

Carmen Bardequez-Brown Miguel Algarín and El Coco que Habla



I met Miguel around 1990-1991, Bob Holman introduced me to him after encouraging me to participate in the Poetry Slam and the Stoop workshop led by Steve Cannon. The Stoop workshop was a child of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe as its intention was to expose and teach aspiring poets and writers the craft of writing based on the experience of the Black Arts Movement, the Nuyorican Poets movement and The Beats. Steve Cannon and Bob Holman facilitated the workshop for two years and it all took place at Steve Cannon's brownstone which was located one block from the Cafe on the corner of 3rd Street and Avenue C. The Stoop had a focused intention as it wanted to ensure that the poets created a poem worthy to be on the

page as well as on the stage. It was a weekly Friday pilgrimage that started at the Stoop and ended at The Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Every week established writers, Jazz musicians and visual artists would partake in what young aspiring poets and writers were concocting to later read at the Cafe. Writers and poets like Willie Perdomo, Reg E Gaines, Dael Orlandersmith, Paul Beatty, Tracy Morris, Edwin Torres among others came from the Stoop and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. This connection between learning and performance was blessed by the padrinos and the madrina: Steve Cannon, Bob Holman, Miguel Algarín and Lois Griffith.

I fell in love with the Nuyorican poetic ethos and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe was the place to be. On any given Friday night, you would see Miguel at the bar talking to Steve or Lois welcoming Sekou Sundiata. "Reverend" Pedro Pietri would enter the Cafe with his usual black attire; sometimes we would see Papoleto and Nancy Mercado, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, Dave Valentin and countless artists that would subsequently perform and read at the iconic bohemian stage. It was the Nuyorican Poets Cafe golden age.

It was magic.

We knew that we were part of something more than our poems. We knew that we were part of a tradition and a literary movement and we knew that we were able to do it because we had a place to go that nurtured our creative souls.

Miguel Algarín created that magical place and he welcomed us all.

I rediscovered my voice with the encouragement and support nurtured at the Cafe. It was the second incarnation of a place that had its roots in Miguel's apartment, but that history needs to be told by those that lived the experience.

Miguel was a scholar and a visionary. His love for life was as contagious as his unique laugh. Who can't forget his laugh! Or his raspy voice when he would read his poems interjected with improvisational rhythms or when he would sing the song *Perfidia* as he recited one of his poems:

Quiereme como nada en este mundo que no hay nada más profundo que el cariño...

He delivered his poems and nuggets of literary wisdom with the same passion that he lived his life. Miguel's authenticity for a language that could describe the reality of the community of the Puerto Rican Diaspora in "Nuyol" was rooted in his love of community and language.

I was always fascinated by Miguel's profound understanding and analysis of literature and how it was centered in history. It is a trait shared by Shakespeare and other great erudites of Language. There is no coincidence that he was a Shakespearean scholar at Rutgers University. An accomplishment that is seldom recognized.

Miguel's work was organic and along with other greats of the Nuyorican Literary canon such as Jorge Brandon, Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Bimbo Rivas, Felipe Luciano, Tato Laviera, Sandra Maria Estevez, Papoleto Melendez and Nancy Mercado helped create the intellectual and linguistic narrative that helped us engage in a unique transformational use of English and Spanish.

They all paved the way to reclaimed English as an authentic language for the Puerto Rican communities living in New York. The colonial history of Puerto Rico under the American empire created the conditions that lead to the Diaspora of the Puerto Rican people. This "language issue" is still a contentious topic within the Puerto Rican literary community.

Algarín took this monumental literary movement to another level by creating a physical space that welcomed and nurtured that creativity. By creating The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Miguel ensured that our work would have a historical presence centered in the community. In his visionary wisdom, like The Bard he helped ensure the preservation of this new creative ethos and language expression called Nuyorican. Miguel was always clear and a staunch exponent and defender of the authenticity of Nuyorican literature.

Miguel always encouraged my poetic curiosity and gave me permission to become a Nuyorican-Puerto Rican poet.

In 2015-2016, I reconnected with Miguel through fellow poet Ra Arraya. We went to a few readings and enjoyed reading and discussing literature. He was eager to share his lifelong experience and was searching for ways to do so. It was obvious that Miguel missed teaching. A few years later, Nancy Mercado and Steve Cannon alerted me of Miguel's deteriorating health condition and ultimately, he had to move into an assisted living arrangement in Manhattan. In 2019 I talked to Lois Griffith and told her that I wanted to visit Miguel and she asked me to accompany her to visit him and spend time documenting his lifelong experience. Lois wanted to document the Nuyorican Poets Cafe's history but more than that she wanted to document and start the serious research of the literary canon of Nuyorican literature. Her continuous effort helped create an archive at Barnard College, her alma mater. Hopefully her efforts will ensure

that there is a physical space to guard artifacts that document the development and creation of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

We visited Miguel a few times and his big smile welcomed us into his new living space. It was sad to see him like this but his mind and passion to engage in any discussion regarding literature and writing or the Nuyorican legacy transported all of us to a happy space, even if the actual surroundings were depressing. He was pleased to receive visitors and would tell us about some of the people that came to pay their respect and visit him.

I recorded some of the interactions that took place between the co-founder and one of the founding poets of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Miguel, and Lois. You could see that there was a lot of mutual respect, admiration, and love as they enthusiastically engage in conversations that would go from the profound existential meaning of life to the most hilarious anecdotal events that happened at the Nuyorican or to many of the artists associated with the Nuyorican. They knew each other well.

Miguel had a profound compatibility with Lois at analyzing the Nuyorican literary philosophy and movement. They shared anecdotes of the many people that pass through the doors of the Cafe as they marked their contribution to this literary tradition. As I listened to their conversations, I realized the rich history of collaboration they had with all major figures of American literature of the past 60 years. From Toni Morrison to Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, Pedro Pietri, and many others.

Miguel and Lois' conversations were an experience that I will treasure for the rest of my life. During one of our visits they discussed the roots of the Nuyorican movement and mentioned Jorge Bradon and how he had the nickname El Coco que Habla. Miguel and Lois were not sure how or why this came to be. At one point Miguel said "el coco is hungry, so you have to feed him." Both stated how Brandon was a poeta del pueblo and how he recited his famous Masacre de Ponce poem with lyrical rhythm and historical authenticity. This is a feature that is part of the Nuyorican literary tradition.

I believe that Miguel's legacy continues in the tradition of El Coco que Habla. If the coco is hungry, we have to feed him with words with more creative work and it is our job to ensure that this history and literary tradition is documented and continues to live in the hearts and minds of present and future Nuyorican-Puerto Rican poets and writers.

Que descanses en la palabra Miguel.

Carmen Bardequez-Brown has published three poetry books: *Straight from the Drums* (2012); *Dreaming Rhythms: Despertando el Sueño* (Miguel Esteparío Productions, 2016,); *Lo que aprendí al otro lado del mundo*, a collaboration with author Julio César Paz (2020). Four of her

poems are featured in ¡Manteca! An Anthology of Afro-Latin@ Poets edited by Melissa Castillo-Garsow (Arte Publico Press, 2017) and Musings During a Time of Pandemic: A World Anthology of Poems on COVID-19, edited by Christopher Okemwa (2020). Bardeguez-Brown's next poetry book, Meditation on Love Dance and Loss is currently seeking a publisher.

Bardeguez-Brown's work has been featured in the documentary, Latino Poets in the United States, an award-winning documentary filmed and produced by Ray Santiesteban that showcases her among other founding members of the Nuyorican Poets movement such as Pedro Pietri and Willie Perdomo. Some of her work has been performed by Felipe Luciano's Poets's Choir, Butch Morris Conduction series #27 was performed at The Whitney Museum of Art. Her work was adapted and performed at the Art in Progress Cantieri Del Contemporaneo at Cosenza Italy; the performance interpretation can be seen on YouTube. <https://cbbpoetry.wordpress.com>