



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 9

Loa to the Divine Narcissus: Postcolonial Contact and Context

Hosts: Adam Hobbs, Molly Martinez:Collins, and Johnny Williams III

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Episode Transcript

Opening Song:

Adam: In festive pageantry

come worship and revere the great God of Seeds!

Molly: En el esplendor festivo

ven a adorar y reverenciar al gran Dios de las Semillas!

Adam, Molly and Johnny:

In festive pageantry

come worship and revere the great God of Seeds!

En el esplendor festivo

ven a adorar y reverenciar al gran Dios de las Semillas!

Everyone: Hi everybody! Hello.

Molly: I'm just gonna do a quick introduction. Hi my name is Molly Martinez: Collins

Johnny: And I'm Johnny Williams III

Adam: And I'm Adam Hobbs

Molly: And We want to share a play with you that does not get enough attention.

Johnny: A play that deals with themes of colonialism, religion, and the contentious relationships of faith and conversion.

Adam: A short play that has heart and music laced through every scene, but also a play that interrogates religion:

Molly: A play that believe it or not was written by a 17th century Catholic Nun

Johnny: And that play is *Loa to the Divine Narcissus*.

Adam: The first question that I would like to ask the group is what drew each of us to this play?

Molly: I'll go first! Sor Juana is an incredible woman, writer and ella es Mexicana! She did so much for her people,

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her community and what better way to celebrate her legacy by making a podcast about one of her plays? What about you Johnny?

Johnny: Truthfully, I was shook by the fact that this was written by a catholic nun, then after reading and re:reading it I had to check again to make sure it was because some of the concepts do not exactly praise christianity and I think that makes Sor Juana all the more rad for writing it. Adam, why did you choose Loa?

Adam: I was really drawn to the very real and honest way that this story looks at colonization, especially in its use of allegory and its look at the way religion has played such a large role in colonization. So to get us started we're going to give a little introduction to the play. We're gonna set the scene for you with a short summary:

Loa opens on the characters America and Occident both in traditional Aztec garb performing a dance called the tocotín. The characters Religion and Zeal enter and begin to work to convert the Aztec people to Christianity. Religion explains the eucharist and then proceeds to propose an allegory play that will help her better explain the eucharist. America, in the play, represents An Aztec Woman. Occident represents An Aztec Man. Music represents another member of the Aztec community and is used to repeat the worship text. Religion represents a Spanish woman Zeal represents a Spanish military captain. To further introduce us to the play we are going to look at some terms and some history for you guys.

What is Postcolonialism?: A theoretical approach in various disciplines that is concerned with the lasting cultural and social impact of colonialism. (OED)

Now I'm going to pass it on to Molly who is going to give us some history of New Spain and how it relates to this play.

Molly: Yes so un poquito, just a little bit, The main conflict in Loa is between the characters, America, Occident and Music, they represent the Aztec Empire and Religion and Zeal represent New Spain. Aztec empires is one of the first empires in what is now present day Mexico and it was this ancient civilization: The Aztec Empire. In the year 1519, Spanish ships landed on the coast of Mexico and although they had been colonizing, enslaving and converting people in other parts of Central America this was the first time that the Aztec empire was introduced to the conquistadors. The leader of this violent Spanish army was Hernan Cortes. At first the Spanish army was received with open arms by the Aztecs, and the king of the empire, King Moctezuma, welcomed him. Although the courting was at first relatively peaceful the conquistadors showed their true colors and war ensued. After the fall of the Aztec empire, Cortes named the territory New Spain. The Aztecs were also polytheistic and although they worshiped many gods the one that was used frequently was Xipe Totec: Who was the god of the seeds, a god that is never seen but mentioned frequently in this play.

Johnny: This play does deal with that religion. This is the key element in this play and it's evaluated in Loa to the Divine Narcissus quite often. Specifically the attempted conversion of the polytheistic characters of America and Occident by the Monotheistic characters of Zeal and Religion. Sor Juana living in Mexico during this point in history where the tension between cultures and religions were so fraught which allowed Sor Juana to comment on these topics in a very potent and meaningful way. Religion says in Act 1 Scene 2, "invite them, in peace and love, to receive the truth of my cult" The word and choice of cult as well as the deliberate description of conversion were

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chosen carefully and it creates a truly powerful moment in the play. Sor Juana was well respected but because of criticisms like these, she was also seen as a threat. The Aztec people were forced into other cults because their faith was seen as a sin. This makes me wonder if Sor Juana was ever afraid to tell her stories, but considering in her last act of defiance she signed her name as I, Worst of All in her own blood... I doubt that she has a lot of fear in those moments. Now let's take a look at the history of this play as its productions ensued from the beginning to where it is today.

Molly: As far as production history goes... There is not a lot out there. In our dramaturgy class this semester our group had some trouble finding past productions of *Loa*. As we've mentioned before, this play is short and *Loa* is a play with specific casting requirements, America, Occident and Music and other minor characters that play other indigenous people must be played by Latine people. It has to happen, and so I think whether it's the length or people did not find the casting requirements it's always been scattered. *Loa to the Divine Narcissus* is also an allegorical play. Which is a play with hidden meanings aimed at political or moral significance. Allegorical plays typically have symbolic figures or the personification of abstract concepts.

Johnny: Like Music or Religion being a character but also main themes within this play. *Loa* is short because it was an introduction to a larger piece which is called an AutoSacramental. These plays were presented at the feast of Corpus Christi to celebrate the mystery of the Eucharist.

Adam: The term “*Loa*” by definition is a short theatrical piece, and *Divine Narcissus* would have been the auto sacramental. Which would make the literal translation of the title “the short play that opened before *Divine Narcissus*.”

Molly: *Loa to the Divine Narcissus* was first published in 1689. This was in response to the Spanish colonization of New Spain, an area that, as I had mentioned before, is now Mexico. With the colonization also came the efforts to convert inhabitants to Christianity. These concepts are significantly covered by the relationships displayed in *Loa*.

Johnny: *Loa* was a piece dealing with the dramas and anxieties of the time it was written in; however, there are few records to show many performances after its introduction onto the stage. Now currently we were able to find Paper Chairs Theatre Company staged *Loa to the Divine Narcissus* in June of 2019, Some educational performances have been mounted like the 2003 The Evergreen State College's production and the 2012 production by the University of Miami.

Adam: In both educational situations something worth noting is that they were both staged readings. In fact, full productions of *Loa to the Divine Narcissus* are so rare that we were able to find one to note.

Molly: So to sum up the production history there is not a lot. But what does this lead us to consider about the play? To start with, a play like *Loa* has so many ideas and concepts that are worth exploring. Often these staged readings are set in the specific period that Sor Juana intended but the ideas of religion, war, oppression and miscommunication are still very modern concepts.

Johnny: *Loa* deserves more attention in the same way that the struggles and hardships of the colonized deserve to

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be recognized. Sor Juana wrote the story in a way that was critical of christianity and dealt with concerns about religious intervention: Concepts that are all too relevant today.

Adam: Like many works that were not done by white cis gender men in England, this play has not been given its rightful time to shine and be analyzed as the text that it is. One of importance, one of great opportunity, and one that start conversations about issues we are experiencing today.

Molly : Another really great thing about it is that it is very accessible for a variety of audiences. The language in *Loa* is not overly complex or difficult to understand. So less intimidating.

Johnny: Exactly so The concepts that *Loa* deals with are deeply rooted in a dark societal and religious conflict, but due to the length and language the play is accessible and not overly difficult to produce.

Adam: The play runs around 30 minutes (depending on how long the fight and dance sequences are). Though she be little, she is mighty. The language is poetic and the vocabulary is creative. The use of terms like “cult” are mentioned throughout the play in a positive and a negative manner, bringing a critical understanding of religion in this play.

Johnny: Any season dealing with colonization would be fruitful to incorporate *Loa* to the Divine Narcissus as a play of its own in the season. Too often *Loa* is just an introduction to larger works as it was originally written and not valued for the larger work it does on its own.

Adam: Now that we know about the show’s production history and the summary of the show we are going to move into looking a little at Sor Juana and specifically looking at works related to her that give us a little bit of context of who she was and how that can connect us to this play. So Johnny if you want to start us off.

Johnny: Perfect. For my related source I decided to look at *You Foolish Men* by Sor Juana. This was the poem that truly changed Sor Juana and her career. The poem criticizes men for their, “censure is unfair; one you blame for cruelty the other for being easy.” Sor Juana deals with the concept of a double standard, an impossible solution. For Sor Juana, men cannot have women how they want them, and they blame women for not making it to their standards; however, they are not willing to adapt the standards. In the same regard in *Loa*, there is a strong double standard being presented by Zeal and Religion. I feel like Zeal and Religion take on the two conflicting ideas of conversion: Zeal with force, and Religion with coercion. Towards the end of the poem Sor Juana asks men to, “leave off their wooing” which created an interesting response by many men. Men started proposing to Sor Juana due to the success of this poem, thinking that she would be a smart choice to pursue. But unsurprisingly that was not the case. In fact Sor Juana did the most logical thing to continue her education while being able to safely avoid the advances of these men: She became a nun. Where she continued to criticize the powers of conversion. The conversion began in poems like *You Foolish Men* and continues in *Loa* to the Divine Narcissus.

Adam: So I looked at an excerpt from the play *The Sins of Sor Juana* by Karen Zacarías which is a play inspired by the life of Sor Juana. The play is mostly about her journey becoming a writer and her life as a nun. I specifically looked at the opening scene which involved Sor Juana convincing a Novice named Maria to take a letter she wrote to a rider to have it delivered to the city. Maria worries that Sor Juana is going to get herself in trouble, but Sor

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Juana is determined and will risk the trouble for the sake of getting her opinion and writing out. The interesting way that this connects to *Loa* is that *Loa* was a play commissioned by the Catholic church but Sor Juana still used it as a commentary on the flaws in the Catholic church and used it to express her own thoughts and opinions. We can see in her life and her writing that she worked on changing the flawed and harmful effects of Religion from within the system itself.

Molly: Thank you Adam. I decided to take a look at Sor Juana's life as represented through different adaptations from film and television. The first adaptation is a netflix miniseries called *Juana Ines* created by Patricia Arriaga Jordán. This seven episode series dives into the beginnings of Sor Juana's life up until her death from as a blooming writer to a cloistered nun. The show also explores her relationship with women. The netflix description for the show is this (Quote) "Juana Inés de la Cruz, a powerful feminist nun involved in a forbidden love affair with a woman, faces oppression in 17th-century Mexico. (Unquote) It's a pretty good hook. The next adaptation is the film *I, the Worst of All* by María Luisa Bemberg. This is actually an Argentinian film that was made in 1990 and as of right now it is the only fictionalized film that has been made about her life. The film is based on the book, *Sor Juana: Or, the Traps of Faith* by the famous Mexican writer and novelist Octavio Paz. The film deals with Sor Juana's life during her time in the convent and the political and religious forces that tried to silence her. In more ways than one. The film also focuses on the relationships between women, religion and what it means to follow non-traditional beliefs and practices. We see these ideas in *Loa* from the representation of America and Occident to those characters and how they question the practices and logic of Zeal and Religion.

Johnny: Truthfully! So you can see how all these different works that we talked about relate back to *Loa* and the concepts that *Loa* deals with so effectively. Now to take all these ideas and put them into *Loa* we are going to take a look at a brief scene excerpt from *Loa* and see how those themes play out as we go through the scene. Adam is going to be playing Music and Occident, Molly is going to be playing America and I am going to be playing Religion. So let's take a brief look and keep the ideas and concepts we talked about through the podcast in mind.

Music (Adam and Molly)

In festive pageantry

come worship and revere the great God of Seeds!

(ZEAL and RELIGION approach.)

Religion (Johnny)

Oh, most powerful Occident,

beautiful, rich America,

who live impoverished amid

these prodigal bounties of wealth:

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put aside this blasphemous cult
 incited by Satan himself.
 Open your eyes! And now follow
 my true belief, the one true faith,
 presented by my Christian love.

Occident (Adam)

Who are they, what strangers are these
 I see before me? Oh heavens,
 why do they wish to impede the
 course of my joys and happiness?

America (Molly)

What nations unheard of and strange
 wish to counter the primacy
 of my most ancient rule and sway?

Occident (Adam)

Oh you, strange and foreign beauty,
 oh you, a lovely rare pilgrim!
 Tell me who you are and why you
 come to trouble my jubilation.

Religion (Johnny)

I am the Christian Religion,
 and I shall endeavor to turn
 your provinces to my worship.

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Occident (Adam)

A fine avowal you demand!

America (Molly)

A fine lunacy you intend!

Occident (Adam)

What you contrive, impossible!

America (Molly)

No doubt she is mad; just leave her,

and let our worship continue!

Occident, America, and Music

Adam: In festive pageantry,

come worship and revere the great God of Seeds!

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Adam, Molly and Johnny:

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