

Juan PaPo Santiago



Miguel said that Hip Hop first showed up at the Cafe with the dancers. As with graffiti, its practitioners came from around the globe, but their forms were known to come from the Black experience. At the moment we were speaking, we were on the park grounds at Orchard Beach in the Bronx for an amazing annual event held by Lisa Centeno that brought Poetry and Bomba music together. I was the host of the poetry portion for most years. Miguel surprised us with his visit, he was accompanied by a fellow Boricua poet, professor, and playwright, Carlos Manuel Rivera (or as we call him, Carlito). It was a decade ago, I was one of the newer kids on the scene. Please excuse that I must paraphrase much of this, and I am painting broad strokes. Most of the conversation points I bring up here, we were fortunate to keep speaking about through the years. In this way, it is an origin story of an ongoing dialogue between elder and emerging poets.

Miguel wanted to sit under the shade of a huge tree on this hot September Saturday. He wore a black collared shirt with floral green leaves and a small stud earring on his right ear. He held a coffee cup that, if I was a betting man, did not have coffee in it. We talked about the importance of Time and Place. The Lower East Side, or as it was known to our Puerto Rican people, Loisaida. It's a very special part of New York City... historically, it is known as the place where artists congregate and shift paradigms. We talked about the Blondie song "Rapture," I had learned about it as an undergrad at Hunter College and had some concerns. Blondie raps on part of the record, and in the video, showcases graffiti heavily and dancers. Supposedly this video is the first rap video to go mainstream, and this was a controversial statement to me, she did not represent hip hop. Miguel uses this as a teachable moment and says that "Rapture" represented exactly what the Lower East Side represented for many artists, for many years, a merging of artistic cultures that would draw the marginalized toward the mainstream. It is in itself, especially with the visual aspects, a paradigm shift for music in America. That's what we are capable of as artists, changing the culture; open doors for more artists that in turn, change the culture again.

He tells me of a book written by Allen Ginsberg (of the Beat Poets), with an introduction by Williams Carlos Williams (early Boricua poet), published by Leroi Jones (better known as Amiri Baracka, one of the founders of the Black Arts movement). What was important about the book, he said, is that it represented the various marginalized voices pooling resources to let out a scream! Before the cameras came and people felt they had to split into one camp or another. Not everyone did this, but it was true that many writers started writing from the box they put

themselves into – instead of from a world they belonged in. (I would google it later and find out that book was called Empty Mirrors).

Our conversation went on for longer than I can write about here, so I will close with his gems. Miguel told me that as a poet that brings people together, it is MY job to make those people feel important. Because there are so many parts of their life, they may feel unappreciated, unheard, unloved. Miguel tells me that if he had to take money out of his own pocket to help me stage the show in a way that makes it feel like magic, to give him a call any time. And he was dead serious.

He also tells me that we remember who we are, as Puerto Ricans, as poor, as living on the margins and the hyphens. We should be fighting for representation on a world stage, while recognizing we are not our own worlds. It's all interconnected.

Little did Miguel know that I had a fellow poet from Uptown getting him a bag of weed! She showed up at the end of our conversation, and Miguel burst with laughter and appreciation. She had brought her two daughters to meet him as well, the father of Nuyorican Poetry.

And after that, Miguel and Carlito disappeared into the park with happy hearts and a joint!

Juan PaPo Santiago is a Puerto Rican writer in the Nuyorican tradition, co-founder of the ‘Capicu Cultural Showcase’ reading series, and ‘La Sopa NYC: The School of Poetic Arts’ writing workshops. PaPo believes people should own their narratives. Community is best healed from within, from people who understand its needs and honor its strengths, that draw from their lived experience to tell authentic stories. PaPo has received numerous honors including: a 2013 Comite Noviembre Award, a 2014 National Positive Impact Award, a 2016 NYS Assembly Citation of Merit, and a 2020 NYPD Community Affairs Award, for community leadership and arts. <https://www.instagram.com/paposwiggity>