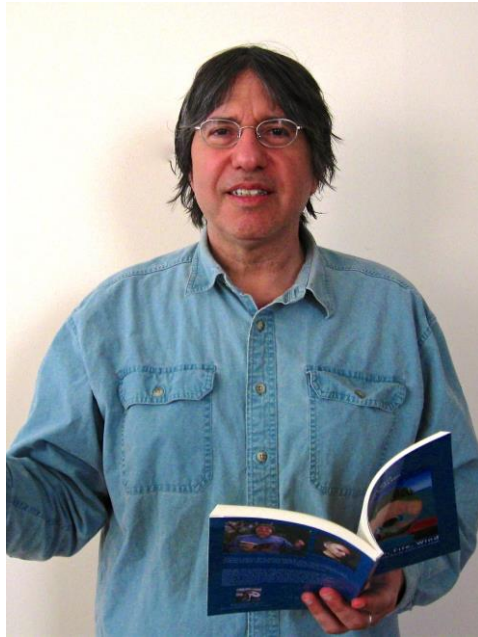


Eliot Katz Tribute for Miguel Algarín



After I had started writing as a student at Rutgers, Miguel Algarín was one of my most important and inspiring poetry teachers. In 1977, I took a literature class with Miguel on the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, and Amiri Baraka; and also did an Independent Study with Miguel, in which Miguel gave me helpful advice about my own early poems. Whether it was about one of the three renowned New Jersey-raised poets that we were reading in our literature class, or about one of my own initial attempts at verse, Miguel always came up with insightful, cut-to-the-core questions: why was it important for that specific line to be in the poem, what were all the possible implications of that line, and could that line have been improved – and, in the case of my own early poems, what wasn't in the poem that could have been added to make the poem clearer or more effective. One thing I'll always remember when it came to Miguel's feedback on my own poems was that his response was usually most

positive when I tried to explore bigger subjects, including national or global political issues that he thought would potentially interest a wide readership. I think his favorite among my early poems was one that I wrote in the style of Blake's prophecies about Three Mile Island and the dangers of nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Because I was the child of a Holocaust-survivor mother who had lost most of her family in Auschwitz, and because I was a young political activist, I was glad that Miguel appreciated those early socially engaged poems, and helped me to make them better, because political poetry wasn't all that popular in academic settings or review journals in those mid-to-late 1970s years. It would be more than four decades later before the New York Times Book Review would devote an entire issue to books of political poetry. I also remember Miguel once telling me that he appreciated when I tried to make lines of my poems livelier by using humor or surrealism, and he thought I should think about "electrifying" even more of my lines, thinking about how Jimi Hendrix had electrified the musical lines of The Star-Spangled Banner when he played at Woodstock.

During our course on WCW, Ginsberg, and Baraka, our class met one day at the original Nuyorican Poets Cafe, and I was one of the two or three student poets that Miguel chose to read a poem to Allen for Allen's feedback, which, in a nice surprise, was very positive and helped to reinforce my thought to continue learning how to become a poet. Although I regretfully didn't keep a copy of that early poem that I had read to Allen that day, I reminded Allen of that experience when, a few years later, I applied to spend a month as one of Allen's apprentices at Naropa Institute in Boulder during the summer of 1980 – an apprenticeship in which I helped Allen answer literary and activist letters and typed up his difficult-to-read handwritten manuscripts, in exchange for incredibly useful advice about my poems that I would never forget.

Within a few years, my poems had gotten considerably better, and I had started a nationally distributed literary journal, called Long Shot, with my Rutgers poet friend, Danny Shot. During those early 1980s years, I was working in a New Brunswick print shop, Downtown Printing (where I would print the first few issues of Long Shot with the help of a few generous co-workers), and I would sometimes, when I had a few hours free, walk over to have coffee with Miguel in his English Department office and talk about the poetry world, including his important work promoting poets and poetry at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which was just beginning to get significant attention from the national media, including attention for helping to popularize the new movement of spoken word. Miguel often described to me how, in founding the Cafe, he was dedicated to providing a sense of a cultural home to Puerto Ricans who were living in New York City, and I remember having coffee with Miguel in his office on the afternoon that a copy of the New York Times was delivered and it included a very substantial article about the rising popularity and literary quality of the Cafe. I recall how much Miguel appreciated that his promotional energies and dedication, as well as his own poems, were becoming more widely recognized and influential.

At one point, around 1984 or 85, after the original Nuyorican Poets Cafe had closed for a few years and before the second version of the Cafe had reopened, Miguel asked Danny and I, as Long Shot magazine, to co-organize a reading series with him in a basement space on East 6th Street, called The Shuttle Theater. I've run dozens or maybe hundreds of readings in my life, and those were certainly among the best and most fun – some of the poets who read in that series, as I recall, included Pedro Pietri, Jayne Cortez, Miguel Pinero, Lois Elaine Griffith, Allen Ginsberg, Eileen Myles, Nancy Mercado, Mary Shanley, and Andy Clausen, along with some downtown jazz musicians like Billy Bang and Jemeel Moondoc. During those 1980s years, when he had to be on the road, Miguel would sometimes ask me to substitute teach his Rutgers writing or literature classes, which I was honored to do if I could fit it around my printing job schedule. Later, after I had begun in the later 1980s to work as a housing advocate for homeless individuals and families, by running a small two-person (or sometimes one-person) New Brunswick Homeless Outreach Center for a group called Middlesex Interfaith Partners with the Homeless, I was no longer able to take time off from my job without the risk of having more people, including kids, sleeping on the streets or in abandoned cars that night.

Long after I had been his student and we had become friends, Miguel and I always made an effort to keep in touch – either by phone, or in person in New Brunswick or NYC for coffee or a meal. I made sure to include poems by Miguel in collections that I edited, including an anthology of American protest poetry that I co-edited in the mid-1990s with Christian Hays for two independent French publishers; and, in 2004, when I guest-edited a Long Shot Beat Bush issue. For that Beat Bush issue of Long Shot, which turned out to be its last issue after over 20 years, I went to Miguel's apartment and helped him go through a few of his recent hand-written notebooks to pick out a recent political poem that he finalized for me there on the spot. About that poem and about Miguel as a person, one thing that always shone through, even when he wasn't feeling well, was his great sense of humor. Through the decades, Miguel would sometimes invite me to do featured readings at the Cafe, including a few readings as the poet right before the crowded Friday night poetry slams, and Miguel and Bob Holman included a few

of my poems in their dynamic Nuyorican Poets Cafe anthology, *Aloud*. I would also occasionally see Miguel when he would travel by bus with Nancy Mercado for Thanksgiving dinner to the Hoboken home of Danny and Caroline Shot, where my partner, the writer Vivian Demuth, and I would also often go. The last time that I saw Miguel was in March 2019, when about a dozen of us, chosen by Miguel, did a poetry reading tribute for Miguel at the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center nursing home, where he was then living. Each of us read one or two poems of Miguel's, while Miguel sat by the edge of the stage in a filled auditorium, obviously happy and proud to see his works recited and remembered.

Because of the electric significance of his work – as a poet, as an inspiring teacher, and as a remarkably effective promoter of poets and poetry both locally and across the globe – I hope and believe that Miguel's work will always be recited and remembered.

Eliot Katz is the author of eight books of poetry, including *Love, War, Fire, Wind*; *Unlocking the Exits*; and *President Predator: Poems to Help Make America Trump-Free Again*. His most recent scholarly book is *The Poetry and Politics of Allen Ginsberg*. Katz has worked for decades as an activist for a wide range of peace and social-justice causes, including helping to create housing and food programs that remain ongoing for Central New Jersey homeless individuals and families. Called “another classic New Jersey bard” by Ginsberg, Katz has a website at: www.eliotkatzpoetry.com.