

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz



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SPEAKERS

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz, Eleonora Anedda



Eleonora Anedda 00:04

Today is the 17th of March, 2022. My name is Eleonora Anedda, and I'm working as an oral historian for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I am in Sardinia, Italy on a Zoom call with Victoria. Victoria, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining the school from?



Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 00:24

Hello, my name is Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz. I am located in Oak Cliff, Dallas, Texas. These are lands that are indigenous to the Wichita, Cado, [Kikapoo, and Tawakoni. Comanche and Kiowa have also lived in this region although it was not often recognized as their homeland.]



Eleonora Anedda 00:40

Perfect, thank you. So just to start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?



Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 00:48

Yeah, is there any specific topic you're looking for, or just general?



Eleonora Anedda 00:53

Just general, whatever comes to mind, whatever feels important to you.



Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 00:58

So I'm a person who is multi-ethnic. And so my mom's family is Mexican-American, Tejano, and

I'm from West Dallas, one of the barrios of Dallas. And my dad is a biracial person who was adopted by my grandparents, who are White people of Irish and German descent. And growing up and going back and forth between Oak Cliff, West Dallas, where my mom and I lived, and then where my maternal family lived, and then visiting my dad in Richardson in Carrollton, that's where his family lives, I saw a really big disparity in my family members' experiences, the access to amenities that they had, quality of health care differences, quality of public resources, like the library that my dad took me to in Carrollton was much more well-kept, and had a wider variety of books in their children's library than the one that was in West Dallas or in Oak Cliff.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 02:17

And as a child, I didn't really understand, "Why are my family members' experiences so different?" It was really confusing for me, and I don't think it was something that my parents knew was on the radar for me as much, so it wasn't properly explained. Now it informs a lot of the work that I do as someone who does organizing or community advocacy work, because those disparities are by design. And they are something that we can combat, but it's because of White supremacy in our society, ultimately. But like I said, it really informs a lot of the work that I do now. As a child, not really feeling considered whole by various family members, because I was multi-ethnic, being put under like a microscope a lot. I don't speak Spanish, and so my mom's family would make fun of me for that. But then whenever I was with my dad's family, they would talk about 401ks and stuff that I was just like, "What? What is that?" It was interesting feeling othered in places that should have been safe for me.

E

Eleonora Anedda 03:49

And so related to that, do you remember the first time where you entered a space—and when I say space, I mean people that you felt comfortable with that understood?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 04:08

Yeah, I think for me, that was my friend groups in elementary, middle, and high school, and college. I've been very blessed and lucky to have found people who vibrate on the same wavelength. In college, moving from Oak Cliff, I went to Townview, the JBS [Judge Barefoot Sanders] Law Magnet because I swore I wanted to be an attorney, and it helped me realize that I, in fact, did not want to be an attorney. They set me up with various internships, and I got to intern at a courthouse and a probate law firm and a tax law firm. And it just, over and over again, I was like, "Yeah, I don't like this. This isn't for me." But it was a great experience nonetheless. But through that, I found some really great friends, and we went on to the University of North Texas [UNT] in Denton together.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 05:00

And it was such a blessing to have them because even though I am White, and I've been around White people before because of my family members, whenever I went to UNT - and UNT, mind you, is a pretty diverse college, considering other schools in Texas. But I went there

and I was just like, "Wow, where are the Black people?" Because going to a DISD [Dallas Independent School District] School that was located in Oak Cliff, it was predominantly Latinx and Black students. And I was just like, "There's hardly any people here." And that was a little tough, working through that, and feeling a little out of place. But again, because of that core friend group I had, it made college so much better for me. So I've been able to wayfind to my group of people that have made me feel very at home and at peace within myself and wherever I might be.

E

Eleonora Anedda 06:14

And has your relationship with your family changed now that you're older?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 06:22

That's a good question. I think now I more so buy into the chosen family idea. So basically, my friend groups. I love my family a lot, but there are just a lot of differences there, and I think misunderstanding. Some of it is chalked up to politics, religion, cultural practice, cultural misunderstanding. But I love them. And yeah, I ultimately wish them all the best. But my chosen family are people that understand a lot of the things that are important to me already, so I don't have to reiterate it and constantly explain or teach. Because of the work that I do, I do a lot of teaching already. And so for me to continuously do that all the time, and for people who might not want to learn. You have your realm of control, and you operate within it.

E

Eleonora Anedda 07:27

Yeah, absolutely. I understand. It's one thing when someone comes to you, and they want to learn, but if they're not open for it, just doesn't - not good. Oh gosh, did I forget the question that I wanted to ask? Yeah, I completely forgot. Well, anyway who do you consider to be a mentor? Is there a person that has guided you over the years, or someone that you look up to?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 08:00

Yeah, I feel like recently, my mentors have been Eva Arreguin of the De Colores collective and podcast. She is an advocate in the arts and equity space and a cultural creator and a voice for justice. And I love her so much, and I consider myself so lucky to have her as a friend, and someone that I can go to for advice. I also think of Vicki Meek. She still is an arts administrator and artist, but she was the - I'm having a hard time thinking of the title. We have different cultural centers here in Dallas, and she was the manager or ED of a cultural center in South Dallas. And the impact that that had on our city was very great. She really is a voice for people who have been historically disinvested from. And she's also part of the reason that I was placed on a Arts Commission here in Dallas, and I'm just so grateful for that experience because it taught me a lot about the way that Dallas operates, the city of Dallas. And I learned a lot from that experience and have since left the Commission but continue to use that to inform some of my other experiences.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 09:39

Also Priscilla Rice. Priscilla Rice was also on the Commission with me, and Priscilla has her hands in just about everything. Her work ethic is just insane. That's coming from me, someone who works really, really hard, but she just is on another level. Priscilla is a poet, actress, arts administrator. She does language equity, so she translates for DISD is her employer, but she's amazing. And she's from Pleasant Grove. I'm married. My partner Mesach is from Pleasant Grove, another barrio of Dallas, and Priscilla lives in Pleasant Grove as well. And so she actually officiated my and Mesach's vow renewal for our five year wedding anniversary, and oh my gosh, I cried whenever I first heard her poem, because she is just so eloquent and beautifully-hearted, and I love her so much. But also my mom. My mom is an artist and retired educator within the ISD. She taught pre-k at Gabe Allen in West Dallas and then Martinez in West Dallas, and she's just been monumental in my own cultivation and identity and being a lifelong learner. I'm constantly learning because of the way that she taught me to.

E

Eleonora Anedda 11:19

I love that, thank you for sharing all of this. And I remember the question that I had for you. I wrote that down. But now that you were talking about life learning, I was wondering, is there a book or a piece of art or anything that comes to mind that was really or is still really important to you that maybe you want to share?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 11:48

Oh yeah.

E

Eleonora Anedda 11:50

You can take your time. It's a big question.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 11:53

No, it is. Oh, so I am not a very good reader. I wish that I was better about really making time for reading. But I recently just took a self-care trip to Mexico, and I took this book with me, and it is Dream Play Build by James Rojas. In one of my capacities, I am a co-founder of an urban planning nonprofit called Rayo Planning. We advocate for fair and affordable housing free of environmental hazards. We have four core offerings: community education, community planning, direct advocacy, and reforming city planning. And James has built a model of community planning engagement that has really inspired my co-founders, Jennifer Rangel and Evelyn Mayo. And what that looks like is basically you have a bunch of little knickknacks and doodads that are not blocks or streets or trees, because it helps the learner really be creative. I'm only maybe a fourth of the way through, but something in his book that he talks his talks about is as we age, our creativity and brain function really changes, and we become less open to new ideas and get set in our ways sometimes. And so this is something that starting off community visioning sessions with something that invokes play and fun helps send signals to the parts of our brain that are built for creativity, are built for making new connections.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 13:47

And so anyway, you get a sheet of paper, and you grab these little doodads and knickknacks, and you build your ideal world, your ideal community. And it's so much fun, because you'll see all these random objects together, and then each person is able to stand up, say, "Oh, I'm Victoria. I'm from here. This is the name of my proposed community, and these are the assets that it has." And it's so fun to see how people vision and build versus how they express that. And I just really, really enjoy it because I think it's something that makes urban planning approachable and really accessible to anyone, at any age, at any cycle, from any background, because urban planning hasn't been accessible in the past. So I would say that that's the book that is really resonating with me right now.

E

Eleonora Anedda 14:50

Wonderful, that's really interesting. So the question that I wanted to ask earlier was, you talked about religion a little bit when you were talking about your family, and so I was wondering if you grew up around religion, and if that impacted the work that you do, or it informs in some way the work that you do today?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 15:20

Yeah. So I was christened at Santa Clara Church in West Dallas. Is it Santa Clara? I'll double check. But I was christened in the Catholic Church as a baby, and I didn't know what was going on, but my mom did that as an act of love, because she was Catholic, she grew up Catholic. I'll say that my mom - I personally don't know Spanish because my mom went to a private Catholic school, and she was hit for speaking Spanish. And then when my mom would go home to my grandmother, my wela, my grandma would ask her to teach her English because my wela was Spanish-speaking, and she wanted to learn English, so that way, she could speak better in her work. And so my mom's Spanish, she's always considered to be, quote unquote, "broken." And she didn't want to teach me her Spanish because of that. And so my Spanish is even worse than her Spanish. And that's something that I feel like the Catholic Church is just -it's coming up as a symptom of a greater problem within our society, which is racism.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 16:42

But even though my mom experienced that she's still felt a deep connection and wanted to protect me in having me christened. Beyond that, I'll say whenever I lived with my wela, up until I was five-ish, I would go to Catholic mass with her. I remember it being fun, because whenever they would do their prayers, they would pull out the little bench in front of them. And I remember that being fun for me, because I could pull it out and kneel. And I wasn't getting a message from it at all, but that's what I understood. That was the part that really made it fun for me. And then my dad's family was Southern Baptist conservative. And I think my grammy - I remember with my Mexican family, my Mexican-American family, around Christmas time, we were playing bingo. And I was five, and I won a little Virgin Mary statue. And I knew that my grammy was very religious, and so I took my Virgin Mary statue to my grammy's when I would go for a week or so during Christmas time. And I took my Virgin Mary

statue, and I put it on my bedside table. And I was like, "My grammy's gonna be so proud of me, because she's religious. And she'll appreciate this too." But she's like, "Oh, Victoria, we don't pray to the Virgin Mary because we're Baptists." And I was just like, "What? What is this? What does this mean?" I didn't understand it because I thought I was doing something that was good.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 18:29

But so that was my connection as a child to religion, those cultural differences coming up. And then also my mom decided to also become Baptist when I was in elementary school. And then she and I were actually baptized at the same time, whenever I was in the fifth grade, which is a very special moment for us, I believe, in our relationship. And then there were some interpersonal things that happened in our church, and we ended up leaving, and we didn't really find another church after that. But then in college, I connected to a Christian university association, and I felt like that was whenever I reconnected to God, to a Christian God. But now it's a little different for me, just because I'm reconciling all of the implications that come along with Christianity. Can you hear these birds? Should I stop for a second?

E

Eleonora Anedda 19:42

No, no, it's totally fine.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 19:44

Okay. But yeah, just with colonization and conquest, because a lot of the time that was done in the name of God. And now I think because I have connections to oral history and wanting to help people connect to their own oral history or personal history, something that they can't be taught in a classroom from a teacher. It's really important to me, and I feel a great sense of just being filled into, kind of like what I felt whenever I would go to church in helping others connect to their living ancestors, and receiving that blessing, that generational knowledge and wealth that comes with recording your family members, interviewing your family members, collecting artifacts, being your family members archivist. That really fills that up for me now. Also, I'm learning more about the indigenous cultures that I have ties to, and it's also filling that for me as well.

E

Eleonora Anedda 21:07

That's really beautiful. So, now that we're moving a little bit towards the work that you do today, would you like to tell me what led you to this work? Circumstances, family, education, what was your influence?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 21:28

Yeah, so I would say a lot, those different lived experiences, inequities that I saw, the privilege of having an educator as a parent was really huge for me. My mom was also an artist. And so right now I work for an education nonprofit, and so that's something that I feel like I can

leverage considering that my mom knew how to navigate our school district as an educator within it, but a lot of parents don't. And a lot of parents don't have the time to understand what's going on, and how magnet programs work, or how sponsorships work or career pathways now. And so that's something that is important to me. But I connected more into history space. After graduating from the University of North Texas in 2016, I came back to Dallas. And this bridge that was connecting West Dallas to downtown had been built, called the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge. And there is redevelopment happening there in West Dallas, and I have family members who still live there. And we were really excited, or they were really excited about it because they thought that these new storefronts were going to be filled with West Dallas-owned businesses and POC businesses, and that hasn't really been the case.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 23:02

At the same time that that was happening, some 300 families were being pushed out of their affordable units by the city of Dallas. Because a lot of those units were rundown and not up to code, the city was trying to force this landlord into selling as a way to evade paying code tickets. And I was just seeing all of this going on, and thinking about, "Well, what can I do in response to this?" And besides that, my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, was being placed in a memory care facility. And that really hit home for me, the importance of recording your family members' stories while they still remember them. Because for her, that moment had come and gone. And so I sat down with my wela, my wela from West Dallas, who is in this community experiencing all these different things. And she told me that we are cementeros, and that she was a cementera, and my Spanish isn't very good, so I had to ask her, "What's that mean?" And she says, "Our people are from the Trinity Portland Cement Company town, from Cemento Grande." And I was just like, "What?" I just graduated from college, and that was the first time that she had ever told me that, and it was because I sat down with her.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 24:39

And I was like, "You can talk to me about whatever you want. I don't really have an agenda." And that's what she decided to share with me, and it was just amazing because it really put me on a trajectory that has landed me where I am now. From that I connected to the Dallas Mexican American Historical League [DMAHL] and Rosemary Hinojosa, who is a barrio historian for Cemento Grande, the Trinity Portland Cement Company town where Mexican workers lived. And Rosemary really blessed me with a lot of knowledge on the community that I wouldn't have been able to access otherwise. And then, through DMAHL, I joined the Emerging Historian cohort, and that's where I met Jennifer Rangel. And so that was in 2019, that I did that. Jennifer and I, our friendship keeps escalating. And so she asked me to help co-found Rayo Planning with her, our urban planning nonprofit, and we did that last year, so we're coming up on our one year anniversary in May, I think. And so it's been amazing, how these things have coincided and collided with each other, but also predetermined my path, and I'm grateful for them. Even the hard times have been for a purpose, and I appreciate that.

E

Eleonora Anedda 26:20

Yeah, that was wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. So when you think about your work, who is your community? And when I say this, I mean, who do you serve and how do you understand

this community or these communities?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 26:47

I would say the everyday person is who Rayo serves, and the other capacities that I'm in, it's the everyday person. Because I feel like the people who might be already in advocacy, or already have some type of notoriety might have better understanding of various resources in any given space. And so that's who I feel like I'm targeting in the work that I do, and how I understand that community is more - hold on one second [pause]. How I understand that community is just because I'm from it, I think about my family, and I think about my mother-in-law, who's someone who needs resources for education, because she has high school students. I think about my grandmother, who has benefited from a lot of generosity within the community, and has given a lot herself, but is a person who might not understand zoning and land use regulations and policies. I think about people who are young, and I think about myself. If I had connected to my own personal history in middle school, for instance, the huge impact that would have given me, the way that it would have affirmed me, and the confidence that I could have walked with sooner, in college, instead of later, would have been huge for me, but I get to do that for others, and I love it.

E

Eleonora Anedda 28:58

I always like asking this question, as I hope you like it, as well. But would you like to tell me about what a typical day in your life looks like?

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 29:17

Yeah, so I'll say that changes depending if it's a weekday or a weekend. If it's a weekday, I get up early, like at 5:30. Something Mesach, my partner, and I have been doing is training, doing exercise together. And it's been great for us, for our relationship, and also just my own personal energy levels and strength building. But I come home after that, I eat breakfast. If it's a weekday, I'm doing my education nonprofit work during the day. Like I said, it's my full time. I'll take a lunch, and I'll eat with my daughter Amelie and my sister-in-law Jasmine. They're here together, and Jasmine watches Amelie for us, and so I'm very appreciative of her and the work that she does. Then I go back, I keep doing my EOD work. And then around six is whenever I'm off, and I'll start having Rayo meetings or other community meetings that are after work hours. I help facilitate those meetings, or am helping others in passing the mic to them, so that way they can share whatever thoughts and ideas that they have. I go to board meetings. It's a lot of meetings, honestly, and note taking, budgeting. I'm the treasurer of Rayo planning, and so I wear a lot of different hats, and I'm happy to help however I can. I've done land acknowledgments for various protest, and also the Coalition for Neighborhood Self-Determination that Evelyn and Jennifer have co founded. So that's a glimpse into the day for me, but it does change a lot, and it's just a lot of work all the time.

E

Eleonora Anedda 31:50

But it sounds like it's work that fulfills you and that you're happy with it, right?

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 31:58

Oh, absolutely. I wouldn't do it if it didn't do that for me. Yeah, I think that balance of work life and personal life is important. So like I mentioned, traveling to Mexico, and that was a really great time for me. So time of rest are definitely important. But for me, a lot of this work that I do is very personal, so it is something that really fires me up and it's my passion.

E Eleonora Anedda 32:40

That's wonderful. So what is your vision for your work and for your community?

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 32:47

I think my vision is for us to co-create a world where zip code doesn't determine your access to amenities, to quality health care, to quality food, where it doesn't predict your likelihood of being arrested, where it doesn't predict if you'll have access to higher education, if that's something that - Success is defined by you, and it's all about you having the resources to reach whatever that looks like. But I think that's the world that I'm striving for. Also access to art is important. I feel like art helps us connect to who we are and express that better. So yeah, that's what I'm striving for, what I want to help to build for my daughter and for other generations.

E Eleonora Anedda 33:58

Yeah, that's amazing. I have one last question for you, but before I ask this question, I wanted to know if there's anything we haven't talked about yet that feels important for you that you'd like to share, you'd like to keep on the record, something that maybe I haven't asked our we haven't talked about yet.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 34:27

So I think this question has been coming up for me sometimes in conversation with coworkers, but I think, at what times do we choose to sit down at the table instead of flipping the table over and making our own? And that's, I think, a situational conversation to have based on each given circumstance. But sometimes, reform isn't what we need, just completely starting from scratch is good, and thinking about building outside of the wounds and scars that have been made from traumas in the past. And so if that means restructuring completely, then that's what's needed.


E Eleonora Anedda 35:21

Perfect. And so the last question that I have, it's more for you more to shoot a message in the future. So this interview, as you know, will be archived, and so hopefully people in fifty years, a hundred years, may listen to it. And also you said that you have a daughter, and so I was

wondering, is there anything you'd like to say to her if, say, she were to listen this interview in, I don't know, ten, twenty years?

 Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 36:00

What a thoughtful question. I love that. Oh, Amelie. She is already so vivacious and bold and she has an opinion on just about everything, which can be a little tough sometimes. But also I love it, because of who I want her to be. I just want her to be her. And I want her to feel so certain that however she shows up, Mesach and I love her for it. She's just wonderful.

 Eleonora Anedda 36:39

All right, if there isn't anything else that you'd like to say, I can go ahead and stop the recording.

 Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 36:45

Okay, great.