



Julia de Burgos

(*Julia Constancia Burgos García, 1914–1953*)

Julia de Burgos (February 17, 1914 – July 6, 1953), born in Carolina, Puerto Rico, was one of the foremost poets to come out of Puerto Rico in the first half of the twentieth century.

Burgos was the oldest of 13 children born to Paula García de Burgos and Francisco Burgos Hans, and was raised in a poor section of Carolina called Barrio Santa Cruz. Her poverty-stricken background and African heritage were factors often depicted in her revolutionary poetry and writings. She was fortunate to be able to attend the University of Puerto Rico High School thanks to donations from local townspeople.

At the age of nineteen, Burgos graduated from the University of Puerto Rico with a degree in teaching. She began her teaching career working at the Barrio Cerdo Arriba in Naranjito, a provincial town some distance from the capital. At the same time she honed her writing skills by writing educational plays and songs for radio broadcast by the Puerto Rico Department of Education's *Escuela del Aire*. Her love for literature led her to write poetry, and her early influences were Luis Llorens Torres, Clara Lair, and Pablo Neruda. Her early inspirations came from her love of Puerto Rico and as noted in her first work *El Río Grande de Loíza* (one of her most anthologized works).

In 1936, she joined the Daughters of Freedom, the women's branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico). This was the independence party headed by Pedro Albizu Campos.

She was married twice but it was Dr. Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón who was to become her great love. In 1939 Burgos and Jimenes Grullón traveled to Cuba. When their affair fell apart Burgos returned to New York in 1940. The mid- to late 1940s marked an important period in Burgos's life. Her poetry was performed in New York City and had been honored by several organizations, including the Asociación de Periodistas y Escritores Puertorriqueños.

In 1946 Burgos was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. Her mental and physical health deteriorated and letters that she wrote to her relatives in Puerto Rico during this period show that she was obsessed with death. Her poem "Farewell from Welfare Island," written in English in February of 1953, indicates that she was deeply depressed and possibly suicidal. The last letter her family received from her was dated June 28, 1953. In July, she disappeared.

Later it was revealed that she had been discovered unconscious on Fifth Avenue between 105th and 106th Streets and taken to Metropolitan Hospital where she died. The coroner's certificate indicated that the cause of death was a pulmonary condition. Because Burgos had no identification on her when she died, her body was buried in a public cemetery. A month after her death, the coroner's photograph of her body finally led to her identification. She was 39 years old.

Public praise for de Burgos and her work began almost immediately after her death. In November 1953, the journal *Artes y Letras* produced a special issue entitled *Homenaje a Julia de Burgos: su vida y su obra*. The issue featured articles and literary criticism by many prominent Hispanic writers, who honored de Burgos for her poetry, and political figures, who honored her for her social activism.

Burgos published three books which contained a collection of her poems. Her third book, *El mar y tú y otros poemas*, was published posthumously in 1954. Since de Burgos's death several selections of her work have been published. An anthology entitled *Obra Poética* appeared in an edition published by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña in 1961. Another collection, entitled *Antología Poética*, was published in 1967 by the Puerto Rican publishing house Editorial Coqui. That same year Editorial Coqui brought out the first major full-length study of de Burgos's work, *Julia de Burgos: vida y poesía*, by Ivette Jiménez Báez.

In 1987 the University of Puerto Rico awarded de Burgos the posthumous degree of Doctor Honoris Causa in recognition of her contribution to the island's literary culture. The poet's devotion to social causes was recognized in the 1980s when Public School 9 was renamed the Julia de Burgos School and an experimental bilingual Spanish-English curriculum was introduced.

The City of New York honored the poet with the Julia de Burgos Cultural Arts Center on 106th Street and Lexington Avenue, close to the location where she died. A documentary about the life of Julia de Burgos was made in 2002 titled "*Julia, toda en mí...*" (Julia, all in me...) directed and produced by Ivonne Belen, and had its US premiere at Teatro Heckscher of El Museo del Barrio during the summer of 2003.