

Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History



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22. Julia de Burgos: Cultural Crossing and Iconicity

Vanessa Pérez-Rosario

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, 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 on Hart Island. 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 Burgos's death in anonymity on an East Harlem street opens up a space for the creation of the Burgos myth. One of the principle reasons that Burgos as a figure elicits veneration in the followers who are committed to the endurance of her work and 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 the potter's field: we want to save her, give her a name, and reconstruct her nebulous personality and life.

1 See *La Prensa*, 2 August 1953; *El Mundo*, 4 August 1953.

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. While many Puerto Ricans already know her life story, and many both on the island and in New York have been captivated by her life, 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. This essay centers on images of movement, flow and migration in Burgos's work, life, legacy, and iconicity, focusing on the escape routes she created to transcend the rigid confines of gender and 1930s Puerto-Rican nationalism. Because Burgos always situates herself in her work at the edge, at the border, we can read her today as a border icon, inhabiting that space between Puerto Rico and New York. Since her death, the Burgos icon has been mobilized in debates around gender, race, and nationhood, across generations and in multiple contexts, making her a figure through which the cultural tensions of the border between Puerto Rico and New York are negotiated and contested. 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 and read them as iconic.² 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, 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

2 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), pp. 1-18.

third space between Puerto Rico and the United States.³ The tensions between gender, language, race, and nation are negotiated, contested, disputed, and mediated through her figure and through interpretations of her life and work, as later generations of scholars, artists, writers, musicians, performers, and playwrights, on both sides of the border, collaborate in the maintenance of Burgos's afterlives.



Fig. 22.1 Julia de Burgos, ca. 1938. Miriam Román Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

Julia Constanza Burgos García was born on 17 February 1914 in the town of Carolina, Puerto Rico, the eldest of Paula García de Burgos and Francisco Burgos Hans's thirteen children. Julia was intimately familiar with struggle, hardship, and death. She watched six of her younger siblings die of malnutrition and other illnesses associated with

3 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*, pp. 61–72.



Fig. 22.2 Flyer for poetry reading by Julia de Burgos, 10 May 1940. Pura Belpré Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

poverty. Burgos is the author of four collections of poetry, although only two were published during her lifetime. Her first, *Poemas exactos a mí misma* [Poems to Myself], she later considered juvenilia and never published. In her first published collection, *Poem en veinte surcos* [Poem in Twenty Furrows, 1938], written during the height of the Puerto-Rican nationalist movement, Burgos creates a nomadic feminist subject. While committed to the idea of political nationalism throughout her life, Burgos nonetheless aligned this nomadic poetic subject with the Puerto-Rican literary vanguard, with whom she found points of departure from the phallogentric and patriarchal Puerto-Rican cultural nationalist project of the 1930s. This subject subverts conventions and anticipates her later departure from the island.

As developed in her poetry, nomadism refers to a 'critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought

and behavior.⁴ Burgos's writing moves away from modernist theories of impersonality and takes up the self, authenticity, and intimacy as topics. Her second collection of poetry *Canción de la verdad sencilla* [Song of the Simple Truth, 1939] develops images of flight, travel and bodily transformations as a way to escape containment. Many of the poems explore the theme of love: the speaker must leave the world behind and undertake imaginative journeys through which she becomes one with nature and her lover. The collection highlights the desire to break down barriers, remove limitations, and transgress boundaries. Although the canonical literature of the time was concerned with nation building and perpetuating the myth of the *jíbaro* [peasant] and the nation as the great Puerto-Rican family, Burgos's nomadic subject finds a way to escape that world.

On 13 January 1940 she left Puerto Rico for New York, and six months later she moved to Cuba where she lived until November 1942. Her third collection of poetry, *El mar y tú* [The Sea and You] was published posthumously in 1954 by her sister Consuelo, who added a final section, *Otros poemas* [Other Poems], that included works Burgos had sent to family members while she was in Cuba and New York. *El mar y tú* marks the climax of the development of Burgos's nomadic subject. Images of water figure prominently in these poems, creating avenues for escape from the rigid social norms that should have contained her and again demonstrate that the female speaker cannot be restricted. In Burgos's final book, the only one written from exile, the sea becomes an open space without borders where the speaker is freed from all restrictions. Either the sea or death offer a final escape. Many of the poems follow a pattern of loss and abjection followed by renewal and transformation. The sea is a primeval chaos offering the possibility of emergence out of the void, depicted in her poetry as a creative and dynamic open space.

From late 1942 until her death Burgos lived in various neighborhoods in Harlem and the Bronx where she struggled to make a living as a writer. She wrote for the Spanish-language weekly *Pueblos Hispánicos* from 1943–44, further developing her political voice. Many view Burgos's move to New York without family and friends as a self-destructive and suicidal

4 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 26.

impulse. However, her journalism shows her political commitment to radical democracy and the struggle for immigrant and Puerto-Rican rights, as well as her advocacy for solidarity with Harlem's African American community. In addition, these writings as well as her poetry and letters reveal her understanding of cultural identity as fluid and unbound by national territory. From 1947 on, she had difficulty finding steady work and held a series of unsatisfying jobs. Her physical state deteriorated as she battled depression and alcoholism. She spent her last years in and out of Harlem Hospital and Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Welfare Island (now Roosevelt Island) in the East River. She was ultimately diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and upper respiratory disease, both consistent with chronic alcoholism. Aware of her deteriorated physical and emotional state, her family and friends in Puerto Rico begged her to return. With her life spinning out of control because of her financial instability, her alcoholism, and her precarious living situation, Burgos regularly mailed her poetry to her sister and other relatives for safekeeping. In the end, her health problems, poverty, loneliness, and alcoholism led to her decline and death.

Burgos privileges water imagery in her poetry as a way to emphasize travel, movements, and routes to escape the narrowly defined nation-island. These images pre-figure Burgos's migratory routes from Puerto Rico to Havana and New York. Her life and work leave an opening for ambiguity, the imagination, and the contradictions that lure scholars, writers, artists, and activists to attempt to reconstruct her. They do so not only because of the assertions that she made in her poetry and her prose, nor in the way she lived her life, but because of the many contradictions we find in her. Her lacunae, her scattered archive, her penchant always to inscribe herself at the border, on the verge of and in between categories — space and time, life and death, vanishing and beckoning to us — compel us to try to recuperate her. Her poem 'Entre mi voz y el tiempo' [Between My Voice and Time] is a powerful example of Burgos situating herself at the frontier, in the 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...!⁵

[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 that 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...
Who will win?
Present!
Am I alive?
Am I dead?
Present! Here! Present...!]

5 Julia de Burgos, *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos*, trans. and ed. by Jack Agüeros (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1997), pp. 192–93.

In this poem we see Burgos positioning herself in that space in-between. Her place on the margins of official history entices and invites readers to secure her in our collective memory. Inhabiting that space in-between allows her to take on a range of identifications, associations, and interpretations. The Burgos icon is able to assimilate a spectrum of inevitably contradictory ideas, including the unresolved tensions around race and gender and the national questions that are debated, negotiated, and contested through her in Puerto Rico and the United States. Burgos's status as an icon goes unquestioned even though what she stands for has long been contested.

There exists a range of stories, at times conflicting and contradictory, told about her in multiple cultural contexts, primarily in Puerto Rico and New York. I am interested here in exploring and interrogating the Burgos icon. How did she become an icon? How has this 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? What do the stories we tell about her say about us? In the end, it is her death in anonymity that opens the path for the creation of both the Burgos myth and the Burgos icon. This icon is the site of contested and politicized ideas; it incorporates and reflects the great variety of the stories, rumors, gossip, and tidbits told both on the island and in New York.

There are two distinct historical moments that have provided fertile ground for reading Burgos as a cultural icon. The first moment was during the civil rights movement of the 1960s when women of color sought to correct the elisions and omissions of writers, artists, and intellectuals of color in the historical records and the literary canon. Latina writers reclaimed Burgos and struggled to have her recognized in literary history. 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.⁶ 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.⁷ They wrestled with how to reconcile the fiercely independent subject

6 For a summary of these debates, see Rubén Ríos Ávila, 'Víctima de luz,' in *La raza cómica del sujeto en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Ediciones Cajellón, 2002), pp. 211–21.

7 Rosario Ferré, *Sitio a eros: Quince ensayos literarios* (Mexico City: Moritz, 1986).

created in some of Burgos's most iconic poems — such as 'Pentacromía', and 'A Julia de Burgos' in which the speakers reject traditional family values — with the woman herself.

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. A range of differing meanings are attributed to Burgos's life. Puerto-Rican writer Mayra Santos Febres calls Burgos Puerto Rico's first modern woman, who 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.⁸ One need only recall the well-known polemics in the celebrated 'María Cristina' poetic exchange between two women writers 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 borinqueña' [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.⁹ 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.

8 Mayra Santos Febres, 'Julia de Burgos, vida corta e intensa,' *El Nuevo Día*, 3 July 2011, www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/juliadeburgosvidacortaeintensa-1006858.

9 Luz María Umpierre, ... *Y otras desgracias/ And Other Misfortunes...* (Bloomington: Third Woman Press, 1985), p. 1. Sandra María Esteves, 'A la mujer borinqueña' in her *Yerba Buena* (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 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), pp. 73–75. For more on their deployment of Burgos in their work, see Vanessa Pérez Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, pp. 94–116.

As a border icon, the Burgos figure is a site where the conflicts around Puerto-Rican gender norms are contested and negotiated.



Fig. 22.3 Many Vega, *Remembering Julia*, 2006. Mosaic by Manny Vega. Photo by Francisco Molina Reyes II. Courtesy of Mambóso Nuyotópia Archives. All rights reserved.

Fig. 22.4 Commemorating Julia de Burgos's death. La Bruja, 2011. Photo taken by author, CC BY 4.0.

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 attachments.¹⁰ 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 (Fig. 3). 'I purposely made her more mulatto,' Vega says, 'because that's who she

10 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 Latinxs and Blackness, see Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez-Román (eds.), *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

was, you know? Beautiful, tall, elegant.’¹¹ In other words, in the mural he gave her a darker complexion because, in his words, ‘that’s who she was.’ 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 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.¹² Mariposa nods to this poem by Burgos in ‘Poem for My Grifa-Rican Sistah, or Broken Ends Broken Promises’, a poem in which she works out her own Black Puerto-Rican identity.¹³ 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, the imaginary of the Puerto-Rican nation, and its relationship to Blackness. These brief examples highlight the way race among Puerto Ricans, in both Puerto Rico and in New York, is brokered and debated through the icon. The island’s literary establishment created a sanitized version of Burgos that was taught in schools in Puerto Rico in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ 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

11 Pérez-Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, p. 143.

12 Julia de Burgos, ‘Ay ay ay de la grifa negra,’ in *Poema en veinte surcos* (Rio Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1938), p. 52. For further analysis of this poem and reactions to its publication in Puerto Rico in 1938, see Pérez Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, pp. 33–37.

13 Mariposa [María Teresa Fernández], ‘Poem for My Grifa-Rican Sistah, or Broken Ends Broken Promises,’ in Jiménez Román and Flores, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 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 (2014), 468–75; and *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, pp. 94–122.

14 Edna Acosta-Belén, ‘Rediscovering Julia de Burgos: The People’s Rebel Soul Poet,’ *Small Axe*, 54 (2017), 188–202.

borders.¹⁵ I would argue that no single group comes to own 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, activists, and scholars that the Burgos icon gains its greatest salience. Beyond a figure through which conflicting views of gender and race are disputed, Burgos's prominence as an icon today is due to her transformation 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.¹⁶ The current financial crisis has led to a migration crisis, and since 2013, more Puerto Ricans live in the continental United States than in the island.¹⁷ This reality makes defining the nation by its geopolitical territory an act of erasure that effectively renders millions of Puerto Ricans landless, if not nationless. While there have been five referendums to determine the political status of the island, four of them have taken place since 1993.¹⁸ 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].¹⁹ In 2012, half a million ballots were left blank. And in the

15 In fact, census data indicates that a higher percentage of Puerto Ricans on 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, https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/data_briefs/RB2016-10_RACE.pdf

16 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).

17 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.

18 The first referendum vote took place in 1967, and there was not another referendum until 1993.

19 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).

most recent referendum at the time of writing, held on 11 June 2017, the Popular Democratic Party organized a boycott, resulting in only 23 percent of the population voting.²⁰ Faced with no suitable options for a political future that would ensure human dignity and self-determination, Puerto Ricans 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 and 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.

I would like to briefly highlight here Puerto-Rican muralist Alexis Díaz's 2012 work titled 'Dejarse vencer por la vida es peor que dejarse vencer por la muerte' [To Allow Oneself to Be Conquered by Life Is Worse than to Be Conquered by Death]. The title and inscription on the mural is taken from a letter that Burgos wrote to her sister in 1942. The mural powerfully conveys the effects of the current debt crisis in Puerto Rico that has devastated the people and brought the island nation to its knees.



Fig. 22.5 Alexis Díaz, 'Dejarse vencer por la vida es por que dejarse vencer por la muerte', Santurce, Puerto Rico, 2013. © Hunter College. All rights reserved.

20 Puerto Rico faces a national 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.

As an anti-colonial writer in the 1930s and 1940s, 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 on 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 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 elaborated her sociopolitical ideology as it related to Puerto Rico and Latin America. The following year, the essay garnered her the *Instituto de Literatura Puertorriqueña's Premio de Periodismo* [Institute of Puerto-Rican Letters Journalism Prize]. 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' [To live with decency on this planet].²¹ She connected the question of Puerto Rico's status to the global struggles of the Second World War, 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.²²

[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.]

21 Julia de Burgos, *Cartas a Consuelo*, ed. by Eugenio Ballou (San Juan: Editorial Folium, 2014), p. 189.

22 Pérez-Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, p. 79.

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' [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].²³ The renewed engagement with Burgos's life, work, and iconicity since the 1990s is telling of the cultural and political concerns of the contemporary moment. Burgos's voice, her image, and her status as an 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 moment. She believed in revolution, in self-determination, in independence. The turn to Burgos at this present moment is not necessarily to advocate for the independence of Puerto Rico. With each passing year the statehood movement grows on the island. The turn to this icon, rather, is a call for Burgos's radical imagination, her visions of freedom that could dream up a world that was more just, more humane, and more liberated.

23 Pérez-Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos*, p. 79.

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