

# Justin Lucero

## Narrative Essay

I am grateful for the opportunity to submit myself for consideration to participate in the NLI. At this point in my career and at this moment in our nation, I have never been more aware of my heritage and intersectional identity, nor more committed to my responsibility -- and the honor -- of positive Latinx cultural expression and promotion. I have relatively recently become Artistic Director of El Paso Opera and I am dedicated to making a shift where we leverage our privilege as a high-profile community cultural organization to better serve the larger majority-minority population, as well as position our regional institution as a national leader in Latinx artist support and opportunity. The NLI's many objectives would help me advance these goals, especially in the area of how to articulately communicate and contextualize the frameworks and awareness of Latinx cultural expression and policy.

I believe a leader must balance being a visionary and being a practical executor of vision. The most effective leaders are forward-thinking and lifelong learners. And they are selfless and inclusive. In many ways I am confident in my leadership abilities, such as in the areas of creativity, strategy, flexibility and attention to detail and big picture. But I recognize several key categories of practical knowledge and skills that the NLI can help me to develop, particularly in such topics as policy, data, and cultural nuance.

As Artistic Director of El Paso Opera, I am chiefly responsible for message crafting, program development and season planning. In the past few seasons I have programmed work that meets the expectations of a producing opera company, while still keeping true to my diversity, equity, inclusion and artistic philosophies. For example, in building my creative team for my first mainstage production, I recruited only women in the leadership roles of conductor/music director, chorusmaster, concertmaster, and choreographer. I then programmed *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, a culturally/thematically significant "mariachi opera," for our celebratory 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary season. I crafted my own adaptation of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in a multilingual manner -- our Papageno spoke the dialogue completely in Spanish, a major departure from tradition, and a major success and crowd-pleaser. I have made major adjustments toward greater accessibility in terms of alternative venues, aesthetic, and most importantly, ticket prices. And I have committed the company to participate in the national 2020-2021 Jubilee season of presented work by artists of traditional marginalized communities. We will be presenting Rodríguez' *Frida*, and we will launch our first annual "Giving Voice" initiative, where we invite a Latinx opera singer to spend a week in our community providing student masterclasses, community panel conversations, and a recital on the

stage of The Chamizal National Memorial. "Giving Voice" is one of two ways our company is officially responding to the August 3, 2019 Walmart shooting tragedy, which targeted Latinos specifically. The second is our co-commission of a new composition by Jorge Martín, a 23-minute requiem, one minute for each life lost in the tragedy. These initiatives are indicative of the core values that drive my work and teaching (I am also Assistant Professor of Directing at the top-ranked School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon University, where I am among the single-digit Hispanic members of the faculty). In the next five years, I hope that the direction of my organization and my work is firmly aimed toward national recognition and respect of my/our championing of underrepresented voices in the performing arts, especially Latinx voices. And I believe I am/we are well-positioned to achieve it. Not only geographically -- we are the largest bi-national community in the world, at the intersection of Texas, New Mexico and Mexico -- but also in our Board's, donors', and community's faith and support of my ideals and values. But the skills and networking that the NLI can provide, should I be fortunate to be among this year's fellows, will help me learn how best to be a servant to these ideals and values and the community.

In terms of describing a recent professional success and an overcome career challenge, I will use the same instance: As with every performing arts organization, we are struggling to navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic situation. As a leader, it pains me to know just how well music can help a community cope, *and* that performing artists are out of work. I was committed to find an innovative way to do our part to address both these issues, and created what we are calling #CurbsideOpera. We fashioned a mobile stage with amplifier and microphone on the back of a pickup (very Texas!) that we drive to various neighborhoods for free pop-up opera concerts. It helps us to reach out to our faithful, as well as new, supporters, especially the elder generations, and helps us give our roster of singers a chance to perform and get paid. A particular challenge has been the pandemic-specific restrictions that I have needed to become well-versed in in order to best lead. The initiative, which will be expanded to include nursing homes and medical centers, has been very well-received thus far and aligns perfectly with the values of our organization.

In closing, the NLI's stated goals seem practically tailor-made for my present personal and career needs. But beyond such valuable practical issues as leadership, policy and culture, it is the cohort and network of people that I find of particular value. I grew up in El Paso, where most of the people in my life were like me. But since my career over the last ten years has led me all across the country, I am now very aware that Latinx voices and positions of leadership are woefully slight (that is, statistically, not impactfully, of course). It has taken me several years to shift my thinking, reorient my mindset, and focus and articulate my wider-picture values. I feel I am now in a place where I can best receive all that a program like the NALAC Leadership Institute so richly offers.