

Ed Morales



Miguel Algarín was many things for many people but for me, he was about authority. Back in the mid-70s, he had organized a group of Downtown Nuyoricans to become the voice of a new generation. Everyone who read on the Nuyorican stage had invested in them the authority to be their bad-assed, unapologetic selves, and that all came from Miguel. He had fought like hell for Mikey, Lucky, Sandy, and so many others to be heard, with authority. When he picked me up in his big boat of a car in the mid-90s to take me to his class at Rutgers,

he was the master of the New Jersey Turnpike. He commanded his tenured professor parking space like it was his birthright. Want some lunch, it's on me, but no more than one glass of wine. Just tell the students what you think they need to hear about yourself and your work. You can take a bus back to New York, but I recommend the train.

Miguel ruled the café in all senses, with a benevolence that served the art of poetry and the ancestors. Intermittently he would serve out his doses of sarcasm if only to make life in the spoken word brega more tolerable. For me at least the slam scores were never as important as Miguel's approval or advice. The most important thing was the spiritual, recognizing where everyone came from, and making sure our blackness was always at the forefront, taking measured breaths and declaiming through centuries of hope, anguish, and desire.

The fire he had ensured his survival through all kinds of challenges and diagnoses. I remember stepping out of the Young Lords' Church after Richie Pérez's memorial, which happened so soon after Pedro Pietri's, and embracing Miguel who was on line to enter, and knowing he was going to be with us for a lot longer. Aggrieved and stoic, but pushing on, stubborn, like the only time we did a high-profile reading together during a Nuyorican residency in Washington D.C.

The reading was for the Organization of American States, in their stately building on Constitution Avenue, and even though we said nothing about it, we knew about the irony of what we were about to do in the belly of the beast. I did my reading and got the polite applause, and then Miguel launched into his usual sermon – a thunderclap of street knowledge that left everyone speechless. Afterward, he smiled and said I had done well, but behind the smile, I knew it was just another night of reading and ruling, of getting over, with authority.

Ed Morales is an author and journalist who has written for The Nation, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Rolling Stone, the Guardian, and CNN Opinions. He was staff writer at

The Village Voice and columnist at Newsday. He is the author of *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico* (Bold Type Books), *Latinx: The New Force in Politics and Culture* (Verso Books 2018), and *Living in Spanglish* (St. Martins 2002). Morales is a lecturer at Columbia University's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race and the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.