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Author(s): Miguel Algarin

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# Nuyorican Literature

## Miguel Algarin

*Livingston College/Rutgers University*

The four-hundred-year plus history of Puerto Rico is really a very simple story of greed and amorality. The men who ventured to cross the great Atlantic arrived greedy for gold and the acquisition of land, and in their wake, they left whole generations of people, whole tribes of people, dead and without any semblance of a history because all historical records were destroyed. And then, in 1917, we were all made United States citizens by Jones Law. By 1946 Puerto Rico was allowed to have its first Puerto Rican-born governor, and there are reforms in the Jones Law that make it possible for Puerto Ricans from the lower classes to come to America looking for bread, land, and liberty. This maxim really is the thing under which the idealized trip up North is sold, and so, in 1948, the Department of Labor initiated the migration to the North that was to result in a mass evacuation of the island of Puerto Rico.

What does it mean, then, to the New York Puerto Rican to have been moved to the North and to find once he gets to the North that there is no real hot opportunity going on—that the dollars are really hard to get to, that the jobs are demeaning, and that historical continuity has been totally severed? It means that only a heroic act can save what becomes the Nuyorican—the Puerto Rican caught in the urban ghettos, where the population that is economically mobile is evacuated and where businesses have long left, and where housing is falling apart, and where all semblance of hope seems to be in the direction of Uncle Sam's welfare check. What that leaves us with is a situation where what we must do is to perpetuate rituals and habits that are the remnants of an already badly weakened historical consciousness or historical self.

What happens is that the first generation of Puerto Ricans in the 1930s and 1940 boldly and heroically maintained the family traditions as intact as they could, with as much fervor as they could. However, the economic situation made it very difficult for the family to hold together, and the dissolution of the family seems to be the actual living threat we now face. At the heart of all of that, there is a loss of trust that leaves us aimless and looking for love in empty spaces. The generations have been very badly stripped of all historical consciousness, and, as I say, what's left is an

heroic attempt at a continuity which is really pale in comparison to what it could have been.

What are the roots of the New York Puerto Rican or of the Northern Puerto Rican? Those roots are really the debris of the ghettos, the tar and concrete that covers the land, the dependence on manual labor that is merely brute force, the force feeding of the young in schools that kill their initiative rather than nourish it, and the loss of trust. I know that that's not fair to say that the loss of trust is a root, but it is, and if you know that it's your root, you might do something about it.

On the more positive side, we have maintained our music, we have put down in New York something that is called *salsa*, and we have carried forward into the 1980s, the Black man's religion, a mixture of Catholicism and African religions, and most importantly, we carry on the oral tradition—the tradition of expressing self in front of the tribe, in front of the family. The holding force in that expression is a feeling and commitment that becomes the deepest bond of trust that we have going at the moment. The conflicts are very many. Languages are struggling to possess us; English wants to own us completely; Spanish wants to own us completely. We, in fact, have mixed them both.

The acculturation is happening very, very quickly, but the bilingualism is helping curb it, so I hope we don't end up like the Polish-Americans. We create poems for ourselves; poverty keeps us away from the space and time that composing long prose pieces require, but that is changing too. So what does the future hold? The future will be procured by what we do that is cultural in the present, so that we are not so much chasing the tradition of a culture as we are putting it down. We do not so much look to the historical development of Puerto Rican literature as much as we just lay down the poem on the page. Our usage and our new content is going to struggle with the forms and the old meanings, but that is again nothing new, and we will continue to fight that struggle.

Puerto Rican literature is alive and well in New York. Its vibrancy stems from Point Zero. When you have nothing and can expect nothing, anything you do is something, so that our experience makes it possible for us to write poems that describe our actual conditions without fearing that they might be too personal or too lost in the detail of the day and not metaphorical enough. The consequence of having that content freed of standards that kept white American writers enslaved for so many years brings with it a blessing, and the blessing is that language can be worn again and

and it can be worn as feeling; you can feel it all over again, since it is something you have just learned.

The persistence of Spanish as a live form of expression makes it even richer because like all European tongues, this mixing of Spanish and English is an old phenomenon, and at the edges of the Latin Empire, French, Portuguese, Rumanian, Italian were all considered the vulgar languages—at the edges of the Empire, and they were really just reflecting constant and daily usage, so that their irregular verbs or irregular usages became dialects which in the ultimate passage of time made the formal respected languages of today. We expect to be able to do the same by mixing Spanish and English and not fearing the present insistence on the part of those who fear it—they claim that if we go the route of mixing languages, we will be ignorant in both and control neither. That's nonsense—language is serviceable on the streets, not in compositions for expository writing, and everyone knows that. If language functions on the street and is useful in conducting the economy of the tribe, it will grow. So the roots of the Puerto Rican literature are in the New World in the urban centers now being evacuated by the white part of the society, and we are inheriting dead cities with no industry and no money to rehabilitate them or to start business again. So the attitude must be something about the future, something about establishing patterns of survival all over again. I don't know that we will have enough time to do it or that there will be any need for it, if, in fact, there is nuclear aggression.

I would say that the Nuyorican esthetic has three elements to it. The first is the expression of the self orally and the domination of either language or both languages together to a degree that makes it possible for you to be accurate about your present condition—psychic, economic, or historical, and I think that the first steps are always oral. The second reality of the New Nuyorican esthetic is that if we are to procure the future, we have to create a discourse between ourselves about setting up systems of protection and mutual benefices, and those in the urban centers of the Northeast are very hard and very difficult things to do, but if we don't, we will find that in the next ten to fifteen years, there will be roving bands of young women and of young men in numbers of fifteen to twenty, all serf-dependent, but mutually aggressive, aggressive against any other band of kids, and those are what you call the gangs inside of the urban centers. We need to be making a discourse that procures our future by realizing that we must establish a constitution for survival on top of tar and concrete, so we must put it down, or we make beer can roses. The second part has a little (a) to it, which is something to do with prosody—the ways in which we use the languages. English has a stress on stress system; Spanish has a syllabic

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system. I think that Nuyorican verse is a combination of both and it is also doing something that Charles Olson took great pains in his essay on projective verse to clarify, which is that the kingpin of English written verse is the syllable. I don't know why he decided to say that in the '50s, but he did, and it is accurate, and we can prove it by our poems and the black man in America can prove it, because the more he depends on the syllable, the more the language can become his, he having the problem of having lost all other traces of ethnicity.

The last thing about the Nuyorican esthetic is something I counsel for anybody looking for art or looking to art to relieve him or her, and that is the transformations before the public eye are a very important way of psychic cure. In other words, create spaces where people can express themselves and create that space expressly for that purpose, and you open it three to four times a week, and you wait, and your public will come, and they will bring their writings. And if you, as guide of the space, have a generosity of spirit, you will find that you will have created a center for the expression of self and for people to transform themselves before the public eye.