

BECOMING JULIA DE BURGOS

The Making of a
Puerto Rican Icon

VANESSA PÉREZ ROSARIO

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"On Pérez Rosario's brilliant reconstruction, Julia de Burgos recovers the thrill and the sting of her own legacy. She also glows with the flashes of brilliance her work ignited in Latin American artists who found her, and themselves through her, in the de-territorialized nowhere or utopia of New York. From that same fraught city, where heritage identities and trajectories become burdens akin to the Holy Grail, this book brings a major poet and activist into focus as incitement to read more and to write bravely."

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"*Becoming Julia de Burgos* is a smart and original study of this important poet and cultural figure. Vanessa Pérez Rosario is an astute and insightful reader of Burgos's poetry, letters, and journalism. Pérez Rosario is also a talented cultural historian: in addition to [offering] readings that yield political and aesthetic dimensions of Burgos's writing, Pérez Rosario also contextualizes Burgos's life transnationally, placing her at the center of debates among Puerto Rican intellectuals about gender, colonialism, and cultural identity. An important study from an exciting and talented new critical voice."

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"In this beautifully written and thoroughly researched study, one of the most important artistic and literary icons of the Nuyorican and Latino diaspora finally gets her due. Vanessa Pérez Rosario gives us the most current and definitive resource to understand not only Julia de Burgos's extensive body of work, but also the expansive cultural movement that continues to find inspiration in her legacy."

—Arlene Dávila, *author of Culture Works:
Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas*

"*Becoming Julia de Burgos* makes a truly significant contribution to multiple fields as it demonstrates the commitment and attention to local histories and locations, set into larger contexts, that marks the best work in Puerto Rican and Caribbean Studies."

—Elizabeth Rosa Horan, *co-editor of This America of Ours:
The Letters of Gabriela Mistral and Victoria Ocampo*

BECOMING JULIA DE BURGOS

published with a grant
Figure Foundation
where the road wind poet

To my parents,
Carmen and Frank Pérez

“The voice of an epoch is in the words of its poets.”

—Victor Hernández Cruz

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	1
1. Writing the Nation: Feminism, Anti-Imperialism, and the Generación del Treinta	15
2. <i>Nadie es profeta en su tierra</i> : Exile, Migration, and Hemispheric Identity	46
3. <i>Más allá del mar</i> : Journalism as Puerto Rican Cultural and Political Transnational Practice	69
4. Multiple Legacies: Julia de Burgos and Caribbean Latino Diaspora Writers	94
5. Remembering Julia de Burgos: Cultural Icon, Community, Belonging	123
Conclusion: Creating <i>Latinidad</i>	147
Notes	151
Bibliography	167
Index	183

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1. Julia de Burgos, ca. 1934–38	2
2. Julia de Burgos to Augusto Calderón, 19 May 1953	11
3. Julia de Burgos and Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón, ca. 1939–42	48
4. Flyer for poetry reading by Julia de Burgos, 10 May 1940	57
5. Jesús Colón, ca. 1973	72
6. <i>Pueblos Hispanos</i> mission statement, 1943–44	75
7. “Estadidad o Independencia?” flyer, 4 November [1945]	78
8. <i>Pueblos Hispanos</i> , 3 July 1943	82
9. Julia de Burgos, ca. 1936–39	132
10. Julia de Burgos Boulevard	141
11. La Bruja and <i>Remembering Julia</i> mural, 6 July 2011	145

Color plates, following page 126

1. *Homenaje a Julia de Burgos*, by Lorenzo Homar, 1969
2. *Corazones y flores para Julia*, by Juan Sánchez, 1994
3. *El pensamiento de Julia*, by Belkis Ramírez, 1991
4. *Despierta*, by Yasmín Hernández, 2005
5. *Julia de Burgos*, by Yasmín Hernández, 2006
6. *Carpeta, Julia*, by Yasmín Hernández, 2007
7. *A Julia de Burgos*, by Andrea Arroyo, 2009
8. *Remembering Julia*, by Manny Vega, 2006
9. *Soldaderas*, by Yasmín Hernández, 2011

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning hours of 5 July 1953, two New York City police officers spotted a figure on the ground near the corner of Fifth Avenue and 106th Street in East Harlem. As they approached, they saw the body of a woman with bronze-colored skin. Once a towering woman at five feet, ten inches, she now lay in the street, unconscious. They rushed her to Harlem Hospital, where she died shortly thereafter. The woman carried no handbag and had no identification on her. No one came to the morgue to claim her body. No missing person's case fit her description. She was buried in the city's Potter's Field. One month later, the woman was identified as award-winning Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos. Her family and friends exhumed and repatriated her body.¹

When I began writing about Julia de Burgos, I hesitated to mention her notorious death, seeking to move away from the narratives of victimhood that have shrouded her life for more than half a century. I wanted to focus on her poetry, her activism, and her legacy. Most Puerto Ricans already know her story, and many both on the island and in New York have been captivated by her life. However, I soon realized the importance of recounting even the most difficult details as I introduced her to new audiences. Her migration experience and her death on the streets of New York capture the imaginations of readers everywhere. *Becoming Julia de Burgos* builds on recent approaches to her work that focus on movement, flow, and migration.² This book proposes a new way of reading Burgos's work, life, and legacy, focusing on the escape routes she created to transcend the rigid confines of gender and cultural nationalism.

In Puerto Rico, the Generación del Treinta (Generation of the 1930s) writers created cultural works that responded to Antonio S. Pedreira's *Insularismo* (1934), an influential account of the shaping of Puerto Rican culture



Figure 1. Julia de Burgos, ca. 1934–38. Miriam Jiménez Collection, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, City University of New York.

and character, which asks, “¿Cómo somos y qué somos los puertorriqueños globalmente considerados? [How and what are we Puerto Ricans globally considered?].” The writers of this generation were obsessed with totalizing genres that they believed would heal the wounds of colonialism. They rooted Puerto Rican national identity in the land. Puerto Rican studies scholars have noted that the literary canon created and imposed by the *treintistas* (1930s writers) in a colonial society has taken the place of a national constitution and

compensated for the lack of an independent nation-state.³ Lyric poetry was demoted and assigned marginal status.⁴ For the 1930s writers, the pleasure and eroticism of such poetry constituted an excess that threatened the nation. With her imagery of waterways, routes, and pathways, Burgos creates a dynamic subject that could not be fixed or contained, placing her among the historical *vanguardias*.⁵ She attempts to create escape routes as a liberatory strategy, but in the end she confronts similar patriarchal structures abroad, suggesting that migration is not a liberatory strategy. She satisfied her quest for freedom through the imagination. While themes of Puerto Rican independence and U.S. imperialism cut across her work, other important motifs include the rights of women and their struggle to assert themselves in a patriarchal society.

The escape routes in Burgos's poetry, in her prose, and in her creatively productive life in San Juan, Havana, and New York helped her write herself out of the nation, challenge the work of the *treintista* writers, and provide routes for other island-based writers who chose to work from a position of exile. These routes allowed her to write herself out of a nation that consigned her—a working-class woman of African descent—to the role of a housewife and mother.⁶ Her deployment of paths, routes, and journeys is not limited to her poetry. These themes permeate her prose, her letters, and her life. Juan Gelpí notes that Burgos creates a nomadic subject in her poetry.⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggest that the nomadic subject develops in open spaces, in environs without horizons, such as the steppe, the ocean, and the desert. While the migrant moves from one destination to the next, for the nomadic subject, "every point is a relay and exists only as a relay."⁸ Rosi Braidotti extends Deleuze and Guattari's work to suggest the possibilities of nomadism for feminist agency. The basis of a feminist nomadic consciousness can be found in the various maps through which feminists exit phallocentrism. According to Braidotti, "Nomadic consciousness is a form of political resistance to hegemonic, fixed, unitary, and exclusionary views of subjectivity."⁹ The routes that Burgos creates to escape the heteropatriarchy of the Generación del Treinta nation builders also create spaces in which gay, lesbian, Nuyorican, and Puerto Rican writers on the margins can have fruitful interactions and encounters. In life and in the literary works of many of these writers, Burgos becomes a figure of sexile, a person who migrates because of his or her gender or sexuality. Braidotti notes that "nomadic shifts endorse a creative sort of becoming; they are a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters, and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience and knowledge."¹⁰

Burgos's death is the stuff of legend. Gossip shrouded her life, but her death made her the subject of great storytelling, myth, and speculation. Edward Said notes that prominent intellectuals are often symbolic of their time: "In the public consciousness they represent achievement, fame, and reputation which

can be mobilized on behalf of an ongoing struggle or embattled community.”¹¹ Burgos became a symbol of her time. In the only biography of her to date, Juan Antonio Rodríguez Pagán highlights the creation of Burgos as a cult figure: “Se va tejiendo en torno a su persona una leyenda . . . que la rescata para siempre de la muerte y del olvido [A myth is woven around her life . . . which saves her eternally from death and oblivion].”¹² Among critical scholars on the island, her life often symbolizes the nation; she is remembered as “la expresión de la conciencia nacional puertorriqueña ante la crisis de identidad que representa ser absorbidos por la cultura norteamericana [the expression of Puerto Rican national consciousness faced with assimilation into North American culture].”¹³ Puerto Rican literary critic José Emilio González writes that her intensity “era el grito herido de nuestra conciencia nacional en la soledad de nuestra noche política [was the wounded cry of our national conscience reflecting the solitude of our darkest political hour].”¹⁴

It is not surprising that many people see Burgos as symbolizing the nation. Her life dramatizes a series of sociohistorical problems that define an important era in Puerto Rico’s history—from the 1917 signing of the Jones Act, which extended U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans, to the 1952 status change under which the island became a free associated state. Although Burgos was born in 1914, her birth year is often cited as 1917, coinciding with the Jones Act. The origin of this confusion is unclear, but a 1917 birth date reinforces her status as a symbol of this defining moment.¹⁵ Burgos’s death in 1953, just a year after the island became a free associated state, represents the idea that Puerto Rican culture (supposedly) died at the time of the island’s absorption into a politically ambiguous relationship with the United States. As with other historical figures who represent their nations, some observers seek to sanitize Burgos’s story and legacy. As time passes, her story is co-opted and serves the nation as well as the diaspora. Yet understanding Burgos’s life and works requires understanding her struggle against hegemony and her enduring belief that political action will enable radical democratic principles of social justice and equality to shape a better world.

During the first half of the twentieth century, many island-based writers, musicians, and artists scripted Puerto Rican migration as both tragedy and cultural contamination.¹⁶ Rafael Hernández’s classic *jíbaro* (peasant) song, “Lamento borincano” (Puerto Rican Mourning, 1929), and René Marqués’s play, *La carreta* (*The Oxcart*, 1953), are salient examples. Written in New York (most likely in East Harlem, where Hernández lived), “Lamento borincano” decries the social and economic conditions that led so many to migrate in search of work.¹⁷ The characters in Marqués’s play leave their rural Puerto Rican town in search of the American Dream in New York City. However, the culture shock of incompat-

ible values and the city's dehumanized modernity and hostility traumatize the matriarch, Doña Gabriela, and her family. Their only hope is to return to their former peasant lives. Puerto Rican scholar Juan Flores notes that in the play, "the entire migration experience is presented as a process of abrupt moral and cultural deterioration."¹⁸ *La carreta* was celebrated both in Puerto Rico and internationally for more than a generation as the classic literary interpretation of recent Puerto Rican history.¹⁹ To many observers, Burgos embodies the *carreta* of Marqués's canonical play. She becomes a metonym for the island itself, her life a version of the narrative of migration as tragedy. She is consumed by the city, just as the island is consumed by U.S. imperialism.

Puerto Ricans in New York who came of age in the 1970s remembered Burgos's migration experience differently than did those on the island. Participants in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s saw her experiences of isolation, financial hardship, and delegitimized existence as illustrating the need for solidarity, coalition, and community. Burgos's life story reminds Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves of her mother, her Titi Julia, and "all those families who came to the United States with dreams expecting to find work and a better life, but instead encountered a different reality."²⁰ Burgos's life evokes the experiences of those migrants who faced discrimination and criminalization because of their linguistic and cultural differences, race, class, and gender. Her poetry binds the experiences of Puerto Rican women, energizing and legitimizing collective emancipatory strivings for many Puerto Ricans in New York. In her final poems, written in English in the months before her death, Burgos wrote of the loneliness, despair, and anguish that shroud the migrant's experience. In theme and emotional inflection, her work and her life inspired the work of a generation of Puerto Rican diaspora writers who came into their own during the 1970s.²¹

The way in which artists and writers have deployed Burgos is important to her legacy. The final two chapters of this book explore Burgos's influence and presence in the contemporary public imaginary as captured in the work of writers and visual artists. In New York in particular, writers and artists pick up on Burgos as an early figure of exile and on what I refer to as the feminist nomadic subject in her poetry. The cultural production of Puerto Rican writers and artists in New York exceeds the narrowly defined cultural nationalism of the *treintista* writers and cannot be reconciled within the boundaries of Pedreira's *Insularismo*.²² The intellectual who writes from exile "does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still."²³ While Burgos's legacy has in some cases been used to symbolize tragedy, this book explores those writers and artists who invoke her memory to "always move away from the centralizing authorities