

Remembering Miguel Algarín: A Celebration

Miguel told me, there are many stories but if you want the truth, talk to Nancy Mercado.

—Miguel Algarín in conversation with Juan PaPo Santiago

Nancy Mercado Guest Editor



Each of these beautiful remembrance pieces brought Miguel back to life for me. Each piece highlights an aspect of Miguel’s notable, funny (sometimes infuriating) personality: how he tried to impose his particular culinary desires on restaurant staff not found on the menu as Sharon Mesmer so hilariously describes. Reliving all of the times, we enjoyed the vibrant atmosphere and frozen margaritas in Mary Ann’s Mexican Restaurant that Edwin Torres brings to life. Miguel’s mischievous ways, warning me repeatedly of how some specific poet was not my friend, then complimenting them and lamenting their exclusion from a panel he was on. For no other reason than Miguel loved to *get my goat*. He just loved seeing people’s reactions to his

contradictory behavior and many outlandish comments. I often witnessed Miguel sarcastically marvel and remark on how everyone wanted to be *Nuyorican now*. He told me and other poets he attributed this phenomenon to the cafe’s international fame as a premier cultural institution, not its legacy. Of course, he said the opposite to others; aww, Miguel, the trickster! Jennifer Blowdryer’s heartfelt piece brings to life the times Miguel and I spent walking in parks, sitting on benches just talking about art and poetry, or him advising me. Or, the times we visited many watering holes on the Lower East Side or of Miguel’s “robust” and witty nature, as Puma Perl and Donna Lorenzo describe. Jacqueline Johnson’s riotous account of Miguel’s facial expression at realizing she was at the Cafe to feature alongside John Leguizamo perfectly brings back the many sarcastic looks he gave me throughout the decades.

I met Miguel in 1978 at the Puerto Rican Studies Department of Rutgers University, where he was the chair. He also served as a Shakespearean scholar in Rutgers’ English department. We remained friends for over forty years until his death. Like many remembrances here: reg e. gaines, Emmanuel Xavier and so many others that speak of Miguel’s generosity in teaching

poets, Miguel also taught me a hell of a lot about life, poetry, friendship, and family. He guided me on several projects, including the Nuyorican Womens' Anthology Poetry Dossier (in two volumes) I edited published in Voices, a Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College e/magazine.

It's difficult to accept that a big part of one's life is gone. You're left alone, in a daze wandering the streets, going into the restaurants and bars you used to frequent together. It's a strange hollow feeling. I miss our wonderful fancy dinners, the ballet, our talks, even our arguments: miss his childlike ways and his high intellect, miss those perfect teeth he flashed at me every time he saw me.

Enjoy these magical vignettes of Miguel's life and influence on so many notable writers and artists. A big Thank You to all who gave of their time and talent to help put this magnificent tribute together: Edwin Torres and David Kirschenbaum for the initial push and advice, Dan Shot for copyediting, Ishmael and Tennessee Reed for their support and follow-through in its publication, and to Miguel for making it all possible.

And now, let's move forward; it's what Miguel would want.

Abrazos!

Nancy Mercado, PhD

Remembering Miguel Algarín: A Celebration, Guest Editor

During the height of the COVID pandemic on December 2020, **Nancy Mercado** established and chaired the Miguelabration Committee, an organizing vehicle created to pay tribute to the founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Miguel Algarín. The committee successfully organized and held a groundbreaking social media event in which poets and artists from around the world came together via Zoom to pay tribute to the father of Nuyorican literature. Ten New York City premiere arts organizations, including the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, joined forces to live stream the six-hour mega-event simultaneously.

Mercado received the American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement presented by The Before Columbus Foundation. She was named one of 200 living individuals who best embody the work and spirit of Frederick Douglass by the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives and the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University.

She is the editor of the first Nuyorican Women Writers Anthology published in Voices e/Magazine (the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College-CUNY). Featured on National Public Radio's *All of it*, *The Talk of the Nation*, and the PBS NewsHour Special; *America Remembers 9/11*, she is the author of *It Concerns the Madness*, *Las Tres Hermanas*, and is the editor of *if the world were mine*. Mercado also authored seven theater plays that were all produced. Her critique of the Broadway musical *West Side Story* appears in *Bigotry on Broadway* (Baraka Books). For more information, go to www.nancy-mercado.com