

Poetas Puertorriqueñas: María Bibiana Benítez Constanza (1783-1873) Puerto Rico's first "known" female poet and playwright, was born into a middle-class family in Aguadilla. Her family loved literature, owned their own library collection of the best books of the era and educated María in private schools. Her first poem was published in 1832 at age forty-nine and she was the first Puerto Rican woman to write a dramatic play. Benítez is honored in her biography titled: "Los Silencios De María Bibiana Benítez."

Alejandrina Benítez de Gautier (1819–1879) is considered by many to be one of Puerto Rico's greatest poets. Orphaned at an early age, she lived in San Juan with her aunt, the poet and author María Bibiana Benítez, who raised her and sculpted her education. She was a member of the group of young writers considered the first generation Puerto Rican poets and writers who founded what became known as Puerto Rican literary culture.

Benítez de Gautier was awarded 100 Spanish pesos from the "La Sociedad Económica Amigos del País" (Friends of the Economic Society of Puerto Rico) for her early 1840's poem, "La Patria del Genio" (The Nation of the Genius). She then abstained from writing until 1861 when her new poems published in local journals began to appear. Possibly her best known poem of the time was "A Submarine Cable to Puerto Rico" in which she pays tribute to the knowledge and engineering of telegraph service between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas. Several schools in Puerto Rico are named in her honor, as is one in Brooklyn, NY.

Dr. Concha Meléndez (1895-1983) poet, writer, and educator was the first woman member of the Puerto Rican Academy of Languages. Meléndez received her primary and secondary education in Caguas, the city of her birth. She earned her teacher's certificate from the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan and continued her studies there to receive her Bachelor's degree in 1924. Two years later she earned her Master's degree from Columbia University in New York and returned to the island to become a professor at UPR.

Meléndez subsequently enrolled in the National University of Mexico and in 1932 became the first woman in the history of Mexico to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy and letters. Again, she returned to the island where UPR bestowed upon her the title of "Professor Emeritus" in Hispanic-American Literature. At UPR she was named director of the Hispanic Studies and Humanities Faculty Department, a position she held between 1940-1959. At the University, Meléndez also founded a tenured chair on Hispanic-American Literature. In 1964, she served as visiting professor at the Middlebury School of Languages in Vermont.

Meléndez's works have been compiled into fifteen volumes and she has been awarded many honors throughout the world. The center of the Biblioteca Nacional de Puerto Rico del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña is named after her. Every year the Coalition of Hispanic American Women of Miami selects five high school graduates to receive the Elena Mederos/Concha Meléndez Scholarship for their outstanding academic records. A school in San Juan and a high school in Virginia are named after her.

Julia de Burgos (1914–1953) is considered by many to be not only one of the greatest poets born in Puerto Rico, but, along with Cuban born Gabriela Mistral, one of the greatest female poets in of all Latin America. As an advocate of Puerto Rican

independence, she served as Secretary General of the Daughters of Freedom, the women's branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and was a civil rights activist for women and African/Afro-Caribbean writers.

Julia was the oldest of thirteen children, six of whom died of malnutrition. But her family's poverty did not keep her from developing a love for nature and her country, as is noted in her first work *Río Grande de Loíza*. According to Burgos: "My childhood was all a poem in the river, and a river in the poem of my first dreams."

She graduated from Muñoz Rivera Primary School in 1928 and was awarded a scholarship to attend University High School. In 1931 she enrolled in UPR and in 1933, graduated at the age of nineteen with a teaching degree. She then taught elementary school and worked as a writer for a children's program on public radio. Her love for literature led her to write poetry. However, she considered her 1935 first poetry collection, "poemas exactas a mi misma" (Poems to Myself) sophomoric and refused to publish it.

In 1936, she was a member of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico) and elected Secretary General of the Daughters of Freedom, a non-partisan women's organization which was the women's branch of the Nationalist Party. As a writer in journals and newspapers in the late 1930s, she published two books, both containing collections of her poetry, and she traveled around the island promoting her work by giving book readings. Burgos's lyrical poems are a combination of the intimate, the land, and the social struggle of the oppressed.

Many critics assert that her poetry anticipated the work of feminist writers and poets. In one poem she writes: "I am life, strength, woman." Burgos received numerous awards and recognition for her work and was celebrated by fellow poets including Pablo Neruda. In 1939, she traveled first to Cuba to attend the University of Havana then worked in New York as a journalist for *Pueblos Hispanos*, a progressive newspaper.

In February 1953, she wrote one of her last poems, "Farewell in Welfare Island," believed to be her only poem written in English. On June 28 that year, she disappeared from her family's home in Brooklyn without leaving a clue as to her whereabouts. It was later learned she had gone for a walk carrying no identification, collapsed on a sidewalk in the Spanish Harlem section of Manhattan then died of pneumonia in a hospital nearby at the age thirty-nine. As no one claimed her body, she received a pauper's burial in New York's only potter's field.

Eventually, friends and relatives were able to trace her and have her remains transferred to the island. Funeral services for her were held at the Puerto Rican Atheneum, with a hero's burial at the Municipal Cemetery of Carolina. A monument was later built at her burial site. Her third book was published posthumously in 1954.

On February 19, 1987, the Spanish Department of the University of Puerto Rico posthumously honored Julia de Burgos by granting her a doctorate in Human Arts and Letters.

Sources: Wikipedia specific to each woman, and

<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/07/05/a-latina-feminist-to-remember-puerto-rican-poet-julia-de-burgos/>