

## Zero Prophet Ri-inventing the Newness

*The poet is responsible for inventing the newness*  
– Miguel Algarín



Coming up as an artist in the 1990's, I was mostly a wanna-be-poet doing political Punk Rock (and Hip Hop) music instead of spoken word and slam. My first band, Ricanstruction, did a combination of Punk meets Salsa and Rap, or sorta something like Joe Strummer of the Clash meets Hector Lavoe, with Flavor Flav as the referee, in a dark and dirty alley somewhere in the Boogie Down Bronx. We saw ourselves as a new breed of Bronx bomber Boricua doing the nuevo next shit!

Ricanstruction mostly played in squats in the Lower East Side back then, but somehow we ended up getting a gig at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe (I guess, because our name was Ricanstruction). We were so excited; after all, the Poets Cafe is the birthplace of the ground breaking Nuyorican Poetry Movement! La cuna of the culture!

The first book my father had ever gifted me was a compilation of poems published back in 1975, called *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. Edited by the founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Miguel Algarín and the outlaw poet, Miguel Piñero, it had pieces by both Miguels as well as Pedro Pietri, Lucky Cienfuegos, Sandra Maria Estevez, Bimbo Rivas, and a host of other resplendent “Nuyoricans.” I read and breathed that book over and over for years until you couldn't read the title on the spine and the cover almost came off. That little book inspired me to write and riot. In the introduction, Miguel Algarín said:

“The poet blazes a path of fire for the self. He juggles with words. He lives risking each moment. Whatever he does, in every way he moves, he is a prince of the inner city jungle. He is the philosopher of the sugar cane that grows between the cracks of concrete sidewalks. The poet studies Che, Don Pedro Albizu Campos, Mao. He carries the tension of the streets in his mind and he knows how to execute his mind in action.”

However, the Ricanstruction show at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe was a bit of a disaster. As soon as our (electric) guitarist played the very first loud, angry, discordant note of our opening song, and our very few fans and family turned the small space into one big, boisterous, moist mosh pit, some folks put their hands over their ears, a few briskly walked out, somebody tried to unplug the guitar amp(!), and we could faintly hear someone at the bar screaming “what is this mierda?!” We got through our entire set, mostly, and magically, if barely, but, yeah, we were more than a bit traumatized, as I'm sure were all the Nuyorican regulars (if for very different reasons) who were there that night.

Over a decade later, I was asked to recite at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe for a poetry event in honor of the Nuyorican poet, Jesus Papoleto Melendez, who's writing was also featured in the Nuyorican Poetry book. By then, I was fairly established (and maybe even somewhat respected) as a poet, music and mayhem maker, and I had performed at a good number of spoken word events, and was even the featured poet a few times, that is, when mi gente weren't afraid to showcase the political "puerto punk rock poet" from the projects. But I was still a bit nervous being that things had not gone over so well the many years before when I had proudly showcased my brand of nuevo-rican musica at the (in)famous Nuyo-poetry shrine.

When I entered the Cafe, I noticed that the founder of the cafe, Miguel Algarín himself, was sitting at the bar. I was starstruck so I said nary a nada and quickly dashed into the restroom. When I exited the bathroom, I heard my name being called. It was my turn to hit the stage! Had I been in the loo that long? I got up there and started to do my thing: I read, rapped, recited, railed, revolted and jumped around like a clown when my nerves got the best (or worst) of me. At one point, I even caught Miguel's eye, which for me, for some reason, made matters that much worse. What was he thinking (of me)? When I finished my last poem (without even one heckle heard!) and was about to step off the small stage and re-become the best invisible man I could be, I saw Miguel start lumbering towards the stage!... He jumped on stage (OH SHIT!)... and put his arm around my shoulder! What was happening here?!.... He then went on to say that I had inspired him to recite and proceeded to read a piece of his own. I was told later (by reliable sources) that he hadn't read anything in years!

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**Zero Prophet** an anti-corporate musician/poet/artist/agitator who is seeking to link up and build supportive/self-starting creative communities with like minded people. Last of the Po'ricans y Otros Afro-artifacts is Zero Prophet's debut poetry collection. It is a verbal and musical profusion of poetry that reflects the cultural landscapes of the perpetual islands of Puerto Rico and New York City through the eyes of a Puerto Rican born in Ponce, living in El Barrio/East Harlem and the South Bronx. Look for Zero Prophet on YouTube on the Abrazos Army Page.