

## MARIANELA MEDRANO

### Interview with ANNECY BAEZ



*My Daughter's Eyes* is the title of Dominican writer Anecy Baez's first book, winner of the 2007 Miguel Marmol prize from Curbstone Press, one of the most prestigious independent presses in the United States focusing on disseminating the work of Latino writers in the United States.

Baez came to the United States at a very young age, and was raised to be a woman in charge of her destiny and a facilitator of the destiny of many others. Aside from being a writer she also works as a psychotherapist, holds a doctorate in social work, and currently directs the Counseling Center at Lehman College in the Bronx. We are united by many ties, both professional and personal. The two of us believe in the healing power of words and the infinite possibilities within humans to heal themselves. As someone who watched the seventeen stories within this book grow and evolve, I present them with great pride and confidence.

Baez is a writer of high sensibility and an intelligence that allows daily life to dress up and pose graciously in her stories—at once elegant, real, and full of humanity. In *My Daughter's Eyes* the narrator navigates with wisdom the different aspects of Dominican culture, presented from an open-minded perspective that is free of prejudice, and in which the feminine and masculine interact to portray human struggles.

Aside from this volume, Baez has also published poetry in different magazines and anthologies in the United States and the Dominican Republic, such as the magazine *Caudal's* publishing her story "The Red Shoes." Baez has also extensively published articles and essays in the field of psychology, mostly about mental health issues among Latinos in the United States.

**MM:** How did Anecy the writer start? Tell me about your first encounter with the literary

world, both American and Dominican?

**AB:** I love literature and I try to read as much as I can about both, American and Dominican. I first started writing after I read Dominican literature. When I was 13 my parents decided to move back to the Dominican Republic from the Bronx. They registered me at the *Colegio Santo Domingo* and that's when my love for literature began. I could see poetry and literature in every aspect of the country. It was in everything from newspapers to magazines, and most of all, among my friends who were able to recite entire poems, which impressed me a great deal.

Back then writing, narrative or poetry was part of my life. I loved novels and dramas, because there was a lot of philosophy and socio-cultural analysis in them, such as Unamuno and Lorca's work. I thought I wanted to be a playwright because I liked seeing how the interiors of people's minds were demonstrated in their actions, thoughts, and words.

Later on, when I had to return to the United States, my teachers in school became also my mentors and introduced me to a whole new world of literature; there was already an established love for what I had learned in Santo Domingo. I was once again living in the Bronx, where there was a profound transition between the Jewish, Latino, and Afro- American communities already in place. The Jews living in my building still had the marks of the Holocaust with the bar code tattooed on their arms. My two teachers, one Jewish and one Spanish, were like my parents and they helped me immensely. My Jewish teacher introduced me to Jewish literature and I began reading about the Holocaust and at the same time my Spanish teacher would help me continue my readings of Spanish and South American authors.

My literary education became more solid every time I visited Santo Domingo on my summer vacations and I would sit at the *La Trinitaria* bookstore and read about sociology, psychology, poetry, essays, stories and novels. Virtudes Uribe, the owner is the sister of my stepmother, Cristina Uribe de Baez, two very sophisticated and educated women who were very proud of my love for Dominican literature. I read works by authors like Angela Hernandez, Aurora Arias, Chiqui Vicioso and many more. I remember on one occasion as I was flying back into the US I was stopped by immigration because they needed to check my luggage and make sure it was just books I was carrying. It was very amusing.

**MM:** In your narrative there seems to be a back and forth between the woman writer and the therapist, what do you think about that?

**AB:** I don't think much about the convergence of the writer and the therapist. I don't think about my writing being therapeutic or not. I don't think like that. I write from an intimate place that reflects my surroundings. It could be that sometimes I would hear a good

story or I experience something when talking to someone and I write the idea down to later on work on it. When that happens, what comes out is what it is. Of course, there are always going to be times when something I write will be a product of my therapeutic work. I hear voices that come to tell me stories. It could be that I hear an aspect of the story or perhaps it could be that I have experienced it. What comes out in the narrative is nothing like real life. The writer in me is not thinking about the therapeutic part to make it converge. That would never work. Writing cannot be forced, planned or turned into a strategy; writing has to flow from a source of wisdom that is inside of us and which allows us explore the interior that calls to be explored. It could be different for other writers, it could be that they have to research, organize, make sketches and plan the strategies and even anticipate what is going to happen with each one of the characters. I discover what is going to happen as I write. Most of the time I am very happy with the results.

But what I mean, Marianela, as you know, when you are trained to be a therapist you begin to see the world with a different perspective. You see things with more compassion, without prejudice, and are able to accept the other people around you. This all comes with the training you receive to become a therapist. In my opinion being a psychotherapist is something very spiritual and I feel that therapy, spirituality, and art all come together very naturally.

**MM:** In your stories we hear the voice of the young women, aching, victorious, innocent, but full of wisdom and full of understanding of the real world. The title itself hints that the perspective is seen through your daughter's eyes. Why the focus on young women?

**AB:** Yes, I focus on young women's perspectives because I am a woman and I was once an adolescent and also because of the stories I hear in my psychotherapeutic practice, which specializes in women, especially young women and their struggle to survive.

**MM:** How do you see the young women's world today?

**AB:** My perspective right now focuses on my experience with young Latino women who attend the university. Many of them are trying to make the most of the opportunity given to them in order to progress economically and I see more and more of them are graduating. I can see a powerful psychological and spiritual force in the Latino women. A force that gives them integrity even though they suffer emotionally, and feel betrayed and abused. They still keep on going ahead, learning from their experiences, and using them as opportunities to create.

**MM:** What do you think about the connection between therapy and literature?

**AB:** I find that there is a connection between writing and healing. I believe that by writing you can cure yourself. I believe that people are always moving towards a place of healing, a place where they feel complete and they do this in various ways; for me this comes with writing and

painting. I sit down to write and I write, but sometimes when I want to touch something in a different place that is more intimate and profound with my writing I paint, make an artistic book or design, tiny boxes to give as gifts to my friends. The meditative state permits the stories to flow.

It's not like I sit down and dictate the stories; the stories write themselves and in the process there comes a fluid energy within the writing and so as I am always growing and transforming myself it certainly fits my manner.

**MM:** This refers me back to the kind of writing I practice, embodied writing; it is written from the body and using all the senses.

**AB:** If I allow the story to flow out of me when I write, through my body, my being on the page, then the story comes out naturally and with a unique purpose. I think that writers, like painters are connected to the world in a very spiritual way. We have a sensitivity to what surrounds us and we use that sensitivity to create, and in the creation we feel connected to the world. We connect to the world in a very different way, very sensitive or multi-sensorial. I see the world in a different light, with more vivid colors, the scents are more profound. Touching things is more profound, the body processes experiences and helps us put them down on paper. Whether I share it or not comes later, and I like that freedom.

**MM:** When did you realize you could write stories?

**AB:** I have great respect for writers. Before I used to look at books not having any idea about the many days and nights the writer spent in solitude, sometimes without the understanding of those surrounding him or her. Other times I would imagine writers writing in a café with a cappuccino while talking about interesting things with friends and enjoying the work. I did not imagine the dedication and faith needed to write. To write a story is not like sewing cloths, or like cooking a splendid meal that the family would enjoy, or like a piece of art that after we finish we hang on the wall. One writes alone, and alone one has to give validity to the writing piece. I would write a story, and re-write it a thousand times, and if I had the fortune to have a friend with me I would ask for a critique to know if the story was turning into something I could read in public or publish somewhere. At the beginning these readers were my husband David and my best friend Michael. But then it got to a point when even the people who love you didn't want to be your critics. At some point I started to participate in literary groups where we would critique each other, in a trusting space, but that costs money. In essence, one has to accept that one is alone in this world, and has to learn to hear the music from the soul telling us that the story is okay, or perhaps look for a literary community where there is no monetary

charge.

When I finished the collection of stories I wanted to be published by Curbstone Press because of their social mission and their commitment to publish Latino authors. I sent the book twice to the Miguel Mármol prize and I did not win, but they called me to tell me that I was a finalist, that they liked my stories and to not give up. I continued editing and the collection of stories started to improve. In December of 2005, I sent the manuscript again and in April of 2006 they called me to tell me I had won and that it was going to be published in 2007. It is incredible how things work out. Right?

Now when I see a book I know for sure the persistence, the faith and the strength the author needed, and that publishing it was not easy. The day I saw the advance copy I was reading in New London, Connecticut, and when the editor, Sandy Taylor\*, put it in my hands, it felt like a baby. I hugged it in front of almost forty people and they understood how profound it was for me.

*Note to the reader: I am sad to say that Sandy Taylor, cofounder and editor at Curbstone Press, passed away on December 2007. He is missed by many.*