

THE HAUNTED ISLAND-NATION: IRISH INTERSECTIONS IN CANARY ISLANDS NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a relatively recent phenomenon: the appropriation of Saint Brendan's narrative as a tool for utopian Canary Islands nation-building. Being one of the favourite lenses of the Canary Islands imagination it is not surprising that the construction of Canary Islands national consciousness (a highly heterogeneous and, till recently, somewhat marginal, process that stretches from the end of the 19th century up to our days) mines the Irish narrative for its own purposes. Nonetheless what is most interesting is the way in which the Irish narrative haunts representations of (national-ist) Canary Islands utopias. Thus, it is not only that Canary Islands nation-builders appropriate the story of Saint Brendan in order to forge their political horizon, but also that the story infects, in turn, their discourse, rendering their horizon utopian. In this paper I look at how such dynamics are instantiated in a number of sources, stretching from the late 19th Century up to the 1980s.

KEY WORDS: Saint Brendan, Canary Islands, utopia, imaginary, nation-building.

RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en un fenómeno relativamente reciente: el uso de la narrativa de San Borondón como un instrumento utópico para la construcción nacional canaria (desde finales del diecinueve, continuando de forma fragmentaria y heterogénea hasta nuestros días). Ya que San Borondón es uno de los motivos más populares del imaginario canario no es sorprendente que se haya utilizado para articular una conciencia nacional canaria. Resulta interesante el modo en el que la narrativa irlandesa permea y distorsiona diversas formulaciones de utopías nacionales o nacionalistas canarias. Por un lado los constructores de la nación canaria se apropian de esta historia para formular un horizonte político, pero por otro, la historia infecta este nuevo discurso, haciendo que el horizonte se vuelva inestable y utópico. En este artículo se analizan diversos ejemplos de utopía insular, procedentes de una variedad de fuentes que abarcan desde el final del siglo diecinueve hasta los años ochenta del pasado siglo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: San Borondón, Canarias, utopía, imaginario, construcción nacional.



The story of Saint Brendan and his legendary journey is a remarkable example of an Irish narrative that has travelled way beyond its original context. Its connection with the Canary Islands can indeed be traced back to the early European expeditions of the late Middle Ages. However, the story is not only engaged as an exegetical framework (the narrative terms in which the first Europeans who arrived in the Islands interpreted what they see) back then but also through the centuries up to the present days. In fact, the many births, apparitions and uses of the Isle of Saint Brendan (inside and outside the Canaries) as a recurrent narrative metaphor merit a thorough study. Nevertheless, whereas the interrelationship between the legendary islands described in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (see Gil Chica) and the legends later developed in the Canary Islands about a phantom island are well researched and documented (Galván; Sörgel; Benito, “San Borondón”; Poggio), the way in which the old Irish narrative has penetrated Canary Islands processes of nation-building has so far been overlooked. Over the centuries the Isle of Saint Brendan¹ has stopped being a place some believed to be real, though undiscovered, to become some sort of symbol of the insular condition. In this respect, Sánchez Robayna describes it as the “maximum insular myth” (De Sancho), some sort of mirror-metaphor through which Canary Islands interpret the texture of their own insularity. The unreachability of the haunted island, hardly ever considered an actual place from the 18th century onwards, has also become identified with the Guanche past in many Canary Islands narratives.²

Not unlike Saint Brendan, the Canary Islands aborigines (i.e. Guanches) have also been constructed after the Conquest of the islands (15th century) and their later disappearance as a distinct and separate community (late 17th century) as a mysterious and unreachable subject. Furthermore, in the same sense that Saint Brendan has become the most favored island narrative for interpreting insularity, the Guanches are, in Estévez words, “the archetypal image of what is Canary Islands; the remarkable embodiment of our self-portrait.” In other words, the Guanches have become, like Saint Brendan, another deceitful mirror, since they are the slippery other onto which Canary Islands subjects project their desired self-images.

Although both narratives have ended up entwined and bearing analogous traits the reasons for their enigmatic qualities are substantially different. Whereas the mysterious and marvelous elements of the narrative of Saint Brendan (i.e. the *Navigatio*), and its Canary Islands sequels, were part and parcel of their literary texture, the mysteriousness surrounding the Guanches has to do with their construction as mute and noble savages, once they were dismantled as a separate, distinct and self-conscious group. Thus, the Guanche ends up becoming a metaphor, a narrative

¹ Whenever I mention in this paper the Isle of Saint Brendan (i.e. San Borondón in Spanish) I am making reference to the mythical eighth Canary island and the stories associated with it in a Canary Islands context and not to the various isles that appear in the *Navigatio*. The isles from the *Navigatio* are referred to by the names given to them in the Latin text (i.e. Jasconius, Isle of the Blessed).

² A popular example is the “Romance de San Borondón,” set to music as “Leyenda de San Borondón”) by Los Sabanderos, see Alonso Quintero.



that provides, in Estévez words, “pre-modern ancestors for the very modern idea of a Canary Islands nation, [articulated] by a Creole elite by means of appropriating European racist and nationalist ideologies” (10).³ Though in more recent times the issue of whether only Creole or non-indigenous Canary Islands people have claimed the Guanche as an archetypal ancestor is not as straightforward as Estévez presents it, it is certainly true that the origins of the Guanche *qua* myth are to be found mostly among non-indigenous and, certainly, elite writers.⁴ Thus, myth making about the Guanches has mostly to do with power dynamics, historical circumstances and competing claims of ancestry.

On the other hand, the *Navigatio*'s marvelous elements might be seen as part of an “allegorical and metaphorical text” (Galván 697) full of symbolic elements from the Biblical and the Irish traditions or, as Rubio Tovar argues in relationship to Marco Polo's *Il Milione*, as a credential of Medieval texts that dealt with journeys to unknown lands: “Instead of bringing into question the credibility and reliability of the work, it [the marvelous element] made it [the work] seem believable” (xxx). Consequently, the marvelous is not just part of a Medieval and post-Medieval view of the world, but also an expected component when reading about other lands and peoples. This naturally shows the connection between the Guanches and the isle of Saint Brendan, revealing the exotic eyes through which Canary Islands elites have regarded the aborigines.⁵ However it is not my aim to explore how these two exotic others came to be entwined but to look at a rhetorical space where they already appear combined. Such space is Canary Islands nationalism, a heterogeneous set of ideologies that can be said to begin towards the end of 19th century,⁶ and which is deeply concerned with issues of ancestry, insularity and national unity.

³ This and all other quotes in the text, except Radhakrishnan's concluding quote (p. xxx), are from Spanish language sources and are my translations.

⁴ In Canary Islands contexts it is never too easy to determine whether someone is a Guanche descendant or not, unless in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the aborigines were a clearly separate community. As I argue later on, nowadays almost any Canary Islands people could claim Guanche origins, since they have become a very democratic and rhetorical ancestral referent. However, it must be said that one of the first Canary Islands authors who enshrines the aborigines as a repository of ideal virtues was Cairasco de Figueroa (1538-1610), who despite being part of the early colonial elite was half-Guanche and whose works contain fragments in aboriginal languages. Nevertheless, many other like Antonio de Viana (1578-1650) or José de Viera y Clavijo (1731-1813), to mention but a few, certainly fit in Estévez's category of the “Creole elite.”

⁵ For a very thorough analysis of the power dynamics involved in the construction of the Guanche, particularly, though not exclusively, in the 20th century see Farrujia's *Arqueología y franquismo en Canarias*.

⁶ Although García Ramos, a nationalist politician himself, ambiguously dates the origins of Canary Islands independence movement to the beginning of the 19th century by linking it to the Junta Suprema and the historical events that could have led to independence along the Spanish colonies of America (26), nationalist thinking is not fully articulated before the writings of Secundino Delgado (1871-1912). If by “independentism” (a deliberate calque from the Spanish on my part), García Ramos means merely supporting the idea of independence he is correct, however, if he uses the term implying some kind of ideological / national consciousness, his claim would be inaccurate. The



Not surprisingly, for accomplishing its nation-building project Canary Islands nationalist thinking relies frequently, though not explicitly, on the narratives of Saint Brendan and the Guanches. If we keep in mind that “the nation is not the source of nationalism but instead it is nationalism what creates the nation” (Estévez), to look at the way in which Canary Islands nationalists appropriate the narratives of Saint Brendan and the Guanches is to analyse the very stuff the Canary Islands nation is made of. Although it could be argued that Canary Islands nationalists inherit the lenses of the European colonists who imagined the Canary Islands as an exotic other, it is also worth mentioning that they appropriate and modify that gaze in order to articulate a political claim. Thus, whereas it is true that their gaze is originally based in the way non-Canary Islands regarded the Canaries and their first inhabitants, it also constitutes a contestive re-appropriation of that first gaze, since it subverts the political agenda of the colonial gaze. However, it is also worth noting how the uncertainties and indeterminacies of the *Navigatio* seem to haunt the imaginary island that is the Canary Islands nation. Said haunting has not so much to do with the colonial legacy of the exotic gaze but with the slippery and difficult-to-find islands (e.g. Isle of the Blessed), or found-but-quickly-lost (e.g. Jasconius), that pervade the story of the Irish sailor-monk.

In the same vein Jarazo argues that the *Lebhor Gabála Erenn* becomes a reference point in “the quest for Galician identity and the enriching of Galicia’s culture through the initiation journey” (680), I regard Canary Islands nation-building as an analogous process that, sometimes deliberately and sometimes unawares, retraces the steps of Saint Brendan and his legendary journey. In order to discuss these dynamics I have chosen some of the foundational texts of Canary Islands nationalism, namely Secundino Delgado’s writings in the newspaper *El Guanche* and his autobiographical novel (published under a pseudonym) *Vacaguaré*, along with more recent excerpts from song lyrics from the 1970s and 1980s (Taburiente’s “Navidad Guanche,” Pedro Guerra’s “Among Clouds” and Taller Canario’s “San Borondón”). This choice has to do with the explicitly utopian overtones of the selected texts and their somehow evident reproduction of narrative traits from the *Navigatio*, particularly the stories concerning the Isle of the Blessed (*Terra repromissionis sanctorum*) and the isle-whale of Jasconius. The uncertainty surrounding both islands represents a useful hermeneutical tool for exploring and doubtful interstices of Canary Islands nationalist discourses. However, before diving into its liminal spaces let me briefly explain how the Canary Islands nation comes to be a single and mysterious island haunted by the Guanches.

events of the Junta Suprema, as important as they could have been, only reflect the hesitations of the Canary Islands elites as to what was the best way to protect their interests (i.e. joining the Republic of Brazil, the United States of America, declaring independence under British protection or becoming part of the Great Columbia) in the face of the French invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. There is no sense that the possibility of achieving independence from Spain was regarded as an expression of Canary Islands national consciousness, not even on the part of those who played with the idea of independence (see Hernández González, *La Junta* 8-9).



One of the main concerns of Canary Islands nationalism from its beginnings has been to create a sense of national unity. This sense of solidarity among the seven isles that make up the Canary Islands Archipelago needs to be articulated around some common narrative that fulfills both the centripetal and centrifugal aspects of any nationalist project: to differentiate the emerging nation from its others and to present a coherent image of the national subject. Even though the islands' histories run somehow parallel and they have been governed by similar, when not identical, institutions (since they were brought under Castilian/Spanish rule at different junctions during the 15th century), there is a strong sense of rivalry and competition among them. This is particularly strong between the two main islands, Tenerife and Gran Canaria, whose economic elites have perceived each other as natural competitors, at least, from 19th century onwards. Whatever the causes of this rivalry (nationalists often claim that it is fostered by the Spanish government as a way of keeping the islands divided and therefore under control) it remains an important hindrance to a sense of Canary Islands national unity. It is interesting to appreciate how Secundino Delgado in 1897, often and rightly deemed the father of the Canary Islands nation, brings to the fore the fact that the islands' separation, both in terms of geography and consciousness, represents an obstacle to Canary Islands independence:

If the Canary Islands were a single, big and powerful island, thus making impossible the alienation of its sons, would they still be subjugated, given their independent personality and daring impulse? Certainly not. (qtd. Hernández González, *Secundino* 102)

Delgado writes in the wake of Cuban and Puerto Rican independence (1898), having probably in mind the example of the Caribbean “single, big and powerful island.” Nevertheless, this is more than a mere speculation or a lamentation at the geographical dissimilarities between Cuba and the Canaries; it could be regarded as a positive and prescriptive statement. In other words, if the Canaries become unified in consciousness and acted like a metaphorical “single, big and powerful island” they will attain their independence. Furthermore, Delgado's rhetorical question is also more than a call to join efforts and rise, it is probably the first articulation of a (discursively) unified Canary Islands space that is truly political, truly national. However, this single, imaginary and unified island remains to be disproved as a utopia.⁷ More than a century after Delgado's formulation of the Canary Islands nation, the unity in consciousness he advocated for still seems underachieved. Suffice to notice the need for various slogans such as “Seven Islands, One People” (see Castellano), “Looking for Seven Islands, Finding One People” (see Gobierno), or

⁷ As Sánchez Robayna reminds us, the modern usage of the word utopia is also connected to an insular imagination, that of Thomas More: “Why did Thomas More place his Utopia in an island? Can we see in this decision the imprint of the famous and non-existing island, that is, of the myth of Saint Brendan [...]?” (34).



“Seven Islands, One Nation” (see Nación) to realise that the desired unity has not yet been reached.

However, political union in a single national space is not the only utopian aspect of the imaginary island-nation dreamed by Delgado and later nationalist thinkers. As the overcoming of local (i.e. isle-based) political demands and consciousness fulfills the centripetal aspect of Canary Islands nationalism, there is also a need to account for what is unique about the Canary Islands national space, what makes it different from other nations and, particularly, Spain. This centrifugal aspect is often accomplished by evoking the Guanche past, since the Guanche has not only been constructed as the Canary Islanders’ “self-portrait” and the “archetypal image of what is Canary Islands” (Estévez) but also represents a version of Canary Islandsness that precedes the colonial encounter and is therefore untainted by Castile/Spain. In this way, the Guanches become the inhabitants of the utopian island-nation, turning the imaginary island further utopian, since their rhetorical presence is enabled by their physical absence (as a living people). Even if the islands became metaphorically mingled in a single national space, it is certain that the pre-colonial past could not be re-created.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Delgado and other early nationalists were not particularly naïve or literal about going back to Guanche times. Like his predecessors in the making of the mythical image of the Guanche, Delgado imagines the aborigine as an archetypal and noble warrior, an embodiment of all human virtues. Although Delgado does not belong to the Canary Islands elites (whether he was Creole or not it is difficult to determine by the end of the 19th century), his Guanche imagination borrows substantially from their discourses. The Guanche appears as some sort of symbol rather than as a particular historical subject. However, for Delgado the Guanches are not used to exemplify Christian virtues (Cairasco de Figueroa) or as the symbol of a lost golden age that preceded the vices of civilisation (Viera y Clavijo);⁸ they are a historical source of inspiration, an example from the past that can be translated into political action in the present. They could be said to be a timeless instance of Canary Islands resistance that re-manifests in every age upholding the quest for dignity, freedom and independence.

In this sense the Guanche essence of the Canary Islands island-nation has nothing to do with claims of ethnic or cultural continuity, the Guanches are, above all, a symbol; as Garí Hayek puts it “returning to what is Guanche is [...] to re-conquer Canary Islands independence” (59). The Guanche is in this way universalised, turned into an embodiment of values that are not specific to the Canary Islands or their pre-colonial past.⁹ Consequently, Delgado does not only proclaim his pride in his

⁸ For an account of Viera y Clavijo’s construction of the Guanche see Estévez.

⁹ Another interesting example of how the immortality of the Guanches is asserted by being turned into a universal principle can be found in Gil Roldan’s poem “La cantara del Mencey loco”: “They can never die / Those who break free from slavery / Releasing themselves from their chains / By means of taking their life” (Gil Roldan qtd. Muñoz- Hidalgo 359). Thus, the “Mad Mencey (i.e. Guanche king),” who chooses death before submitting to the Castilian invaders, becomes a symbol



Guanche origins but also in his Spanish ancestry, “such pride being of no significance to his nationalism since what is meant to be received from the Guanches is a political teaching [and not a claim of ethnic continuity]” (Garí Hayek 60). In fact, if we understand the Guanche as a political role model virtually anyone could claim Guanche origins. The universalisation of the Guanches as a symbol democratises ancestry, enabling virtually any Canary Islands person to claim them as her or his (spiritual or political) ancestors. After all, who would not like to be related to such noble and ideal predecessors? Ironically enough, for the actual Guanches their ancestry and heritage was a source of shame and social discrimination that led to their eventual dismantling as a cohesive and recognizable community.

Discussing the Guanches as imaginary inhabitants of a utopian (is-)land does not mean to suggest that they never existed or that they, as individuals, along with some of their cultural practices did not survive and contribute to the melting pot that is Canary Islands culture. However, their idealised and archetypal image, constructed mostly through their absence or muteness is a highly mobile and flexible construct that enables all kinds of imaginative projects. It is this fictional Guanche who resembles strongly the slippery and mysterious isles of the *Navigatio*. Not unlike the Isle of the Blessed, the resting abode for the Celtic heroes and the aim of Saint Brendan’s journey, the Guanche seems “wrapped in mists so dense” (Gil 76). In fact these mists do not only cover the island but also prevent the sailors from seeing each other, thus not only preventing the final destination to be reached but also isolating the subject, turning him into an uncertain and invisible island. Analogously, the Guanche might also be compared to Jasconius, the whale-island where the monks celebrate an Easter Vigil before the whale shakes them off its back in the morning (Gil 75). The Guanche is such unstable location, never fully found, despite being often sought.

These slippery dynamics which combine at once the narratives of the *Navigatio*, the story of Saint Brendan in the Canary Islands imagination and the problematics of using the Guanches as a myth, are instantiated in a short story that acts as a prologue to Secundino Delgado’s autobiographical novel *Vacaguaré...! (Via-Crucis)*. The short story, also entitled “Vacaguaré,” was not written by Delgado himself but by Antonio Rodríguez López (1836- 1901), whose name Delgado used as a pseudonym to publish his text after he was imprisoned by the Spanish authorities (1902). The choice is not, of course, accidental, by adopting the name of the poet, playwright and short story writer from La Palma (i.e. Rodríguez López), Secundino Delgado presents his novel and the short story that precedes it as a seamless web written by the same author. The interrelationship between short story and novel is also significant, since Delgado sees his autobiographical narrative in terms of Rodríguez López’s tale. The short story acts as a mirror reflection of the autobiographical novel: the short story being about the heroism and misfortune of the Guanches in the 15th century

that lives beyond his own death. In fact, the immortality of the Guanche as the symbol of freedom and resistance is enabled by the death of the Guanche as a subject.



and the novel about a modern Canary Islands hero and his misfortunes. In this way Delgado sees his life-story as a modern manifestation of the timeless paradigm of resistance to Spanish oppression embodied by the Guanches.

It is important to remember that Rodríguez López was not a nationalist and that his celebration of the Guanche past is more a Romantic recreation of a universal principle through a local motif than a reclaiming of the local as such. Even though Rodríguez López belonged to the elites of La Palma and his depiction of the Guanche is highly idealised, and somewhat de-politicised, his story can be easily appropriated by Delgado as a discursive weapon for fostering the double aim of social and national liberation. Rodríguez López's story is a semi-fictional, though not altogether historically inaccurate, account of some significant events from the conquest of La Palma by the Crown of Castile in 1493. It describes how every single Auarita kingdom falls in foreign hands,¹⁰ except Aceró, ruled by the rebel chieftain Tanausú. Since the Castilians cannot defeat Tanausú in the battlefield they kidnap him through deceit and ship him to the Iberian peninsula. Far from accepting defeat, Tanausú refuses to eat during the journey and starves himself to death while shouting "*vacaguaré*," which literally meant 'I want to die' in Auarita language.

However, what is most interesting about "*Vacaguaré*" is how the narrative is framed, how the island-story that is the Guanche past manifests itself to the narrator (a 19th century local writer). This narrator is sitting by a cliff in the highlands of La Palma, facing West (where the Isle of Saint Brendan was supposed to appear) at dusk, which "is the time of mysteries and visions" (Rodríguez López 9).¹¹ Then among misty clouds, like the ones surrounding Saint Brendan's sailors, manifests "the genius of Benahoare" (9), ready to tell the narrator about the heroes of yore. Benahore was the aboriginal name of La Palma and therefore this genius is nothing but the embodiment of the island's forgotten or hidden history. In a sense, the genius becomes, through this epiphany, a mirror for the narrator; in it he discovers something about his own history and identity. After all, the genius is a living archive, the repository of La Palma's buried past, as proclaimed by the genius itself: "I keep all stories from your fatherland, which is also mine" and "Here rest all memories

¹⁰ Although all Canary Islands aborigines are generally, though inaccurately, referred to as Guanches, the term Guanche was originally only employed for the aborigines of Tenerife, being the ones from La Palma, Auaritas, La Gomera's Gomeros, El Hierro's Bimbaches, Gran Canaria's Canarios and Fuerteventura's and Lanzarote's Majos. In this respect, Delgado (who was from Tenerife) uses the term Guanche indistinctly for all aborigines, but Rodríguez López makes a distinction by acknowledging the aborigines from his island by their historical name. Throughout this paper I have chosen to refer the more popular term Guanche for referring to all Canary Islands aborigines, although historically inaccurate, since "Guanche" is also the name under which they have been constructed as a semi-legendary and idealized collective.

¹¹ Although the myth of the Isle of Saint Brendan is well known throughout the Canary Islands, it seems to be particularly alive in the island of La Palma, where the phantom isle was more often claimed to be seen. Poggio's *La isla perdida* is an exhaustive study of how the story of the mythical island has haunted the history of the actual one (La Palma), lending its name to a number of actual place (129-163) and constantly inspiring the island's artists, writers and musicians (165-197).



of Benahoare” (9). This epiphanic being is like the “Isle of the Blessed” which does not only lie towards the West among misty clouds that confound the very identity of Saint Brendan’s sailors, but also acts like a compass, imbuing with meaning their journey. As Saint Brendan himself tells them “These mists cover the island you have been searching for seven years” (Gil 76). Thus, both islands are the answer to the travelers’ prayers, since the narrator of “Vacaguaré” also begins by invoking “the bards of ancient ages” and the “benahorita race” (9) as he laments their latter muteness.

The genius-island of Benahoare also renders the adventurous life journey of Delgado meaningful. Through the epiphany experienced by Rodríguez López’s narrator, Delgado finds a story, a metaphorical space that allows him to make sense of his existence. Seeking refuge in this archival and imaginary island, inhabited by the noble Guanches, is, nevertheless, a risky undertaking. After all, this island is not only the Isle of the Blessed where the heroes of the past dwell but also Jasconius, the ever-unstable whale-island. Once Tanausú’s story has been conveyed, the genius of Benahoare disappears as suddenly as it first appeared. All that the wistful narrator is left with are the traces of its absence, which are identified with the sound of a running spring (“that’s the genius weeping” (9)) or with the echoes of deep valleys that, in an analogous pathetic fallacy, keep on repeating the genius last words. It is impossible not to make a connection between this genius and the Canary island of Saint Brendan, the slippery island that fades away when approached.¹² However, this slippery island is also the single Canary Islands island-nation, presented here as an archive that encapsulates the Guanche past.

As any other nation, the Canary Islands nation needs an archive full of stories that articulate and interpret its functioning as a discursive organism. Many of these stories belong to the Guanche lore, or to be more precise, to the lore generated about the Guanches (mostly) in their absence. If we consider the fluid and changing nature of the Guanche as a myth it is not difficult to compare it to the slippery island of Jasconius or the Canary island of Saint Brendan. No matter how powerfully they are conjured in various imaginaries, the actual Guanches can never be reached, which is why they can be imagined in so many ways. Therefore, their island, the archival island that contains all their stories cannot be reached either, it is a shifty no-man’s land that is alternately seen and not seen. By dancing with this archive, the slipper “genius of Benahoare,” the narrator of “Vacaguaré” involves himself in a simultaneous process of self-construction and self-deconstruction. On one hand he is granted an insight into his past, thus forging a sense of identity, and, on the other, he is reminded of the ungraspability of such self-image, of its

¹² In a truly postmodern fashion, Tarek Ode and David Oliveira organised an exhibition in 2004 about a fictional and successful expedition to the Isle of Saint Brendan. The exhibition featured old photographs and objects took from the fictional island at some point in the 19th century. For the exhibition’s catalogue see Ode.



ultimate insubstantiality.¹³ This elusive quality of Canary Islands nation-building is not exclusive of its early stages but manifests frequently enough through its history.

Similar dynamics can be appreciated, for instance, in song lyrics from the 1970s and 1980s, a time when Canary Islands nation-building and identity-reclaiming came to the fore again as part of the changes experienced in the Spanish state after the death of General Franco (1975). One of the earliest musicians that mined the Guanche imagination as a political weapon was the folk band Taburiente who, like Antonio Rodríguez López, also came from the island of La Palma.¹⁴ Among their earliest song is “Guanche Christmas” (1976) which re-appropriates the single isle of the Canary Islands nation as a locus for Guanche utopia in a highly original fashion. In “Guanche Christmas” it is never clear whether the Christian narrative of Jesus’ birth is being adapted to the imaginary landscape of the Guanche past or whether it is being used as a symbol for conveying a nationalist epiphany. However it might be, this celebration returns us to the unstable horizon of a mysterious island.

The mysterious single unified island is thus invoked in the first stanza along the seven Canary islands, which appear in the form of stars, thus linking the Christian narrative to nationalist symbolism¹⁵: “Seven stars fell from the sky / To kiss the Atlantic they went / And another star descended / Proclaiming to the Guanches their god.” This eighth star could be identified both with the isle of Saint Brendan (often called the eighth Canary Island, see Benito Ruano, “La Octava”) and with the star of Bethlehem. In fact, as the story unfolds we discover how the eighth star-island manifests qualities from both narratives. The reading of the eighth star as a utopian eighth island is further confirmed when the adoration of the Magi is translated to a Guanche context: “From each island they came/ The Guanche Kings to see him / From Tenerife Tinguaró /From Gran Canaria Doramas/ And from La Palma Tanausú/ All guided by the same light.”¹⁶ This imaginary journey

¹³ Even though he probably means it as a fundamental human predicament, Sánchez Robayna’s statement about Aprositus (another name for the Isle of Saint Brendan) would also be very valid if applied to Canary Islands identity: “Ah, the island never found, the *non trubada*, Aprositus. In other words, ourselves” (41).

¹⁴ Although he does not mention “Guanche Christmas,” Poggio also acknowledges Taburiente’s contribution to the lore of Saint Brendan in La Palma (181-182).

¹⁵ The metaphor that identifies the seven islands as seven stars has featured in the various Canary Islands flags created by nationalist movements throughout the 20th century. Thus, the first Canary Islands flag that can be said to be an expression of national consciousness (i.e. the one displayed at El Ateneo in La Laguna in 1907) consisted of seven white stars on a blue background that represented the sea. Analogously, the flag created later by the MPAIAC in 1964 also featured seven green stars upon a blue stripe, which reproduced the metaphor of the seven stars floating upon or “kissing” the ocean. In fact, Taburiente’s most famous song, “Ach-Guañac,” is a celebration of this more recent flag, explicitly referring to its design as “a blue sea shining with seven green stars.” For more information about Canary Islands flags and their relationship to various political projects see Suárez Rosales.

¹⁶ For the sake of historical accuracy it must be pointed out that unlike Tinguaró and Tanausú, who belonged to the aboriginal nobility, Doramas was born a plebeian. Moreover, and unlike Tanausú who was the highest authority in his kingdom, Tinguaró was not a king/ chieftain,



featuring three historical characters begs the question of where are these three Guanche kings going and, therefore, where the newborn baby at the centre of this nationalist epiphany rests.

For a start, the encounter of these three historical characters constitutes a utopian reworking of the past, since they never had a chance to meet. Doramas and Tinguaró died on the battlefield in the islands where they were born (Gran Canaria and Tenerife, respectively) and Tanausú, as discussed above, starved himself to death while being taken away from La Palma as a captive. Thus, presumably none of the three kings ever had a chance to see any Canary island other than their native one.¹⁷ However, in the imaginary and utopian space of “Guanche Christmas” they actually leave their islands and meet in, presumably, another island or insular space. This island could be one of the four remaining and unacknowledged islands (i.e. La Gomera, El Hierro, Fuerteventura or Lanzarote), however the utopian quality of the meeting probably calls for a more utopian and non-geographical space. After all, “Guanche Christmas” is not only preoccupied with celebrating the Guanche past but also with the overcoming of rivalries among the islands, dramatised in the meeting of the three kings who are “all guided by the same light.”¹⁸

This unifying and leading light seems to emanate from the eighth star, which plays the star of Bethlehem’s role, guiding the Magi towards the locus of epiphany. In “Guanche Christmas,” this eighth star is both a leading agent and a location in

but king Bencomo’s brother or half-brother and so he is sometimes referred to as “prince.” Although these are European categories imposed on Guanche society, the story of Doramas, a “shaven” plebeian (aboriginal noblemen did not cut their hair as a sign of status), highlights the inequalities of pre-colonial society. His life-story is a unique instance of resistance both to the European invaders and to the local elites, who in Gran Canaria often followed a policy of appeasement with the colonisers. Doramas proclaimed himself a noble/captain (*gaire*) and the aboriginal nobility (a relatively flexible body not exclusively determined, though heavily influenced, by birth) seems to have finally accepted him because of his remarkable fighting skills, charismatic leadership and large following. He died a noble/warrior (though not a king) in 1481. For more about Doramas and his story see Marín de Cubas. Nonetheless, I refer collectively to Tanausú, Doramas and Tinguaró as “the three kings,” since the term conveys their identity with the Three Wise Men or Magi and also highlights their noble status within the aboriginal society.

¹⁷ The issue of whether the Guanches had any navigation skills, visited islands other than their own or were brought to the Canaries from North Africa by a Roman, Greek or Phoenician is still a highly debated one and it escapes the scope of this paper. However, there is no evidence of Tanausú, Tinguaró or Doramas meeting each other or having been on a Canary island other than their native one. Thus, we might apply Occam’s razor and assume that their meeting in the utopian space of “Guanche Christmas” is an historical re-imagination of the past.

¹⁸ A structurally analogous narrative can be found in the story of Sor Catalina de San Mateo (1648-1695), a nun from Gran Canaria who claimed to have visited the seven Canary islands along with the Isle of Saint Brendan in her trance-like visions. Even though for Sor Catalina the Isle of Saint Brendan is possibly an actual place and her visionary world is not metaphorical, it seems significant that Saint Brendan already appears as the centre of her pilgrimage. She is, in a sense, like the three Guanche kings, since she travels in a visionary way to the eighth island while her body remains in her convent in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. For a brief account of the nun’s story see Benito Ruano, “Sor Catalina.”



itself, an eighth island-star which transcends the other seven and facilitates their union. The eighth star bears all the traits of the single island of the Canary Islands nation: it offers transcendence from inter-insular conflicts, it acts as an archive for the Guanche past and it offers a utopian horizon. Furthermore, the mysterious eighth island of “Guanche Christmas” also embodies significant features from Jasconius and the Isle of the Blessed. Like the whale-island, it is not only an unstable location, merely reached through the utopian imagination of the song, but also acts as a guiding and leading agent. Although Jasconius is famous for being a treacherous and unreliable surface, it also acts as a guide for Saint Brendan, as he tells his sailors: “Do not be afraid. Nothing bad will happen, on the contrary, it [Jasconius] is helping us in our path. Moving in the right direction, the beast led them towards the shore of the Isle of the Birds, where they rested till the Whitsunday octave” (Gil 76).

Analogously, the utopian eighth island is also the Isle of the Blessed, not just because of its epiphanic quality, but also because it is the resting place of ancient heroes. Even though this aspect does not appear in the *Navigatio*, the idea that the great heroes went to rest to Blessed Islands towards the West was not alien to the *Navigatio*'s larger context.¹⁹ In “Guanche Christmas,” the heroes of the Guanche past, who all suffered dishonourable deaths²⁰, re-appear in a new island with their dignity and royalty restored. This utopian and archival space imagines itself as an island that remained undiscovered and unconquered, where the Guanche past was never tainted by Castile/Spain and which can act as a legitimate source for retrieving an allegedly ancestral sense of unity. Nevertheless, not even Saint Brendan and his monks could stay in the Edenic island they finally reached and where “time stands still, without even a shadow of death” (Gil 79). After trying their fruits they have to return to their fatherland and, thus, dive once more into the mists that surround the Isle of the Blessed. Similarly fated are the utopian sailings that aim for the archive where “time stands still,” where Guanche resistance has survived time.

Though “Guanche Christmas” does not show the dissolution of the utopian vision, Pedro Guerra's “Among Clouds” (1985) dwells extensively on it. In this case, the aboriginal past appears explicitly framed by the narrative traits of the Isle of Saint Brendan/the Isle of the Blessed. The symbol of Guanche utopia is now the *tagoror* or aboriginal council, which manifests among dystopian clouds: “I dreamed that among cement / Among buildings and roads / Like a sprouting seed / Re-Arose the *tagoror* // Among tar and smog/ Skyscrapers and Malls/ Under the sky's mist/ The *tagoror* was found.” Moreover, the *tagoror* does not only stand for the Guanche past but also for relative horizontality and democratic values “The Mencey and the elders/[...] Discussed the treaties, // Discussed progress,” which contrasts with the verticality and violent attitude of the “vile tyrants” which disrupt the idyllic scene

¹⁹ As Galván Reula points out the myth of the Western Isles of the Blessed, which seems to originate from Ancient Greece, also appears in the Celtic lore, mingled with local elements (687-690).

²⁰ Tinguaró was stabbed from behind in the battle of Aguerre (1496), Doramas decapitated after being killed and his head exhibited by the Castilians as a means to discourage aboriginal resistance (1481) and Tanausú starved to death while being forcibly taken away from his native island (1493).



“With their horses and swords/ Destroying the *tagoror*.” This traumatic re-enacting of the utopian island’s fall and the destruction of its ancient culture runs parallel to the singer’s awakening: “I woke up also/ Overwhelmed and crying/ And now I tell my dream/ Wherever I go.” In this context, the Guanche past is not merely a Jasconius-like creature that is bound to dissolve sooner or later, it is a subject forcibly and violently brought to obliteration. Nonetheless, the dream-like element is still present; both the utopian vision and its dystopian framing are part of the same dream. Thus, the dreamer’s awakening does not only signal the end of the utopian vision but also the birth of a political consciousness of resistance: “And even though the vile tyrants/ Destroyed its truth/ I shall never forget/ My risen *tagoror*.”

The island-*tagoror* becomes in this way a locus of resistance even though such a space is enveloped in dreams and dystopian clouds. The Guanche dream-like other stands as the negative image of the current Canary Islands self; an image the present self can never become but which acts as a source of guidance and inspiration.²¹ In this way, even though the utopian explorers need to eventually exit the island-nation they can take away some symbolic reminders, like Saint Brendan’s monks who go back carrying “fruits and gems” along with the promise that “this [is]land will be claimed for your descendants, once the Christians are no longer persecuted” (Gil 78). Both for the monks and for the poetic persona of “Among Clouds” the island lives on in their imagination when no longer on sight.

A few years after “Among Clouds,” the band Taller Canario, created by Pedro Guerra and two other songwriters in the mid-1980s, will sing again to this “Island I can’t find,/ A place that drifts away./ I’m so close yet I can’t reach/ And you get lost in the waters.” The song “San Borondón” (1988) is possibly the most explicit celebration of the ambiguities and uncertainties of the single island of the Canary Islands nation. Not only is the island regarded as some sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*, as “An island [...] That belongs to time and it doesn’t/ A shadow that is not a shadow/ Which I could see but now I see no more.// An island [...] That is a dream and is not a dream,” it is also a space connected to the Guanche past. “San Borondón” is the closing song of the album *Identidad*, which was Taller’s painstaking attempt to re(?)-invent a Guanche musical heritage. After adapting various extant fragments from Canary Islands aboriginal languages recorded in historical sources and even trying to re-create the instruments the Guanches might have used, the

²¹ Funnily enough, at the time of the conquest of the Canaries (1402-1496), which coincides with the growth and hegemony of the Christian kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula, culminating in the Castilian conquest of Granada in 1492, there was a similar legend about the Isle of the Seven Cities. It was believed that at the time the Muslims took over the Iberian peninsula (711) seven bishops, along with some peasants, exiled themselves to this island, founding each bishop his own city. Consequently, this island had preserved Christian Iberian culture in all its purity, untainted by Muslim influence. Given that the Age of Discoveries coincides with the end of Muslim Iberia, Castilians, Portuguese and Aragonese sailors were very interested in finding this island, since they could have imported “pure” Christian culture “back” to the Peninsula instead of having to purge the (Muslim) other within their self-image. For a brief account of the legend and Ferdinand Columbus’ description of the island, see Sörgel 48-52.



songwriters came to realise that this is an island “I thought mine/ And went out to reach/ But you weren’t there/ When I looked for you.” True to itself, this metaphorical isle of Saint Brendan, the haunted island-Nation, eludes every project that is too solid, stable or literal.

However, the songwriters’ realisation is not to be construed as an acceptance of political defeat or a rejection of the island-nation as a mere utopian fantasy. In fact, in a Jasconius-like manner, the instability and unreachability of the Guanche island is not a mere absence but a lead to a new discovery: “Such an island does not exist/ You make it up/ You make it up.” This ending perfectly voices the ambiguities of the imaginary island by exposing the parallel process of self-construction and self-deconstruction. The closing refrain could be regarded as a simultaneous wake-up call and an invitation to dream. In other words, recognizing that we make up what we are does not mean that we stop imagining ourselves, but can, on the contrary, be seen as a call for political and representational agency. Consequently, if identity is not regarded as something given that needs to be discovered but as something that is constructed by the subjects it represents, the undecidable nature of the haunted island is not a source of political frustration but a representational opportunity to rethink and build the island-nation.

To sum up, the cycle of Saint Brendan, stretching from the *Navigatio* up to its more recent rebirths in the Canary Islands, has haunted the imagination of Canary Islands nationalism from its very beginnings. The constant presence of the monk’s story, along with its Guanche mirror narrative, shows us how an Irish narrative has contributed to simultaneously construct and deconstruct the image of the Canary Islands nation. The seemingly contradictory tendencies at the heart of this interaction, which can be traced back to the paradoxes of the *Navigatio*, do not only turn the Canaries into an-other Ireland but also keep the process of identity open to creativity and contestation. Unlike other attempts that have tried to define Canary Islands identity in too solid or reductionist a way,²² the haunted island “makes it possible for movements to commit themselves simultaneously to the task of affirming concrete projects of identity on behalf of the dominated and subjugated knowledge and to the utopian or long-term project of interrogating identity as such” (Radhakrishnan xxiii). Above all, the ambivalent interstices of the haunted island allow for the nation to be imagined and counter-imagined in a number of ways, enabling representational agency to be expressed in a pluralistic and democratic fashion.

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²² An instance of such a project was the MPAIAC’s (1964-1980s) articulation of Canary Islands identity, based on the premise of ethnic continuity. For the MPAIAC the foundation of the Canary Islands nation was the claim that Canary Islands people were direct (and somewhat exclusive) descendants of the Guanches and therefore an African people colonised by a European power. An account of the movement’s history and ideology can be found in Garí Hayek 113-168.



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