

A SELF-DEFINING DAWN: "AFRIDENTITY" IN THE POETRY OF JULIA DE BURGOS

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The poetry of Julia de Burgos (1914-1953) is usually noted for its poignant love themes and imagery of nature, but she also produced lesser-known poems focusing on the African heritage of Puerto Rican identity. Burgos is considered to be one of the major poets of the *Generación del treinta*, and indeed of the Americas because of her impressive contribution to this literary genre.

In 1937 she completed the first of her collections of poems, *Poemas exactos a mí misma*, which was never printed and is presumed to be lost. Her subsequent books are *Poemas en veinte surcos* (1938), *Canción de la verdad sencilla* (1939) and *El mar y tú*, which was finished in 1940 but published posthumously in 1954. Her most noteworthy Afro-Antillean poems are "Ay ay ay de la grifa negra," from the collection *Poemas en veinte surcos* and "Ella" from the collection *Canción de la verdad sencilla*.

This paper seeks to show how in these poems Burgos reinterprets the dominant culture's language and established ideologies that stigmatize blackness, to the advantage of people of black heritage. Through these poems, Burgos achieves what Nobel laureate Derek Walcott (1993) refers to as a culture's "self-defining dawn." Burgos does not solely observe, but breaks through cultural impositions to define her own identity.

There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn. (Walcott)

The language in Burgos' poems challenges ideologies that regard blackness as inferior by questioning and subverting the accepted,

stereotypical notions of black heritage. This analysis shows the importance of poetic discourse in the psychological as well as social emancipation of post-colonial people from cultural imposition.

Global Perspectives on Blackness

Throughout the African Diaspora there have been manifestations of poetry that address black identity and culture, the plight of people of black ancestry and portrayals of black people within their societies. For example, during the 1920s in the United States, black poets of the Harlem Renaissance expressed pride in their blackness, and their sentiments about racial prejudice, through poetry, plays and narrative. In Francophone Africa and the Caribbean, black poets lauded and reaffirmed black culture through the concept of Negritude. In Latin America, Black theme literature presents various aspects of blackness. In this region, the black theme poetry has been given a variety of labels including *negrista*, *negroide*, *mulata* and *antillana*. Although usage and terminology have varied over the years, Rosa E. Valdés-Cruz (1970), asserts that the term *negroide* is preferable for its all-encompassing nature:

Preferimos darle el nombre de NEGROIDE, sin que se entienda tratamiento despectivo alguno, porque nos parece más propio y más amplio, ya que abarca tanto las manifestaciones de blancos como de negros y mulatos, sin las limitaciones que traerán consigo las denominaciones antes expuestas y que pudieran tomarse como aplicables a la producción exclusiva de una raza (negra), o para dar gusto a la raza negra (negrista), o como una manifestación limitada a una región (afrocubana o afroantillana). (Valdés Cruz 11)

[We prefer to give it the name BLACKISH, without intending any disparaging treatment, because it seems most suitable and broader, since it embraces the manifestations of whites just as much as those of blacks and mulattoes, without the limitations that may come with the

denominations previously put forward and that could be taken as applicable to the exclusive production of one race (black), or to gratify the black race (*negrista*), or as a manifestation limited to a region (Afro-Cuban or Afro-Antillean).¹

Indeed many of the literary works were produced not only by writers of black ancestry, but also by white authors who sought to positively portray people of African heritage in their literature. According to Marvin A. Lewis (1983), however, both *negrista* and *negroide* carry negative connotations throughout Latin America. *Negrista* and *negroide* refer to works written by non-blacks, “suggesting something less than authentic related to blackness.” As a consequence, he prefers the term Afro-Hispanic. (Lewis 1). Enrique Noble rejects all of these terms. He employs the term *Mulata* poetry, which he defines as “a social poetry that is based on the contrasts and assimilation of cultures: the white, the Negro and the mulatto cultures” (Lewis 2).

In this paper, I will use the term Afro-Antillean to refer to the poetry that will be analyzed, since in my view Afro-Antillean comes closest to encompassing the combination of the Spanish, African, and to a lesser degree, Taíno cultures, while highlighting that particular geographical setting. Furthermore, the prefix “Afro” emphasizes the focus of this work: the perceptions of the African heritage of the people’s identity, and the representation of blackness and black culture.

From Rejection to Affirmation

In the poems “Ay ay ay de la grifa negra” and “Ella,” we observe the problems of self-identification, given the imposing negative perceptions of the Other, and racial prejudice in a Caribbean context. The Other in these cases refers to those classified as non-black—particularly Puerto Ricans. These poems reveal the social conventions regarding blackness in Puerto Rican society during that period, and present insight as to how many individuals who belonged to the more marginalized groups consequently perceived themselves. This analysis focuses on the question of *afridentidad*,² “afridentity”—the acknowledgement and appreciation of African heritage from a positive, Afro-centric perspective—as seen through poems that reflect efforts

to reject the imposition of the dominant culture's ideologies.

Burgos presents the perceptions of race, color discrimination, the impact of miscegenation and the African legacy in Puerto Rico in the poem "Ay ay ay de la grifa negra." This poem stands out because of the intensity with which the perceptions of blackness are expressed through the voice of a mulatta who recognizes and rejects the cultural imposition. Within the poem there are three distinguishable segments representing the source of her lament. Each of these is linked to a specific point in time—present, past and future—in which the poetic voice describes the physical characteristics, the history and destiny of her blackness. The first segment of the poem presents the physical images of the mulatta. [In these verses, the repetition of the term *negra*, black, and the images of black are things used to describe and emphasize her blackness.] When the exact term *negra* is not utilized, it is alluded to through the use of other words that are representative of blackness: *grifería*, *mozambiquea*, *tinte*, *noche* and *cuervo*.

Ay ay ay, que soy grifa y pura negra;
 grifería de mi pelo, cafrería en mis labios;
 y mi chata nariz mozambiquea.
 Negra de intacto tinte, lloro y río
 la vibración de ser estatua negra;
 de ser trozo de noche, en que mis blancos
 dientes relampaguean;
 y ser negro bejuco
 que a lo negro se enreda
 y comba el negro nido
 en que el cuervo se acuesta.
 Negro trozo de negro en que me esculpo,
 ay ay ay, que mi estatua es toda negra.

[Ay ay ay, that I am grifa and pure black; / nappiness of my hair, kafir in my lips; / and my flat Mozambican nose. / Black of intact dye, I cry and I laugh / the vibration of being a black statue; / of being a piece of night, in which

my white / teeth flash, / of being a black rattan / that gets
 tangled up in that which is black / and bends the black nest
 / in which the crow goes to bed. / Black piece of black in
 which I sculpt myself, / ay ay ay, my statue is all black.]

The first three lines set the initial tone of the text as the poetic voice uses terms to describe her physical features and their African origin. The juxtaposition of the terms *grifa* and *negra*¹ is significant in that *grifa* is used to refer to a woman of apparent mixed black-white ancestry who has a very light skin complexion, whereas *negra* refers to a woman of clearly Negroid features—of “pure” black ancestry (Jorge 181). Although the combination of the two terms seems contradictory, it serves to point out that the amount of black ancestry really is not important, but the fact of having it is. By placing the term *grifa* in the first position, she seems to signify how others describe her and how she has viewed herself. The terms used to describe her African features suggest that others can readily observe them, and that they were designated by the Other. *Grifería* contrasts with kinky, African hair with straight European hair. The use of this term suggests that the latter hair type, which is characteristic of the dominant culture, is considered more attractive and superior. *Negra* indicates the root of her *grifería*—her black ancestry. Her use of the derogatory images to describe herself depicts the conflict of looking at and judging oneself through the eyes of the Other. Appropriating the Other’s perspectives to one’s own viewpoint is a common concern in Afro-Antillean poetry. Frantz Fanon refers to this dilemma of cultural imposition as psychopathology in the Negro⁴ (Fanon 192). At this point, the poetic voice has internalized the negative views of blackness that have been established by the dominant, white society and consequently she considers herself unattractive. However, a crucial element in the poetic voice is the fact that she shifts perspectives and takes a closer look at her black ancestry through her own eyes.

Burgos’ use of the term *grifería* is clearly a reference to Luis Palés Matos’ major work *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1937)—a collection of Afro-Antillean poems. This Puerto Rican author is highly

regarded as the renowned innovator of Afro-Antillean poetry in the Spanish Caribbean. In his poems, Palés develops rhythmical, seminal verses through his magnificent use of African terminology and onomatopoeic sounds to portray sensual, black figures in African and Caribbean settings.

Culipandcando la Reina avanza,
y de su inmensa grupa reshalan
meneos cachondos que el gongo cuaja
en ríos de azúcar y de melaza.

[Gyrating the Queen advances,
and from her immense rump slips
sexy movements that the gong congeals
in rivers of sugar and molasses.]
(Palés Matos. "Majestad negra").

The image of the black woman created by Palés Matos is a sexual being who is situated in the Caribbean setting. The reference to sugar and molasses undoubtedly link her to the island but she is disconnected from her social situation. The woman is depicted as an exotic creature rather than a human being who ponders her situation and experiences. However, the poetic voice in Burgos' poem departs from these eroticized, idyllic, seemingly caricatured portrayals of a black woman as a basis for addressing the essence of her identity.

In "Ay Ay Ay de la grifa negra," the poetic voice employs the derogatory terms and images of blackness that have been designated by the dominant culture to insinuate that blackness is inferior. The description of her lips and nose further emphasizes her African features, which are considered unappealing by European standards. The *cafreria* in her lips describes the thickness of her lips, with reference to *kafir*—the derogatory term used to refer to blacks in South Africa. Her nose, "*chata, mozambiquea*" is also described using terms which highlight the fact that they are perceived as unbecoming according to European standards of beauty. *Chata* describes the flat shape as opposed to a

thin pointed one. *Mozambiquea* is an interesting neologism that makes reference to the African origin of the nose while simultaneously evoking an exaggerated image of the characteristic Negroid nose—broad and flat. However, as mentioned earlier, as the discourse progresses it reveals that she does not accept this ideology. The choice of verbs used to express her emotions, *lloro y río*, suggests the sentiments of sorrow that the Other has caused those of black ancestry by imposing stigmas to blackness, thus marginalizing them. She cries as she contemplates the self-pity that many people of black ancestry have experienced. The laughter reflects the irony that one group persistently tries to dominate the other by defining the identity of the latter. Her darkness is further emphasized by the contrast between herself as the dark night against her white teeth that appear as a flash of lightning. These terms that she uses to describe herself are representative of images of blackness that have been perpetuated in a society where the dominant culture has traditionally viewed white as superior and esthetically pleasing.

In the final verses of this segment, she emphasizes her blackness from the point of view of the Other who tends to objectify her through the use of visual images of various objects synonymous with darkness: ink, night, and black statue. Yet, she subverts these traditionally negative images and her laughter ultimately results from knowing that she has the ability to endure and reject those ideologies while reclaiming her power to define her “Self.” For her, the “black statue” symbolizes something that is strong, hard and able to resist harm inflicted upon it. The feelings that the poetic voice expresses appear to gradually transform from those of a person who has been melancholic, to the point of becoming somewhat indifferent to the negative ideologies, into those of a person who finally transcends to take pride in her black heritage. This is evinced in the second segment of the poem where the description of blackness shifts from regurgitating negative images of the mulatto and blackness to a more introspective, positive standpoint.

Dicenme 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 en los hombres,
 igual que en las naciones;
 si el ser el siervo es no tener derechos,
 el ser el amo es no tener conciencia.

Ay ay ay, los pecados del rey blanco
 lávelos en perdón la reina negra.

[They tell me that my grandfather was the slave / for whom
 the master gave thirty coins / Ay ay ay, that the slave was
 my grandfather / is my sadness, is my sadness. / If he had
 been the master, / he *would be* my shame; / for in men, / the
 same as in nations; / if being the servant is not having rights,
 / being the master is not having conscience. / Ay ay ay, the
 sins of the white king / wash them in forgiveness black
 queen.] (*emphasis mine*)

The negative imagery and ideologies illustrated in the initial verses of “Ay Ay Ay de la grifa negra” are deconstructed to allow the poetic voice to redefine her identity. Burgos endeavors to break through what W. E. B. DuBois (1989) refers to as “the veil,” in order to see and judge herself through her own self-consciousness. This veil is the “double-consciousness” through which blacks in the Americas see themselves, not through their own eyes or self-consciously, but through the eyes of the Other (DuBois 5). Although the tone of the poem initially appears woeful as the poetic voice describes herself as a *grifa negra*, the tone becomes proud as she begins to view her identity through her own eyes. The use of the interjection “¡Ay!” emphasizes the depth of her lamentation. Throughout the poem she repeats “¡Ay Ay Ay!” as she expresses the source of her sorrow. Claudette Williams (2000), offers a different interpretation of “Ay Ay Ay.” For her, it is an

exclamation of celebration rather than a lamentation. However, given that this interjection is generally used to express pain or affliction, it would stand to reason that “Ay Ay Ay!” represents the pain that the poetic voice initially experienced as she was confronted with negative perceptions of blackness. As the discourse within the poem progresses it becomes evident that she has been able to overcome these imposing ideologies and reconceptualize her identity. She then goes on to define the true source of her sadness and subsequently presents a new self-defining discourse on black heritage.

The content progresses from physical descriptions of herself to a discussion of her ancestry, and what it means to her. She does not only mention how the experiences and actions of her ancestors have affected her, but she also makes judgments about those individuals. At this point in the poem the poetic voice reaches beyond her physical appearance in order to examine her identity more profoundly, and elucidate what it means to her. Her acknowledgment of her grandfather's slave status is an extremely important part of her perception of her identity, despite the stigma that has been attached to slavery. Although society has considered slave ancestry as the source of her sadness, she regards the idea of her grandfather being a slave master as ignominious. She posits that the shame of having descended from someone who had no conscience is far worse than having descended from someone who had no rights. The act of buying, owning and raping slaves is clearly viewed as despicable, yet ultimately she asks that the white man (king) be forgiven for his actions by the black queen she is held to be.

She elicits the magnanimous black woman to forgive him and his sins, and in essence gives her power over the man who kept her people in bondage. In this sense, the black woman is viewed in a new light. She is the bridge of forgiveness. She has the power to shape a harmonious future between the two cultures. The connection, which results in the racial mixing that takes place, is the topic of the last segment of this poem.

The final “ay ay ay” that the poetic voice expresses is her concern over the disappearing black race. It is not attributed to annihilation but

to racial amalgamation.

Ay ay ay, que la raza se me fuga
 y hacia la raza blanca zumba y huela
 a hundirse en su agua clara;
 o tal vez si la blanca se ensombrará en la negra.
 Ay ay ay, que mi negra raza huye
 y con la blanca corre a ser trigueña;
 ¡a ser la del futuro,
 fraternidad de América!

[Ay ay ay, that the race flees from me / and buzzes and
 flies towards the white race / to sink itself into its clear
 water; / or perhaps the white race will darken itself in the
 black one. / Ay ay ay, my black race flees / and with the
 white one becomes olive-skinned; / to be the one of the
 future, fraternity of America!]

The image of the black race fleeing and merging into the white one represents the *blanquización*⁵ theory—the whitening of the Puerto Rican people through racial mixing. Richard Jackson (1976) points out that the ultimate goal behind embracing black people in Latin America was to eventually wash out the black race through racial amalgamation (Jackson 2). In this segment of the poem *blanquización* suggests a blending of the races to form a united group. The result of this interracial union, in which blacks get lighter as whites get darker, is the mulatto or *trigueña* people: “¡la del futuro, fraternidad de América!” This final explanation is an example of parodic discourse of the political and social propaganda of that era in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. It is presented as the result of the elimination of the stigmas on black ancestry. Nonetheless, upon closer analysis this fusion can be viewed as negative rather than as the positive, ultimate goal of a people. Negative perceptions of blackness are only temporarily obliterated in order to promote a united multi-heritage Caribbean people. Sidney Mintz (1975) asserts that this conditional acceptance of black heritage

is another manifestation of the society's political ideologies: "any emphasis upon the African component in the local culture usually must be reconciled politically, with the objective of a generalized Hispanic cultural unity" (Mintz 58).

The poetic voice in Burgos' poem depicts transformations in her own perceptions of self-identity. She subverts the stereotypical images of blackness while challenging the notions of superiority of the Other who is the source of her imposed ignominy. Yet, she recognizes that the appreciation of blackness in that society often culminates in a conditional acceptance of blackness—inasmuch as the final result is a mulatto people. She further elucidates the concept of prejudice and rejection in the poem "Ella." But in this poem she indirectly addresses the dominant Other—the white male—through a discussion of the white woman.

Beyond the Eyes of the Other Woman

The poem "Ella" is structured in the form of a monologue in which she discusses her white counterpart who judges her solely on the basis of her skin color. However, it is apparent that her words are directed at those who have shaped the ideologies of Otherness, as well as at the white woman who blindly accepts and perpetuates these norms. The poem "Ella" is a poetic response to those who have established color hierarchies in a racially mixed society.

La que juzga mi alma por la piel que me arropa
ni siquiera se extiende lo que alcanza su voz.

Pobremente cargada con herencia de normas
se tuerce en el abismo donde la luz no llega.

Su figura se alinea en la red de las fórmulas,
y su mente se rinde, seca y lacia de ideas.

Por ella hablan los siglos su impiedad lujuriosa.
Lo finito hace huella en su endeble sentir.

Desposadas del vicio del no ser, la coronan,
y se está por el mundo, numerada y con fin.

¿Qué culpa la persigue?

¡Son tantas las entradas para el soplo de ayer!

¡Piedad para su alma, que no siempre se encuentra
una voz comprensiva en labios de mujer!

[She who judges my soul by the skin which clothes me /
does not even extend herself to what her voice reaches. /
Poorly loaded with the inheritance of norms / she twists in
the abysm where light does not reach. / Her figure is aligned
in the net of formulas. / and her mind surrenders, dry and
limp of ideas. / Through her the centuries speak their lustful
impiety. / The finite makes tracks in her weak judgment. /
Married to the vice of not being, they crown her. / and she
is through the world, numbered and with end. / ¿What blame
pursues her? / So many are the entrances for the gust of
yesterday! / Pity for her soul, for not always does one find
/ an understanding voice on the lips of a woman!]

The poetic voice states that the female subject, *Ella*, is blinded by racial prejudice. She judges her without ever taking the time to get to know her beneath the skin. Interestingly enough, Martin Luther King Jr. expressed the same sentiment decades later during the civil rights movement in the United States as he fought for the liberty and equality for all people—but particularly for blacks, who had been suffering because of racial discrimination. These ideals were presented in his “I Have A Dream” speech: “I have a dream that one day my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

The irony of Julia de Burgos’ poem is that the poetic voice does not directly lay the blame on the woman discussed in the poem, but rather pities her. She does not simply excuse “her” actions. She tries

to determine their source. This source is undoubtedly the “heritage of norms” which have strongly influenced the female counterpart of the Other, resulting in her believing that she is better than those who are not of her skin color. “Ella” is depicted as a pawn, manipulated by society’s traditional European views of women’s beauty, which have postulated the superiority of the white woman. The poetic voice asserts that because the “ella” who she speaks of is so indoctrinated in these beliefs, “she” is unable to develop her own ideas about herself and others and therefore, is no more than a puppet in this drama of life. The implicit suggestion is that it is the (white) man who has been responsible for these attitudes and standards while the white woman has been a passive receptor of them to the point where “her mind surrenders, dry and limp of ideas.”

“Ella” is depicted as a shallow shell that has been filled with insidious ideologies that she spreads to others. The woman discussed in the poem is presented as a mimic, a creature that cannot or will not rely on her own intelligence and conscience to form her attitudes and behavior towards those who are different from herself. The assertion that these ideologies have been disseminated through her over the centuries is important in that she is not one individual being. That is to say that she is representative of many individuals through whom such notions are inculcated.

The final verses of this poem present a parodic conclusion about “her” culpability. The poetic voice questions why this woman should be held solely responsible, since the blame could be attributed to so many sources. The anger that the poetic voice could feel towards “her” is ironically replaced by pity for her soul. The poetic voice makes a strong contrast between herself—a compassionate, conscientious woman—and this thoughtless, hardhearted woman.

In this poem Julia de Burgos presents an important development in the psyche of a mulatta. The poetic voice is not a melancholic, disillusioned individual who struggles with the issue of her African identity. Instead, she asserts that the question of color—the discriminatory racial ideologies—is the problem that the Other has created. The *mulata* in the poem has experienced what Cornell West

(1994) defines as a psychic conversion. She has rejected the ideologies of the dominant, white culture and views herself through her own eyes (West 136). She rejects her role as the victim and in doing so, frees herself of the emotional conflicts of identity crises that could be detrimental to her self-image.

In conclusion, Burgos reinterprets the Other's language and established beliefs that have stigmatized the black heritage and the *mulata* by restoring a positive view of blackness through her own eyes. Burgos does not acquiesce to societal ideologies that regard blackness as inferior; she challenges these ideals. The irony in her poems redefines her identity and validates black heritage while questioning and subverting accepted stereotypical notions about blackness. The analysis of these poems demonstrates her successful efforts to emancipate herself from the ideologies imposed by the dominant white society and gives voice to a new discourse on blackness.

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NOTES

¹ I have included my own translations of all the Spanish quotations.

² See Jessie Dixon *Café con leche: The Question of Color in Puerto Rican Literature and Society*.

³ There are several terms that are used to describe a person in terms of the increasing amounts of blackness: *Grifa* and *jabá* refer to someone of very light complexion with frizzy, kinky hair and somewhat Negroid hair texture or features. The terms can be used interchangeably. *Trigueña*, or *mulata* describe someone of mixed ancestry who has wheat-colored or light brown skin. *Prieta* and *negra* almost always refer to someone who is dark or clearly black. See Angela Jorge "The Black Puerto Rican Woman." However, many people use the expression "Mi negra" as a term of endearment regardless of color. Also see Claudette Williams *Images of Black and Mulatto Women*.

⁴ Fanon describes the stages of psychopathology in the following case: "As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I

catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro." F. Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁵ The ideology of "*adelantar la raza*" is the concept behind the whitening process that is also called *blanqueamiento*. Miscegenation has become the means by which Puerto Rico attempts to fade-out the Black population. See Jessie Dixon *Café con leche*.

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