



IYAWO ALICIA ANABEL SANTOS

Photos by Carlos Rodríguez

Interview in Harlem, October 27, 2016

Ana: Thank you Iyawo for sitting with me for this conversation. I'm here because when we first met at Yale, when you were there to present your Latino documentary -- and that was amazing because I was like "¿Otra dominicana? What?!" -- I was so excited and amazed at the project you were working on back then and all the work you have done throughout the years. Learning about all the writing workshops you have done, all the mentorship you have given in New York City and of course your own work. I want to talk with you and see how you see yourself in the world, how you see your writing in the world and your creative work in general because I don't want to limit this to writing. The four areas I want to concentrate on are your history in the city, the questions you engage in your work, your opinions on the role of art in social change and whatever you are doing now. I would like to start with your history in New York.

Iyawo: Well First thanks for including me in this amazing project to include us in history and in this conversation about what is considered art and literature and how women fit in that. I was born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens -- very Dominican. Growing up in the 1970s, it was very clear in my home that, "En esta casa se habla español, en esta casa tu eres dominicana. De esa puerta para allá puedes ser Americana todo lo que quieras." I was raised with a lot of Dominican pride, so even though I'm from New York born and raised -- I'm very Dominican. I have a father who is very proud and so that is something I've held up. I am very proud of the love my father instilled in us about where we come from. One of the things he taught us is, "Si no sabes de donde vienes ¿para donde vas?" and so I think that as I continue to grow up, the journey has been that. Where do I come

from? And who am I? And so I think as I transition and have had all kinds of moments of transformation and rebirth and personal deaths, I've been looking for that answer. Who am I? Where do I come from? And where do I go?

I left New York as a teen to Rhode Island, to a very white Rhode Island and so I was exposed to a completely different reality. Very America, very American. I was the only Latina, the only Dominican, in a white school. So that created an identity crisis for me because I felt like the outsider and like I didn't belong. We were middle class and both parents had cars, we each had our own bedroom so for a Dominican "llegamos". So I looked for my community in Providence and I would spend my time in the disco with my people holding on to my roots. I got married, had my daughter got divorced and moved to Florida. Florida is where the artist was born

Ana: Florida is where the artist was born?

I: I always journaled but I didn't know I was born to be a writer or an artist. Everything changed on September 11, 2001. I was always in this limbo trying to figure out who I was because when you are raised Dominican there are traditional roles expected of you. Yo llegue cuando me case con un hombre gringo, blanco, italiano so ahi cumpli.

A: Cumpliste con el guion de la mujer dominicana en Estados Unidos.

I: That's it, I had made it and so I started to demolish that idea by not staying married and later on coming out as a lesbian. My daughter Courtney and I were in her room in Florida and I remember 9/11 happened and I started to think about what contributions I had made to society. What if I were the one falling the twin towers -- what did I leave her? What significant work? How would she remember me? That moment I decided to write her a memoir about my life. I still didn't know I was a writer because I wanted her to understand... basically if anyone was going to tell her my dirt it was me, if anyone wanted to chismear about her mother it was me. I was going to tell her about my life in New York and where I came from and all of that. And then I was reading this book *Writing from Personal Experience*. The idea is that in our daily lives there is material for the stories we are born to tell. That was the epiphany moment. I said, "Woah- this is what I'm born to do. I'm a story teller that is my gift to the world." That was October 3, 2001. We were in bed together, she was reading a mystery book and I said "I'm a writer." She said, "I know mami. You are gonna' write me a book and you're going to be rich and buy me a house with a McDonalds in it and a Carvel."

And so that was the moment where there was no turning back. I understood I would be looking into really hard truths I would be answering. Dealing with violence, abuse, oppression, being a woman, not wanting to be a woman,

whiteness, not wanting to be Dominican, not wanting to be black, acceptance. I really started to explore these things. I started in the sixties and talking about my parents -- their courtship and just going back really dreading this historical journey of their life and how I came to be about. I started to get really uncomfortable with the work. I started to get real. Not just frivolous. After 9/11 I knew I wanted to be a writer in New York. I knew Florida was not going to nurture the artist in me, so I packed my kid up and came to New York with one hundred dollars in my pocket, to live in my aunt's two bedroom sleeping in a twin bed. I came here to pursue my art. I wanted to work in publishing and get that book deal, which I am still waiting for fifteen years later. It's not that easy. We have been here ever since and I've grown so much. But, initially, coming out as a writer and then coming as a lesbian and then as an Afro--Latina -- those are three significant moments in my life.

A: Did you grow up with a lot of stories tellers? How did you come to stories?

I: I think that we had this neighbor, this amazing Boricua man. I can't remember his name part of me wants to call him chino but that's not his name. He was this short chubby man with a lot of little dogs and he would always tell us cuentos. He always had a cuento, always had a joke, always telling our parents. But my parents are storytellers, too. My mother tells her history, she talks about her mother and her grandmother and her twin brothers who died when they were babies and her brother who disappeared in the air force in the times of Trujillo. She feels like Trujillo is responsible, the crew killed him. She always had these amazing stories and when I started storytelling, she credits herself. She says, "Yeah, you got that from me." and it makes sense since she is the keeper of our history, of our family.

A: What was the Dominican New York you knew when you where little?

I: The Dominican New York I knew was very centered on family. Tios and tias and weekend get a ways and parties and celebrations pero de ahi no pasaba. There wasn't a lot of community stuff, there wasn't a lot of crowds.

A: It wasn't like you came into Manhattan.

I: No. If we went to Manhattan or the Bronx it was to visit family. It would always be family not like a Dominican parade or anything having to do with art. My parents never took us to see the museum or anything like that. That came later. It always was family. Everything else that I learned from my identity came later in my twenties and thirties when I came out as a writer, especially because I started to investigate and became a master researcher.

A: You began asking new questions.

I: Completely different questions and questioning everything they taught. That was a completely big deal

A: Huge deal.

I: What they were saying about being Dominican. Right now my father and I have a lot of conflict about the book I'm working on, the historical fiction *For the Love of Parsley*. He doesn't know too much about the details but he does know it's the story about two women, a Haitian and a Dominican woman. [It takes place in the 1930s]. The Haitian woman comes to work in the D.R. and they fall in love. Coming out as a lesbian in the D.R in the 1930s could not happen publicly. That's what I'm exploring.

A: That is beautiful.

I: Amazing. I'm proud of the work because while it's set in the 1930s and the historical moment is the Parsley Massacre, the massacre is happening really fast and that is not the story. The story is these amazing women and how they can have this relationship during a time where there was so much hate in the nation. I'm exploring classism and colorism and racism and just all the anti-Haitianism. It's really my response to what is happening in the D.R right now, with Haitians being deported and being stateless in the country. That is what really triggered the idea to write.

A: Maybe you can talk about a little about the questions that you are asking with your work generally and I'm glad you started talking about your book. The questions you're asking with that book in particular. What are your questions more broadly with your work? You also mentioned earlier that you are looking at all of these other things happening in family dynamics.

I: I think that my earliest work has been about my personal journey and identity. Those were the initial questions that I needed to figure out. Like how I was going to show up to the world as a writer, what kind of writing I would do, what kind of writer I would become, what kind of genre is more me -- there was a lot of things. When I first started writing, chicklit was popular, also very safe. It was very easy writing and so not to diss chicklit, but I felt like I would like to write something that would be more of a contribution to history than chicklit. There is a place for chicklit you know? It's fun and entertaining and light but I don't like fun and I don't like light, because my life has not been fun and it has not been light. I like things raw and in your face, a bit more aggressive and real because that has been my experience. So I wrote my memoir *Finding New Force: A Journey to Love*. It came from a letter series I posted on my blog. So I started as a blogger and published every single day about what I was feeling, my response to things happening in the world and things on the news. Very woman centric, very grounded. I mean most of what I write is in honor of women, that is my work. I love society and culture and being Dominican and Latina and all of that, but it's women first. That is my first lens when I do a story because that is who I am, how I identify, right? So yeah I was

exploring my sexuality, I was exploring being abused by my father you know? Who I love dearly but treated me very unfairly and so I was looking at that. I was forced to look at power very early and gender dynamics very early. What I understood about that moment in time being bi[sexual] was that there was something about my personality that needed to be silenced, that needed to be shut down, and so my writing was in response to that you know? Finding my voice. That was what my initial writing looked like when I was first coming out. Being angry and responding to all of these things and men that had hurt me and being raped and all of that. I was coming out louder and louder and louder and then I started to find focus. I wrote this memoir that I really had to purge out of my body. I needed to release that because I was carrying it. When I published it in 2011, I was thirty-five. No mentira I published before my fortieth right? In 2011, five year ago, I wanted to give myself my first publication before I turned forty. I wrote the book in a month.

A: Amazing!

I: I had to, we had to get it out.

A: So it was like writing testimony as witness, writing as freedom and forgiveness?

I: That was very important, you know? And it was for my daughter. I wrote it for her. I gave it to her on her nineteenth birthday. So yeah we got that done and then I could move on to the stories that I wanted to write around culture and being Dominican. I came out as a lesbian and the direction of my story telling was different because when I came out I came out in a very public way. I really thought that coming out to my parents was going to be easy because they had been in the US for a really long time and I thought they had some liberal thinking. The Dominican was well alive in them and the Bible was thrown at me real fast. I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready to not be accepted by my people, the people that I thought would have my back. So it just became my sisters and my daughter. So my writing shifted because I wanted to write about my sexuality in a very empowering way as a Dominican woman. My writing shifted to where I started to explore my lesbian identity and my political response to not being accepted as a Dominican lesbian in my family. I was doing a lot of work in the gay community because I was coming out, so I was being reborn. I've had so many shifts and turns I think coming out was the moment that gave me the most power and the most grounded I've ever felt in my skin. Truly it was something. [I became] militant, more confident, more secure in my skin. I didn't feel that safe before.

A: Who are the writers or artists you are in conversation with?

I: When I came out I had a lot of conversations with people online. People who are my friends today are people who I met in the world of myspace. Because I came out when myspace was a thing. So I had amazing friendships. There was

something special about myspace as an artist because you could put your work there and be in conversation with people around the world. I could put up a poem and dialogue with other writers who are my friends today like Vanessa Marti, who is Puerto Rican, and Maria Rodriguez and just a lot of women in the writing circle that I'm still very much friends with. Tamara Schenk is an amazing social justice activist and we met when she was living in Nicaragua. She was one of those people I was talking to in those days. I didn't find lesbian fiction that I could relate to, or Latina lesbian writers. That was a really, really hard thing to find.

A: You were in conversation with activists and you were in conversation with people in the cybersphere?



I: Because it felt safer and it didn't feel like there was community here to have those conversations openly you know? And I did not know that [Noche Bohemia or Alianza Dominicana] existed. So yeah it's now, so many years later, that I'm creating community. I feel like I've done that. Like I'm the one who has been creating spaces for Latina writers as the founder of the New York City Latinas Writers Group, with over 650 members. We met here in this apartment in Harlem ten years ago, six Latina writers who wanted desperately to tell their stories and I am proud of that.

A: That is something you should definitely feel proud about, the fruit of labor. Tell me the story of that group.

I went to a panel discussion in October 2006 and there was a Latino panel and there was a white Latina who was talking about her book and the moderator asked "How do you feel about being called a Latina writer?" and her response was, "I don't want to be called a Latina writer. I want to be seen as a writer". When I heard her say that, the animosity in her tone, I received it as, "I don't want to be seen as a Latina writer. I want to be seen as a white writer." Because to me

writer meant you want to be in the literary cannon with all these white old men you know? That's what you're really saying. I was very offended and I felt like there was no space for me in that world for my stories, for my characters, for the worlds I wanted to create. And so as I was leaving Bryant Park I said to my friend, "I'm so pissed because there is no writers group for Latinas. I wish there was a space for Latinas to come and tell their stories." and she said, "If they don't have it, build it." I launched it the next day.

A: How does it live in the world today?

I: We have so many women who have self-published, who have gone to start writing workshops. We have so many artists in our group: playwrights, film makers, actors, performance artist, and poets doing amazing work in the world. Activists, educators, fierce women. We had our celebration a couple of weeks ago, October 15th.

Ana: Felicidades,

I: Thank you. I should send you a picture. We had this estera with all of their books and an altar for Oya, because it was el día de Oya. It was amazing and to see all of their work, all of their titles and all the Latina Women - Dominican and Boricua - from everywhere, all over Latino America.

A: Do you all have conversations about race and gender and sexuality? Is it really focused on the business of art?

I: It really focused on the business of art, but it's a conversation we should be really having. I think we should host a special events and maybe we'll do it while you're here maybe we'll organize something where you can be a part of this conversation with these women. Let's talk about finding a space to do that; that would be amazing to have all of these Latina writers in a space and maybe Dominican writers to have a conversation around that.

A: That leads me to the next question. What are your points of view, your opinions on art and its role on social change?

I: There are people who say that the personal shouldn't be political and people who believe it's one in the same. I know that my art is in direct response to how I move in the world as a woman that is political. Every day I wake up I don't get to take off an outfit. I walk in the world as a black Latina lesbian woman every single day and that is a statement and also an act of resistance. I understand I can't separate the two. With art I can play and create some world and that's not what I do. Even with the story of *For the Love of Parsley*. It's really uncomfortable to write because I'm writing about a Haitian woman who comes to the DR as a service worker and you see how Haitians are being abused by the privileged Dominican

families with money. You see how they are beat or violated or taken advantage of and not being paid and so the art is not always beautiful. It can be downright ugly. I'm writing about bateyes, the coarse communities that Dominicans and Haitians live in. So I'm writing about themes and issues. That is how I even outline a book "What themes am I going to tackle in this story?" And so the book is based on loyalty and tradition and religion and family, also what I think about la isla. I'm talking about voodoo. There is a lot of taboo, ideas about what voodoo is and so [I write to] dispel those myths. Showing a different truth through my lens and my point of view. When I told my dad that I was writing this book he said, "Haitians where being killed in the DR because they were going to take over the government. They were creating these secret societies." I said, "Papi show me where you got that evidence. Email it to me. I want to read that. I want to see where you learned that." Those myths were passed down about the history of the D.R. My art is researching that and learning so that I'm informed and I can share that. It's also what I was doing with the Afro-Latino project.

A: I have one last question. You were born in New York; you were raised Dominican. Have you gone back and forth to the D.R? Do you have community there? How do you actually feel in this moment about this place that you're supposed to have a relationship with? What does that actually mean today? Because I recognize that is something that can change from day to day.)

I: It has. Eight years ago I started the journey of writing the documentary of *Afro-Latinos: An Untold History*. It was celebrating the contributions of Afro-Latinos throughout Latin American, including black Latinos in the conversation about who gets to be part of the African diaspora. Afro-Latinos is the story of the estimated 150 million Afro-descendants, so when I went to the D.R for the film, I went with so much hope that I would find a welcoming community, a community that embraced blackness. What I found in some spaces was an exploitation of blackness for folkloric reasons and artistic reasons, not necessarily celebrating blackness. I also was in D.R during the time when the constitution was being changed to kick out Dominicans of Haitian descent. I always dreamt of going back to D.R because I wanted to live in D.R and do social justice work. I wanted to work on LGBT issues in DR, the feminist movement in D.R. like I really wanted to be in D.R.

But we are Americans and we have things that we have been blessed with. Access to things, education. We have some privilege even though we are black Latinas, we have privilege and we have the chance to go to great schools and live in good communities. I wanted to give that back and what I was finding is that I'm not welcome there. That my frame of thinking and my social justice work is not wanted there. The reality is that I could be killed in the D.R for the kinds of things that I could be saying, that could be perceived as anti-Dominican because saying

anything pro-Haitian is anti-Dominican. I began to feel embarrassed to say that I was Dominican because that kind of Dominican I was raised wasn't being a hateful Dominican, that is not how my family raised me. So to go there and witness the mistreatment of Haitians and hear their stories was a harsh reality to face. How could I not include it in my art? My dreams of living in D.R have shifted because as a lesbian woman I don't know that I feel safe in a patriarchal society that isn't welcoming to my kind of Dominican. But I am going back next summer to D.R. and Haiti to do research for my book. As Dominican artist and writers it's hard to get out stories out because we are not getting the money.



A: It's an historical thing. I'm looking at Maldonado's archive in the 1970s with 15 years under her belt leading Ballet Quisqueya, here in New York. She had 15 years of experience and she didn't get funding from the New York Council for the Arts for six years. Our voices are not necessarily deemed significant or relevant and so it is a struggle, a big one.

I: But we are changing it, we are the ones who have to. That is why the women in my group are self-publishing, we are not waiting for it.

A: So you talked about the issues that affect you in the D.R. What are the issues that affect Latinas and women in New York right now?

I: I often wonder where our feminist movement is. I am ashamed to say it, but it feels like as Latinas...well, when I think about black folks in the U.S, they have a Black Lives matter movement, and black people here in the U.S. have historically fought for their rights and the Civil Rights Movement happened and the Black Panthers happened. But where do Latinos fit in that conversation, you know? And when we talk about Latinas I feel like we are, in some ways, being silenced or have become complacent and accepting of the status quo. The women that I know and the writers who desperately want to publish something are afraid to finish

because they feel like they are not going to be heard. So why bother finishing. So my mission is to be a leader because that is what I do. I lead this amazing group of women and show them it can be done and how it can be done. I understand that I have to market myself and be an expert. You can't just be an artist, you have to be your own market and lawyer, your everything. You are protecting your rights and work so someone does not steal it. I am writing *For the Love of Parsley* as a screen play and the genre that I'm playing with is screen play, poetry and prose. The three genres merge as one. I am creating my own genre.