

John Howard-Algarín Remembering Miguel

Photo Nancy Mercado



I remember my tío, Miguel. I remember childhood visits to New Brunswick, NJ, to Rutgers University where he lived with Richard August. I knew him as a man who loved... And who loved men from my earliest recollections...

I remember his first floor railroad apartment on 6th Street in the Lower East Side where every Sunday after mass at St. Brigid's Church, even as a college professor, Maria Socorro Algarín – his mother, my grandmother, and our general – would bring him comida – home cooked food to eat –

pa' que el nene would be alright... the men of the family cooked the meals, she coordinated distribution. I remember the extraordinary gatherings that occurred at that 6th Street lair for years, and never visiting without the screams of "Oye Miguel" through the front sidewalk window from Loisaidans – whether Mikey Pinero, Bimbo Rivas, Miguel Loperena, Lucky Cienfuegos, The Reverend Pedro Pietri, Midnight, Daylight, Hard Rock, whoever... Mind enhancing aromas everywhere like the smells of abuela's cooking... I remember the Nuyoricans descending in San Juan during my tribe's brief displacement to that paradise... Miguel, Cienfuego, Loperena... my community had never seen so much hair... I was about 10 then when the bangs came on the front gate with Loperena screaming "The pigs got Miguel"... and how that was strange to our context, and how you, Miguel, appeared at the house later that day as if you had been out to brunch. I remember the first Cafe space on 6th Street, and one of its earliest productions: The Side Show, maybe even my cousin Naomi was in that one. Can't remember what it was about, I was too busy looking for the sister of the Salsa Twins, mesmerized that such a person could exist. I remember that the Nuyoricano put its energy behind my grandmother's first play, Miguelito el Huerfanito... Little Miguel the Orphan... and the crowds were always the same... the OWNERS of THEIR OWN BREATHING SPACES... I remember Loperena's and subsequently Miguel's opening cry... La La La le le Leeeeeee I remember the Cafe's move to a cold space on 3rd Street, and how the troops followed. I remember how the movement brought Eddie Conde, Willie Correa and Diana Gitesha Hernandez, Bob Holman, Rome Neal, Lois Griffith, Amiri Baraka, Pepe Flores, the Salsa Twins, their sister sometimes, Julio Dalmau, and so, so many others musicians and talents, and how they collectively breathed life into the space that would solidify a movement... THE NUYORICAN MOVEMENT.

I remember plays, Monk, Julius Caesar, Slams, Dancing, boundless thoughts, the government coming and taking everyone off of 3rd Street for social security fraud including a tiny 4'10 man with a beard and cane who had like 12 kids – and OVERALL AN UNDYING SENSE THAT WE BELONGED AND WERE DOING OUR OWN THING... and THE WORLD LOVED IT.

Finally, I remember us living together for a while in the Bronx with my mom, his sister, Irma Antonia Algarín, and what a magical, crazy time that was until you, Miguel, abruptly disappeared leaving us in shock only to reappear on WBAI to announce that you were HIV positive; I remember understanding why, in the beginning of that frightening era, you left to keep us safe from an unknown invader. I remember Philadelphia, Italy, California, and all those from the west who became part of the Nuyorican family, Guillermo Gomez Pena, Rudy Anaya, Jimmy Santiago Baca. I remember too much to remember and to say here... with too many great Poets, artists, and minds, but enough to thank you...and tell you I love you...

John Howard-Algarín is a judge for the Bronx 2nd Municipal Court District of the New York City Civil Court, Bronx County. He is the nephew of Miguel Algarín, founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.