Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon

New dimensions of Julia De Burgos were reflected on, explored and shared last week in the presentation of the book *Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon*, by Vanessa Pérez Rosario at Centro. The evening opened with an introduction of the panelists by Oscar Montero, professor of Latin American Literature at Lehman College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Pérez Rosario, whose previous works includes the editing of *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration: Narratives of Displacement* (Palgrave 2010), dedicated the night to Juan Flores, who passed earlier in the week and had been her mentor and friend. Flores hosted her during the year she was writing the book at New York University in 2010. Commenters Richard Perez and Virginia Sánchez-Korrol also joined in the moment remembering Flores and sharing some words of celebration for his life and legacy in the realm of Puerto Rican, Latino and Afro-Latino studies.
Richard Perez, English Professor at John Jay College, then celebrated Vanessa’s accomplishment and shared his reflection on the book with the audience. “With this book Vanessa creates a shift in the perception on the way we see Julia De Burgos. She also offers interpretative tools for the reader to understand Julia.” He explains how the iconic Julia is interpreted as a “nomadic” Julia; a term introduced by Pérez Rosario in what Professor Perez considers the fundamental contribution of this book. As a “nomadic subject, without ties that bound her to a pre-disposed identity…Vanessa challenges us to an utter commitment to transformation. Julia is a symbol of ‘becoming’ – in future tense. She speaks to us from the future, reconfiguring her relation to time. That’s why she is a poet and not a historian,” said Perez. Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, Professor of Puerto Rican & Latino Studies at Brooklyn College, reflected on a new Julia she herself discovered in Vanessa’s book: Julia as a Nuyorican. “Not the distant icon, but an everyday person who walked the streets of New York City just like us,” said Sánchez-Korrol. Alluding to the many publications about Julia that only discussed her work, her tragic death and her beliefs in independence for the island, the vision of Julia as a New Yorker, a Nuyorican, was inspirational for Sánchez-Korrol. The woman who writes to her sister, who travels by subway and suffers discrimination, brings all of this into her writing. This helped Sánchez-Korrol understand Julia’s life, not as a tragedy, but as life worth celebrating. “I lived in the same world that she lived in. This is where she found a home, where she could be the person who she really was,” said Sánchez-Korrol. Pérez Rosario’s book also brings forward how Julia’s journalistic essays showed her dedication to justice and her alliance with the working class. “She writes about this before anyone else. Her letters, essays and newspaper articles show us the human,” said Sánchez-Korrol.

Professor Oscar Montero also commented on Vanessa’s book, giving it a space among other “critical readings that reveal gaps in the story, omissions and dramatic hyperbole.” He praises the way that Pérez Rosario does not isolate or place one narrative against the other: the iconic legend against the critical reading. Both coexist and establish a fruitful tension in the work. The book
shows Julia rooted in one identity, the Puerto Rican from the island, yet searching for other identities in New York: an exile, a Latina. Her life story of identity, love and abandonment is the powerful story of an urban legend, although her ending without a name becomes many names. “Death without a name becomes the name of every Puerto Rican freezing in a Barrio basement or sweating it out on the streets of Alphabet City. Vanessa’s book suggest that this place without a name for a moment was Julia De Burgos dying on a street in New York, it is also the source of the many names of exile. Not just for Puerto Ricans, but also for Haitians, Cuban, Dominicans, Mexicans…she called it la cosa Latina,” said Montero. He also makes reference to the ‘cosmic connection’ Julia has, as a poet, to the rest of the humanity and her relation to time. The book shows a nomadic Julia whose home is everywhere. He closed his reflection with his favorite verse from Julia’s poetry, “Yo fui la más callada, la que saltó la tierra sin más arma que un verso” (“I was the more reserved, the one that leap the earth without more weapon than a verse.”)

Then Pérez Rosario read from her book, including some segments of Julia’s letters. She emphasizes that “the symbolism of the tragedy on the migration” that is generally presented in previous publications about Julia, is in her eyes rather an “escape from victimhood.” Her studies of the collections of Julia’s poetry in the context of her life place her as an “early figure of sexile.” Pérez Rosario extends the definition of sexile to include Julia as a heterosexual woman that “does not conform to the traditional gender role.” The letters to her family presents a dimension of Julia that cross the border between her personal life and her writings. Some of the letters reveal Julia’s observations of her new life, the awe of traveling and the adventures of getting to know the city for the first time.

If you missed this presentation stay tuned to Centro’s YouTube channel where the event will be posted shortly.