

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

Queens College

---

2017

### The Afterlives of Julia de Burgos

Vanessa Pérez-Rosario  
*CUNY Queens College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc\\_pubs/580](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/580)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

# The Afterlives of Julia de Burgos

Vanessa Pérez-Rosario

In the summer of 2004 I traveled from California where I was living at the time to New York City to begin research on what would later morph into *Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon*.<sup>1</sup> In advance of my trip, I had been connected virtually to Jack Agüeros (1934–2014), a New York Puerto Rican community activist, poet, writer, and translator and the former director of El Museo del Barrio. Agüeros had authored four collections of poetry, but my real interest in meeting him during my summer research trip was because of his translations of Burgos's poetry that he published in *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos*, the only bilingual edition of her complete works.<sup>2</sup> We agreed to meet to talk about this anthology, translation, and his fascination with Burgos in his neighborhood at Taza de Oro. We chatted for about an hour, and before I had a chance to ask him any of the questions I had carefully prepared, he abruptly brought the conversation to an end by asking me what time I would be returning in the morning. I had planned to spend the rest of my research trip in New York at the library and archives at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies.<sup>3</sup> I had not planned to take up any more of his time.

In a great display of generosity, Agüeros made available to me boxes of papers, letters, newspaper articles, and flyers for events on Burgos that he had collected over the years.<sup>4</sup> He set up a space for me to work in his living room while he worked in his office. Every morning I would pick up two cortados on the corner, one for him and one for me, before heading upstairs to his apartment. During work breaks we would chat about the materials I had been reading, or Burgos's letters that he was in the process of translating and preparing to publish, or the FBI file on Burgos that had taken him years to obtain.<sup>5</sup> It was an unexpected gift; he shared decades of his work with me. Before returning home, I made copies of the letters, the FBI file, and other relevant documents to take back to California with me. Several years later, when I moved to New York City to begin teaching at the City University of New York, I learned that Agüeros had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease shortly before I met him that summer. His decision to hand over a lifetime of work to a stranger now made more sense to me. In 2009, when I attended an event to raise money for his medical expenses, I reintroduced myself to him and thanked him for his intellectual generosity that summer. He didn't recognize me or remember how he had facilitated the development of my book project, but he thanked me for remembering him. The traces of Burgos that Agüeros had collected and meticulously organized

<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); hereafter cited in the text. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> See Jack Agüeros, *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 1993); *Correspondence between Stonehewers* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose, 1991); *Sonnets from the Puerto Rican* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose, 1996); *Lord, Is This a Psalm?* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose, 2002); Julia de Burgos, *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos*, ed. and trans. Jack Agüeros (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, City University of New York, [centropr.hunter.cuny.edu](http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu).

<sup>4</sup> Agüeros's archive was acquired in 2012 by Columbia University as part of an initiative led by Frances Negrón-Muntaner and the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race to collect papers and records of Latino artists and activists in New York. See [library.columbia.edu/news/libraries/2012/20120918\\_jack\\_agueros.html](http://library.columbia.edu/news/libraries/2012/20120918_jack_agueros.html).

<sup>5</sup> María Consuelo Sáez Burgos, Burgos's niece, had allowed Agüeros to make copies of all of Burgos's letters.

deepened my interest in the Burgos myth, symbolism, identification, and icon for Puerto Ricans living in New York that would later become the focus of *Becoming Julia de Burgos*. Agüeros's fascination with the icon in turn sparked a curiosity in me to understand the production of the afterlives of the poet among Nuyorican writers and artists. My response to this *Small Axe* book discussion begins here, with this personal anecdote about Agüeros's generosity, as a way to think about intellectual genealogies, generations, and iconicity themes explored by Rebeca Hey-Colón, Edna Acosta-Belén, and Jossianna Arroyo in their insightful and gracious reflections on *Becoming Julia de Burgos*. The three essays make clear that engaging Burgos's work and icon is a fruitful endeavor in the twenty-first century. Rather than offering a direct response to these essays, I will address parts of them as I offer some reflections on why Burgos is a writer of this moment and how the Burgos icon has been mobilized in debates around gender, race, and nationhood, across generations and in multiple contexts making her a border icon through which the cultural tensions of the border between Puerto Rico and New York are negotiated and contested. I will also offer some clarifications on my motivations and general approach to *Becoming Julia de Burgos*.

My interest in Burgos started with a fascination with the range of stories, at times conflicting and contradictory, told about her in multiple cultural contexts, primarily in Puerto Rico and New York, and what those stories say about us, the people who tell them. From the beginning, what motivated this project, quite apart from what drew me to her poetry, was my interest in recognizing and interrogating the Burgos icon. How did she become an icon? How has the icon become so powerful? How has it evolved as a national, transnational, and border icon? What does its popularity say about those who created it? Icons are defined as a person or thing that is regarded as a representative symbol, that carries a certain fixed meaning, and that is often considered to be worthy of veneration. Constructed by communities, these symbols rely on the presence of an interpretive community that is able to recognize them and read them as iconic.<sup>6</sup> A careful analysis of the history of the treatment of these figures and their reception can offer insight into the cultural epics and melodramas of the nation, since these objects are used to channel strong emotions in large groups of people. Icons require shared cultural knowledge and act as signifiers of collective aspiration. While icons are often deployed in the service of the nation, I was intrigued by how the Burgos figure is claimed by Puerto Ricans in both Puerto Rico and New York. Rather than symbolizing a certain fixed meaning, Burgos absorbs a range of contradictory meanings, as symbols often do. As such, Burgos is a border icon, one that inhabits the contact zone, that third space between Puerto Rico and the United States.<sup>7</sup> The tensions of gender, language, race, and nation are negotiated, contested, disputed, and mediated through her figure and through interpretations of her life and work. *Becoming Julia de Burgos* opens with Burgos's death in anonymity on an East Harlem street and the moment when her body is exhumed and repatriated (1), because this is the moment when the Burgos myth is created. One of the principle reasons that Burgos as a figure elicits veneration and followers who are committed to her trace, to the endurance of her work and

---

<sup>6</sup> See Dianna C. Niebylski and Patrick O'Connor, "Reflections on Iconicity, Celebrity, and Cultural Crossings," in Dianna C. Niebylski and Patrick O'Connor, eds., *Latin American Icons: Fame across Borders* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 1–18.

<sup>7</sup> For more on border icons, see Robert McKee Irwin, "Joaquín Murrieta and Lola Casanova: Shapeshifting Icons of the Contact Zone," in Niebylski and O'Connor, *Latin American Icons*, 61–72.

legacy, is precisely because of how blurry, murky, and ambiguous her image is, because of the belief that at any moment she might disappear. The desire to rescue her for our collective memory is rooted in her death in anonymity and her burial in Potter's Field: we want to save her, give her a name, and reconstruct her nebulous portrait.

One of the responses to the book that has always intrigued me is the investment in what I call the "facts" of Burgos's life. Did she write in English? Did she really die of alcoholism? Why are there murals of her and a street named after her in El Barrio and not in the South Bronx, if we know that she lived there? These questions reveal the way Burgos is an object of conflicting cathexes. These questions, I feel, miss the symbolism of the icon. In reality, it is not surprising that Burgos would come to be associated with El Barrio, the highly symbolic neighborhood for New York Puerto Ricans. This symbolism has been immortalized in the novels *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas and *Bodega Dreams* by Ernesto Quiñonez and in the photographs of Hiram Maristany.<sup>8</sup> Although Burgos lived in different parts of Harlem and the South Bronx, there are details of her life and mostly of her death that lend themselves to the association with El Barrio. For example, she worked in East Harlem when she wrote for *Pueblos Hispanos*, whose offices were located there. And, most significant, she died there. In the end, it is her death in anonymity that opens the path for the creation of the Burgos myth and icon. Later generations of scholars, artists, writers, musicians, performers, and playwrights, on both sides of the border, transform her into a transnational icon and collaborate in the maintenance of Burgos's afterlives.

My research for *Becoming Julia de Burgos* led me to engage in conversations with a range of people who shared stories about Burgos that were often contradictory and could not always be verified by her scattered archive. I spoke with family members in Puerto Rico and in Brooklyn. I spoke with people who have childhood memories of seeing her sitting in Central Park near East 105th Street. Others remember her living in single room occupancy housing (SRO) in East Harlem and the Bowery. These traces, marks, vestiges, imprints, and remnants of Burgos were a challenge to structure into a cogent narrative. Fearful of reproducing stories, rumors, and anecdotes about Burgos that I could not verify, I decided to focus instead on the works created by various writers and artists who strongly identify with Burgos. I was interested in understanding how the Burgos icon is deployed, mobilized, and utilized by various artists and writers and to what end. What work does the Burgos icon do? What does the Burgos icon enable these writers and artists to say? How does the Burgos icon mediate meaning for Nuyorican writers and artists who strongly identify with her? While the stories told to me by individuals who felt they had some historical connection to Burgos were often impossible for me to verify, works of art are able to absorb these stories without the necessity of verifying the facts. They are just that, artistic representations that say more about the artists who create them than they do about Julia de Burgos. The Burgos icon is the site of contested and politicized ideas; it incorporates and reflects the great variety of these stories, rumors, gossip, and tidbits told both on the island and in New York. *Becoming Julia de Burgos* analyzes but a mere fraction of these stories and does not claim to be a definitive account of what the icon represents.

---

<sup>8</sup> Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Vintage, 1967); Ernesto Quiñonez, *Bodega Dreams* (New York: Vintage, 2000); Hiram Maristany, "Looking at East Harlem," *Small Axe*, no. 48 (November 2015): 163–74.

*Becoming Julia de Burgos* makes two moves. First, it seeks to offer a more dynamic picture of this icon through new readings of her poetry; her writings in 1943 and 1944 for *Pueblos Hispanos*, published in New York; and a selection of her letters written from New York and Cuba to her sister Consuelo. The book relies on Burgos's own writings to highlight her complexity and dynamism. The second move the book makes is to trace Burgos iconography in New York, highlighting its importance in New York Latino culture by focusing on the mediating role of Burgos's figure. In my view, it is not enough to study Burgos's poetry and her writings. To make sense of who she is as a figure and as an icon requires a study of the photos, artwork, poems, music, stories, gossip, and rumors of her life that populate the terrain surrounding her to understand how she has been represented and to make sense of her afterlives.

While it is true that *Becoming Julia de Burgos* offers new readings of Burgos's poetry, essays, and letters, this is never done in search of any "true" or "false" aura of the poet. The book seeks, rather, to create a more dynamic profile of the writer through an analysis of her own writing. In the first three chapters of the book, I read themes that she develops in her work—the struggle against US imperialism; exile; writing against a patriarchal society—that enable her to be constructed as a transnational icon (rather than just a national one). *Becoming Julia de Burgos* seeks to understand the icon by tracing its multiple reincarnations across generations and across borders. Unresolved tensions around race, gender, and the national question are debated, negotiated, and contested through the Burgos icon. The Burgos icon is able to assimilate a range of inevitably contradictory ideas. Burgos's status as an icon goes unquestioned even though what she stands for has long been contested. Her life and work leave an opening for ambiguity, the imagination, and contradictions that lure scholars, writers, artists, and activists to reconstruct her, not only because of the assertions that she made in her poetry and prose and in the way she lived her life, but also because of the many contradictions we find in her, her lacunae, her scattered archive, her penchant to always inscribe herself at the border, the edge, the fringe, on the verge of and in between categories, space and time, life and death, vanishing and beckoning to us to recuperate her. The poem "Entre mi voz y el tiempo" ("Between My Voice and Time") is a powerful example of Burgos situating herself at the frontier, the border, in this liminal space, between life and death, in mid-ocean, between her voice and time:

En la ribera de la muerte,  
 hay algo,  
 alguna voz,  
 alguna vela a punto de partir,  
 alguna tumba libre  
 que me enamora el alma.  
 ¡Si hasta tengo rubor de parecerme a mí!  
 ¡Debe ser tan profunda la lealtad de la muerte!

En la ribera de la muerte,  
 ¡tan cerca!, en la ribera  
 (que es como contemplarme llegando hasta un espejo)  
 me reconocen la canción,  
 y hasta el color del nombre.

¿Seré yo el puente errante entre el sueño y la muerte?  
 ¡Presente . . . !  
 ¿De qué lado del mundo me llaman, de qué frente?  
 Estoy en altamar . . .  
 En la mitad del tiempo . . .  
 ¿Estoy viva?  
 ¿Estoy muerta?  
 ¡Presente! ¡Aquí! ¡Presente . . . !<sup>9</sup>

Her marginality to official history entices and invites readers to save her for our collective memory. Inhabiting that space in between allows for a range of identifications, associations, and interpretations.

Edna Acosta-Belén, through a personal narrative, remembers her “reencuentro” (reengagement) with the poet, which happened almost twenty years after her death. Her account in “Rediscovering Julia de Burgos” highlights the way writers, artists, and icons change and shift across generations and borders. Current generations of writers, scholars, artists, and activists see something in Burgos—a brilliance that seemed to go unnoticed by earlier generations. Acosta-Belén’s generation was committed to recovery and rediscovery of the often neglected history of Puerto Rican migration as a way to “uncover and reclaim their own histories and contributions to the building of US society.”<sup>10</sup> Acosta-Belén remembers that Burgos’s name “stood out” among the names of those migrants from the past who made a mark because of their contributions to cultural and political life. Yet it is notable that Burgos’s work was not included in recovery efforts, nor did she receive the attention at the time that writers such as Jesús Colón did, for example, even though both Burgos and Colón wrote for *Pueblos Hispanos*. Burgos’s prose has still to be collected, republished, and translated into English.<sup>11</sup> Acosta-Belén notes that her rediscovery of Burgos came to her transnationally, via the second-wave feminist movement in Puerto Rico. These women set out to dispel the generalized portrayal of Burgos as a woman victimized by love and failed relationships, consumed by the self-destructive alcohol addiction that left her destitute and caused her to develop cirrhosis of the liver, depression, and other physical ailments that brought her to an early death.<sup>12</sup> However, second-wave feminist writers, such as Rosario Ferré, grappled with Burgos’s legacy and struggled to make her into an icon of feminist empowerment. They wrestled with how to reconcile the fiercely independent subject created in some of Burgos’s most iconic poems—such as “Pentacromia,” and “A Julia de Burgos” in which the speakers

<sup>9</sup> Burgos, “Entre mi voz y el tiempo,” in *Song of the Simple Truth*, 192; “On the banks of death, / there is something, some voice, some sail about to depart, / some vacant tomb / that courts my soul. / Why, I even blush at looking like myself! / The loyalty of death must be so profound! // On the banks of death, so close!, on the bank / (which is like contemplating myself arriving at a mirror) / the song recognizes me, and even the color of my name. // Am I the errant bridge between the dream and death? / Present . . . ! / From what side of the world do they call me, from what front? / I am at high sea . . . / In the middle of time . . . / Am I alive? / Am I dead? / Present! Here! Present . . . !” (“Between My Voice and Time,” 193).

<sup>10</sup> Edna Acosta-Belén, “Rediscovering Julia de Burgos: The People’s Rebel Soul Poet,” this issue of *Small Axe*, 200.

<sup>11</sup> I am currently editing a bilingual anthology of Burgos’s prose, poetry, and letters titled “I Am My Own Path: The Writings of Julia de Burgos.”

<sup>12</sup> Acosta-Belén, “Rediscovering Julia de Burgos,” 200–201. For a summary of these debates, see Rubén Ríos Avila, “Víctima de luz,” in *La raza cómica del sujeto en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Ediciones Cajellón, 2002), 211–21.

reject traditional family values—with the woman who experienced failed relationships and suffered from alcoholism.

As a border icon, the Burgos figure is utilized to debate the politics of gender and sexuality in Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican diasporic communities. Even among the three essays included as part of this book discussion, one can note the differing meanings attributed to Burgos's life. For example, Rebeca Hey-Colón, in "Toward a Genealogy of Water," argues that Burgos uses water imagery as a subversive tool to battle against gender norms, a trait that she identifies as Burgos's primary contribution to a feminine genealogy of water. Acosta-Belén describes Burgos as "the people's rebel soul poet," while Jossianna Arroyo, in "Julia de Burgos and the Mourning of Community," notes that Burgos subscribed to traditional family values imposed by the patriarchal imaginings of the nation.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos-Febres calls Burgos Puerto Rico's first modern woman—Burgos had been a champion javelin thrower at university and by 1932 was divorced, had had abortions, smoked, and drank—and goes on to explain that Burgos's tragic end highlights how challenging it was for women to be modern.<sup>14</sup> One need only to recall the well-known polemics in the celebrated "María Christina" poetic exchange between two women who both closely identify with Burgos: Sandra María Esteves, often referred to as the *madrina* (godmother) of Nuyorican poetry, and Luz María Umpierre, a queer Puerto Rican poet, writer, and scholar. Their debate over appropriate gender roles for Puerto Rican women took place over a decade (1985–95), across different cultural contexts and positionalities, in the form of published poetic exchanges. Esteves published a poem, "A la mujer borriqueña" ("To the Puerto Rican Woman"), espousing traditional family values imposed by a dominant patriarchal culture through a narrator named "María Christina"; Umpierre countered with a poem titled "In Response," which opens with the lines, "My name is not María Christina. / I am a Puerto Rican woman born in another Barrio," and continues with a challenge to patriarchal authority and a refusal to adhere to traditional roles for women.<sup>15</sup> Although second-wave feminist writers and scholars sought to rescue Burgos from victimhood and narratives of migration as tragedy, some also desired to distance themselves from her alcoholism and other characteristics they viewed as weaknesses. They recognized her brilliance as a writer, but some also saw her as a cautionary tale. As a border icon, the Burgos figure is a site where the conflicts around Puerto Rican gender norms are contested and negotiated.

In the contested terrain around Puerto Ricans, US Latinxs, and race, the Burgos icon becomes one of the sites where these tensions surface and are debated, contested, and negotiated from various points of view by people who have different investments and

---

<sup>13</sup> Rebeca Hey-Colón, "Toward a Genealogy of Water: Reading Julia de Burgos in the Twenty-First Century," this issue of *Small Axe*, 000–00; Acosta-Belén, "Rediscovering Julia de Burgos," 188–202; Jossianna Arroyo, "Julia de Burgos and the Mourning of Community," this issue of *Small Axe*, 203–8.

<sup>14</sup> Mayra Santos-Febres, "Julia de Burgos, vida corta e intensa," *El Nuevo Día*, 3 July 2011, [www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/juliadeburgosvidacortaeintensa-1006858](http://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/juliadeburgosvidacortaeintensa-1006858).

<sup>15</sup> Luz María Umpierre-Herrera, . . . *Y otras desgracias / And Other Misfortunes* . . . (Bloomington, IN: Third Woman, 1985), 1; Sandra María Esteves "A la mujer borriqueña," in *Yerba buena* (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review, 1980). For a summary of the debate, see Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 73–75. For more on their deployment of Burgos in their work, see Pérez-Rosario *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, 94–116.

attachments.<sup>16</sup> Again, a range of views is expressed in the essays here that form part of this discussion. Arroyo argues that the historical Burgos followed a traditional Hispanic and nationalist agenda embracing the concept of *mestizaje*; Hey-Colón notes that Burgos asserts blackness through the recurrent water motifs in her poetry, since water is a pivotal space where blackness is relocated in Caribbean literature.<sup>17</sup> I will share briefly two examples of how the Burgos icon is deployed to debate the questions around Puerto Rico and blackness by Nuyorican artist Manny Vega and poet Mariposa. In 2006, Vega created the mosaic mural *Remembering Julia*, one of the more popular murals in El Barrio. “I purposely made her more mulatto,” Vega says, “because that’s who she was, you know? Beautiful, tall, elegant” (143). In other words, in the mural he gave her a darker complexion because, in his words, “that’s who she was.” I interpret this to mean that is who she is to *him*. Vega is aware that he is contributing to the mythmaking of the icon when he reinvents her to be a symbol of blackness. That is not to say that there is nothing in her life or writing that would allow for such an interpretation. The poem that is often used as the basis for Burgos’s identification with blackness is “Ay ay ay de la grifa negra,” published in 1938 in her first collection of poetry, *Poema en veinte surcos*: the speaker in the poem, a descendant of an enslaved woman, is a black Puerto Rican woman who takes the position that she would prefer to align herself with the enslaved rather than with the colonizer.<sup>18</sup> It is this poem that Mariposa nods to in her “Poem for My Grifa-Rican Sistah, or Broken Ends Broken Promises,” in which she negotiates her own black Puerto Rican identity.<sup>19</sup> One can see how Burgos’s voice mediates the affirmation of a black political identity, although the distance between Burgos’s poem and Mariposa’s is great. In the end, Mariposa’s poem is not really about Burgos; it is a poem about racist and oppressive standards of beauty and Puerto Rico’s relationship to blackness. These brief examples highlight the way race among Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and in New York is negotiated and debated through the icon. Acosta-Belén recalls learning about a sanitized version of Burgos that had been created by the island’s literary establishment in schools in Puerto Rico in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>20</sup> This Burgos is in contrast to the Burgos icon deployed as an affirmation of blackness by Vega and Mariposa, highlighting the conflicts around Puerto Ricans and race that play out in multiple cultural contexts, across generations and borders.<sup>21</sup> I would argue that no single group comes to own

---

<sup>16</sup> For more on Puerto Ricans and blackness, see Ileana Rodríguez-Silva, *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Isar Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and US Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015). For more on Latinos and blackness, see Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez-Román, eds., *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> See Arroyo, “Julia de Burgos,” 207; and Hey-Colón, “Toward a Genealogy of Water,” 183.

<sup>18</sup> Julia de Burgos, “Ay ay ay de la grifa negra,” in *Poema en veinte surcos* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1938), 52. For further analysis of this poem and reactions to its publication in Puerto Rico in 1938, see Pérez-Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, 33–37.

<sup>19</sup> Mariposa [María Teresa Fernández], “Poem for My Grifa-Rican Sistah, or Broken Ends Broken Promises,” in Flores and Jiménez Román, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, 280–81. For a more complete reading of this poem and the way Mariposa inherits and extends Burgos’s legacy, see Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, “Affirming an Afro-Latin@ Identity: An Interview with Poet María Teresa (Mariposa) Fernández,” *Latino Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 468–75; and *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, 94–122.

<sup>20</sup> Acosta-Belén, “Rediscovering Julia de Burgos,” 191.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, census data indicates that a higher percentage of Puerto Ricans in the island identify as white compared to those who live in the United States. Carlos Vargas-Ramos, “Some Social Differences on the Basis of Race among Puerto Ricans,” December 2016, Centro RB2016-10, [centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/data\\_briefs/RB2016-10\\_RACE.pdf](http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/data_briefs/RB2016-10_RACE.pdf).



the icon, and no version of Burgos's story surpasses the other. As a border icon, Burgos is mobilized by various groups in multiple cultural contexts to debate the tensions that exist among Puerto Ricans and their unresolved relationship to blackness.

If icons signify a certain era, perhaps it is among the turn-of-the-century generation of writers, poets, artists, and scholars where the Burgos icon gains its greatest salience. Beyond a figure through which conflicting views of gender and race are disputed, I would argue that her prominence as an icon today has transformed into a site where the national question—the political status of Puerto Rico and its future—is contested and debated. The intensity and urgency over the political status of the island has surged since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. Puerto Rico became a nation on the move in 1917, when the Jones Act passed and Puerto Ricans became US citizens.<sup>22</sup> The current financial crisis has led to a migration crisis, and since 2013, more Puerto Ricans live in the continental United States than on the island.<sup>23</sup> This reality makes defining the nation by its geopolitical territory an act of erasure that, according to Hey-Colón, “effectively renders millions of Puerto Ricans landless, if not nationless.”<sup>24</sup> While there have been five referenda to determine the political status of the island, four of them have taken place since 1993.<sup>25</sup> The recent referendum votes suggest that current political forms are exhausted, as voters reject the options available on the plebiscite that include statehood, independence, and maintaining the status quo. In the 1998 referendum, which marked one hundred years of the US occupation of Puerto Rico, the majority of voters rejected the options on the ballot by writing in, “ninguna de las anteriores” (“none of the above”).<sup>26</sup> In 2012, half a million ballots were left blank. And in the most recent referendum held earlier this year, on 11 June, the Popular Democratic Party organized a boycott, resulting in only 23 percent of the population voting. Puerto Rico faces a debt of \$74 billion, with another \$49 billion in pension obligations that it cannot pay. Public schools and hospitals have closed amid a mass exodus of the population. Faced with no suitable options for a political future that would ensure human dignity and self-determination, Puerto Ricans issued a protest vote; they rejected any of the listed alternatives. They have expressed their disenchantment with official politics and their dissatisfaction with limited political options as solutions to Puerto Rico's problems, creating an opening to imagine alternative forms of belonging and solidarity to find a creative response to enduring problems. It is in this moment of crisis and conflict that the Burgos icon has grown in prominence.

As a 1930s and '40s anticolonial writer, Burgos was preoccupied with decolonial struggles in the Caribbean and the liberation of the peoples of Latin America. In her poetry, essays, and letters she expressed her visions of freedom, human dignity, social justice, and self-determination for Puerto Rico. The economic crisis of the 1930s led to widespread strikes and boycotts in the island. Migration to the United States became a way to offer relief to Puerto Ricans who could not find work. In response to the Puerto Rican political situation, Burgos

---

<sup>22</sup> Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Puerto Ricans Leave in Record Numbers for Mainland US,” Pew Research Center, 14 October 2015, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/14/puerto-ricans-leave-in-record-numbers-for-mainland-u-s](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/14/puerto-ricans-leave-in-record-numbers-for-mainland-u-s).

<sup>24</sup> Hey-Colón, “Toward a Genealogy of Water,” 182.

<sup>25</sup> The first referendum vote took place in 1967, and there was not another referendum until 1993.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the debates on the political status of Puerto Rico, see Frances Negrón-Muntaner, ed., *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

wrote the essay “Ser o no ser es la divisa” (“To Be or Not to Be Is the Motto”), which appeared in 1945 in *Semanario Hispano*, a short-lived Spanish-language newspaper published in New York, in which she elaborates her sociopolitical ideology on Puerto Rico and Latin America. The following year, the essay garnered her a journalism prize, the Instituto de Literatura Puertorriqueña’s Premio de Periodismo. In the essay she frames the debate regarding Puerto Rican independence in the language of human rights—the right of a people to govern themselves rather than to be merely pawns in capitalist and imperialist designs. In several letters to her sister Consuelo that same year, Burgos wrote of the right of the people of Puerto Rico to “vivir decentemente en este planeta.”<sup>27</sup> She connected the question of Puerto Rico’s status to the global struggles of World War II, as well as to the despotic governments in power in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Honduras: “A esta hora de encrucijada a que ha llegado la humanidad, podemos llamar la hora de las definiciones. No de las definiciones de carácter lingüístico, sino de las definiciones de carácter humano que tienen su tronco en el hombre, y se esparcen sobre las colectividades en una dinámica social que rige el destino de los pueblos por el bien o por el mal. Estamos en la era de la definición del hombre.” Burgos argued that the colonial situation in Puerto Rico could be resolved only through a complete break with the United States, through independence: “En Puerto Rico hay solo dos caminos. O exigir el reconocimiento incondicional de nuestra independencia, o ser traidores a la libertad, en cualquiera otra forma de solución a nuestro problema que se nos ofrezca” (79).<sup>28</sup> The renewed engagement with Burgos’s life, work, and icon since the 1990s is telling of the cultural and political concerns of the contemporary moment. Burgos’s voice, her image, and her icon are mobilized to debate Puerto Rican sovereignty, humanity, freedom, and human dignity.

At a time when current political forms appear to be exhausted, artists, writers, and scholars turn to Burgos. There are, as mentioned, some parallels that can be drawn between the two historical moments—the economic and migration crises, for example. However, Burgos lived at a moment when she believed that there *were* options, that there *was* a choice to be made. In many ways Burgos was a woman ahead of her time, but in other ways she was very much a woman of her time. She believed in revolution, in self-determination, in independence. The turn to Burgos at this present moment is not to necessarily advocate for the independence of Puerto Rico. With each passing year the statehood movement grows in Puerto Rico. During those weeks in 2004 that I spent working in Jack Agüeros’s Chelsea apartment, I began to realize that his devotion to Burgos’s trace, to recovering her image, did not turn on an investment in Puerto Rican sovereignty. It is particularly impactful that he continued this work even after he was aware of his illness. Agüeros’s devotion to reconstructing Burgos’s archive, his commitment to restoring her image and to preserving her imprint so that it would not disappear—so that *she* would not disappear—speaks to the importance that Agüeros conferred to remembering Julia de Burgos and the significance of her legacy for the collective memory of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora embodied in her icon. He understood the urgency of Burgos’s

<sup>27</sup> “To live with decency on this planet”; Julia de Burgos, *Cartas a Consuelo*, ed. Eugenio Ballou (San Juan: Editorial Folium, 2014), 189.

<sup>28</sup> “Today, humanity finds itself at a crossroads. We might call this the era of the definitions. Not definitions of a linguistic character, but definitions of a human character, with its roots found in man, and it spread to collectivities in a social dynamic that governs the fate of the people for good or bad. This is the age of the definition of man”; “In Puerto Rico there are only two paths. Either we demand the unconditional recognition of our independence, or we become traitors to freedom by accepting any other solution to our problem that is offered.”

radical imagination, and visions of freedom that could dream up a world that was more just, more humane, and more free.

## Acknowledgments

My gratitude to Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, who insisted on the importance of intellectual genealogies and histories and encouraged me to write about my intellectual friendship with Jack Agüeros. Many thanks also to David Scott for his detailed reading and comments. I would like to dedicate this essay to Jack Agüeros's memory.