

## **Kymerly Brown** **Miguel Algarín/ Remembrance**



Miguel Algarín came along at maybe the most important time in my life – when I was deciding how I was going to live my life and how my future was going to look. It was right in the middle of my undergraduate education at Rutgers University, and I now had two majors – English and Political Science to complete coursework for. Due to parental estrangement, I’d become independent financially the previous year, and my college experience had become a five-year commitment. That was not a problem for me. I loved Rutgers and all the things I had learned and studied and done there, from political activism with the Student Action Union to theater pieces at Mason Gross School of the Arts and the George Street Playhouse.

The semester before, I had a horrible experience with one of a group of “well-esteemed” professors in the English department that seriously downgraded creativity and critical thinking to a ‘B,’ even if you added what they considered “gospel” about whichever topic in British literature they were teaching. At that point, dead poets never seemed so dead!

So I was understandably suspicious of getting another of this type of teacher when I walked into the second-floor classroom in Murray Hall and met professor Miguel Algarín, my new Shakespeare professor, for the first time. He introduced himself, and somewhere in the middle of that first class, there was a moment that everything clicked – the connection between political activism and theater, between poetry and self-realization, between where I was and where I wanted to be – and I set out to find that mystical place, the neighborhood of Loisaida, where Miguel and others had brought together a community of voices through poetry, theater, and the arts when they founded the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. It was also the beginning of a life-long friendship and connection that included more love and hugs than most. It also included scholarship and legacy, as Miguel recruited me as his teaching assistant at Rutgers for his Shakespeare, Poetry of Protest, and Ethnic Literature of the U.S. courses from 1993 on, and chose me to assist him to prepare the manuscript for *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets’ Cafe* anthology. Both jobs required constant communication, intellectual dialogue, and verbal acuity; contacting, reading, conversing with, and scheduling some of the greatest living poets for class performances, ordering their books from the Rutgers Bookstore, and creating and grading student work on their poetry and plays right alongside those of Shakespeare. And Miguel was the Bard – a mix between Shakespeare, Chaucer and Neruda? – in my life. I found my land bridge to real life, and through communion with community, that mystical realism! So it was: on from the classroom, to the Nuyorican!

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe had members of all races, nationalities, religions, genders, and preferences – in a creative, peaceful and fun atmosphere that made listening not only possible but a prelude to mind-opening changes in those who participated. *Don’t Explain*, was the first play I

saw at the Cafe, and will always be my first love, but loving and then getting to assistant stage-manage the plays *Savage Wilds* and *Happy Birthday, M.F.* there for Rome Neal were great moments and opportunities Miguel brought me. But he also brought so much more, helping me to reimagine myself at a difficult time by sharing his passion, his friendship, and most especially his verbal communion, where he shared his words and you also shared yours – and I quickly found out this included poetry way before that Shakespeare course I had him for ended. Poetry was electricity!

Later on that night of *Don't Explain*, Miguel came to me and said, “Everyone is asking why you're so close to me,” followed by “I don't know, I just feel close to you.” I couldn't have explained it better. And at that moment, I also knew that poetry was going to be with me forever. I started going to the Cafe most nights, and began writing every day. I talked with Miguel often and he gave me the courage to share my words, at first with him, and then with others around him, or friend-poets I'd met at the Cafe. It wasn't long before Miguel started telling me how “he never read at the Cafe,” (but now he was so) he must be showing off for me!” Earlier that particular day, I'd bought him a Bird-Of-Paradise and he'd put it with its pine branches in a vase in front of Miky Piñero's sanctuary behind the bar at the Cafe, and I was moved. He then went to the stage and proceeded to read/sing his “*Alvin Ascends*” piece, and when he finished, said “I was kind of embarrassed to read with them, they're so fine,” and gave me a hug and a kiss. I was again moved. Coincidentally, this piece also initiated the start of going with Miguel to the Ballet – and later occasionally to the Opera – just more of the seemingly endless cultural experiences we shared beyond poetry, theater, music, and literature. Over and over again, I took communion with the community through the arts, with Miguel, and experienced that mystical realism of art and joy in daily life, in daily living.

Another time I had recited Joy Harjo's poem, “*Desire*” as well as Miguel's own “*Michael Skolnick*” poem for him at his office for a class assignment. He had closed his eyes; he was moved, I was moved. “What a way to start a day,” he'd said. I thought to myself, I bet no one has read him this particular poem out loud before, that he's never heard it read, and wondered if he knew how he had, by giving an open-ended poetry memorization/recitation assignment for which I had chosen one of his poems to recite, also inspired my own letting go of intense grief over a recent loss – a literally overnight demise from viral encephalitis of a teacher of mine and friend that'd just died. Learning how to grieve, learning how to celebrate – these were the kinds of moments I'd have with Miguel, and they would always stay with me, cheering me on in darker times.

I didn't know right away about Miguel's HIV-positive diagnosis, and don't know when I found out, most probably in his reading me his poems, but, truthfully, nothing was going to keep me away from Miguel, not even HIV/AIDS. Sometimes he got fevers or got sick, and I liked to leave a rose with baby's breath by the driver's side mirror of Maria, his '76 Buick Electra 225. She was like another player in the life, and luckily, she liked me. She started for me all the time, and Miguel let me drive her around in New Brunswick. Both setting and character, Maria holds a special place in my heart during a time I rarely drove, with smiling dreams of freedom and closeness that being in her with him always divined. In part II of Miguel's poem, “*H.I.V.*”, “*Salvation*,” the speaker posits: “If I were to show you/ how to continue holding on,” that he/she “would not share fluids” with him/her; in my copy of Miguel's “*Love Is Hard Work*,” where the

poem appears, he wrote to me: “To K. for Kindred, / Spirit of the soul, hold on just to make/ feelings stay.” Love may be hard work, but it also brings “the subsequent eternal breaking of concrete.” Miguel has succeeded in showing me how to continue hanging on, and in making feelings stay.

I could never thank the universe enough for bringing me Miguel, who bridged so many worlds, and who always embraced me for who I was inside, which somehow he could see more of or better than most others around me, and whom he trusted with certain responsibilities at a time when others around me did not – making what was possible so much larger than the version that had been presented to me growing up – and whose inspiration to share with and hear all the voices of America and understand what is, was and has really been going on, and to be the change that you want to see in the world has never left me, instead becoming a cornerstone of all that I am. And I can still hear him saying, “I love you, girl” anytime I need, because these feelings will always stay: “Two roads diverged in a wood, / and I – / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.” Bravo, Miguel Algarín! Muchas gracias y amor para siempre!

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**Kymerly Brown:** poet, singer/songwriter, English Teacher for Jersey City Public Schools for twenty-four years, mother of three beautiful daughters. Got her chops at The Living Theatre, The Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, A Gathering of the Tribes/Stoop, and CHARAS in the Lower East Side, NYC. Published in the American Book Award-winning anthology, *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe*, two volumes of *The National Library of Poetry*, and *A Gathering of the Tribes*, *Whirlwind*, *Big Hammer*, and *Long Shot* magazines. Kymerly also served as Program Coordinator for *BandWriting Collective*, a songwriting program in NYC for musicians under 18 for eight years. [www.linkedin.com/in/kymerly-brown-b51b7731](http://www.linkedin.com/in/kymerly-brown-b51b7731)