

'Nuyoricans' Express Pain and Joy in Poetry

*but meanwhile your neon signs tell
the real truth: you are bilingual
Puerto Rico you are NUYORICAN
on your own home soil!*

—Miguel Algarin

By DAVID VIDAL

About 10:40 P.M., Miguel Algarin rises to face the audience and says, "Buenas Noches." Then, in English, he adds, "Tonight we have a lot to read, so we better get started early."

There are about 40 young men and women, largely second- and third-generation Puerto Rican New Yorkers who call themselves "Nuyoricans," in the crowded storefront cafe at 505 East Sixth Street, on the Lower East Side. Some are poets, some are listeners.

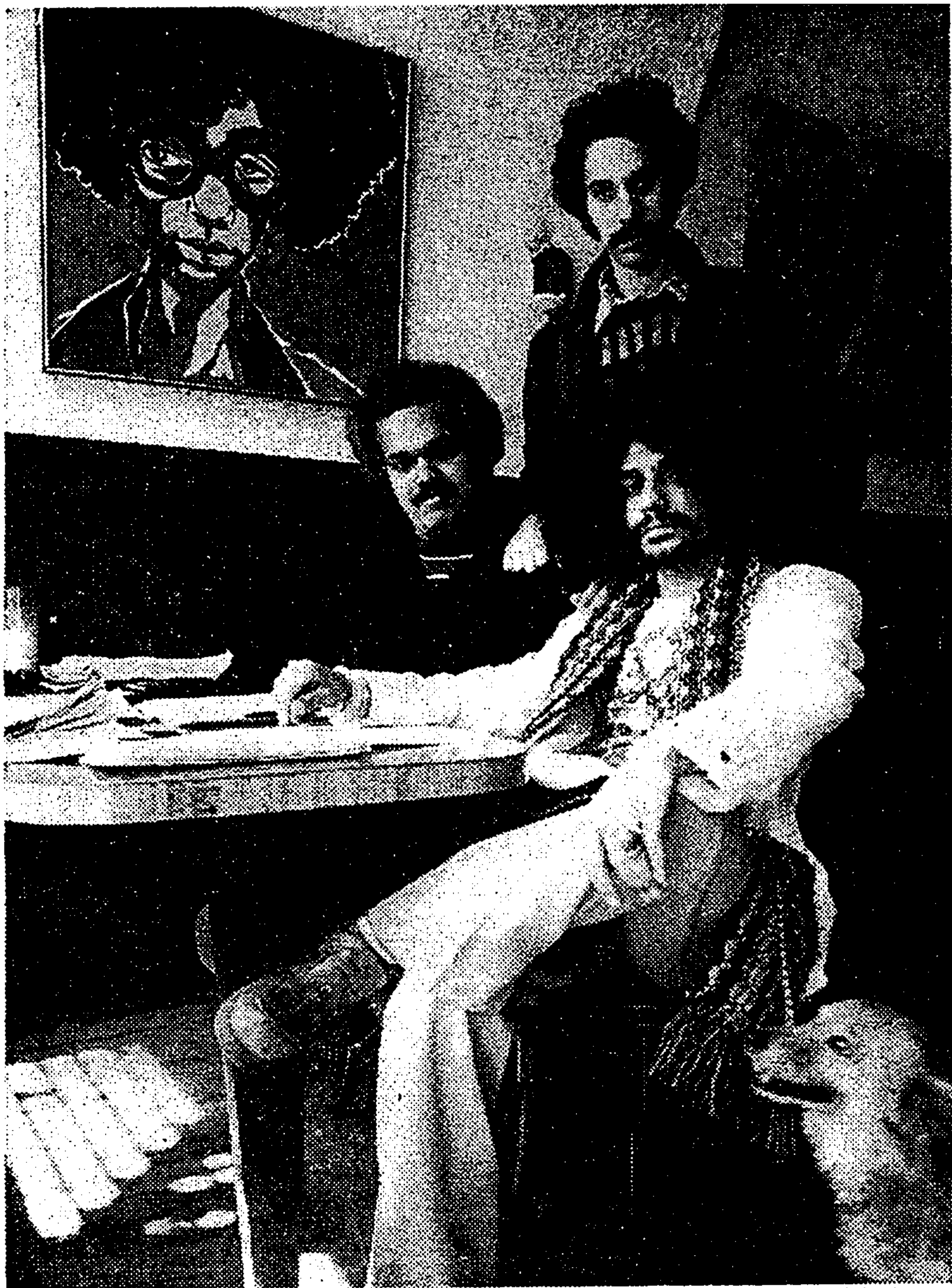
Another evening filled with a new, intensely cathartic poetry that was born on New York City's streets, and whose readings have been stretching long into the night every Wednesday

through Sunday since Halloween, has begun at the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe.

The readings, by a group of young artists whose writings reflect the anger, despair, pride, identity conflict and hopes of the children of the young marriage between New York and its Puerto Rican population of more than one million people, have been attracting growing audiences in a dynamic cultural phenomenon on the Lower East Side.

Their ages and backgrounds vary. Jorge Lopez was only 9 when his poems were heard last year. Martita Morales is 16 and already has had some of her work published. She is from the

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Miguel Algarin, seated at left, Richard August, standing, and Lucky CienFuegos discussing poetry at the cafe they run at 503 East Sixth Street.

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'Nuyoricans' Express Their Pain and Joy in Poetry at New Cafe

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neighborhood, but others came to the cafe from Brooklyn, the Bronx or Upper Manhattan.

Lucky CienFuegos is 25. His head is crowned with a huge Afro hairdo that makes him look taller than he actually is. His scarf dangles from his shoulders to his shoulders to his knees, but that is not as noticeable as the rainbow colors of the shirts that top his jeans.

"I have always been going back and forth between Lajas and New York," he says, referring to his birthplace in the southeastern countryside of Puerto Rico.

"But I've always lived on the Lower East Side," he adds, noting that his flat next door to the cafe is also to become a stage for dance work that he and the others plan.

"The Influence of Don Quijote" is the title of one of his poems:

*"Screws screwing spinning twirling
the mind moving
the mood of time with the looney
tunes transforming humans
into cartoons.
Cold frozen ice cubes bathing
themselves in the veins of
Don Quijote . . ."*

"When I was young in Puerto Rico I met a tourist who took me to St. Thomas and left me stranded, so I wrote a poem," says Mr. CienFuegos, who adds that the very first thing he ever wrote was a song called "Please Don't Leave Me in This Misery." He "survives" off his poetry readings and his plays, such as "Flamin-

go," which just opened at the cafe.

Noel Rico is a 23-year-old student of English at Long Island University. He lives on the Upper West Side, near 145th Street and Broadway, but his family has a home in Brentwood, L.I., where they moved from the South Bronx when he was 14.

"To a very real extent, they have embraced the American Dream," says Mr. Rico.

A frequenter of the cafe since last January, he calls it a "point of reference" he had not been able to find elsewhere. He was named Most Likely to Succeed when he was graduated from high school in Brentwood. Later he attended Colby College in Waterville, Me.

"There was always a tendency to deny the American part and make a blind grab for the Puerto Rican part," he said with reference to a social dynamic he has felt and seen among other second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans here.

"But there should be an equal embracing of the two," he said. "To me Luis Llorens Torres is just as much a part of me as Walt Whitman, and the differences between the languages is a question of temperature. English is colder, but the heat from the Spanish is rubbing off on the English."

Torres (1878-1944) was a Puerto Rican journalist lawyer and poet whose writings contain the seeds of what was to become a search for

Puerto Rican identity by many other writers.

For Mr. Rico, the "equal embracing" of his two parts began in Maine.

"I had an affair with a young lady who all her life had this stereotype of Puerto Ricans as being like in West Side Story," he said. "That experience was heavy. From it I learned that we all share the same pains, but express them in different tongues."

But even more indicative of the reconciliation between his Puerto Rican and American parts, he says, is the existence of a son of his in Arizona. The son is half Navajo, half Puerto Rican, and Mr. Rico says that "the fact that there is something like that out there is very symbolic of my marriage to America."

Miguel Algarin is a writer. An assistant professor of English literature at Livingston College of Rutgers University, he also is one of the founding members of the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe.

Born in Puerto Rico, raised on the Lower East Side by working-class parents, Mr. Algarin, 34, still lives in the area, just a few houses down the block from the cafe.

"The most exciting thing has been getting out into a world where writing is done by the impulse people feel, rather than because of an assignment they may get," he adds.

The other leaders of the artists' movement that he belongs to include Mr. CienFuegos and Richard August, who comes from Brooklyn

and makes his living by directing plays, and Miguel Piñero, who won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1974 for the best American play, with "Short Eyes," a work based on his experiences in an upstate prison.

A book of poems by more than a dozen of these Nuyorican writers, "Nuyorican Poetry, an Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings," has just been published by William Morrow & Company, in English and Spanish or both—a "Nuyorican dialect" that the writers see as just being born. Its possibilities are broad, they say, because English nouns often lend themselves for conversion into verbs in the Spanish of their poems. Spanish verbs may in turn become adjectives.

Outsiders have been attracted by these artists, too, and a poetry festival where they all meet is on for the rest of May. Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and William Burroughs are among the invited guests. They see in the Nuyorican poets the kind of dynamism and vitality that they recall from the days of the Beat Generation poets in San Francisco.

For the summer, a cabaret is being readied in the backyard of the cafe as more and more writing comes forth. Three additional books are due to be published in the coming months by their own Nuyorican Press, founded with the cafe, which replaced an Irish bar.

To Mr. Algarin, "the existence of the cafe represents the visibility of the poems." The neighborhood of three- and four-family row tenements is not quite rundown, but does appear neglected. Youths in the area have developed adopt-a-building programs to reverse the deterioration that threatens to come in with the abandonment of neighborhood buildings.

The artists had experimented with other locations for the cafe, "until we learned that if you are going to do popular theater for the people you have to do it in the community in the first place," Mr. Algarin said.

Passersby, young and old, have been attracted to this

symbol of new cultural expression from as far away as the Bronx, united "by the sense of not having to let go in order to survive; we are not forced to drop our language in some sort of search for American citizenship," says Mr. Algarin.

It is about 11 o'clock now on this evening at the cafe.

The conga drums have ceased, but their rhythm returns intermittently, with a dash of guitar added. The animated conversation in Spanish and English, or both, has quieted as the poems demand their moment. Cups and glasses filled with coffee, beer or red wine click no more atop the half dozen tables on the left side of the room, or along the book-decorated bar with about 14 high chairs on the right.

The cafe's dim amber lights bounce against some of those standing in the audience, against the paintings of neighborhood artists that deck the walls, against the flower pots hanging inside the unpainted window that looks onto a dark sidewalk.

The darkness is surely merrier now, for there are no more available seats and the crowd has fast grown to more than 60 people.

The Nuyorican state of mind is a collective experience here, and the listeners sometimes encourage the poet by shouts of "Right On!" or "You Got it, Sister." But sometimes the poet feels his private experience is so strong and the possibilities for group understanding amid verbal outpourings so few that he may dejectedly return to his seat, abruptly cutting off his reading.

*Weaver
weave us a song of many
threads
that will dance with the colors
of our people
and cover us with the warmth
of peace.*

Sandra Maria Esteves has so written her understanding of this collective spirit to create by Nuyoricans.

*inside the self
that's what the street
nuyorican has to learn
for survival . . .
he knows salvation is from
inside
the self . . .*

To Miguel Algarin's way of writing, that is what it all means.