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¡CANARIAS TIENE UN LÍMITE!

On the 20 April 2024 the Canary Islands saw the largest protests against the growth of tourism under the banner *Canarias tiene un límite*, ‘the Canary Islands have a limit’. The implication is that the limits of the islands have been ignored and are being exceeded in some way. This prompted me to think about the various meanings of ‘limit’ (capacity, boundary, definition and so on) and why we might have ever thought that these islands in the African Atlantic were without limits. I also wondered how this might relate to the common conceptions of the islands as ideal for a holiday, often at a bargain price. During my own research on the translation of a writer, Agustín Espinosa (1897-1939), who was born on one of the islands (Tenerife), I have become interested in how the natural environment in which (and about which) he wrote might be reflected in his writing style. And given that translation involves shifts in both language and time, I wondered how the changes seen in the Canary Islands in the last 100 years might inform my translation. Without realising it I had become an interdisciplinary researcher: suddenly I was not just translating text, but history, politics, geography, environment – the list could be endless – too.

We might not consider Homer an interdisciplinary researcher, but the Greek geographer Strabo thought so, and saw him as ‘the originator of the art of geography [...] he was interested not only in human activities [...] but also in each of the places of the entire inhabited world, both land and sea. Otherwise he would not have gone to its farthest limits in his writings.’ In his literary exploration of limits, Homer referred to the Elysian Fields, situated ‘at the world’s end’ in *The Odyssey*:

and life is there the easiest for humans.
There is no snow, no heavy storms or rain,
but Ocean always sends up gentle breezes
of Zephyr to refresh the people there.

4.564-567 (Translation: Emily Wilson)

From the time of Strabo, at the beginning of the Common Era, the mythical afterlife of Elysium was beginning to be associated with the islands of Macaronesia (which include the Azores, Madeira, Cabo Verde as well as the Canaries). It was Pliny the Elder who first specifically identified the Canary Islands as the *Fortunatae Insulae* – the Fortunate, or Blessed Islands, which all have ‘quantities of fruits and every kind of bird in plenty’. The mythical and literary origins of the Canary Islands seem to resonate with the issue of their limits today: perhaps in our imagination they have become fantastic, beyond reality, beyond the difficulties of contemporary life. Homer tells us ‘life is there the easiest’, there are ‘no heavy storms or rain’. The only limit, it appears, might be our imagination. And on my visits to Tenerife to carry out research I have seen some extraordinary sights. The view at sunrise from the top of the Teide volcano (the highest point on Spanish territory at 3,718 metres) was particularly evocative of the limitless and unearthly.



The view towards Gran Canaria from the peak of Teide

But of course, there are real limits. The eight islands – El Hierro, La Gomera, La Palma, Tenerife, Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria, La Graciosa, and Lanzarote – have a surface area of 7,557 km² and a total population of 2.17 million (2021 figures). For comparison it is helpful to know that the county of Devon in the UK is 6,564 km² and has a population of 826,319 (2022 figures). Despite these real limits—eight small islands—we seem to enter an imaginary world when we realise that in 2023 13.9 million tourists visited the archipelago, an annual increase of 13.1%. And in the first six months of 2024 8.7 million tourists have already visited the

Canaries, an increase of 10.3% on the same period in 2023. There is not just a high concentration of tourists in the Canaries; economic and social problems intensify here too: figures for wages, unemployment, poverty, and rental costs are some of the worst in Spain. No wonder there are protests. In what way could these islands be considered *fortunate*?

In my research into the imagination of Agustín Espinosa, I have found his most extraordinary writing was in his surrealist experiment *Crime*, written in 1934:

This faraway island, where I now live,
is the island of damnation.
Around me seethes a spiteful sea of cloudy blue,
darkening distantly on a withered horizon,
empty of Latin sails and transatlantic funnels.
Beneath my feet, brown earth
masses around stabbing curved cacti,
delicate dying fig trees and golden gorse.
Violet egrets swoon shadows over the rockface.
Me, bastard child of the island. *El aislado*.

I am sure that Espinosa is questioning the mythical status of the Canaries as the Fortunate Islands here: for him they became islands of the damned, a hellish outpost of the world, leaving him feeling he was the '*aislado*' – the isolated one. Writing in 1934 Espinosa appears to be speaking to the instability in Spanish society and politics that culminated in the attempted military coup of July 1936 and ultimately the Spanish Civil War. And one of the key figures of the conflict, the right-wing military general Francisco Franco, was sent to the Canaries by the left-wing Republican government early in 1936 in an unsuccessful attempt to weaken his power. The futile attempt at exiling Franco in Tenerife seems to evoke both the imaginary of the Canaries as a paradisaical beyond from which there is no (wish to) return and that of a hellish afterlife from which horrors might come back to haunt us.

In J G Ballard's 1978 short story *Having a Wonderful Time* – in the form of a series of postcards sent back to the UK by a couple visiting a holiday complex in Gran Canaria – we see a horrifying vision of tourism in the Canary Islands. The couples' flight home is repeatedly cancelled, and it is suggested that the 'entire Canaries [are] being developed by the governments of Western Europe, in collusion with the Spanish authorities, as a kind of permanent holiday camp for their unemployables'. These 'unemployables' or 'human reserves' are 'mostly English working class from the north and midlands'. There are many ways of reading this story, but I am struck by the ironic way the Canaries are degraded into a kind of societal dustbin: there is nothing to be valued on the islands, they are just wasteland to be utilised to meet economic and political needs. The promise of cheap paradise attracts the working classes, but it turns out to be a one-way ticket to a hellish means of class segregation. I thought of Ballard's short story when I walked west along the coast from Puerto de la Cruz in Tenerife and came across a hotel of unreal proportions built into the volcanic rock. This hotel

(with 18 floors and 286 rooms) was built in 1971 and was the first five-star hotel in the area. Despite the supposed luxury status and coastal location, the building looks – in its high-density uniformity – reminiscent of the social housing blocks built in the 1960s in cities like Coventry.



The hotel 'Best Semiramis', Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife

Interestingly, the Canarians themselves are invisible in Ballard's story, as if they do not exist. The contemporary reality is that, given the extraordinary volume of tourists, the Canarians must feel crowded out, imposed upon. I saw evidence of anti-tourist sentiment further along the coast, on graffiti scrawled on a sign by a beach. The sign reads 'You are in a natural environment, take care of it, and respect it'. The graffiti added in English 'Tourist go home!' makes the sentiments of the writer clear; they have also altered the instruction in Spanish (to take your rubbish with you for a sustainable beach) to include the term '*guiri*', a term for foreign tourists, often used in a less than complimentary way. Interestingly the flags of all three countries are all crossed out, including Spain. This is a reminder that in the late fifteenth century the Canary Islands were taken through Spanish conquest of the indigenous population, a people likely to be descendants of the Imazighen of North Africa. Perhaps it is not surprising that there is currently a modest renaissance of Canarian nationalism. A nationalism which seeks definition and independence for the islands. A nationalism which wants to clarify just exactly where the limits are.



A local council sign, with graffiti, above Playa los patos, near Puerto de la Cruz

During the rise of Francoism, such moves towards regional independence in Spain were repressed, with the autonomy granted to Catalonia in 1931 being abolished in 1938. While Franco was initially concerned with defining a self-sufficient and unitary Spain, in the late dictatorship moves to liberalise trade saw tourism become an important vehicle of post-civil war economic recovery and development. From the 1960s tourism in Spain has expanded rapidly, including – especially, given their subtropical climate – in the Canary Islands. This is where the imaginations of foreign investors and tour operators seem to have been unleashed in an uncontrolled way, ultimately pushing the Canaries beyond their limit.

Thinking back to the slogan used in the recent protests – ‘The Canaries have a limit’ – I wonder if we can respond to this by considering how we might limit our own fantasies of escape. If we lived within our limits – if we lived more manageable and pleasurable lives all year round – perhaps we would not crave escape. What is it about contemporary society and culture that causes us to want to buy into the fantasy of an ‘away from it all’ holiday? What the example of the Canaries teaches us, amongst many other things, is that there is no ‘away from it all’; all the contemporary challenges in the world exist there too, often in more extreme forms. Perhaps we need to definitively break their association with the Elysian Fields and the Fortunate Isles; these are not, and never were islands of perpetual spring, there *are* storms, clouds and rain (although the islands are currently suffering from the most serious lack of the latter in their history). They are one of the most biodiverse areas of the temperate zone, and

nearly half of the islands' territory is now classed as a protected natural area. How can such a unique natural environment have become so at risk from tourism? In our desperation for holiday escapes, we inadvertently treat the imagined paradise as a dustbin for our stresses and ills. And in the process damage nature and remain stuck in our own unsustainable ways of living; ways of living that leave us exhausted and craving mythical rest in a non-existent paradise.



It may look like paradise... The view to Teide from Barranco de la arena, near Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife

Reading and translating Espinosa today, he appears strangely prescient of the threats that tourism might represent. In 1929 Espinosa wrote *Lancelot, 28° - 7° A Comprehensive Guide to an Atlantic Island* inspired by his stay on Lanzarote in 1928-9 whilst working as a teacher there. It is a kind of ironic travel guide in which he creates a new mythology for Lanzarote, invoking the Arthurian character Lancelot as muse.

A land without a strong tradition, without a poetic atmosphere, suffers the threat of a fatal diffusion. It is as if those anaemic, inane words of signification carry the roots of this land's disappearance in their cheap and inexpressive luggage.

What I have tried to achieve, above all, has been this: a poetic world; a unifying mythology. My aim is to create a new Lanzarote. A Lanzarote invented by me. Following the widest tradition of universal literature. Therefore, I substitute a Lanzarote that today already says nothing, that has lost its true sensibility, with Lancelot: hero of the grand knightly Brittany; knight of a passionate lineage;

admirable collector of adventures; famous guest of the Middle Ages; teacher of Amadís and of Don Quixote. I substitute a word—Lanzarote—now without sense, for another that is still charged with feelings of a high heroism.

Espinosa's reference to a 'fatal diffusion' resonates with the current, extraordinary, dilution of the Canarian population by the quantity of tourists present all year round. Espinosa locates the solution to cultural diffusion in tradition and poetry, perhaps implying that the loss of tradition after the Spanish conquest is the root of the problem. The 'anaemic, inane words' imported during Spanish colonisation contain something harmful, here personified as having 'cheap and inexpressive luggage'. Whilst the luggage of contemporary tourists might not always be cheap or inexpressive, it has brought with it something damaging. And we now must acknowledge that our conceptions of the Canary Islands as limitless providers of cheap holidays (with optional doses of the extraordinary natural landscapes there) are no longer viable economically, socially, environmentally, or culturally.

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