



# SOUTH SIDE VENUS

THE LEGACY OF  
MARGARET  
BURROUGHS

MARY ANN CAIN

FOREWORD BY HAKI MADHUBUTI

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For George, now and always.

And for the ancestors.



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## FOREWORD

Haki Madhubuti

how did we arrive?  
mothers as artists and seers  
as earth toilers, sun consumers  
workers at midnight and dawn  
nurtured us with apples, bananas, open hearts, seeds,  
cultural language, illustrations, and institutions.  
lovingly cut the umbilical cord,  
not the commitment or sacred findings.

The very large question that this well-researched and heartfelt biography by Mary Ann Cain asks is, “What role did art, history, culture, mentors, and political activists play in the life of Margaret Burroughs?” Buried in Cain’s *South Side Venus* you will find answers that are conclusive, definitive, and long-term. Her subject emerges from this study as true and timely as the art she created and the institutions that she was instrumental in founding as well as guiding: the National Negro Museum and Historical Foundation, the South Side Community Art Center, the National Conference of Artists, the Lake Meadows Art Fair, and Chicago’s internationally respected DuSable Museum of African American History, the first of its kind in the United States.

It was a Saturday morning in the summer of 1962 when a twenty-year-old soldier from Fort Sheridan, Illinois, found himself at the home of Margaret and Charles Burroughs, which also served as the newly established Ebony Museum of Negro History. The young man was in search of answers to a multitude of questions raised by his short life and voracious reading—questions that interfered with his life, particularly his sleep, rendering him ill-tempered during his workdays and increasing his anger about the plight of his people.

That young man was me, Don L. Lee. I had read about the museum in the *Chicago Defender*, and the first Saturday I had off, I knocked on the door of this Bronzeville mansion at 3806 S. Michigan Avenue on the South Side of Chicago. A white man answered the door, and at once I felt that I was at the wrong address. But he greeted me warmly as I asked for Margaret Burroughs, who was listed as the museum's founder. This was Eugene Pieter Feldman, a Jewish white man and another one of the founders, who had been unwelcome in his home state of Alabama and, like hundreds of thousands of black people before him, had migrated to Chicago. Feldman, a historian, writer, and long-distance activist, immediately escorted me to the kitchen, where I was introduced to Margaret Burroughs. She was working on a linoleum cut, or linocut—a form of art that was new to me—but what struck me immediately was her natural hairstyle, which she proudly wore in 1962, years before the “Black Is Beautiful” movement started, marking her as one of the originators and proponents of “the natural.”

Mary Ann Cain shares this bit of history and leaves out very little in her exploration of Margaret Burroughs. The many *firsts* of this remarkable woman are highlighted, as they should be; however, we are also privy to the interiors, the loneliness, and, in many ways, the complications and confrontations that color the transformative journey spanning the ninety-plus years of her illustrious life.

The clearest betrayal of a worthy ancestor is to forget his or her name. A greater slap in the face of any of our significant long-distance runners is to offer insecure, unprepared acknowledgment of their contributions to civilization in the times in which they lived. Mary Ann Cain spent special time with Dr. Burroughs toward the end of her life; thereby, she is able to render a portrait of this multitalented, committed artist and activist that would be lacking if such interactions—intimacies and visual perceptions—did not occur. She writes:

Margaret Burroughs learned early on that art and language were her passports for crossing. But her crossings were not so much in search of acceptance as they were to issue invitations to join the revolutionary vision of true democracy—all humans created equal, of equal worth, full participants in the shaping of their worlds. How Burroughs learned to make those crossings, how she used art and writing to accomplish them, and how she

learned how to pass on that knowledge are what is at stake. Those crossings are on the verge of being lost to generations who know only technology and the navigation of cyberspace alone in the brave new world of entrepreneurs writ large. . . . She was raised with the notion that she had something to say and something to give. Art was her first and most lasting means of making it up and passing it on.

*How* Taylor understood her legacy—through making a contribution by struggling to make something happen—is what is important to examine, not simply the end results of those struggles. Her story is unique in that it was not about a single achievement—not just as an artist, a museum founder, a teacher, or an activist. It was unique in its success at being and staying connected to a larger experience. Her art was the means by which she made and maintained these connections by crossing otherwise uncrossable lines.

In *South Side Venus*, Dr. Burroughs emerges as a part of the air we breathe, the green juice of life, from warm smiles of deep memory. Her life's work stands firm alongside the unforgettable first-class artists and activists of her day in what is now the age of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram; she represented what the social media do not have time for—the complicated yesterdays, today's, and ill-defined tomorrows. We are dealing with people whose enslaved ancestors were branded like cattle and who are now more occupied with building their personal “brands” on the internet than with seeking an understanding of the politics, history, culture, and economics of their people. Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs blossomed in the twentieth century, a century that was not kind—one that was forcibly unjust, deliberately and legally unaccommodating to black people. Her legacy, according to this fine book, is that she defined her times even while the times tried to define *her*.

Art, *visual* art, informed her life to the point that there was no life without art. It was clear to me, and Cain confirms this impression, that all artists are decision-makers, which makes them to some degree the freest people in any culture. No one told Dr. Burroughs what to create. She decided on the medium (printmaking, drawing, painting, sculpture, poetry, or prose) and subject matter of her art. Cain's book reveals that at a very young age, Burroughs became a “decision-maker” rather than, like most

people, making choices within the parameters of other people's decisions. This was critical to her own maturation and ultimate station in life.

In concert with all of her accomplishments, especially during the early years, Margaret Burroughs endured ostracism, government harassment, the negative fallout from Chicago's Red Scare, and a critical whitelash due to her choice of friends, mentors, and acquaintances. One of her most important and pivotal influences was the multitalented, internationally acclaimed vocalist, actor, and activist Paul Robeson. Other defining influences were Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Alain Locke, Ida B. Wells, Richard Wright, Katherine Dunham, St. Clair Drake, Vivian Harsh, and Charlemae Rollins. Yet few influenced her more than Robeson, whom she openly supported during the worst of the McCarthy years, when all liberals were viewed as communists.

you with the brushes, canvas, paint, tools, and ideas  
with African hair, mind, and memory  
instigated an uprising to change the conversation  
quicken our run toward saneness, smiles, and fear  
outpacing a leadership that moves  
like a roach with Alzheimer's.

As an artist, teacher, and mentor to literally thousands of young people, including me, Burroughs always led with her heart and resources. Slow to criticize the young, she was our example, and with encouraging words she would always say, "Go see for yourself," as well as "I'll stand my ground, you stand yours." Cain succeeds in capturing the artist's humility and generosity, creating a biographical portrait that echoes the essence of a woman who wholeheartedly believed that what we achieve is not about "me" but about *us*. Cain gives us insight into Burroughs's personal life, especially her marriages to Bernard Goss and Charles Burroughs, and her children, Gayle and Paul. Equally important is Cain's further recognition that Burroughs remained mindful of the "little people," among whom she always claimed membership.

Dr. Burroughs possessed what I would call the integrity of doubt and doing. One should never have all the answers, but most certainly one should have many. Consequently, she surrounded herself with the best of the best, many of whom would become lifelong friends: Gwendolyn

Brooks, Timuel Black, Ishmael Flory, Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, Gordon Parks, George Neal, and many others. Her commitment to Africa, African Americans, and world history early in life gave her the impetus to teach and build institutions that enlightened even the least of us.

Being defined early in her life as a “race woman” never distracted her from her lifelong pursuit of using her art in the bonding of the “races.” This too is partially the legacy of Dr. Burroughs. Her view of the world was one of infinite possibilities in creating a climate of togetherness. Cain highlights Burroughs’s community-oriented vision and notably explains that her phrase “lived up from the roots” was not to be interpreted so as to leave anyone out. As noted by the author, Burroughs’s yearlong sabbatical in Mexico was a “watershed moment in her life.” Mexico and its artists confirmed that in order to be oneself, one must have a knowledge of one’s history and culture, and that black identity and social justice institutions are critical to an informed people.

I took the model from Margaret Burroughs’s DuSable Museum and Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press in 1967 to start the Third World Press with \$400 and a used mimeograph machine in my basement apartment in the Englewood community of Chicago. I exist, in part, because they existed, but it was Margaret and Charles Burroughs who lit the fire in my young, impressionable mind and soul. And yes, it was also Malcolm X, Hoyt W. Fuller, Barbara Ann Sizemore, and the great Gwendolyn Brooks who sealed my future. Mary Ann Cain, in this wonderful biography, connects them all and much more. In writing about the life and legacy of such an important historical figure, Cain also gives us an unacknowledged history of Chicago—a Chicago that Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs helped to create.

I and millions of blacks were told that the best way to hide something was to put it in a book. The secret is now out, and books are no longer tangential to our existence. Books represent water, light, soil, and fire. It is absolutely necessary that we add *South Side Venus: The Legacy of Margaret Burroughs* to our reading lists and libraries.

yesterday and today, we, on jet powered roller skates  
still eat your dust  
still are wondrous of the measure  
of your gifts.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first time I visited the DuSable Museum of African American History, in 2003, I had hoped to learn more about the Bronzeville community in Chicago. Although I had grown up in the city's southwest suburbs, I had only recently discovered that this South Side neighborhood had a name as well as its own unique history. Also, thanks to early dial-up internet technology, I had just found the DuSable Museum online. Excited but also self-conscious about my ignorance, I entered the museum on a mission. My novel-in-progress at the time included characters from Bronzeville, and so I set forth on a research trip to round out my knowledge.

Back then, I never would have dreamed that not only would I meet the founder of the DuSable Museum, Dr. Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, but that I would write a book about her. Had it not been for the friendly security guard who inquired what I was writing about in my journal as I moved through the galleries, had he not called a staff member, registrar Theresa Christopher, to further assist me with my research (given that the museum did not have Bronzeville exhibits at that time), had she not sat with me in a quiet corner of the Harold Washington wing for half an hour and given me the names and contact information of important Bronzeville people, including Dr. Burroughs, this book would never have come into being. These were the people who first set me on my path of discovery, of Bronzeville, to be sure, but eventually of Dr. Burroughs and her immense but too often overlooked legacy.

After Dr. Burroughs passed on in 2010, my friend, teacher, and community partner in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Omowale Ketu Oladuwa, had recently begun a new community organization, the Three Rivers Institute of Afrikan Art and Culture (TRIAAC). In 2011 we decided to memorialize Dr. Burroughs, who had visited Fort Wayne twice in recent years, and whom Ketu had met in Chicago in the early 1980s, with a presentation that I would give at TRIAAC. Afterward, I felt compelled to reciprocate

Dr. Burroughs's generosity and kindness toward me. I decided to write a book focusing on her life and its legacy. I had no idea how much further her legacy would extend to me until I began to research this project.

This book came into being in large part because those who knew Margaret Burroughs wanted it to happen. At every turn I met with openness, assistance, hospitality, and commitment. I received rides, names and contact information, corrections and clarifications, but also a sense of enthusiasm and eagerness to see this project come together. It has truly been an honor and a privilege to meet those who knew Dr. Burroughs and what she stood for, but also what she has left behind. Among those I was fortunate enough to interview, I want to thank Theresa Christopher, former registrar at the DuSable Museum, for setting me on this path; Eric Toller, eldest grandson of Dr. Burroughs, who deeply understands his grandmother's contributions and their value; Dr. Haki Madhubuti, founder and publisher of Third World Press, emeritus professor at Chicago State University, and University Distinguished Professor at DePaul University, for his initial, unquestioning support of this project as well as his ongoing encouragement; Timuel Black, Chicago's oral historian par excellence; the attorney and emeritus South Side Community Art Center board member Lawrence Kennon; Clarice Davis Durham, teacher, friend, and fellow activist to Dr. Burroughs; Art Center board member and former president Diane Dinkins Carr; artist and former Art Center director Doug Williams; artist Debra Hand; prison minister and Operation PUSH organizer Reverend Queen Mother Helen Sinclair; Daniel Texidor Parker, emeritus professor at Olive Harvey College, professor at Chicago State University, and collector of African and African American art; Bennett Johnson of Third World Press, a fellow traveler with Margaret and Charles Burroughs; and Omowale Ketu Oladuwa, community activist, writer, drummer, and instructor, whose gracious sharing of his immense knowledge of African and African American history and culture set me on a path to write this book.

Another friend of Dr. Burroughs who provided valuable time, resources, and encouragement is Dr. Gloria Latimore Peace, producer of the Chicago cable series H3O and a former professor at Northeastern University. Arcilla Stahl of the South Side Community Art Center opened up archives, answered questions, and overall made sure I received whatever assistance needed; and George Stahl counseled me on how to push for

greater access to key resources. Rose Perkins, assistant to Dr. Madhubuti at Third World Press, provided timely, gracious, and precise assistance throughout this project.

I also deeply appreciate the assistance of museum curators, archivists, librarians, and administrators, including Masequa Myers, executive director of the South Side Community Art Center; Leslie Guy, former chief curator, Skyla Hearn, archivist and special collections librarian, Kate Swisher, registrar and collections manager, Troy Ratliff, chief operating officer, and Perri Irmer, CEO, at the DuSable Museum; Liz Wolf, exhibitions and collections coordinator at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston; and Allison Hausladen, cataloger and reference librarian at the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries of the Art Institute of Chicago. Closer to home, Sue Skekloff, research librarian at Purdue University Fort Wayne, provided much research guidance, as did Carrie Brooks, former student and current faculty at Purdue University Fort Wayne, who also read and reacted to parts of the manuscript.

I want to further thank the excellent staff at Northwestern University Press for their warm reception, professionalism, and honesty, including former acquisitions editor Mike Levine, who first encouraged this project; editor in chief Gianna Mosser, who steered me toward sound writing and revisions; former acquisitions assistant Maggie Grossman, for keeping it all on track; and Anne Gendler, managing editor and director of editorial, design, and production, for trustworthy advice and timely assistance. A very special thanks to Jill Lisette Petty, acquisitions editor, for her savvy guidance, reassurance during the early editorial transition, and mutual fandom of Margaret Burroughs.

The Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana University provided important grants to fund my travels for research. I am also indebted to the university's vice chancellor of academic affairs, Carl Drummond, as well as my department chair, Hardin Aasand, and Dean Eric Link for allowing me release time to complete this project at Purdue University Fort Wayne. Writers Jeff Johnson and Lynn Sweet deserve thanks for helping me with contact information. My friend Susan Hunter, a Clayton State University emeritus professor and department chair, has taken me all over Atlanta in search of relevant materials and exhibits.

My sister, Linda Cain, fed me important Chicago-based information throughout the writing of this book. My brother, Tom Cain, took mental

walks down memory lane with me to help contextualize some of these materials. My mother, Ruth Seaman Cain, deserves credit as a South Sider who raised me right, along with my father, the late Lester Ray Cain.

Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank my husband, life partner, and beloved, poet George Kalamaras, for helping me light the creative torch and think through the snarls and obstacles, offering support and encouragement at all the right moments. What a joy it has been to share the writers' life with you and our beloved beagles, past and present, Barney and Bootsie, reminders that our animal selves matter in everything we do. Together we have conjured a household conducive to creativity, study, critical thinking, political analysis, and, of course, playfulness. I love you now and always.

# **SOUTH SIDE VENUS**



## PROLOGUE

Perhaps one of the most important legacies that Dr. Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs has left is to ask us to consider our own. I first met Dr. Burroughs in 2003, when she was already eighty-six years old. She had a firm grasp on her own legacy by that point—most notably the DuSable Museum of African American History, which she and her second husband, Charles Burroughs, began in 1961 in their living room at 3806 S. Michigan Avenue at the behest of her DuSable High School students. She was still serving as a Chicago Park District commissioner, advocating activities that broadened the parks’ offerings beyond the typical sports-centric agendas to include the connective tissue of the arts. Her own production and growth as a printmaker, painter, and sculptor were still very much in evidence as she continued to take classes and create and distribute copies of her linoleum prints to anyone she deemed worthy of such a prize. She was still conducting workshops, giving talks, and raising funds, not only for the DuSable Museum and the South Side Community Art Center (another institution she had helped found) but also for her “boys” in Stateville, Joliet, and other prisons and correctional facilities across the state to whom she taught classes in art and poetry. And a few years later, just as she turned ninety, to further drive home the point that she was far from resting on her laurels, she took up roller skating.<sup>1</sup> Few people have taken the meaning of legacy so much to heart as Margaret Burroughs. She intended to be an example of what was possible; she wanted people to pay attention and learn. She had arrived at a point in her life when she knew what she had to pass on and that she had the responsibility to do so.

Those who knew her—as a contemporary, teacher, mentor, friend, elder, and organizer—called her a Renaissance woman. While she left her most visible mark as an institution builder and artist, her accomplishments go much further and deeper than the fragments of written and visual accounts suggest. Her interests were wide-ranging; she was gifted in multiple media in the fine arts (printmaking, drawing, painting, and sculpture)

and as a poet and writer, but she was also interested in theater, dance, and music, not to mention journalism, educational research, and curriculum development. She was someone with vision, yes, but she was a visionary who executed her visions. Some called her a builder. She helped build two arts institutions, but her building extended beyond brick-and-mortar sites and into organizing people and groups. For instance, she began the National Conference of Negro Artists in 1959 and headed its leadership until a few years before her passing. With the help of her close friend and travel agent, Eleanor Chatman, she spent decades organizing tours of countries that spoke to her sense of African legacy, those of the African diaspora. But she also aimed to visit every country in the world, a goal she had not fallen all that short of by her life's end in 2010. She was constantly organizing people, connecting one person with another. As her longtime friend, Clarice Davis Durham, commented, Margaret was always inviting people to come to her house and sit in the legendary meeting place in her kitchen. She was not much for chitchat; she always had a goal, and one of them was organizing people to accomplish tasks that she deemed important.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Burroughs's legacy is so vast and deep that it is a challenge to attempt to map it out. Her accolades were many, including the Legends and Legacy award given by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago just weeks before her passing. And so it would seem that her position in history rests secure, her legacy firmly established.

Yet on some level I can't help but think she also worried a little about that legacy being passed on. One day as we finished lunch at Pearl's Place, just down the block from her South Michigan home, I caught a look from her. Beneath her mauve beret, in between bites of Mary's seafood gumbo, Creole-style home cooking reminiscent of her childhood in St. Rose, Louisiana, she gave me a look that questioned even as it seemed to calculate. *You're a writer*, it seemed to say. *Why not write about me?* This was perhaps my second meeting with her of only a handful; I had yet to discover just how many people had already written about her. She had yet to publish her autobiography. But she was as far from an egotist as they come. As her eldest grandson, Eric Toller, noted, she was completely selfless when it came to promoting herself.<sup>3</sup>

And yet that look. The concern that everything she knew and stood for might be lost. It wasn't about her. It was never about her. It was always about her "little people," of which she counted herself one. It was

about getting through. About passing on the torch of justice and equality through artistic expression. Margaret Burroughs was uniquely gifted in her ability to do just that.

Just ask the poet hawking his latest collection across from the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue.

“How’d you get interested in poetry?” I asked, flipping through his pages. Just for kicks, I added, “Do you know Dr. Margaret Burroughs?”

Big smile. He knew he had me now. “I owe it all to her,” he said. “She got me started. Dr. B is the best.” I handed him a ten-dollar bill; he handed me his verse.

Later that night there was the djembe drummer just up the street on the Michigan Avenue bridge. Same story. *She’s everywhere*, I think. Who doesn’t know her? She’s cast her net much farther than I could ever imagine.

But that look. She knew on some level how fragile even the largest net can be.

What Margaret Burroughs surely knew was at risk of being lost is an enormous body of knowledge, not just of artifacts, ideas, and lives, but also ways of doing and being that she herself embodied. She came of age in a time and place when African Americans, the ones who kicked away southern dirt and crammed into Illinois Central trains, came north to Chicago in two waves, during one world war and just before and after another. Unlike the earlier “old settlers,” these migrants were penned into ghettos by housing covenants and street corner violence, starting with the 1919 race riots three years before five-year-old Margaret Taylor made the long trek northward from St. Rose Parish, Louisiana, which lay just upriver from King Oliver and his legacy, Louis Armstrong. But even as blacks were being railroaded into exclusive contact with each other in northern cities, a cross-cultural, cross-class, and cross-racial current was offering young people a window on themselves and their circumstances that linked them to the struggles of others in history and around the world. Not only was there the cross-pollination of national and international figures such as Paul Robeson, Burroughs’s lifelong role model, traveling from one urban center to another. There was also that of working-class Jews and other ethnic whites and Latinos who for various reasons found purpose in crossing the lines of color,