

**Interview with Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez**

**Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez** is an unrepentant border crosser, ex-dj, writer, painter, and academic. He teaches Creative Writing and Hispanic Southwest Literatures and Cultures in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of New Mexico, and has also taught and lectured at the University of Iowa, Penn State, the Universidad de Salamanca, the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, the Universidad Pompeu Fabra, and at Texas A&M University. Author of three collections of short stories, *Algún día te cuento las cosas que he visto* (2012), *Luego el silencio* (2014), *One Day I'll Tell You the Things I've Seen* (2015). His literary work has been published in anthologies in Spain, Italy, Latin America and the United States. In this interview he talks about his writing, what inspired him, and what he believes is unique about a Latin@ author.

**Q:** *At what age did you understand that you would become a creative writer? Was there any incident or incidents that inspired you?*

**SVV:** Recently, I was reading an essay by a writer I admire, Haruki Murakami, and he writes that he knew he was going to be a writer after attending a baseball game. He was in his 20s, I believe. In my case, I don't know if there is a specific incidence or an age at which I knew I would become a creative writer. I grew up in a family of storytellers, and I remember as a child my aunts and uncles in Mexicali sitting around the kitchen table telling stories, about family, about people in the neighborhood, about friends. Often they would start telling ghost stories, stories they had heard about things they heard had happened to friends or family. But it was more than simple gossip or ghost stories, really. In their telling they were bringing that person back into existence, they were acknowledging their presence and they were giving weight to a life. At the same time, I was also an avid reader of everything that I could get a hold of. I taught myself to read in Spanish so I could read comic books. But even before knowing how to read in English or Spanish, I was always

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looking at comic books and imagining the stories that were contained. When I learned to read, then, a whole other world was opened for me. I spent a lot of time in the school library and at the public library in town, reading. Reading; reading; reading. That was my education as a writer, being a reader and a listener of my family's stories. In my early teens I discovered Stephen King, and I was hooked. His stories reminded me in many ways of the scary stories I had heard as a child. When I was in high school, I picked up John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, and that book, like Stephen King before, changed my life. Maybe it was there that I decided I wanted to be a writer. His stories of upper middle class life in the northeastern US offered a vastly different vision of life than I was exposed to: I grew up in a rural town in northern California, surrounded by olive orchards and orange groves. My summers were spent right across the US/Mexico border, in Mexicali, capital of the state of Baja California. For me, his stories were almost magical realism, I couldn't imagine what that lifestyle was like. Years later, when I went to Boston and New York City for the first time, I began to understand Irving's work more. After Irving and Vonnegut, I moved into Latin American literature through *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, another book, like *The World According to Garp*, composed of stories.

**Q:** *Can you remember anything about your first attempts at writing? What did you want to write about and why?*

**SVV:** My first attempts at writing were the results of my reading interests: science fiction and fantasy. I have this theory that when you're young, you make a decision to either become a reader of detective fiction or a reader of science fiction and fantasy. Though I occasionally read mysteries, especially Agatha Christie, when I was a teenager I was decidedly in the fantasy/sci-fi camp. When I was around 11, I first read Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy. That series blew my mind. I think now that what attracted me to the genre was because it was so far removed from my daily reality, a reality filled with tragedy, violence, and horror. My father was abusive to my mom, my mother — trapped in a relationship defined by violence — responded with violence to me. We laugh about it now, but it was a pretty dreadful time in my life, it was the years when fear kept me in

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its grip. Escaping into a world of magic and quests was my retreat. When I was thirteen, my mother finally found the strength to leave my father, which pushed us into a precarious economic situation compounded by the fact that my sister got cancer a few months later. I spent the next couple of years sleeping on a cot beside my sister whenever she was in the hospital. Fantasy and sci-fi became even more of a lifeline. In college, I became an art major and spent most of my years either painting in the studio, or at the university punk rock radio station where I became a DJ. That terror and fear that held me remained. Writing, like painting, became my release. But I wasn't painting fantasy scenes — I used to often draw stuff like that in high school — or writing stories of wizards and dragons. My stories were about young punk rockers who watched too much TV, read too many comic books, and went to concerts. People like me. I lived for a year in Mexico City, when I was 21 and I began to read a lot more in Spanish, especially the work of Juan Rulfo and Juan José Arreola. From Rulfo, I got a love for sparse narration with an air of mystery, of potential tragedy, and sadness. From Arreola, I got a love for compact stories. For me, writing is all about editing, reducing, constantly reducing a story as much as possible. When I returned from Mexico, I tried to write stories that had more magical realist elements, but I soon realized that the magical elements were taking over too much of the story. What I wanted was to tell a story that happened to have some kind of strange — possibly magical — element, but one that would remain completely logical for that story. Upon my return from Mexico, I also discovered that the type of stories I was interested in was not what was considered “Chicano” at the time. Reviewing contemporary writers, I discovered that Chicano literature was either about growing up in the barrio, or working in the fields. I have very little fieldwork experience, and I didn't grow up in a barrio, but rather in a rural community. I admire both types of stories, but they couldn't be mine because they were not my experiences. After being told a number of times that my stories were good, but not “Chicano,” I stopped writing. It wasn't until near the end of grad school that I began to write again, but this time in Spanish. And the questions that were asked were not why it wasn't Chicano, but how it was that a writer who grew up in English, would suddenly start writing in Spanish.

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**Q:** *What was your first published work? Do you have a favorite piece? If so, why?*

**SVV:** My first published creative work in a major book was a short story called “Ella está allí” that came out in 1999, in an anthology in Spain, *Líneas aéreas*. Before that, I had published a couple of stories in independent literary journals. The story in *Líneas aéreas*, however, changed my life from one focused on being a scholar with a secret writer side, to a writer who also does scholarly work. From 1999 to 2014, I published many stories in anthologies and journals, in 2012, I published a small chapbook of stories, *Algún día te cuento las cosas que he visto*, and then in 2014, an independent press out of Miami, Florida, published a collection of my stories, *Luego el silencio*. The majority of the stories had been previously published and were adapted for the collection. In 2015, the University of New Mexico Press published my first book in English, *One Day I’ll Tell You the Things I’ve Seen*. The majority of those stories were originally written in Spanish and I self-translated them. Of the stories I’ve published, I probably have two favorites, “Ella está allí” and “Algún día te cuento las cosas que he visto.” The first is a favorite because it represented a change in my life. Oddly, I’ve never translated that story. “Algún día te cuento las cosas que he visto” is also a favorite because it has appeared in Spanish, Italian, and in English. Its first publication is in Italian, when it appeared in an anthology of Chicano short stories. It then came out in Spanish when it served as the titular story of my first chapbook. Its translation into English, “One Day I’ll Tell You the Things I’ve Seen,” became the title of my most recent collection of short stories.

**Q:** *Now you’ve established yourself as a writer, would you consider yourself as an academic who writes, or a writer who works in academe? Is there any difference between the two?*

**SVV:** Now I consider myself a writer who is also a scholar. For me, the distinction lies in where my heart lies. When I was in grad school, I decided to become a scholar who had a secret life as a writer, because I discovered that creating art was looked down upon in a department like Spanish, where our worth was defined by our skills at analysis and close reading. I don’t believe that creative writing doesn’t use analysis or close reading, in fact, those skills I learned as a grad student — especially in the

areas of conducting research — have aided me a lot in my work as a writer. At the same time, I work hard to write creatively in a manner that does not seem like I'm doing literary analysis or cultural activism. That is, first and foremost for me is telling a story that can open a discussion about topics of border crossing, migration, violence, or economic inequality without coming off as if I were writing a manifesto.

**Q:** *What inspires you to continue writing?*

**SVV:** My inspiration as a writer comes from the stories that I hear when I'm out. For years I resisted writing stories that could come off as autobiographical. I have read too many interviews with writers of color in the United States who are asked about their work as if it were simple memoir. For a long time I found that type of questioning almost offensive as it seemed to give the impression that we could only tell stories that were lifted directly from our lives. I would often ask myself why white writers like Updike or Irving weren't getting those types of questions, as if it were more believable that a white writer could simply create a fiction. Lately, however, I've rethought my stance on the issue. Writing is a magic trick. Telling a story in some ways is an invitation to create a bond with a reader, it's an invitation to bring a reader into a different world that is opened up by the text. If we, as writers, then, can create a work that appears to be so believable that the reader is forced to question whether the work is autobiographical — or how autobiographical it is — then we have "tricked" the reader. We have led the reader to believe in an illusion that we have created. One of my favorite responses to the question of the writer of color as memoirist is one that Junot Díaz gives when he is asked about how much of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is real. His response is that the only part of the book that is real is the part about the talking mongoose.

**Q:** *This issue of JAST is about Latin@ Studies. Do you consider yourself a Latin@ writer? If so, why? If not, why?*

**SVV:** As a US Latino, I do consider myself a Latin@ writer who writes as a Chican@, a member of the Mexican-American community in the United States. As a writer of color, I think it's important to recognize your community, to give props to that community that shaped you. I was

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born a Mexican in the United States, my parents crossed the border a few months before I was born. I grew up in a farming community in northern California that had a large Mexican immigrant population. We would go to church on Sunday in Spanish, when we went out to parties or to visit friends, it was to Mexican households or fiestas. My first language was Spanish. I learned English when I started school, and then I became a Mexican American. I spoke English at school, and Spanish at home. Soon, I began to mix my two languages, because that seemed natural for someone living in two languages. When I got to university, I became a Chicano. That was an important step in my process of self-identification. Though I was born too late to participate in the activist portions of the Chicano Movement of the late 60s and early 70s, I'm a product of that movement. Because of the Chicano Movement, I was able to go through bilingual education, I was able to maintain my two tongues, and I was able to take classes on Chicano literature from Chicano/Latino faculty in college. To deny all that would be to deny a core part of my self.

**Q:** *Do you prefer to write in English or Spanish these days? Why?*

**SVV:** These days I switch between Spanish and English. When I first started publishing in Spanish, I kept my academic work in English. For me, English was my rational language, and Spanish was my creative tongue. However, after I started receiving invitations to read in English, this self-imposed language border began to dissolve. Now I feel like I have two, possibly three with Spanglish, toolboxes at my disposal. If a story is not working in Spanish, I'll try to work it out in English. It's important for me to also continue writing in Spanish as I wish to continue in a tradition of creative writing in Spanish by Latin@ authors like Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Tomás Rivera, and Miguel Méndez. But also, I wish to demonstrate that as Latin@s in the United States, we have multiple languages at our disposal, and that we should be able to use our particular brand of US Spanish as a creative language too.

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**Q:** *Do you think that creative writing can also be political? If so, why? If not, why?*

**SVV:** Definitely. The act of creating art is always going to be a political act. Andy Warhol, in silk screening a Campbell's soup can onto a canvas and placing it in an art gallery is a political act that speaks about mass consumption, and mass culture. By writing stories about a Chican@ middle class, or Chican@s who travel, is a political act in that I'm showing the diversity of the Mexican American experience, and that many acts of trying to keep our community down — closing off access to education, demonizing the community as criminals, denying the history and presence of Mexican Americans in the United States — are doomed to failure. We are here, and we are staying.

**Q:** *If you were giving advice to someone starting a writing career, what would it be?*

**SVV:** My first piece of advice would be to read. Read as much as possible. Read everything. Following that, write. Write as if your life depended on it.