

Jacqueline Johnson

That Night I Met Miguel and Read with John Leguizamo



I got a call from Edwin Torres who was organizing a reading at Nuyorican Poets Cafe. He gave me a choice of reading with Darius James, the author of *Negrophobia*, or some guy named John Leguizamo. I did not think my work would go along with the experimental format in *Negrophobia*, so I chose John Leguizamo.

On the night of the reading, I arrived a half-hour early at Nuyorican. I was surprised to see it was filled to standing room only from upstairs to the ground floor. Things were happening all over the place. I briefly met Edwin at the bar who introduced me to Miguel Algarín. Just before things began Miguel went onto the stage. I remember Miguel looking at me like – where in the world, did she come from? Who is this black chick? It didn't matter that I was

one of the featured readers, there were no seats to be found. John came over and offered me a seat with his family which I gratefully accepted. There was electric energy in the room. I was going to read poems and John was going to read scenes for a play. My five friends had found seats upstairs, and his two hundred family, friends, and supporters had filled both floors. There were producers and agents mixed in with the everyday folk. There was barely enough space to walk to the stage. I don't remember being nervous as Miguel passed me the mic. I read for about fifteen or twenty minutes. I glanced up to see Miguel giving me an intense look. It was all in the eyes. I knew my time was up. I ended the reading and returned to the table. The response to my work was good. I did what I came to do. John read his play from the table inhabiting many characters and various scenes from his neighborhood. I think he read from an early version of *Mambo Mouth*. People were proud and so excited about him. His success was palpable and already in the world. I was an emerging poet, and he was the new hot, Puerto Rican, playwright headed to the great white way and Hollywood. We were two very different artists on different paths who met briefly on a beautiful and wild night at Nuyorican Poets Cafe. I will always remember Miguel, how he commanded the stage and managed the triangular space between the door, the bar, and the stage. May he rest in peace and poetry.

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Jacqueline Johnson is a multi-disciplined artist creating in both poetry, fiction writing, and fiber arts. She is the author of *A Woman's Season*, on Main Street Rag Press and *A Gathering of Mother Tongues*, published by White Pine Press, and is the winner of the Third Annual White Pine Press Poetry Award. Her work has appeared in: "Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era," Routledge 2020, *The Slow Down*, American Public Media, October 16, 2019, and "Pank: Health and Healing Folio," 2019. She is a Cave Canem fellow, VONA Fiction fellow, and BEI fellow 2018-2021.

Works in progress include: “The Privilege of Memory,” “How to Stop a Hurricane,” a collection of short stories, and “This America,” a poetry collection. She is a graduate of New York University and the City University of New York. A native of Philadelphia, PA, she resides in Brooklyn, New York.