

Vincent Toro

Dear Miguel,



Folks know you as the founder of the Cafe, but I knew you first as my Shakespeare professor. At Rutgers, you taught students how to read *As You Like It* through a queer lens, to critique *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* through the lens of race. You shredded the bard for writing *The Tempest* while also convincing us that Shakespeare himself couldn't see it, but Caliban was the smartest one on that island. Later, in your office, you said to me, "pero that's how they see us, Vicente, as Calibans." The only way they know how to see us." You are one of only two Boricua teachers I ever had during my nineteen-year formal education.

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So I took every course I could with you, including your creative writing classes and your Ethnic Literature in the U.S. class. You designed that class so that we had the opportunity to sit in the same room with the writers we were studying. "Why ask me about their work when you can ask them yourself," you said. We read and chatted directly with the likes of Amiri Baraka, Paul Beatty, Tracie Morris, Edwin Torres. In this class, I learned that U.S. literature IS ethnic literature, and that literature is not a museum of dead artifacts. It is alive, there are living authors making culture in our own cities, our own neighborhoods.

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But one time I cut your class, just because it was nice outside. You saw me on campus that same day and you never said a word about it. A few weeks later, you canceled class five minutes in, telling us that you were not feeling well. As the students were leaving, you stopped me and asked me to help you grab some things from your office and put them in your car. But we never made it to your office, or to your car. We headed to the Old Bay and had a three-hour lunch. When the waiter brought our food, you held up your glass of rum and raised your chin at me as if to say, "THIS is how you cut class, hermanito!"

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The school had asked you to perform for Hispanic Heritage Month. It was the first time I heard you sing, that bright bellowing storm of a voice devouring the hall of listeners. After the reading I shared with you how moved I was that you sang during your reading, and you confessed that before you ever wanted to be a poet you wanted to be a salsero. Decades later, a few days after you got all ethereal and ditched Earth, Reg. E. Gaines sent me a digital copy of you performing your poem "Sunday Afternoon," and it sent me chills to hear you sing again. A gift among gifts.

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Once it became clear I was serious about being a poet, you took me to the Cafe. I had slammed at campus events and at the local coffee house in New Brunswick, but the Nuyorican was like playing Madison Square Garden for me. I didn't feel worthy of taking the stage. I was terrified. But because you took the time to bring me there yourself, I knew there was no choice but to slam that night. My fingers trembling, I grabbed the clipboard. As I wrote down my name you squeezed my shoulder, then you vanished from the Cafe completely. I didn't see you again until class the next week.

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The week of my graduation from Rutgers, I visited you at your office to tell you I was moving to Turkey to teach. You gave me an abrazo and made me promise to come find you at the Cafe when I returned. It was a promise I did not immediately keep. I didn't come to find you again until five years had passed. When I did return, we took to meeting every week at one of your regular Lower East Side drinking spots. After a few weeks of sitting there with you nursing rum and cokes, I gathered the courage to show you the poems I had been working on. You proceeded to read sections out loud in the bar. You abruptly stopped at one particular line and pointed in silence. "That one," you said. You belted out the line, "Disemboweled wanderers that caged him." You repeated it several times, then hugged me and said, "Señor Toro, this here is your arrival." The next time we met up at the bar you invited me to read at the launch of some new literary journal. I swear, at that moment it felt like I was being knighted.

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Our happy hour meetups ceased when I moved to Texas. I let my new responsibilities as director of a theater there get the better of me, and as a result I did a horrible job of keeping in touch. Nevertheless, when I called you for a recommendation to apply to the Macondo Writer's group, you obliged me, though you did make me promise to visit the next time I was in New York. I regret very much now that another five years went by between that last phone call from Texas and when I finally visited you again. I thank our hermano Carlos Manuel Rivera for putting us back in touch. By then, your health was already waning, but we went back to meeting for happy hour (though less frequently) at your new hangout on 1st Avenue, Karma Lounge. When my first book was published, I scheduled a meetup to bring you a copy. You were quintessential Miguel that day. First you praised how beautiful the book looked, then ordered me to give a free copy to your drinking companion of the day, insisting that I also buy both of you a round, all of which I did without question or hesitation. And when I told you that I longed to celebrate the publication with a book party at the Nuyorican, you agreed to help me with that. I accepted your help, but on the condition that you attend. You vowed not to miss it. I knew when I asked that it was not entirely up to you, that your body had final say on what you could or could not do on any given day. But that day... that day your body was kind enough to get you there, and I can honestly say that your presence meant so very much, not only to me, but to all of us that gathered at the Nuyorican on that Sunday morning of the Puerto Rican Day Parade in 2016. This proved to be the last time I would ever see you, a fact that feels so literary and magical but that also fills me with regret. I intended to see you again, I really did. Unfortunately, before I could make that happen the pandemic effectively canceled all gatherings. And then you were gone.

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After studying with and being mentored by you at Rutgers, I had come to feel that the most meaningful thing I could do with my life is become that Boricua professor that other Puerto Rican youth and students of color so very much need in their classrooms. There are still shamefully too few Latinx professors and professors of color, though there are now more than I ever had, certainly more than you had, if any. I often think of all the barriers that must have been put up in front of you, a queer Afro-Puerto Rican man working and living as a poet and a profesora, how you demolished those barriers with your fierce intellect, your hurricane voice, your humor, your conviction, and your love for your gente. You created space – with the Cafe, in academia, and in the American literary landscape at large – for the rest of us to find ourselves and find each other. What you must have had to fight against just so you could provide this space, these gifts. If gifts are in fact energy meant to be shared and circulated, then I have to think it is our duty to keep alive the legacy that you helped to build and maintain by also creating space and tearing down barriers. We are here, doing that work, at least in part because of you. So rest well, Profesora Algarín. You earned that shit.

Vincent Toro is a Boricua poet, playwright, and professor. He is the author of *TERTULIA* (Penguin Random House, 2020) and *STEREO.ISLAND.MOSAIC*. (Ahsahta Press, 2016), which won the Poetry Society of America’s Norma Farber First Book award.” His play, “21,” won The Spanish Repertory Theater’s Nuestras Voces Playwriting Award. He is a recipient of poetry fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the New Jersey Council on the Arts, and the Poets House. Vincent is a Professor of Creative Writing at Rider University, contributing editor at Kweli Literary Journal, and a Dodge Foundation poet. <http://www.grito.org/professor-vincent-t.-toro.html>