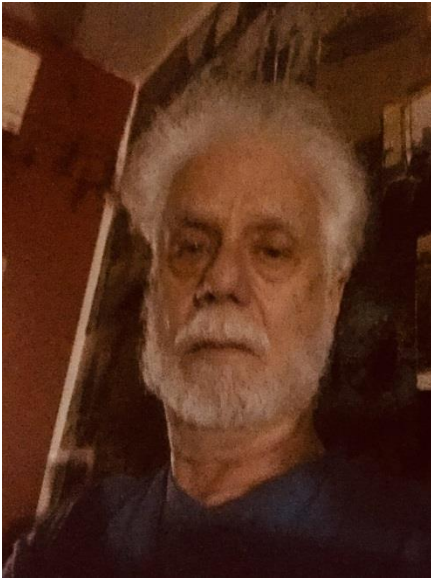


Roy Skodnick True Son of Hephaestus



He finally went and did it! After years of crisis, flirting with the final move, Algarín died. For a year or so he had been totally on ice at the Cardinal Cooke Nursing Home. Isolated, visited occasionally by old friends, without a phone, without mobility, Miguel spent his days in the Day Room at a little table sitting in his wheelchair, writing and reading.

The TV blaring didn't bother him. He had always used TV as reference, turning headlines into poems, statements, imprecations; but never the *Times*, rather the *News* and especially the *Post*, the better to stir and reflect passions, the "public" mind and intemperate attitudes. He loved the flamboyant, excessive brutal front page to demonstrate how truth comes in blows; but he sometimes ignored how truth is sacrificed to

spectacle.

Miguel was keyed into the daily news cycle, noisy rant-show biz-complaint, "blab of the pave" (Whitman), police beat-beat streets and Losaida. He long ago named the Nuyorican world as it was striving to gain public acknowledgement, long long before Jaylo and showbiz took the word and cashed in.

At the Cardinal Cooke Home, a Catholic sister who was also a poet occasionally visited him. I found them once in deep discussion. Otherwise Miguel was not surrounded by his peers. The Nursing Home was a warehouse of unfortunate lives from New York's ghettos. Yet Miguel was still making plans, had invitations for readings (so he said); but he needed to go downtown to his bank and get a phone and get mobile again. Then Covid came.

The times I saw him at Cardinal Cook were not all grim. We traded memories of friends gone and long gone. Together, we were Lear on the heath with poor Tom. We always played Shakespearean clowns, wise fools, madmen and zanies. Miguel taught Shakespeare for thirty years. We had taught *Othello* together at Livingston College. Iago was always with us, the insinuating vigor of the dense Venetian streets, rumor, complaint, innuendo, all those double edged swords and turns of hot "Italian" rhetoric that Shakespeare took from the Italian romances to render into his dramas. Miguel carried all of Othello in him, the noble general councilor to the Doge, a man of state, if fallen on hard and tragic times.

Thinking back on our long friendship, I come to the notion that what Miguel really taught was friendship of the highest order, entire grammars of gesture and demonstrative companionship. With him there was always an adventure, be it to visit a cultured old

world lady in Princeton long ago, see a ballet or conduct a discussion at dinner with Richard and David, Jim, Kathy, Marilyn, his inner circle at Rutgers in English and Comparative Literature that I joined in 1969.

Miguel was generous with his attention and when he shone his light on thee you were deeply recompensed. His trained orchestral power was always ready to play off and balance daily happenings in restaurants, kitchens and in all the rooms where we lived, most of all in the classrooms where we had been trained and taught.

Miguel was locked into a huge establishment with the elderly urban poor, a community he had served in his poet and scholar's way uniquely. But now he hadn't time or strength to take any of it on except as he suffered his own condition. I brought him Amiri Baraka's book of elegies. He leafed through it, finding compañeros.

Sharing poetic and social responsibilities, he and Amiri had been deep conspiring, even savage friends who got blind drunk sometimes and plunged into analysis of community woes. They played their poet's game of the dozens, putting down friends, laying down total critique, telling raucous tales of absurdity, fighting and turmoil on every front; hard times were more than hard and keeping it going was more more than hard, doubling up the words because to quote Lucky Cienfuegos "it beez that way."

By the end, Miguel had become in an odd way pure showbiz. I used to prod him, accuse him of "star-fucking" to interrupt his litany of star talk about Michael Jackson or Robert De Niro. He got to hang with the Broadway crowd, the Hollywood music heavies, enjoy the special party favors and pleasures, sensual rackets and diversions of late night city life.

He became a large Falstaffian man like the older Orson Wells. A long way from the first Miguel, the willow waisted aesthete I met in 1969. You wouldn't believe how he grew in girth, voice and scope of vision assessing all the streets buzzing with thick "Elizabethan" Puerto Rican Nuyorican life.

Speech on the street suited him - the entire buzz thick around him, as he walked triumphant through the torrent. "Papi!" "Oye, Papi!" He was sending out vibes, humor, imprecations, all that street crit and crazy play cajoling his people to laugh it all to rags, as Ed Dorn wrote, in rage and crazy wisdom.

Miguel heard it, spoke it, knew it in his bones, in his loins as he never stopped telling you, in his ears and (bless us all!) in his ever-glorifying mouth. Yo! Just as the community was being pushed out, the Cafe itself became a transfer agent as the well of local creativity and pride. The creation of an urban myth it turned out to be. However, at the start and well into its history, the Cafe remained a live earthquake, kids breaking through, voices cultured, judged and heard.

Commercialized, Real Estate, occupied by the university colonizing the entire village moving east. Some had homesteaded in the bad old days of street heroin, shooting

galleries. Walking past Ave A meant you knew where you were going or hey, wake up you would soon find out. Faded now into bo-bo-hemian gentrifying Manhattan cleansing the deep street danger of all beauty, dirty and otherwise, where Miguel grew up, came back to, from university and for thirty years continued to commute to university from his streets. From Mine Street, New Brunswick to Sixth Street, the first apartment and the first Cafe in the store front across the street up the block towards Avenue A.

As Baraka had, Miguel took cues as poet-leader from William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson. Took on the politics and history of place, speech and culture: the whole Shakespearean Globe on the Lower East Side. Joe Papp had supported Miguel and the Cafe to the max. Theater Workshops, plays, street actions, Miky Piñero, Lucky, Pedro Pietri, Bimbo Rivas and the old man Jorge Brandon, the great griot of Puerto Rican consciousness.

Every bartender knew him. Vodka and Cranberry Juice. Miguel always loved sitting at a bar. We used to eat at the bar years before that became de rigueur. He liked knowing the scene up front and quickly those seated around him, putting everyone on notice and (well, sometimes!) at ease. A jovial presence but often raucous, loud, outrageous. Explosive laughter!

The tributes are crashing in, remembered by the great world, his influence, his contacts, his presence as a reader, as host – initiating presence – of the Cafe. Well he deserves all that. But for me, who knew him for so long and so deep behind the public scenes, praise is not enough. The deeper story must soon be told.

A charismatic figure, Miguel led a complex social/sexual life that was sometimes Dionysian with enough Apollonian form to produce art. Only in these last years did substance abuse and alcoholism become all consuming, leaving the Cafe without guide or vision. He drifted away from all responsibilities. He had been so constant for so long, the one that kept the vessel on course, with contacts, money, producing, directing, etc. He had done this all with a rare equanimity, love and charm that seduced most anybody. But in the last years, often erupting in anger, he made impossible demands. “Buy me silver jewelry!” after his gold and eagle claws were stolen. He was still a presence at the Cafe, sitting at the bar, receiving homage, signing books and caging drinks.

I write as Miguel's editor and his oldest living friend. Oh, those gone before us! He was documenting his final inferno called *Dirty Beauty*. I read one thousand plus pages out of love, the poem's single reader threading my way through a dark dark wood where the straight way was decidedly lost. He had asked me as the first reader to provide "editorial" advice. Impossible!

The book is a diary of assignations parading as moments of vision, sex scenes with all but hydraulic diagrams (the “action” of the poetry moves as such). A notebook of compulsive repetition, this endless saga was as disturbing, if a fascinating document to a literary scholar who he had helped to fashion way back then in the turbulent groves of academe when America exploded.

Roy Skodnick was educated at Columbia and Rutgers, taught at various schools and universities; worked in the art department at The New York Times; a fellow at the Smithsonian; editor of All Area, a journal on method and place; worked with artists Ana Pellicer and James Metcalf in Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, Mexico; curated exhibitions of their work, wrote biography of Metcalf, True Son of Hephaestus (Grupo Mexico, Mexico City, 2014); afterword to Algarín's Love is Hard work; researcher and biographer for The Sehgal Foundation for Village Development in India.