



POET OF THE YEAR, POET OF THE WORLD

BY *Curtis Ashley*

PHOTO BY *Jaray Hunt*

There are many esteemed professors here at the City College of New York. They stand in front of classrooms, sharing their knowledge and experience with young minds looking to blaze their own paths to their own goals. For such professors, it's nice to be reminded every now and then of their greatness.

On October 6, CCNY professor Michelle Yasmin Valladares received her acknowledgement. The Americas Poetry Festival of New York named Valladares the Poet of the Year. She received the award "in recognition for her lifelong literary achievements and for her poetry that reflects the rich multicultural spirit of the Americas."

"I was completely shocked and stunned. I thought they had made a mistake," a humbled Valladares admitted. "I was clueless. I had no suspicion. I just feel so deeply honored, so grateful."

Valladares is more than just a professor at CCNY. She is the director of the MFA program in Creative Writing, a role she has had for nearly a year and a half. Valladares has over ten years of teaching at CCNY under her belt. Outside of poetry, she is a

filmmaker. *O Sertão das Memórias*, a film she co-produced, won best Latin American film in the Sundance film festival.

Valladares lived in many places before finally nesting in New York. She was born in Bombay, India (now known as Mumbai). As an infant, her family moved to Kuwait. While she lived there, she attended an international school where she was exposed to people of many different backgrounds. Valladares lived there until she was 13, when she and her family immigrated to the U.S. Since then, she has bounced around the country, living in Arizona, California, and ultimately settling in New York.

The immigrant experience is something Valladares focuses on in her writing. At the poetry festival in October, which included 60 writers from all over the world, she read a few of her poems. One of them was called "Mythmaking." The poem talks about the injustices that women face, particularly in refugee camps. Valladares explains where she found the inspiration to write it, and why it is important. "I had this really powerful image of these girls circling my bed," she said. "I think I was haunted by those images,

and I think this poem came out of what's been happening on the news."

Being named the Poet of the Year will not slow down Valladares. It was her literary work that won her the award, and that is what she plans to continue. She plans to soon release a poetry anthology called *First Map of the New World*. "It starts with a sequence of persona poems, taking a young girl who is a stowaway on Vasco da Gama's ship. She's from India, and she stowaways on his ship and goes back to Portugal," Valladares explained. "We always get the narrative from the victors point of view, and we always get the narrative from the male point of view. So you take someone from the culture who's a young woman and invert the lens."

It's important to be aware of cultures that are different from your own in this world, now more than ever. We can all learn a lot from Professor Valladares's life, experiences, and poetry. "I'm part of the world," Valladares said. "I don't sit down and say 'I'm going to write a really political poem' but this came out because it's in me, so I'm the vehicle."