

Edwin Torres

TO MERGE AMONG THE GREATER WE: what Miguel Algarín taught me about cosmic dancing

Photo: Linda Obuchoska Photo: Paul Hosefros



Miguel Algarín was a complicated introduction to an emerging poet, although this recollection will be parsed into a parable through much older eyes — having emerged, I am here

on the surface, years later, imagining layers through much younger eyes.

This memory takes place during the creative crucible of The East Village circa '91-98 — my perception as a newbie in the throes of searching for a voice, was that Miguel could parlay vulnerability into a gift for comfort, a charisma to attract the seeker. At the time, my questions of identity were consumed by making, so experimenting with language and form was my play. The question I toyed with, that being whether or not Miguel understood my work (whatever that meant), was a direct challenge to my own placement and search for acceptance. Was I making enough difficulty to bring eyes back to language? Of course, he received whatever he needed from anyone else's need, realizing now, that the poet's understanding is to blend into purity what's possible with play (note Nuyo alliteration). My wondering whether or not anyone "got me" was in truth a question for me, whether I was the one who "got" what I was doing, a lifelong quest for a poet's infinite encircling.

My instinct for his bravura was to absorb that energetic quality of sensuality as a lifestyle, to embrace the absorption that life had to offer — a poetic absorption to eroticize language as a sensory experience. I think this is what compelled me towards his vision, his aesthetic as a poet, not a human, not even a Nuyorican, there was no genealogy to his identity for me. While fully Latino and soaked in Hispanic pride, his aura was emblematic of flesh for me, more than nationality.

Indeed, as an adventurer nomad poet geek, I suppose I was living through a vicarious symbol of emergence, through his work. As I was traveling those early Nuyorican steps, I may have had dreams, but I wasn't awake. In my hetero id, I wasn't interested in the other sex, but, the other tongue. The one between identities, between Spanish English yes, but more interested between creatures, between what could be and what was given, between the twilight hieroglyphics of street and beyond.

Between street and beyond was Miguel to the core. He was always intrigued by cosmic possibility, a mutual dynamic we shared through the various support mechanisms he afforded me

via the cafe, class visits, art openings. He gave me relevance into my possibilities, just like the neighborhood itself, the chance for invention was not obscured but championed. The role of the accomplice is to lay groundwork for what hasn't happened yet, Miguel was adept at functioning as both mentor and accomplice. This fell in-step with my then explorations into performance improvisation. I was in a circle of musicians who embodied their instruments as extensions of vibrational selves — the alignment of auras on a given plane, manifest by the pulsed evaporation of stars within a lifetime's moment, made it clear that it was my time to have met these incredible collaborators.

Enter Sean G. Meehan, a drummer beyond mine, or anyone's, years. He would play the idea of the sound, not just the drums, his hearing was an instrument of its own, a landscape I could easily get lost in. I first saw him with a cellist wrapped around his body, holding her cello and playing it, while he walked across the floor playing his drumsticks in the air. The evolution of my performance career with Sean as fulcrum to my aesthetic, is an entire book worthy of exploration. For now, let's say Sean and I had established something beyond chemistry whenever we improvised, whether on stage or the Williamsburg waterfront. After becoming comfortable in recording studios, and being continually inspired by Miguel's presence and voice, we both had the idea to try and record with Miguel as a trio.

The action of arranging the session was a blur during those fertile years, I know I had, by this point, established a rapport with that studio on 9th Street between 1st & 2nd Ave. They needed notice of just a week or two but it had been months it seemed, that I was trying to get Miguel to commit.

As a voice is planted in the cosmos, the strength of its conviction, volume and shape, will be determined by the logistical crosshairs of emotional elegy needed for the universe. Finding him at the cafe, early evening before the fireworks, I told Miguel we wouldn't need any rehearsal, a true improvisation recorded live at the studio, how about it? He said, could I read one of my poems? I was perplexed and said, most definitely, you read one of yours I'll read one of mine Sean will read his drums, we're all reading at the same time. Miguel declared, oh yes honey, I'm in, set it up, and swayed to the dance floor in Miguel fashion. With that, I did, but the session wouldn't happen until many phone calls later.

Partly assuring him that there was no record label attached, no business venture in the works (Sean and I didn't know what we would do with the recording, we just wanted to capture a moment) partly encouraging his gifts, I found a layered nuance to his approached uncertainty which resulted in convincing him to have lunch at Maryann's, a Mexican place on 2nd Ave and 5th Street, my treat. Over Margarita's and afternoon burritos, we talked about how books were written, the neighborhood, how much it had changed, and then about the recording. In his relaxed (more relaxed than usual I should say) state, his guards were lowered and he confessed that he wished he had recorded with musicians more in his lifetime, and how he wanted this to be perfect. Knowing the value of spontaneity in an improvised moment, I assured him that we could be nothing but perfect by just showing up. And then I told him what I could do is rewrite an opening stanza of one of my poems for him to begin with, as a way to connect with my words,

as well as an opening into his own words.

The day arrived and after 20 minutes we started wondering, but the door buzzed, it was time. Microphones were set up around Sean's drums, Miguel and I had our own microphones but were facing each other closely, he said he wanted to feel my breath, yet we still needed vocal separation for each recording track. I showed Miguel what I had written for him as an opening, he said, I don't want to see it, I'll see it when we record. I had a piece about a kiss from a girl who drew horses, he had a piece about a dancer who moved kingdoms, our love for life in full view. We set our poems out on music stands, the engineer said rolling, and we started, no rehearsal. Sean begins with his drum sticks, bending them on the snare, plucking them as if they were twigs in an impossible forest of sonic thievery, and suddenly Miguel lets out this clear alto, singing the first word I'd written in my opening "she" which unknowingly was the title of his poem about the dancer. His voice, a bell cutting through signifiers beyond lineage, he weaves his way through melody and speech, settling into his poem as I begin mine, "equinnical kiss." I knew to keep my voice low as his was dancing, literally, through octaves and firmament. As Sean conveys release and give, with unerring dynamics, our voices are intertwined assemblages of rhythm and force. And then it's my turn to release and soar with Sean and Miguel beckoning higher yet lower, we sound off on phonemes, then Miguel senses when to bring in what we're searching for, just as Sean powers low into bow-strung drone, his strongest voice powers in at the end, with a clarion call of, "seekiiiiing" "yieldiiiiing" "gropiiiiing" "touchiiiiing," and we settle back into our unknown reality with a whisper.

Needless to say, we were spent. Just 7 minutes, we wanted to do more, but Miguel had reached his limit and I didn't want to force anything. We hung out for a little while, listening to the playback, unsure what we had at the time, knowing we had climbed something. Miguel was breathless, he had truly given his all, and the recording is a testament to what we're given when we're ready.

Sean had the foresight to create an artifact out of the experience, he was the one who arranged to have the recording pressed into a 7-inch vinyl record, using audio on one side, and text from both poems silkscreened onto the other side. We designed it to slip into a vellum sleeve with penciled lettering, and assembled 100 copies, one evening after midnight in the basement of Dance Theater Workshop.

My memory of Miguel is bound by time, to accept relevance with motion, stability of the powerful inertia out of length into want, of listening's root structure, into transition, into alignment, into surrender, into the actions of our immediate ability for flesh to accept its language. How many ways to paint the roof of a tongue that won't bite, to inter-enter the offspring of chance with demon, but I digress... this is supposed to be about Miguel and improvisation, and how a Nuyorican boy wants to be the one who can smile at the party and go home alone, dancing on a kiss. Thank you Miguel, for your time with me, for letting us hear your voice in this miraculously present recording with Sean, and for being an accomplice to your own journey, ours, with you!

Edwin Torres is the author of twelve poetry collections, including *The Animal's Perception of Earth* (DoubleCross Press), *Xoeteox: the infinite word object* (Wave), *Ameriscopia* (University of Arizona Press), editor of *The Body In Language: An Anthology* (Counterpath Press). He has performed his bodylingo poetics worldwide, and has taught his workshops, *Brainlingo* and *Feel Recordings* at Naropa University, UPenn, The Poetry Project and Liminal Lab. Anthologies include, *Manifold Criticism*, *Post Modern American Poetry Vol 2*, *American Poets In The 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*, *Kindergarde: Avant Garde Poems For Children*, and *Aloud: Voices From The Nuyorican Poets Café*. His next book, *Quanundrum: I will be your many angled thing* is forthcoming from Roof Books. A native New Yorker, he is currently living in Beacon, NY.