

reg e gaines
Rhyming Couplets



Miguel Algarin SDnny Shot and Reg E Gaines- Loisaída, 2007

In the spring of 1993 I received a call from Miguel Algarín requesting we meet outside his 2nd Street apartment. I hop on the PATH to 9th Street and walk east. Crossing Avenue B, I see Miguel and Paul Beatty talking in front of the building. Former Grand Slam Champs and members of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe Live, were expected to teach in Miguel’s Ethnic Literature in the U.S. class, at no charge. I guess we’re off to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J. As I near the two iconic poets I hear Paul whisper a subdued, “what’s up” as he turns and enters the building. It suddenly dawns on me, Paul’s not going and that they both live there.

Miguel unlocks the car, climbs in then with his subdued buddha grin says, I would be speaking to his Shakespeare students today. I’m puzzled. This was the third year I’d done his class yet had no idea Miguel gave lectures on Shakespeare. Driving south on the New Jersey Turnpike towards exit 9 I quiz him on today’s tactics. He asks if I have a favorite Shakespeare play. With little hesitation I reply, “fuck Shakespeare.” Miguel dives into what sounds like a rehearsed speech about his love of Shakespeare and his relevance to contemporary poetry. He then suggests I begin the class reading the first line of my signature poem, which just so happens to be written in iambic pentameter. That Miguel knew anything about my writing was an utter shock. Sarcastically he asks if I knew a few of Shakespeare’s rhyming couples? I mention Freshman Honors English at Snyder High School in Jersey City and a teacher who had a thing for *Othello*. Mr. Vincent Russo was on a crusade to make certain his “underprivileged” students were all exposed to The Bard. In twenty years I’d never given Russo a moment’s thought. His presence would be felt today.

We arrived in New Brunswick. Miguel instructed me to begin class while he collected materials from his office. I strolled in the room looking like most of the students. Bubble jacket, button flys, Adidas, Negro League skully. With no introduction I begin to whisper the refrain from Danny Hoch’s Message To The Bluntman. I repeat the verse three times, raising my volume on each pass. By this time Miguel enters the room. There is almost no sound other than the echo of my voice. The imagery of Danny’s words have grabbed the student’s attention. I complete the phrase and there’s a smattering of applause. Miguel’s voice suddenly breaks into song. Well, not actually a song but a series of sounds which somehow accentuate the rhythms I’ve established. The class looks perplexed yet mesmerized. Miguel hits a final note as his voice fades. He then instructs me to “say aloud” the first line of Air Jordans. I kick it as he quickly asks the class if the syllables, beats or rhythms are recognizable. Hands rise, Miguel points to a person who replies. “It’s in iambic pentameter.” This creates instant engagement. With no introduction and no plan, Miguel is making rapid decisions seemingly off the top of his head. They seem to be based on a

desire to create a foundation for learning. He demands the term rhyming couplet to be defined using a Shakespeare example. Simultaneous voices shout out not waiting to be recognized. I spit couplets from *Othello* I did not remember I remembered. Thank you Mr. Russo. Miguel directs this free flow exchange of information and ideas not unlike a traffic cop on 42nd and Broadway at rush hour. The student's enthusiasm is infectious. I brim with confidence. Miguel is obviously in his element. Lines from Shakespeare which are foreign to my ears bounce around the room. I count syllables from Hip-Hop lyrics I love and know by heart. Surprisingly I find that the first two lines of EPMD's, "You Gots To Chill" is a rhyming couplet. Miguel engages a room full of teens who most surely would rather be bobbing their heads to Nirvana bass lines than analyzing lines from Shakespeare. He makes us all believe in the power of memory. Using what one knows to lead you where you need to go. It's a valuable lesson in trusting your gut. I've leaned on that experience ever since.

After class, we settle into the weird ambiance of the Pink Frog. Tony Spiller, Miguel's longtime attorney, slides through the door. The bartender serves them drinks, never asking what they'd like. It's time to feast. Miguel mentions how he thought I'd fuck up class because I knew nothing about Shakespeare. Sipping from a tall ice filled glass of ginger ale, I realize how right Miguel is. I don't know shit.

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