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### Feminism, Race, Culture in the Metaphysical Poetics of Julia de Burgos

My interest in the Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos (1914-1953) came from the first time I read the poet in a Latin American literary course at Lewis University. Her poems “A Julia de Burgos,” “Ay, ay, ay, de la grifa negra,” “Yo fui mi misma ruta,” “El mar y tu,” “Proximo a Dios,” and other poems were discussed in class. De Burgos’s use of metaphors to describe abstract concepts and emotions was an element of the Romantic metaphysical poets that I became quickly interested in. De Burgos grew from a male-dominated literary scene, used the language of her male predecessors, and challenged the male gatekeepers in poetic strategy and wit. She used the patriarchal literary scene to turn both the writers and readers to their own perceptions, forcing them to analyze the lack of women in stories and writing. The metaphysical exercises found in her poetry are reflective of the need for deep contemplation in the institutional power systems people exist in, and the language used within a system found in a patriarchal Puerto Rico. Her division of the “I” is personal, sociopolitical, and collective, signifying the importance in revisiting time and time again.

In Carmen L. Torres-Robles’s biographical essay “Social Irredentism in the Prose of Julia de Burgos,” Torres-Robles notes one of Julia de Burgos’s major principles from her essay “Generación del Treinta,” which appears in the discussion of my analysis. Julia de Burgos’s goal was to capture “the exposition and advocacy of philosophical, historical, sociological, aesthetic, and linguistic principles for the common people” (Torres-Robles, 44). I discuss the aesthetic and linguistic features of Julia de Burgos’s “A Julia de Burgos,” recognizing the metaphysical elements, poetic strategy, and artistic care she puts into her autobiographical poem to point out

the importance of being in discussion with one's "self" and community for the improvement of equity. For Julia de Burgos, her fight for equity transcended her accessibility into the literary scene, as she opposed the patriarchal notion of having to live as a domestic housewife. Not only did she champion women's rights in Puerto Rico, but she championed the rights of black people in the Caribbean. In her poem "Ay, ay, ay de la grifia negra," de Burgos uses the same literary, metaphysical elements from her poem "A Julia de Burgos," shifting the attention of societal issues to the forces in power, making the literary scene dominated by men see the existence and humanity of people outside the white heteronormative. In my explicative essay, I will examine the methods and strategy behind Julia de Burgos's work, to identify the significance of her poems, to both herself and the collective readers she inspired from her time and forward. I will demonstrate the authority Julia de Burgos has over her audience, as she dismantles the dichotomy between gender-specific roles for herself and the collective she seeks to educate and represent.

In Julia de Burgos's "Ay, ay, ay, de la grifa negra" (Ay, Ay, Ay, of the Kinky-Haired Negress), the poet's voice is no longer speaking through a split "I," shifting in tone from "A Julia de Burgos" into a resonant, representative voice collective, profound "I." Julia de Burgos is expressing the different strategies behind the use of the pronoun "I." To return to Springfield's initial study of Julia de Burgos's poetry, Springfield finds three outstanding purposes for Julia de Burgos's "I:" "there is the 'I,' an ontological object, and the 'I,' who reflects on the individual and social histories. To this, she adds a third 'I,' the collective self who represents the speaker's racial and sociocultural conscience" (707). "A Julia de Burgos" is the ontological exercise, reflective, and building in philosophical reasoning with each following stanza, so the main focus with "Ay, ay, ay, de la grifa negra" is examining the strength of the "sociocultural conscience."

For instance, the beginning stanza represents a cognizant speaker, who is aware of her appearance and historical background—two components that shape how the speaker is perceived by others:

Ay, ay, ay, que soy grifa y pura negra  
griferia en mi pelo, cafería en mis labios;  
y mi chata nariz mozambiquea (ll. 1-3).

(Ay, ay, ay, that am kinky-haired and pure black,  
kinks in my hair, Kafir in my lips;  
and my flat nose Mozambiques) (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 1-3).

The allusion to Mozambique shows the significance of history often obfuscated in Latin America, a refusal to accept the citizenry and humanity of the black people living in the Americas who were forced to work the lands, since their capture during the slave trades of the mid-fifteenth centuries. Springfield adds, “Burgos invents an allegory where self and national identities merge. Puerto Rico’s legacy of colonial and racial oppression becomes the terrain for an exploration into self-identity as well as a quest for self-reconciliation” (709). Julia de Burgos’s mission in writing “A Julia de Burgos” has been understood as a separation from the rigid gender conventions associated with her womanhood, and so the same strategy is applied to the poet’s blackness represented in “Ay, Ay, Ay, la grifa negra.” Julia de Burgos is highlighting the colonial history of Puerto Rico, while separating herself from the oppressive forces of whiteness, showing person’s race can shape the outcome of their systemic reality.

Moving into the second stanza of “Ay, ay, ay la grifa negra,” the speaker moves away from being the subject, but more so the object of the poem: “Negro trozo de negro en que me esculpo / ay, ay, ay, que mi estatua es toda negra” (“Black chunk of black in which I sculpt myself, / ay, ay, ay, my statue is all black”) (ll. 12-13). The poem internalizes the objectification imposed on both women and black people, underlining the irony in the poet’s voice when she

objectifies herself throughout the entire second stanza. Yet, in de Burgos stripping her own humanity from the second verse, the third stanza that follows becomes all the more powerful in the insight de Burgos shares:

Dicen que mi abuelo fue el esclavo  
 por quien el amo dio treinta monedas.  
 Ay, ay, ay, que el esclavo fue mi abuelo  
 es mi pena, es mi pena.  
 Si hubiera sido el amo,  
 Sería mi vergüenza;  
 que es los hombres, igual que en las naciones,  
 si el ser el siervo es no tener derechos,  
 el ser el amo es no tener conciencia (ll. 14-22)

(They tell me my grandfather was the slave  
 for whom the master paid thirty coins.  
 Ay, ay, ay, that the slave was my grandfather  
 is my sadness, is my sadness.  
 If he had been the master  
 it would be my shame:  
 that in men, as in nations,  
 if being a slave is having no rights  
 being the master is having no conscience) (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 14-22).

Julia de Burgos poses that the significance of being the object of oppression is the morally righteous stance in the relationship between “master” and “slave,” since it is the slave that is stricken with “sadness” and “no rights,” but at least not the individual without the “conscience.” The relationship between “master” and “slave” is captured with a deep complexity in under eight lines, where de Burgos makes mention of the capital, ethical, cultural, and gendered relationship between the “master” and “slave.” The mention of “thirty coins” is the undervalue in humanity, which is the ethical dilemma the Americas are constantly trying to mask, and yet it is the poet’s voice that continues to articulate the consequences that arise from the past. Julia de Burgos does not abandon her womanhood for her blackness, as she shows in saying, “que en los hombres, igual que en las naciones,” to indicate the intersectional relationship between gender and race.

Overall, the relationship between “master” and “slave” is supposed to highlight the dichotomous characteristics that are attributed to the moral standing of the two figures, which demonstrates the pride that can arise in the poet’s voice for being black and not white, since she does not live with “[la] vergüenza” of having owned a human being.

Furthermore, the binary opposition that Julia de Burgos points out through the historical relationship between “master” and “slave,” or white and black, is again, who associates with the consequences of the past, and who can administer amends. For Julia de Burgos, the resolve is recognizing the new relationships arising in the sociopolitical atmosphere between white and black people: “ay, ay, ay, los pecados del rey blanco / lávelos en perdón la reina negra” (“Ay, ay, ay, wash the sins of the white King / is forgiveness black Queen”) (ll. 25-26). The poet realizes that the relationship between “master” and “slave” has transformed into “King” and “Queen” with the creation of a new social race, often categorized as “mixed-race,” or in Puerto Rico, “mulatto.” Julia de Burgos poses, that it is the women of the poem who have the power to forgive the oppressor for their consequential harm. Interestingly, through the creation of “mixed-race” people, Julia de Burgos does not administer any sort of ethical characteristics to the “child” of the “white King” and “black Queen,” but remains ambiguous and speculative:

Ay, ay, ay, que la raza se me fuga  
y hacia la raza blanca zumba y vuelva  
a hundirse en su agua clara;  
o tal vez si la blanca se ensombrará en la negra (ll. 27-30)

(Ay, ay, ay the race escapes me  
and buzzes and flies toward the white race,  
to sink in its clear water;  
or perhaps the white will be shadowed in the black) (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 27-30).

Julia de Burgos’s speculation is reflective of the many shades of people across Puerto Rico, whose historical backgrounds are often a mystery, yet the indication that neither the “white” can

“sink in its clear water” or the “black” “[shadow]” the “white” is a commentary on racial hierarchies. Julia de Burgos does not privilege “black” or “white,” but accepts the circumstances and the issues with the truth. The unforeseeable future in the power of a “mixed-race” nation is a question that the poet poses without directly asking the reader. Ambiguity assures the reader that the formation of a being that is neither all “white” or all “black” is not a sign of a solution to the sociopolitical issues in Puerto Rico, and across the Americas, or a sign of who will take power in a Anglo, heteronormative society. De Burgos is only certain of the transformed relationship between “master” and “slave,” which fortifies the “fraternidad de América” (“fraternity of America”) (ll. 34).

In “A Julia de Burgos,” de Burgos explores the profound nature of “yo” (I), dividing the “self” into two characters. Julia de Burgos’s division of the “self” opens herself up for introspection, leading her to self-definition of who the “yo” is, as a woman living in Puerto Rico during the 1930s. The conversation between the “self” and “other” makes a point to alienate the “other,” offering criticism to what the “other” represents to the socially conscious poet. The speaker begins with a clear division between the one Julia de Burgos and the “other:”

Ya las gentes murmuran que yo soy tu enemiga  
porque dicen que en verso doy al mundo tu yo.

Mienten, Julia de Burgos. Mienten, Julia de Burgos.  
La que se alza en mis versos no es tu voz: es me voz  
porque tú eres ropaje y la esencia soy yo;  
y el más profundo abismo se tiende entre las dos (ll. 1-6).

(Already the people murmur that I am your enemy  
because they say that in verse I give the world your me.

They lie, Julia de Burgos. They lie, Julia de Burgos.  
Who rises in my verses is not your voice. It is my voice  
because you are the dressing and the essence is me  
and the most profound abyss is spread between us) (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 1-6).

Julia de Burgos's speaker recognizes the influence other people have in her battle between herself, beginning with "ya las gentes" ("already the people"), indicating society's influence in the demeanor and roles women internalize and act on. The speaker of "A Julia de Burgos" is the "self" Julia de Burgos; it is her that dominates the poem's verses, and is credited to the "voz" (voice). Something to consider, is the "tú" (you) that Julia de Burgos is addressing, and "othering" simultaneously. In recognizing de Burgos's use of the informal you, "tú," instead of "usted," the reader realizes the grammatical conventions Julia de Burgos is utilizing for the effect of disassociating certain aspects of herself, disrespecting the "other." Furthermore, de Burgos defiantly clarifies the dominant "self" through the dominant voice she speaks through in her writing, claiming the representative "self" through her verses: "la que se alza en mis versos no es tu voz; es mi voz / porque tú eres ropaje y la esencia soy yo" ("who rises in my verses is not your voice. It is my voice / because you are the dressing and the essence is me" (ll. 4-5). The first two stanzas do not discuss the reason for the division of "yo" (I), but the distinction between "ropaje" (clothes) and "esencia" (essence) that de Burgos poses, signifies what de Burgos values. That is, "ropaje" is representative of de Burgos's exterior, which is the characteristic the speaker "others." "Esencia" is a heavy, philosophical term that embodies a person's personhood, yet de Burgos claims her "voz" encapsulates her "self." In the following stanzas, clarify the division in "yo," bringing the discussion closer to Julia de Burgos's womanhood in the midst of a patriarchal Puerto Rico.

In Aída M. Beaupied's "Auto-reconocimiento y autogénesis en la poesía de Julia de Burgos" (Self-recognition and Autogenesis in the Poetry of Julia de Burgos), Beaupied also explores the dialectic between "self" and "other" as a literary theme among popular Latin American writers, posing the question as to why writers divide and dissect themselves in such a

fashion. In Beaupied's literary analysis, Beaupied recognizes the philosophical exercise in conversing with the "I" in the manner of "self" and "other," stating, "en [la obra de Julia de Burgos], independientemente de si la auto-observación resulta en reconocimiento o en alienación" (Julia de Burgo's work, regardless of whether the work is for self-observation, will result in either self-recognition or alienation" (374). If "A Julia de Burgos" is a philosophical exercise, then the exercise seeks to recognize where Julia de Burgos is herself as she sees herself, and where Julia de Burgos is the socialized, submissive woman patriarchal society seeks to characterize and create:

Tú eres fría muñeca de mentira social,  
y yo, viril destello de la humana verdad.

Tú, miel de cortesanas hipocresías; yo no;  
que en todos mis poemas desnudo el corazón.

Tú eres como tu mundo, egoísta; yo no;  
que en todo me lo juego a ser lo que soy yo.

Tú eres sólo la grave señora señorona;  
yo no; yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer.

Tú res de tu marido, de tu amo; yo no;  
yo de nadie, o de todos, porque a todos, a todos,  
en mi limpio sentir y en mi pensar me doy (ll. 7-17).

(You are the cold doll of social lies,  
and me, the virile starburst of the human truth.

You, honey of courtesan hypocrisies; not me;  
in all my poems I undress my heart.

You are like your world, selfish; not me  
who gambles everything betting on what I am.

You are only the ponderous lady very lady;  
not me; I am life, strength, woman.

You belong to your husband, your master; not me;  
I belong to nobody, or all, because to all, to all

I give myself in my clean feeling and in my thought) (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 7-17).

From stanzas three to six, de Burgos utilizes couplets to create an illusion of unity, where the form appears to make the conversation concerning the “I” as whole, yet the couplet’s form offers a duality, in which a line holds one concept that opposes the concept of another line. For instance, de Burgos dissects herself between the woman she desires to be, and the superficial woman she seeks to “other,” and in saying, “tú eres fría muñeca de mentira social” (you are the cold doll of social lies), de Burgos’s speaker criticizes the “other” as a “lie,” a fabrication made for society’s play-thing, or the “cold doll” she mentions (ll. 7). The opposing concept follows in the next line, where de Burgos expels the “social lies” from her being, and exposes the “viril destello de la humana verdad” (the virile starburst of human truth) (ll. 8). De Burgos values the woman who expresses “human truth,” revealing the intellectual insight de Burgos is after, abandoning any idea of being a submissive woman.

Furthermore, Aide M. Beaupied invites Tanto Eliana Rivero’s analysis of “A Julia de Burgos,” recognizing the inner-battle within Julia de Burgos as a result of society’s systemic forces: “Para Rivero la división del “yo” en la obra de Burgos es un reflejo del antagonismo presente en la lucha de clases de una sociedad injusta” (For Rivero, the division of the ‘I’ in the work of de Burgos is a reflection of the antagonism present in the class struggle of an unjust society) (374). Rivero’s claim points to class struggles, claiming the division in “I” is a reflection of both the speaker’s “self” and society. De Burgos is not destroying the integrity and wholeness of the “I,” but examining herself in an almost a violent fashion demonstrates the poet’s paradoxical desire to remain whole. Beaupied raises an excellent point to the purpose of de Burgos’s “A Julia de Burgos:” “la hablante intenta darnos una definición de sí misma como mujer que contradice y desafía la definición oficial de la época y que al hacerlo habla desde la

perspectiva de un ‘yo’ que se desdobla para acusar y rechazar su inautenticidad” (the speaker tries to give us a definition of herself as a woman that contradicts and defies the official definition of the time and that in doing so speaks from a perspective of a ‘I’ that unfolds to accuse and rejects its inauthenticity) (377). For example, in stating “Tú, miel de cortesanas hipocresías,” (“You, honey of courtesan hypocrisies”), de Burgos is revealing a facet of herself she needs to dismantle in order to remain intact as the woman she desires to become (ll. 9). The woman she desires to become is the woman she claims to be in the following line, “en todos mis poemas desnudo el corazón” (“in all my poems I undress my heart”) (ll. 10). De Burgos’s poetic strategy extends into *ars poética*, revealing her intention in writing “A Julia de Burgos.” She “undress[es] [her] heart” by criticizing herself when she poses as the “other,” calling her the “hypocrite,” but finding strength in coming to terms with her own “human truth.” The strength in coming to terms with the truth of the characteristics she seeks to shed, she credits to her womanhood: “yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer” (“I am life, strength, woman”) (ll. 14). In the following seventh stanza, the poet makes the distinction between “self” and “other” clear in the form of a tercet. The line that starts the seventh stanza begins with the “other” as a subject in criticism: “Tú eres de tu marido, de tu amo” (“you belong to your husband, your master”), pausing at the semi-colon, and leading back into the dominance of the assured “self,” “yo no” (“not I”) (ll. 15). The speaker’s “self” dominates the next two preceding lines, using the tercet to reinforce the dominance and strength the poetic voice has over the submissive de Burgos: “yo de nadie, o de todos, porque a todos, a todos, / en mi limpio sentir y en mi pensar me doy” (“I belong to no one, or to all, because to all, to all / I give myself to my clean feeling and my thought”) (ll. 16-17). Julia de Burgos is reinforcing the need to expose her submissive self that is given into her “husband,” but regains the strength through the seventh poetic stanza, allowing the

leading lines to be spoken by the aware voice whom knows of her “clean feeling and thoughts, and whom outweighs the submissive “other.” The autobiographical poet to “A Julia de Burgos” is misleading, in the sense that, she is no more divisive than the verses she constructs. Purposeful in arrangement and argument. De Burgos challenges the submissive nature with the complex weavings of language, clarifying her own split identity in the confines of a language dominated by a patriarchal society.

In further examination of the poem “A Julia de Burgos,” Julia de Burgos challenges the male authority over power and language. Consuelo López Springfield studies the relationship between de Burgos her utilization of semiotics to distinguish the power imbalance between genders in a patriarchal society. Springfield calls in a Lacanian lens:

To a Lacanian, Burgos’ act of writing assumes phallic semblance. If one were to assign a cultural reading within the context of Latin America’s literary history, it could also be argued that as the *word* signifies the power of the conquering *sword* over the voiceless oppressed, Burgos’ appropriation of the word challenges the subordination of the silent female to male authority (703).

In the eighth stanza of “A Julia de Burgos,” the poet associates her submissive counterpart to an idle woman concerned with vanity: “Tú te rizas el pelo y te pintas; yo no;” (“You curl your hair and paint yourself; not I”) (ll. 18). To complement the character of Julia de Burgos, the following line of the couplet is an assertion of her dominance: “a mi me riza el viento; a mí me pinta el sol” (“the wind curls my hair, the sun paints me”) (ll. 19). What distinguishes the eighth stanza from the former stanzas in the dialectic between “self” and “other,” is the internalization of what Springfield classifies as “male metaphors” (705). Julia de Burgos’s authority arrives from two masculinized symbols. The first, the noun “viento” (“wind”), as the wind passes through her hair.

The second, the symbol of the “sol” (“sun”), which bronzes her skin. The symbols surround the speaker, and distinguish her from the idle “other,” strengthening her opposition toward the domestic woman she is disassociating from, to be able to regain the autonomy of the woman who speaks in Burgos’s verses. Furthermore, the conversation involving “male metaphors” extends into the ninth stanza, where Burgos is more direct in her rebuke toward the domestic “other,” and in her molding into a male, literary figure:

Tú eres dama casera, resignada, sumisa,  
 atada a los prejuicios de los hombres; yo no;  
 que yo soy Rocinante corriendo desbocado  
 olfateando horizontes de justicia de Dios (ll. 20-23)

(“You are a housewife, resigned, submissive,  
 tied to the prejudices of men; not me;  
 unbridled, I am runaway Rocinante  
 snorting horizons of God’s justice”) (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 20-23).

The speaker claims to be the “runaway” horse “Rocinante” from Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, illustrating the feminist strategy Burgos employs in her work. She refutes the boundaries found within gender conventions, to convey her ability to inhabit characteristics traditionally recognized as male. Burgos breaks down gender-specific roles in her poetry, being able to idealize and become the emblematic symbol from the male hero of *Don Quixote*. The allusion as a “male metaphor” becomes so powerful to the poem’s purpose, that the speaker no longer feels the desire to assert a definitive characteristic to her “self,” but rather creates a list of everything she no longer is, signifying her full integration into the emblem of the “runaway” horse:

Tú en ti misma mandas; a ti todos te mandan;  
 en ti mandan tu esposo, tus padres, tus parientes,  
 el cura, la modista, el teatro, el casino,  
 el auto, las alahas, el banquete, el champán,  
 el cielo y el infierno, y el qué dirán social (ll. 24-28).

(“You in yourself have no say; everyone governs you;  
 your husband, your parents, your family,  
 the priest, the dressmaker, the theatre, the dance hall,  
 the auto, the fine furnishings, the feast, the champagne,  
 heaven and hell, and the social, “what will they say” (Trans. Agüeros, ll. 24-28)

The metaphysical voice is represented in the absence of signs. Julia de Burgos is the essence, who is not governed by the physical people, objects, and social interactions she lists. In the same fashion de Burgos discusses the dialectic between “self” and “other,” she also distinguishes the binary in the presence and absence of defining signs, signifying the dual existence in a sole image. In Luis A. Jiménez’s “Lenguaje, Ideología y Vanguardia En La Poesia de Julia de Burgos,” (Language, Ideology, and Vanguard in the Poetry of Julia de Burgos), Jiménez looks at the structure and influence in the semiotics of Julia de Burgos’s work. Jiménez identifies the metaphysical elements in de Burgos’s work, finding a dichotomy existing between the aesthetic and sociopolitical characteristics de Burgos’s work embodies (115). Jiménez mentions the vanguards, a general term for the gatekeepers of developing ideas, and in the context of de Burgos, the gatekeepers are the literary, patriarchal leaders fronting the Romantic movement. Julia de Burgos uses the aesthetic elements of a metaphysical poet, but subverts the idea of an artistic, apolitical, elevated voice to subvert the control over narrative and subject. In other words, her voice refuses to be “governed” by “[lo] que diràn social.”

In the conversation of both “A Julia de Burgos” and “Ay, ay, ay la grifa negra,” the poetic strategy Julia de Burgos embodies and employs demonstrates a progression toward the wholeness between one’s self, between genders, and between cultural communities. In “A Julia de Burgos,” the dialectic between “self” and “other” appears to be cataclysmic, as the speaker divides the “I,” scrutinizing facets of herself, which paradoxically work to repair the separation within herself. The poem proves to be a philosophical exercise through metaphysical technique

in order to empower the poet as a woman, but not only for herself, but for any woman who feels she is in the same position as Julia de Burgos. Julia de Burgos's poetics illustrate a profound example of the collective-self, where her poetry is not only reflective of herself as a being, but is reflective of the people in her community. Specifically, the women who align themselves to "A Julia de Burgos," and the black women who align themselves to "Ay, ay, ay la grifa negra." Toward the end of my explicative analysis of Julia de Burgos's two poems, we see that Julia de Burgos is indeed an introspective poet, and with self-analysis arises more questions. For instance, the speculation that occurs toward the end of "Ay, ay, ay la grifa negra," where both writer and reader are unsure of the power dynamics to arise in those who share the history of both the "white master" and "black slave." Julia de Burgos's work is a mental exercise in the aesthetics of poetry, in the philosophical contemplations in a split "self," and in the significance of positioning one's self in their respective sociopolitical community.

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