV. Like you said, if they're going to brand themselves one of the most diverse universities in the country, or if it is officially—I don't know what the numbers are—then the faculty should also represent that because these students want to learn from a diversity of teachers and staff. It's been cool to be there. I just hope that when they're hiring more full-time people—I don't know how that whole process works—that they're able to diversify it. Once you have tenured that person is there until they decide to leave or retire.

Yes. It's interesting, the whole academia kind of thing. Going back to your art, from what I read in my research of you, your art very much has to do with how you express your Latinidad. Can you tell me a little bit more of what Latinidad means and what it means to you?

Just in the work and stuff?

In the work itself, yes.

I think for a long time I didn't want to—I feel like even though it's so personal to me and to my personal identity and the nuances to my specific identity, I think sometimes the terminology that I'll use, to me, it seems very general. But I don't know. This is just my experience. I want to be

able to have—let me start over. In the beginning I remember I didn't want my work to look like Latinx.

Or folk art.

Or folk art, yes. I'm like, no. I wanted it to look—

Contemporary.

No. Like whites. It's so crazy and so obviously now wrong. But I would be like, that's the work I see in the museums, so I need to make work that looks like that so I can get in there. The reason the work in the museums looks like this is because it's all white artists. That's why there's no diversity in the museums, or that's why the work looks a certain way because you only have a certain group of people making the art that is in there. I'm trying to make work that looks a certain way to get in there. Then I start making work and I'm like, well, maybe I can infuse it with a little bit more of a political message or maybe questioning the establishments. Then I start little by little making work that talks about topics that are more important to me, like representation, visibility, about Latinidad.

And Latinidad, I've never had to answer that; what does Latinidad mean to me? I don't know. I just stopped talking about one thing and now I'm like, uh, what does Latinidad mean to me?

We can come back to that question.

I guess I'm just doing it. What it means to me is being able to be yourself and serve your community and be visible to your community and then have other people in other communities be able to see your community being represented and the issues in part of your community being spoken about, talked about, because that's not something you ever see. The Barrick Art Museum has one of my pieces in the permanent collection, and the piece that they decided to have in their

permanent collection says a phrase. It says, "I want to see brown bodies." That was a phrase that I appropriated from somebody talking about not seeing themselves represented in museums or on social media or anywhere, so then they just decided to take it into their own hands and just do it. I don't know if you're familiar on Instagram, it's called the (Federan a si Lucas).

Yes. I love that Instagram.

I forget her name. I should know her name. She's the one who said that. She said she didn't see her community represented on social media. Instead of waiting for somebody to start that archive, she just started it herself.

And now she gets so many submissions.

Yes. She ended up going to get her MFA at the Art Institute of Chicago. She got her master's in art and did research on all that. She said, "I was so tired of..." I think her actual quote was, "I want to see brown bodies, so I'm the one who's going to do it." I just kept thinking about that; who I was making art for. I'm like, why am I making art for white people? Why am I trying to please them? Because that's what I'm doing by trying to make work that looks this way so it can get into these spaces. I just need to make the work that I want to see in these spaces. That was my first dive into that. I don't know if that answers that, but I think that's what Latinidad means to me, or one of the things it means to me is just taking it into your own hands and just making the work or talking about the things that you don't see other people taking the time to do.

That's awesome. That's incredible.

I don't know if I answered that right.

There's no right or wrong answer. Like I said, oral history is for you to dictate what you want to say. I noticed that in a lot of your artwork you use calligraphy or at least handwriting. Why does handwriting have such an influence in your art?

It started off with handwriting. This goes back to when I was saying earlier that my influences were this minimalist named Carl Andre. He would do these repetitive text pieces, but it was all typewriter. He called it poetry. In the poetry it was supposed to be very mechanical, very sterile. Visually I remember liking it. A lot of my work was influenced by that. I feel like when you first start making work as a student, you're literally just saying, I like that; I'm going to try to copy it, or be influenced very closely to it, because you're finding your voice. You don't know what you want to make work about yet. Or when you took the beginning of my class, the assignment was really like, look at these artists, be inspired by them, and now go create work that looks like this.

I was like, how can I make this my own? When writing down these phrases, I think for me the thoughts going on in my head are, doing something by hand, like hand gestures, traditionally throughout history, all of history originally was handwritten by men. We're talking hundreds of years, but the only people who knew how to read and write for a long time were men or monks, and it was only allowed to be men or maybe nuns. You have Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz who is a famous Mexican nun who became a nun to be able to read and write her literature and her studies and her philosophies. But now when you see a lot of handwritten art or just things, it's seen as feminine, almost like a diary or emotional or sentimental. I think for me initially that's what attracted me to the writing, because it was a very arduous process of making this work this way. That inspiration came from the minimalists of doing this mechanical repetitive work that just talks about hand gesture and the process and the material. But then the way that we interpret handwriting now, you wonder gender it, and I think a lot of times people want to feminize it. These were my thoughts in the beginning when I was using text and why I wanted to do handwriting.

Now, just over the years and me working at the magazine and doing graphic design work with the magazine, I started getting away from that process and I really started to get into the history of typography and type and communication. Because naturally my world was just more about marketing and sales and communication and magazines, I just started to really notice all that around me, and so I feel like my work started to become more sterile, closer to what those original minimalists were. Then I had to still keep that quote-unquote gendered mark making, and I think that was also to question why people want to gender certain things. A lot of it was hand sewn. It's so crazy. People still want to see that type of folk art, weaving and sewing and textiles. It's like so badly they want to gender it. It's this desire that's innate and it's structural. It's just something that we've been socialized to think this is something women do, whatever. It's old, whatever. As my work gets more into typography and more sterile or more quote-unquote visually masculine, I just want to push people to question. Those are my ideas around typography and text and the mark making and all that.

The text specifically is not—that's why I originally was attracted to handwriting, but now it's become more about the mark making and the shapes and the compositions and the colors and what people think just the way art should be made and who's making art and why they're making art. You see a lot of people going back now to the way we used to make things, just like these handmade textiles, like clothing, especially—I'm going off on a tangent. I don't need to do all that, sorry.

That's great. It started off as something that you admired and then you owned it and formed your own narrative.

Yes.

That's awesome. What was your first exhibition like? How did that come about? What did you feel when you were offered this opportunity?

The first exhibition I ever had—this is crazy. I've had a meeting with her earlier this morning. She's teaching in the department. She was an MFA student here. She's now teaching full-time at the department. We met because we were just going over some things. She is the one who gave me my first exhibition, and it was because I had been bartending for five years, and in 2013 she reached out to me and said, "Krystal, why aren't you still making work? What are you doing? I'm head of the Winchester Gallery." Winchester, the cultural center.

Yes. She's like, "I'm the curator. I want you to put in an application." I'm like, "No. Why do you want me to do that? I don't have anything good. I'm not making..." She basically pushed me through the entire process. She helped me write it. She helped me do it all. Then I got a show. This was actually 2012 because the show was 2013. I got a show there and that's probably why I'm still making work today.

Favi (Justin Favela) and I talk about this all the time. She was never my teacher. She was just another friend. But she was Favi's very first art teacher. Her name is Wendy Kveck. She is such a champion of always helping artists and just pushing you. Even right now it's like, "Wendy, I need your help. I'm so overwhelmed." She's like, "All right. Let's meet up real quick." She was helping me figure some stuff out. She is so, so good. She gave me my first solo show in 2013.

What was it on?

It was handwriting. That's kind of like what started the handwriting pieces in a serious way. Then I had a video piece and I had photography.

It's kind of cool that it was at Winchester Cultural Center because that place just keeps getting bigger. The just expanded. They're getting a new theater built. They're having a new sign. They do the Day of the Dead Exhibition.

Which is coming up really soon.

It's so cool. Do you go to it?

Yes. It's great.

Now it's two days instead of one. It's really neat that that's where it was. It's cool having all these art opportunities here. Sometimes it's changing, but it's a little frustrating there aren't that many opportunities here as an artist.

Can you describe the Las Vegas art scene? Is the Las Vegas art scene different from the Latinx art scene? Why do you say it's difficult?

Anybody can make art and you can show it anywhere, but I think that there's different achievement levels that you can unlock. When I first graduated I showed at the Arts Factory before. You can have your own gallery at the Arts Factory and now there's Art Square. I showed at the Winchester. The way that it's difficult is a lot of it is community led. Community led opportunities. Community led spaces. Most of the museums and galleries that are known around the world are in L.A. or New York or San Francisco, Chicago—all the really big cities. It's going to be a huge deal when Las Vegas gets the Nevada Art Museum, if it does well, but I think it will because Seven Magic Mountains was done by the Art Production Fund in New York with the collaboration of the Nevada Art Museum. It's been extended. They've repainted it. It's been so popular. People are really consuming art in such a high amount and ferociously. People really want, even with all the murals downtown for Life is Beautiful, just all sorts of different types of work. There's just so many different levels. I think I've kind of gone through all the

opportunities available here in Las Vegas. There's not that much more that I could at this point achieve that could further my career or get me more opportunities. Well, actually that's not true because now I'm teaching at UNLV. That was an achievement I hadn't unlocked yet.

That your parents are very proud of.

My parents are very proud of, yes. Then I had a solo show at Grant Hall two weeks ago, so I hadn't done that. I guess I'm still unlocking these achievements. If you're in L.A., you have the LACMA, you have the Getty, and those are world-renown institutions. That's a whole other level, not even near that. Favi [Justin Favela] is. I live with a famous person.

Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with Favi?

Yes. He's one of my best friends.

Did you guys meet here?

Yes, we were in the art department together. We became fine art senators together for the student union.

Oh, for our season?

Yes. We were fine art senators together. I think that's when we got closer because we knew each other, but then we just decided, let's be the first Latinx fine arts senators. I think we were. Then our friend was a master student at the time and she was a photographer, so she took promotional shots for us in the studio with lighting. Then she designed a flier for us to get us voted. I don't know, we won, so it worked. We were the senators and that was interesting. Then we just stayed friends. I got back from Spain when I was twenty-one and I graduated when I was twenty-four, so three years when we were friends in school. Then we moved in together when I was twenty-five, so we knew each other for four years before.

He is a genius. He would roll his eyes at me right now. But he is so talented. It's just such a natural...he works very hard, not to take anything away from him. He is one of the hardest working people I know. He is also just one of the most naturally gifted people I know. He works very hard, but he's good. I admire his work ethic. I feel like I work very hard, but he's a whole other level. Sometimes I'm just like, "I just want to watch Netflix," and he's just working in the garage or doing something and I'm watching the British bake-off show or whatever.

I think we went through all the proper roommate relationship things. We loved each other and we were hanging out all the time, and then we couldn't stand each other and we were fighting all the time, and then we almost had a falling out because it was so dramatic, and then we made up and close again. It's been a roller coaster, definitely like family almost. We are one hundred percent ourselves around each other. It's like a brother.

My roommate—oh my God, my boyfriend, oh my God, my boyfriend. Retract please. My boyfriend is seven years. I've lived with Favi for ten years, and my boyfriend Bobby has lived with us for six of those years. He just laughs at us because we bicker all the time, but now it's more of a friendly brother-sister bickering, when you get close to somebody. It happens especially with long relationships and long friendships.

It's like, at this point you're not my friend anymore, you're family.

Yes, I know, so I can tell you exactly how I feel and you're not going to like it. He's like, "I can always count on you, Krystal. Whenever I'm feeling really good about myself, I can always count on you to just bring me down to reality and tell me how it is." I'm like, "You're welcome."

You're like the same.

I know. The same, exactly.

Talk about art and all the great things that you've done, all these opportunities that you've had. What is the one art piece that you created that you're like, this is it; if I don't make any more art, this is what I want to be known for.

Well, I am not hopefully at that point in my career where I haven't made my best piece yet. But I can tell you the one piece that really changed my perspective on a lot of things, and it was that piece that's at the Barrick, part of the permanent collection, the one that said "I want to see brown bodies." I think before then all my work was very safe and very much always for a white audience and very much for what I thought I needed my work to look like; that whole thing that I explained. When I made this it was the first time where it just opened up so many conversations, so many doors. I felt like it was the first time where I was being subversive in a way where I was criticizing. Even now I have friends that are like, "Well, I just don't want you to get an enemies. You don't want to be too...with the language you're using in the work, attack. Just be a little bit safer. Maybe make funny work." I'm like, "No, that's not me."

That piece was that point and that was in the initial, called Plural at the Barrick in 2017 or 2018. I'm really proud of that piece. If I never made anything else that would be a cool one to be known for because it inspired me to apply to grad school; it inspired me to keep making work. I think with art making it's so—now I finally understand the term *starving artist* because you're not literally starving—some artists are—but the reason is because I spend so much of my time and money just pouring it into art and it doesn't always come back, and sometimes you just get tired of that fight because you're like, why am I still making work? It's very fulfilling. It's fun. It's exhausting. It's rewarding. But it's like, why am I still pouring all this money that I could be pouring into investing or retirement or going on a vacation? Why am I spending all this time and money on this? That was a moment where I felt like some of that reward where it's like, oh okay,

I see more a purpose. I can go to grad school. I can pursue this. Then I just want to keep pushing. Also just competitive with myself to be like, no, I'm going to keep making work because I'm going to prove that me being POC, woman, I can be in these spaces.

Yes, you deserve to be there.

Yes, but it's exhausting.

It is because you also represent everybody else in the Latinx community.

Also, you're really pushing through. You're having to work so much harder. Like I said, a lot of these things that I'm saying are just general statements. You're working so much harder. You're getting paid less. Blah, blah, blah. But these are things that we all know about because they're true. It's like, oh okay, I get it; I get the starving artist now because you're just pouring your life and money and everything into this, but it's very fulfilling. But I'm still doing it. I haven't given up yet.

What keeps you going?

Currently I don't know. I'm just kidding. I really didn't think I was going to like teaching. I'm not going to lie about that. It's not something I ever felt a desire to do. But I sort of thrive on being extremely uncomfortable and challenged; that's when I thrive the most. If I get too comfortable, I get bored. But then when I'm uncomfortable and challenged, I'm having a panic attack and feeling like, why am I doing this? Then afterwards I'm like, oh that was really great. With teaching I was like, I've never done that before; that seems really hard; okay, I'll do it. Then the whole semester has been so stressful because I've never taught before. The lesson plans are so time-consuming. Monetarily being adjunct staff, it doesn't pay very well. My students, I get frustrated with them. They don't show up on time and sometimes they don't do their work. Then I have days like today—this is such a teacher cliché response—I have days like today when

all my students were so excited and they were doing their stuff and they were all there. I'm like, it's all worth it. That's what keeps me going for teaching.

For art-wise, I think I keep reaching levels that I would have never thought, not that I'm even that well-known or have a career in it, but I keep getting opportunities that I never thought I would have had, like that studio visit I mentioned. Never would I have thought that I'd have a studio visit with the chair of the art department. There were six people in that studio visit. It was Heather Harmon of the Nevada Art Museum, Las Vegas. There was the co-curator of the Nevada Art Museum in Reno. There were two people from a museum in New York. And the chair of the art department. Even if I don't get that opportunity—it was because they were looking for people for an art show—even if I don't get that art show, it's like what a privilege.

Experience.

Yes, and what an opportunity that somebody like me can do it. Now I feel driven. I want to tell my students, you can do it, too. It's like, oh my gosh, how many movies have you seen where the teacher comes in...? I'm not even trying to be that person. I just generally never thought I could do any of this.

When you mean that studio visit, was that at your home in your garage?

Favi and I have turned our upstairs bedroom—we finally took out the bed and it's been turning into a studio. I set it up as a studio, and, yes, they came in and they look at your work that you've been making and they decide. Then they ask you questions about your work and your research and your interests. If they think that you are a good candidate, they invite you to be in an art show. That's how I got the opportunity to be in *Tilting the Basin*; it was an art exhibit in 2016 that the Nevada Art Museum had in Reno and in Las Vegas. They came and did a studio visit. That was the first time. I don't even love that piece I made for that show, and that was way more

important than the Barrick. The Barrick Museum is super important, don't get me wrong. It's a huge deal. But the Nevada Art Museum is a nationally known museum. It's like a video game; I keep unlocking another achievement. I'm ready to be like, this is good, and then I'm like, well, let me just try.

Side quest.

Yes, yes. Then I just keep...I'm sure eventually—like my mom, a couple of weeks ago, they were all excited about me teaching, and then I told them how much I made, and they were shocked. They could not believe it. Because I bartended and I also had a salaried job before, so I've done okay or good, whatever. They were just like, "How is it possible that anybody's who teaching at a university that's how much they get paid?" I'm like, "That's just how adjunct positions get paid at everywhere."

And that's why there's so many.

Yes. I'm like, "It's not just me." And they're like, "Did you not do something right? Are they paying you less?" I'm like, "No, that is how much anybody makes." They're like, "Then why are people doing it?" It's like, "Because..." I don't even know if I should be mentioning this here. I think people just do it because they want the experience and you're teaching at a college level. I don't even know what my point was. Yes, I guess it's that was just such a good opportunity I couldn't pass it up. I'm like, I want to teach adjunct, so I did it. Maybe that could lead to something else.

Yes, in the future, always in the future.

Always hustling. I don't know if that's a good word. Everybody says that word, right? I'm not trying to say like a hustler, but hustling.

Yes. You really are your dad's daughter.

I know, right? I know. Isn't that funny? I think for a long time I couldn't relate my path to my parents' path. The one thing my parents taught me is to work really hard. At the very least, what you can get from working hard is you'll always have work because people appreciate a hard worker. Also, I think so many of the opportunities I've gotten is just from saying yes all the time. Yes, I'll do it. Always being available and working hard....

What's your favorite art piece? Any one in general.

Ooh, this is a loaded question because I can't...I really like an artist named Eva Hesse. She is German American. I don't have one in particular—actually, no. There's another artist that I like more, sorry. I think I would rather say artists that I really enjoy or admire because then I like all their work. I really like another artist named Félix González-Torres. He made a lot of installation work. You might be familiar with some of it. He would do like these piles of candy and it would be in a corner of a museum and you'd take a candy with you. Or he would make stacks of prints at the museum and you could take a print with you. Maybe you don't recognize the name, but it's an artist that is always—he's the tokenized queer Latinx artist that always gets in the big exhibitions. His work is amazing. He's very talented. But I feel like the museums and these institutions always have their go-to brown people that they like to show.

Kind of like Samuel L. Jackson in movies.

Yes. Are you familiar with Carol Walker?

No.

She does like these black cutouts of slave narratives with Victorian clothing.

Oh, I think I've seen her exhibition at the National Portrait Museum.

Yes. Babalito hates her work. He does not like it. Maybe not *hate*—I shouldn't put those words in his mouth. He is not a fan at certain pieces. I'm just like, "But why? We should be

supporting.” He has a really good reason. That’s what he does for a living. He’s an art historian, so he has a very strong opinion. I always love talking to him and Favi about my work. Yes, exactly like Samuel L. Jackson; they have their go-to people. You’re like, what about—

Everyone else.

—all these other beautiful people, talented people that could be included? But his work is really good, Félix González-Torres. It’s very beautiful and poetic. It’s about being queer and the eighties and New York. I think I initially was attracted to him because he is Latinx and a photographer and then started making mixed media work. Photography was my first love. Now I do stuff that’s different and other things, but I always go back to photography. Even now being back with my students, I hadn’t been in a darkroom in ten years, since I graduated. It was also very intimidating for me to be back in there. Now seeing them make the different work in the darkroom, I’m like, oh that’s so cool. I want to get in there and just play around because I always go back to that.

Do you like film or digital more?

Both. I don’t think I could choose. I did only film in the beginning because the department was all film and we had the black-and-white darkroom. Then we also had a color darkroom, so you would shoot in color, get it developed, and then do prints in color in the darkroom. There’s a look that you can’t get digitally that you get with film, and I really appreciate that and the process and it slows you down because it’s not like you can take a million photos and then just delete all the bad ones.

And it’s expensive.

And it’s expensive, yes. It used to not be very expensive, but now it’s like, oh my gosh. You pay like twelve dollars for the roll, twelve dollars to get it developed, and then another twelve dollars

to get it scanned. Who can afford that? But digital is so advanced now and you can make some really great work, beautiful work digitally. I think now the more I learn and the more I teach, I can also just see through people who maybe aren't very technically good and they cheat and do things in Photoshop, which is fine, but I think I'm learning to appreciate the digital people who have really mastered that craft of digital work, and so I try to really be influenced and mimic those digital photographers that I really admire. So both.

Can you tell me a little bit about your artist in residence at the Juhl downtown?

That was in 2017, maybe. It was a year—maybe it was six months—six months that I got to live and work in that space down there. When I was in that residency, I created the piece for the Barrick. It was tough living downtown, and then also I still had my house and my boyfriend and my cats and all my stuff. It was a little stressful living in two places. But that was the first time I ever had a studio since college. I think maybe that's why I was able to create that piece for the Barrick, because I had the space and I was not limited. It was really high ceilings, so I was able to really create this giant piece for the first time with no limitations of space or being afraid of getting it dirty or messing up the walls. It was a really beautiful opportunity. Also, I got to live in a loft that was attached upstairs. I'm like, man, is this how they live? I was like, this is so nice. It was like a one-bedroom loft with a kitchen and a beautiful view. It was great.

Going back to your childhood and growing up, were there many people that looked like you, like in school, admin or student-wise, or did that come as Las Vegas grew? How has the Latino community changed since you've arrived?

That's a good question. My first and only...I need to be careful how I say this because he's still my teacher. It's totally PG. I remember having a crush on one of my teachers and it was the first Latino teacher I ever had. But it was super innocent. This is a side story. But I think it was

because I had never in my life, not elementary school, middle school, or high school—I did not have a single Latino teacher, not one.

And you lived on the east side, right?

Yes.

Which was a predominantly Latino population at the time, correct?

Yes. I remember the Spanish teacher in my high school was Latinx, but she was not my teacher.

I remember that's one of the first times that I saw a Latinx teacher, but she was not my instructor. Honestly, I don't even think I had a black teacher, not elementary school...

It wasn't until college that you had...?

It was not until college. Even in college I don't think I had any black teachers. I don't even think any Asian teachers. I just had a conversation about this with one of my friends, Lance. We were just saying, "Whoa, I never thought about that." He is black and he was like, "Can you believe that I've never had a black teacher?" And I'm like, "No, that can't be." Then I thought about it.

Anyway, it's very innocent, but I did have a Latinx teacher and—it was very short lived—I had a crush and then I realized that it's like, oh, this class is really hard; the only reason I had a crush is I had never seen anybody that looks like me that was in any sort of academic setting. Being so young and innocent, I remember just being, wow. Everybody that was brown that looked like me was the help or—

Adjacent.

Totally. Me, my young mind reacted into just being like, wow, I admire you; I have a crush on you; it's so amazing. Then as the semester went on, I remember being like, oh God, you're just another professor making my life miserable. I think my very initial reaction was just admiration because I couldn't believe it. I was in awe.

Then when I was in Spain, my teachers were all Spanish, but that's different. They're Euros.

They're very white-centric, too.

Yes, totally. There was just one professor that reminded me of that Latinidad, more Latin culture instead of Eurocentric. She was from southern Spain and she was dark-skinned. In the south they don't have the lisp and it's completely in southern Spain. She was completely very—because in the south there is a lot of Moroccan influence and the Moors, and so it's just a different culture in the south with the Spanish. She's the only professor I had that made me feel like I had a Latinx teacher even though she was Spanish, but all the other professors... They actually got on my nerves. They would always tell me how I spoke Spanish wrong; that I wasn't speaking Spanish; that I was speaking Mexican; that I was using the wrong words. She was the only teacher that all the rest of Spain saw the southern Spain as that too; they were very racist against people from southern Spain. Maybe she a little bit understood or was more—she's still Spanish, whatever. She's still a white woman, whatever. But it was a different feeling I had from her.

But, yes, only one professor in college. Even now in the art department I don't think there are any Latins. Babalito was never my teacher, but he was the first—also I fell in love with him, too, not in love in love, but a crush. These are crushes of oh my gosh. Even being older, I remember being like, I've never seen anybody like you, and you're getting your PhD? Like, whoa.

There is like this hunger to consume what we've never had.

Yes. Maybe that's what *Latinos Who Lunch*, the podcast, does for a lot of us, is we hear these people in this way that we've never been given or allowed or nobody makes space for that. We make that space for ourselves. It's really fascinating and I love it.

Thinking of everything that you've done, everything you've created, and the amazing opportunities that you've had, what's your next step? What's something else that you want to accomplish that you haven't had the opportunity?

Grad school.

Are you in grad school right now?

No, no. Marcus, the chair, believed in me. I do photography for a living. He's like, "You have the experience. Come teach it." I'm like, "Ah..." I'm just teaching right now, but I think grad school. I am excited about it, just a little bit like, oof, going back to school; it's going to be hard.

But you're already in the environment, so...

Yes. That's been cool. Kind of making lesson plans and teaching all the stuff to the students gets me back in that mode of learning and twice a week teaching, so it's fun. Are you in grad school?

Yes, I am. I'm in the journalism department.

See, that's something I've thought about, too, is I can't decide. I'm like, maybe I want to get a master's in journalism.

You should try it. A lot of liberty in what you want to do. Actually, there's two ways to get your master's. You can either do the contemporary thesis route, or you can do...a name for it, like a visual or something else.

Oh really?

Yes, an artistic thesis that you replace. There's a name for it.

I've considered that. but then I also think that I've worked so hard in all this art stuff I'm doing, if I go the visual journalism route or journalism, would that mean that I'm leaving behind that? I know it's not necessarily that it has to be separate, but if I pursue journalism; that's journalism. I'm interested in that. I'm not trained in it. I haven't had the opportunity. But working at the

magazine they'd send me out sometimes to photograph for—well, everything I had to photograph was whatever the writers were working on, and it felt just a lot more impactful and humanistic, talking to real people and help tell their stories.

Yes, creative thesis; it just came to me. You can do your regular research thesis, or you can do a creative thesis. You can do a documentary or exhibitions, anything you want.

Oh wow. Here?

Yes, here at the journalism school.

Interesting.

You should think about it.

Is it two or three years?

It's one and a half.

One and a half?

Yes, if you're on track. I didn't know what I was doing, so I'm on my third semester. I should be graduating next semester.

This Latin Voices, is this your thesis?

No. It will eventually be part of my thesis, but I'm actually a research assistant for the project.

Oh. I'm so torn. I don't know what to do. I want to do both.

Or you could do both.

I know, but I'm not—what do the people say? I'm not a spring chicken, or what do they say? I'm not old and you can do whatever at any age, but I just feel like an urgency of—

Getting it done.

Yes, like, what am I doing with my life?

Obviously you're doing a lot.

Career-wise, I guess.

Career-wise, yes. Before we wrap up, I always like to ask people what they think of the term *Latinx* and the new usage of it. Do you like it? Do you see yourself reflected in it? What do you think of this new term that tries to encompass everything that is known as the Latino community?

I like it. I didn't grow up using it, so it's just something I have to integrate into my vocabulary now and learn how to use it. I think sometimes I still want to use the gender term. But I like that it challenges the conventions of the Spanish language because everything is gendered. Just like on a language level, I like it because of that. I don't know. I really love it. I love that you have a term that can encompass everybody and everything in the Latinx community. Is that right? I'm thinking. You mean Latinx versus Latina/Latinos?

Just in general, like this new vernacular that we're starting to use, the term *Latinx*. It's in the project itself; that's something that the university chose to identify what we know as the Latino community.

I have a better way to answer this. I like Latinx because it's like a very intentional word. It always really bothers me when people say *Hispanic*; I hate that word.

Same.

I feel like people are so used to saying Hispanic everything. In this specific sense this is like a very specific word that people are being told to replace that awful word with. Latinx can mean something different to a lot of people, something as simple as not having to use the gender terms, like I just said, or challenging the conventions of the Spanish language, which the Spanish are very proud of their Spanish language, *Castellano*. Personally, as being Mexican, we've always been more okay, I think, with—the Spanish language is a lot more—it's easier for us to change

and evolve and just use different words, and we make up our own words sometimes and they just become part of the language.

Indigenous influence there, like a *squinklé*.

Yes, totally a *squinklé*; that's a word. I love that. I like that we have this word now that we can just tell people, not Hispanic; Latinx, like guide people. I know people sometimes are just like, why do we have to do all this work of reeducating people? But maybe before persons didn't have a good enough explanation or whatever the reason was for people to keep using Hispanic, but I really feel like this could be what could replace that, and I hope it does.

It is slowly, slowly but surely. The biggest challenge now is teaching. We use it in academia and contemporary pop culture, but now it's teaching your average person, your average Latino/Latina how to use it, people that are not exposed to that, teaching them why it's important to use this term over Hispanic that was imposed on us rather than self-imposed.

Yes. Can we get it on the census?

Try to. We're going to try. Hopefully in the next few decades we transition. I'm not sure how it's going to be worded in the census.

One of the artists that we have here at the art department now, she's from the Bay Area. She's doing an art project called the *Census Project*. I've heard only some of it, but she kind of in her work is talking about how the census is going to evolve as people start to just identify in different ways. If you choose how you identify, like when you asked me in the beginning, versus what the government wants you to identify as.

And how they racialize you.

How they racialize you, and then how you choose. It's really just a checkmark that you're putting on there, but then how do they create the boxes? It's this whole project around that idea

of decades from now what is the census going to look like? Definitely the United States is the most diverse it's ever been and we're not going to move back. We're just going to keep getting more diverse and just more beautiful. But then what does the census look like? Should there even be a census? Does race even exist in the census? Do you take that out completely? Do you categorize people in different ways?

Like by class, yes.

Yes. There's other dangerous things that it could lead to. Ideally a more progressive way, but the way this country works...

We go forward and then two steps back.

I know.

Anything else you'd like to add or share before we conclude?

I feel like I've talked your ear off. Thank you for the opportunity. This was fun. I feel like I was just chatting with a friend.

Thank you so much for coming. We look forward to your art in the future.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]

Appendix

March 12, 2020, just as the threat of Covid-19 was beginning to impact gatherings, the Latinx Voices project hosted a panel discussion at the East Las Vegas Library at 2851 E. Bonanza. Krystal Ramirez created three puzzles to be assembled by participants that evening.

The mixed media work is titled **We Get What We Take**. The puzzles, explained and photographed as follows by the artist, were each glued together. They are kept in the UNLV Libraries' Special Collections & Archives.

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada Community Collection, approximately 1973-2020. MS-00935. Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Las Vegas, Nevada.

We Get What We Take

Collaboration with a division of UNLV Special Collections,
Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada

I began research for this project in January 2020. My objective was to take a more in-depth look into the history of protests in Southern Nevada. The demonstrations I focused on for this project took place in Southern Nevada and involved folks represented by the Culinary Union, a UNITE HERE local affiliate, and primarily took place in the 90s unionize Las Vegas casinos. One of the longest most successful strikes in the history of the United States, the Frontier Strike, began on September 21, 1991, and ended after six years, four months, and ten days on February 1, 1998, in which over 550 workers maintained a 24/7 picket line. These protests are but a microcosm of the more extensive history of protests in the United States but remain an important part of the local history of Las Vegas, Nevada. My mother has been a part of the Culinary Union for 25 years, and even though she was not in Las Vegas when these significant protests took place, the effect and success of them undoubtedly changed the course of my family's life. The idea to make the photographs into puzzles is inspired by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. As has been said about Gonzalez-Torres's work, The puzzles suggest a nostalgic movement coming from the disheartened intention of reviving a past time's intensity.

Display

Boxes should not be used for display purposes, only for storage. Puzzles can be displayed in a variety of ways and that is up to purchaser/owner.

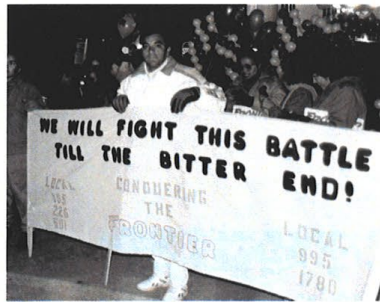
1. Puzzle can be assembled, attached to backing with adhesive, framed and displayed on a wall.
2. Can be used for community based projects, where folks are invited to sit and assemble the puzzle together (discuss the realities, possibilities and limitations of the texts presented in the puzzle. Upon completion, puzzle is disassembled and placed back in box. This process would be repeated as desired, and with acknowledgement from owner that natural erosion would occur and become part of the artwork.
3. The puzzles can be fully or partially assembled (I would leave this up to the discretion of the person or institution) and displayed together as a triptych on a pedestal.



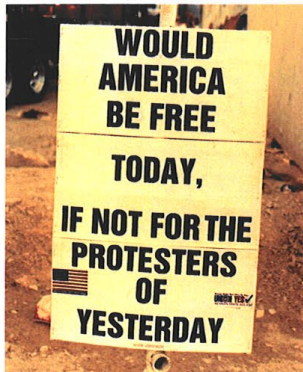
Photographs of MGM Grand rally, Culinary Union, Las Vegas (Nev.), 1994 May 26
Size: 16" x 20"

Medium: Paperboard, adhesive, printed reproduction of a photograph

Classification: Mixed-Media
Date created: February 2020



Photographs of Desert Solidarity march, Culinary Union, Las Vegas (Nev.), 1992 December 05
Size: 16" x 20"
Medium: Paperboard, adhesive, printed reproduction of a photograph
Classification: Mixed-Media
Date created: February 2020



Photographs of Frontier Strike rally, Culinary Union, Las Vegas (Nev.), 1991 September 21
Size: 16" x 20"
Medium: Paperboard, adhesive, printed reproduction of a photograph
Classification: Mixed-Media
Date created: February 2020