

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH SARA ORTIZ**

An Oral History Conducted by Rodrigo Vazquez

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Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada  
Oral History Research Center at UNLV  
University Libraries  
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

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



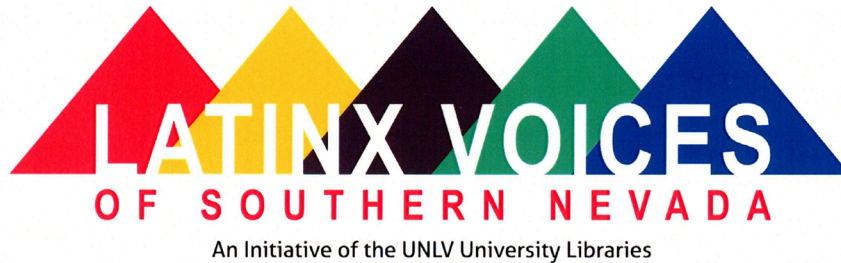
Sara Ortiz is the program and festival director of *The Believer* magazine and Black Mountain Institute. She was born and raised in Austin, Texas where her Salvadoran parents settled, though led a “nomadic” life within Austin. Her mother was a housekeeper and her father worked several jobs to care for their family. Within that loving family, Sara cultivated a love of storytelling from an early age.

After graduating from St. Edwards University in Austin, she was accepted into the Columbia Publishing Course—an intensive summer course offered by Columbia University’s School of Journalism. Prior to *The Believer*, she worked for literary institutions such as McNally Jackson Books, Scholastic Inc.; Disney Publishing Worldwide, and Penguin Random House. She has strived to incorporate the Las Vegas landscape into the Believer Festival, the literary festival produced by UNLV’s Black Mountain Institute.

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December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
in Las Vegas, Nevada  
Conducted by Rodrigo Vazquez

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**Today is Friday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019. I am Rodrigo Vazquez. I am here with Sara Ortiz. We are in the Oral History Research Center here at UNLV.**

**Sara, can you please spell your first and last name for me?**

Yes. Sara, S-A-R-A. Ortiz, O-R-T-I-Z.

**You were talking about how you were born and raised in Austin and the changes that you saw?**

Yes. It's interesting when you come from a place where you are born, where you are raised, where you went to school, maybe even did your undergrad. A place becomes you; you become that place. For me, Austin certainly became that, and it has evolved and changed in many ways; some ways for the better, and then some ways not. We were just talking about how Maryland Parkway is a very important thoroughfare to get from campus to downtown, and right now, because of construction, it's a mess. For me, all of Austin is like that right now. In the way that Las Vegas is considering a light rail, that conversation has been also brought up in Austin. They did put a light rail, but it doesn't actually serve the city all, because it circumvents Austin. The light rail starts in downtown Austin, circumvents through East Austin and ends up north. There is no actual benefit to the greater Austin Area. *The New York Times* broke down the history of New York subway map. I don't know if you've seen this. It's really cool because it breaks down how the team that drew the train lines to the subway map—

**Oh yes.**

It's really fascinating. But basically, they made it so that it might not make sense to scale, and it might not make exacting sense, but the artists sat down on every subway line, and they closed

their eyes, drew a line according to how the subway train moved. While the map is not actually to scale, it does have that curve and feel the way you would feel inside the train. It's very interesting. They've used the map for something like forty years, and they've added to it, changed it as new lines and old lines have been brought in or taken away. I don't know why we're talking about this.

**Infrastructure is important.**

Infrastructure is important, but it requires some change.

**Yes. I think also you brought up a really interesting point about what infrastructure does get built. It's also about who it's serving, right? Sometimes you'll go to cities that are developing new infrastructure, and you're like, I don't know who this is for, right? I wouldn't personally ever use, I think, a lot of the things that they built, like the best bus system here in town, which is kind of awful. RTC needs to be better. It serves tourists, right? It's the Las Vegas Boulevard line or whatever gets individuals out of McCarran and to McCarran faster. I just think it's interesting that that's kind of where infrastructure tends to go, right?**

That's funny to hear because—so, born and raised in Austin, where I spent the first twenty-something years of my life, I ended up making my way to New York, where I got spoiled by not driving, and so I used the Metro, the subway system, the entire time. It was glorious. When I moved back to Austin, because I had already sold my car, I didn't have a car when I returned for a job. This job, my mom's house—where I moved back to—were far apart. In Austin, there are two main interstate highways, if you will; or kind of like major highways or smaller highway. There's the east side of Interstate 35, which runs from Chicago all the way down to Laredo, and



everything that's on the east side of I-35 in Austin, at one point was considered lower class or lower socioeconomic families. Then there is what's on the west side of I-35. That was at some point, sort of middle class. Mopac is this other thoroughfare further west, and if you live on the west side of Mopac that's where the fancy homes are; that's upper class. It's really interesting to see the similarities even here. I know here it's complex because you have the northwest part of Las Vegas, so it's not an exact math, and it's also not an exact math in Austin.

But when I moved back to Austin, my mom's house was in southeast Austin, East of the I-35, and my job was on the west side of Mopac. Again, that fancier area. I was like, *how am I going to get there without a car? Surely there is no bus system that takes me.* Then I looked it up, and to my surprise there was a bus that took me from my mom's to work. In my conversations with other people, I was like, "Isn't it so weird that I live here and I can get there by one bus route?" And they were like, "No, Sara. Don't you know our bus system was built in a way so that housekeepers and servers and all the people who did the work for the richer families had an easy way to get to their place of employment?" In my head I was like, oh yes, yes, yes. That's a reality.

**It's like a direct supply of labor.**

Oh my God, yes. Who is taking the city bus? In Austin it was not people who had money, because they probably had cars or drivers or whatever. It was obviously serving a lower socioeconomic population. Until this day, my parents are both housekeepers and live on the east side.

**Did you grow up in southeast Austin?**

My family was very nomadic, even within the Austin city limits. I can think of at least a dozen places where I lived in Austin. I went to five different elementary schools. My parents were very nomadic because there was this scrappy mentality; they're both Salvadoran immigrants. I think that my parents were convinced that *les estaban tomando el pelo*. Oftentimes we went into a one-bedroom apartment—which, by the way, for a family of five, that wasn't allowed. You're not allowed to have five people in a one-bedroom, but my parents would just lie and say we were four. I remember after they'd be in a place for six months or even a year, rent would go up by either fifty bucks or however much, and they could not understand why. They're like, oh, they're just taking advantage of us; they think we don't know. We would move if not every year, every year and a half. We were constantly on the move because my parents would sign these short-term leases, and they didn't realize that that was normal. It's what happens everywhere, really. They were literally taking us kids, me, my brother and my sister, and chasing cheap rent in Austin. It didn't matter if it meant putting us in a different school.

It finally got to the point when I was in fifth or sixth grade, which would have put Eva at around third or fourth grade, and Lito by that point was in middle school. When they were going to move us again that last time, I was like, "No." We had been to so many elementary schools. We knew that the school that would eventually be my last elementary school, Bryker Woods Elementary, was an amazing school as far as education and extracurricular activities went. My brother and sister and I, we were the only brown kids in a school of white kids. But talk about getting a tour of your own city and learning which are the lower performing schools and which are called blue ribbon performing schools thanks to their resources. It's just really interesting. I fell in love with music, because of the teacher at Bryker Woods, whose name was Melody Long.

It's really interesting to get that window as a kid. It's a very nomadic and voyeuristic sort of experience.

**Were you the one that told your parents that you didn't want to move?**

I wouldn't be surprised if I was one of them. I seem to recall that especially me and Eva, we were like, "No, we're not doing this again." We finally were old enough to speak our mind and say, "You guys can't keep doing this to us." We were getting at an age where we learned to value friends, and it was like, "No, this is not okay." We learned to value our education and we were like, "No, you don't understand. We can't move again." It was a very strange sort of ordeal. I do remember how we made a case, and they were like, "Okay, if there's a way we can still do it, then let's try." I don't remember how we managed to stay there, but I managed to stay there through sixth grade—they had sixth grade at the elementary school. Then I ended up going to one of the feeder middle schools, which happened to be closer to where we lived, so it worked out.

Eva and I would take the city bus to get to school. When I think about that now, I'm like, how wild was that? Because I don't know that I'd necessarily put someone in fifth grade or even in sixth grade—and my sister was two grades below me—in a school bus. "Here you go, kids, off you go." We did that. It's so wild. We won that battle, but at what risk?

Then when I left that school, we tried to keep Eva going, but that meant she was taking the city bus alone. After a while my parents were like, "We're moving you to a new school." She ended up in a totally different district.

But, yes, I had to fight for that. But it also taught us to make friends fast, moving from school to school.

**Did you go to the same middle school the remaining two years?**

I remained in one middle school and in one high school even though they still moved a lot within that period, but they managed to stay within that school's district.

**And they were working as housekeepers at this time?**

My mom has been a housekeeper at St. David's Hospital in Austin, Texas for over thirty years. She's been there a long time.

My dad kind of had different jobs. I remember he was working for the City of Austin in the trash and recycling department. He suffered a work-related accident there. He's had different jobs, like as porters at different car dealerships. Then he eventually ended up also becoming a housekeeper. I think he's been doing that for about a decade now.

**Are you the second youngest? Are you the youngest girl?**

I'm the middle child, the eldest girl; I have a younger sister and an older brother.

**You said that your parents were immigrants. Did you grow up in a Spanish-speaking household?**

Oh yes. Spanish is my entire family's first language, everyone in my family. Yes, we were definitely a Spanish-speaking household. Eva, Lito, and I, we eventually learned English. Of course, I was in ESL classes for a good bit. I remember when we got to that elementary school, Bryker Woods—Eva started second grade; I got there at fourth grade. At second grade Eva did not know how to speak, read, or write in English. Her teacher did not know how to speak, read, or write in Spanish. But somehow, they figured out how to communicate. That school, I'm telling you, it did wonders for Eva especially because she was the youngest. By the following

year, she was at a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level. She just absorbed it. Everything kind of kicked in all at once for her. It was a very cool thing to observe.

I remember how we all got a grasp of the language. The funny thing is I couldn't tell you...I have memories of conversations, but I can't imagine us as little kids not speaking to each other in English. When I speak to my siblings, our default is English. The only times we default to Spanish is when we are speaking to relatives, our parents, or when we don't want anyone else to know what we're fucking saying, but other than that...But we clearly had to switch at some point, because I remember one night when we lived in this two-story duplex a south part of Austin. We grew up in a very conservative, very strict household. My parents were the law. I know there was a time where we switched to English, and I remember this because Lito and Eva and I would start speaking in code around my parents. We would start speaking in English. But then we learned our mom was picking up on what we were saying, so then we had to start spelling words in English. She's like, "I know what you're saying." She would tell us that in Spanish. We had to start spelling things. Until this day, when we don't want her to know, we will spell things. It's kind of horrible.

**I think you're right. I can't remember conversations with my siblings before I spoke English. But my older brother, when we got here—he's five years older. I was three, so he was eight. I learned English before school, but I must have been four or five once I was speaking it. Even then, I was always a talker. My older sister, who is two years younger than my brother, they had to have communicated in Spanish for years, and with me as well, and I don't remember any of that.**

Yes. Isn't that weird?

**Yes, it is. I've never actually thought of that. But, yes, you're absolutely right.**

It's weird. It's so weird. Of course, we talked and we communicated and we played with each other. I just remember when the switch started happening when we were like, okay, now we have to say things to each other in English. Then eventually when we were in school, it naturally evolved into the dominate language between us siblings. We still to this day speak to our parents only in Spanish because their English is still basic even though they've been here for over three decades.

**How prevalent is Spanish in Austin?**

It's got a massive brown population where, it's about 40 percent Latinx. You have to keep in mind we're only a few hours away from the border, like five-ish hours away from the border, not that far. What's happening now is gentrification, and it's unfortunate for a lot of immigrant families there, especially because they are getting pushed out of the center of Austin and further out into Manor, into Buda, which is south, or Kyle. Basically they're getting pushed out of the Austin city limits, so they're more the Greater Austin area.

The east side of Austin where I grew up—I've done an east side tour for friends whenever they come to Austin. I'm like, "We've lived in that house. My parents lived in that basement." Yes, they're sort of markers of the city that I remember. Some of them still have the structural integrity to it because this part of East Austin is a historic neighborhood, so you need permits before you can even try to do anything there.

**Your parents were both Salvadoran, you said? What kind of foods would you eat? What kind of traditions did they keep ongoing? What kind of heritage did they instill in you guys?**

That's an interesting question. My parents were hustlers; they worked all the time. I don't remember a time when my mom or dad did not have a job or two. Oftentimes, us kids, we were raising ourselves. The meals that we made at home were *sopa instantánea*; it was like Ramen noodle soup. We were far from wealthy.

It's interesting. My mom cooked a lot when she was in El Salvador because my grandmother, her mom, and my *tía*, her sister, they grew up in a really small town in the state of Usulután called Jiquilisco. They would cook for a lot of the workers in that area. They would pay my mom's family what they called a *quincena*, so they'd pay them for two weeks' worth of meals, and my mom and my grandmother and my *tía* would make these meals for a whole group of people. It's how they made money.

My mom came to Texas when she was nineteen or twenty, maybe a little bit older. I forget. But she didn't actually—I wonder why she didn't do this, but she didn't necessarily pass on any *costumbres*. I knew that I was Salvadoran. I knew that my parents were Salvadoran. I knew that they came here from El Salvador. Growing up, they did not share a lot with us; it wasn't until we got a little bit older that I learned more. It wasn't until we kind of got more curious and started asking more questions that they would talk a little bit more about El Salvador. They never told me that a civil war was happening there; I learned that separately. They didn't tell me that they fled from that; I learned that. Then I started asking, I think, the right questions. I think to an extent they were shielding us. They didn't want us to know everything that they were going through. Of course I knew what *pupusas* were. Of course I knew what *platano frito* was. Of course I knew what *pastel de carne* was. *Pastel de carne* is what people here call empanadas. What we call empanadas are actually a very sweet, creamy dessert. I knew all of these things

because we would eat Salvadoran food, but my mom and my dad did not make it at home growing up.

Actually, the first time that we—notice I said we—that we made *pupusas* at home—my mom and I took a trip back to El Salvador back in 2005. My grandmother and one of my *tías* taught me how to make *pupusas* there, so I brought that knowledge back home. In so much that I would make *pupusas* for Thanksgiving.

They didn't say, this is a part of who you are. My parents were not preachy about cultural roots like that. They're not like an after-school special. They're far from it. They're more like, this is the law. They're no longer that way now, they can't be. Growing up it was more like—you also have to keep in mind that they also lived in fear, because they were in the States undocumented. During Reagan's presidency, Salvadorans who had made their way to the U.S. got asylum and they were able to apply for a green card. I think after that they started to feel a little more secure. I remember my parents hustling. They still do. When we ate food it was either bad American fast food or we made Ramen noodle at home, because it was just us three kids taking care of each other. I don't remember, *yum*, amazing meals growing up; there was none of that home cooking, and no one like \_\_\_\_\_ (25:30) said, "This is the kind of music," *da, da*. No, it was nothing like that. I think we learned traditions and customs because we got curious and we wanted to know more.

But there were things that needed that—I would say they were the basics. There was language. Spanish was the first language that I learned to speak, read, and write in. I knew the Spanish alphabet before I knew the English one. It just so happened that this part of town where we grew up in, the east side of Austin, there were a lot of families like ours, probably primarily Mexican



families, but there were a lot of families like ours where Spanish was the only language. I went to Spanish-speaking-only classrooms, so that's how I learned. Also, the church we grew up in only did services in Spanish. There was no room for English for us growing up. In many ways I think that was a strength, looking back on it now.

But there was nothing about our parents that was like, "This is what it's like to be Salvadoran," *da, da, da*. No, no, no. That's not how my parents were.

**That's really interesting. I grew up in a very similar way where usually it was stories my parents would tell, right, about the town that they grew up in. For the most part, it just wasn't like...I think a lot of the times what happens is some of our parents don't have the time.**

Yes, they were too busy working. We also weren't allowed to go play with people because I think they were, again, trying to protect us. I think what maybe doesn't get spoken about enough is that when there are members in your family who are undocumented, there is this fear, and so they're like, "Don't go out there; don't talk to people; don't tell them about us." There is a lot of secrecy there, which is strange for people because we look for connections. Whether you call yourself a recluse, or whether you call yourself an extrovert, whatever, you're still looking to connect with people, maybe not in the most traditional, like through conversation,. But if you're connecting to music, if you are reading literature, guess what? You are connecting to an artist's mind in some way. You're connecting with people. Whether you're playing a game and chatting with people, if you're a gamer, you say you like to spend time alone, but you're still connecting with people. When something like secrecy gets involved, alienation becomes a part of it. Really,

like I say, my siblings and I raised each other, but we were also each other's only friend for a good little portion. Yes, it's very moving to think of.

**You're very close to your siblings, aren't you?**

I would say I think so, yes. Yes, I think I am. Eva and I, while we're two grades apart, we're only thirteen months apart, so we're what they call the Irish twins. Then growing up, my brother and I were really close because we both used to sing in church choir. Yes, we were really, really close, and then I left for New York, which naturally creates that sort of distance. When I came back to Austin, it's like, *yeah, yeah*. We're a small family, so there's not like a lot of room; I don't think you have that many options when you're a small unit like that. But, yes, close.

**What was high school like for you?**

High school is one of those...It's weird. It's strange. How do I talk about this because it's weird? I grew up in what my family just calls church, but what, in fact, has been a church that really functions more like a cult. It's funny because I guess what some people would really clutch onto, customs and culture, that for us was always secondary or even tertiary because what really took up a lot of the real estate at home was faith and religion. We were not Catholic. Growing up, I was always kind of told, "We're nondenominational Christian church," is what I often heard. I was like, okay, I'm in a Christian church. But it was actually a little culty, what I think about it because it was one of those faiths where the doctrine was law; again, which references back to my parents' very strict way of being, primarily my dad's very strict way of being. My parents were married because of the church, so the three of us were literally products of this church. I call us many things. We're products of the Civil War. We're products of our parents. But we're also products of this faith and this church. Because of these factors, my siblings and I exist.

It's very interesting because growing up I really valued that community. In hindsight, I'm like, ooh, yes that community really got us. Some people might really find something where they feel tethered to something, that thing that our family felt very tethered to was not so much our genetic makeup and our ancestors; it was primarily this faith, which is why I think when I started to find a departure from the faith, I was able to focus or to give a little more thought to our ancestry, to where we come from. We're always kind of looking to find ourselves and where we come from.

**Were your parents involved with this church when they were in El Salvador?**

Yes, they were. Actually, it's because of this church that...I'm sure this isn't an uncommon story, especially in Latin America where families are often hustling and kids start working from a very young age. But my mom received a third-grade education, and my father got up to a fifth-grade education, and even though he went up to fifth grade, he was mostly illiterate. It was because of church that he actually learned how to read. The Bible, those passages were some of the first words he read aloud. It helped my dad. It's kind of an interesting thing that that's how he began to read. Even when he reads today in Spanish, he really takes a slow time. He still will sound out a word. It's very interesting, because I work with books.

**Yes. How did you get into that? When did you realize it was something that you wanted to do or work with?**

I say this in hindsight. I didn't know this when I was young. I believe that I loved stories. I loved hearing stories. I loved talking to people, learning stories. What I didn't know at the time that I know now is it creates a connection with people. Some of the first stories that I heard came from the Bible. It's weird because I can still appreciate those values that are still a part of me today. All to say that I liked to read, but I would never call myself a voracious reader when I was

growing up. I read what I had to read at school. I wasn't this early reader, nothing like that. Again, we were the furthest thing from an after-school special; we were not that. I liked stories. Again, because of my parents' super conservative upbringing, we weren't allowed to watch any TV that wasn't the TV that they were watching, so a lot of the time we grew up watching telenovelas, so I watched *Marimar*, *Dos mujeres, un camino*. I watched all these Latin stations. What's that one, Televisa? Univision? I watched all these different things. It's weird because they're also not necessarily the most age-appropriate things young kids should be watching. I remember when my parents did have those demanding work days where we were like, oh my God, we'd have free cable at this apartment; what are these other channels? I remember discovering *Saved by the Bell*. We would watch PBS growing up because I feel like my parents were like, "That seems good for you guys." We watched Mr. Rogers; we watched *Sesame Street*; we watched *Ghostwriter*. I loved *Ghostwrite*, oh my God, that was a good show, because there are also Salvies on that show. There were the brother and the sister who were Salvadorans and their parents owned the bodega.

Anyhow, I knew that I loved a story. I knew I loved storytelling. I think like anybody, I appreciated that. It wasn't until I was in college that I realized I had a certain knack when it came to writing. A lot of these skills I actually learned from church, from hearing stories, from hearing people connect, from hearing scripture. Hearing all these things actually really laid the foundation deep in my subconscious that when it came to writing, writing was something that I found quite therapeutic, but I also found that I was learning a lot about myself through writing. It was one of those things where it wasn't until I was well into college where I was like, *oh yes*.

I have this really weird reading trajectory. Bible first. Whatever books happened in school, half of which I probably didn't read if I'm being totally honest. Then I had this crazy jump from reading something like a *Goosebumps* book or *Babysitters Club* book to just adult literature. I don't really remember anything in between other than the Bible. When you think about it, the Bible is not really kid-friendly. We were also reading it in Spanish. I didn't grow up reading the bible in English. I read it in Spanish. I also say it would make for a great bible trivia partner.

It wasn't until I was a little bit older...I kind of like that it worked out that way because I found it on my own and I appreciate it more because of that. It wasn't something that has been instilled in me from whatever. It certainly was a little bit more nuanced. It wasn't like, "I've been reading Jane Austen" No, no, I've never read any of the Brontë's books. I probably never will. I don't think I've ever picked up a Brontë sisters' book. I prefer contemporary literature, anyway.

**That is something that I didn't read as much of growing up, is contemporary literature.**

**That's something I'm very much getting into now. Yes.**

I see Ocean Vuong over there.

**Right. It's difficult for me to get through this one in particular just because he's a poet, obviously. Have you read it?**

"On Earth [We're Briefly Gorgeous]"? I have not read it.

**Have you read any of his poetry?**

Yes. Oh yes. Have you seen him perform?

**I have not, no.**

Just look up videos. It's worth looking at. I tried to get him for the festival, by the way, for The Believer Festival that we host late in the spring semester. He's unavailable, just so you know.

But I am interested in bringing him here. What made you pick up the book, then?

**I got into poetry relatively recently, contemporary poetry, anyway. I started going to a lot of BMI readings in school because I didn't really know many people when I transferred over to UNLV. I always really enjoyed reading. I happened upon BMI. Jessica Teague would really push it.**

Was she doling out extra credit for it, too?

**Yes. But I would go to these things and I wouldn't write things for extra credit because I went to one and I really enjoyed it. I guess you guys saw Morgan Parker.**

Yes, who is coming back, by the way.

**Is she? Okay, great. I love her.**

She's coming back in March.

**I bought everything she's written since I saw her.**

Save the date, March 24<sup>th</sup>.

**Ever since then I started on Twitter following all of these writers and poets and contemporary writers. Vuong, I had never read anything about him, but he was on my radar suddenly. Then a friend of mine took Dr. Emily Satina's class and she taught a contemporary poetry class. She was like, "Oh, I love his poetry." I bought his poetry book and I have it. I haven't read it. But I picked up his novel and it's been hard. I would have**

**been done with it by now. I started actually a couple of days ago. But I keep rereading passages because they're amazing, so it's really hard to get through, not because the language is difficult.**

No. I know.

**You reread passages and then you really can't do anything else.**

Isn't it kind of amazing when someone uses all the same words that you know and they make that?

**Yes.**

Isn't it kind of crazy?

**It is.**

It's crazy.

**It's insane.**

It's a beautiful skill and talent. Yes, it's weird because you know all of those words, but they have put them in such an order where you're just like, *boom*.

**Yes, and it's all you can think about. It's like you would never be able to do that. That's why I say I could never write fiction. I could never write poetry. I don't think I have a brain for it, but I enjoy consuming it and reading it.**

One of my favorite books—because I feel like there are definitely occasions where life stops and the world pauses when you read a book. I don't get that feeling quite often. But one of those

books that did it for me, I read it in New York on the day that it came out. It's a very short read. It's called *We the Animals* by Justin Torres. This book came out, I think, in 2010. It was just made into a movie in 2018. It follows three siblings. Surprise, surprise, three siblings. But these are all boys. Their mom is Italian; the dad is Puerto Rican. They're mixed kids, but they're also the only brown kids for miles. They're the only brown kids in their school. They live in Upstate New York. The parents have a very tumultuous relationship. There is this beautiful thing that Justin Torres does with language. He toggles with the first person; he toggles from the singular to the plural. Oftentimes he'll go from "we did this, we did that," and it feels like he's telling it in a verse. It feels very poetic. He's a poet as much as he is a fiction writer. But it's told in these really, really short vignettes. It's loosely based on him and his three brothers. Actually it's a really beautiful story. It's heartbreaking, but it's one of those where I was like, "This book is so good," and then I gave it to my siblings.

**What was the first book that made you feel that way?**

I think it was *We the Animals*.

**What college did you go to?**

I went to St. Edwards. Actually, I take that back. I did go there. That's where I graduated from. I had quite the winding undergrad trajectory. I started with the community college at Austin, ACC, Austin Community College, where I was working on a music major. I was studying voice and music education. I was there for a while. I knew I would eventually transfer from ACC into a four-year college, and so I did. I ended up transferring to Texas State, which is twenty minutes south of Austin. I would commute to school. Twenty minutes is nothing. I would go to school and I was taking more music classes. Then I auditioned for their music conservatory program at



Texas State. I got in, which was really great because I didn't know that I was going to get in. I wasn't sure that that was going to happen.

Then life happened. I had to leave the music school and I moved to Houston. The long story goes I eloped and I moved to Houston with this person.

That didn't work out, and so I moved back home to Austin where I was like, what am I going to do? I was like, I can't do music; it's really not going to pay, *da, da, da, da, da*. I was like, I know what I'll do; I'll do creative writing, because I thought *that* was going to pay. I do really think it turned out for the better. I'm positive it turned out for the better. I ended up graduating with an English major, creative writing focus and, also, a focus on Middle Eastern studies, but I did that from St. Edwards University in Austin, which is a private liberal arts school that I am still paying back loans for, still till this day. It took me on a winding...It took me seven years when I switched majors, life happened, and then I really settled in.

Then I heard through a friend about this publishing program that's offered by Columbia University up in New York. I didn't want to move to New York, but I remember thinking, oh this would be a really great way for me to make connections. It's only a summer-long program. It's one of those programs where you're in classes basically all day Monday through Friday. You live on campus. Your meals are on campus. I was like, well, I can't afford this program, but if they happen to accept me and give me a full ride, I'll go, and that's what happened. I wasn't looking to leave and then I got a letter. It's called the Columbia Publishing Course and it's offered through the School of Journalism at Columbia University. I took a summer-long sabbatical from my job in Austin to attend. My plan was to come back.

By the time this program ended, I actually got a couple of job offers in New York, so I stayed there. It was not my plan to live in New York, but it did work out that way.

**I find that people who don't want to move to New York have a better experience in New York than people whose goal it is to move to New York.**

Yes. Poor New York. If I would have put all that pressure on that city, like, well, you can't count on me, because it's not going to do you any favors. It is going to test you every single way. The funny thing is, is that nomadic experience that I experienced with my parents growing up in Austin, I had that in New York. I was there over five to six years; somewhere around there. I lived in over ten different neighborhoods. That's crazy.

**When did you get to New York, what year?**

I can't remember, 2009, 2010. I can't remember exactly.

**Post-recession New York City.**

It was just as the recession ended. Here's the thing. This publishing program was actually the first program to happen—maybe it was the second program to happen—after the recession hit. Only seven of us walked out of jobs out of a cohort of a hundred. It was not the easiest time to get a job in New York. It's crazy when I think about it. I also didn't have any financial cushion. My parents did not pay for my education. My parents were not going to pay for me to be in New York. There was no way I would have stayed in New York had I not had a job lined up. I just don't have that kind of financial cushioning to help.

**When you got out of this program and you get this job, did you see New York change while you were there, like in the same way that you saw Austin change?**

One of the first neighborhoods I lived in—first I was living in a dorm in Morningside Heights in Manhattan, and then I slept on a couch at my friend’s apartment in Chelsea, again proper Manhattan. I needed to find a place like this, (snapping), because I had a job. I started that job almost immediately. Then I just needed a place to have all my stuff. I found an apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. That is a neighborhood that I saw heavily go under gentrification. There are still parts of it which kind of retain the very West Indian and Orthodox Jewish communities, and that I don’t think will ever leave. It’s got at least one little indie bookstore, and all these hip coffee shops all over the place, and even hip laundromats if you want that. It’s different. That was what I think is considered a very residential part of Brooklyn. Even to see more businesses pop up was a little strange because those businesses used to be people’s apartments and homes.

### **After New York, you said you moved back to Austin?**

I moved back to Austin again because I had a job lined up. There’s no way I would have gone back to Austin without a job. Here is the thing about New York pay. I’ll just give you a random number. Let’s say you’re making fifty thousand a year. New York takes about—and don’t quote me on this—but New York takes something like 40, 37 percent of your income, which means you’re not seeing a whole lot of money. You might as well be getting paid a fraction of that in another part of the country. It’s funny. When I moved back to Austin, I took a significant pay cut, but I was actually making more. I saw more in my bank account because just the way that New York taxes take over. It’s crazy. It’s great in some ways, but the struggle is real if you are starting out in New York with little pay. It’s tricky.

Yes, I moved back home. I remember when I moved back home, my mom was very glad to have me in the house. She's like, "You can stay here." And I was like, "Don't worry. I'm going to find my own apartment." *Da, da, da.* Here's the thing about living in a lovely Latin American home when you've got your mom. She's like, "Oh, sit down and let me make you some breakfast. Do you want something to eat?" She's just such a caretaker. The funny thing is I didn't grow up with that version of my mom, but I had that attentiveness when I moved back to Austin. I was almost thirty-one when I moved back to Austin, and I'm like, oh yes, I could get used to this. I was always like, "I can move out; I can move out," and then I realized I wasn't going to move out, and so I stayed home. It was lovely. Actually, when I got this job in Vegas, it was so hard to say bye, to move out, because I was so wonderfully happy living at home. My mom and I grew very close. So funny.

**Did you get into publishing then, after you finished the program?**

Yes, because it was a publishing program. It's crazy to think about. I was running the events for McNally Jackson Books, which is an independent bookstore in Manhattan. Now they've opened up so many locations that I think they have something like five locations between Manhattan and Brooklyn. I think they have a few locations now.

Then after that I worked for Disney Publishing Worldwide on the children's side. I worked with a lot of children's literature and librarians and educators.

From there, I was offered a job at Penguin, which then later merged with Random House and now is the biggest publisher in the world, Penguin Random House. I was there during the merger. While I was there I was offered a job at Scholastic, which at the time—now I'm not sure—was the largest children's book publisher, best known for *Clifford The Big Red Dog*, or the

*Goosebumps*, R.L. Stine books, or the *Harry Potter* books or *The Hunger Games*. They publish some of the biggest books in the children's lit game.

I always knew I wasn't going to stay in New York. I loved New York. I loved being there. New York was actually pretty okay to me. Again, I wasn't looking for it; it just so happened that I stayed there. It felt like an opportunity that I should not pass up. Then I saw this job in Austin that looked perfect, and so I talked to the people there and got that job.

**You said that when your friend told you about essentially the position at *The Believer* magazine, you had a certain idea of what Las Vega was. What idea was that? What did you think of Las Vegas?**

I had been to Vegas once before that and it was for a work trip. It was one of the American Library Association conferences that took place here and it was in the dead of summer, dead, dead summer. When the sun is sweltering, the air is undulating a little bit. It's like, oh yes, it's that hot. I was like, oh my God, that's actually something people see. It's not just a film effect, but it's a thing people see. I think about how I got around that entire trip, I never left the Strip, one, because it was very much a work trip. If I was ever outside, I was in line for a taxi or in line for a shuttle to take me somewhere, but it's not like I walked around. I was going in and out of casinos and smoky lobbies. I was like, who lives here? That was my only introduction. Also, I'm not a gambler, and I'm not a big drinker. When I drink it's seldom. I'm not a smoker. There are just so many things where I was like, this is not where I could live; I cannot live here, because that's all I knew. All I knew was the Strip and that's what people also associate as Vegas. Even then, I didn't know that much about the Strip. I couldn't have told you back then, oh, this is all there is to Las Vegas. I couldn't have said that because I didn't really know much about it to

know anything. But it has that stigma that it's known for bachelorette parties, bachelor parties, these bridal weekends or whatever people do here, debauchery. It gets a bad rap.

I will tell you, as someone who has come to love Las Vegas, part of me—and I hope this isn't a mean thing to say—but part of me hopes that people continue associating it that way because I've seen what happens to a really good city and good town when everyone “gets it”. They're like, oh, this is the thing; this is the really cool thing about this place. I feel like doing what I get to do here and with this very strong, robust arts and literary community here that I feel is thriving, I feel like we get it; we're in on it. For those who are just passing through, I'm like, yes, of course, come visit; okay, bye. I don't care if that's what they associate us with because I very much feel like I am a part of this town in ways that I did not anticipate at all. I could not have ever seen that. Part of me is like, yes, continue thinking what you're thinking and go on your merry way; go to your Brooklyn; go to your Seattle; go wherever. I'm totally okay with whatever stigma you have because I am from Austin and I've seen what happens to a city when people are like, I get it; I'm going there next. I'm okay if folks pass on Vegas.

**I think that that's something that would happen to me a lot. I guess I didn't really realize that that's what it was until this very moment. When I worked at Container Park, obviously everybody was drunk, having a good time, whatever. Gambling isn't really my thing. Drinking isn't much my thing, either. But they would ask me, “Oh hey, what's it like to live here? What happens?” Do you know where Atomic Liquors is downtown?**

Yes, yes.

**They're like, “What will I find if I keep walking down Fremont?” I'm like, “Well, there's a really cool bar called Atomic Liquors and then there's Writer's Block and a cool record**

**shop.” This is before Writer’s Block moved. They’re like, “Yes, yes, yes, but what would I find if I go past that?” And I would just be like, “You’ll find abject poverty.” I would just say the most outlandish things I guess to try to get people to break their illusion of Las Vegas, but really I think it’s for the same reason, because I just didn’t want them to stay, which is awful, right?**

No. I’m like, “Yes, do the thing you need to do on the Strip.” Like you, how many times do you drive down the Strip?

**Never.**

Never, exactly. You bypass that shit if you need to. I seldom go down there. If I have to even drive close, I’m driving down Paradise. I try to avoid that street by all means necessary. But you know when I’m reminded that I live in Vegas? Because I avoid that part. I’m reminded that I live in this idea that people have of Vegas, I’m reminded when I’m on a plane and coming here or leaving because I hear the groups of the bachelors without fail. Also, at least when I would fly in and out of Austin or different places, there would be an empty seat; not for Vegas flights. The flights to and from here, the ones that I’ve been on are packed. People really come here. It is a destination for people. I’m like, all right, as long as it’s not a permanent stay, do whatever you need to do here, get it out of your system. The nice thing is I actually don’t have to deal with it.

You know what’s really nice for me is when we host this festival and we have at least a hundred people come in from out of town, and I’m not talking about performers, but people who come from out of town to this festival. They’re like, “I didn’t know Vegas was this.” It’s kind of a showcase, because we’re also very intentional about giving a window to Vegas that people might not associate with this town. We take them to Red Rock. We take them to the Writer’s Block.

We took them to the Ne10 Studio, the Neon Museum. We took them to the historic courtroom inside the Mob Museum. This year<sup>1</sup> we plan to take them into the Ferguson's outdoor amphitheater that's gone up there. Out of towners have to stay in a hotel, where there's a lot of gaming, casinos, and slot machines, so every day what we're doing is taking them out of that. We're not making them go through this other winding casino to get wherever. We're taking them away from that and we're like, here, look at this beautiful striking desert sunset that's happening during this reading. We're very intentional about how we bring artists here and how we have them interact with Las Vegas. It's really nice.

But, again, because I'm born and raised in Austin, I know what it's like to have something lovely. I couldn't have told you that it was a little bit territorial at the time, but it is somewhat territorial. The funny thing is, even till today, I will get people who are like, "So, how's Vegas?" And I'm like, "It's fucking phenomenal." But it's okay; I don't need you to believe me." We love our home here. We love the people here. Also, keep in mind, I'm from Texas, where people are known for being kind and hospitable, kind of that southern hospitality that takes place. But people here are genuinely nice in a way that still kind of surprises me, which is really nice. It's always refreshing.

### **Tell me about BMI.**

What do you want to know?

### **When did it start? What's the history of it?**

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<sup>1</sup> Due to Covid-19, the BMI staff could not host The Believer Festival in 2020.



I can't tell you the year it started, but I can tell you it started with the City of Asylum Program. The City of Asylum Program is one that takes writers whose lives are in peril or who have been imprisoned because of their writing, and it gives them a place of asylum where they can come live and write. We host them in Las Vegas. BMI's beginning started with the City of Asylum Program.

I'm terrible with the history. I should know a little bit more. But it exists in large part thanks to Bev Rogers. Like her, there are very few philanthropic people. The Rogers Foundation really gives a lot to the community. It's a rare thing to have. Even us in Las Vegas, we recognize how fortunate we are to have that support, because without it we literally would not exist. It's quite impactful. Or we would not exist on the level of which we currently exist. Carol C. Harter is a founding board member; she's the one who actually founded Black Mountain Institute, a former president of UNLV. Right? Was she a former president?

**I think so.**

Yes, I think she was a former president of UNLV. She founded BMI. She gave the first endowment of sorts, and then Bev Rogers contributed to that and really kind of gave it that institutional heft that it needed in order to become a successful program. I know very little of what's happened in its first ten years, but I can tell you in the last two to three—in April, I will have been here two years—but in its last two to three years, thanks to its acquisition of *The Believer* magazine, BMI is getting national recognition. BMI already had some local or regional attention. The way I always talk about it is: BMI has that institutional and financial capital. And *The Believer* has the cultural capital and recognition because of its history and its beginnings and for its believeresque, somewhat quirky approach with its selection of prose and essays. It's

unorthodox, and it's kind of cool. It catapulted, I think, what BMI is doing, the programming that we're bringing to Las Vegas, and amplified our mission to a wider audience. It's a very exciting time for us, I think, but it never stops being a challenging time.

Right now I'm knee deep—not even knee deep, I'm waist deep into festival planning mode. This festival is especially very different from other festivals, too, because it's not a plug-and-play. I've worked with many other book festivals around the country, and I'm not discounting or dismissing their work, because those are a lot of work as well, but we are bringing a publication to life. I begin with a blank canvas every time. There's nothing that says, oh, I have to go back there. Anything is on and off the table. We don't just have touring authors come through. We don't only feature authors. Our literary lineup is about a third of our lineup. We don't bring hundreds of performers. We probably bring closer to thirty-ish people. It's very special. I honestly don't know where else I would get to do something like this for a literary organization. It's a very singular sort of thing to get to curate and plan with my colleagues. It's a very special experience and it's happening right here in Vegas. I'm also friends with many other festival organizers, what we do is very interesting and rare. It's not that common. It's very cool.

**I don't know if you have ever seen BoJack Horseman.**

Oh, I know about that.

**Yes, that was like the scene, yes, *The Believer*.**

*The Believer*. They're like, "Look at that font." Also, I will tell you the right word is *typeface*; it is not *font*, typeface. "Look at that font." They said font. "Look at that font. That's a nerdy font, like something from *The Believer*." That's the best.

**Yes. It's insane. I was doing my undergrad here when they were talking about buying The Believer, or acquiring it. Again, it might have been Jessica Teague and John Hay, her husband. They're just like, "This is a big deal."**

It is a big deal. I don't know how to say that enough. I never want to be dismissive of BMI or anyone who isn't familiar. The Magazine has the cultural capital. When I learned that I could direct this festival, I was like, wait, what? You know what? I think at the end of the day, was in a ten-hour interview. But still, the draw and the appeal is getting to curate the festival for *The Believer*.

**It has so much clout.**

It has clout.

**Yes. I think that's when they're like, "This is a big deal." You're right; I think BMI is doing amazing work, but I can just imagine how long it would have kept going just because you go—I would go to these BMI readings, a lot of the times with PhD students, creative writing students, and they'll talk about how they were surprised when they got to Las Vegas. They're like, "I didn't expect Las Vegas to be what it is." I think it's generally everybody's reaction. It was very much your reaction. I think that people would have eventually maybe know more about BMI nationally, but I think it would have taken a really long time.**

Really long time.

**Yes, exactly. Because nobody, nobody—one, it would really have BMI facing up against this idea of what Las Vegas is, and that's a giant idea to think of Las Vegas as anything**

**other than the Strip. It's huge, right? And then they acquired *The Believer* magazine and suddenly *The New York Times* writes an article about Las Vegas as a literary hub, which is true; it very much is. The thing is, is, yes, BMI has been here, but if we're talking on a national level what's putting them on the map is *The Believer* and The Believer Festival.**

I'm not, by any means, discounting all the work that has come through because there's been a literary scene here. There are people—and I say this word in the most respectful way that I possibly can—there are veterans; there are people here that are veterans of the literary scene that has been here a good minute. While *The New York Times'* piece calls to this slightly, they could have maybe done a better job kind of boasting them a little bit more. It kind of reads like *The Believer* is here; there is something to keep an eye out for. I'm not saying it's not true, but I don't want it to dismiss or to alienate those who have been doing this for, say, decades here in Las Vegas who have known, who get the special part that here this young blood is helping promote. I don't want it to be an us-versus-them. It's a very different sort of entity. We're just adding to what's already been here. But I do agree. I don't know when or if *The New York Times'* piece would have gotten picked up without the magazine here. I'm very curious. I don't know. It maybe would have, but I just don't know when that would have happened.

**I think because the city isn't huge on preserving history and things like that, really we're up against the myth of Las Vegas. We're up against this giant myth. Even though these things have existed and in multiple respects, there are some really great artists. We've interviewed a lot of really great artists for the project. Even when you go out and you tell people you're from Las Vegas, they imagine the myth. Forget the fact that you avoid the Strip as much as possible, right? And by any means necessary. That's what everybody is up against, so it's true that all *The Believer* magazine did is—well, not all it did—but it did**

**really put it on the map. Why? Because *The Believer* carried just as much clout as the myth of Las Vegas, right? I don't know. I think it's really interesting. I think people are finally...It also adds another dimension. I think people can finally look at Las Vegas and be like, oh hey, it's not just this; there's other things happening, very far from the Strip I might add. Yes, I think it's a very exciting time to be here.**

It's very exciting, super exciting. I'm very excited.

**When will this happen? Where else could this happen?**

Actually it's funny because Vendela Vida and Heidi Julavits, they are two of the founding editors for the magazine who are ex-officio editors now; they don't work on it, but they are still very much involved in what we do in some capacities. They come out to our festival every year. I hope they come again this year. But they described it as the magazine finally coming home, coming out here to the desert, because it is this strange publication even on its own. Think about all the strange things that are here in Las Vegas, everything from Seven Magic Mountains to a pyramid-shaped casino. There are some really odd things that happen here that maybe wouldn't succeed or work in other places. It kind of feels like the magazine came to its spiritual home here, which I really think is a very interesting way to look at it. We are definitely up against the myth of Las Vegas, which, again, I don't mind if people still believe that myth. Keep thinking about that myth; it's okay.

I also didn't realize how much living in the desert would really impact...Now I find that my mood is swayed so much by the weather, which is such a weird thing. In Austin it rains all the time—not all the time, but it rains a significant amount. It's a very humid place. There are lots of quarries and lakes and rivers around. There you get a very humid heat and here you get

this very desert dry heat. But I forget how sunny and how clear it is for miles here. When I don't have that same clear, crisp visibility...It's crazy that from several miles away you can see snowcapped mountains pristinely. It's kind of crazy. I was in New York a couple of weeks ago and my first day there was wet, wet, wet and bone cold. I was like, oh no, this is not right. It's very interesting how it affects your mood in ways that never happened to me before. Now, because I live here, I expect sunny days all the time. I'm like, yea, this is great.

**This is a strange part about having lived here most of my life is I don't notice how weird a place this is until I leave somewhere else.**

It's weird. It's a weird place.

**Yes, it is.**

We live in a weird place.

**We were just recently in Salt Lake City for a conference. I'm like, oh, this city is pretty. It was really weird. Salt Lake City is weird. Then I thought about it more and I'm like, wait, there's probably more places like Salt Lake City than Las Vegas.**

Yes, probably.

**Was there any last story you want to say? Anything you want to tell yourself?**

I don't know that I even gave you anything good.

**What do you mean? Are you kidding me?**

I didn't even give you anything good. It was just...I don't know. Do you have a question?

Maybe I can answer a question, but I don't think I have a story.

**What do you hope for the literary community or just Las Vegas in general? What do you hope for the city? What's a secret that nobody knows?**

That's a good question. I would love for Vegas to have a really exceptional center that is dedicated to stories and/or storytelling. My dream would have been that if Huntridge would not have sold to somebody, basically preserving that, maintaining its structure, and that serving as a center or a theater for storytelling whether it would be BMI programs, whether it would be Clark County Poet Laurette programs or Poetry Promise or the Henderson Writers Group, or whatever other literary entity, organizations, individuals. I would love for there to be a center that elevates storytelling and literature. I would also like it to serve not just adults, but children. I would love for there to be more literacy oriented programs right now.

I will be very candid and say the book festival in town could be stronger. It needs a leader who is mission-driven. Who cares about children's programming. Who understands author care and publishing protocols. Right now they don't have the infrastructure in that team to make it that. But it could be an amazing, amazing festival, and it is not right now.

Nevada Humanities has actually done an amazing job with the Reno Lit Crawl that takes place in Reno in early fall. It is a beautiful program. They bring in something like a hundred authors. They do programming all day on one Saturday and it crawls around a central part of Reno. It's beautiful. The book festival needs someone who is passionate about literary and literacy programming who is ready to take it on and really go beyond what they are currently doing, because there's so much potential here especially with the community. There are so many opportunities. The book festival could do so much more with the library; they could do so much more with CCSD. There are so many possibilities.

I want so many good things for Vegas, so many. This list could go on and on and on. But I feel like storytelling, connecting people through stories, improving just the sort of stage that literary or even visual arts programs get here, I feel like there's so much opportunity there. Storytelling also gets back to preserving our stories and the historical integrity of, say, neighborhoods and buildings and archive collections. For me it comes back to stories and ethical storytelling. Who's stories are we sharing? And why? If there is a way we could somehow elevate that and elevate Vegas with the individual stories and stories of the city, both macro and micro, I really do feel like it would change something in the fabric of this city for the better. I really do think that could be a strong suit. I feel like there are so many stories here, so many.

**Thank you. This is great.**

**[End of recorded interview]**