

East 106th Street: Julia's River Spirit Lives

By Roger Hernandez

Those of us who spend time on East 106th Street know that there is a special spirit along this Manhattan corridor. It is a natural river, with all its gifts from Mother Earth. It is also a sense of human spirit flowing within our community of East Harlem.

I could sense the special nature of this glen having been born and raised on the corner of East 106th Street and Madison Avenue. I learned to swim, fish, camp and ice skate on the edge of this majestic natural flow- now buried by concrete and pipe. It was not too long ago when families could rent rowboats and skim up the lake to the waterfalls currently hidden behind the Lasker Memorial Pool and Ice Rink.

I love East 106th Street because I was born into this spirit which I felt every living day. This served to guide my educational pursuits into water resource management. I have since served as the water plant operator at the Central Park Reservoir and as a legislative analyst for the NYS Assembly Subcommittee on Water Resources up in Albany. My fondest childhood memories are of this area because of the strong sense of affinity this water body emits. I learned to conquer all my childhood fears by understanding how to love the nature of our world. It has opened up glorious adventures for me that would take volumes to describe.

East Harlem resident- Julia de Burgos also found condolence along this stretch. She was drawn to the spirit of this river on 106th Street later in her life, having exhibited her special bond to the power of flowing water in her celebrated poetry of "El Rio Grande de Loiza". It was close to this street where she was later found dead of extreme exposure suffering from degenerative health failure. It is said that she was refused medical admittance into Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital (located at 106th St.) based on the color of her skin. That was a lonely cold winter night that should not be easily forgotten. It epitomized the nasty cruel human dysfunction created by an era of prejudicial bigotry and ignorance of a time that our elders can remember. Ask the seniors of East Harlem whose sacrifices are too easily forgotten.

In her poetry, Julia evokes the personification of the human spirit in her testament to the Puerto Rico River *El Rio Grande de Loiza*. This poem celebrates the human duality sensed in an eroticism of a grand naturalism developed with a flowing river. This type of dynamic relationship with a natural spirit has been written about since time immemorial. It affords us mortal humans with an introspective sense to our nature which consists of 75 per cent water. There is simply no greater force than that of water. And Julia de Burgos wrote about that to remind us of this nature. And, she was able to put her sensual love for that into her writings. Remembering the legacy of Julia de Burgos along East 106th Street with the East Harlem Cultural Center on Lexington Avenue is a wonderful way to educate our own residents of a primordial identity we possess as human beings, and the failures of our humanity within this context- again, too easily forgotten.

Her writings also have a very special meaning to me because the headwaters of *El Rio Grande de Loiza* start at my families ancestral Taino homelands in San Lorenzo, P.R. along the Cayaguex

valley. The water pools ("pozos") of la Cayaguex are well known for their medicinal healing powers. It is in this valley where "La Samataria" worked her miraculous cures to all the infirmed who found their way into this river valley of San Lorenzo during the 1930's and late 40's. Flowing from the headwaters of San Lorenzo, past Caguas, thru Rio Grande and into the PR Coast of Aldea de Loiza, "El Rio Grande de Loiza" is celebrated in Taino Indian mythology, African song and dance, and Puerto Rican folklore. Julia de Burgos captured the essence of the New World's human culturalization with this poem.

It is with profound sentiment that I now share the grandness of enlarging Julia's vision with the proposed renaming of East 106th Street from Fifth Avenue to the East River as "Julia de Burgos Boulevard". I ask that all residents of East Harlem who have the inherent ability to recognize the spirit of nature to share the writings of Julia de Burgos, and to celebrate her legacy as a fellow resident of East Harlem.

The river under East 106th Street continues to flow. Julia's sentiments do the same. Remember Julia, our ancestors, our elders, and our human spirit with nature. That is the glory of life. And that is worth protecting and celebrating in East Harlem.

Mapped in 1865 by Egbert L. Viele, the topographical drainage of East Harlem stretches from Fifth Avenue to the East River along East 106th Street (see map below). Central Park's highlands slope downhill towards Fifth Avenue and 106th Street. East Harlem kids know the winter thrills of Central Park snow sledding down "Snake Hill" to the flats along the "Harlem Meir" lake. This lake is currently drained by an outfall pipe that follows the original watershed drainage under 106th Street. It is evident.

Homeowners can attest to the high flooding basements here. A battery of cannons were established at the top of Snake Hill facing the south as a testament to the estuary reaches of the NYC tributaries up to this spot. It was a historic naval military position that can be researched within the annuals of the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812. The natural drainage of East Harlem created the confluences of the NYC waterways now known as Hell's Gate connecting the Harlem River, the East River and the Long Island Sound surrounding the erosion deposits that formulate nearby Randall's and Ward's Islands. This area was extremely rich in waterfowl, shellfish, game and fish. Native American settlements are documented in this area. It certainly had to be a celebrated gift from our creator to the original peoples who appreciated the grace and bountiful marvels this area afforded. Landfill operations which have since enlarged the East Harlem flats continue to flood during heavy rains particularly at Park Avenue and 106th Street.

Roger Hernandez was the first child born at NYCHA George Washington Carver Houses on East 106th Street. He studied Oceanographic Sciences at Florida Institute of Technology and worked at the NE Fisheries Center at Woods Hole, Mass. He is the Editor of the UCTP magazine "La Voz del Pueblo Taino" that can be found at www.uctp.org. Roger produces a weekly MNN Television series "Presencia Taina.TV," and is active in community development activities throughout the nation.