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WRA 805: Rhetoric Theory and History

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Julia de Burgos: A Master Poet and Rhetorician

Abstract:

Julia de Burgos was a Puerto Rican poet, freedom fighter, and civil rights activist. Although she was alive for a relatively short time (she was born on February 17, 1914 and died on July 6, 1953) her work has had a huge impact on the Puerto Rican community in and outside of the island. The impact had by Burgos on Puerto Rican culture is undeniable, but can her work be considered *rhetoric*? In this piece, I will attempt to answer that question by looking at Julia de Burgos' poetry as rhetorical performances, and using rhetorical theory/terminology to start a conversation with the field about what Burgos' poetry can teach us about the ways in which rhetoric operates where it is not being named as such. In order to do this, first I will provide a bit of a historical context for Burgos and her writing. Then I will look at three of her poems, letting them show us what rhetorical moves Burgos made in order to gain the amount of visibility she got in her lifetime and beyond. Lastly, I'll make an argument about how by studying Burgos, we can learn about the ways in which rhetoric is employed where it is not being called rhetoric.

Full Essay:

Julia de Burgos was a Puerto Rican poet, freedom fighter, and civil rights activist. Although she was alive for a relatively short time (she was born on February 17, 1914 and died on July 6, 1953) her work has had a huge impact on the Puerto Rican community in and outside of the island; her poetry is required reading for middle schools and high schools all over the island, there are several private and public spaces that bear her name in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Connecticut, and her most famous phrases can be seen adorning shirts, phone cases and other types of apparel.

The impact had by Burgos on Puerto Rican culture is undeniable, but can her work be considered *rhetoric*? Well, the answer to that depends on how it is that we are defining rhetoric. In a class lecture, Dr. Stuart Blythe argues that there are five senses of rhetoric: rhetoric as empty words, rhetoric as performance, as a set of precepts, as an analytical tool, and as a field of academic inquiry. For the purposes of this piece, I'm going to focus on three of these senses: rhetoric as performance (a speech given, a text written, or an artifact created,), as an analytical tool (when people use rhetorical terminology as analytical tools for critiquing other people's performances), and as a field of academic inquiry (Whenever academics gather to talk about rhetoric). In other words, I'm going to look at Julia de Burgos' poetry as rhetorical performances, and use rhetorical theory/terminology to start a conversation with the field about what Burgos' poetry can teach us about the ways in which rhetoric operates where it is not being named as such. In order to do this, first I will provide a bit of a historical context for Burgos and her writing. Then I will look at three of her poems, letting them show us what rhetorical moves

Burgos made in order to gain the amount of visibility she got in her lifetime and beyond. Lastly, I'll make an argument about how by studying Burgos, we can learn about the ways in which rhetoric is employed where it is not being called rhetoric.

The History of Rhetoric

In his essay titled "Writing the Other into Histories of Rhetorics: Theorizing the Art of Recontextualization", LuMing Mao states: "In the past few decades, rhetoric and composition scholars have showed a collective interest in crossing borders and in studying other discursive traditions and practices" (Mao 41). He goes on to show how this turn is based upon the realization that the field's current accounts of rhetorics remain "partial, incomplete, and in want of revision" (Mao 41).

A similar sentiment was stated by Jacqueline Jones Royster in her piece titled "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in The History of Rhetoric". In it, she states: "What is we treated what we know about Western rhetorics as if it were merely what we *know* best rather than what *is* best? Such a question opens a world of possibility as we look out at a landscape that by many accounts in contemporary work is still only marginally revealed" (Royster 166). Both of these authors express the same ideas in different ways; namely that the field of rhetoric and the history of rhetoric are hindered because of a too-narrow focus that looks only at the West as the places where rhetoric may occur. Although both of these pieces were written seventeen years ago, the main idea they presented (that canon and history of rhetoric is

incomplete because it does not include voices outside of the Wester tradition) is still a valid one today.

One of the reasons why it seems to be taking so long to expand our current understanding of what is the history of rhetoric is because of the word rhetoric itself. If we limit ourselves to only studying what calls itself rhetoric, then we are left with the tradition of Aristotle and his followers in the West. In order to expand our canon, we need to look at rhetoric where it is not being named as such. That being said, this approach also presents us with a problem: how can we ethically interact with texts of other times and cultures without oversimplifying them to fit into our existing definitions of rhetoric or simply discarding them as "too different" to count?

There have been several scholars that have proposed possible solutions to this problem, all of them exceeding in some way and admitting their shortcomings in some other. Two approaches that particularly stood out to me were proposed by Bo Wang and Mary Garrett. In her essay titled "Rethinking Feminist Rhetoric and Historiography in a Global Context: A Cross-Cultural Perspective", Wang uses the Chinese Feminist movement to show us how we might rethink feminist rhetorics by approaching it from a global perspective. She states: "rereading, recovery, and extrapolation grounded in dialectical processes of recontextualization will help us pay attention to linguistic/rhetorical specificity as well as recognize how broader geohistorical factors bear on the rhetorical choices made by the rhetor" (Wang 47). In other words, Wang is encouraging us to always look at the text within the context that it was produced

and acknowledge the ways in which outside factors such as location, time, etc. affect the ways in which the creator of the text could effectively communicate.

Whereas Wang's piece focuses on the positionality of the creator of the text and their context, Garrett focuses on the positionality/context of the reader. In her piece titled "Tied to a Tree: Culture and Self-Reflexivity" Garrett explores why it is that she had such a visceral reaction to an ancient Chinese story about a Father sacrificing his own son in order to assure that his brother's son may live. She describes the process she underwent in order to figure out why she had these reactions and ends up calling it self-reflexivity. Of it, she states: "self-reflexivity is crucial to any project of textual interpretation. To the extent that interpretations involve negotiation of difference, self reflexivity is essential; it is the only way we can lengthen the tether that ties us to the tree" (Garrett 254). In other words, one must always keep an eye on how one's own intersections and identities affect the ways in which we react to certain texts.

Both of these approaches prove to be valuable when attempting to broaden the scope of rhetoric, and both are strategies I will attempt to use while writing about Julia de Burgos and why she could be a great addition to our field. First, I will recontextualize her as an author and her body of work by giving a closer look to the period of time during which she was writing as well as to her own life and how her embodies experiences affected what she was trying to say. Afterwards, I will look at some of her works, drawing connections between her life, her contexts, and the work that she produced. Lastly, I will attempt do do all of this while remembering that the ways in which I interact with de Burgos and her poetry as a Puerto Rican woman are

inherently different than the ways in which many of my non-Puerto Rican peers in the field would.

Julia de Burgos: Who Was She?

It can be a real challenge to distinguish between Julia de Burgos: the person who lived and walked this planet, and Julia de Burgos: the myth that was created by the Puerto Rican communities both in and outside of the island. There are many stories told about burgos in multiple contexts and, more often than not, these stories can be contradictory and conflicting with each other (Pereéz-Rosario 210). That being said, there are several points on which people can agree on. That being said, by looking at those fixed moments in her life, one may be able to get a better understanding of what it is that Julia was attempting to do within her writing. Those fixed points start with the place of her birth.

Julia de Burgos, named Julia Constanze Burgos García at birth, was born and lived the majority of her childhood inside of a *barrio* in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Being the eldest of thirteen children, she was given the opportunity to go to school and receive a formal education. Many believe that here is where her love of literature and writing was first born. Her affinity for writing was such that she continued to study even after completing her highschool diploma. She earned her degree from the University of Puerto Rico at age 19. After graduation Burgos kept busy by becoming a teacher, joining the female wing of the Puertorican Nationalist Party named *Las Hijas de La Libertad* (The Daughters of Freedom), and publishing some of her first works.

By the time she reached the age of 23, Burgos became a critically acclaimed author both because of poetry and her journalistic pieces. By this age she also went through her first divorce after three years of marriage. Instead of assuming the name of her ex-husband, as was conventional at the time, the feminist poet re-took her maiden name, changing it from its original iteration of “Burgos” to “de Burgos” (Vicioso 56). This was a way for her to take ownership of herself since “de” means “belonging to” and Burgos was a name of her own.

After her divorce, de Burgos embarked on a passionate love affair with Dominican physician Dr. Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón. De Burgos and Grullón moved frequently as part of their nomadistic, Bohemian lifestyle. The couple spent a brief sojourn in Cuba and then moved to New York City, where de Burgos would spend the remainder of her life. While in New York, de Burgos continued to write. She continued to argue for the independence of Puerto Rico, as well as social justice on the basis of sex and race. Unfortunately, the relationship didn’t stand the test of time, and de Burgos and Grullón had ended their relationship by 1942. She was left alone and practically penniless in New York City. This city would also be the place where de Burgos took her last breath. At the age of 39 she collapsed and died of pneumonia. There was no one who could identify her body at the hospital she was in. Because of this, she was initially buried in an unmarked grave. Some time later, some of her relatives from the island discovered her grave and were able to bring her remains back to her beloved Puerto Rico.

Textual Analysis

Now that we have an idea of what context Julia de Burgos was writing in, we can finally start to look at her poetry. For the purposes of this essay, I chose to look at three of her most celebrated poems. The reason I chose her poetry over her prose of her journalistic work is because it's the part of her writing that has proved the most transcendent, having reserved spaces both within the Puerto Rican education system and popular culture. Additionally, I chose to look at three individual poems as opposed to one of her entire poetry collections because that would have been far beyond the scope of what I could cover in a single essay without relying on abundant oversimplifications or lack of depth. The three poems that I've selected are "A Julia de Burgos" ("To Julia de Burgos), "Ay, Ay, Ay de La Grifa Negra" ("Ay, Ay, Ay of The Kinky-Haired Negress), and "Rio Grande de Loiza". Each of these poems either reflects careful rhetorical choices or implements rhetorical devices in a way that is worth noting.

A Julia de Burgos

The first poem I will look at, "A Julia de Burgo"s. Her beginning address remarks on how people who read her poetry are already pointing out the difference between the ways she "speaks" within her poetry and the ways she speaks outside of it. She states: *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 mi voz/porque tú eres ropaje y la esencia soy yo; y el más profundo abismo se tiende entre las dos;* "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" (Burgos 2-3). Here we see de Burgos' poetic voice addressing her by name, making a clear distinction between herself and the "physical" de Burgos that exists outside of her poetry. The poetic voice goes a step further in asserting herself as an entity separate from the physical de Burgos when she asserts that the people reading her poetry are liars since the one speaking within her poems isn't de Burgos, but rather herself. The poetic voice also asserts another key difference between the physical de Burgos and herself: that she is the true essence, hence she is real, while the physical de Burgos is an illusion, no more than "dressing".

Once she establishes this initial separation, the poetic voice goes on and continues to point to differences between helsef and the physical de Burgos. The poetic voice describes the physical de Burgos as "You are the cold doll of social lies, honey of courtesan hypocrisies, selfish, and ponderous lady amongst other things" while she described herself as "virile starburst of the human truth, she who undresses her heart, she who gambles everything betting on what she is, and life, strength, woman." Here the poetic voice puts on full display the preformative nature of being a woman in Puerto Rico during this time period. The actions and words of the physical de Burgos are a show put on for onlookers, more specifically for me. Meanwhile, the de Burgos that exists as her poetic voice is free to exist as her most authentic self. This idea that her physical self is just a performance is repeated later in two of her most powerful verses. She writes:

> *Tú en ti misma no 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 alhajas, el banquete, el champán,/ el cielo y el infierno, y el qué dirán social./ En mí no, que en mí manda mi*

> *solo corazón,/ mi solo pensamiento; quien manda en mí soy yo./ Tú, flor de aristocracia; y yo, la flor del pueblo./ Tú en ti lo tienes todo y a todos se lo debes,/ mientras que yo, mi nada a nadie se la debo.* "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, champagne,/ heaven and hell, and the social, "what will they say"/ Not in me, in me only my heart governs,/ only my thought; who governs in me is me./ You, flower of aristocracy; and me, flower of the people./ You in you have/ everything and you owe it to everyone,/ while me, my nothing I owe to nobody." (Burgos 4-5)

De Burgos' poetic voice makes it a point to list every individual that has control over the physical de Burgos' performance. What's interesting is that as we saw in her biography, de Burgos did not grow up as part of the aristocracy that the poetic voice is describing the physical de Burgos is being subjected to. Because of this, one can read this list less as the poetic voice listing all the institutions that literally affected the physical de Burgos, and more as a metaphor for the patriarchal, colonial, and capitalistic society that regulated how the physical de Burgos could and could not behave. Meanwhile her poetic voice, immaterial and not bound to the needs of the body, is more free than the physical de Burgos could ever be. It is the poetic voice through which de Burgos is able to give life to her true thoughts and make arguments about social issues that she deeply cares for.

De Burgos' final argument is presented in the form of her signature. Although the poetic voice spends the entirety of the poem showing the physical de Burgos how both of them are not the same, she signs the poem with the name Julia de Burgos. This reminds the reader that

although the physical de Burgos and the poetic voice presented in this poem inhabit the same body, thus inviting the reader to question: *Why can't this de Burgos exist in the physical world too?*

Ay, Ay, Ay de La Grifa Negra

Similarly to the previous poem, de Burgos uses herself to make an argument for what is happening around her. In "Ay, Ay, y de La Grifa Negra", de Burgos takes tropes found within the Romantic poetry that more than likely was a part of her formal education and flips them in order to speak about race. The very first verses of the poem serve as a celebration of de Burgos' blackness and a reminder of how the blackness is tied to her body. She starts her poems by stating: *Ay ay ay, que soy grifa y pura negra;/ grifería en mi pelo, cafrería en mis labios/ y mi chata nariz mozambiquea.;* "Ay, ay, ay, that am kinky-haired and pure black/ kinks in my hair, Kafir in my lips/ and my flat nose Mozambiques" (de Burgos 32-33). She highlights the features of her body separate from the color of her skin that would set her aside as a black individual within Puerto Rican society and exalts them as beautiful and worthy of celebration. She continues to emphasize that this poem is about blackness in her following verse, making sure to have a variation of the word black or dark on every line contained within it.

After celebrating her beauty born of blackness, she moves to tell the reader how she is reminded that her grandfather was a slave. She writes:

> *Dícenme 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; "*They tell me that 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 the slave is having no rights/ being the master is having no conscience" (de Burgos 32-33)

In this verse, she emphasizes how her grandfather's enslavement is a great pain for her to bear, but instead of only focusing on the pain, she juxtaposes it with the shame that she would have to bear had her grandfather been the slave owner instead. She goes a step further and uses these two men as allegories for the entirety of nations; any one or any nation that takes away the rights of another is one that is missing a conscience and is less of a person than those it's enslaving. The poem ends on a positive note though, with her putting forth her dream of a future fraternity within the Americas in which black and white women and men walk as equals.

Rio Grande De Loiza

Out of the poems I selected, this is the only one in which de Burgos is not the protagonist. Rather, the main muse of the poem is the Rio Grande de Loiza, a beautiful river found in the town of Loiza, Puerto Rico. She humanizes the river, and speaks of it as if the river were her lover. She writes: *Enróscate en mis labios y deja que te beba,/ para sentirte mío por un breve momento,/ y esconderte del mundo y en ti mismo esconderte,/ y oír voces de asombro en la boca del viento;* "Coil yourself upon my lips and let me drink you/ to feel you mine for a brief moment,/ to hide you from the world and hide you in yourself,/ to hear astonished voices in the

mouth of the wind" (de Burgos 8-9). In doing so, she is able to portray the deep love that she has for this river, and for the town of Loiza after which it's named.

A little bit of context might be required for those outside of Puerto Rico in order to understand this poem. Loiza is a town that was founded by former slaves, some free but most escapees. For de Burgos, and for many black Puerto Ricans on the island, this town holds a double meaning. It's a reminder of the pain brought by Puerto Rico past slavery and preset colonial status yet it also signifies the promise of a better life free of the double bind of racism and colonialism. This might be best exemplified in some of the later verses from this poem:

> *Río hombre, pero hombre con pureza de río,/ .../ Muy señor río mío. Río hombre. Unico hombre/ que ha besado mi alma al besar en mi cuerpo./ ¡Río Grande de Loíza!... Río grande. Llanto grande./ El más grande de todos nuestros llantos isleños,/ si no fuera más grande el que de mí se sale/ por los ojos del alma para mi esclavo pueblo.*"Man river, but man with the purity of river,/.../ who has kissed my soul upon kissing my body./ Rio Grande de Loiza!... Great river. Great flood of tears./ The greatest of all our island's tears/ save those greater that come from the eyes/ of my soul for my enslaved people" (de Burgos 10-11)

Unlike the men in her life, the river and the land it represents are the only things that have managed to touch her soul. She could never love a man, or be loved by a man, in the same way that she loves and is loved by her home country. This is because her land, which has been subjugated to the will of others, specifically the will of a racist-colonial-patriarchal system, is the only one that could understand her experience as a black Puerto Rican woman.

Conclusions

Julia de Burgos did not write about rhetoric, she did not even mention the word rhetoric in most of her writing, but she was rhetorical in how she wrote. Through her poetry, she was able to make arguments for the liberation of her home country and for social justice for women and black communities on the island. She was hinting at key concepts of our field such as performativity, intersectionality, and others before we had words to describe that kind of phenomena. If voices such as hers are included in the canon of rhetorical history, we might learn a lot more than if we only look for the people that talk about rhetoric.

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