

Urayoán Noel

Poetry's Transformations: Miguel Algarín Vive!



When I met Miguel Algarín in the late 1990s (gracias a Nancy Mercado) he was already a legend many times over, as founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe & main theorist & anthologist of a Nuyorican poetics that sought to use words to create spaces for "transformations before the public eye" as a "very important way of psychic cure" ("Nuyorican Literature," 1981) for all of us drowning in the physical, mental, & spiritual debris of empire. For Miguel, code-switching between English & Spanish was a crucial part of this transformative poetics: a daily part of the diasporic Puerto Rican struggle/lucha in dying industrial ciudades/cities but also a lengua/language as beautifully raw, alive, cosmopolitan, & cutting edge as his beloved Shakespeare's was in his day.

Then there was institutional code-switching! For Miguel, this might mean, on the one hand, fighting for access within existing institutions: with Miguel Piñero, he brought Nuyorican literature wide exposure & laid the conceptual foundations for a Nuyorican cultural identity through the groundbreaking Nuyorican Poetry anthology (William Morrow, 1975), &, as a longtime professor at Rutgers, he mentored generations of students, including many who would go on to be crucial contributors to Nuyorican/New York arts, culture, & activism. On the other hand, politics was for Miguel about creating alternative institutional spaces rooted in yet extending far beyond the urban realities of the Puerto Rican diaspora.

When I interviewed Miguel for my PhD dissertation, which would become the basis for my book *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (2014), I was struck by the nuanced self-awareness with which he described his complex trajectory as a poet, playwright, & community worker, & at the same time as a PhD & (distinguished) tenured professor & public intellectual. All these practices weren't independent from each other, they were interdependent though distinct, as we are. Independence, in any case, was tricky with Miguel. Whereas the Nuyorican Poetry Movement (to which he gave a home & conceptual coordinates) was largely pro-Puerto Rican independence, Miguel was not. For him, Nuyorican identity was shaped in the underbelly of empire: that was its tragedy but also its revolutionary force. Nuyoricans were double agents: they could unsettle empire from its very heart. Besides, poetry was its own independence, not in the sense of cloistered individuals writing lyrics, but of a transformative personal/social language of supervivencia (survival, but also vivencia in the Spanish sense of a [heightened] lived experience), as in the title of his 2009 selected poems *Survival/Supervivencia*.

Maybe that commitment to heightened experience &/as survival was why he chose to translate (the anticolonial, non-Nuyorican) Pablo Neruda, specifically *Canción de gesta* (1960), a book published in Cuba that rediscovers the political power of song in the aftermath of the horrors of Stalinism. Miguel's *Song of Protest* (William Morrow, 1976) finds in Neruda a poetics of Third

World solidarity rooted not in the traps of ideology (which, he reminds us in Nuyorican Poetry, diverted the Young Lords from their community roots), but in the music of poetry itself as a shared language of contestation, a poetics very much aligned with his communitarian yet in many ways anti-programmatic vision of Nuyorican literature, culture & identity, & still (a)loud & clear in the multi-ethnic continuum of his & Bob Holman's *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (Henry Holt, 1994). In his focus on the culturally specific & communitarian within a global, diasporic matrix, Miguel was far ahead of his time; what academics struggled to articulate in the 1990s with clunky terms such as "glocal" & "translocal" is something that he had already envisaged, theorized, & mobilized in the 1970s, by paying critical & creative attention to the contours of personal & community experience & struggle.

I remember reading something kind of hermetic & preciously experimental at the Cafe once & Miguel shouting at me from his spot at the back of the bar & with his usual bravado: Dale! He was letting me have it for not bringing my best energy to the stage but also encouraging me to hit it out of the park. To this day, when I need to find that extra gear for a reading or performance, I hear Miguel's voice & tell myself Dale! I think of how he let it all out in the queer utopian/dystopian explorations of his early book *Body Bee Calling (from the 21st Century)* (Arte Público, 1982), where he summons: "clap la clave straight / into our writhing body." This is a poet who understood early on how sharing our vulnerable bodies could & must be a political act, & how ideologies risked giving way to a disembodied politics that ultimately reinforced a range of systemic oppressions. That vulnerability begat a wisdom in his later poetry, a poetry that embraced the transformative power of personal & social remembering & memorializing, of writing as an embodied practice (*Love is Hard Work: Memorias de Loisaida*, Scribner, 1997). Generations of us queer Puerto Rican writers have been emboldened by Miguel's embodied, sonic, & graphic (in every sense) explorations. At the same time, it's hard to deny the homosocial, masculinist poetics of the early Nuyorican Poets Cafe, & to engage Miguel fully is to engage critically with his sometimes uncomfortable writing & being in the world (he always preferred criticality to faint praise).

Miguel was also an innovator in Afro-Puerto Rican & Afro-Latinx literature & culture, & I can't help but think of how Nuyorican Poets Theater, showcased by Joseph Papp through his Public Theater & presented at Central Park's Delacorte Theater, begins with Miguel & his mentee Tato Laviera's *Olú Clemente* (1973), which imagines Afro-Puerto Rican icon Roberto Clemente as a philosopher-griot, a Yoruba deity & spirit guide for a racialized Nuyorican imaginary, & reverberates all the way through & beyond *Action: The Nuyorican Poets Cafe Theater Festival* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), co-edited with Lois Elaine Griffith.

Warts & all, it is that irreverent spirit energy of Miguel's that I channel, honor, & celebrate, as when he would cut loose & maybe read one of the hardcore early poems he rarely did anymore at very informal community gatherings (a backyard party in the South Bronx, an almost empty reading with Pedro Pietri at the Cafe) but then get asked to do a big reading at a fancy university & leave them with 10 minutes or so of his trademark chanting. That's institutional code-switching! It all comes back in a flurry of images: Miguel brilliantly expounding on his fellow Nuyorican poets & why their work would continue to matter; Miguel with his little notebook in the corner of the Cafe; Miguel unfolding breath lines from his homegrown classic poetry book *Mongo Affair* (Nuyorican Poets Cafe, 1978); Miguel upstairs at the Cafe with its archives in

boxes that looked more fragile than even he ever would; Miguel getting closer to say how lindo (pretty) one of us looked; Miguel effortlessly & joyously code-switching from Shakespeare & old French poets to Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Ntozake Shange, or Amiri Baraka; Miguel laughing that unmistakable full-body laugh as Pedro Pietri gave me the hook with his trademark hand at the Cafe; Miguel being silly with the queers at the club; Miguel dodging questions & bluffing answers over noon cocktails; Miguel remembering his childhood Santurce & the old Loisaida; Miguel talking with the eternal gleam in his eye about ongoing projects & work yet to be done; Miguel arguing out of trickster perversity or singing a bolero in a symphony of lenguas; & siempre Miguel doing the work of channeling the drum, the always alive heartbeat of our cities & the memory of songs (sobre-vive) yet to be sung. Gracias, Miguel! Ashé!

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