

Interview with the *El Paso Strong* Mural Artist Gabe Vasquez

Elvira Carrizal-Dukes

University of Texas at El Paso, on land of the Tigua and Mescalero people.¹

Fresh new paint sprang up across walls in the city of El Paso after a mass shooting killed 22 people. For mural artists like Gabe Vasquez, paint is a way of dealing with crises. For many writers like me, writing is our refuge, our form of expression. Some take to the streets; others also turn to their canvases and journals.

On the morning of August 3, 2019, I was driving toward the El Paso International Airport. Little did I know I was heading directly into the line of fire. I was on the highway, and a white truck behind me flashed its headlights and sounded an alarming siren. I thought the driver was a civilian wanting to get past me as we drove onto the Sunland Park exit going east. My first thought was that this was some sort of new trick or “outfitting” of a car, similar to those annoying loud mufflers. I thought to myself *this is the new loud muffler*.

As I passed downtown, speeding Border Patrol trucks were full speed ahead on the fast lane. I had never seen speeding *migra* trucks. And then as I got closer to Bassett center, I saw police vehicles at the entrances closing all exits. At this point, I knew something was wrong. As I got closer to the Airway airport exit, more police cars sped by. At that point, I received a text alert on my phone that warned El Pasoans to stay home because there was an active shooter in progress at Cielo Vista Mall. I immediately thought about my youngest brother, so I texted him. He confirmed that he was safe and that the shooting was all over the news. I got off at the Airway exit and arrived at the airport.

I was on my way out of town to visit an aunt I'd never met before and to go hiking with my dog and husband. God works in mysterious ways. The mass shooting and having to process the hate that caused it was something I needed to deal with carefully. I'm a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), a full-time Assistant Professor of Practice, and an Advisor for majors and minors. I'm also trying to meet deadlines writing graphic novels and plays. Needless to say, my life in recent years has increased my stress levels, and my mental and physical wellness has become a priority like never before. Looking back, hiking with my dog and husband alone in the forest is just what I would need to help me deal with the shock and pain of this tragedy. Reading all the breaking news and social media raised my anxiety levels.

When I arrived at the airport, the lady at the counter asked, "Did you hear what happened? There's a shooting at the mall." The way she asked was as if she was asking me if I'd seen the latest action film at the movie theatre or as if she was sharing gossip with me. She didn't understand why I didn't match her smile or enthusiasm, as if I was the one being a rude customer because I wasn't being friendly. Little did she know that inside my anxiety was increasing, and I just wanted to get out of there and back across town away from the chaos.

We all have different ways of dealing with tragedy. My way sent me into a downward spiral of introversion. I just wanted to hide inside the shell of my body to deal with my own emotions. I needed time to process what was happening and why. Hiking in the woods was my immediate outlet.

Before arriving to the forest, I encountered Coloradans at a dog park who asked me where I was from. When I said El Paso, a lady said, "Oh. I'm so sorry." The next day at a different dog park deeper into the forest, I encountered not so friendly stares. In the parking lot, I noticed vehicles with Pro-Trump bumper stickers. At breakfast, a white man told me to be careful out there. Suddenly, I had thoughts about my own safety.

I'm a brown woman. My husband is a Black man. I was the intended target of the mass shooter; my husband would have been a bonus. I wanted to go back home to El Paso. I felt unsafe. I had no way of knowing if the mass shooter was inspiring more like him, more killers of Mexicans – people who look like me. It felt too soon to be out in public. I didn't know what my face and skin color would trigger for others. I went further into the forest. I didn't mind getting lost in nature and disconnecting from social media. The anxiety was swelling, and I cried it out amongst the tall beautiful pine trees and breathed in the fresh air.

The people of El Paso immediately got to work in dealing with this tragedy. Everyone contributed in different ways. El Paso muralist Gabe Vasquez did what he

does best and got to work on paying tribute to the 22 victims in the racist terror attack at the Cielo Vista Walmart in El Paso. He spray-painted a wall for over 24 hours straight, working through the night, to finish the *El Paso Strong* mural quickly (Figure 1). The mural, located at 1011 N. Cotton Street, is now a historical landmark in El Paso.



Figure 1: The *El Paso Strong* mural at night. Ronnie Dukes photographer.

Dr. Isabel Baca, an Associate Professor at UTEP, reached out to me and asked if I'd be interested in interviewing the *El Paso Strong* mural artist for this publication, and for that invitation, I am grateful. I was enrolled in Dr. Baca's Community Literacy internship course, where we were learning about writing with, for, and about the community. Dr. Baca is the Director of the Rhetoric and Writing Studies doctoral program, where I am currently a doctoral candidate. My research focus is on Visual Rhetoric and Composition. I research Mex-Chicanx artists who advance marginalized voices through their artwork. I am also involved in the arts community in El Paso as a comic book author, playwright, filmmaker, and I teach art at the El Paso Museums of Art and History. In Dr. Baca's course my internship was with the El Paso Museum of Art working for their Education department. I also teach Chicana/o Cinema, Theatre, and the Roots of Latina/o Hip Hop at UTEP.

I knew I had to move quickly in getting an interview with Gabe Vasquez. He had been featured already in other articles discussing the *El Paso Strong* mural and the

tragic event that took place on August 3, 2019. I got in touch with Gabe through a student photographer at UTEP named Gaby Velasquez, whose photos are featured throughout this *LWRS* issue on recovery and transformation. I'm grateful to Gaby for her kindness in sharing her beautiful work with us and for putting me in contact with Gabe.

The evening I got in touch with Gabe, he mentioned he was getting ready to dive into a very hectic schedule, so the interview needed to happen that day.² I met Gabe that night at the KLAQ Haunted House where he was commissioned to paint giant glow-in-the-dark murals to add to the spooky environment and Halloween vibe. This atmosphere was the backdrop of our interview to describe the setting. I filmed Gabe in front of some of his murals. Because our meeting was last minute and because I didn't have a crew, I recruited my husband Ronnie Dukes to help me film the interview, so that I could focus on interviewing Gabe.

I truly enjoyed meeting and getting to know Gabe. I felt a genuine kinship with him, as if I was meeting a brother from another. I believe Gabe is truly a conscious artist. He wears his heart on his sleeve and on his art. I was moved by his mission to coach and inspire young people to better their lives. I hope this interview provides some insight and an artistic perspective of this horrific event that aimed to kill people of Mexican descent like Gabe and me.

So, without further delay, I present to you my interview with Gabe Vasquez. Videos of my interview are embedded in this text as links to YouTube so that readers have direct access to my recording. I edited the videos and added subtitles.

INTRODUCTION

ELVIRA: What is your name and background?

GABE: My name is Gabe Vasquez. I go by the name Grenade. In 2006 I was introduced to Robert Kasner a.k.a. Jaws who's no longer with us. He took me in like a coach and taught me so much. Introduced me to a bunch of people. I'm going to say the reason I'm good at graffiti letters is because of Jaws. Jaws introduced me to a guy named Gems. And Gems is the reason I'm doing all this. Because he taught me how to paint art. There's also a guy named Blast who taught me some things too. I'd say I'm a collaboration of all the legends in El Paso.

ELVIRA: What kind of art do you make? What is the genre of your art?

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GABE: I'd say that my art is from the soul. There's a lot of graffiti involved. What I do is what I like. It's who I am.



Video Link 1: [Click on image.](#)

ELVIRA: What is an important artist tool? What can't you live without in your studio?

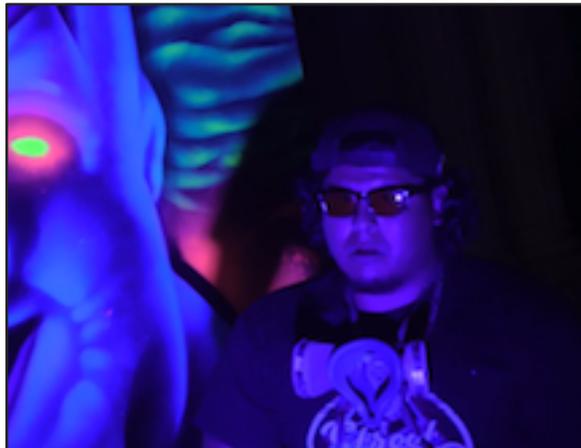
GABE: I like painting with paint brushes, but spray paint - I love it. There's certain caps that I like using. It's not the one this paint comes with. These little guys right here, there's different kinds. I got a whole thing. I'll show you. Honestly if I was in a studio, I'll be upset if I'm painting anything smaller than this. I really want to paint big canvases. Four by four feet at the smallest. Cuz I like to spray paint them. That's just what I love to do. I'm really good with a brush too. I went to school for it. Spray painting is where my heart is completely present.



Video Link 2: [Click on image.](#)

ELVIRA: When did you start making art?

GABE: I would say in 2006 when I met Jaws. He definitely brought out the artist in me, sent me to people who really brought it out. It's really hard for me to say. I'm stuck on 2006. I used to be in a rock band. I did wrestling for eight years. I started taking art seriously in college. I took spray-painting seriously the whole time I used it. When it came to art, more than just graffiti, I started taking it really serious in college. I went to Waldorf University in Iowa that's where I got a scholarship to wrestle. I was out there, and I was like, man, I haven't done any graffiti in a while. Just training hard. I was like I kinda want to do graffiti. I started doing business as my major. Then I switched it to graphic design. Then I switched it to Humanities with a Minor in Art. When I did that, I started going to the art classes. The teacher Christy Carlson, she pushed me hard. It's because she knew I was good. I just wanted to do graffiti. She would say hurry up and finish. I ended up doing nine murals at the college I went to. One in every department. I did a Marilyn Monroe in the theatre department. It was so cool. I was so about it. That's when I started taking art seriously. I was still a little minor at it. I didn't start getting like this until last year.



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ELVIRA: What are your words of wisdom for someone starting out in your field? For your future students...what words of wisdom?

GABE: It's the same thing I'll tell all my wrestlers. I know you guys have high hopes and big dreams...you want it all. Hey, I'm not going to tell you you can't have it. But you're going to lose so many times before you start winning. And when you start winning you need to remember and realize why you're winning. And what's working

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and do that only. It's gonna' be a while. You're new at this. I believe in you like crazy. Do you believe in you enough to commit? Because you're gonna' have to be in here first and you're gonna' have to be the last to leave. Every time. You're gonna' have to pour your heart out when you're losing. As if you're on top of the world winning. It is so challenging. You're gonna' get broken down in so many different ways. But if you can rebuild yourself, you'll come back stronger and harder to break. Just don't get discouraged by the losses. They're coming. I promise you. I still take some to this day. Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you react to it. So, you gotta' really really think about that. Decide where your heart's really at. Cuz it's gonna' hurt.



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Cont. Interview with the *El Paso Strong* Mural Artist Gabe Vasquez

Elvira Carrizal-Dukes

EL PASO STRONG

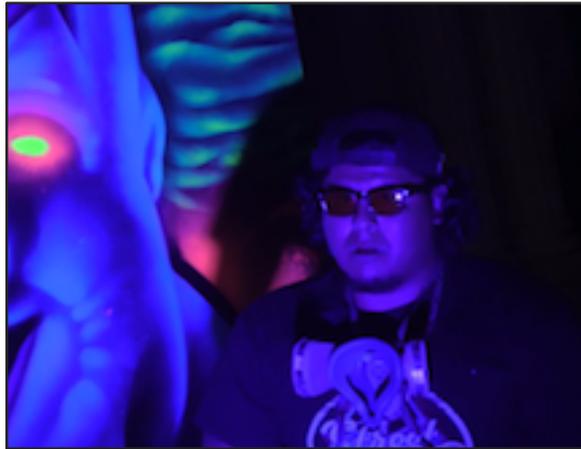


Figure 2: Gabe Vasquez and other artists working on mural.
Gaby Velasquez photographer.

ELVIRA: What inspired the El Paso Strong mural piece? What does this piece represent?

GABE: All right. I can't say that I was directly affected by the tragedy that happened. I wasn't so hyped to heal the community. The way it happened was that this dude that I know he had permission to paint that wall and do graffiti on it. Told me that if we do it right now in the heat of the moment, you're gonna' get a bunch of attention. He wanted to do it like the billboard, which is just white and orange El Paso Strong. I thought that was kinda lame. No offense to him, but that's just so simple. I was like

people died, bro. I'm trying to go hard for them. If this is about to be a memorial piece, I wanted to do them justice. I knew right off the bat what to do because that's just how I am. I'd like to say that somebody put that idea in my head. You know what, dude? Let's just do some simple letters and write El Paso Strong. And put the city inside of it. That's gonna' go hard. That's a lot. I was like I'll do it. I went out and bought some paint from the store. Went over there and started it. It didn't get real until I met people who were directly affected. I'm talking about a guy whose sister dropped to the floor to shield her baby. Broke the baby's arms. Got lit up and died with her husband. That one hit me the hardest. What a way to go out. Hearing all the stories. That put me on a mission. People started coming. It wasn't about the news. It was about people who were directly affected coming and bleeding their soul to me. Whoa, it means that much to you? Then I guess we gotta' kill it.



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ELVIRA: How does the El Paso Strong mural help with recovery and transformation?

GABE: Well with recovery I'm gonna' have to say that time heals all wounds. Recovery is also very based inside the mind. Because if you can't let it go, you're gonna' be hurt forever. But you don't have to be. As far as transformation goes... Well this city has definitely stepped up its security game. As a society, our own little thing going on, I just hope that it was an eye opener to people. It could have been any one of us. So, at any time you can go. It will be your turn. Are you even ready? If you're not, you need to get out there and get ready. I myself still can't die a happy person. I still feel like I got so much more to do. That's only gonna' happen through pushing myself. I have a lot of love for the people that passed. If you don't push yourself and really chase after

what your vision is, then you're never gonna' have a life that you want. That's what I want for everyone really. I feel like everyone chasing their desires. I feel like that uplifts our community as a whole. Improves everybody's life.



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ART PROCESS

ELVIRA: How did you make the mural? How did you know when the piece was finished?

GABE: This thing is how I do it. I know when I'm done when this thing (pointing to head) is quiet. Whenever you're painting a wall, if you don't step back a thousand times it's not a good job. You have to step back so many times. I've been doing this for fifteen years. I have a real good idea of what a solid mural looks like in my eyes. On top of that I have a friend who's my partner. His name is Dave Navarro. He's a very critical person too. Together we create all these things. He's who I've been doing all my El Paso Strong Murals with. If I can please that guy, then I know that my art is amazing. That's good. I did a good job. All right. Dave's quiet. Good.

ELVIRA: How did you meet Dave?

GABE: His brother's Gems. Gems the reason I can do this. A lot happened that day. I may have lost some friends who weren't really my friends. But not Dave because Dave's actually my friend. And he stood by my side when everyone left. We've been painting a lot. Even before that we've been painting. It brought us closer together. I'm really happy for that. Life is a lonely place.



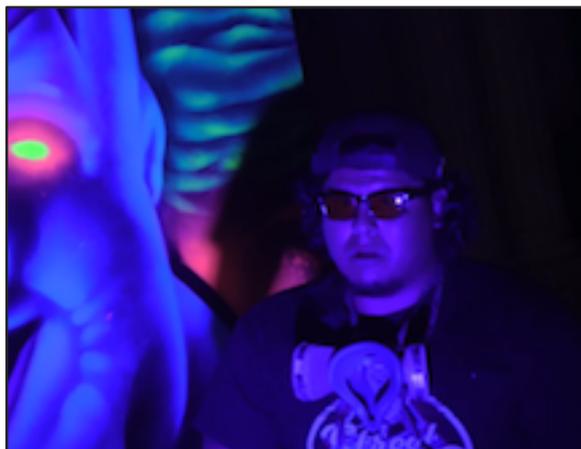
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HEALING THROUGH ART

ELVIRA: How does the El Paso Strong mural help us heal?

GABE: I'm gonna' be a future art teacher and wrestling coach in high school. In Texas you have to teach to coach. I love combat. I'm almost a black belt in a martial art. Inspiring others is what I love doing. It's kind of like, if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. But if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. That right there, to me that's what inspiration is all about. Through inspiration healing just happens. I'm not trying to distract everyone from what happened. I just hope that through the concept that we're pushing that is El Paso Strong, that people will remember it and remember everything we've been through. I'm hoping that how hard I'm trying... shows them exactly how I feel about what I want to do with my life. I'd like for all this to be what I do for the rest of my life. Coming from El Paso it's kind of hard. If I was in California, it would be gravy. But in El Paso, it's a little challenging. We're a good arts community. I'm hoping through all of this it inspires others to go out there and chase their dreams. Diligently. Super committed. Just do it. I have a lot of love for the people who were affected. I wish there was more I could do besides just painting pretty things. If I could at least put this El Paso Strong mural that means a whole movement that we have. It's like a mentality. Then that's cool because if it unifies the community just a little bit, if it uplifts it just a little bit, well then it was worth doing a thousand times.

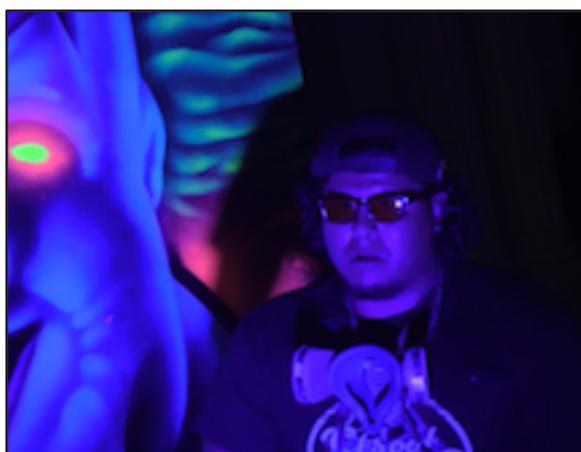
Interview with the *El Paso Strong* Mural Artist Gabe Vasquez



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ELVIRA: How do you see the role of artists?

GABE: I got a good one for you. Have you ever heard that a picture is worth a thousand words? Maybe more. I kind of feel an artist is a voice for people. And hopefully what they do impacts society positively. Don't get me wrong I like to write my name on everything. I do graffiti. If I can help people become inspired through what I do, present positive messages through symbolism. Uplifting the community is big deal to me. My role to me as an artist, is to inspire others, uplift them, inspire them through the things that I do. As far as community goes, I feel this way everywhere I go. It's about humanity really. Humanity is so much bigger than society at large. It's everybody. Everything. I'd like to be a positive source of inspiration to everyone. I'd rather uplift everyone everywhere. I'd rather just empower everyone everywhere that I go. I'm all about that. I really am.



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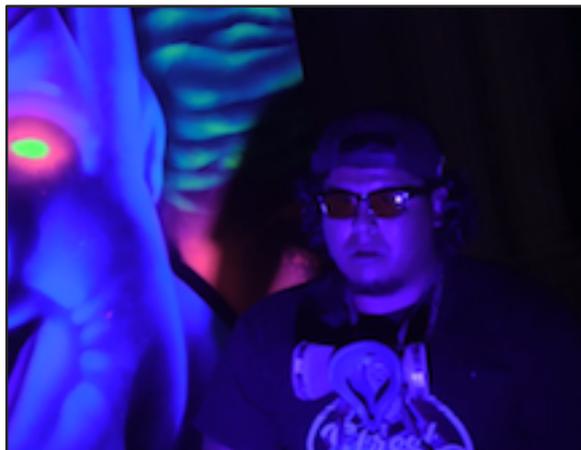
Cont. Interview with the *El Paso Strong* Mural Artist Gabe Vasquez

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CHALLENGES FOR ARTISTS

ELVIRA: What are some of the obstacles and challenges you've encountered as an artist?

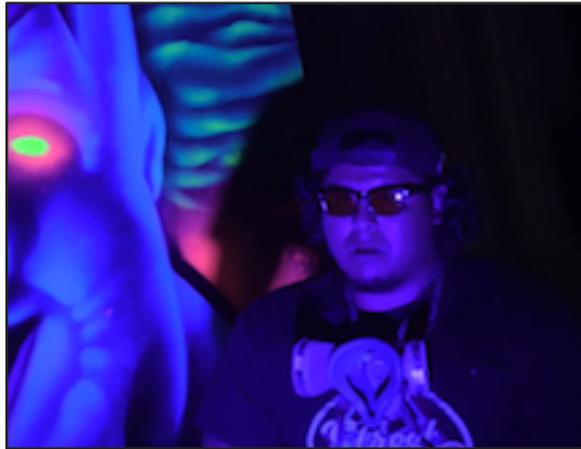
GABE: I can describe it in a metaphor. This city is like a bucket full of crabs. Stepping on each other trying to get to the top and get out. And it's not cool because we can all make it in whatever we do. There's no need to hate on anybody. Me for instance, I'm not doing this for the attention, fame or money. I'm real serious about doing art for my life as a career. I'm real serious about being a very very high pedigree art teacher. I'm covered in tattoos. Any high school I go to is going to think twice about me. If I have a really gnarly background, I'm in. And then I can make some real noise in the community. Helping people get better at being themselves. Really, I'd like to just eliminate the hate. No matter what you do, you're not the only one here doing it. If you're the best, good for you. You don't have to act like it. If we're all a big team, then imagine how much easier those obstacles are removed. It's a big thing. The hate in this city is pretty real. Envy and all that stuff. If we were all El Paso Tribe, then we're gonna' go places fast. No one's gonna' have to worry about anything except pushing themselves. To be worth it.



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ELVIRA: What impact do you think that commercialism and the media has had on your work? Is this good or bad?

GABE: Well it's really cool, but a lot of people say ah, you're going to be a sellout. I would love nothing more than to be on Team Red Bull, Team Mountain Dew, Team Montana. And just promote everything. Because I think it's really cool. What was someone's dream to be when they started to play guitar? To be a rock star, right? I don't see what else you'd do with that. It's just really cool when you can engage in that segment of this game. There's the quality that's number one to me. There's the technique that's number one also. Exposure and what you can do with it that's a big thing too. I'm not trying to be a reckless person and be famous. If I was gonna' be well known, I'd like it to be positive, uplifting. That way I'm not a bad guy.

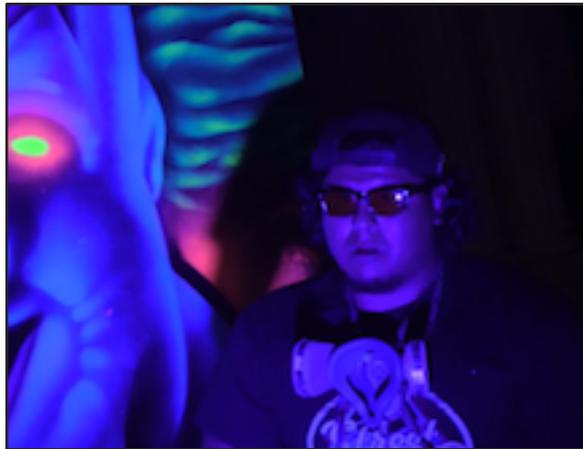


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ELVIRA: Can you talk about how do artists survive? How do you make a living? If there's a message you could give to people in El Paso who want art, what would you say?

GABE: There's degrees to it because if you want something simple then you might get it cheap. But if you want something like this, you're gonna have to break the bank. Everyone has cute ideas they want to have done. When they try to get it done, they find out how much it actually costs to do it. That's when their ideas aren't cute anymore. If you want someone really good, you're gonna' have to pay up for it. Not because we think we're so amazing we gotta' charge for everything. No. What you're paying for is my fifteen years of blood, sweat, and tears. My family just started having hope in me. So, you're paying for a lot. No one's just born able to do this. Art is not

something you're born with. You weren't born with the soul of an artist. You earned it through hard work. I went to school at Hanks. My wrestling coach, Coach Carter, has a great saying. Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard. I don't know if you guys think that some people are special, they're not. They just work really hard. There are some people gifted but if they don't work hard, they're not going far. So that's the thing when pricing art. The difference is going to the mall for clothes or going to Goodwill for clothes. What do you want? Name brand? Super amazing. Go to the mall. You might find some cool things at the Goodwill, but you went there cuz it's cheap. And you got hand me downs that are worn. So, it's just what you want. That's the thing that people don't understand. I hate it when they think we're gonna' do it for exposure cuz I don't need any of that.



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CONCLUSION

Putting this work together and writing this piece, months after this tragedy occurred has provided me an opportunity to further process the aftermath. We now know that the killer was indeed driven by bigotry, hate, racism, and white supremacy emboldened by the current President of the United States of America. However, even more infuriating, the shooter, who acted like he was brave driving over ten hours from Allen, Texas to El Paso, acted cowardly pleading not guilty.

As a playwright, I also had the opportunity to participate in the El Paso Strong evening of short plays by El Paso Playwrights. This special event was presented by the Dramatists Guild and the UTEP Department of Theatre and Dance and led by the amazing award-winning playwright Georgina Escobar, a Visiting Professor of Practice

at UTEP. I used this writing opportunity to try and wrestle with the bigger issues that led to this hate crime and act of terrorism. It made me think about the ideologies that exist that spawn this sort of violence and hate in our society and that goes on to shape individuals to do such a thing.

In a course I teach, *The Roots of Latina/o Hip Hop*, my students and I discuss Robert Moses, known as a “master-builder” in the City of New York, whose own racist beliefs and actions led to the further destruction of people of color, especially Blacks and Latinx in the Bronx. I based the main character, *El Billonario* (The Billionaire), of my short play on Robert Moses. To me, he represents a corrupt politician with white supremacy motivations to uplift white people and further marginalize people of color. I also wrote the short play as a challenge given by the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel who had just visited UTEP and gave a playwriting workshop that I participated in. The challenge she gave us was to write a play based on a profile on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. The assignment was to pick a character who disrupts our assumptions of people based on race, class, and gender.

I found a white male character on the list with the build of a fireman and the look of a corporate-looking white man who I perceived we would normally see in positions of power. In my play, *El Billonario* is a powerful businessman who acts like a politician, but his wealth is what gives him so much power over major decisions being made in the City of El Paso. I wanted to illustrate a dominant force actively advancing the quality of life for white people and corporate entities, while completely ignoring and destroying the lives of marginalized communities and people of color. In writing the play, I was also inspired by an analysis a colleague gave, offering criticism of those who say they are surprised by acts of hate and violence. I believe I understood her message as saying that if you’re surprised by the existence of racism and white supremacy, then you’re choosing to ignore the reality of the experiences and history of people of color. If you chose to be ignorant of and to the experiences of those less fortunate in your community, then you too help to pull the trigger, unleashing the spray of bullets that kills innocent victims who live regular lives buying school supplies on a beautiful, sunny Saturday in the safest city in America – El Paso, Texas.

I stand with my fellow artist and my spiritual brother Gabe Vasquez when he says that *El Paso Strong* is a message to the world that we are a strong community that will rise above the terror unleashed on our beloved *Chuco*. If anything, this tragedy only makes us stronger. El Paso’s artists are just getting started in a renewed movement to empower, raise awareness, and uplift and heal our community.

Endnotes

1. Land acknowledgement – Shepherd, J. P. (2019, March). "Indigenous El PASO": How the Humanities help us SEE El Paso as a native place. Retrieved March 21, 2020, from <https://humanitiescollaborative.utep.edu/project-blog/indigenous-el-paso-how-the-humanities-help-us-see-el-paso-as-a-native-place>
2. This interview took place on Friday, September 20, 2019 in El Paso, Texas.

Embedded Video URL Links

Link 1: <https://youtu.be/XKop-v0uogA>

Link 2: <https://youtu.be/dGvJBO3VvJE>

Link 3: <https://youtu.be/xJH1gXinlbo>

Link 4: <https://youtu.be/eE5n-K8ai3U>

Link 5: <https://youtu.be/jQpx2VLPiKE>

Link 6: <https://youtu.be/DGpa8ocGEts>

Link 7: https://youtu.be/r4_9jLG8PJs

Link 8: <https://youtu.be/JH7XlCxIzPE>

Link 9: <https://youtu.be/LGVxnuvSUsI>

Link 10: <https://youtu.be/bHNfhsOL5EM>

Link 11: <https://youtu.be/qc9Sy7IEhnY>

Link 12: <https://youtu.be/12vZb2atOVA>

About the Author

Elvira Carrizal-Dukes is a Doctoral Degree Candidate in the Rhetoric and Composition program at UTEP where she is also Assistant Professor of Practice and an Academic Advisor for Chicana/o Studies. Elvira earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in Journalism, Chicano Studies, and Theatre Arts, and she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Film from Columbia University in New York City. Elvira was born in El Paso, Texas and raised in Chaparral, New Mexico. She is the author of graphic novels, plays, and films. Her Japanese graphic novel *A.W.O.L.* exhibited at Tokyo Comic Con in 2018. For more information about Elvira's work, please visit <http://www.dukescomics.com>.



Figure 3: Religious items placed outside of the Walmart to memorialize the victims.

Photograph by Gaby Velasquez.