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Writing and Bare Life: *Locura* and Colonialism in Matos Paoli's *Canto de la locura*

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Francisco Matos Paoli, one of Puerto Rico's most prolific poets, published *Canto de la locura* in 1964. He wrote this long poem while receiving psychological treatment at an institution. He began experiencing psychological difficulty during and after his imprisonment as a result of his participation in what he calls "la chispa revolucionaria en 1950" ("Autobiografía espiritual" 16). He received a sentence of 20 years of incarceration for several speeches he gave in favor of independence. After being granted a pardon by the governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, he was released from prison and hospitalized. His problems did not end there; Matos Paoli experienced bouts of depression or *locura* for most of his life. As he reveals in his *Diario de un poeta*, he was always ashamed of his breaks from reality, even though they also provided him with an opportunity to expand his poetic vision. This is a rather strange reaction since in general it is the mystical quality of his poems about Puerto Rico that distinguishes him from other poets. Though his poems maintain the theme of "el terruño y nación" that unites many Puerto Rican poets, according to Franco Oppenheimer's study, his mystical images are what make him unique and revered by many (192). However, a distinction must be made between "mysticism" and *locura*. By using the word "mystical" to speak about the experience of *locura*, we already have a way of defining or coming to an understanding of an experience that is beyond the limits of language and social institutions. Matos Paoli is not troubled by his mystical experience, but by his *locura*, since in that experience he not only goes beyond the bounds of religious or "mystical" experience, but also beyond the confines of *colonia* and even *patria*. In his poetry, particularly *Canto de la locura*, and in his *Diario*, it is possible to see him struggle with his experience of *locura* as he tries to resolve it with the defining and limiting experiences of nationalism, colonialism, and words.

Matos Paoli must contend with the same limitations as all artists, those imposed by their chosen means of communication. In addition to the more traditional limitations of the artistic medium that all must face—whether they are the word, the canvas, or musical notes—colonialism and its response, nationalism, also place other limits on Matos Paoli and Puerto Rican artists, especially those of his generation. I would contend that his guilt or shame about his passing bouts of depression and *locura* come precisely because they take him beyond the

limits of word and the political. It is perhaps there, in the threshold marked by the sign *locura*, that Matos Paoli's poetry, and particularly his *Canto de la locura*, is potentially also the most political.

In the introduction to *Canto de la locura*, Matos Paoli speaks about his time in prison following his participation in the uprising of 1950. Speaking of when he first began to experience psychological difficulty he says, "no pude resistir el confinamiento solitario y como consecuencia fatal enloquecí, perdí la razón" (16). As a result of his "loss of reason," Matos Paoli tells us, "tuve un altercado personal con Don Pedro Albizu Campos" (16). Julio Ortega, referring to this passage, says that, "Ésta es seguramente la parte más difícil de descifrar del relato autobiográfico porque está al centro de la transformación del poeta" (141). Ortega then goes on to list the two major poems Matos Paoli wrote during and after his incarceration: *Luz de los héroes* and "Canto nacional a Borinquen." Ortega says that as a result of Matos Paoli's bout with *locura* he became "un poeta mayor" (141). The loss of language, Ortega says, is also illustrated in the altercation with Albizu, who surely did not take into consideration the gravity of the "malestar del amigo porque su perturbación era más bien interna" (141). Ortega goes on to study how the interior spaces that Matos Paoli experiences enrich his poetry and create relations between him and the great poets like Darío and Vallejo. The altercation with Albizu as a consequence of his *locura* is of central importance precisely because it shows the difficulty Matos Paoli had translating his liminal experience into his own reality and the discursive categories available to him. Matos Paoli feels the need to interpret his experience of *locura* while it signals an end to language. He cannot speak from that perspective, since it is an experience without language, and must make several decisions. He could do as other poets have done, to repeat infinitely the disjunction, or he can use it to try to effect social change. Matos Paoli often chooses the latter. A constant theme in his *Diario* is his argument against critics who do not see the political potential of his poetry and choose to speak of it as a new iteration of "poesía pura." His decision to make his poetry political, due to the social and political circumstances that confronted him, limits the way in which he can speak about or understand his *locura*.

Matos Paoli resolves his *locura* by channeling it into the recognizable and pre-existing codes defined by the nationalist/colonial dichotomy.¹ He does this by executing a first step, the conflation of *locura* with mysticism. This is because *locura* is an experience that Matos Paoli finds humiliating and of which he is ashamed. The reason for his shame is, in part, because *locura* casts him out of the discursive structure of nation into a place beyond the law, in a state of lawlessness.² In the first volume of his *Diario de un poeta* he says, "Y estando en la cárcel también perdí la razón, una de las humillaciones más tristes del ser humano" (72). He overcomes this humiliation, however, through a transformation, speaking about the transcendental tone of his poetry. He says immediately after the

¹ I would like to take this opportunity to thank the anonymous reader of a previous draft of this paper for bringing this to my attention.

² I refer the reader here to Rubén Ríos Ávila's article "Final Inqueery" where he speaks of shame as an abject space from which a critique might be articulated.

above quote: “Por eso la cualidad religiosa de mi poesía es lo más característico en mi vida de creador” (73), and later “la poesía nace de una pristinidad espiritual” (73). Once he understands his *locura* as mysticism he then translates, or conflates, that with the nationalistic discourse that has Pedro Albizu Campos as its Savior. This becomes evident when, in his *Canto de la locura*, he executes a play on words between “Pedro” and “Piedra” that is similar to the one Jesus makes in the Bible. “Pedro” becomes the “rock” upon which the nation is constructed. But even more than the Pedro/Peter/Piedra construction, Matos Paoli seems to make Albizu into Jesus the Savior: “Piedra fluvial y alada/ con el aroma de sangre de mártir/ de un Domingo de Ramos.” The blood of the martyr, Christ, is here related to Albizu, the savior/Christ of Puerto Rican nationalism. That is, the figure of Peter, who was also crucified, is transformed into that of Christ, the ultimate savior of Christianity. Albizu becomes all of these things at once. In some senses Albizu portrayed himself as a Christ figure and, in many ways was, unfortunately, also sacrificed by the U.S.; after years of imprisonment and torture, he died.

It is difficult to speak about Albizu with anything but reverence since he was, if not the strongest, most forceful voice against U.S. colonialism, definitely among the most remembered and often cited. To this day his image has the same cult status in Puerto Rico as that of Che Guevara in the rest of the world. As the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. was being defined, he was the leader and perhaps most strident critic against U.S. incursion on the island. Consequently, the U.S. imprisoned him and subjected him to radiological experiments that left his skin hot to the touch. Against the offending pole of colonialism, he offered the resistant discourse of Puerto Rican nationalism. However, as many critics have uncovered and are making evident, nationalistic practices are not without their problems. The reception of such statements not only shows how deeply ingrained a sense of nationalism is in Puerto Rico, and what a lasting impression someone like Albizu has left on the cultural imaginary, but also how dangerous it is to speak against a practice that is in itself exclusionary and not inclusive of all Puerto Ricans. So it is not without concern and trepidation that I cite Juan Duchesne Winter’s article, “Metafísica narrativa de la nación albizuista.”

Similar to postcolonial critics, Duchesne shows how the concept of “nation” is one that is an invention “moderno de factura europea” (19). He then goes on to show, citing the famous essay by Ernst Renan, “What is a Nation?,” how the construction of nation is predicated on a spiritual bond between the people in that nation. It is also, according to Renan, a bond that all agree to by a “daily plebiscite” and the “abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community” (Renan 20). As Duchesne relates, the nation requires a cult of personality in which, “la ‘personalidad’ nativa constituye un personaje inscrito como *verbo en la carne*, en una secuencia de acciones ya codificadas por un relato ancestral salido de las brumas incuestionables del origen” (29). He then cites Albizu who says, “En la nación hay un soberano y una personalidad” (*Obras escogidas*, I:21; qtd. in Duchesne 29) to prove his point. In short, similarly to what well-known postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha have done elsewhere, Duchesne analyzes how colonial societies, in an effort to resist colonial hegemony, create sys-

tems which end up duplicating in many ways the same repressive discourses of the colonizing power. Duschesne is not alone in showing how this happens in Puerto Rico; Carlos Pabón, Rubén Ríos Ávila, Frances Negrón Muntaner and Arlene Dávila are just a few of the most recent examples. What is important as it relates to Matos Paoli is that the cultural imaginary also tends to duplicate a discourse that is predicated on discursive models emanating from northern, occidental centers. That is, just as for Albizu and other nationalists for whom the only possible response to colonialism that they can imagine is nationalism, so too it is for Matos Paoli as he comes from his state of *locura* and looks for a way to speak of what he saw: if his poetry is to be thought of as politically engaged, then his *locura* has to be translated through a sense of spirit that conflates the mystical with the national. His *locura* constantly challenges him to come up with a different response to colonialism. However, in an attempt to remove the shame he feels because of his *locura*, he often recurs to older, pre-established and accepted ways of imagining the nation.

Some have argued that the interior space remains the last stronghold against colonialism. Chatterjee criticizes Benedict Anderson for claiming that the “spirit” of Latin America and other colonized parts of the world is delimited by Western cultural practices. Chatterjee argues, similarly to Julio Ortega in his article on Matos Paoli to some extent, for a sovereignty of the interior that remains untouched by the force of colonialism. Chatterjee states:

The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. (6)

He goes on to argue that if the nation is an imagined community, then it is via the “sovereignty of the spirit” that a group of people have in common that the nation is created against the colonial power and its imaginary. With Matos Paoli this can explain how his interior mysticism is translated into nationalist poetry. His interior space becomes that sovereign location where the spirit of the Puerto Rican people is held. The poet then, becomes a preserver and translator of this sovereign spirit for his or her people. There are several problems with the point Chatterjee makes here. One is that it already translates the interior space of the poet as “national essence,” when the inner experience, the one I am calling *locura*, is a place beyond language. Another problem, similar in many ways to the first, is that the only way to sustain his point is if there is a threshold between the public and the private that has not been disturbed by the bio-political force represented by the colonial state of exception. Giorgio Agamben makes clear that in the state of exception, “the law seeks to annex anomie itself” (39). That is, the state of exception tries to contain and limit what is outside of itself, what is lawless or without law is brought into the “law” (a word Agamben writes by crossing out). In the colonial state, there reigns a state of exception where the threshold between public and private is removed by the exertion of bio-power. It could even be said that this threshold is erased also by nationalistic efforts to co-opt it to their own designs.

The history of Puerto Rico can be read as one of the constant exertion of bio-power upon its inhabitants and those in the Diaspora by colonial systems, whether Spanish or U.S. Recent studies like *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870–1920*, as well as *Política sexual en Puerto Rico* and *Escritura afropuertorriqueña y modernidad*, have done a lot to document its effects on the people of Puerto Rico. However many of these studies, like *Imposing Decency* and *Escritura afropuertorriqueña y modernidad*, show that colonial power as much as the nationalistic response against it are responsible for producing a state of exception in Puerto Rico resulting in the elimination of the threshold between public and private. While it is obvious that there are other instances of the exertion of colonial bio-power in Puerto Rico, the one that is most important to the circumstances surrounding Matos Paoli's life and the publication of *Canto de la locura* is the "Gag Law" or *La ley de la mordaza*. Matos Paoli's *locura*, and perhaps his poetry in general, can be read in the space between the two attempts to control private space: colonialism represented by the "Gag Law" and its response, nationalism. In the reveries he experiences in *locura*, Matos Paoli is in a lawless place, a place beyond the limits of nation and colony, a place of pure potential. When he returns from his *locura*, he then translates that potential into the forms available to him. The experience moves from potential, to mysticism, to language, to nationalism. The experience of this potential allows him to renovate poetic forms, as he says in the second volume of his *Diario de un poeta*, "Debo la renovación de mi poesía al acceso de locura que padecí en 1950 mientras permanecía en la cárcel" (27). Because of the relationship between poetry and *locura* he calls poetry "la protopalabra" (Tomo I, 163). Through the relationship with potential/*locura*, the poetic word can become the place where new forms and perhaps where a new type of union among people might be imagined beyond the Western forms imposed by colonial models of which nationalism is one. The effect of colonialism and bio-power on discourse is that language becomes more transparent in its mimetic relation to reality and the imagination. Recent Latin American critics such as William Rowe, Elizabeth Monasterios Pérez and Jill Kuhnheim try to reinscribe the political potential of what some might consider the more "aesthetic" elements of poetry. Rowe says for example that, "where (or when) symbols are formed is the location of the poetic imagination's power" (12) and points to the important transformative effects poetry can have on language and thus on culture as a whole. Matos Paoli's poetry inscribes the potential that language, particularly poetic language, holds in reserve but which bio-power has eliminated, or attempts to eliminate.

Due to Puerto Rico's political status as a colony and specific laws such as the "Gag Law" imposed there, the relationship between language and power, and the importance of maintaining a space that is outside the law is perhaps all the more evident.³ In order to understand the force that the poetic imagination holds in the face of colonialism, it is helpful to employ Giorgio Agamben's no-

³ In his essay, "Final Inquery," Ríos Ávila analyzes the space created by Queer culture in Puerto Rico as also being a lawless space, outside that created by nationalist and colonial discourses.

tion of what he calls *potenza* or potential as it relates to the bio-political exertions to remove it.⁴

Agamben attempts to reassert the “edge of semantic availability” (Williams 134) in his essay, “Language and Death: The Place of Negativity,” when he argues that what has been lost in modernity is the encounter between the sign and the absolute, most particularly death. Philosophy and poetry, according to Agamben, were always concerned with understanding the unique position of human beings, that we, unlike other animals, are capable of encountering our own death. Out of this encounter with the ineffable, humans are able to live and speak. Though we know about our death, we do not experience it as anything more than a thought or an emotion. Similarly, language is able to talk around the experience of the absolute, but it never is the absolute. Though language is not able to represent the absolute transparently it is able to lead us to the space of contemplation, a place of encounter with the absolute, a place that Raymond Williams refers to as the “edge of semantic availability.” The potential power of language resides in its ability to bring us to the encounter with our own death through the act of reading.⁵ However, the result of modernity’s project via bio-power has been to remove this encounter and therefore we are no longer able to live and speak in an authentic language. Our ignorance or lack of willingness to encounter the absolute through philosophical thought or poetic language has rendered us docile cogs in capitalism’s cultural machine created out of bio-power. By rearticulating the relationship between the absolute and language Agamben tries to reassert the threshold between private life, “bare life,” and polis that was collapsed via bio-power and the progress of modernity. As Agamben says, these two are always in contention, the polis is always trying to encroach upon “bare life” and render bodies along with thought and language docile.

One of the many ways since 1898 and before that bio-power was exerted in Puerto Rico in an effort to create docile bodies was through the institution of the “Gag Law.”⁶ Enacted in Puerto Rico from 1948 to 1957, it was an overt political attempt to legislate speech and thought in public as well as private spheres. The so-called “Gag Law” dictated, among other things, that it was illegal to raise the Puerto Rican flag, speak patriotically about Puerto Rico or to otherwise make proclamations that could be characterized as being against *El gobierno insular* (Acosta 72). In other words, as Ronald Fernández puts it, “*La mordaza* presented Puerto Ricans with a contradiction in terms” (177); they could do whatever they wanted as long as it was not something that could be interpreted as being against the U.S.-appointed governor or the U.S.-controlled government.

⁴ Though it is true, as a reviewer said, that the relation between politics and aesthetics has been discussed elsewhere, one cannot employ all theoretical models. Agamben is most interesting here because of his work on the state of exception as well as potential and language. Using the ideas of Rancière, for example, might be helpful, but there is not space here to take them into consideration.

⁵ Agamben does not go as far as I have here since he is more concerned with the philosophical importance of his argument. However, if language does offer a potential, we can only encounter that potential via the act of reading.

⁶ The topic of docility has concerned Puerto Rican critics for years. Though it is a debate that is of extreme interest, there is no space to go into it here. For starters one could consult Juan Gelpí’s work as well as that of Juan Flores and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones.

The law effectively made it illegal to speak publicly or privately in favor of Puerto Rican independence precisely at a time when the matter of Puerto Rico's status was supposedly being discussed.⁷ It was during this time also that the October 30th Revolution occurred. During this Revolution as many as a thousand people were imprisoned including the leader, Pedro Albizu Campos, and the secretary of an *independentista* group, Francisco Matos Paoli. Albizu and Matos Paoli were placed in cells in a jail known as *La Princesa*, located in Old San Juan. Matos Paoli's crime was reading speeches "de carácter subversivo" in Cabo Rojo and another one in Lares (*Diario* Tomo I, 3).

What happened to Albizu and Matos Paoli as a result of their political activities demonstrates effectively what Foucault means in his Introduction to the *History of Sexuality* as he describes bio-power, saying that: "[M]odern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (143). By the imprisonment and torture of opponents of its colonial power in Puerto Rico, the U.S. asserts its capacities of "bio-power," which Foucault characterizes as "an indispensable element in the development of capitalism" (140–41). Through its exertion, bodies are rendered docile and become pieces of the capitalistic, and in this case colonial, machine. Foucault's analysis and criticism in general seems to end here. Discourse, whether poetic or not, is all part of the web of power forming the panopticon in which we live. There is no depth, no outside, everything is converted into surface, and all is seen, observed, and controlled.

In Puerto Rico the "Gag Law" is one of many examples of how the colonial power wished to complete the task of modernity by leveling out the discursive field.⁸ That is, it seeks a relationship of power that exerts complete control where all bodies are converted into docile machines in its well-functioning system, eliminating any private spaces where the imagination and its potential energy might be developed. Such a relationship requires the elimination of private life or, at the very least, the control "through the disciplines" of education, law and other means of the personal to the extent that there is no noticeable difference between the public and the private. To this end things like "gag laws" and the imprisonment and torture of offenders play a very vital and obvious role by placing dissenters in locations outside the discursive field and therefore unable to communicate their ideas for change.⁹ In this way even the "spiritual" space that Chatterjee wants to remain sovereign and so untouched by the colonial state of exception, is brought under the controlling gaze of the bio-political panopticon. Ronald Fernández and Ivonne Acosta offer several examples attesting to how the "Gag Law" exerted political control over private life. To those examples I would

⁷ Of the many studies that exist, Ivonne Acosta's is the most authoritative. In it she draws a link between *La mordaza* and McCarthyism. She also unearths how the creation of Law 53 also aided Luis Muñoz Marín as he jockeyed to position himself to become Puerto Rico's first "freely elected" governor.

⁸ One of the arguments in favor of U.S. influence in Puerto Rico has always been that with U.S. control also come the benefits of modernity. It is also obvious that the U.S. influence in this area did not begin or end with the "Gag Law."

⁹ The "Gag Law" formed what Agamben calls a "state of exception" in Puerto Rico, when the political seeks control over elements that were often held outside its grasp, such as *potenza*, for the supposed good of the state. As Agamben also makes evident, this state of exception, in modernity, becomes the norm; it is no longer exceptional.

like to add Matos Paoli's conduct while imprisoned for the speeches he read during the October 30th uprising.

Along with writing poems while in prison, Matos Paoli also refused food, giving it away to other prisoners, which caused him to lose a lot of weight. In her introduction to his *Diario de un poeta*, his wife, Isabel Freire Matos, relates the horror she felt when she visited him in prison and the horror of seeing him suffer self-imposed fasts (I, 3–6). On his first visit with Isabel he asks her: “Aquí en la cárcel, ¿qué puedo hacer por la patria?” (3). In response to his own question he spent his time in jail meditating, reading and writing; none of which were permitted. Though there was nothing they could do about his refusal to eat, they did censor his poetry. Matos Paoli wrote poems on his cell's walls. As soon as the warden found out he ordered guards to whitewash over them, thus removing them from view. Undeterred, Matos Paoli continued to write poems on scraps of paper that were smuggled out of the prison to his wife, Isabel Freire Matos, who later unveiled the poems and tried to get them published. Reading the poems it is difficult to see much, if anything, that is subversive or dangerous. However in the context of the “Gag Law” and its intended effect, to silence all opposition and, implicitly, to render all inhabitants of Puerto Rico docile, the poems, the fasting and the meditating take on a different meaning. All of these actions can be read as Matos Paoli's effort to reserve a space for himself, his private/bare life, as colonialism exerts bio-power in an attempt to eliminate the private spaces that remain beyond its purview. However, as is also shown by his altercation with Albizu, and the resultant shame, the experiences he has in the private space may also require a different understanding of “nation” from the one Albizu articulated.¹⁰

If the present political and cultural discursive field is one that is decided and controlled by a colonialist paradigm, then it is only by looking for potentialities, for a lawless space outside of that field, that liberation is possible. This potentiality “anticipates an *us* to come, a *coming community*” (Carl Wills “Au Hasard” 43) rather than simply repeating codes and signs already manufactured in the colonial discursive field. Matos Paoli can only speak of that potential place. Rather than succumb to the places made for him, either entirely within the polis as one of many “mechanized bodies” or outside in an unintelligible place of abandonment, Matos Paoli places himself and his poetry at the intersection between the two, reminding us of the potentiality that exists outside the current structure. By existing here he risks his life or being characterized in a way that would have the effect of eliminating him from public view. This is carried out initially by imprisoning him, but as bio-power begins to have its hoped-for effect in Puerto Rico, he is characterized as “insane.”¹¹ It should also be remembered that his

¹⁰ On a personal note, when I spent two days interviewing Matos Paoli in the summer of 1994, he wanted to make clear that even though he and Albizu had a disagreement when in prison, it was something which caused him great shame and for which he was still trying to repent. It seems that it was an experience that marked him profoundly and from which he was still trying to recover forty years later.

¹¹ There are plenty of examples noted by Ronald Fernández showing how political leaders and news organizations in Puerto Rico characterized nationalists or *independentistas*. An example of this is the official reaction to some events of the October revolution. Along with the

locura is also what causes him to have a disagreement with Albizu when they are in prison, and he later interprets it in acceptable terms for the nationalist cause. However, in some space between those two delimiting discourses, is also the contact with the poetic word and potential. It is perhaps here that poetry can present its most revolutionary possibilities.

Rather than reject outright the public categorization of himself as insane, Matos Paoli seems to embrace it and rearticulate it as a potential space for revolutionary change. His poem, *Canto de la locura*, can be read as a long poem or a series of poems describing a descent into madness that is similar to a mystical journey through “a dark night of the soul.” However, in Matos Paoli’s poem there is no narrative arc, as the “yo” of the poem oscillates between complete madness or confusion and clarity without ever really falling fully into either state for long. Similar to Agamben’s articulation of “life on the threshold,” Matos Paoli here is on the border between madness and sanity. *Locura* here is proposed as a way of reshaping language and cultural symbols by writing on the threshold of aesthetics and politics, madness and sanity. Madness then forms an absolute, similar to death in Agamben, which Matos Paoli encounters in his poetry. This encounter helps Matos Paoli signal toward a potential that poetic language offers beyond the current, colonial paradigm. In the poem it is possible to see Matos Paoli grasp for ways to interpret his *locura*; one way is to understand it as mysticism that becomes nationalism, but at other moments he seems to break even with that form.

The cover page of *Canto de la locura* gives an indication as to the link between madness and its political potential as well as his attempts to translate his *locura* at the service of the nationalist cause. Matos Paoli dedicates the book to Lolita Lebrón, “nuestra Juana de Arco.” This dedication is followed by a quote from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Both the dedication and the quote are significant and create certain tensions in the reader not prepared for Matos Paoli’s poetic unification of the political and the aesthetic. Lolita Lebrón was one of several Puerto Ricans who entered the U.S. capital and fired upon members of Congress in 1954. The quote from Aristotle, since it is from the *Poetics*, recalls not only classical, formalist notions of aesthetics, but the quote itself is one that shows the link between art and madness:

En efecto: por la naturaleza misma de las cosas persuaden mejor quienes están apasionados; y así, más verdaderamente conmueve el conmovido, y enfurece el airado. Y por este motivo el arte de la poesía es propio o de naturales bien nacidos o de locos; de aquéllos, por su

armed takeover of several towns on the island, an attempt was made on president Truman’s life in what is known as “the attack on Blair house.” In his radio address broadcast throughout the island after the revolt, Muñoz Marín apologizes for the event and distances himself and the majority of Puerto Ricans from the “mad, grotesque and futile nationalist violence makers” (29). He also states that he has won the governorship of Puerto Rico through fair and independent ballots cast by the Puerto Rican people. He says that those in favor of independence, his opposition, “hate the vote” (30). What Muñoz Marín does not wish to recognize is that he won the governorship when it was illegal for anyone to voice opposition.

multiforme y bella plasticidad; de éstos, por su potencia de éxtasis.
(40)

By referring to Lebrón as “our Joan of Arc” he links her to the divine madness of revolution against an oppressive political force. He also links the *locura* to the *potencia de éxtasis*, showing how madness also has the potential to lift one out of oppressive circumstances and see different possibilities. The quote from Aristotle links his own divine, poetic madness, “the lifting out of self” which is different from the poetry that “can take the mold of any character” since it proposes new models. Juxtaposing Lebrón with Aristotle here can lead us to an interpretation that madness is also political as well as aesthetic since it leads us to create new forms. By placing the Aristotle quote beneath the dedication to Lebrón, he creates a visual sublimation of the *locura* discussed by Aristotle, by the nationalistic, revolutionary madness of Lebrón.

However, nationalism is just one of the possible interpretations Matos Paoli gives to his *locura*. Throughout the poem there is the anaphora exhorting that “tenemos que enloquecer” or “tengo que volverme loco.” What does this mean for Matos Paoli and for us as readers? Matos Paoli speaks of his descent into madness saying: “me desencajé de mi yo estereotipado por el escapismo inútil, acepté el devenir y me reconcilé con el mundo” (33). Though he speaks of his psychosis as something humiliating it also allows him a new perspective on his self and his poetry in relation to the world around him. As is evident throughout his diary and the poems he writes, he places himself in a position between madness and the “raíces hondas” of the earth. He says at one point in his diary: “mi posición defiende un movimiento envolvente de cielo a tierra, de tierra a cielo. Llegar a lo incommunicable utilizando un lenguaje comunicativo” (46). He understands his *locura* as mysticism which then becomes nationalistic: “La colaboración política a favor de nuestra Independencia Nacional es un corolario directo de mi concepción metafísica de Dios. Entiendo lo inmanente como una encarnación de Dios en la tierra” (*Diario*, I:48). The constant mention of a return to earth is literal as well as figurative, since the earth or “el terruño” of Puerto Rico is a constant theme in many Puerto Rican writers (Franco Oppenheimer).¹² By reconnecting to the earth, not only is he metaphorically “coming down from the clouds” of his *locura*, he is also connecting with the land of Puerto Rico and, symbolically, with the nation and its traditions.

The position he occupies between divine madness and the rational is similar to the one he takes with respect to his poetry. He rejects outright aestheticism because it is too removed from reality, yet he also rebuffs realism because it is too limiting. He says again in his diary: “Creación quiere decir solidaridad con el pueblo. Esteticismo es sinónimo de enajenación” (36). So for him creation is defined by solidarity with the people, with everyday life, and he defines aestheti-

¹² Perhaps the most omnipresent symbol of the importance of the land in Puerto Rican culture is that of the *jibaro*. This figure became a cultural icon and image of the Popular Democratic Party. There are many stories, poems and plays using this figure as a representative of Puerto Ricans: *La carreta* (René Marqués) and many stories in *Mi isla soñada* (Abelardo Díaz Alfaro) as well as the poetry of Luis Llorens Torres are just some examples. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones and a long list of others have criticized the *jibaro* as well as what it represents.

cism as alienation from reality and the social concerns it presents. Later he says: “Yo rechazo ambos tipos de poesía. No soy idealista. No soy realista. Los idealistas, por su lado, tienden a la difuminación de la realidad, al fantasma lingüístico. Los realistas tienden al achicamiento del horizonte virtual del hombre . . . Yo estoy justo en el medio” (50).

This intermediary position between the ephemeral and the quotidian is one that runs through his poetry and is similar to the position that Agamben tries to reassert in his philosophy. Matos Paoli’s *Canto de la locura*, because it is a song that comes out of his real experience with madness, presents perhaps the most extreme example of his position *justo en el medio*. As shown earlier, he chooses to conflate mysticism with nation and with his nation’s savior, Albizu Campos. There is perhaps nothing new about this since patriotic celebrations often resemble spiritual performances; national heroes are often represented as having a god-like aura. However, events both from the recent and distant past show the often volatile danger of this mixture. Using national heroes in this way usually creates a belief system that is polarized into a static ethical understanding reducing relationships to us and them. Because Matos Paoli encounters the absolute and therefore exists on the threshold between “bare life” and polis, he cannot believe in silencing his opposition. As he says again using biblical terminology: “[E]l tirano admira tanto el silencio forzado de sus tristes prosélitos. Porque la palabra abre el horizonte de la trascendencia, impele hacia la libertad generosa, desata el nudo de la nada en que nos avasalló el impudoroso déspota” (*Diario* 71). Nonetheless, he advocates independence and sees those who struggle for it as imbued with a spiritual goodness. The tyrant likes even his “proselytes” to be silenced because the word carries with it such transcendent force that it moves toward freedom. This is true for any tyrant, not just the tyrants Matos Paoli does not happen to agree with.

The verses that Matos Paoli writes in *Canto de la locura* that follow his deification of Albizu encourage everyone, including the reader, to search on his or her own for the roots of freedom. In order to achieve the goal, we must enter into a state of madness: “Tenemos que enloquecer, / extraer de nosotros mismos la raíz despavorida/ del cielo.” This individualized search for freedom via madness extends beyond nationalist concerns; we have to extract it from ourselves and in our own way. But this freedom is something that, especially given the current political circumstances, is far away. As he says, “Está lejos el sueño/ en el reino de la lógica.” The “dream” could be the dream of freedom, but it could also be the dream world or the dream in general. The kingdom of logic he refers to here is the situation created by bio-power where everything is reduced to surface, to the limiting dichotomies available in a colonial context: colony or nation. The dreams he speaks of here—similar to *locura* or the “irrational” state of lawlessness—are far away or removed entirely from the realm of possibility in the kingdom or paradigm created by logic. Like Agamben, Matos Paoli tries to re-inscribe the threshold between logic and dream, polis and bare life that has been collapsed via the exertion of colonial bio-power. For this reason both Agamben and Matos Paoli argue for the need to confront the ineffable absolutes of dreams, madness and death. But they also wish to use them for their political potential.

In his essay, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, Agamben argues for

the negative potential of poetic and philosophic language. Again, for some his argument might simply repeat what has already been said by many others and has the risk of sounding like simply being supportive of high modernist poetry that attempts to speak the unspeakable, or the ineffable. In many respects it is just that; he places the relationship, however, between the sign and the absolute in the political context of the current paradigm. The result of bio-power is to remove the radical altering potential from language, and Matos Paoli, like Agamben, seeks to reassert that potential. Like Matos Paoli's differentiation between "creation" and "aestheticism" the potential of language that Agamben talks about is never complete, it is always left in reserve as a potential or *potenza*. This allows him to form a contrastive position to, or perhaps to complete, the theoretical paradigm that Foucault constructed. Agamben says that in this age "of absolutely speakable things" when "all figures of the Unspeakable [. . .] have been *eliminated*" is also the age of man's "in-fantile dwelling (in-fantile, that is, without Voice or will, and yet *ethical*, habitual) in language" (92). Agamben characterizes this current phase of modernity as the result of bio-power, when we are with language but unable to speak authentically because language's relationship with potential (*potenza*) has been eliminated. That is, the relationship between language and its negativity through a confrontation of absolutes such as death or *locura* is no longer thought. Because of this we speak, but in an inauthentic language. Relating this back to the argument he makes in *Homo Sacer*, we no longer speak authentically because the border space that the subject once inhabited between public and private does not exist. This border region was eliminated when the private sphere was collapsed into the public via the "the state of exception," which is no longer an exception but the norm.¹³ Agamben uses the extreme example of the Nazi Death Camps to show the result of modernity's project: "the total politicization of life that is the camps signals the total collapse of this project" that was a negotiation between the public and the private (Norris 50).

Art, over the course of the centuries, has also lost its critical power with relationship to capitalism and its effects. As Paul de Man studies in his book *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, the avant-garde movements, which started out in a space on what Agamben would call the threshold, gradually evolved into innovation for the sake of innovation, transforming art into a pure play of surfaces and very linked to capital and its need for constant production of new and improved products. Matos Paoli resists the reduction to exchange that occurs in the capitalist, colonial paradigm. He begins *Canto de la locura* with the line "Ya está transido, pobre de rocío,/ este enorme quetzal de la nada." It is, to say the least, a curious image to begin a poem with, especially since the quetzal has no

¹³ It is no surprise that Agamben's understanding of "the state of exception" as developed in his essay, *The State of Exception*, as well as how he characterizes it in *Homo Sacer*; is the aspect of his thought that most interests current theorists. The "state of exception" studies how the State has, by legal means, taken control over biological functioning as well as our imagination. This is the element of his thought that most closely coincides with the paradigm described by Foucault's "bio-power." However, what those critics who focus on this aspect of Agamben's thought often miss is how Agamben proceeds to argue for a reinscription of private spheres in opposition to the "state of exception" that has become the norm.

relation to Puerto Rico whatsoever. As is well known, the Aztecs trying to appease Cortés gave him quetzal feathers along with gold. The beautiful feathers of the quetzal had value to the Aztecs not just for their beauty, but they also served as an object that had an exchange value. To the Spanish colonizers they had very little value aside from being an object of interest. The poem begins by offering something, indigenous to Latin America, that has no value to the colonizers but which is synonymous with exchange to the indigenous people. Yet, the quetzal here is not money but is of nothingness, “de la nada,” signaling the value and the potential of something without monetary value; it is worth nothing in capitalistic terms. The term “de la nada,” however, also relates to the no-thing that Matos Paoli encounters in the space of language’s negation, in *locura*. It has no use for nationalists or for colonialists. Nevertheless, this thing of beauty, which has no worth in economic terms, is also losing its potential, it is “transido” or stricken and the ideal/rocío (dew) seems to be drying up.

Similar to Agamben and his reassertion of the ancient boundary between the political and the private, Matos Paoli seeks to inscribe a place for himself on the boundary between the political and the imaginative. He resists the exertion of colonialist bio-power creating a paradigm where language’s potential is obliterated. As Matos Paoli says, he is *justo en el medio*. Nevertheless, he is unable to avoid entirely the effects of colonialism so, in an effort to speak of his experience “beyond the law,” he translates it in terms he and others can understand in an attempt to remove the guilt he feels. To be overly idealist, as he has been accused of being, removes one from any contact or relation with reality. But to be too concerned with reality places limits on human potential. Both Agamben and Matos Paoli argue for a return to the meeting up, the dialectic if you will, between language and its opposite: a negativity. Agamben says, “We can only think if language is not our voice, only if we reach our own aphonia at its very bottom” (Language 108). By recognizing language and its negation, it is possible to return to an understanding of language and the potential of language’s lawless, creative and revolutionary force. As critics such as Carlos Pabón in *Nación postmortem. Ensayos sobre los tiempos insorportables de la ambigüedad*, try to imagine something beyond the exclusionary discourse of colonialism and nationalism, it might be interesting, as many are already doing, to return to poetry and the potential it offers for imagining a different relationship among people, beyond the limits of the colony and an overly determined nationalism.

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