

Charlie Vázquez Talking Books and Getting Drunk with Miguel



I met up with Miguel Algarín at Nice Guy Eddie’s on Avenue A on a scorching summer day in 2010. I hadn’t been around for the glory days of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which had inspired me as a Puerto Rican New Yorker and writer. This distance from his legacy and the house he built was cause for concern since I admired him greatly. And so, a friend connected us. He arrived at 2:00 p.m. as planned and we reacquainted ourselves. The poet Emanuel Xavier, our friend in common, had introduced us at the Cafe the year prior, but both Miguel and I had had our fill by the

end of the evening. We laughed about that. And so, I went to the bar to buy him a Budweiser and vodka shot when he requested them, returning with our drinks.

“Water?” Miguel said, as I brought my pint glass to my lips.

Not wishing to disappoint him further, I joined him for his second round of Budweiser and vodka ten or so minutes later. We discussed projects we were working on, what it meant to be Puerto Rican writers, our love for the visual arts and photography, and his admiration of dance, ballet, and opera; the alchemy of the creative process and the secrets the night conceals.

Miguel pulled two books from his book bag and set them before me, Time’s Now/Ya es tiempo and Body Bee Calling from the 21st Century. “They’re signed,” he said, grinning childish mischief. “You can have them,” he added while sipping his beer. “For twenty dollars.”

“I didn’t bring cash.”

“There’s a machine over there,” Miguel said, pointing to the back of the bar.

I withdrew forty dollars and bought them, since I’d just started reading the works of the founding Nuyorican poets, his most importantly. My novel *Contraband* had just come out, so I gave him a copy, figuring he was low on cash. Miguel winked at me after glancing at the back cover author photo, which I’d been warned about. It hardly bothered me.

“A novel,” he said. “What is it about fiction that you like?”

“The limitless possibilities.”

“And poetry?”

“I dabble now and then,” I said, “but I wouldn’t consider myself a poet.”

Miguel opened to a random page in my book before reciting: “During my initiation, the chanting medicine priests stripped me naked and painted me red, slashing a stripe of white across my eyes. After my initiation, I was allowed to work with them, though they worked naked, which intensified the already dangerous venom-extracting.”

He glanced up from the pages and said, “That’s poetry, too.”

Miguel mentioned a long, epic-style piece he was drafting called *Dirty Beauty*. Not wanting to reveal much more, he took on an almost bashful air when I asked what it was about. I’d researched his life and work, enough to guess I’d assumed, but left it alone. We changed the subject to books we liked and laughed and drank some more, getting plastered by 3:00 p.m. And then it happened.

Miguel’s gaze brightened with the warmth of intoxication. He reached into his bag and stared into my eyes. “There’s something else you might want from me,” he said, winking. He set the tiny book before me, which had been authored by María Algarín.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You read in Spanish?”

“I do,” I said. “Very well.”

“My mother’s poetry.”

I parted the pages and took in the first piece I came to, impressed by the rhyme and meter of the writing, the artfulness and vulnerability of voice, the lack of pretension. I looked up at Miguel and said, “This is really good.”

“I know,” he said, grinning proudly. “You can have it –”

“Oh, I couldn’t –”

“For ten dollars.”

We connected this way many times after that day, whether alone or among friends. This was true until the last time I saw him in January 2020, on a visit that poet Nancy Mercado organized to include Urayoán Noel and myself. Miguel was spending the last months of his life at the Cardinal Cooke Home in East Harlem and appeared thrilled to receive us.

The building stood on the intersection where poet Julia de Burgos collapsed before dying at Harlem Hospital in 1953. The irony of this chilled me both times the three of us went to see him. I brought him books to keep him company. Miguel opened each volume with the wonder of a boy receiving toys, even if aging would prevent him from enjoying them.

“Did you read the Victorian mystery from last time?” I asked him on our final visit. Miguel, in a wheelchair by then, stopped to think about it. “Which one?”

“The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher by –”

“Oh,” he said, as if searching for the memory. “The boy...”

“Yes,” I said, “whose sister gets jealous of the attention he’s getting –”

“And... kills him.”

“Slits his throat,” I added.

Miguel and I shared an admiration for dark storytelling, so it was natural to discuss the crueler aspects of human nature with him in this way. It would be the last time we’d ever talk books; our final drinks enjoyed together vanished in the fogs of the past somewhere...

Miguel Algarín left us for good on November 30, 2020.

I remember running into him at the Loisaida Center back in May 2015. Our colleague Carlos Manuel Rivera had staged a performance piece in a cardboard coffin set into the center of the gallery, where works by Luis Carle and other friends were hanging as part of an exhibit.

I didn’t notice when Miguel arrived, though he was making the rounds with a cup of wine by the time I did. A cast encircled his right forearm, which he struggled not to put pressure on. A bookbag hung over his shoulder, a rolled-over paperback jutting out from it.

“Hey,” I said, greeting him with a hug. “What you got there?”

“Richard the Third,” Miguel said, his voice frailer than the last time.

“Okay,” I said, not knowing the royal plays as well. “Why?”

Nancy Mercado came over to say hello and snapped the photograph that captured the conversation. It brings me back to every discussion Miguel and I shared, which centered around what we were reading and working on. Plus, scandalous other subjects once we got tipsy.

“Why?” Miguel said, as if annoyed. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“I figured you’d had enough of Shakespeare by now.”

“No, nene,” he said. “This one’s the bloodiest of them all”

Charlie Vázquez is the author of novels and short stories. You can learn more about him and his new Latino thriller *Contraband* at www.charlievazquez.com