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Source: *Callaloo*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Puerto Rican Women Writers (Summer, 1994), pp. 684-693

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931844>

Accessed: 22/09/2013 21:27

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THE RIVAL TO THE RÍO GRANDE OF LOÍZA An Interview with Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón*

By Sherezada Vicioso

No one understood as fully the profound rending of absolute sensibility, the slow death that is New York, like Julia de Burgos. That is why Julia speaks for all of us, interprets us, represents us, accompanies us.

*Many things have been said about Julia—she has been exalted as a romantic woman (Puerto Rico's *Alfonsina*), she has been belittled as a political militant (her country and America's fervent nationalist)—but little is known of the period of her life that most forcefully made her life a "song to the simple truth": her romance with Dr. Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón, the rival to her Río Grande at Loíza.*

This interview with Dr. Jimenes Grullón, kind, tender, immense in his mighty-oak fragility, who still recites Julia's verses as if he could see her by the banks of her river, has as its goal that of making Julia known in all her dimensions and to reply to the queries that have woven themselves around one of the most mysterious and passionate romances of our times. It is an interview shared by Don Juan's rocking chair, his books, the high walls, the patio balancing the semi-darkness, Cuca (his wife), for whom Julia has become a part of the family, and above all, Julia . . . present in her verses twenty-eight years later.

Cuca . . . Juan gave a lecture in New York in 1947, I already had my first two children and Julia was there . . . I didn't meet her, and afterwards Juan asked me, did you see her?

Juan Isidro . . . I had already broken up with her . . .

Cuca . . . Yes, he has always been a one-woman man . . .

ISIDRO: The romance began in mid-1938. I gave three lectures in San Juan, Julia attended, she seemed to like those expositions of mine I later gathered in a book, *Luchemos por nuestra América* [*Let's Struggle for Our America*], and she told me she was interested in showing me her poetic work. We arranged a meeting at the Hotel where I was staying, the Hotel Roma, and in fact she kept her appointment two days later, read me the poems, handed me her first book, we read it and I realized that I was really before a poetic figure of great sensibility.

* This interview appears in Sherezada Vicioso's *Algo que decir: Ensayos sobre literatura femenina* (1981-1991), published in Santo Domingo, DR, by Editora Búho in 1991.

VICIOSO: Why did she bring you her poetry? Were you already known as a critic of poetry?

ISIDRO: No, no, because she wanted me to see them. I had been welcomed in Puerto Rico as a Latin American intellectual and revolutionary, the press had hailed my arrival, and the lectures I gave were at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, San Juan's most important cultural organization. Then Julia read the book to me, we discussed it, arranged another meeting, then another (because there was an attraction, let's say, a mutual attraction); I found out that she was separated from her husband, and after three or four meetings a romance developed between us. And this romance was to last throughout my stay in Puerto Rico, which began, as I told you, in mid-1938 and ended in late 1939.

My parents were there at the time, and found out about the romance (I believe I told them myself). They sought out information about Julia and were told that, yes, Julia was a great poet, but she was not a woman attached to the traditional values of home and family. She had a tendency to dipsomania, and as was to be expected (my parents were good bourgeois), they opposed the relationship.

VICIOSO: How old was Julia then?

ISIDRO: I figure about 24 years old . . .

Poetic Production

ISIDRO: I developed an enormous affection for Julia, so much so that despite my parents' opposition my goal was to vanquish their resistance (they would not even think of meeting her) and sooner or later marry her, because I really felt for her a profound love—as undoubtedly she did for me, and the best proof of that is in her book, *Canción de la verdad sencilla*. I witnessed the birth of all those poems; they were written practically by my side. It was that book which made me understand the extraordinary poetic eloquence of that girl. Her first book (it was called *Poemas en surcos* [*Poems in Furrows*]) had already told me, but it was in this second text, *Canción de la verdad sencilla*, where she dazzled me poetically.

Of course, by that time, she had already written the poem that had brought her most notice, most fame . . .

VICIOSO: "Río Grande de Loíza" . . .

ISIDRO: Yes, "Río Grande de Loíza." About *the encounter between the man and the river and the rival to my river* . . . Let me get my anthology to show you the poems she wrote by my side . . . Here is *Poema de amor en tres cantos* [*Love poem in three cantos*], do you know it? I saw practically all these poems, all of them, grow, since when I went to bed

she would stay up to write and in the morning she would show me what she had written during the night, always love poems . . .

The truth is that my parents remained totally opposed to that love, and I felt a lot of respect and love, a true veneration, for them. I decided, therefore, to leave for New York in November of 1939, with the intention of writing a historico-political book about the Dominican Republic and because I found myself in conflict between my parents' opposition to that love and the love itself. I told myself "let me go to New York and once there maybe Julia will forget me, or if she doesn't forget she will join me again . . ." The truth is that during all that time, as long as she was with me, I made a supreme effort, successfully in general terms, to make her give up her dipsomania.

VICIOSO: What did you know about Julia's childhood?

ISIDRO: Very little and only that she had a difficult childhood. Julia belonged to the rural lower middle class. Her father, I believe, was a rural teacher . . . and he drank. That must have affected her because Julia was very sensitive and had a very complex psychology; but she was a generous person, very unselfish, immensely good, and above all a fervent lover of justice. I told you already that she had gotten married, and later got divorced during our romance . . . the truth is that I made a great effort to cure her of her dipsomania, and was relatively successful since the entire book of "the simple truth" was written without a single drop of alcohol . . .

Problems

VICIOSO: Did her dipsomania lead to the break between you?

ISIDRO: This poem explains her case, that is, what happened between us . . .

If my love is like that, like a torrent,
like a swelling river amidst a howling storm
like a lily taking root in the wind
like an intimate rain
without clouds, without sea . . .
If my love is of water,
To what stationary course
would you anchor it down?

VICIOSO: It is a beautiful poem . . .

ISIDRO: But notice that it already contains an explanation. She could not concentrate on one sole love, although she concentrated on me for four years . . .

VICIOSO: Yes, her romance with you was absolute.

ISIDRO: Absolute, as they say in the prologue to her anthology. I was her only love, that is the truth, but the moment came when we reached a crossroads; it was my mistake to take her to the University of Havana, where she could meet young bohemians . . . well, re-reading this book, the latter part, a tragic part that is almost a call to death, you will find a poem she wrote when we went to Trinidad, Cuba. Did you know we were in Trinidad?

VICIOSO: No . . .

ISIDRO: When we went to Trinidad, I didn't have a penny, but I had a lecture scheduled for which I was to be paid \$50.00. I had barely enough to buy the train tickets for Julia and me, so I bought the tickets and I believed I had about twenty cents left; we didn't have enough money left to eat lunch that day until we arrived at 6:00 p.m. . . . After I gave the lecture, which Julia loved, we went to the source of a stream and I remember that that afternoon, on the mountains, she sat down to write that poem about the river, which is also very beautiful. All those water poems are part of *El mar y tú*, and they are monumental. It was Consuelo, Julia's sister, who divided the poems in two parts for the anthology. The first part, "Memoria encarnada de este vivir" [Memory of Live Made Flesh] is "the sea and you." "Velas sobre el techo del mar" [Sails Over the Sea's Roof] is what Julia called the poems of the first part. Love takes possession in them, although there are some intimations of defeat. "Poemas para un naufragio" [Poems for a shipwreck], the second part, are the poems to death, truly death poems.

VICIOSO: Death poems . . .

ISIDRO: Yes, but they have nothing to do with the first ones. If you read them, you will see that they are classified under the same title, *El Mar y tú*, although there are very few mentions of the sea, of water, yes, because she was passionate about water . . . Look, she also wrote this poem by my side.

VICIOSO: Which one?

ISIDRO: "Poema del hijo no nacido" [Poem to the Child Not Born] . . . she wanted a child so badly . . . ! And so did I!

VICIOSO: If she had had a child . . . would you have married her?

ISIDRO: Maybe what happened would not have happened; maybe maternal love, the dreams she would have fostered for her child, would have meant that she would have remained by my side . . . that she would have given me her total loyalty . . .

C A L L A L O O

VICIOSO: And maybe your parents, since it would have been your child, would have accepted her.

ISIDRO: Possibly, maybe they would have accepted her . . . But let me read you the poem.

Since you were born for brightness
you left not being born
you were lost in serenity . . .

Tell me if this was not strange. I once asked her why she wouldn't come to the gynecologist with me to look into the causes of her infertility (because I knew I wasn't infertile) and she asked me, what for? what for? . . . let life speak for itself . . . let's not make use of science . . . A poet's mania . . . and later, thinking about it, I came to the conclusion that the bottom line, the explanation, was that she lived a supra-vital life, completely pledged to her reveries, given completely to her abstractions, and I was the complete opposite: I was completely in the world, in the life of the combatant, and of course the two things clashed.

VICIOSO: A clash between the earth and the air, the earth, and the water?

ISIDRO: The earth and the air, both of them, and then the crash . . .

VICIOSO: Couldn't it have been a matter of Julia's profound existential loneliness, Don Juan?

ISIDRO: No, no, because she *was* there, she lived in Havana, with Bosch's lover, who had a little girl to boot, and she was in constant contact with the Dominican exile community where I visited frequently, and especially with that girl Graciela Hereaux. And wherever we went, I introduced her as my wife; there were very few people who knew she wasn't. I even introduced her to Neruda as my wife.

Neruda

VICIOSO: Neruda?

ISIDRO: Yes, we met Neruda together; we attended a reading he gave and at the end of the recital a girl, the daughter of a great Cuban literary figure, brought him over and introduced him to us. After this first encounter we continued together, a group of about eight of us, and from there sprung an invitation to lunch at my house. He was married then to a little chit of a woman, the strangest little thing whom we called the little ant, a woman without the slightest physical attraction or intellectual preoccupation who didn't even seem to have an artistic sensibility. He later divorced her.

At some point the two of us sat at the dining table so she could read him her poems and analyze them, and he said this is magnificent . . . or this is a bit deficient but has enormous poetic force. When we said goodbye, he said to me, "Juan . . . Julia is going to be one of the three or four great women poets of America"

VICIOSO: What impact did New York have on Julia's poetry?

ISIDRO: Here is something very important about New York in one of her letters:

*This country is something extraordinarily empty, in this environment
loneliness has no modesty and gives itself in total nakedness to any
passerby . . .*

In New York, even at the moment of loving plenitude, the loneliness and emptiness of New York life besieged her, like a brier-omen . . .

There she wrote this other poem where she says, *I have made his life my own, there is no pain he endures that I don't share . . .* see how deeply she came to love me . . . You see how deep was her passion for me . . .

VICIOSO: You went to New York in 1939. Was that Julia's first visit to New York? How long did she remain there?

Cuba

ISIDRO: Julia arrived in New York some fifteen days after I did, and we stayed there until May or July of 1940, when I left because I felt harassed by the economic situation and wanted to publish immediately the book I had just completed. I wanted to publish it in Cuba, where I had many friends, great contacts, and where I hoped to receive the same welcome I had had before and to be invited again by various cultural societies to give lectures. But when I arrived I found a very serious political situation that impacted on cultural activities and which greatly reduced the possibility of giving paid lectures. Precisely one of those paid lectures was the one in Trinidad I mentioned, where Julia went with me.

It was then that we found a room in the Carreño building, which was, by the way, somewhat disreputable, but where the rent was cheap . . . and the rooms were more or less comfortable and furnished, the room, as a matter of fact, where Bosch wrote the prologue for my book *República Dominicana: Análisis de su pasado y su presente* [*The Dominican Republic: An Analysis of its Past and its Present*].

VICIOSO: How long did you remain in Cuba?

ISIDRO: Two years, from July 1940 to March 1942, when she returned to New York . . . she re-engaged. From there she writes to her sister . . .

I will try to drown in the world's painful instant so as not to feel in my bones my utter loneliness . . .

VICIOSO: It was in Cuba that Julia attended the University. What educational background did she have? I know she was a teacher . . .

ISIDRO: A teacher . . . Julia had a pedagogical background, but she also had a remarkable memory, and not only a great lyric and poetic talent but also great mathematical aptitude. Once I was facing a problem I could not solve, and she asked me, "what is the problem, Juan?" And she solved it in two minutes with algebraic equations. I said to her, "Well, Julia, you remember algebra?" and she said, "but of course, and all other mathematical equations as well because I used to love them" . . . I was astounded and said to her, "it is such a strange thing for a woman of your poetic gifts to have such love for mathematics." I am a disaster in math . . .

VICIOSO: So am I . . . a disaster

Literary Formation

ISIDRO: Julia really had some pedagogical training and came to master English perfectly, but her literary training was limited to some contemporary poets, the most admired of which were Neruda and García Lorca. From García Lorca I told you she learned the technique of the *romancero*, and I think I also told you she felt a great admiration for César Vallejo.

Of course she also knew the women poets, but she always walked around with a book by Neruda . . .

VICIOSO: *Veinte poemas de amor* [Twenty Love Poems]? . . .

ISIDRO: No, *Crepusculario*. The twenty poems of love she knew by heart, but she had no knowledge of the classics because in Puerto Rico back then Spanish literature was hardly taught.

She also knew some English-speaking poets, North Americans primarily, especially Walt Whitman. In a nutshell, I'll say that she had a limited literary background, no preparation in philosophy or history; so I made sure she enrolled in the School of Philosophy and Letters so as to enrich her education, although after one of my trips, when I asked her what she was learning, I realized that at the time you learned very little at the University of Havana because the political struggles absorbed all the students and dragged them along. It was the period of the well-known university mess.

VICIOSO: Among women poets, whom did she admire most?

C A L L A L O O

ISIDRO: Alfonsina Storni. Once, for example, I was talking to her about Juana de Ibarborou, and she said, "Yes, she handles her verses very well, but she is superficial . . . her work lacks the depth and tragic sense of life . . . of the other one . . ."

VICIOSO: And the passion for water.

ISIDRO: Ah, yes, and the passion for water . . .

VICIOSO: Those were years of intense political activity for the Dominican exiled community . . . Did Julia collaborate?

ISIDRO: Within limits. She, for example, wrote a poem against Trujillo, and a number of other poems about the struggle, which must be in the hands of the CIA, because they took away her passport and all her papers when she entered Miami on her return to New York . . .

VICIOSO: Was she under surveillance?

ISIDRO: I don't think so, but our relationship was known and maybe I was . . .

VICIOSO: Was Julia linked to the Puerto Rican Nationalist Movement?

ISIDRO: While she lived in Puerto Rico, she was; after that she continued to be an enthusiastic and fervent *independentista*, but she lost touch with the Nationalist Movement.

VICIOSO: Did she meet Albizu?

ISIDRO: I can't tell you for sure, because I don't recall that she was a Party militant. Julia was essentially a nationalist, a lover of all aspects of the cultural foundations of the Puerto Rican people, and as a result aspired to the autonomous development of their culture.

VICIOSO: This was the time of most aggressive American penetration in Puerto Rico. I believe that they had even prohibited the use of Spanish as the language of instruction in schools.

ISIDRO: They had forbidden it before. It was the period of the Second World War. I remember that I was in San Juan when the Molotov-Preventov treaty was signed, and I wrote an article for a magazine arguing that this was a tactical step for the USSR. Julia was extremely interested in that article. We discussed politics constantly, but spoke more often about literature and poetry than politics . . .

Political Formation

VICIOSO: Was Julia's political formation more intuitive than formal?

ISIDRO: Yes, very much intuitive. Her social formation, her passion for justice, all that was much more intuitive. She had not studied the evolution of the democratic movement, or of representative democracy, nor the evolution of the Socialist Movement. Neither had she read anything of Marx, nor had I at that time—maybe some brief summaries by Lenin. Julia did not know Marxism, but intuitively she was a Marxist; she was aware of the class struggle, but all this was bound with her lyrical chimeras and all those feelings that implied a penetration into the roots of life, death, water, air, nature, love, and pain. That's why she could express the love of justice so well in her poetry without falling into pamphleteering, without losing her lyricism.

Additional Interest

VICIOSO: Did Julia delve into any other literary genre?

ISIDRO: Her fundamental passion was reading. I remember that the last novel she read (because she read novels, she loved novels) was Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

VICIOSO: Did she ever attempt a novel?

ISIDRO: No, she never tried writing a novel or a short story, only poetry, but she mastered prose admirably, very poetically . . .

Julia-Bosch

VICIOSO: Don Juan, a rumor that circulates is that the enmity between you and Don Juan Bosch was caused by a romance he had with Julia . . .

ISIDRO: That is totally absurd, absurd! I had already been asked about that in an interview with a woman reporter from *El Sol*. Our rift has an exclusively political origin. Notice that in Havana Juan and I lived with our respective lovers, Juan with Lili (his Belgian companion) and their daughter, and Julia and I.

Julia and Juan were great friends, yes, but he respected her as my wife, as I respected Lili, for whom I felt a great affection, a girl of great tenderness and sweetness who loved Julia very much because Julia was extremely charming, she was amusing to talk to and very spiritual to boot; she earned the affection of everyone who

knew her . . . It is monstrous to insinuate something like that. In this country Mainardi, Miolán, they all know that it is not true, it makes absolutely no sense.

Farewell

VICIOSO: After your breakup, did you see Julia again?

ISIDRO: Yes, six months after I broke up with her, I saw her again in New York, where I went on political business for the Movement and the Party. I was staying at Juanito's house, with some relatives of his, and I asked him to find me a room for the week I was to stay there. An independent room with its own key.

Juanito had a lot of contacts in the Puerto Rican colony because his wife was Puerto Rican. Julia found out I was in New York, and the poor thing came to see me one evening. I had already gone to bed. She knocked on the door, and when I asked who it was, she said, "It's me, Juan, Julia." I let her in and then she told me she was having a rough time of it, she hadn't been able to find work, she was staying with a friend who loved her very much, living on what her friends could give her, and she wanted a reconciliation. But I was closed to it and told her no, that it was over.

She said, "Ay, Juan! Are you going to abandon me like this? . . ." She shed such tears! But I insisted that there was no possibility of a reconciliation. I had loved her too much . . .

I dressed and walked her to the train, paid her subway fare and never saw her again

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert