



YOSELI CASTILLO

Photos by Carlos Rodríguez

Interview in her home in Harlem, October 27, 2016

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Ana: Thank you so much for sitting with me to have this conversation. How do people know you as an artist?

Yoselli: As a poet a writer a lesbian writer and I guess an activist and a teacher.

A: Tell be a bit about your history in New York City.

Y: I came to the States on December 20, 1988. I was not very happy being here because I was a teenager in the Dominican Republic (D.R.) and in my fourth year in high school. The beginning was rough you know? I was able to find people to help me -- especially a few teachers, but one in particular. Once I knew I was not able to go

back [to the D.R.] then I said, "Ok, I need to go to college and find my way and find people to help me find my way." I started writing. I've been writing since I was small, but I was reading for work before pleasure. I had my first crush with this teacher. I started writing poems for her and calling them "poems". I was reading a lot of romantic poets and she was giving me a lot of books and that opened up my writing world. That's when I started writing. Even though I had written songs before, I never considered myself a poet. That was my first introduction to writing in New York. I used to go to [Fort]Tryon park after school and write and just look at the trees and hear the birds and stuff. Washington Heights was my introduction and that teacher taught me all that stuff.

A: Where you writing poetry in Santo Domingo as well?

Y: I was writing songs that Menudo was going to sing. My brothers and sisters would make fun of me. Since I can remember, I have been writing. It's just that back then they were songs. Even though those were poems I never connected them like that and then when I came here, this teacher she made me see. I wrote one short story about my trip to the US and she said, "You can write." I was like 'WHAT?!'

A: Most people that come to New York don't have a poets' experience of New York. El desafío de estar aquí en un contexto en donde no te esperabas encontrar, encima de eso te estas descubriendo como una poeta.

Y: Y como una lesbian. It was everything all at once basically. I never looked at it in that perspective.

Ana: And you always stayed in New York?

Y: Yeah, I have always lived in New York City, mainly but I lived upstate for a little bit. Not long -- a year.

A: Tell me about when you came to Washington Heights the world of art that greeted you there, and the world of Dominicanidad.

Y: In college I really started writing and I also discovered my feminism and obviously grew more conscious of my lesbianism. I was looking for space to write to hear my own voice. In high school another teacher told me about a writing workshop at Manhattan Community College (MCC) and it was all in Spanish. I was the only teenager in there. Then in college I started writing in English, especially [because] a lot of feminism theory is in English. I wanted to write in Spanish and I wanted a space where I could move through both. I was part of Daisy Coco de Fillipis's Tertulia in the mid-nineties. I went a couple of times even though it was in Spanish and there were women I was not comfortable with.

A Why?

Y: I felt out of place because I was writing in both Spanish and English AND I was coming out as a lesbian and I did not felt comfortable doing that in that space. I was growing and finding myself. Even though Daisy was amazing -- she opened her doors to me -- I did not [feel comfortable]. I started going to the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans] Center and to A Different Light [bookstore]. I went to the LGBT readings, but again that was in English so you know --my bilingual stuff. I couldn't find a space. I was sort of navigating both and not being comfortable in any of them, but I kept on writing. It wasn't until later with the Noche Bohemia -- that was almost ten years later. We created that space with Jacqueline [Jimenez Polanco]. Actually in the 1990s, the first time I read something gay or lesbian was at Alianza [Dominicana]. Alianza had an LGBT program. It was mainly boys, but there were some women. There was a lesbian

component. There was this guy Bruna who created a cultural night and a poetry night. So one time, when I read one of my poems, it was like the most “this is it!” moment because it was bilingual. I was talking about that with Alicia [Anibel Santos] the other night. I told her that was the first time I was like “Oh my god!” En español, en inglés, en lesbiana lo que sea, hablando de plátano de lo que sea and no translation needed. That is what silence was doing. You have to explain certain things or ignore certain things and that is a way of silencing yourself. But in that space it was liberating.



A: That is so powerful. We don't often think about how if you are gay or lesbian who is working in multiple languages that in the moment you have to translate your words you're losing a piece of yourself.

Y: And you have given a piece that you didn't want to give.

A: What are the questions that you are asking with your creative work?

Y: What I want my work to do is make people think and act in a different way. If it can just change of mind or a passing thought or sometimes even [produce] action. I like to write provocative stuff. I write stuff about farts and periods and the body and sex, obviously. Stuff people are not comfortable with and block in spaces. The shock value is part of it but it is mainly to humanize people or just bring up stuff that is there but nobody talks about -- to make a portrait and to reveal. Obviously my thing is with being an immigrant and a lesbian in the Dominican community, or being Dominican at work in New York. One of the thing I always say is that I carry [those stories] everywhere all the time. When I am in the classroom everyone knows I'm a lesbian and an activist, I'm an aunt, and all of that is there. Even when you look around in my class there is stuff that tells you who I am. I have a boat on my desk que se llama "la inmigrante." Everything is with me because it's me all the time. Sometimes people compartmentalize their selves but I am who I am all the time.

A: Can you talk about how you understand the relationship between art and social change.

Y: I think art is one of the most powerful ways to create social change. It gets to the human, to people. It's what humanizes us. When you are sensitized and open to seeing something like gay rights or even immigrant rights. When you relate to somebody's

experiences of being abused or the journey they had to go through, it is humanizing. Social change is for us, for humans and the best way to reflect that change is to do art because it makes us be proud of it and see the immigrant, the lesbian, the gay person as a person with these experiences. It's funny because teaching kids they think they have the world figured out. When they find out I am a lesbian and I say "My partner in picking me up," it's like a two- minute conversation outside school, but it blew their mind wide open. That is my little activist, mi granito de arena no?

A: It sounds that in a lot of ways by including arts and poetry in your classroom which nor all teachers do...

Y: Most people don't and it kills me because we are trained to be the personal and not the political. That is one of the things I love about queer theory and feminist theory. That's what it gave me: my personal life is political and everything I do matters and creates a ripple effect. I might not see it but it's there. Most people are not [feminist or queer] and that is very male oriented. A man can be a great politician but a horrible father and husband and womanizer. It's two different worlds and I don't believe in that. Everybody should be accountable and responsible as a person and then everything else goes with it. That is a very male way of thinking because you can be great at you job but as a human being you are horrible and that to me does not click. But we as women are judged by our character more than men and society separates those things. I tell my kids, the way you see me, I don't change. I don't put a suit that would change me.

A: One of the things I'm finding in the archive is that Dominicanas are in the mix, in the middle of different things. Both civic and political activism, even artistic activism, but even today there is a lot of invisibility about the roles. Here you are so active in New York City. Could you talk about some of the strategies that you have used as an artist to address the things that you think are important to talk about.

Y: Well in terms of Dominican activism as a vehicle to social change, I think it's still pretty invisible.

A: Could you talk about that?

Y: As much as we want to be open and do things we are very marginalized even within the Dominican community. We are segregated and there are different things that people do. My thing is LGBT and when [the Dominican community] needs something LGBT they call me or Francisco and then "We will think about you in a few years". It's the truth. That is the way it is, including with the Dominican Studies Institute.

A: There is still a lot of marginalization happening.

Y: Even within the Dominican literary community. There is a lot that needs to happen still. I mean I have participated before independently with the woman and men I know.

It's very frustrating, but at the same time I know that if I need something from one of the women they will [be there].

A: Is it important to you that you are Dominican? How important?

Y: El patriotismo is different. For my family and students [patriotism] is wearing the flag and eating platanos but for me, I don't think the D.R is the best country in the world, but I'm Dominican and I like going there especially because I still have family there. There are things that I value, but at the same time I won't stop criticizing and fighting for the rights of Dominicans of Haitian descent, or [speaking about the] corruption in the country or the horrible things that tourism is doing in DR, you know? Somos la puta del Caribe. I'm very clear of that. The discourse of Dominicans here is glorifying the country



and not saying those things. Back in 2008 I think, or 2009, I showed the documentary that a Haitian doctor did. He analyzed the [Dominican] media and it's horrible. The documentary shows how Hattians are portrayed in the D.R. and how the sensationalism of the media [creates violence]. When I showed that documentary Dominicans - - and I did it in a venue that was open and I invited a lot of people -- two or three Dominicans came and said to me, "How could you portray this?" I am Dominican but I am not blind and I'm not going to be nice. In the states I criticize and fight for this and that for Dominicans here. I love being Dominican I think we have a warmth as a people. When you go to DR and you go to someone's house they welcome you like you are theirs. There is some genuine feelings and pride of being like that. I cannot disconnect ever from [where I was born

and grew up] and I will never deny it. I am sad and ashamed when Dominicans do bad things but its life, I feel la dominicanidad de la misma manera.

A: How does your work pick up these realities in the stories? What are you working on right now?

Y: I have a book of short stories and am working on my second volume of poetry. I have enough to do another volume now

A: What are they about? Can you tell us?

Y: The poetry is kind of similar to the other book. In a way it is experiences of the same themes: immigration, lesbianism, love, family, teaching -- those are the things I write about. I have something like a fictional exchange between Frida Kahlo and Gabriela Mistral; it's like a short story but also a dialogue. I have another one about my mom and her premonitions, and I have one that was published in Spain which is a conversation between me and this 94-year-old woman. I spent a summer in Spain and I would see her every day dressed in all black and she would sit on a bench bien maquillada, bella. She looked like she was an actress or a dancer and I would see her when I would go to class. One day I decided to speak to her. That conversation lasted a couple of hours. I spent hours trying to remember [her story], and it stayed as a fictionalized story, but trying to stay true [to that conversation]. One story is about a professor that gets killed, mas el horror y el crimen. The short stories -- I want to call them colloquial because it's about telling a story within a story or conversation or an interview and also hay una ponencia, a talk. It's about lesbians questioning lesbianism, it's a play on words. It about questions you ask to find out if somebody is a lesbian. And then one of these stories is an interview with this woman who killed a man that abused her son. That is the scope of that work.

A: Those are my questions related to the overarching question [of this project], "What is the role of the Dominicana artists on the socio-political world in new York City." I don't know if you want to add something.

Y: Besides saying that it's not that big in the [scope of] New York City. Within the [Dominican] community [art] is very important, I believe. I think that is maybe because we are a marginalized community and now even more so. We can't claim Washington Heights anymore, so it's more diluted. There have been some people who have made it out of the little hole we live in, but it's hard, I think. I remember back in the 1990s when I was in college, I had this Urban Studies class and all we talked about was the blacks, the Italians and the Puerto Ricans and I said, "I am Dominican and I see a lot of Dominicans in Washington Heights." The Professor told me there was not much research on Dominicans. This was back in the 1990s. Everything was new, there was not even a book that I could find that would talk about Dominicans. There was one about Dominican Republic's history and then one in English talking about Trujillo, but nothing about the reality of Dominican communities here. It's kinda still like that. Yes, we are one of the emerging groups, but in terms of creating political change, creating economic change or artistic change, I don't think we have moved very far.

A: What would you think it would take?

Y: I don't know. I guess more time. With the Puerto Rican community, they have been here longer, like the Mexicans and I think maybe I am hoping there will be young writers and actors that will make it.