

James Ruggia Remembering Miguel Algarín



It was in the beginning of the Reagan years. His secretary of state, Alexander Haig, was defending the rape and murder of four women in El Salvador. Two of them were Maryknoll nuns (Maura Clarke and Ita Ford). Two were Catholic women accompanying them (Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan). All were American. Haig said the car carrying them had returned fire in a shoot-out with the Salvadoran National Guard. He said they were criminals. He called them all ‘terrorists.’ but Haig was the criminal and he worked for the greatest political con man I’ve ever seen, Ronald Reagan.

Reagan imposed a murderous Central American policy while playing the part of a sanctimonious political parson for Nixon’s “silent majority,” by then becoming a “moral majority” that was never silent or moral. In the age of Trump (the second celebrity president) they would literally attempt to take the capitol and overthrow the presidential election.

In 1981, Reagan and Haig were the subjects of the poem I planned to read at the William Carlos Williams Poetry Festival being held in the Rogers Locomotive Building of Paterson’s Great Falls. I was 27. Another young poet, Joel Lewis, read that day. Coming in from New York City was the star of the event, Allen Ginsberg.

Both Joel and I had been Naropa participants. We were excited at the prospect of seeing Ginsberg in this setting. At that time, he was still ‘Carlo Marx,’ to me, still a hero of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. As I got to know him and his work better, he became much bigger than the character in that book. He arrived in Paterson that day with a contingent of poets from Manhattan’s Lower East Side. One, a strikingly handsome Latino man, was Miguel Algarín. At one point, coming away from a talk with Ginsberg, I mentioned to Algarín that I was ‘awe-stricken.’

He looked very closely at me and said, ‘Awe,’ then a long pause, ‘Stricken.’ It said something important to me. Even with all his greatness and the greatness of the Beat Generation itself, one was indeed, ‘stricken’ by idolatry. If I was going to take the next step as a poet, I would have to begin thinking of other writers, even great ones such as Allen, as colleagues, siblings all in the pursuit of poetry.

Algarín would go on to help found the Nuyorican Cafe. A venue that would expose a whole poetry to us in the New York area. It wasn’t that poetry had changed, but notions of ‘Literature,’ with its snotty capital L covered in ivy had. In many ways we can thank Algarín and Ginsberg for widening the world of writing, growing its big tent, and thus making way for the Nuyorican Cafe and exposing us to Nuyorican poetry. It wasn’t foreign, it was American. New York poetry like Walt Whitman’s.

James Ruggia wrote travel articles for more than 30 years, visiting about 110 countries on more than 200 assignments. 1991's Pacific Asia Travel Association's Journalist of the Year, he curates and emcees a reading series in Jersey City; now online (www.BackroomBroasdsides.com). He studied at Naropa Institute; was the editor of St. Mark's Poetry Project Newsletter; and has published numerous poems, mostly with Michigan's Big Scream Magazine. Some of his poetry and essays can be found at The Museum of American Poetics at www.poetspath.com/.
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