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# A Poet(*h*)ics of Intercultural Dissonance:

Dynamics of Perception in Elizabeth Bishop's Braz*z*ilian Texts

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## Abstract

The central hypothesis of this study is that Elizabeth Bishop's poetics of culture shock and alterity (of the other and of the self) elaborates on an expansive perception of *dissonance*, which shifts, as in 20<sup>th</sup>-century music theory, from an antithesis—to be resolved or fixed—to an ethical problematization of the very terms on which antithetical thought reduces experiential reality. Chapter 1 contextualizes this hypothesis against the imperialist and aestheticist strains under which Bishop's authorial image has gained prominence in the canon of Anglo-American literature. Chapter 2 consolidates and expands on my interdisciplinary premises, inter-relating a good portion of Bishop's theoretical-critical essays, which argue for nonlinear composition, with Arnold Schönberg's conceptualization of emancipatory dissonance in atonality. From this perspective, chapter 3 shows how Bishop's mappings of otherness go against the grain of their own aestheticist models of transculturation and authenticity by refusing either to resolve otherness (dissonance) into sameness (consonance), or to dissolve intercultural conflict altogether by fixing otherness into an antithetical, primitivized, 'timeless past' (*sic*). Chapter 4 examines conflicting layers of meaning within the poetic persona's strategies to produce effects of resolution or authorial control over the dissonant voices disturbing the surface order of her texts. Chapter 5 situates Bishop within the political context of mainstream confessional poetry, relating her poetics of culture shock with the refusal of regulatory practices of identity that ostracize dissonance and difference to the monolithic categories of antithesis and madness—exoticism at best. Chapter 6 focuses on the textual crisis (critique) of gender and class identity in Bishop to argue that her Brazilian corpus is invaluable precisely because the author fails, and disturbingly so, to produce mastery over her dissonant perceptions of reality. Thus I argue for an irreducible politics or ethics of reading that refuses to reduce the intercultural text to solipsistic discourses by which even so-called democratic acts of freedom covertly converge with totalitarian dynamics.

## Resumo

A presente pesquisa parte da hipótese central de que a poética de choque cultural e alteridade (do outro e do eu) em Elizabeth Bishop elabora uma percepção expansiva de *dissonância*, cuja concepção enquanto antítese—a ser resolvida ou *fixada* (mapeada, consertada, sanada)—entra em crise, assim como na teoria musical do século 20, problematizando os próprios termos através dos quais o pensamento antitético reduz a realidade experiencial. O capítulo 1 contextualiza essa hipótese em meio às tensões imperialistas e esteticistas sob as quais a imagem autoral de Bishop ganhou proeminência no cânone da literatura anglo-americana. O capítulo 2 consolida e expande minhas premissas interdisciplinares, demonstrando inter-relações entre os textos teórico-críticos de Bishop, que criticam a concepção linear do tempo narrativo em autores modernistas, e a concepção de ‘dissonância emancipatória’ ou atonal elaborada por Arnold Schönberg. A partir dessa perspectiva, o capítulo 3 demonstra como os mapeamentos de alteridade (dissonância) cultural feitos por Bishop no Brasil desafiam seus próprios modelos esteticistas de representação (especificamente, os modelos de transculturalismo e autenticismo), ao se recusarem a resolver a alteridade na uniformidade (consonância), ou mesmo a dissolver seus conflitos, *fixando* a alteridade num ‘passado atemporal’ (*sic*), antitético, primitivizado. O capítulo 4 examina camadas conflitantes de significação submersas por estratégias autorais para produzir efeitos de controle ou resolução sobre as vozes dissonantes que perturbam a ordem superficial do texto intercultural. O capítulo 5 situa Bishop no contexto político da poesia dominante (confessional) de sua época, relacionando sua poética de choque cultural com sua recusa de políticas reguladoras de identidade, em que a dissonância e a diferença são banidas às categorias monolíticas da antítese e da loucura—em sua versão mais amena, do exotismo. O capítulo 6 contextualiza a crise (a crítica) textual de consciência social e de gênero em Bishop para demonstrar que seu corpus brasileiro é valioso justamente porque a autora fracassa, e de modo perturbador,



em realizar seu projeto de produzir resolução sobre suas percepções dissonantes da realidade. Nesse sentido, minha argumentação é por uma política irreduzível ou ética de leitura que recusa reduzir o texto intercultural de Bishop a discursos solipsistas, pelos quais até mesmo atos aparentemente democráticos convergem dissimuladamente com dinâmicas totalitárias.

For my parents,  
Geraldo e Neuza,  
with joy in gratitude

and for my siblings,  
Peter, Rita, Andy, and Gerry,  
to our intercultural rides

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[W]e are not looking for a perfect analysis, but we are looking for the mark of vulnerability which makes a great text not an authority generating a perfect narrative, but our own companion, as it were, so we can share our own vulnerabilities with those texts and move.

[T]he pleasure in cognitive victories, if understood as symptomatic, can be enabling rather than disabling. And if it is disabling, it is not a disablement that one should shy away from.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*

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### Key to Abbreviations

Harvard	Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Princeton	Princeton University Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ
Rosenbach	Rosenbach Museum Library, Philadelphia, PA
Texas	Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX
Vassar	Vassar College Library, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY

### Note on the Text

Elizabeth Bishop's poems (identified by title in the text and transcribed in the Appendix) are quoted from her *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983). Her watercolors reproduced here are from her *Exchanging Hats: Paintings*. Edited and introduced by William Benton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996). In transcribing Bishop's manuscript materials—poetry and prose drafts, critical essays, letters and notebook annotations—, I have incorporated her spelling and punctuation, parenthetical remarks and crossed-out sections (~~xyz~~), including mistakes and idiosyncrasies. Sections that relied on inferences of spelling and punctuation for their transcription are indicated within braces: {abc}. Sections of illegible handwriting are indicated by a question mark within braces: {?}. My syntactic adaptations of these quotations are indicated within brackets: [ ]. The same applies to other writers' texts transcribed here for explanatory, comparative or illustrational purposes.

## Foreword

I had never read Elizabeth Bishop when I set out to delimit the topic of this dissertation. My purpose was not to do research in Bishop studies, but in one telling instance of intercultural literature. I wanted to explore the interplay between two different conceptions of musical dissonance as a useful, significant perspective from which to read intercultural texts, and I was eager to find out how this perspective might branch out and change when reconsidered closely, in specific contexts. However, I had yet to find a literary corpus that would activate this research.

Bishop's long residency in Brazil seemed to provide a pertinent corpus for my purposes. For at least one reason, which was confirmed throughout the research process: since Bishop was a resident rather than a mere tourist in a foreign country, her writings were more likely to challenge easy resolutions of intercultural conflict than those found in travel writings by sojourners. Moreover, her texts seemed challenging for another reason: several Brazilian writers (for example, Monteiro Lobato, Érico Veríssimo, Sousândrade, Ignácio de Loyola Brandão, Gilberto Freyre) have taken up residency in the U.S., and incorporated Anglo-American perspectives, but not so the other way around. In this regard alone, her Braz/silian corpus exemplifies an atypical instance in North and South American literary relations, one that de-naturalizes intercultural hierarchy even while reproducing it from within the Anglo-American literary establishment Bishop came to represent in Brazil—for her U.S. readership, as her letters show. When I learned that Bishop had taken up residency in Brazil unexpectedly, her writings became personally intriguing to me for the reason that I had also, though at a much earlier age, landed and remained in Braz/sil in ways that were unexpected to me, and increasingly significant. So I decided to study Bishop's writings before I ever read them.

My very first readings of poetry and prose by this writer, however, immediately

frustrated my expectations that her Brazilian texts might potentialize dissonance as a valid jumping-off point for an exchange between literary texts and theory. They seemed too self-righteous of their implicit position overseeing the intercultural site. I could not see how their condescending tone could possibly lend itself to a more complex and flexible perception of the dynamics of intercultural conflict and relationality. I soon came to acknowledge my obvious mistake: I had presumed that in simply turning to such a writer I would find a literary corpus that would explore in the poetic field some of the concerns of my own bicultural experience. But my mistake was double. To my surprise, the more I read Bishop over and over again, without those expectations, the more self-challenging, uncertain, and restless I found her poetic persona(s) to be. Their self-righteous tones, far from resolvable, disturbed me with dissonances where I least expected them. Furthermore, with a CAPES-FULBRIGHT grant allowing for research in Elizabeth Bishop archives, I read in manuscripts that her thoughts and essays on timing in literary composition are interwoven with her class annotations, of the same period, on Schönberg's conceptions of musical dissonance, precisely those I had been working on.

Of course the validity of the conceptualization of dissonance as a perspective on Bishop's writings should not be dismissed had she not thought of it herself. Although intentionality does play an important role in the construction of a writer's *personae* and texts, this role is often contradictory and never containable within any one narrative. (In fact, it cannot even be asserted that Bishop *intended* to develop an interdisciplinary poetics.)<sup>1</sup> As poststructuralist theories have shown, assumptions by which texts can be fit into a kind of "recovery" of some essential purity of meaning, consonant with the author's presumed intentions, motivations, and ends, cannot hold water. In this light, any study of Bishop's

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<sup>1</sup> In her essay "It All Depends," in response to John Ciardi's questions for his anthology of mid-century U.S. poets, Bishop wrote that she "do[es] not understand the question about the function of overtone" (1950: 267), dismissing the question at that.

poetic projects, the forces interacting within and between them—even any author’s own *autobiography*—can best be understood as what Jacques Derrida has called an *otobiography*, or the displacement of the presumed events of an author’s life into the constantly changing perceptions of the *otos*, i.e., the ear as perceiving organ. As Rodolphe Gasché puts it,

[biography is] not to be in any way confused with the so-called life of the author, with the corpus of empirical accidents making up the life of an empirically real person. . . . The biographical is thus that internal border of work and life, a border on which texts are engendered. The status of the text—if it has one—is such that it derives from neither the one nor the other, from neither the inside nor the outside. (Gasché 1985: 41)

In short, it is not *authorial intentionality*, but rather the very *potentiality* of the text to disturb the *author-ity* of the author, which has interested me in this study. Nevertheless, the manuscript findings that point to Bishop’s thoughts on writing and music composition (see chapter 2) do strengthen my hypothesis that her texts are potentialized and problematized by the 20<sup>th</sup> century shift in musical conceptions of dissonance. In fact, those findings extend my preliminary hypothesis further, as they derive from this research an *otobiography* listening to a poetic project that has remained unheard under the various artistic intentions Bishop signaled explicitly through statements in interviews and letters. More tellingly, they suggest that her intercultural texts can be understood as an attempt to *prove*<sup>2</sup> an early-sketched theory of nonlinear composition, which in her college essays she outlined on the terms of “[her] own idea of the sustained *contradictory* time-pattern” (“Time’s Andromedas” 105, qtd. emphasis). This poetics of dissonance, with its ethical implications, is what the present study has become most substantially involved in.

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<sup>2</sup> My choice of this word comes from Bishop’s comment that Gertrude Stein “would like to convey . . . what amounts to Henri Bergson’s theory of ‘continual creation’ . . . but although Miss Stein believes in this theory, her characters certainly do not *prove* it” (“Time’s Andromedas” 116, my emphasis).

[Western] culture is sufficiently logical to criticize the paternalistic despotism of institutions, thinkers and subcultures, but perhaps not logical enough to make clear to what extent the despotic rule is inherent in any kind of discourse that is not rooted in listening.

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*

The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in a chord. They then cease to exist separately. On the other hand, discord exaggerates the separation between its elements. These propositions are stated in a variety of terms.

Wallace Stevens, *Letters*

. . . being a digression not the link in the argument,  
a new direction, an offshoot, the limb going on elsewhere,  
and liking that error, a feeling of being capable *because* an error,  
of being wrong perhaps altogether wrong a piece from another set  
stripped of position stripped of true function  
and loving that error, loving that filial form, that break from perfection  
where the complex mechanism fails, where the stranger appears in the clearing,  
out of nowhere and uncalled for, out of nowhere to share the day.

Jorie Graham, "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them"

On the other hand, I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, [it] resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixed.

Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

## Com-positional Dissonance and the Threat from the Outside

Noise is less disturbing when it is also seen; ideally, from a corner window. The eye is, after all, more commanding than the ear.

Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*

They spread across a wide swath of sky, each rather alone, and at first their wings seemed all to be working perfectly together. But by watching one bird, then another, I saw that some flew a little slower than others, some were trying to get ahead and some flew at an individual rubato; each seemed a variation, and yet altogether my eyes were deceived into thinking them perfectly precise and regular. I watched closely the spaces between the birds . . . the interspaces too, catching up and continuing the motion of the wings in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does—not a blankness but a space as musical as all the sound.

Elizabeth Bishop, “Time’s Andromedas”

### 1.1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

It is no mere “casualty,” as is said of those whose life has been taken by war,<sup>3</sup> that the corpus of the poet Elizabeth Bishop has been shaped into the canon of Anglo-American literature precisely by the tenet that she is a painterly writer.<sup>4</sup> Nor is it incidental or natural that her meticulous visual observation, epitomized in brimful snapshot depictions of her travel experience, has been understood to reflect and legitimize the authority of her moral vision.<sup>5</sup> Such ideological subscriptions to the discourse of the poet’s mastery of vision over “the edge of the unknown”—as Brazil is still referred to by some Bishop scholars today—are upshots

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop ends her essay “It All Depends” with the following sentence: “This does not mean that I am opposed to all close analysis and criticism. But I am opposed to making poetry monstrous or boring and proceeding to talk the very life out of it” (1950: 267).

<sup>4</sup> Bishop said she was flattered by Meyer Shapiro’s remark in 1942 or 1943 that “She writes poems with a painter’s eye” (see Brown 1996: 11). As to critical praise in writing for Bishop’s translations of the visual, perhaps the first among several occurrences came from Lloyd Frankenburg’s review of *North & South* (see Frankenburg 1946); three years later Frankenburg himself pointed out that Bishop’s readers are often deceived by surface description into missing the underlying subjects and concerns of the poems (see Frankenburg 1949).

<sup>5</sup> C. K. Doreski, for example, singles out the superiority of Bishop’s “Crusoe at Home”—the poem “in the canon that embodies the entire complexity of her experience and vision”—on the grounds of its “moral purpose” (1993: 126-31).

of colonialist discourses of enlightenment and expansionism that reify what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “Imperial Eye”: the *I* that gazes over the *other* in travel literature.<sup>6</sup>

A safe position for the cultured writer above the framing of an objectified reality (a lavishing nature and a savage people): this is the cliché to which the complex interrelations between writing and painting often seem reduced in the canonization of Anglo-American literature.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Bishop’s *Brazilian writings*,<sup>8</sup> the critical emphasis on such comparable features as pictorial description and detached observation on the surface of what is by far a much more complex and dynamic set of resources within and between the arts has often functioned to frame and inoculate the ethical conflicts instigated by her texts.

Indeed, Bishop has been most readily praised for her rigorous descriptive skills, as if allowing for language itself to point to the unsayable, to portray or map the unknown (yet observable world)—even, it has been said, “in disdain toward its social forces”.<sup>9</sup> And whereas some scholarship has disdained her Brazilian poems as being inferior<sup>10</sup> to her Anglo-

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<sup>6</sup> I refer to Jacques Lacan’s conception of the Other: “the beyond in which the recognition of desire is bound up with the desire for recognition . . . the locus from which the question of [the subject’s] existence may be presented to him” (1977: 172; 194).

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of the discourse of exoticism in pictorial representations of the tropics, see Stepan 2001.

<sup>8</sup> The comical disturbance often caused by the term “Brazilian writings,” when referring to texts authored by Bishop, is imbricated in a colonial discourse anxious to dismiss any suggestion that she might have been “going native” through her Brazilian life and experience. My use of the term by no means dismisses the fact that Bishop was not Brazilian, nor that she wrote from the standpoint of her Anglo-American cultural background, on what she called “the front” or the “boundaries” of the text (“Gerard Manley Hopkins” 6-7). I use it emphatically to distinguish these writings from “Brazil writings”—i.e. “writings *about* Brazil” (rather than *inscribed* or *affected by* Brazil), produced by a supposedly detached observer.

<sup>9</sup> For Bonnie Costello, Bishop immersed herself “in the observable world, sometimes in disdain toward its social forces, but with delight in its natural beauty” (1991: 9).

<sup>10</sup> For example: Doreski 1993: 102-125. Also, both Helen Vendler and Silviano Santiago, in important asides during their keynote speeches delivered in Ouro Preto, May 17-20, 1999, at “The Art of Elizabeth Bishop: An International Conference and *Celebração* in Brazil,” pronounced the inferiority of Bishop’s Brazilian poems within her overall corpus. Debate on the issue of the ethical value of these poems, and of Santiago’s attack on imperialist criticism of Bishop (rather than on critics), was silenced among Anglo-



American corpus, it has done so only insofar as it has managed to sustain the myth of origins as to the author's cultural framework ("American," New English? Canadian, Nova Scotian?), often eliding its hierarchical conflicts with her life and work in the foreign reality (Brazil? the U.S.?) she literally (not merely literarily) *breathed*.

In this sense, much criticism (and I do not refer solely to Anglo-American criticism) has valued Bishop's *command* of spatial representation over her travel writings, often with the effect of projecting onto Bishop's foreign culture the incompatibility it shares with the cultural framework that the poet commands with greater familiarity and authority. The value of her Brazilian corpus is often appropriated, therefore, by a discourse exalting the purported skill (or lack thereof)<sup>11</sup> of the author to command or control the dissonant intercultural text. By the same token, the Brazilian life and experience that marks Bishop's writings has been a source of anxiety for criticism which systematically evades their power to challenge her mastery of the text, reducing the foreign site to a source of raw material benefiting from the writer's polished culture: an exotic landscape being captured and tamed—and then, as in an industrial line, being framed and packaged to fit the discourse of exoticism and the demands of its consumers on the global market. No wonder what ensues is the soaring appreciation of the Brazilian *landscape* in Bishop's Brazilian poems—and of the poems themselves, if only

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American and Brazilian scholars alike, as if politely disturbed by issues of intercultural conflict. Furthermore, the debate was obliterated by questions of authorial intentionality in criticism. Santiago's point, however, as I understand it, is not that Bishop could not interact with Brazilian culture, but that her imperialist attitude toward Brazil alienated her from engaging the cultural issues in "The Burglar of Babylon" and "Manuelzinho," for example, as consistently as they were engaged by such Brazilian writers as João Cabral de Melo Neto and Monteiro Lobato. My view is that what her texts do engage are crises in the imperialist representations of these issues.

<sup>11</sup> Intercultural conflict is often evaded through a facile escapism that assumes the sheer impossibility of heterogeneous cultural intercourse. In this authenticist vein, Doreski, for example, argues that Bishop's "domestic [poems demonstrate her] consummate skill with familiar material; while comparing such fully realized works with even her best Brazil poems illustrates her unease with situations in which landscape, character, and language do not, for her, fully cohere" (1993: 125).

for their ethnographic, if not altruistic deed—, as it is finally advanced and elevated, as if upgraded, translated into the language of the global market, in the masterful hands of the humanitarian and cosmopolitan author.

This is to say, without exaggeration, that Bishop's Brazilian texts have been a locus for restaging a major motif that pervades the imperialist tradition of travel literature: the xenophobic narrative of the mythical author's exile, whose heroic and lone quest to survive the hostility of the foreign experience is consummated through an undeviating bond with the presumably higher art and language of her original culture.<sup>12</sup> Though valuing Bishop's poetry for her firm objectivity and self-restraint, thus emphasizing high modernist over romantic ideals of art, readings that sever Bishop from the foreign culture and text—even from her own Brazilian texts—do not cease to construct an aura around the author, often dissociating her writings (and redeeming them) from historical contingencies.

It is not surprising that Bishop's canonization should shape her into the role of the *ubiquitous* and *timeless* author—in other words, that she should be assigned a mythical self: one to “create oneself by one's own means, to become fundamentally different and to attain a state free of all spatial and temporal restrictions” (Bilen 1992: 865). The discourse of insulated security, stability, and freedom, on which canonization relies, has long situated poetry, alongside music and silence, as the *consonance* of “the harmony of the spheres”—in other words, as self-presence, or an original and absolute signified that shows itself through the artist's sublime transcendence of language, violence, and even time. It is as if there should

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<sup>12</sup> Doeski grounds the inferiority of Bishop's foreign poems in the fact that they were “written by a poet who never psychologically braved the ghetto. . . . For her to be successful, she must place her intelligence in control; her voice, with all its elegance and euphony, must be the voice of the poem” (1993: 123). She also grounds their inferiority in racial, social, and cultural difference: Bishop “was not very successful in empathizing with people of distinctly different ethnic or racial backgrounds, and the voices and personae derived from her observations of the inhabitants of Brazil, for example, are not always convincing or effective,” [since] “English-language poetry offers no adequate model for empathizing with people so distinct from herself in culture and class background” (xii; 107).

be revealed a realm apart, safely inoculated from historical contingencies. Representing an ideal consciousness on some linear trajectory of human progression, the “cultured” author is supposed to encounter *nature*, not another culture; and this encounter is supposed to be without conflicts in the self, only in the other: the author is presumed to embody a superior truth, elicited by a morally attractive aesthetic, and contrasted against the chaos and remoteness of nature, located someplace in a lingering time: a past that is presumably overcome by the Anglo-American self (living and speaking “here,” and “now”), and at the same time inaccessible to the other (who is thus portrayed “there” and “then,” lost in the past), who still begs a better, if only imaginary, future. Such a linear notion of time implies that cultural homogenization is no more than most of the globe’s need to “catch up” with history (read global competition) from lagging positions in a primitive past—or (as *their* need) *not* to catch up. From this sovereign vantagepoint, Bishop’s poetry of exile—her *Imperial I* (eye) displaying an Emersonian self-reliance—is like an “envoi,” shuttling between “here” and “there,” like an innocent, self-righteous if not disinterested missionary. And such a poetry of exile can only be organically coherent, morally true, and aesthetically free—concepts which, seeking to sidestep conflict, have been under stress for decades now.

Epitomized in different periods by such travel writers as Defoe, Humboldt, Darwin and Lévi-Strauss, the imperialist trope of the mythical author—whether as naturalist, cartographer, ethnographer, or cultural interpreter—thus lingers on. In Bishop’s case, covering the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been re-enacted by scholarship that, on the grounds of authorial origins and intercultural hierarchies, grants import to the Brazilian perspectives in Bishop’s texts, but only by producing as *ethnical* the *ethical*<sup>13</sup> conflicts that

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<sup>13</sup> I refer to the notion of *ethics* glossed by Paul de Man as “the structural interference of two distinct value systems” (1979: 205); Geoffrey Harpham articulates *ethics* with *undecidability*: “Decisions achieved without a passage through what Derrida would call undecidability and what a more traditional account would

taint the canonical clout of her corpus, thus produced as unmarked. The resulting mythical and nationalist aura around Bishop provides the sanctioned pre-text for *author-izing* intercultural dominance:<sup>14</sup> in a move typical of canonization, the ethical force of her texts is overshadowed by the function of aestheticizing the ‘cultural encounter’<sup>15</sup> in order to domesticate rather than engage its historical, discursive, and ethical conflicts.

Such an aestheticist perspective, by which Bishop has been canonized, assumes that she produced, through her efforts of imagination, readjustments of reality under the ideal freedom of a self-reliant *I*.<sup>16</sup> It assumes, for example, that her precision of language reached the point of safeguarding her autonomy, as if minute description—which marks the literatures of travel, ethnography, and exoticism, consolidating the centrality of an authorial gaze—

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call the circumstance of free choice represent mere blindness and brutality. Ethics . . . sustains an august reticence, a principled irresolution . . .” (1995 [1990]: 397-98).

Daphne Patai underlines the dangers of reductionist conceptions by which *ethics* is conceived as antithetical to the notions of *free will* and *absolute truth* naturalized by master narratives. Such a conception has come to regard ethics as either the curtailment of the self—as in the phrases “interfere[nce] with the autonomy of the individual . . . dogma . . . inquisition . . . repression” (1994: 138)—or, alternately, as the liberalist naturalization of inequality instead. In the latter case, so-called “ethical” resolutions are taken for granted as “universally correct” to the detriment of the system of values of the other—precisely what ethics, in its non-liberalist, non-ethnocentric or non-solipsistic conception, is *not* all about.

<sup>14</sup> As pointed out by José Ortega y Gasset, “Author derives from *auctor*, he who augments. It was the title Rome bestowed upon her generals when they had conquered new territory for the City” (1956 [1925]: 19).

<sup>15</sup> I use quotes to deflect the frequent connotation of this term, often used to evade intercultural conflict by presuming a fictitious reconciliation or exchange between historically central and peripheral cultures, as if on equal or consensual terms.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in proposing the “circus-tent” as a metaphor for an ongoing integration of reality and imagination, Bonnie Costello regards Bishop’s poetics of “constant readjustment” as one of compensatory resolution rather than conceptual suspension:

Within her folding and adjustable “circus tent” [the critic’s metaphor for Bishop’s integration of reality and imagination] the world appears fragmented and unresolved. . . . *Geography III* continues the nostalgic dream of home but provides alternative satisfactions: moments of plenitude in flux, of imaginative habitation in the wilderness . . . Autonomy and completeness are achieved by closing the world out. As attracted as Bishop is to this dream, she awakens

*mastered* rather than *set off* ethical conflicts in her texts. Conflict in Bishop has thus often been read as being aesthetically subdued by the poet's imaginative skills; by the same token, when it has proven untamable in her texts, it has been systematically pathologized as pertaining to an essentially remote, chaotic, exotic reality, a culture thus emphatically *antithetical* to her own. If this binary systematization amounts to a tautological presumption (in that it anticipates the suppression of textual conflicts under the poet's familiar cultural framework), it also conveys the disturbing *anxiety* shared between much of Bishop criticism and her writings, pre-occupied in stalling the knowledge that no such suppression ever holds water after all.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, the purpose of the present study is to demonstrate that what has been sanctioned as Bishop's painterly eye in her Brazilian writings—her mastery of vision over the travel scenes she depicted, and her masterful gaze over others—is an issue that remains unsettled among the conflicts instigated by their intercultural context. Indeed, her writings about her Braz/silian life and experience are often marked by textual moments in which the deeply-rooted cultural categories she uses to make sense of the foreign culture prove to be insufficient. These are textual moments of irresolution, crisis, and silence, in which the poet's original cultural paradigms must give way to an expansion of meaning capable of producing a more satisfactory account of the reality she is experiencing as a writer. My central hypothesis is that these textual moments of culture shock can be understood in terms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shift in musical conceptions of dissonance.

## 1.2. CULTURE SHOCK

As a working definition, I will be using the term *culture shock* to mean the

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from it, as in "The Moose," to the reality of travel. But again she finds compensation in an imaginative response to the physical world. (1991: 173-74)

<sup>17</sup> Joan Copjek glosses anxiety as "that which nothing precedes, that which signals the overproximity" of nothingness (1994: 118-19).

impossibility of *fixing* (pinning down and adjusting, *correcting*) reality within a static conceptual framework of order, as a monolith. Therefore, the term is not understood here in its colloquial sense, which gives a big leap in assuming the lack of connectedness between cultures. Specifically for my purposes in this study, by *culture shock* I mean the clash between the simultaneous anxiety and resistance to produce an interpretive closure on intercultural reality or on the cultural identities constructed therein.

Though ironic, it is hardly surprising that the anxiety to produce Bishop's centrality in her Brazilian text is intensified by her long-standing stay in Brazil.<sup>18</sup> Her original cultural values are increasingly threatened by the fact that her stay no longer defines her as a sojourner passing through on her way back to an original cultural identity (a resolution of dissonance). Instead, her stay develops into *residency*, and therefore into the need to learn

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<sup>18</sup> While I am indebted to the work of several Bishop scholars, in Brazil, the U.S. and Canada alike, I would like to comment on certain problematic remarks that have had a carefree way of being reproduced, perhaps since they are couched in books that have rightly become classics of Bishop scholarship. For example, on Bishop's move to Brazil, Brett Millier writes, "That her status as a wealthy white woman put these people in some sense under her control made the situation ideal—she liked to be waited on" (1993: 243). This statement, anxious to safeguard Bishop's superior status at the root of her relationship with Brazil, crassly overlaps overtly classicist and racist discourses without any trace of ethical questioning in the critical text. More subtly, in reports on library purchases of Bishop's papers, the word "recovery," as if the material had been lost, is used exclusively for cases in which its previous owner is based in Brazil. On this tone, Lorrie Goldensohn conducts the classic victory narrative of American salvationism within Bishop studies:

Now that [Bishop's papers previously owned by the Brazilian Linda Nemer] are in American hands for the first time, the first American hands since Elizabeth's, Linda is clearly uneasy . . . Linda has not allowed me paper and pencil near the notebooks or folders, but she volunteers that she thinks that they should be in American hands. They aren't doing anybody any good in Brazil . . . I think of that box in nearby places where I can use its contents . . . Nobody seems dead when all this vibrating stuff full of passions still turns in your hands. (1992: 23-24).

There are countless other examples of this coarse discourse of *ex(r)oticized* consumerism, that arrogates nearness and remoteness according to a self-centering point of fixity whose liveliness and legitimacy feed on assuming lifelessness (death, as Goldensohn implies) elsewhere—very much like in the unethical intercultural clichés Bishop tackled obliquely in her Brazilian corpus, as I hope to show in this study.

and assimilate Brazilian perspectives.<sup>19</sup> That she resisted learning them is precisely my point.

It cannot be ignored, for example, that Bishop may have cherished clinging stubbornly to her bad Portuguese. She always wrote the word “poema” in the feminine (“uma poema”)—indeed, a word which cannot have escaped her attention as a poet. Though it could be argued that she did so to highlight or even rewrite the traditional feminization of poetry under its (male) creator, as in such poems as “Brazil, January 1, 1502” and “Crusoe in England,” her misuse of other words in Portuguese alongside her superb understanding of the cultural aspects of the language (as shows, for example, her translation of the Brazilian *The Diary of Helena Morley*)<sup>20</sup> indicates otherwise. The noun “poema” carries an irregular gender inflection, but this fact alone cannot be the reason for Bishop’s mistake. She was the kind of poet who had her Harvard students use the dictionary to “understand every individual word, even if [they] had no idea what the poem was about as a whole” (Gioia 1996 [1986]: 142), and who wrote poems whose genderization in the culture she would not have been blind to (having herself pointed out, for example, her association of Brazil with the pronoun *she*). Nor can it be ignored that Bishop’s “return” to the U.S. was a move she tried for years to avoid having to make rather than a timely decision toward cultural resolution, let alone recovery—this latter, the version that has often been taken for granted despite scholarship on the issue.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bishop lived in Brazil from 1951 to 1970; after that she still remained in the country for intermittent periods, alternating seasons between Harvard and Ouro Preto. It was only in 1974 – therefore 23 years being the span of her period of Brazilian residency – that she moved definitively back to the United States.

<sup>20</sup> While I would suggest that Lota was the principal translator of the *Diary*, even in such a case it is safe to say that Bishop studied the translation thoroughly. Bishop acknowledges her partner’s help when she writes, in the introduction to the *Diary*, “To my friend Lota de Macedo Soares, who reluctantly but conscientiously went over every word of the translation with me, not once, but several times (Morley 1957: xxxiii).

<sup>21</sup> As goes the only version, as far as I know, Bishop left Brazil for good following Lota’s death, so she stayed in Brazil only while their relationship lasted. However, Bishop moved into her house in Ouro Preto in 1969, two years after Lota’s death, with the project to continue living there. From my perspective, she cannot have lived so long in Brazil without trying deeply to meet her minimal needs of belonging t/here—even if those

Clearly, Bishop's residency in Brazil is too conflicting, and too strong a force in her texts to be trivialized by readings that reduce it to a sojourn, running over the ethical conflicts involved in her intercultural text. As Bishop's experience of residency involves bringing the other culture, produced as remote, to the center of her present experience, her long-lasting outsider status ironically decentralizes her own position in the cultural encounter. It is no wonder, then, that she is anxious to remain a guest in Brazil in and through her writings, by constructing herself as an outside observer of Brazilian culture to her readers abroad—as she puts it, “mak[ing] use of all my inside information” (from Petrópolis to U.T. & Joe, Apr 25 1961, Box 37, Vassar).

Bishop's recurring experience with shattering cultural categories is analogous to the aural perception of dissonance, as is any process by which well-accommodated value patterns are uprooted by discrepant perceptions of experiential reality. Under the pressure to master her contradictory intercultural perceptions, Bishop's Brazilian texts often com-pose dissonant visual and/or sound imagery, in what she called (in the context of Gertrude Stein's use of visual and sound perception in her writing) “a direct effort to express one sense in terms of another” (see Bishop 1933: 119). In visual terms, this is necessarily a poetics of *refraction*: the “deflection of a wave in passing obliquely from one transparent medium into a second medium in which its speed is different” (*Columbia Encyclopedia* 1995: 2295). In intercultural terms, it empowers the discrepancy between, on the one hand, dichotomies between self and other that warrant for Bishop a safe position in the encounter with alterity (her own, in the

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needs concur with the anxiety to insulate herself safely within the identity of an original cultural background. I am foregrounding this aspect of connectedness in conflict (dissonance) which has not been fully addressed in Bishop scholarship because from personal experience I have learned that one cannot stand living in a place in the expectation of leaving it in the future—not for two decades. That Bishop's is an active though conflicted residency rather than a long sojourn is evidenced by her attempts to settle down in Brazil—a project repeatedly shaken by the crises in her personal life, but which took form nevertheless: she not only purchased her house in Ouro Preto, but also invested heavily, both financially and emotionally, in the project of living there despite her loss of Lota—both before and after Lota's death.



Brazilian culture she lived in; and the foreigner's, in the cultural mindset she shared with her readers), and on the other hand, the qualities of experience that they fail to accommodate.

I refer to dichotomies such as familiar/strange, center/margin, culture/nature, male/female, see-er/seen, progressive present/primitive past, and so on, such that each binary contains a secondary term designating a position of mere *antithesis* bound to confirm the supremacy of the foremost, occupied by the author. This discrepancy empowered by a poetics of dissonance—rather, the contradictions it sustains—enacts a critique of hegemonic perceptions of intercultural conflict: antithesis is not resolved back into the centrality of the author's preliminary thesis; nor is it held as paralysis within incompatible but co-existing frames of cultural reference. Instead, Bishop's Braz/silian writings set off an expandable interplay of deferring conceptions, therefore not subjected to the reassuring demands for resolution within binary frameworks. They engage a process of meaning-making rather than the subjugation of conflict—a complexity rather than an antithesis, an expansion of perception rather than an object to be either co-opted or excludently exoticized.

Bishop does employ such dualities, interpreted by some scholars in ways that imply the reinforcement of her original cultural paradigms (see, for example, Goldensohn 1992: 233-236). My purpose, however, is to demonstrate that although the perception of dualities is explicit in her poems, the impact of their usage is in that they are double-edged, persistently exceeded *from within* the discourse defining them.<sup>22</sup> Bishop does not pretend there is a way out of the system of binary thinking and language. Her writings foreground rather than obscure the familiar discourse of antithesis. They display the illusory naturalness of its paradigms, and so they undermine their own resolutions. In other words, although Bishop does employ binary concepts in her work, they function as springboards for *exceeding* duality which I find significantly sensitizing in her writings—so that oppositions release, rather than

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<sup>22</sup> I am deeply indebted to what has by now become a consistent tradition in Bishop studies concerning her poetics of indirection or obliqueness. See at least Keller 1984, Schweik 1991 and Roman 2001.

proscribe, meaning-making processes. This tension between static and dynamic conceptions of meaning is crucial in modern literature. Jacques Derrida distinguishes them as

the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play . . . which seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile . . . [and] whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation . . . and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. *The affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center.*” (1978: 292, qtd. emphases)

This “affirmation that determines [dissonance] otherwise than as loss of [consonance],” this ambivalence in which simultaneous yet irreconcilable meanings are at play, emerges in Nietzsche’s writings as a constant deferral of stasis and certainty, setting off uncontrollable processes of signification. Melnick argues that in the end of *The Birth of Tragedy* (sections 5-7) Nietzsche redefined the Dionysian (dissonance): from “the ‘choric’ response embodying the audience’s awed, enraged, and immense desire for the perfected Apollonian forms,” to

the choric audience’s recognition that beautiful Apollo is but a fiction yet . . . here the perceiver’s recognition (like the creator’s) denies all certainty of self, of subject, and of audience itself, in other words, moves away from the lyric ideal toward the model of dissonance . . . Nietzsche’s redefinition now insists that the Dionysian is an aesthetic activity, above all a *process* involving the listener/reader in a journey of engagement, the destination of which is

unknown. (Melnick 1994: 50)

This process, formulated in Arnold Schönberg's *Theory of Harmony* as a shift from antithetical to emancipatory dissonance, is what Derrida calls *dissemination*, a sowing of meanings from traces of difference, with no prospective claim of paternity, origin, or any limit to what grows from them (see 1981a). *Dissonance* and *dissemination* are only two among several double-edged conceptions of culture. I refer to them generically (these terms are not interchangeable; rather, they activate different meanings in their specific contexts of formulation) as illustrations of the pervasive quest for language to articulate the 20<sup>th</sup> century crisis of master narratives. This pervasive double-edged function, also verifiable in Derrida's conceptions of *différance*, *hymen* and *aporia*, can be traced back to the Greek term *pharmakón*, which "provides the textual moment [in Plato] when binary logic is visibly subverted by the logic of both/and" (Childers and Hentzi. 1995: 226). Meaning both *remedy* and *poison* (and still a chain of signifiers irreducible to this polarity), *pharmakón* is employed by Derrida to reveal another term, *pharmakós*—"the chosen victim whose sacrifice has a purging effect upon a community" (Childers and Hentzi 1995: 226)—which is occluded by Plato in his *Phaedrus*. I will attempt to show that *pharmakós*, "a force whose effects are hard to master, a dynamics that constantly surprises the one who tries to manipulate it as master and as subject" (Derrida 1981a: 97), is precisely the element occluded from the binary oppositions remedy/poison, sane/insane, which affects Bishop in her elaboration of a poetics of alterity (dissonance). Still another relevant pivotal concept is that of the *exotic*—an intercultural construct understood in the terms formulated by Renata Wasserman as "the acceptable, mediating guise" (1994: 259) that dresses the criticism of and resistance to dominant assumptions about cultural identity—, the focus of chapter 4.

Not all these mediating concepts will be dealt with in this study, but they help to contextualize the destabilization of intercultural dichotomies that informs much of Bishop's

writings that are deeply affected by her life and experience in Brazil. Indeed, the very proliferation of pivotal terms associated with 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural theories is itself performative of the constitution of *culture* as a site of mediation, questioning assumptions of fixity and performing *mobility* as glossed by Stephen Greenblatt: “not the expression of random motion but of . . . cultural exchange . . . of social energies and practices” (1995: 229-30). The relevance of this notion of mobility for approaching cultural texts is highlighted by Francis Barker and Peter Hulme, who remind us that “any reading must be made *from* a particular position, but is not *reducible* to that position”; writing on the dynamics by which culture both conditions and activates meanings, they claim

in all texts a potential for new linkages to be made and thus for new political meanings to be constructed. Rather than attempting to derive the text’s significance from the moment [and place] of its production, this politicized intertextuality emphasizes the present use to which texts can now be put. (1985: 193)

In the course of this study, I found that discussions on the troubling sort of irresolution that ensues from dissonant intercultural perceptions in Bishop often treat their ambivalence and inconclusiveness as moments of critical paralysis, political alienation and semantic dissolution that threaten to de-historicize and de-politicize her texts—even to empty them of their signifying power. It is as if the author’s—or else the reader’s—resolution of conflicts were necessary in order to make the text political. As if politics amounted to devising moments, however temporary, of critical safety: either a heroic liberation from fixed cultural meanings, in a romantic key, or, in a high modernist key, a triumphant domestication of chaos under the imaginary order and conceptual framework each poem is constructed on. It would seem, from such a missionary notion of politics, that resolution is compulsory; and that irresolution can only be understood as a dismissal rather than acknowledgment and

engagement of conflict. But the value I find in Bishop's Braz/silian corpus is precisely in that the author *fails*—disturbingly, compulsively, relentlessly—to produce resolution, to master or seize command over the intercultural text. The chapters that follow will be developing this argument in the specific contexts of her writings, but for now I want to point out that the label on Bishop as a painterly writer is misleading when it oversimplifies painting itself, under the rubric of the art of *mastering visual representation*.

### 1.3. THE QUESTION OF *UT PICTURA POESIS*

In the discourse on Bishop's visual imagery, its analogies with painting have taken on the status of authenticating the poet's inner vision—and, by extension, her authoritative gaze outward. Thus, analogies between Bishop's writing and painting are often grounded, not surprisingly, on authorial *intentionality*: the fact that—she declared it herself!—she would have liked to be a painter, and that she actually did produce significant paintings whose artistic value has been well acknowledged (see Benton 1996).<sup>23</sup> What is surprising is that such analogies often suppress the fact that, far from mastering her objects, her painterly frames—both in her poems and in her watercolors (see Bishop 1996)—display the failure of visual mastery instead. To give a quick example, it is noticeable from her watercolor “Mérida from the Roof” (Fig. 1) that her use of perspective, detail and framing defies any detachment or completion of vision. As Jim von der Heydt has pointed out, what is at stake is the problematization of representation, whether in mapping a reality in motion onto the flat surface of a poem, or in reifying the mimetic doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*, by which the poetic and painterly crafts are one and the same.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For that matter, she also said that she would have liked to be a musician, were it not for the fact that she would have to perform in public, a prospect that terrified her. As a writer, Bishop fled from poetry readings while she could, well into her later years; she engaged in such appointments only reluctantly, and invariably out of financial necessity.

<sup>24</sup> See Jim von der Heydt's important discussion of these representational questions in his essay relating Bishop's poetics of mapping with Walter Benjamin's perspective of translation (2001: 179-91).

Indeed, a glance at Bishop's paintings shows that, whatever else they may do, they unsettle the very conventions of perspective, texture and framing that they employ (see also Fig. 7 on page 279). A more careful look shows, moreover, that they persistently expose the constructedness of those boundaries, de-naturalizing the hierarchies they imply. Bishop thus engages (post)modernism's crisis with the ideal of an ongoing rupture with the past—the ideal of overcoming or transcending the limitations of the past through a linear history which is constantly dismissed under the galloping arrival of ever new forms. In other words, far from dismissing formal conventions, Bishop's paintings highlight such conventional parameters as the proportional relations by which vertical traces, as well as the intensity of color textures, construct the effect of shifting degrees of profundity:

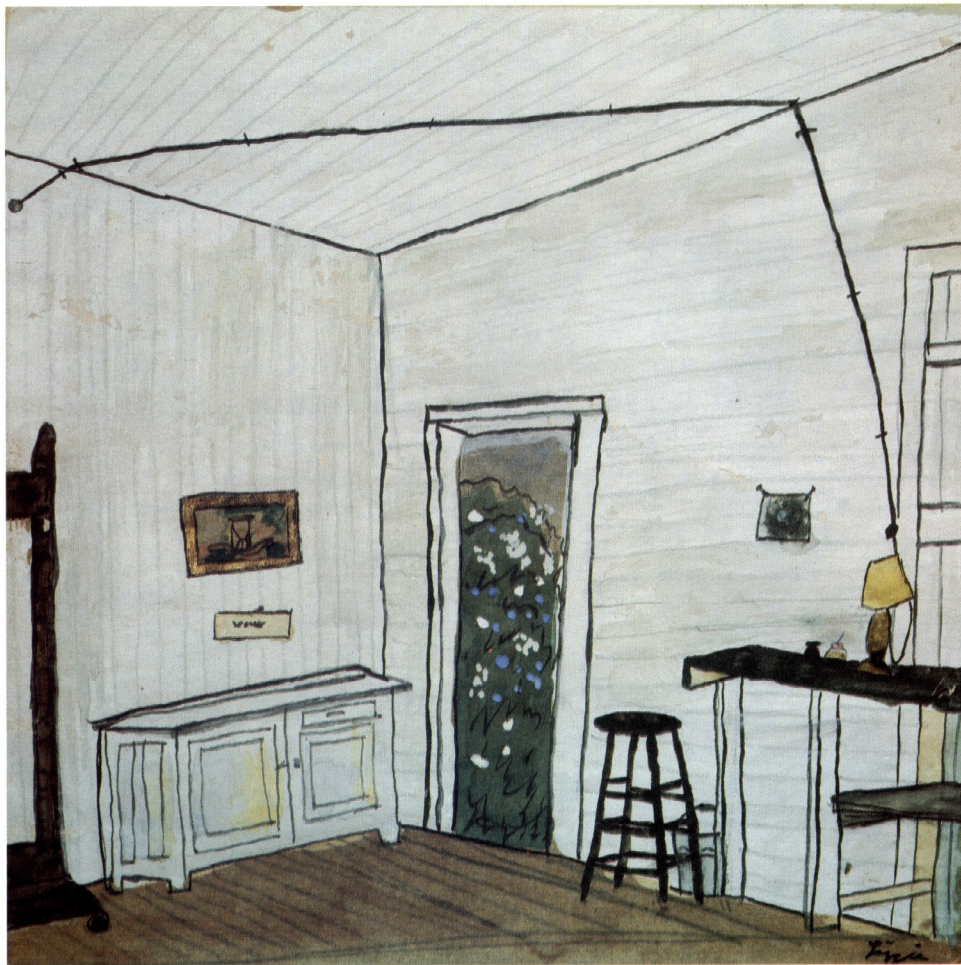


Fig. 1. "Interior with Extension Cord" by Elizabeth Bishop



They also create and simultaneously frustrate expectations of a central focal and vanishing point:



Fig. 2. "County Courthouse" by Elizabeth Bishop

or theme:

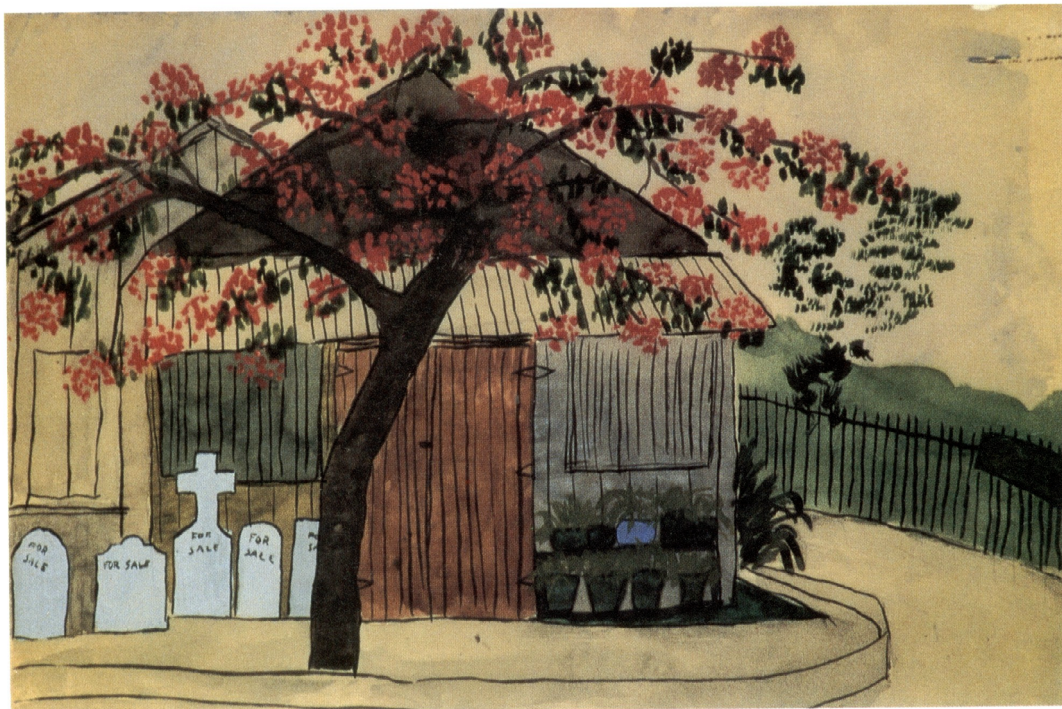


Fig. 3. "Tombstones for Sale" by Elizabeth Bishop



Or else, they leave unresolved the expectation of a singular or even prevalent object being depicted:



Fig. 4. “Mérida from the Roof” by Elizabeth Bishop

In the case of “Interior with Extension Cord” (Fig. 1), it is the *exterior* which unexpectedly calls the viewer’s attention, invading the *interior* of the room while bringing into the picture the fallacy of the supposedly extraneous title. William Benton, in his 1996 caption for the printed reproduction of the watercolor “County Courthouse,” thus indicates that Bishop’s view is “composed of what obstructs it,” and her wit transforms her [picture] from a ‘scene’ into an image of impasse” (22). In short, Bishop’s contradictory use of formal conventions undermines their transparency—such that, as she wrote of Hopkins’s poems, “the [form] and the sense quarrel with each other [and] seem to push against the reader, like coiled springs against the hand” (Bishop 1934a: 7).

Countering oversimplifications of the use of painting techniques in travel writing, it



would be more accurate to say that Bishop's descriptions *disturb* the very mastery of visual representation for which her texts have been canonized. In fact, these texts become invaluable precisely because they foreground their constructedness and rhetoricity—the arbitrary connections between what they mean and what they say.<sup>25</sup> In intercultural terms, they highlight the bias and inadequacy of their own authoritative portrayals of the cultural encounter, the encounter with the Other, with the unknown. This is the sense in which James McCorkle points out that

Bishop's descriptions are always informed by the condition of *aporia*: already before the condition of knowing, and hence describing, is the condition of doubt, so that even in the moment of knowing doubt exists or shadows understanding. . . . Revelation is displaced into the conditions and constructions of writing. (1999: 260)

Like her paintings, which blur the contours of spatial coherence, Bishop's writings also disable any generalization or resolution of perspective, because their ongoing accretion of minimal detail disrupts seams of textual linearity and definition. For example, in her epigraph for "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (Bishop 1983:92, see Appendix), she quotes Sir Kenneth Clark portraying the surface order of a "tapestryed landscape," only to hear, in her own poem, ungraspable voices "retreating, always retreating, behind it." Likewise, her metaphors move away from generalization (consonance) by conveying unlikeness behind indications of sheer likeness. Thus, the same poem initially compares nature with a tapestry, "as if just finished / and taken off the frame," only to undercut the comparison in retrospect. Whether in her paintings or in her writings, conflicting perceptions work, not as a relativist

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<sup>25</sup> For a working definition of *rhetoric*, I refer to Blasing 1995: "a political, persuasive figuration of the material code into meaning bear[ing] witness that meanings are not inherent in the material . . . [any] naturalization of the code as inherently meaningful fits the material fact into an already meaningful whole of some purposive, progressive history" (19).

*system* legitimizing the centrality (consonance) of the observer's necessarily biased representations, but as an *ethos* focusing attention on their limits instead. My argument is that these conflictual perceptions de-center the hegemonic gaze which has done much to canonize Bishop in the imperialist tradition of travel writing in modern literature.

#### 1.4. DISSONANCE, COUNTERPOINTING AND SYNCOPATION

Whereas the use of irreconcilable perspectives does not free Bishop from the pressures and conventions of language, it does help her to rearticulate them. This is not surprising, since she was among the several poets, following T.S. Eliot and others, who did not pretend to discard meter while composing in free verse, but rather reformulated meter in free verse.<sup>26</sup> Charles Hartman describes this re-articulation in terms of Foucault's metaphor of the grid,<sup>27</sup> as it occurs in Louise Bogan's poem, "The Cupola". In his book significantly titled *Free Verse: an Essay on Prosody*, Hartman calls it *counterpointing*, which he defines as a "significant tension among formal patterns" (1980: 61). Where he uses visual elements, I have parenthetically added aural ones—*rhythmic/harmonic*—that correspond, respectively, to

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<sup>26</sup> The poetic line typical of the mid-century generation was, according to Antony Easthope, a "compromise of 'freed verse' in which the iambic norm, constantly departed from, is by that token constantly invoked and so never displaced" (1983: 333) For a discussion of prosody in this period, see also Finch 1993 and Hartman 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault explains his notion of the grid in analogy with a grammar, which conditions utterances but cannot determine them. Each utterance or focus shift is what he calls an "event," a historical reality or process that cannot be tamed or frozen into fixity. The grid, for Foucault, is the mechanism, organization or vehicle through which power is exercised:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.

diachronic and synchronic timing in music. The resulting paragraph offers a helpful way to approach the interrelations between the visual, the rhythmic and the harmonious in Bishop's conception of timing (I might suggest taking in the bracketed additions in a second reading around the visual elements):

One might imagine looking through two grids [listening to two *pulsations/tones* simultaneously]: pieces of window-screen, for instance. When they are perfectly aligned [when only their common *beats/overtone*s are heard], we see one thick screen [hear one clear *rhythm/tonality*]. But when one is tilted slightly [when even just one *offbeat/uncommon overtone* is heard], a new pattern appears that bears no visual [*rhythmic/harmonic*] relation to the regular horizontals and verticals [*pulsations/intervals*] of either grid [*rhythm/tone*]. This pattern—the moiré effect—curves and ripples in the most astonishing ways. The laws that organize each grid [*rhythm/tone*], their straight lines and right angles [*regular pulsations/tempered intervals*], fail utterly to foretoken the shapes [*rhythms/chords*] that emerge. As the relation between the grids is again shifted even minutely, different patterns [*dissonances*] spring into existence. (Hartman 1980: 63)

Hartman's description of tilting perspectives could very well describe Bishop's sketch on her manuscript of "Dimensions for a Novel" (a sketch which is also relevant, by the way, because it predates by a few decades the conception of nonlinear structures devised for computer networks). This sketch did not make it into the published version of Bishop's essay, so she translated it as a "bramble bush" (1934b: 99):

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. . . The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle. (Foucault 1980: 98).

If I were to draw any more diagrams of the development of novels, although again greatly over-simplified, I am afraid the result would be something like this:

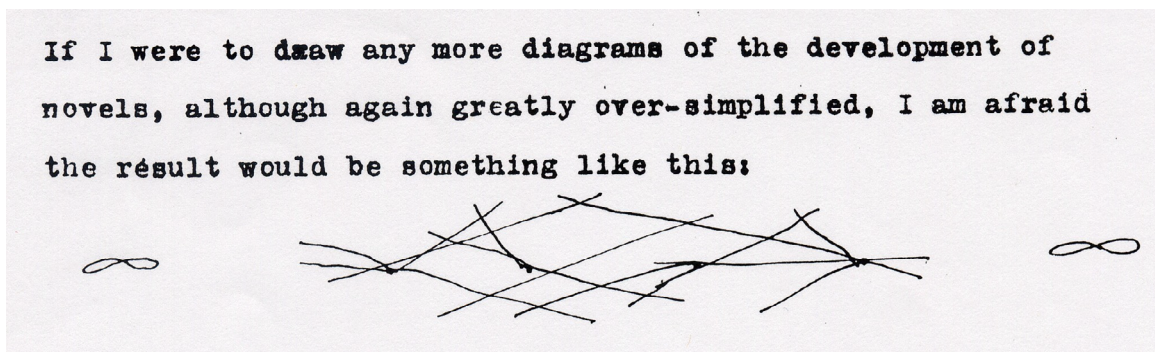


Fig. 5. Sketch for the typewritten college essay “Dimensions for a Novel,” by Elizabeth Bishop

It could also describe what she called “serious faults” in Hopkins—faulty products of a poem when it comes to confirming its conventional frameworks, significant events when it comes to re-articulating them:

These may be serious faults making for the destruction of the more important [consonant] rhythmic framework of the poem, but at the same time they do break down the margins of poetry, blurr (*sic*) the edges with a kind of vibration [reverberation, (dissonant) tension] and keep the atmosphere fresh and astir. (Bishop 1934a: 7)

I find the metaphor of “tilting the grids” a good illustration of how Bishop rearticulates traditional formal devices in her writings. It helps to understand her notion of nonlinear timing in composition in the postmodern sense of breaking down modernism’s avant-gardist alignment of form and content along a progressive evolution toward self-presence, therefore not in the avant-gardist sense of claiming inherent truth-content to a progressive aesthetics.<sup>28</sup> By “tilting the grids”—highlighting the different contents that break out of forms as they alter each other’s trajectories—, dissonance is effected to undermine the closure of representation between conflicting cultural values. I am proposing that this poetics<sup>29</sup> clashing meanings

<sup>28</sup> I refer to Blasing’s conception of postmodern poetics as questioning the modernist naturalization of progressive techniques and rhetorics as an organicist identification between form and content. See especially 1-29.

<sup>29</sup> I refer to Blasing’s terms on the *poetic*:

between cultural frameworks in Bishop can be understood as a hermeneutic *ethics* (exceeding systematization) operating from within an ontological *system* (confirming systematization), requiring us (and her) to listen to contradictions as they dis-place meanings into changing perspectives.

In sum, Bishop's project, far from dismissing formal conventions, is to rearticulate ("tilt") their frameworks, demystifying their seemingly natural, immanent or essential meanings. Form, Bishop seems to say, is irreducible to its culturally-sanctioned contents at any given moment. Or: the text *shows* more than it tells, and *says* more than it means, since (as long as it is being read) its rhetorics undergoes a constant reconfiguration of its familiar meanings. As Charles Altieri has pointed out in another context, it is this "tilting" of perspectives that empowers modernist art's political project of "constructivist abstraction", i.e., the project of criticizing systems of knowledge *from within* their very conventional modes of perception.<sup>30</sup>

What we see, what is only physical form and movement, nonetheless grows in sense, so that sense itself becomes an elemental condition, bridging the gap between mental and physical—but only when we see the bridge as precisely this condition of the tilt away from conventional modes of seeing. To understand the painting is to understand the coordinates it sets up at a tangent to those used by ordinary perception. . . . The painting is at once within the world, and not congruent with it. (1980: 217; 220)

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Poetry is no more reducible to any given set of formal practices than to meanings; it names the distance between the two. . . Poetic discourse understood as rhetorical is inescapably political. . . [it] is figuration and persuasion at once, and each function of poetic language keeps exceeding the other, which excess sets in motion uncontrollable side effects. Poetic language is both formal and discursive; repressing the discourse under the sign of formal-aesthetic value and elevating discourse over the aesthetic equally lose the poetic. (1995: 19-21)

<sup>30</sup> Altieri's working definition for constructivist abstraction is "the deliberate foregrounding of the syntactic activity of a work of art (either noniconically or in conjunction with representational content)" (1989: 56).

In this sense, to understand it is to perceive it as an expansion or *prolongation*<sup>31</sup> of ordinary perception (consonance), a prolongation that is *irreducible* to its linearity. In Bishop's case, her Brazilian texts work at a tangent to the framework of visual mastery—unpredictably, in the tension between what she calls the “front” of the text and “the under side of it”. This way, the reader “is let in on the problem either in order that he may realize its difficulties, or as the only way of solving it” (Bishop 1934b: 101-02)—which is also to say, of course, that *the text offers no solution*. In this context of textual vulnerability, the mastery of visual representation celebrated in her descriptions is actually a source of anxiety in her texts, the anxiety that builds up on the absence of a “front”—a master narrative, or, in musical terms, a tonality—to elide the problem of the under-pressures disturbing representation.

### 1.5. NONLINEAR COMPOSITION

Any reading that disrupts linear, evolutionary assumptions of resolution (or dissolution) of conflict between modern and archaic cultural positions in Bishop's writings must also question the framework of progressivism in which they are couched and buckled toward *globalization* as a naturally inexorable improvement, an advancement that resolves conflict (dissonance) by *capitalizing* on it, or bringing it into the market, through naturalized laws of competition (tonality). This aesthetic economy of politics establishes a tautological

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<sup>31</sup> This musical term refers to “an association between events at different hierarchical levels, resulting from ‘transformations’ [in Noam Chomsky's sense] that turn notes on one level to notes on another level” (Larson 1997: 115), as attention and memory retain experience according to limited frameworks of order. This conception of ongoing variation (and vibration) points up problems with notions of stability and salience embedded in consonance, and of their lack in dissonance.

Texts that expand perception of prolongational levels foreground the interconnectedness between consonance and dissonance: “notes or harmonies that are intervallically consonant nonetheless prolong[ ] notes or harmonies that are dissonant,” and vice-versa: “while dissonances may be prolonged by consonances . . . , at the next structural level the dissonances always end up prolonging notes and harmonies that are relatively consonant” (Straus 1997: 137-38). See Benjamin 1982 for a study of a tonal harmony that is prolonged but nowhere present in the musical surface. See Lerdahl 1988 for a study of prolongation in atonal harmony.

win/lose situation in which only tonal harmony can win, for its organicist structure confirms the universal, uniform, unchanging order (consonance) of a consensual and absolutist dynamics (tonality), a pattern reproducing and reconfirming itself endlessly by keeping at bay “our inability to grasp the undefined and unordered” (Schoenberg 1983 [1911]: 29).

Such idealizations of progress—of tonal progression and competitive social development—feed, and feed into, the naturalization of a global, or geometrically-growing, order: the inflation of inequalities in the competition for displaying, consuming, and reproducing abstract goods. As an exclusionist process passing for an inclusionist one, globalization (like tonality) is also a universalist, master narrative that passes for a pluralist reality. This *ideology*<sup>32</sup> has the effect of unproblematizing the modern experience of mediation between the pressures of cultural homogenization and the possibilities of difference. Entire worlds of meaning and experience are reduced as if they amounted to no more than the reflections of an essential failure to keep up with the market demands of modern times.

Thus, the imperialist reassurance that is sought in Bishop’s painterly mappings, framings or *spatializations* of reality translates into the *linearization* of timing on the surface of her texts. This is a self-reassuring timeframe, one that also implicates Bishop’s Brazilian corpus in the broader canon of globalization, asserting a present position for itself by

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<sup>32</sup> James H. Kavanagh glosses *ideology* as a

social process that works on and through every social subject, that, like any other social process, everyone is ‘in,’ whether or not they ‘know’ or understand it. It has the function of producing an *obvious* ‘reality’ that social subjects can assume and accept, precisely as if it had not been socially produced and did not need to be ‘known’ at all. The ‘nonideological’ insistence does not mark one’s freedom from ideology, but one’s involvement in a specific, quite narrow ideology which has the exact social function of obscuring—even to the individual who inhabits it—the specificity and peculiarity of one’s social and political position, and of preventing any knowledge of the real processes that found one’s social life. (1995 [1990]: 311-12)

producing local cultures as backward by contrast.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, by moving representation to work “at once within and not congruent with” its own absolutist paradigms, Bishop’s poetics of dissonance challenges aestheticist discourses of cohesion that produce an aura around the author and her text, and apparently insulate them from external threats.

## 1.6. THE THREAT FROM THE OUTSIDE

Bishop’s outsider status in Brazil implicates her in a core contradiction on which U.S. cultural imperialism is founded: a revolutionary rhetoric that overshadows its hegemonic strains by constructing the “American”<sup>34</sup> self as a hero defending freedom and modernity—even the progression of time itself—against the external threat of archaic and colonial powers.<sup>35</sup> An example that is close at hand is the discourse of U.S. victory which at least from the cold war on to this day appropriates freedom by appropriating the *belief in freedom* as the one and only defining trait of American-ness, and constituting a national identity based on such *fundamentalism* (itself merging with a religious-like *belief in liberalism*)—an identity otherwise unmarked, as if unprivileged internally and externally by the representational

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<sup>33</sup> See Godzich 1991 for a discussion of interculturality in Bakhtin’s theory and critique of modernity.

<sup>34</sup> The very fact that the term “American” usually refers to a country instead of a continent is a concise example of imperialist discourse being overshadowed under the guise of an anti-colonialist voice representing the entirety of the colonized Americas against a common Old World oppressor.

<sup>35</sup> John Carlos Rowe contends that “many Americans have been willfully deceived by political, social, and cultural rhetoric that has disguised U.S. colonialism while exposing and condemning its practice by other nations” (2000: 26), justifying the colonization of peoples and their territories, both outside and within the U.S., “as part of national ‘consolidation,’ a necessary defense against the imperial ambitions” of other nations (5). Richard Van Alstyne emphasizes that this nationalist rhetoric of anti-colonial revolution which ostentatiously “side-step[s] the use of terms that would hint at aggression or imperial domination” by the U.S. This rhetoric draws on such terms as “open door,” “freedom of the seas,” “good neighbour policy,” etc. (1960: 7). For Edward Said, “a dense body of American writing . . . shows a peculiarly acute imperial cast, even though paradoxically its ferocious anti-colonialism, directed at the Old World, is central to it” (1963: 62-63).



power of hegemonic market-and-culture policies.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, social and economic inequalities within and outside the U.S. are often unproblematized as the byproducts of marked “minorities” that, by contrast, either do not embrace freedom or are still way behind in earning it.<sup>37</sup> The emphasis on the U.S. as heralding a heroic, free self, his (*sic*) freedom salvaged from foreign aggressors, requires such mythical enactments of self-righteousness as the resolution of good over evil, progress over archaism, rational-racial enlightenment over religious-ethnic darkness, and so on. Freedom, on which discourses of “good war” have long been based, is thus postulated as the *cause*, at once origin and end: the *telos* that establishes time as a linear progression into the autonomy and self-presence of a certain future.

I refer briefly to this ideology of freedom-and-peace-making imperialism because it underlies the wide scope of travel writings that mark the literature of modernity and globalization, and in particular those by Elizabeth Bishop. Having straddled the two cultures of her childhood spent between Nova Scotia and New England, Bishop began working on her Brazilian texts precisely during the cold war years, when several writers contributed to consolidate as anti-colonial the specific construct of freedom which has massively overshadowed its own hegemonic dynamics. Bishop’s contradictory stance toward her life

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<sup>36</sup> This solipsistic notion of freedom contrasts against the notion Bishop articulates in her short story “In Prison,” which shows freedom through contingency:

‘Freedom is knowledge of necessity’; I believe nothing as ardently as I do that. And I assure you that to act in this way is the only logical step for me to take. I mean, of course, to be acted *upon* in this way is the only logical step for me to take. (Bishop 1984 [1938]: 70).

<sup>37</sup> They are projected, in other words, to the field of *zoe*, the Greek term designating bare life in its homogeneous form (like sound in “noise”) as opposed to the particular, plural, and political life of *bios* (in “music”). See Agamben 1998 for a thorough discussion of the dichotomy *zoe/bios*, and of the tension it *contains* (double meaning intended), “a link that secretly governs the modern ideologies seemingly most distant from one another” (4). I find Agamben’s insights helpful for a better understanding of other dichotomies involved in intercultural conflict, such as culture/nature, order/chaos, present/past, and self/other—all of which bear on the dichotomy consonance/dissonance.

and experience in Brazil is embroiled in this context. As Robert von Hallberg puts it, in referring to midcentury poets from the U.S., Bishop among them:

American poets are usually aware, painfully so, of being the unacknowledged representatives of national culture, or vulgarity, wealth, and power, and implicated in the expansion of empire. . . . The adequacy of American high culture was in serious question after World War II, exactly because the nation's economic and military institutions were moving into many of the places left unattended by the European powers. For poets to feel upon them the questioning eyes of fellow citizens, as well as of Europeans, was natural, and to concentrate their energies on those types of poems that display taste, sophistication, intelligence, and inventiveness was, after all, responsible. . . . somehow the intellectuals were commonly thought to have removed themselves, at least in terms of taste, from middle-class vulgarity. (1985: 85; 91; 133)

It is because of this background that I have introduced Bishop's Brazilian texts in the context of imperialist criticism and literature, from which perspective I have considered some of their interrelations with painting and globalization. This chapter has also introduced some ways of thinking about the impact of culture shock in Bishop's poetics of dissonance.

This study aims to demonstrate a specific poetics at work in Bishop's intercultural texts, not to define them under that poetics. To this end, I will be working on some of the ways dissonance, as "a structure lacking any center" (Derrida 1978: 279), marks vulnerabilities within her intercultural texts, and how these texts change when reconsidered closely. The in-depth, close readings this project has required have in turn required a necessarily narrow range of texts for its corpus, which is not meant to be comprehensive. My choice of texts was guided by the concerns brought up throughout the process of inter-

relating Bishop's prose poetry—and poetic prose—with the various focal points of her theoretical and personal writings. These concerns ranged from matters of timing and memory in perception (chapter 3), to authorial control over dissonant voices in the text (chapter 4), and to the politics of a dissonant poetics in Bishop (chapter 5). Chapters 2 and 6 deal with a good portion of Bishop's theoretical and critical essays, her letters, and her poem in Portuguese, while they add insight to the intercultural perspectives and arguments of this study. The next section provides an outline of the chapters that follow.

### 1.7. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 2 introduces 20<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of musical dissonance and atonality, and relates them with Bishop's notes and essays that sketch out a theory of nonlinear composition. Chapter 3 demonstrates that dissonance is unresolvable in two poems, "Manuelzinho" and "Santarém," as they go against the grain of their own ethnographic model: the model of an evolutionary timeline that constructs cultural others as belonging to a primitive past in need of resolution into the future—that being the speaker's own supposedly central and present cultural framework. Chapter 4 also focuses on this dissonant dynamics operating between layers of meaning. My main question is how the pressure to loosen identity borders impinges on two poems, "Pink Dog" and "Crusoe in England," under the anxiety of losing authorial control. My aim is to show that these poems work intertextually to activate a nonlinear poetics, not as much undercutting humanist discourse as problematizing it, since by revising the authorial tradition of consuming the island landscape, Bishop also reveals (and re-veils) her own discourse of *anti-conquest*.<sup>38</sup> My argument is that dissonance

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Louise Pratt defines discourses of *anti-conquest* as

the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert [metropolitan] hegemony. The term "anti-conquest" was chosen because . . . these strategies of innocence are constituted in relation to older imperial rhetorics of conquest associated with the absolutist era. [The main protagonist is] "the seeing-man," an admittedly unfriendly label for the European male subject of

in these poems sustains an ethics acknowledging limits to the poetic imagination. Instead of pretending that the aesthetic creates an ideal materiality from poetry, Bishop acknowledges that poetry

proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath . . . . The other way - of using the “spiritual” - the beautiful, the nostalgic, the ideal and poetic, to produce the material - is the way of the Romantic, I think - and a great perversity. (qtd. in Harrison 1993: 3)

Chapter 5 contextualizes Bishop’s poems “The Armadillo” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” within the politics of the mainstream poets of her time to argue that embedded in her response to confessionalism is a poetics engaging the strangeness of the self through a suspicion of all efforts to alienate the responsibility of the self in violence. I will argue that in these poems, spatial configurations become vulnerable to aural breakthroughs of dissonance, as Bishop repeatedly echoes and rearticulates memories of her mother’s scream of madness, whose aural impact resonates throughout the work of her lifetime.

Chapter 6 explores Bishop’s construction of a dissonant subjectivity, with its poetic and ethical implications, and leads up to a set of three key avenues for further research and for criticism interested in de-hegemonizing the imperial self in intercultural discourses. Each of these avenues derives from and also extends the preliminary hypothesis of this study: that irresolution in Bishop’s Brazilian writings can be understood in terms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reconceptualization of musical dissonance, or, to put it another way, that intercultural conflict in her texts cannot be resolved except by ideological and arbitrary means.

I do not propose this set as a sum-up, much less a result, of this study, but rather as refracting avenues which it points toward at its moment of stopping—not an ending or

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European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess. (1992: 7).

conclusion, therefore, but a pause for revised questions and further explorations. These avenues correspond to what I have found to be three major interventions in the imperialist canon of intercultural literature, activated by Bishop's conflicting intercultural perceptions: 1) the construction of a *Brazilian poetic persona* interrupting Bishop's anglocentric gaze; 2) a critique of reductive analyses of *gendered discourses* of cultural consonance; and, importantly, for its power to problematize the hegemonizing narrative of Anglo-American salvationism, 3) a revisioning of *social-conscious writing* by highlighting the selfcentric rhetorics of representation.

To demonstrate that Bishop constructed for herself a *Brazilian poetic persona*, I will explore textual fragments that are highly significant in their incongruities. Among these texts is a letter that turned out to be a poem—or vice-versa—, what Bishop called her “only poem in Portuguese . . . this wonderful poem” (my translation): “minha poema só português . . . esta poema maravilhosa” (unpublished manuscript, Vassar).

To show that Bishop's feminist text complicates reductive analyses of *gendered discourses*, I shall refer to the important and so far neglected exchange of quotations between colonialist and sexist discourses in “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” I will briefly analyze the dissonant dynamics underlying this poem in order to highlight the fact that the highly problematic genderization of “our eyes” as masculine, and therefore of “Nature” as feminine, is overshadowed by the speaker's morally-attractive discourse of anti-conquest.

Finally, I will argue that Bishop's intercultural poetics expands perceptions of intercultural conflict, deconstructing the specific dynamics she uses in her poems to naturalize Braz/sil's hierarchical status and socioeconomic identity under the U.S. What I have in mind is what Bishop called her “social-conscious” writing. My argument is that her Brazilian poem “Squatter's Children” (1956) revises her earlier poem, “A Miracle for Breakfast” (1937), into a self-implicating poetics that marks a shift from a missionary (a self-

righteous) to an ethical (an anti-solipsistic) politics. I think this changing perspective calls for a shift in focus on her entire corpus—often read exclusively in the same terms of her imperialist text, anxious to centralize her authorial and authoritative position over the foreign text.

Scholars have noted the oblique politics underlying Bishop's transition from modernism's progressive and humanist view of history—*modernism* here understood, in a nutshell, as a shift in temporal orientation from an absolute past to a future that is not pre-ordained—to postmodernism's destabilizing view of a progressive sequence (see Harrison 1993; Shetley 1993; Blasing 1995 and others). Within this debate, my aim is to foreground the intercultural *momentum* requiring ethical changes in Bishop's poetic and political sensibilities. In terms of her revision of "social-conscious poetry," my aim is to show that intercultural relationality dismantles the aura around peace-making and conflict-management strategies that reduce the scene of poverty to a refuge for the self-exempting author (and reader).

This shift can also be understood in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's helpful terms, from "an invitation to be benevolent towards others" to "a radical acceptance of vulnerability"—in other words, a suspicion of affirmative politics and of any sense of victory, whether in providing a solution or setting limits to *what interrupts one's own project*, producing the truth, affirming an identity, and so on" (see Spivak 1990: 27-49, my emphasis).

Bishop's letter-poem is perhaps the text which most visibly shows evidence that, contrary to what is often taken for granted by scholarship due to her overt statement that she was "a completely American poet" (Brown 1966: 5), she invested her writing in the disturbing dynamics between "part[s] of [her] psyche" which she did not or could not resolve into a whole—nor into discrete parts, for that matter. Instead, she left the boundaries of those parts recurrently deferred in her texts—and their conflicts, understated.

Bishop's use of understatement is well known, to the point that it has become cliché: it has been employed to canonize her as a high-modernist version of the masterful author embodying rational restraint, patience, control, and shrewdness with an Emersonian self-reliance emblemized in her supposedly exclusive, undeviating bond with the English language. Much argumentation on Bishop's use of understatement is grounded in her own overstatement of the issue during a 1966 interview conducted by Ashley Brown in 1966, in which he inquired about some of the differences between poetry in English and in Portuguese. To the question of what she meant by "our poetry went off in a different direction much earlier" (as if along a single, progressive timeline), she answered, referring to Portuguese speakers:

I suppose they have still never quite escaped from romanticism. It's an interesting fact that there is no word in Portuguese for "understatement". Marianne Moore's poetry is nearly all understatement. How can they understand us? So much of the English-American tradition consists of this. They have irony, but not understatement. (Brown 4-5)<sup>39</sup>

Less well known, I think, is the fact that her use of understatement refuses any static poetic function. It takes on, in fact, a variety of functions, from creating all the way to frustrating imperialist ambitions (one example is the understated scene of rape in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," as we shall see).

Uses of understatement, silence, and smallness do not make up merely a recurrent trope in Bishop's corpus. As we shall see throughout this study, their recurrence is also a speech act setting off and expanding perceptions of cultural dissonance through the sensing

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<sup>39</sup> Bishop's knowledge of Portuguese is understandably limited, and obvious in this case. Of course the lack of a noun in English meaning "saudade" has not kept English language speakers from understanding Portuguese language speakers in their feelings of "missing" someone, someplace, etc. It can be said of Bishop's

of language—in each specific case, compelling attention to what exceeds foregrounded meanings by bringing into focus presumably irrelevant details whose *resonances*<sup>40</sup> disrupt coherence, self-righteousness, conclusiveness, and fixity.

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painting too that “it is nearly all understatement”—in Portuguese, I would use the adjective “singelo” to a very similar effect. English has “understatement,” but what about “singeleza”?

<sup>40</sup> For the pertinence of the musical notions of *dissonance* and *resonance* to literary and cultural theory, see especially Dimock 1997.



## Chapter 2

## Toward a Theory of Composition: Bishop's Poet(h)ics of Dissonance

I feel like those moments I've {just} been watching on the beach when two waves going at angles to each other meet and an immense confusion of helpless ripples and foam and upheavings (*sic*) result.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1963 letter

My own thoughts, conflicting with those of the book, were making such a wordy racket that I heard and saw nothing—until the page before my eyes blushed pink. I was startled, then realized that there must be a sunset at my back, and waited a minute trying to guess the color of it from the color of the little reflection. As I waited I heard a multitude of small sounds, and knew simultaneously that I had been hearing them all along—sounds high in the air, of a faintly rhythmic irregularity, yet resembling the retreat of innumerable small waves, lake-waves, rustling on sand.

Elizabeth Bishop, "Time's Andromedas"

### 2.1. CLASS NOTES AND ESSAYS ON COMPOSITIONAL TIMING

If Bishop's Brazilian texts refuse the resolution or reduction of her experience of culture shock, then the question, for her and for us readers, becomes: *how* can language be used not to resolve, control or fix incompatible frameworks of perception into a timeline, but instead, to engage their discrepancy so as to set them in relational *motion*? *How*, in fewer words, do texts *move*? Bishop gave much thought to this theoretical problem—in fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that it obsessed her in her formative years. Her college essays, published in 1933-34 while she was a student at Vassar (majoring in Music Composition), recurrently address the problem, whether on the terms of sustaining *contradictory time-patterns* in narrative composition—in musical terms, *dissonance* between and within tones ("Time's Andromedas"), or of the use of timing to construct *resonance*, in Bishop's words "a moving, changing idea or series of ideas" ("Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry"); or, still, of the nonlinear, "bramble bush [effect of] . . . the interplay of influence between present and past, . . . this constant readjustment among the elements of any sequence" ("Dimensions for a Novel"). In these essays, Bishop refers to the writers she discusses as being "time-conscious" or "time-bound," and suggests that the same can be said

of herself in light of her considerations on “the time in the composition being the phenomenon of it” in Stein (“Time’s Andromedas” 115).

### 2.1.1. The First Essay: “Time’s Andromedas”

In the first of these essays, “Time’s Andromedas,” Bishop referred to the practice, taken up by a wide range of writers,<sup>41</sup> “either to prolong [a] first contradictory time-pattern into the after recollection of the novel” (to prolong dissonance as antithesis, confirming the centrality, or consonance, of a tone, thus confirming *tonality*), “or to make it no longer contradictory but acquiescent with our own” (dissonance again as antithesis, but *resolved* back into consonance, therefore also confirming tonality), to suggest clearly that “there may be grounds for [her] own idea of the *sustained* contradictory time-pattern” (dissonance as expansion of perception, or *atonality*)<sup>42</sup> (105, qtd. emphasis). Such a device would engender a nonlinear matrix for the textual time-stream, exceeding what Bishop would later call, in a passage noticeably swamped in allusions to militarism, the “line of march” of the linear narrative.<sup>43</sup> In other words, it could be used to challenge the author’s *solipsism*, as Bishop’s rhetoric suggests in her essay on Dorothy Richardson’s and Gertrude Stein’s treatment of timing:

Miss Richardson’s tempo is *her own*, she intimates it and retards it *as she wants*; and Miss Stein goes back to the beginning *at will*, yet each is after all moving *in a line with the world*, against the time-stream. I wonder if any one

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<sup>41</sup> Bishop associates Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Somerset Maugham, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Gertrude Stein with modernity’s self-conscious time-sense, which “has been erected into a universal philosophy” (Bishop here quotes from Wyndham Lewis), as contrasted against Dorothy Richardson’s “method of adding time to the novel, of preserving it in counterpoint . . . with our own” (“Time’s Andromedas” 106, qtd. emphasis).

<sup>42</sup> *Atonality* is not reducible to its colloquial usage as the *antithesis to tonality*. The prefix *a-* signals not a negation, but an excess of, or an irreducibility to, tonality. The term thus refers here to the field of tension between tonality and what exceeds it, or between tonality and what *from within* tonality sounds like *noise*.

<sup>43</sup> For a thorough study of Bishop’s oblique poetics against militarism, see Roman 2001.

has ever thought of writing a novel which would do neither of these things, but attempt something further.<sup>44</sup> (“Time’s Andromedas” 119, my emphasis)

In the tautological, even solipsistic framework of tonality (a “time-pattern acquiescent with our own”), narrative timing is spatially contained within a succession of stages that lead, as if organically, to the author’s pre-established and final aim. Thus the sustaining of consonance, or of “an acquiescent time-pattern,” in Bishop’s words, “seems to be limited to fitting either our ideas of time past (Proust), or our ideas of present, happening time”. This is to say that, embedded in the timeline, that places the self in the present, is the deceptive perception under which a dissonant time pattern (“their time, pulsing against and contradicting [our] own”) “los[es] its reality and be[comes] a *fixed* feeling, a little section of the past which [changes] and become[s] timeless for [us] because of its escape from [our] own time pattern” (“Time’s Andromedas” 104, my emphasis).

In order to be neither dissolved into such timelessness, nor resolved or fixed into sameness, what Bishop calls a “sustained *contradictory* time-pattern” (sustained dissonance) would necessarily mark, in Derrida’s terms, “the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime”. This interval, according to Derrida, “can be inscribed only in a bifurcated writing (and this holds first of all for a new concept of writing, that *simultaneously* provokes the overturning of the hierarchy . . . and the entire system attached to it, *and* releases the dissonance of a writing within speech, thereby disorganizing the entire inherited order and invading the entire field)” (1981b: 42, qtd. emphases). Toward the end of her essay, Bishop’s phrasing implies her investment in such a bifurcated or dissonant writing, one that releases unpredictable time-patterns by “re-arranging” the conventional pattern of linear timing (tonality) without dismissing it:

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<sup>44</sup> There is no indication in the literature on or by Bishop that she ever started a project of writing in the

Is it possible that there may be a sort of *experience-time*, or the time pattern in which realities reach us, quite different from the hour after hour, day after day kind? All books still seemed bound to this much order, but I have a suspicion that it will go next and writers will discover new beauty in breaking up this most ancient of patterns and re-arranging it. (119, qtd. emphasis)<sup>45</sup>

Of course the perception of the “beauty in breaking up this most ancient of patterns and re-arranging it” is not as new as it may have seemed to Bishop in the mid-1930s. In his study on modern fiction and the aesthetics of music, Daniel Melnick presents a historical overview of what has become a key aesthetic and ethical perspective of modernism and postmodernism (1994: 3-15). As a creative principle—what Joseph Conrad called a “sinister resonance, a tonality of its own”,<sup>46</sup> or that which averts what Theodor Adorno called “the deceptive moment” in the reception of conventional art (1976 [1962]: 50-51)—, *dissonance* as a metaphor of destabilization of habitual thinking toward an expansive perception of reality can be traced back at least to 1886, when Nietzsche wrote, in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*:

[I]t is precisely the tragic myth that has to convince us that even the ugly and disharmonic are part of an artistic game that will, in the eternal amplitude of its pleasure, play with itself. But this primordial phenomenon of Dionysian

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genre to which she restricts her argument, the novel.

<sup>45</sup> According to Bishop, we have Joyce’s “*Ulysses*, with its classical unities obscured by the same microcosmic idea, and obscured slightly more by the idle fact of the actual reading time unavoidably upsetting the classical unities time” (“Time’s Andromedas” 105). In “Dimensions for a Novel,” she writes, “In some parts of *Ulysses* it seems as if Stephen-Joyce were rather experimenting in thought than expressing the thought through the medium of novel-experiment, although Joyce has probably gone further with this latter work than any other modern author” (102). Of Woolf, she asks, “What does Mrs. Woolf’s talking about flux do if her characters remain as rocks?” (102).

<sup>46</sup> The full passage reads: “It was like another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck” (1995 [1917]: 11).

art is difficult to grasp, and there is only one direct way to make it intelligible and grasp it immediately: through the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance* . . . The joy aroused by the tragic myth has the same origin as the joyous sensation of dissonance in music. The Dionysian, with its primordial joy experienced even in pain, is the common source of music and tragic myth. (1968: 729)

“Difficult to grasp”: the phrase evokes the intangible complexity of a liminal perception, and the conception of possibilities yet to be articulated. It also signals the pain in acknowledging the delusion of what McCorkle calls “a failed ideology and one on the threshold of necessary transformation” (n.d.), the delusion of the totalizing narrative of consonance. Melnick points out the paradoxical overlapping of visual and aural imagery, apocalyptic despair and hope, by which the metaphor is constructed, which follows Nietzsche’s conception of dissonance as the projection of “becoming along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of being” (1994: 729).<sup>47</sup>

Apart from its metaphorical force, dissonance also carries a compositional force, perhaps precisely as what Bishop called “a device built on the idea of experience-time,” an instability that “deliberately makes use of this constant readjustment among the members of any sequence” (“Dimensions” 97-103). In this sense, it is not a progressive technique revealing some kind of inherent content, a form that should warrant the kind of freedom of form often associated with the Dionysian in metaphorical dissonance. Rather, it is a composition of meanings requiring attention to their *prolongation*, where various fields of signification shock, so that, for example, even if in a given set of meanings, they converge (resolve into consonance), their entailments (overtones) do not. As meanings permeate and

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<sup>47</sup> On the utopian breadth of negative thought and related questions concerning dissonance and utopia, see especially Adorno 1973; Attali 1985; Bloch 1988; and Norris 1989.

shock against each other, they release unpredictable relations that build up *momentum* in the text, disseminating changes in the perception of apparently unrelated events.

### 2.1.2. The Second Essay: “Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry”

Bishop’s second published paper is about Gerard Manley Hopkins’s treatment of poetry as such motion through instability.<sup>48</sup> In this essay on the poet whose major impact on her own writing would be restated throughout her life, Bishop focused on his use of *counterpointing* and *reticence*, embedded in the moment he chooses “to stop the poems, set them to paper, at the point in their development where they are still incomplete” (1934a: “Gerard” 7). Such a textual moment indicates, far from an end or closure, a pause—for a change of rhythm, a *syncopation*:<sup>49</sup> a silent skip of beat, an interruption of predictability and expectation, a space of expectancy in the time-lag opened by refraction. Syncopation can be understood as a time-pattern that picks up from conceptual suspension, a break from “perfect” systematization, and possibly what Bishop calls, in the context of her break from Marianne Moore’s mentorship as we shall see, that “particular fault [without which certain things] would be without the means of existence” (letter to Moore, Jan. 5 1937, Rosenbach).

Bishop’s definition of *sense* as “the quality that permits mechanical irregularities while preserving the unique feeling of timeliness in the poem” (“Gerard” 5) comes very close to Hopkins’s conception of *counterpointing* which Randall Jarrell describes as “a constant struggle between certain fixed regularities and certain variations from these” (1996 [1942]: 701). It also comes close to Bishop’s notion of the baroque use of counterpointing in

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<sup>48</sup> In a letter of 1935, commenting on her readings of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s letters and journals, Bishop pointed out that in his observations on relations between music theory and composition Hopkins “mentions some of the very things I’ve been studying” (to Marianne Moore, April 2, 1935, Rosenbach).

<sup>49</sup> For Catherine Clément, who borrows the term from musical rhythm, in which it means an interruption of predictability (in medicine, it means *an apparent death*), “*syncope is also the mother of dissonance*; it is the source, in short, of a harmonious and productive discord. . . . Attach and haven, collision; a fragment of the beat disappears, and of this disappearance, rhythm is born” (1994: 4; x, qtd. emphasis).

Hopkins, which she noted quoting from Morris W. Croll (1929): ““out of the struggle between a fixed pattern and an energetic forward movement, [baroque art] arrives at those strong and expressive disproportions in which it delights”” (“Gerard” 7”). On this understanding, it is no wonder that what Bishop admires in Hopkins is that he portrays ““not a thought, but a mind thinking””: “the manner of timing so as to catch and preserve the movement of an idea, the point being to crystallize it early enough so that it still has movement” (again qtd. from Croll), and his use of “devices that contribute in spite of, or because of, their awkwardness, to . . . break down the margins of poetry, blurr (*sic*) the edges with a kind of vibration” (Bishop 1934a: “Gerard” 7)—devices by which habitual perceptions change.

Thus, Hopkins’s timing moves poetry away from “sudden apparitions” of immanent truth-content in forms, to undercut the supposed immediacy of (the supposedly unmediated) meanings that culminate in *epiphany*,<sup>50</sup> an emblem of the aesthetic alignment of form and content, and of transcendence into consonance.

## 2.2. CREATIVE LISTENING/WRITING AS CRITICISM

Bishop’s own treatment of timing—whether *prosodic* or narrative timing, and whether in *prose* or poetry—has made reticence her understated autograph, most likely since Octavio Paz’s homage to her in 1977. Paz asserted, in “Elizabeth Bishop or The Power of Reticence,” that in her poetry “things waver between being what they are and being

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<sup>50</sup> The literary concept of *epiphany* is defined by James Joyce in his aesthetic theory, expounded to Lynch by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “By epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. . . . [The thing’s] soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany” (Joyce 1968 [1916]: 288-89). Stephen’s theory is based on a phrase from Thomas Aquinas, “ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur, integritas, consonantia, claritas,” which Joyce renders as “Three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony and radiance” (212). Notice that in this translation, Joyce subscribes to the widely accepted interchangeability of meaning between *consonance* and *harmony* which Schöenberg rejects (see section 2.3.).

something distinct from what they are,” and that it is for this uncertainty that “poetry is not in what words say but in what is said between them” (15). Expanding on Paz’s insight, my suggestion is that Bishop’s reticence, apparently the cause of what Altieri calls her “generality of appeal”, need not be understood as a brace for critical safety as he suggests (1995: 232),<sup>51</sup> but rather, as producing the force of an unguided and unpredictable change of beat or tone—in other words, the hermeneutic indeterminacy Bishop wrote about in “Dimensions for a Novel”.

### 2.2.1. The Third Essay: “Dimensions for a Novel”

As this last of her published essays shows, Bishop gave much thought to the notion of hermeneutic indeterminacy developed by T.S. Eliot, in his 1922 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” that the narrative constructed by works of art is changed or readjusted

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<sup>51</sup> In Altieri’s words:

She does what she does so well that she has come to define the image of poetic intelligence most widely shared among contemporary poets. But there may be good reason to insist on the limitations of any mode that could find such diverse champions as Lowell, Merrill, Ashbery, Ostriker, and Rich, since its very generality of appeal suggests it may participate too fully in what we might call the age’s richest commonplaces about what it means to be human. (1995: 232, qtd. in McCorkle 1999)

Altieri’s critique, however, is founded on the moral attractiveness of authorial centrality, cultural cohesion or resolution “connecting specific emotional economies to general cultural and intellectual traits” of “a single cultural enterprise” (1984: 7). Thus, his emphasis is on “how the poem structures the course of a feeling, understands its artistic coherence as testimony to specific mental and aesthetic powers, interprets its resolution as a model for aligning the sensibility to sources of value, and finally makes its claim on the attention of the audience an emblem of how an author can represent choices as worthwhile, as worthy of attention and respect from a community” (7-8). Furthermore, he posits as a “logical solution [to passivity] . . . a return to the imagination as an instrument allied with the struggles of will [so that] the existential consequences of poetic craft [are] whether or not we can respect the poetic persona produced and the model of community she hopes to produce through the witness she bears” (167). This affirmative positing of art is explicit also in his later book, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*: “Art is literally empowerment: the making available of exemplifications that enable us to look at ourselves, as we encounter different sites of being and modes of inhabiting them. And the direct testimony provided by such examples promises to free its audience from its dependency on the entire apparatus of representation” (1989: 56). From this solutionist perspective, far from providing a model or example, choices for a dissonant poetics in Bishop are evidently not worthwhile.



constantly by subsequent artworks. It is remarkable that this is precisely how Eliot defined *criticism* in 1932, two years before Bishop interviewed him for the college journal *Con Spirito* she co-edited at Vassar, soon before writing this term paper sketching out her thoughts on hermeneutic indeterminacy and timing—and, as I want to emphasize, on the interrelations between poetry and criticism. Here is Eliot's definition of *criticism*: “a process of readjustment between poetry and the world in and for which it is produced . . . without coming to the stultifying conclusion that there is nothing to be said and that opinion changes . . . not as a sequence of random conjectures, but as readaptation . . .” (1964 [1933]: 27).

In “Dimensions for a Novel,” Bishop expanded on Eliot's theory of hermeneutic indeterminacy, to work out a treatment of timing that would develop some of the issues she had given thought to and articulated in her previous essays. She now argued for nonlinearity as narrative readjustment, thus *criticism*, not only throughout the history of literature but also within each single text, through “the sequence of events or even of pages or paragraphs in a novel”; and for “the interplay of influence between present and past”: a “constant readjustment among the members of any sequence”. If, as she had written of Hopkins's poem, the target is in constant motion, now, she seems to say, the target is also the *author*, whose authorial knowledge is challenged and put to motion, so that the *text* is the marksman, in motion as well: “the *recognition* itself of what is being written must be kept fluid” (“Dimensions” 97-100) to unleash the force of criticism, of latent discrepancies between unpredictable meanings, of their unfolding perspectives-in-motion in the text.

The following chapters will provide various examples of this force of criticism in Bishop's poems, but for now I would like to introduce her conception of timing by quoting from the essay in question. I find this passage worth quoting at length because it shows important anti-hegemonic strains underlying her argument for nonlinear composition. Here it

is noticeable that her writing project is to exceed the totalitarian, even militaristic politics of *linear timing* in narration (i.e., the *closure* of the past into present meanings):

Novels as we know them are still fairly linear; they go along, in some sort of army style; I can think of none to which the march figure would not be applied. We may have halts and retreats and flights in disorder - but that we are moving from one point (usually in time) to another is always certain. The author guides us along this line of march, marshals and directs.

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I have mentioned what I call the “march” of the novel, implying movement and a linear sequence to the writing; but I know of no novel which deliberately makes use of this constant readjustment among the members of any sequence. (Perhaps characters occasionally think back over their relationships with one another and re-interpret actions or speeches, but I am speaking here of re-interpretation as an integral part of the whole book, not the proper working out of the story.) It seems almost too simple to say that in the existing novel the ending throws back no light on the beginning, but (excepting of course the rough example of the detective story!) I think it is true. Present events run both forwards and backwards, they cannot be contained in one day or one chapter. All the past forms, to use a musical expression, a frame of reference for the future, and the two combine to define and expand each other. (“Dimensions” 96-97)

In musical terms, Bishop is criticizing the linear assumption of tonal progression, or *tonality*, a recurrent re-affirmation of a center through the resolution of dissonance into the consonance or sameness of a fundamental tone. In Bishop’s argument for mutual influence and interplay can be heard the strains not only of the antimilitarism mentioned earlier

concerning her first essay, but also of a non-authoritarian *ethos*, a non-solipsistic *ethics* of writing. The text, with its changing perspectives-in-motion, “should . . . be presented in such a way” as to keep the author from co-opting the future into an organic-like extension of the self’s present perceptions and expectations:

To do justice to one’s sense of characters, events, thoughts, I think that not only should they be presented in such a way as to show perpetually changing integration of what has been written with what is being written, but also the *recognition* itself of what is being written must be kept fluid. These recognitions are the eyes of the novel, not placed on the face-side looking ahead, but rather as in certain insects, capable of seeing any side, whichever seems real at the moment. (“Dimensions” 100)

Formal irregularities are thus sustained in the pressure of Bishop’s intercultural texts to expand the poetic persona’s perception of intercultural reality, effectively questioning the autonomy of the authorial voice in relation to the text. Given her concern with keeping fluid “the recognition itself of what is being written,” and of discerning “what seems real at the moment,” it makes sense to say that her tentative theory of writing is also one of *listening*. This proposition may sound far-fetched at first glance, but we will see now that Bishop phrased the problem of writing and the problem of listening in noticeably similar terms.

As to the problem of writing: having in her previous essay said of Hopkins that by a sense of timing he “bring[s] down onto paper his poem . . . as a moving, changing idea or series of ideas” (“Gerard” 6), Bishop in her own essay likewise defers to the changing resonances of “[her] own idea” so it can move on, and so she listens, readjusting her own position:

Perhaps, however, the image of the man in the shooting gallery is incorrect, since the mind of the poet does not stand still and aim at his shifting idea. . . .

Granted that the poet is capable of grasping his idea, the shooting image must be more complicated; the target is a moving target and the marksman is also moving. (“Gerard” 6-7)

As to the problem of listening: in the notes Bishop took down in her music class about the time she wrote on the need of keeping fluid the “recognition itself of what is being written,” she also wrote on the need to keep fluid the recognition itself of what is being *heard*:

The fact that music is a form of motion makes the technique of listening doubly difficult. If there were any way of keeping a group of sounds constantly in front of us for the purpose of comparison and analysis, listening would be an easy matter, but as it is, we must catch the notes as they go by and deal with them only in retrospect. This makes memory the most important feature of the art of listening.

As it is, *listening*—grasping “the notes as they go by”—is not “an easy matter”: the present self (for the self is constructed in the present, and in the center) perceives as meaningless or unwanted *noise* (dissonance) “the idea” which is difficult for the writer, too, to “grasp”. I find the similarity between these two excerpts striking. Moreover, the recognition itself of what is being heard is also moving, as Bishop had said of the marksman-poet:

Also, our listening to any regular, pulsing sound is psychologically affected by the phenomenon of “Periodicity of Attention”. Our concentration, even the quality of the sound we hear, depends upon this constant in and out, weak and strong of our listening apparatus. This feature of sound and motion and the way it affects us has a great deal to do with our listening to music - the fact that we hear it not in regular, one after the other beats, but in a pattern of them,

regular, but with some more important or emphasized than others.

(Notebooks, Vassar)

It seems clear from this passage that what makes the technique of listening doubly difficult for Bishop is 1) the fact that sounds in motion can only be dealt with in retrospect; and 2) that our memory tends to freeze or frame into a diametrical pattern sounds that are actually nonlinear, relational and unpredictable in their motion. But what is not clear—at least not from her tone of certainty—is that she wavers as to what the term “regular” conveys as it occurs twice in the last sentence of the passage above.

My understanding is that in “regular, one after the other beats,” the word means *linear*; and that in “a pattern of them, regular but with some more important or emphasized than others,” it means *uniform*: of equal duration, and also repeated consecutively, like in a *march*—or, in musical terms, a *binary measure*.

At least part of what seems to be Bishop’s difficulty in writing the explanatory apposition for the act of “listening to music” comes from an indefiniteness or inconclusiveness, because her rhetoric takes the shape of an ongoing shifting of terms, a syncopation. Notice the irresolution that builds up as she suggests that: our reductionist perception of sounds in motion is rooted in a limited “auditory apparatus” (*biological matrix*) that relies on a limited “memory” (*psychological matrix*), which in turn is constrained by a binary syntax (*cultural matrix*, this “constant in and out, weak and strong”), that, in turn, limits—and we come full circle here yet without any closure whatsoever—our “auditory apparatus”.

Let us consider for a moment that Bishop’s rhetorical looping, wavering, or *aporia* signals a changing perception, a tilting of the grids so to speak: Bishop cannot frame the “technique” (a term which she therefore changes to “art”) of listening—as she cannot frame writing or painting either, as we have seen—into the binary measure by which she is supposed to register passively, or merely draw coherent patterns of, stable correspondences

between received meanings. In other words, she seems to be keeping “the recognition itself of what is being written . . . fluid” rather than pretending to reveal an epiphanic alignment of form and meaning that might confirm her authorial presence and objective knowledge. In the end, not even in the surface “front” of her text does she pretend to fulfill her promise to disclose the fundamental flaw by which *the self fails to listen*.

At this point, Bishop veers on acknowledging that not only is the “*art of listening*” limited by finite resources of perception, but also that it requires *memory of complexity*—as well as anticipation and cross-referencing, as she might have pointed out (like she did, if only by suggestion, in “Dimensions”)<sup>52</sup>—, to expand perceptions of the relations between those resources. However, Bishop’s explanatory voice only adds to rather than eases the complexities of listening.

### 2.2.2 Temporal Predicaments in Attention, Listening, and Understanding

It seems to me that at this textual moment of dissonance, when her explanation does not lead to closure or resolution, Bishop begins to focus her interest in a poetics of listening that shares in Schönberg’s compositional project to “re-educate our ears,” as she underlines in her class notes. This interest also connects with her own project of writing so as to expand the “periodicity of attention,” or the “frame of reference for the future, so that [both the future and the past] combine to define and expand each other” through an ongoing “readjustment among members of any sequence,” *within the very dichotomous structure of order, the binary measure, that shapes perception*.

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<sup>52</sup> The passage reads:

Present events run both forwards and backwards, they cannot be contained in one day or one chapter. All the past forms, to use a musical expression, a frame of reference for the future, and the two combine to define and expand each other . . . the moments I have spoken of occur so sharply, so minutely that one cannot say whether the recognition comes from the outside or the inside, whether the event or the thought strikes, and spreads its net over past and sometimes future events or thoughts. (“Dimensions” 97-99)

This binary measure of attention span draws in concentric circles a protective sphere around the self, a meaningful center constituted by the construction of dissonance as *noise* outside: a threat to the self, a blurring of the senses, a nonsensical reality. This attention span is also what Bishop calls “experience-time,” beyond which the sounds and meanings of relatively remote realities look blurred like a homogeneous smear that “escape[s] from our time-pattern”. Yet, as Schönberg pointed out in 1911, “what today is remote can tomorrow be close at hand; it is all matter of whether one can get closer” (1983 [1911]: 21). This brings us back to Bishop’s first essay, in which she likens “experience-time” to the radius of attention within which the self perceives otherness in layers of concentric circles or orbits around one’s own centrality:

It is like standing in a snowstorm and looking back through the minute vistas of flakes. Those near at hand seem to be coming down slowly, purposefully, those just a few feet away drift fast and carelessly, and the further through the storm you look the faster the flakes seem to fall, until away back at the end of vision there is nothing but a rapid, flickering white mist. If there is any sense of proportion natural to things that happen to us, any sense of their occurrence in our time-pattern, surely this impression . . . is truer than that received from the rise-and-fall, growth and development, climax and anticlimax sort of writing. (“Time’s Andromedas” 113)

Within this predicament of normal and effortless understanding, this immediacy of perception, the moving marks(wo)man marks her own centrality according to the degree of nearness and remoteness relative to her moving perspective. The passage above is therefore connected with Bishop’s attention to an at once spatial and temporal predicament that reduces perception to a totalitarian center—in musical terms, a *tonic*, confirming an organic, stable, absolute truth. This reductionist mechanism of perception is so pervasive that it re-inscribes

systemic hierarchies precisely while seemingly “declaring war” to them, rather than raising questions to confront what Spivak calls attention to as “your own subjective investment in the narrative that is being produced” (1990: 18; 29).

### 2.3. REDUCTIONIST VS. EXPANSIVE DISSONANCE

The function of dissonance resolution in tonality is precisely one of systematic reduction, a compulsive return to a central, fundamental tone, and the reassurance of *ease*, taken for granted as the *natural pleasantness* of tonal unification, or of solipsistic perceptions of reality. Author-ized since the 5th century B.C. by the Pythagorean system of harmonic-numerical consonance, the organicist or tonal version of harmony is to this day naturalized as a self-present structure, an unmediated reflection of the rational laws of mathematical proportion found in nature. However, as Ernst Bloch noted,

Mathematics remains the key to Nature, but it can never be the key to history and to those self-informings by the non-identical and the asymmetrical which number was devised to counter, and for whose gradual objectification the human spirit ultimately produced great music. (1985: 169)

But granted that proportions remain the same within all mathematical systems, which I am not sure they do, still their conceptions, uses, and meanings are clearly not so stable. This is the case, as James Tenney points out in his *A History of Consonance and Dissonance*, of the perfect 4<sup>th</sup> interval. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century it had already achieved status as consonance within the numerical system, still it became dissonant once contrapuntal harmonization was felt to better shield melodic clarity from what was perceived as noise in the emerging, increasingly polyvocal textures. The concept of consonance/dissonance was further re-adjusted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to emphasize the hierarchical *function* of each note in the triadic chords (themselves having become newly consonant due to their organicist structuring of harmony, as formulated by Jean Philippe Rameau in his *Traité de l'harmonie* [*Treatise on Harmony*] of 1722). This



new functional conception of harmony became increasingly dominant as it naturalized the need for resolution (in the case of dissonant intervals) and reassertion (in the case of consonant intervals) (see Tenney 1988). Plainly, what has counted as “the music of the spheres” (consonance) and what has been crossed out as “noise” (dissonance) has been conditioned by such inflationary, capital-dictated, solipsistic values as how much, and how quickly, it feeds into reaffirming, reproducing, and spreading itself.

It is well known that the Pythagorean system is by no means a transparent reflection of natural laws but a construction naturalizing uniform ratios, a systemic rationalization that renders nature a unified, organic whole.<sup>53</sup> With this in mind, Lawrence Kramer foregrounds the postmodernist project of music criticism that deconstructs the concept of the extramusical, extra-rhetorical signified. He points out the participation of music in the cultural economy of “the harmony of the spheres” in the legitimation of science:

The idea that cosmic order coincides with musical harmony derives from Pythagoras, enters Western literature in book 10 of Plato’s *Republic*, and passes into music theory through Boethius’s concept of *musica mundana*. As the concept of world harmony becomes Christianized, creation narratives emerge that combine biblical creation imagery with the Pythagorean imagery of the music of the spheres. . . . It is also worth noting that the idea of a

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<sup>53</sup> Schönberg, for example, wrote:

[The Western scale] is not the last word, the ultimate goal of music, but rather a provisional stopping place. The overtone series, which led the ear to it, still contains many problems that will have to be faced. And if for the time being we still manage to escape those problems, it is due to little else than a compromise between the natural intervals and our inability to use them—that compromise which we call the tempered system, which amounts to an indefinitely extended truce. This reduction of the natural relations to manageable ones cannot permanently impede the evolution of music; and the ear will have to attack the problems . . . (1983 [1911]: 25)

For discussions of the totalitarian politics underpinning tonal harmony, see especially Bloch 1985; Adorno 1973 [1949]; Norris 1989; and Kramer 1995.

musical creation lingered in scientific discourse at least into the seventeenth century. In his *Harmonice Mundi* (1619), Kepler argued that God gave the planets elliptical orbits because the concentric spheres imagined by Pythagorean cosmology would have yielded an aesthetically defective monotone, whereas the elliptical orbits yield a polyphony. For Kepler, god the creator is God the composer. (1995: 73-74)

Kramer argues that the discourse of “the harmony of the spheres” was invested to legitimize science in the Renaissance period by bridging science and religious discourse. Thus, in *The Creation*, for example, Haydn “at once invokes the classical / Christian metaphor of *harmonia mundi* and makes that metaphor evolutionary, scientific, modern” (75).

In this context, dissonance often remains unproblematically defined as the “unpleasant” element that should be resolved, as if by natural progression, into those overtones that most closely, or frequently, repeat the fundamental tone.<sup>54</sup> It is often conceived of solely as a deviation from *consonance* and *tonality*, both of which stand for *harmony* itself, although this systematic conception was shaken by the impact of atonality in Schönberg’s

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<sup>54</sup> This is still the dominant aesthetic conception: dissonance is ugly or else strange (exquisite, exotic), in any case antithetical to consonance, which is beautiful and familiar. Dissonance is “hard to sing and sounds bad, for which reason it is forbidden” (Fux 1943 [1725]: 35); and is “nothing but *retardations* of the [consonant] notes following, and thereafter [should always resolve] as if brought from servitude into freedom” (56, my emphasis, to signal an overlapping of the discourses on *mental difference* with those on the *anti-aesthetic* and the *primitive*).

[T]he more perfect the consonance, the less harmony it has. In addition, we know that the dissonances in themselves are altogether lacking the grace and charm of harmony; and that whatever pleasantness and beauty they may give the ear have to be attributed to the beauty of the succeeding consonances to which they resolve. (56; 97)

Since Fux’s *Steps to Parnassus* is the classic pedagogical tool based on the Palestrina style, this passage on dissonance has been highly influential on perceptions of dissonance. “A Note on the History of the *Gradus ad Parnassum*” (7-13) cites evidence that the following composers’ studies were based on this book—dubbed, after Beethoven’s second teacher, “Albrechtsberger’s oracle”—: Haydn, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Berlioz, Rossini, Paganini, Liszt, Telemann, Handel, Brahms, Bruckner, Schenker, and Hindemith, among others.

compositions and theoretical writings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dissonance was then, in his terms, “emancipated” from its monolithic conception by *atonality*: a field of tonal ambivalence exceeding, without dismissing, tonality.<sup>55</sup>

In Bishop’s time too (as in ours), tonality and consonance both stood for harmony itself, although in some music courses atonal harmony was not so easily dismissed. The excerpt below, from Bishop’s class annotations on what she subtitled Schönberg’s “extraordinary revolution” in musical composition, suggests that she distinguished between *harmony* and *tonality*; this is how she explained to herself the meaning of *tonality*:

Tonality is melody and that need or urgency to get back to the starting point, or to the fundamental tone {underlying} the whole melody, whether the melody actually started on it or not. In harmony, tonality is the same thing, really, only of a succession of chords there will be one particular chord felt to be the tonic of the succession and in order to satisfy us the harmony must finally come to rest on that. In both combined tonality is the same need to get back to the tonic, but in this case the tonic of the melody [diachronic, consecutive, linear] and the tonic note of the tonic chord of the harmonic [synchronic, simultaneous, unpredictable] {accompaniment} are the same note - tonality is exactly the same [in {melody} as in harmony] as far as a feeling

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<sup>55</sup> Theodor Adorno argues that Schoenberg’s effort to denaturalize consonance, through what he called emancipatory dissonance, unwittingly led to another reductionist systematization, that of harmonic serialization (1973 [1949]: 66).

According to James Tenney, serialization, and subsequently chromaticism, required another readjustment of the conception of dissonance, a change aimed at regulating its dissemination in music recently invigorated by the slippage of dissonance from the harmonic to the rhythmic layers where radical pitch and timbral ranges were being exploited. In this most recent conception, consonance is a continuous, dissonance an intermittent sensation of tone—according to the speed of the beats or of the pulses of tone in the production of sound, isolated from any harmonic or melodic context (see Tenney 1988: 87-94).

goes, it is just introduced with more strands of sound and all the strands depend upon the same tonic chord for their final resolution.

We want to get back to a fundamental tone.  $\frac{1}{2}$  promises . . . A kind of musical gratification . . . the dissonant combinations pressed forward into a consonant RESOLUTION.” (Notebooks, Vassar, qtd. emphasis)

In these notes, Bishop seems to have grasped not only the difference between the two concepts but also the fact that they are usually conflated as if mutually interchangeable. It is contradictory, therefore, that she also repeats in her own explanation the conflation of incompatible views of tonality. On the one hand is tonality as *harmony*, presuming an organicist totality, unification, alignment or identification with it; on the other hand is tonality as *a part of*, or *a set* within, harmony. Either way, the “return” that she undermines as “ $\frac{1}{2}$  promises” is clearly the sanctioning stamp of the pre-Schönbergian notion of harmony, a marching, military-like advancement of a pre-existing truth or revelation bringing peace to conflict, assurance to uncertainty, and progress to backwardness—such benefits being aesthetically embodied in the resolution of dissonance. In such a circular framework, as we have seen, *harmony* and *tonality* are used interchangeably, dismissing atonality altogether even as a set within harmony. Thus, atonal chords are homogenized as “non-harmonic chords,” obliterated for the low degree of interdeterminacy between their tonal frames of reference (whose root or original identity is therefore undecidable). When they are not obliterated, they are presumed as having been resolved or subsumed under the prevalence of consonance: the closer, more frequently sounding overtones. Otherwise, they are taken to have failed harmonization altogether, which is a contradiction in terms.

The “contradiction in terms” I refer to is the fact that, as Schönberg noted very simply, any chord (*Zusammenklänge*: tones sounding together) forms harmony, so “either there is no such thing as non-harmonic tones, or they are not non-harmonic . . . Of the

acoustical emanations of the tone nothing is lost,” although the most “remote overtones”—the more complex relations within the tone<sup>56</sup>—have been aesthetically excluded from the harmonic system by their functional value as antithesis. For Schönberg, what is at stake is that the dissonant relations between tones constituting each sound event cannot be conclusively resolved into a stable identity (consonance) even though they are supposed to in the tonal system of harmony. Such a system is clearly not a realistic one, though it realistically obliterates phenomena that do exist, and “arrogate[s] to itself the status of a natural system, whereas it will scarcely do as a system of presentation. . . . There are, then, no non-harmonic tones, no tones foreign to harmony, but merely tones foreign to the harmonic system.” Thus Schönberg points out ironically that “[h]armony, its theory, its pedagogy, is concerned with ‘non-harmonic’ tones!” (1983 [1911]: 309-21, qtd. emphasis.)

The reductionist conceptualization that Schönberg is criticizing (of dissonance as a function of tonality) is, however, the keystone of various fields of inquiry. For example, in Psychology, *cognitive dissonance* is defined as a merely oppositional term. It is understood as an exclusively negative, quasi-insane, “distressing mental state” yet to be “cured” or controlled: a state in which “people feel they find themselves doing things that don’t fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold” so that dissonance reduction is a primary component in cognitive functioning (Festinger 1962 [1957]: 42). In seeking to ward off such a condition that sounds dangerously close to something like schizophrenia, these phrasings presuppose that the resolution of cognitive

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<sup>56</sup> Whether the perception of simple (consonant) tones and complex (dissonant) tones is due to physiological sensory factors (such as the degree of wave frequency synchronization between auditory nerve impulses and the stimulating wave in the cochlea or inner ear) or to cultural conditioning factors (such as exposure to sound combinations, the arbitrary temperament or rationalization of musical scales, aesthetic standards and learning skills) remains unresolved. The funding and large-scale production of scientific experiments linking dissonance perception to physiological and psychoacoustical factors has had the effect of naturalizing the former vector as exclusively true.

dissonance is natural, the coherence of consonance warranted by sheer familiarity, an ongoing re-production of reassuring certainties.

In sum, contrasting against its more conventional concept as the negation of consonance and unity, what Schönberg calls constructive or emancipatory dissonance is the principle, intrinsic to every tone, by which the overtones constituting each fundamental tone pursue their own central tonality, in an endless process of tension and motion. It is the principled irresolution through which conflict exceeds reduction into identity or stasis, demanding instead an expansion or change in the terms of perception. This is very different from the conventional function of dissonance: an accidental, or else ornamental, deviation of the tone, a malfunction or risk that needs to be either co-opted or excluded in order to restore consonance. Its functional constructedness (rhetoricity) displayed, dissonance becomes a trope of difference, *deferring* instead of confirming the naturalization of tonality. Thus Bishop wrote in her notebook, under the title “Schönberg”:

No such thing as a tonic. All tones of equal importance - ½ step apart.

Anything possible. All counterpoints - because all combinations are good. . . .

Diff. degrees of intensity of dissonance . . . Have to re-educate our ears -

Not merely polytonous - though that's important. . . . Exploitation of detail. Relativity among details.

Schönberg maintains, in fact, that listening and attention to detail prevent the reduction of reality (in his words: “reality, the tone”) into manageable, systematic modes of perception, and confront “our inability to grasp the undefined and unordered” (1983 [1911]: 29). This is because any system or structure is potentially demolished by the tone itself: “problems are concealed in [the tone], problems that clash with one another; the tone lives and seeks to propagate itself” (313)—or, as Bishop put it in remarkably similar terms some twenty-five years later, “[t]he crises of our lives do not come, I think, accurately dated; they crop up

unexpected and out of turn, and somehow or other arrange themselves according to a calendar we cannot control” (“Dimensions” 100). Both Schöenberg and Bishop thus offer a critique of the assumption that a “front” (consonance) must be restored at the cost of the aesthetic exclusion of those meanings or overtones that incite unpredictable processes, contradictions and conflicts within the composition—asymmetries that tonal harmony was devised to counter.

It is in this sense, of attention to detail and therefore to “the limits of the narratives” (Spivak 1990: 19), that Bishop connects the art of writing with that of listening, so that, in both cases, “texts are emerging phenomena, activated and to some extent constituted by the passage of time, by their continual transit through new semantic networks, modifying their tonality as they proceed” (Dimock 1997: 1061). This notion, of an unstable semantic transit, implies an interactive rather than a deterministic effect on positions and identities: so-called original meanings gain endless resonances, their dynamic trajectories uprooting systemic centralities as they intercept one another over time. This is very different from the two-dimensional notion which unproblematizes cultural homogenization as most of the globe’s need to ‘catch up’ with history on some linear trajectory of human progression. As Wai-Chee Dimock argues,

This conception of time as a destabilizing force undermin[es] the integrity<sup>57</sup> of any unit of meaning—a word, a sentence, a literary text . . . No preposition is

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<sup>57</sup> Dimock employs *integrity* in the sense of *closure*, or of *a totality that is inviolable*. In mathematics, the integral refers to a total sum of infinite and equal partitions, hence to *inviolability* because it requires an abstract limit, like an interpretive perspective, in order to be calculated (given *closure*). According to Geraldo Ávila, the notion of *integrity* draws on the 18<sup>th</sup> century conception of the (definite) integral, which also amounts to a reduction into *closure*—an interpretive transformation of an analytic expression of a function into an algebraic one:

[T]he definite integral, though known to be the graphic area of a function, came to be interpreted [in the 18th century] as the difference of values within a same primitive function. Thus, to calculate a definite integral meant essentially to find a primitive, that is, to

more important to a synchronic historicism than the reassuring *in* [*in* history']. But why should a text not be interpreted in relation to events outside its temporal vicinity? (1997: 1060-61)

The reassuring *in* of 'in history' is significant here. To lock dissonance into a history of closure prevents resonance from taking place, from changing the status quo of any given meaning, system, or fundamental tone. It also produces the essentialist notion that positions and identities are fixed, rather than composite or constituted by dynamic contingencies, themselves generating new interceptions of meaning-making processes over time. But to conceive of dynamic rather than static trajectories instead, is counter-hegemonic: "frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places" (1061). The notion of progress—tonal progression and social development—as culminating in its supposed destination point, aligning all cultures on unequal hierarchical orbits around a single time-axis, is one of hegemonic consolidation, reducing and dehumanizing the dissonances of intercultural conflict (as the word *primitive* shows) into the sheer competitive failure of lagging positions in the progression of consonance, thus constructed as a *global* time, a concept that optimistically evades postwar delusions with a "universal" time.<sup>58</sup>

In sum, Bishop's argument for nonlinear composition, overlapping unresolved configurations "among members of any sequence," advances a critique of the militaristic

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algebraically transform the analytic expression of one function into another. (1993: 164-65, my translation)

Thus, it makes sense to consider that even the mathematical notion of *integrity* provides yet another example of a term working a double logic, meaning *both* openness (irresolution) *and* closure (resolution), along with the terms *totality*, *unity*, and even *coherence*—terms which, concerning literary texts, can also mean, rather than reductionist resolution into "original" meanings (consonance, resolution), the ongoing relatedness between meanings perceived as contradictory (dissonance, irresolution).



“line of march” of master narratives. Bishop proposes the destabilization of hierarchies and pre-conceived sequences by expanding perception of an “experience-time” that opens itself to momentous perceptions of unedited events. She takes up this issue in a letter of the same period:

If I try to write smoothly I find myself perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness. (And don't you do that sometimes yourself?) However, I think that an equally great “cumulative effect” might be built up by a series of irregularities. Instead of beginning with an “uninterrupted mood” what I want to do is get the moods themselves into the rhythm. (Letter to Donald Stanford, 1933, Harvard)

The definite article in the phrase “the rhythm” calls attention to the possible lack of a complement that seems to be elicited, and which Bishop provides in her essay published the following year:

The point is: the moments I have spoken of occur so sharply, so minutely that one cannot say whether the recognition comes from the outside or the inside, whether the event or the thought strikes, and spreads its net over past and sometimes future events or thoughts. Overall the novels I can think of the author has waved a little wand of attention, he holds it in one position, whereas within the shiftings produced by the present over the past is this other shifting, rhythmical perhaps, *of the moments themselves*. (“Dimensions” 99-100, my emphasis)

This other shifting, *of the moments themselves*, is unpredictable, and non-linear. In constructing a device to dis-place linearity, Schönberg also uses “the ‘cumulative’ effect of a

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<sup>58</sup> Such are the conventional notions of consonance as *progression* and dissonance as *retardation*. This latter term also connotes dehumanization of mental difference, an issue closely related with cultural dissonance as well, as we will see in chapter 5.

series of irregularities,” confirming the regularity of “an uninterrupted mood” that is unrealizable except as an arbitrary abstraction—for example, the arbitrary quantitative degree of tonic repetition necessary for claiming its value as presence or truth. This is why Schönberg’s conception of atonal harmony is useful for a poetics engaged not merely in switching or inverting symmetrical values, but in *changing the very terms of perception*. Schönberg upheld this distinction in his formulation of atonality. This is how Ethan Halmó puts it in musical terms:

It is not that it is impossible to identify whether a chord is (or is not) dissonant according to the rules of tonal theory. It simply becomes difficult or impossible to determine which of the tones in the chord is the unstable tone, and which are the stable ones.

When the dissonance cannot be identified, its resolution cannot be directed. And when that happens the emancipation of dissonance is at hand—not as a result of theoretical speculation about the more remote overtones of the harmonic series but as a consequence of the extension of the methods of chordal formation to include multiple altered and elaborative tones.

. . . The conjunction of two chords both of which contain dissonances but in neither of which can be ascertained which of the tones are the dissonances eventually leads to . . . profound consequences. If dissonance cannot be identified, it cannot be resolved. (1997: 81-82)

This *non-identity politics* performs what Christopher Norris, in arguing for the utopian potential of deconstruction, allegorical reading, and music as a temporal process, calls “a constant anticipatory awareness of what is lacking in the present” (1989: 327), or what Derrida calls the “force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly *delimiting* it” (1978: 20). This force which

delimits systems of language because it “excludes totalization [is] a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center” (289).

The modern crisis of the Pythagorean “harmony of the spheres” connects directly with the anxieties of a de-centering (dissonant) self. It distinguishes between two *simultaneous yet irreconcilable* conceptions of dissonance. On the one hand, dissonance as a *product*—a deviation, fragmentation, or loss (therefore confirming a pre-existent presence). This conception controls dissonance within the tonal framework by assigning it a *function*, the function of embodying, as if naturally, the need for the restoration of consonance. On the other hand is dissonance as a *process*, of opening the framework to an ongoing change of meanings, thus to the rhetoricity and constructedness of its forms.

Now it becomes clear that dissonance is itself bifurcated by atonality, which refuses closure on the identities and oppositions naturalized in different contexts by tonal (antithetical, or functional) dissonance. In atonality, dissonance overlaps its own potential functions without merging or resolving them into one. It therefore becomes *both* a negation assuming a center, *and* an affirmation of noncenteredness; both an *alignment* between form and content *and* its refusal, in the same breath. The conception of dissonance as a double-edged device thus involves a rejection of a politics of change as a rupture with past forms of thought. Bishop’s essay “Dimensions for a Novel” shows her critique of the reductionist mechanics of such oppositional or binary thinking, specifically between present and past:

The discovery, or invention, whichever it may be, of a new method of doing something old is often made by defining the opposite of an old method, or the opposite of the sum of several old methods, and calling it new. And the objective of this research or discovery is rather the new method, the new tool,

than the new thing. In the come and go of art movements, movements in music, revolutions in literature, and “experiments” in everything, we often see this illustrated. The modern French composers who devised the ingenious and seemingly pregnant method of using two or three or more keys against each other, where one alone had been used before, are often very disappointing because despite the possibilities suggested by poly-modality and poly-tonality the themes in themselves are meagre and uninteresting. (Bishop 1934b: 95)

This theme of binary thinking is recurrent in Bishop; it reappears decades later in the poem “Santarém,” in the form of a critique of “literary interpretations / such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female”—which, as I will argue in chapter 3, her speaker merely pretends to have left behind. Instead of either affirming or negating binary systematization, Bishop uses dissonance in an attempt to exceed (without dismissing) its own historical meaning—i.e., its categorization of otherness and alterity as antithetical to harmony, to *connectedness*.

Bishop’s anti-hegemonic politics, however, does not exempt her texts from the anxieties of imperialist discourse. Nor do readings that foreground her inner, humane struggle (her strife in overcoming the psychological upheavals of cultural breakthroughs as she learns to acknowledge new perceptions of reality), for they necessarily repeat the hierarchy of the speaking self over the silent other, and perhaps this time with a sophistication (that renders the repetition immune to criticism): the prevalence of Bishop’s humanity over the other, over her text, over the reality she represents. My point is simply that Bishop’s self-centering discourse of hierarchy fails as the need and urge to expand her perception of reality recurrently disrupts and exceeds her speakers’ solipsistic strategies.

The next chapter should show that textual moments of dissonance are intensified in Bishop’s texts as the event of culture shock intervenes and disables her speakers’ containment of otherness (the dissonant self and the dissonant other) within the static

framework of the past. In this light, I will argue that Bishop's Brazilian writings are not about *the place* but about her *split* (Braz/sil) from what she calls, as the next chapter shows in "Santarém," *the idea of the place* (Brazil)—a split brought about by the experience of dissonant geographies.

## Dissonant Cultural Geographies: Irreducible Positions and Identities

When I had looked away I was conscious for a minute of their time, pulsing against and contradicting my own; then it lost its reality and became a fixed feeling, a little section of the past which had changed and become timeless for me because of its escape from my own time pattern. . . . The result is that the time of the book comes really to mean nothing to us, and if we think of it consciously we can only with an effort imagine the characters spaced, spread out, in our own time-scheme.

One of the chief difficulties of Proust for me has always been a Puritanic conviction that so much thought backwards from a sitting posture, no matter what wonders it brought to light, must be a sin against the particular beauties of the passing minute.

Elizabeth Bishop, "Time's Andromedas"

Already a fictitious past has supplanted in men's memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false.

Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

### 3.1. MAPPING: WRITING PLACE OVER TIME

In a letter to Ilse and Kit Barker, written sixteen months after her first arrival in Brazil, Bishop expressed her awareness of the ungraspable, dissonant connections between geography and experience: "It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia—geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even" (Oct. 12 1952, Princeton). In this passage, Bishop seems to sense that even geography, with its emphasis on writing place over time, cannot reduce the way time intersects and overlaps spatial positions, activating meanings in unexpected ways. She acknowledges, in other words, that the meanings and positions which have marked her experience cannot be made to "sit still," to be contained or mapped within seemingly unrelated cultural contexts.

Sensing that the present cannot be insulated safely away from the unresolved meanings of past experiences—as the past cannot be protected from the conflicts of present experiences—, Bishop looks to a poetics that may resist the hegemonic notion that past meanings either determine or are surpassed (and suppressed) by a present identity. In such a poetics, even geography—*writing* place—is irreducible to stasis, the stasis of interpreting, identifying, or *mapping* place. Thus, a reading of Bishop's geography requires us to listen to

a poetics that exceeds the linear notion of time.

Bishop's poems "Manuelzinho" and "Santarém" are the focus of this chapter's discussion, because they take up this poetics of dissonance pressing the poetic persona and her readers for an ethical and self-implicating crisis within the framework of geographical consonance set up by Bishop's speakers. While these poems both enforce and disable the Manichean discourse of resolution, my aim is to show how they work to deconstruct the solipsistic ideology of linear time, progress, resolution and resolve. I will argue that Bishop's dissonant text recurrently catches her in the realization, expressed in her letter to the Barkers, of the connectedness between seemingly unrelated positions in place and time, and thus of the impossibility to render the other (and her own past) as remote—whether in a chaotic ("Manuelzinho") or idyllic ("Santarém") time.

Bishop's employment of geography to write *mobility* over time rather than the *stasis* of place had been signaled in such early poems as "The Map," in which she situates the fiction of place divisions even in the *product* of the act of mapping: "[t]he names of seashore towns run out to sea," and "the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains." It is in her poetics of culture shock, however, that this textual refusal of authorial control gains *momentum*, pressing for narrative timing not only to show the "perpetually changing integration of what has been written with what is being written," but also to "ke[ep] fluid, as she wrote in "Dimensions," "the *recognition* itself of what is being written" (1934b: 100).

If we consider that Bishop's Brazilian writings reveal very little about Brazil as compared to very much about her culture shock (the clash between the anxiety and resistance to produce an interpretive closure on her perceptions of Brazilian and Anglo-American cultural frameworks), we can consider also that they abound with the contradictions of her own mapping of the place. This ongoing conflict emerges every time the poet seeks and fails to interpret her experience of the place (Braz/sil) according to what she calls in "Santarém"

her “idea of the place” (Brazil). Bishop’s descriptions recurrently raise and frustrate expectations of mapping the foreign place within a remote and manageable position in time: each added detail disturbs the humanist framework of detached contemplation, as description is altered, and contradicted, again and again. We will see that throughout these poems, changing frameworks of meaning grow increasingly incompatible, and threaten to loosen the functional identity borders that should distinguish the self from cultural others. In order not to shatter, these frames of reference recurrently demand that the other be placed in a periphery—in the periphery of a timeline, i.e., in the past.

### 3.1.2. Mapping: Writing Place as Time

Bishop’s Brazilian pieces often start by projecting the poetic persona’s own culture shock onto the other in order to appropriate presence, and presentness, to her own position—a stable position or identity from which to claim centrality. They attempt to produce, therefore, as a defining trait of others, their presumed ineptitude in adapting to a modern (present) perspective (her own). Placing others in the framework of the past is made easier by scenes that are spatially framed, statically portrayed—as in “still-life” photographs, landscape paintings, or film frames. This strategy produces for the poetic persona a position of presence and mastery over the otherwise disturbing incompatibility of simultaneous frameworks of time. In sum, in order to assert her centrality in the cultural encounter, the poetic persona seeks to *map the foreign culture in a remote space, by covertly pinning it down in a backward time*.

Ironically, however, the stasis attempted through cultural stills is betrayed by the intensity of movement which they *contain*, in both meanings: as having *contents*, and as producing *containment*. In other words, *precisely* as in a photograph or film frame, movement is immanent and imminent, irreducible. Thus, descriptions which seemed to be exclusively spatially oriented—often regarded by Bishop scholars as ethnographic and objective—can be



read to actually foreground the discourse of containment as such. They trace the conflict that develops in the text to the point of shattering the centrality of her speakers' patronizing gaze over others.

To place or map the other culture in a (negative or positive) primitive past is indeed an effective way of asserting one's own centrality (presence). More subtly still, to overtly relinquish centrality is an even more effective way of asserting it. Next we will see how this strategy, of asserting the speaker's centrality by portraying her advanced humanitarian capacity for self-consciousness, self-criticism and even for what Spivak posits, without solutionist naïveté, as "unlearning privilege" (1990: 50-58), is developed in "Manuelzinho," published in 1956 for her *The New Yorker* audience.

### 3.2. "MANUELZINHO"

I would like to call *differend* [*différend*] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. ... A case of differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*

This poem is about the impossibility of reducing into a consonant perspective the dissonant reality of a man who escapes the speaker's idiom of identity and definition: "Half squatter, half tenant" comprises the entirety of the first verse, already refusing identity closure. The impact of half definitions at such an early stage in reading the poem, already with no prospect of both halves converging into a whole, is deeply disturbing. This disturbance is further intensified as the speaker, Manuelzinho's landlady, seeks to involve the reader in her own anxiety and frustration.

#### 3.2.1. Ill-Defined Identities

The pattern of unresolvable identities and positions begins from the moment the poem opens with what can scarcely be considered a definition of the other, creating anxiety from the outset:

Half squatter, half tenant (no rent)—

a sort of inheritance; white

The man is contrasted against a set of values based on the terms of capital exchange and productivity (and on the elided speaker's power to represent him: the ill-definition of the poetic persona herself is conveniently elided by contrast, in the poem's subtitle). The fact that Manuelzinho does not pay rent is explained as "a sort of inheritance," a time-bound value by which present and past interact. The legitimacy of this "sort of inheritance" is rejected in the speaker's tone, suggesting her view that his time-bound values should obviously be left behind, in the past, in favor of those of a progressive future which she conveniently produces as an improvement for him. In these opening lines it seems that the speaker is addressing either the reader or the poet, and that Manuelzinho is the object not of their conversation, but rather of a detached description and exposure of his features—not subjective, but objective and impersonal, as in the tedious reading of items in a checklist.

Manuelzinho's indefinition marks the initial lack of an acknowledgment of his status as the poem's interlocutor, which crassly generates an imaginary three-member group of persons—the poet, the speaker, and the reader—sharing one same set of cultural paradigms, contrasted against Manuelzinho, who is thus ostracized to a minority position. However, the third verse suddenly undercuts the assumption of detached depiction by shifting to a tone of frankness addressing Manuelzinho himself, directly:

in your thirties now, and supposed

to supply me with vegetables

The man's approximate age is revealed as evidence of his physical ability to work, and so it functions to define as sheer laziness his unwillingness to comply with the speaker's code of civilized exchange—in other words, to offer some sort of retribution to what by now has been characterized condescendingly as a favor, the opportunity for learning, that he receives from

the benevolent, concerned speaker. The readers are not given a clue for what seems clearly to be Manuelzinho's unwilling attitude; in order to fill in this gap, we are therefore supposed to rely on what follows—an allusion to the *natural* stubbornness or unwillingness of the *primitive*:

But you don't; or you won't; or you can't  
get the idea through your brain—

Already in the sixth verse, therefore even before she has gotten halfway through the first stanza, the poem has displayed the workings by which self and other are defined in an opposition between relevant and irrelevant values. Manuelzinho is not a squatter, not a tenant, not an employee—not even a barterer. He simply does not fit. Still, and by the same token, Manuelzinho resists placement. Because this challenges the dichotomous discourse of fixed identities, it is a source of anxiety for the landlady, who cannot grasp the motives or meanings of whom Bishop would call, in a letter to her friends living in England, “the poor little man”:

You paint—heaven knows why—  
the outside of the crown  
and brim of your straw hat.  
Perhaps to reflect the sun?  
Or perhaps when you were small,  
your mother said, “Manuelzinho,  
one thing: be sure you always  
paint your straw hat.”

The speaker is caught ironically in the contradiction of producing an egalitarian discourse so as to humanize herself against the “primitive man.” This requires her acknowledgment that she is ignorant of his reasons and sources, trivialized, nevertheless, by the tone of mockery

directed at a supposedly superstitious (read primitive) mother. Torn between the validity of the other's value system, on the one hand, and the impossibility of uprooting him (read saving him) from his own background values, on the other, she resorts to a *dissolution* of conflict:

One was gold for a while,  
but the gold wore off, like plate.  
One was bright green. Unkindly,  
I called you Klorophyll Kid.  
My visitors thought it was funny.  
I apologize here and now.

If the speaker is confused, the reader is even more so, but at least this confusion provides what Bishop called a “front” for the narrative: in short, it deflects attention from the speaker's tight spot. And the strategy works, apparently, since it immediately restores her humanitarian characterization. In the “under side of it” (“Dimensions” 101), however, if conflict cannot be resolved, the next best strategy is to dissolve it, into a feeling of perpetuity that often creates what Bishop called, in her critique of Gertrude Stein's timing, a “self-imposed dizziness” (“Time's Andromedas” 116). In assuming unresolvability as a dissolution of conflict, this strategy is analogous to the first strategy of reducing intercultural conflict into the consonance of the speaker's centrality. By restoring the poem's focus on the speaker's humanity against a chaotic, inhumane and dehumanizing reality, the tone of Bishop's narrative immediately confirms her speaker's solipsistic discourse, very much along the lines of the confessional tradition (see chapter 5). To stop at such a reading would only empower that discourse, re-centering and humanizing the speaker against the “primitive man”:

You helpless, foolish man,  
I love you all I can,

I think. Or do I?  
 I take off my hat, unpainted  
 and figurative, to you.  
 Again, I promise to try.

It should be clear, if only from the adverb “again,” that this speaker is bound to continue breaking such a promise. The imperialist power to assert hierarchy through representation cannot be written off by a sudden awakening in the confessional stall.<sup>59</sup> It remains recalcitrant even as the positions of observer and observed are reverted, as in the passage above. If the speaker does not succeed in trapping the other into her framework of order, nor does the poem succeed in trapping her imperialist gaze. It slips away—not into the middle of nowhere, but carrying through its own unresolvable meanings which, far from dissolving conflict, expand its force, exceeding the speaker’s control. Next we will see some subtextual meanings that are potentialized when unresolvable dissonance marks the reading process, disturbing the linear timeframe of resolution or dissolution of conflict.

### 3.2.2. Nature vs. Nurture

We have seen that Bishop’s speaker initially portrays Manuelzinho as a man who is unable, or stubbornly unwilling, to be nourished by culture. As I indicated earlier, this portrayal is strengthened by the poem’s subtitle affirming a bond, overtly displayed by the author with her speaker, “a friend,” implicitly including the reader in their community of progressive (read higher) values. Only in passing does the speaker mention the possibility that Manuelzinho is purposefully refusing to agree with his landlady’s approach to him as part of the deal closed around her purchase of the land:

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<sup>59</sup> The pervasive self-aggrandizing effects of discourses of humanitarianism find a good example in the oxymoron “subdued magnificence” in Bishop’s statement on Robert Lowell: “One does miss the old trumpet blast of *Lord Weary’s Castle*, but poets have to change, and possibly the more subdued magnificence of his later tone is more humane” (Brown 17).

supposed  
 to supply me with vegetables,  
 but you don't; *or you won't*;<sup>60</sup> or you and can't  
 get the idea through your brain—

Reinforced by this exasperated tone is the implicit assumption that Manuelzinho is to blame for the inequality of his exchange with the buyer of his land. Much of her exasperation is due to the fact that the deal would be considered fair if only Manuelzinho would cooperate by receiving, as compensation for his “dispossession,” the benefit of learning his (presumably philanthropic) landlady’s modern values. Thus, the man is depicted as hampering the potentially equal exchange willed by what is then configured to be the superior value system of the more powerful buyer—values which should confirm her expectations of controlling the land (and Manuelzinho) with the regularity necessary to guarantee regular produce as well:

Tilted above me, your gardens  
 ravish my eyes. You edge  
 the beds of silver cabbages  
 with red carnations, and lettuces  
 mix with alyssum. And then  
 umbrella ants arrive,  
 or it rains for a solid week  
 and the whole thing’s ruined again  
 and I buy you more pounds of seeds,  
 imported, guaranteed,  
 and eventually you bring me  
 a mystic three-legged carrot,

or a pumpkin “bigger than the baby.”

### 3.2.3. The Anxiety of the Discourse of Equal Exchange

The speaker seeks to control Manuelzinho by getting him to control the land according to her aims of work regularity and standardized produce; simultaneously, however, the land is “always already” released from her control by Manuelzinho, who resists definition by neither openly opposing nor complying with her aims. Thus the land is written in two irreconcilable, dissonant ways. Whereas the speaker writes it within a static framework of regularized or *titled property* (a *product*), Manuelzinho writes it within a framework of *time* (a *process*). As he *traces* its historical place, he writes the land not on paper but through “the steep paths [he has] made / or [his] father and grandfather made.” This is a framework of ownership through experience and ongoing interaction with the land. In this light, it is no wonder that Manuelzinho bonds with the speaker’s discourse of humanitarian philanthropy only through a double-edged discourse that both reassures and defers titled property:

In the kitchen we dream together  
 how the meek shall inherit the earth—  
 or several acres of mine

I want to point out that criticism of this poem often considers Manuelzinho either innocently or stubbornly savage, in any case inept or unqualified for modernity, thus disregarding altogether the possibility that his refusal “to get the idea through [his] brain” may take place actually from *within* the framework of capital/labor exchange rather than dumbfounded by it. Meanwhile, the reader is instructed to share in the speaker’s values of progressive resolution, whose superiority is naturalized by the speaker in her contempt that veers on pity for Manuelzinho. That his *ways* are portrayed as irresolute, unpredictable and unproductive implicitly invites the reader’s complicity with the speaker, whose *values* are produced as

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<sup>60</sup> Italics mine, to emphasize the speaker’s awareness of the possibility that Manuelzinho was

benevolent, caring and secure (thus Manuelzinho is portrayed as not having *values* of his own, only chaotic *ways*).

### 3.2.4. Property (Place): Fencing In Process (Time)

This clash of the landlady's and Manuelzinho's diverging cultural approaches to the land—a clash in which products contrast with unexpected events that reveal the complexity of nature and culture in close interaction—is clear in the poem:

You edge  
 the beds of silver cabbages  
 with red carnations, and lettuces  
 mix with alyssum. And then  
 umbrella ants arrive,  
 or it rains for a solid week  
 and the whole thing's ruined again  
 and I buy you more pounds of seeds,  
 imported, guaranteed,  
 and eventually you bring me  
 a mystic three-legged carrot,  
 or a pumpkin "bigger than the baby."

Manuelzinho's refusal to "get the idea through [his] brain"—*his* incapacity to adapt—apparently naturalizes *her* framework of order as being more evolved within a linear timeframe. The more she fails to map the man onto the past, the more she needs to exoticize him, representing him as primitive, nonsensical, even savage. Thus, the poem itself enacts the failure of Bishop's strategy to place the man in the position of antithetical dissonance on a linear, consonant geography of evolution.

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uninterested rather than unable to supply her with the produce of the land.



Refusing to give in to the speaker's assumptions of property over the land and over Manuelzinho's knowledge of it, he remains dissonant: improvident and unpredictable. It is not surprising that the more the speaker senses the shattering of her stiff cultural geography, the more anxiously she insists on producing the man as self-evidently inferior and strange, as in these short, accelerated, almost desperate phrases:

The strangest things happen, to you.

Your cow eats a "poison grass"

and drops dead on the spot.

Nobody else's does.

Attempting but failing to dis-implicate herself from the conflict of her powerlessness, the speaker mistakes Manuelzinho's resistance to her idealization of controlled and predictable productivity for what she produces as his unrealistic, foolish, romantic mysticism:

Among endless variety,

you eat boiled cabbage stalks.

And once I yelled at you

so loud to hurry up

and fetch me those potatoes

your holey hat flew off,

you jumped out of your clogs,

leaving three objects arranged

in a triangle at my feet,

as if you'd been a gardener

in a fairy tale all this time

and at the word "potatoes"

had vanished to take up your work

of fairy prince somewhere.

In this ultimate self-centering strategy of exoticizing the other, Manuelzinho's recalcitrance or "stubbornness" in keeping himself dissonant in relation to the speaker's consonant order is associated with backwardness and *retardation*.<sup>61</sup> Depicted as resisting progress, Manuelzinho is dehumanized.<sup>62</sup>

### 3.2.5. Implicit Madness: the Discourse of Exclusion

The dehumanization of alterity affected Bishop profoundly due to her mother's isolation for madness and subsequent early death in a mental hospital—after which began the poet's experience of homelessness, on which she wrote so much (see Harrison 1993: 107-41.) My reading of Bishop's dissonant poetics is informed by the hypothesis that her experience of a disseminating outsiderhood (atonal dissonance)—pressing her into such reductionist, antithesized identity affirmations as a "madwoman's" daughter, twice or three times an "expatriate," numberless times a "foreigner," a "lesbian," a "feminist," an "anti-feminist," an "alcoholic," an "imperialist," an "exotic" other—can be read as a resonating trace, an ongoing displacement and refusal to resolve multilayered dissonant identities into the consonance of identity.

Bishop's traumatic quest for relationality with alterity, however, was just as pervasively challenged by her refusal to be marginalized or isolated, outcast as her mother had been. Read in this light, her Brazilian poems produce outsiders not in order to rewrite the narrative of exclusion, but to overwrite it, so as to exceed the reductionist discourse of consonance. In doing so, it constructs outsidership as the *irreducibility of the subject to any*

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<sup>61</sup> This term is closely related with representations of otherness and dissonance.

<sup>62</sup> This representation, in order to be self-exempting (I have both the writer and the "friend of the writer" in mind), is most effective when legitimized by what, in another context, Wai Chee Dimock has called *blaming the victim*: by ascribing free agency to all, the discourse of self-freedom (consonance) assigns its own sovereignty while at the same time assigning responsibility of victimization (dissonance) to the subjects themselves (1989: 111).

*static identity*—what Kristeva calls, in her essay on abjection, “an *opening* toward the new, as an attempt to tally with the incongruous” (1982: 188, qtd. emphasis).

Indeed, it is the irreducibility of experience into cultural categories which makes culture shock an experience asserting subjectivity while shattering identity. When Bishop’s narrators portray to her Anglo-American audience the conditions she is confronting in Brazil, projecting her own perplexity onto and through a disturbing subtext that blurs identities, they are also conveying precisely what incites selfhood in the most radical dimension of subjectivity: being *subject to* contingency.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the stronger the antagonisms she confronts, the more effectively she presents herself in a control generated out of her own subjectivity, rather than out of the environment from which she is anxious to detach herself. The more intense she portrays culture shock, the more reassuring is the construction of a lucid—and *sane*—self-reliant *I* through the text. And that is not all. The projection of her culture shock onto the reader is also a strategy for protecting herself from oversimplifications of her foreign experience—oversimplifications by which her audience might otherwise easily map her onto the remote, exotic, peripheral realm of the country in which she is living.<sup>64</sup>

In this context of an outsidersness moving from marginality to centrality, it is hardly surprising that the theme of madness and aberration underlies the representation of Manuelzinho by this uncomfortable speaker. The man is initially portrayed in the manner of a “chiseling halfwit” who, “[b]y embracing all of the roles available to the impoverished, . . . begins to assume an almost human form”; or, in a Caliban-like depiction, an “uncerebral

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<sup>63</sup> This notion of *subjectivity* connects with Bishop’s notion of *freedom*: see chapter 1 n32.

<sup>64</sup> In a letter to Robert Lowell in 1960, Bishop wrote:

I worry a great deal about what to do with all this accumulation of exotic or picturesque or charming detail, and I don’t want to become a poet who can only write about South America, etc.—it is one of my greatest worries now—how to use everything and keep on living here, most of the time, probably—and yet be a New Englander-herring-choker-bluenoser at the same time. (qtd. in Goldensohn 1992: 17)

criminal . . . if not actually guilty [then] accursed . . . plagued with misshapen produce . . . unable to voice his struggle [except] through his uncertainty, unreliability, ineptitude, and occasional surprising grace” (Doreski 1993: 118-19). However, the poem develops into allowing a reading, toward its end, by which Manuelzinho’s indefinability is a pivotal strategy allowing him to move away from the speaker’s interpellations that pretend to fence him into her univocal categories. Still tempted to evade the resilient power of a reality that cannot be controlled under rationales or causal explanations, the speaker assumes her stand to be realistic, hindered in contrast by his unproductive, aimless, *lunatic* ways:

Twined in wisps of fog,  
I see you all up there  
.  
.  
.  
-- all just standing, staring  
off into fog and space.  
Between us float a few  
big, soft, pale-blue,  
sluggish fireflies,  
the jellyfish of the air . . .  
.  
.  
.  
You paint—heaven knows why—  
the outside brim of your straw hat.  
Perhaps to reflect the sun?

### 3.2.6. Whose “Manuelzinho”?

The speaker’s anxiety to assert her centrality in this conflict is only compounded by the fact that, in decentering the other to an object position, she isolates herself from him in the process—and from the land. Her anxiety materializes into the concrete fact that she ironically

relies on Manuelzinho to assert her own control, generating a problem analogous to that of contradictory interpellations in ethnographic research:

What occurs in the preparation of a text utilizing [living persons] does involve the transformation of “raw material” . . . Whether construed as capitalist entrepreneur or laborer, then, the researcher is the person whose time and investment is acknowledged and rewarded . . . [O]f the frequent claim that [such an exchange] is empowering in that it “gives a voice” to those who might otherwise remain silent, one may well ask: is it empowerment or is it appropriation? (Patai 1994: 144)

Bishop was well aware of the problem. Shortly after the publication of *Manuelzinho*, she wrote in a letter to the Barkers, “I’ve earned so much money off the poor little man now I feel guilty every time he comes to the kitchen door with a bunch of monster radishes” (June 5 1956, Princeton). Her post-script self-consciousness of the asymmetrical exchange between the man and herself generates more anxiety than any kind of resolution in practical terms: her words and tone suppress her concern over having reduced Manuelzinho to *raw material* for her intellectual labor. Associating his figure jokingly with the aberrant vegetables he supplies her with (those which the poem says he is supposed to supply but doesn’t), her letter deflects attention from the anxieties of contradiction and guilt that she discloses to her friends, only to once again reinscribe the dehumanization of Manuelzinho in the process. This is a typical move of colonial discourse to suppress the inequalities on which the imperialist project is based by highlighting its humanist ends, and essentializing those inequalities as a product of the other’s aberrant “nature” *not* to evolve.

In the context of this imperialist move, it is hardly surprising that, in order to efface Manuelzinho’s power of resistance, the speaker must portray him such as to justify her desire to contain his relationality with the land, and, ultimately, to contain the land itself as a site of

undesired historicity, with its history of generations in the hands of the other. The land is thus portrayed as being both threatening because of its dissonant geography, and threatened by that geography, which, rather than appropriating or mapping the land, puts into relief its responsiveness to the dynamics of the other's necessity and *motion* instead:

I watch you through the rain,  
trotting, light, on bare feet,  
up the steep paths you have made—  
or your father and grandfather made—  
all over my property

Bishop's anxiety to safeguard the hierarchy of her speaker's position over Manuelzinho is evident in this passage, as the narrator must overtly claim the property in face of the evidence of the family history of a mode of ownership ("a sort of inheritance") pertaining to the place. The evidence I refer to are the traces of that family history itself, literally: the paths traced by bare feet over generations on the land. As she is increasingly threatened, indeed disturbed by her inability to control Manuelzinho—and the land—into her mode of property, or at the very least to share his rapport and intimacy with it ("trodding, light, on bare feet / up the steep paths . . ." dangerously wet in the rain), her anxiety to efface the dissonant reality of co-existing conflicting scales of values intensifies, leading her into isolation:

and feel I can't endure it  
another minute; then,  
indoors, beside the stove,  
keep on reading a book.

Notice that the sequence set up by the conjunction "then" followed by the verbal phrase "keep on" has a pivotal rather than linear effect. On the one hand, "then" creates an expectation of a coherent progression of structural relations within a mobile yet controlled

form. On the other hand, this impression of linearity is not at all mirrored by semantic exactness: to “keep on reading a book” means simultaneously *to resume* what was interrupted (the attention in reading, which had been drawn outside towards Manuelzinho) and to *continue* what was never interrupted (she never left her spot after all, so her perception of Manuelzinho fails). Although the surface text produces an impression of self-confidence and resolution into consonance (in both cases, the narrator confirms her initial position), this underlying twofold effect mocks the pretension of linearity, so that dissonance exceeds consonance even while pretending to confirm it.

Clearly, “reading a book” is very unlike walking barefoot on the land in terms of asserting one’s bond with it; ultimately, it is undecidable whether “reading a book” indeed resolves the conflict which the narrator had not been able to endure. It does not seem to, from the trivializing article in “a book”—there is no sign of involvement there (although there is irony, once the reader is engaged in the exact same act). However, it is taken for granted that it does produce the expected resolution, on the surface text which relies, to this end, on the literariness effected (literally in this case) by the act of reading. In other words, the narrator resorts to reading as a strategy of legitimizing her framework of land ownership over Manuelzinho’s. She reinscribes the dichotomy culture/nature between herself and the man in order to assert her cultural superiority, an effect further strengthened as she bonds with the reader, also “reading a book”. Elided from the dichotomy culture/nature, represented on the surface text as landlady/Manuelzinho, is the disturbing possibility that the speaker is exasperated *by her own ignorance, or effacement*, of the other’s knowledge of the land. (The possibility is disturbing because it would align the man with culture rather than with nature, therefore shattering the whole dichotomous framework legitimizing resolution—into the proprietor’s value system over Manuelzinho’s—on the grounds of an evolutionary, linear progression.)

### 3.2.7. Dissonant Interpellations of the Land

The speaker's insulation within literariness is in stark contrast with the relationality between the man and the land. While he relates to its dissonant geography by trailing its steep hills with steep paths instead of flattening out the land onto an easily manageable form, she recoils indoors in anguish and denial. The coherence of her economic power over the land—along with her expectation for the easy, comfortable product (consonance) of Manuelzinho's labor, which she had presumed as a bonus on her financial power to provide him and his family with medicine and food—only vanishes in thin air:

You starve  
your horse and yourself  
and your dogs and family.  
Among endless variety,  
you eat boiled cabbage stalks.  
And once I yelled at you  
so loud to hurry up  
and fetch me those potatoes  
your holey hat flew off,  
you jumped out of your clogs,  
leaving three objects arranged  
in a triangle at my feet,  
as if you'd been a gardener  
in a fairy tale all this time  
and at the word "potatoes"  
had vanished to take up your work  
of fairy prince somewhere.



What vanishes is not only the expectation of securing the speaker's order—namely, that of taming Manuelzinho into taming the land—, but also of reassuring the speaker's centrality in the encounter that should lead to a progressive transition from rural to urban, provincial to cosmopolitan life. That centrality, after all, should have brought Manuelzinho to meet his landlady's expectations of making the land more productive. On the contrary, though, the speaker is disempowered by the unexpected fact that she cannot contain his dissonant interaction with the land. From this perspective, the land is more in Manuelzinho's hands than in hers, since she depends on *his* produce to legitimize the replacement of his framework (of a dissonant geography or relationality with the land) with hers (of a consonant geography or taming of the land). In this sense, he displays *the landlady's* dependency on *him* to allow her to impose her consonant geography on the dissonant reality of their conflicting positions—a reality that resists being fit into the speaker's idealization of harmony as a solipsistic progression.

Manuelzinho resists yet another way the speaker uses to impose (her) order of consonance: the technologies of quantitative analysis, mapping, and classification. The account books do not work, the telephone wires are stolen, and to appropriate him as a classified botanical species (“Klorophyll (*sic*) Kid) marks the crumbling of her humanitarian discourse of philanthropy. Such repeatedly failing appropriations threaten her framework of hierarchy which had initially signaled detachment, contempt, and mastery—all the qualities hitherto supposed to conceal her anxiety of control over the dissonant reality of conflicting orders.

### **3.2.8. Biblical Quotations in the Project to Legitimize Consonance**

The comparison of Manuelzinho to Cain—the representative of the dispossessed—is one of two powerful biblical quotations used by the speaker to legitimize her capitalist appropriation of his land. First, in giving the land to Abel, the good son, the episode of Cain's

curse in the Old Testament produces the righteousness of appropriation. In the speaker's denial of Manuelzinho's co-existing but irreconcilable framework of order, she portrays him as unreliable, unable, or unwilling to meet his obligations to his benevolent superior. In what is clearly a reversal of the roles of exploiter and exploited to patch up the myth of righteous progress, she seeks to victimize herself under his unwillingness to establish a relationship of equality based on the exchange of labor and capital. This trope of the untamed land in the hands of the lazy native is the typical excuse of the colonizer to legitimize appropriation: legitimacy is due to whichever order makes the land more productive (whichever order resolves dissonance), thus taming the land into the consonance of the progressive standards of "order and progress".<sup>65</sup>

Whether resisting or evading her role as colonizer, Bishop dis-places the narrative that defines otherness in terms of hierarchical inferiority (conflating nationality and class), *re-placing* it by defining otherness in terms of productivity. This displacement occurs as she adopts the voice of her Brazilian friend, a voice that is class-conscious ("In the kitchen we dream together / how the meek shall inherit the earth –"), benevolent to the extreme of being victimized, even, by Manuelzinho's helplessness, as he is uncooperative enough to turn down her "good deeds". Out of the picture now, Bishop can elide nationalist discourse and still redeem herself of its colonial trope of the untamed land by projecting it onto a Brazilian other. Thus she takes on the role of the egalitarian poet merely elaborating, supposedly from "an outside," an ethic from which to view the conflict. Bishop splits onto the speaker, therefore, just as she splits onto Manuelzinho. For someone receiving the benefits of the

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<sup>65</sup> In the text she wrote for the Time-Life book *Brazil*, Bishop points out that this phrase, "Order and Progress," which is stamped on the Brazilian national flag, was the slogan of the Positivist group at the time of the Old Republic, which "started as an improvised collaboration of ill-assorted elements: the idealistic Positivist group that dreamed of establishing a political utopia; the military group led by the first president . . . ; and the great landowners, many of whom had been ruined by the abolition of slavery" (1962: 128).

dollar's skyrocketing appreciation on Brazil's inflationary financial market,<sup>66</sup> her reprimand of Manuelzinho's low productivity is strikingly ironic when confronted with the recurrent crises concerning what she regarded as slumps in her own productivity, which come up again and again in accounts of her personal biography (see, for example, Harrison 1993: 78-79).<sup>67</sup>

The second biblical quotation ("the meek shall inherit the earth—or several acres of mine") is an ironic reference to a change in rhetoric covering up an unchanging content, from the Old to the New Testament. In the former, it is written that "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Psalms 37.11), and in the latter that "the humble will receive what God has promised" (Mt. 5.5); "the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them" (Mt 5.10). The inheritance of the earth by the poor is thus displaced in both cases to an indefinite future, guaranteeing, also in both cases, the possession of the land by the rich in the present.

As in the scene of the rivers in "Santarém," as we shall see, the speaker's procedure is to construct (her) consonance by using European/biblical narratives. As in "Santarém" too, however, the discursive frame does not fit. Instead, the speaker's discourse becomes increasingly conflated with resonant meanings. Nearing the end of the poem, the statement "I love you all I can" evokes the meaning "I cannot love you"—naturalizing hierarchy along a linear timeframe even while acknowledging its arbitrariness.

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<sup>66</sup> The following are some of the excerpts on which my argument is based:

I'm investing some money here - borrowed it from my U.S. bank and invested here where interests are fantastically high; and I can pay them back and still make quite a bit (to Aunt Grace, from Samambaia, July 5 1956, Box 25, Vassar);

Brasilian money is slipping so fast it's terrifying. It is fine for me - I am very rich, as far as buying things here goes - (to Aunt Grace, from Petrópolis, May 20, 1958, Box 25, Vassar);

The inflation here is like a nightmare - prices are about 2,000 % more than when I came here if you can imagine that. Of course my \$\$\$ keep rising, too - but not enough - and I can still manage here while I'd have to teach or something in the U S (to Aunt Grace, from Samambaia, March 18 1963, Box 25, Vassar)

### 3.2.9. The Gaze Refracted

In retrospect, “Klorophyll Kid” is a frame by which the poetic persona deconstructs this speaker’s gaze of exclusion: instead of depicting the other, the poem reverts the speaker’s gaze onto herself. It is relevant that it is her own outsiderness, stereotypically americanized into the sarcastic “Kid” frame, that she projects onto Manuelzinho—and that it doesn’t work. This is the moment when the speaker finally implicates herself in the dissonant reality which she had so far effaced, relinquishing its resolution and engaging instead its disturbing power:

You helpless, foolish man,  
 I love you all I can,  
 I think. Or do I?  
 I take off my hat, unpainted  
 and figurative, to you.  
 Again I promise to try.

Bishop’s draft of the poem shows that the last line above was rephrased, having initially read “But, can’t you try?” (Box 57, Vassar). This urge to assert self-centrality as well as the power to produce hierarchy cannot be written off or resolved by the stroke of a pen, by a “promise to try”. In the end, the poem does not pretend to succeed in solving the speaker’s imperialist gaze. Bishop stops the poem precisely when the gaze must be neither resolved nor dissolved, but confronted.

In this light, to “promise to try” revises the promise to resolve dissonance into a promise *not* to. Rather than promising a resolution into consonance, the speaker promises to engage the dissonant resonances and silences that ensue from her changing subjectivity. Thus the poem ends by clashing against the very framework it has developed. By exposing its

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<sup>67</sup> I see no need to take Bishop’s word for her slumps in productivity, however. As her manuscripts show, she stashed up on fragments and entire drafts, many of which completed, of texts she would not think to publish.

failure to dismiss Manuelzinho's meanings despite all attempts to resolve them, the poem opens itself to its own contradictions. The speaker acknowledges, by the last stanza, the arrogant arbitrariness of her humanistic exasperation to change the man:

Unkindly,  
I called you Klorophyll Kid.  
My visitors thought it was funny.  
I apologize here and now.

By the end of the poem, the speaker's awareness of this ignorance and ignoring of her own biased position cannot be reduced to a reading of the mere evidence of her humanitarian self-restraint, obliterating all she restrains *from*, why, and how. Such readings succeed in anticipating for Bishop the very aura of modesty, humility, and unquestionable ethical integrity which her unsolipsistic poetics significantly demystifies. At the very least, they evade the fact that, though elaborating an ethics, her recognition of bias is an operation by which she gains double control over the other: after all, to perform authority to the point of purportedly relinquishing it (as if she could erase her power of representation in the first place) is, ultimately, to reassert authority over the other, even while redeeming herself of the act.

As I mentioned earlier, a poet(h)ics operating in the intercultural text should problematize even Bishop's speaker's acknowledgment of arrogance. Otherwise, the acknowledgment of bias merely feeds into the aura of the magnanimous, benevolent authorial self, at the expense of further patronizing the other. Thus, caught between dissimulating a false equality or consonance on the one hand, and perpetuating arrogance on the other (as in the final verse "but, can't you try?" of Bishop's manuscript drafts), Bishop must dramatize the poem by speaking through an adopted voice, splitting authorial identity between author and speaker so as to transfer her responsibility of representation to "a friend," as made

explicit in the poem's bracketed subtitle: "Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking." Failure, which is more effective in the words of an un-author-ized speaker, can no longer be effaced through another "promise to try". Failure thus becomes the performative starting point for a poetics of ethics between incompatible frameworks of identity. Wavering, irresolution, anxiety, deferral: the poetic persona no longer finds herself secure within a self-reliant identity. In refusing resolution, the poem also refuses to unproblematize cultural homogenization into the aesthetic of a consonant geography.

Thus, if the speaker acknowledges the validity of Manuelzinho's meanings, it is not because she engages relationality with him. Instead, she "promises to try" because, having failed in her previous attempts to establish her order as "better" or "more civilized" than his, she must now resort to asserting a contrast between his primitive helplessness and her civilized willingness to learn. The tone of the last verse may well read as humanitarian discourse, but it is more accurately its display, since while the speaker portrays herself as being uniquely capable of self-criticism and self-consciousness, the poem's dissonant poetics *both* reinscribes *and* disavows such hierarchy.

### **3.2.10. Irresolution vs. Inactivity**

Manuelzinho does not voice a stand; instead, he defers any stand, resisting any reduction of meaning. Though his ambivalent silence is initially presumed as the stubbornness of a "helpless, foolish man," it resists appropriation, becoming powerfully ambivalent toward the end of the poem, when the speaker becomes implicated in her representation of him. That confrontation entangles the readers in the irreducibility of Manuelzinho's dissonant positioning and in their self-implicating imposition of meanings on his silence.

Some critics have remarked (see chapter 1n8) that this poem is inferior as compared to Bishop's North-American corpus, due to the writer's withdrawal, dis-implicating herself

from the scene.<sup>68</sup> However, what makes the poem powerful is not its moral attractiveness, but precisely the fact that it foregrounds the vulnerability of the discourse of benevolence, *disguising intercultural hierarchy* (the writer vis-à-vis Manuelzinho) in the guise of *intracultural hierarchy* (the Brazilian landlady vis-à-vis Manuelzinho), i.e., in the voice of “a friend”. Thus the writer seeks to project onto the upper-class Brazilian the ethical dilemma they (the writer and her friend) share in their anxiety to evade the disturbance caused by Manuelzinho, who challenges them to historicize rather than dehistoricize the land. By the end of the poem the enactment of an affirmative politics, posited in the feigned resolution of the speaker’s “promise to try,” only perpetuates Manuelzinho’s silence further in the anxiety to restore the speaker’s visibility and centrality. Thus caught in a loop, this political strategy to convey a conclusive, positive (re)olution is countered by the underlying *prolongation* of formerly consonant meanings (the speaker’s benevolence, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, etc.) that now become dissonant for disrupting the speaker’s framework of certainty and positive representation (of the other and of the self). This vulnerability in the poem suspends the positive, affirmative representation which, in its alignment with capital ownership, is as arbitrary as that of the interpreter of culture who reduces or flattens historical reality (dissonance) to a commodity, legitimizing its consumption as its only acceptable form

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<sup>68</sup> Brett Millier’s remark that “[t]he fiction is necessary because the poem’s message has to do with the distance between the *tenant* and the *landowner*, and Elizabeth herself owned no land” (1993: 271) is anxious to evade the distance, disturbing also for Bishop (as we have seen in section 3.2.6.), between the *writer* and her (profitable) *representation* of Manuelzinho. This anxiety is evident in Millier’s haste to obliterate precisely the point that makes the poem disturbing from the outset, destabilizing the speaker’s initial, apparently self-confident representation: the fact that Manuelzinho’s subject-position can *not* be defined or reduced to that of a “tenant”. More serious still is Millier’s reduction of generations of history on the land to “the family’s long tenancy”. This apparently self-evident assumption is misleading: it overrides the entire complexity of land capitalization in Brazil by arbitrarily suggesting that the verses “the steep paths you have made – / or your father and grandfather made – / all over my property” show evidence that the land belonged to previous generations of the *speaker’s* family rather than Manuelzinho’s. His family is thus taken for granted as having benefited, and for

(consonance). The poem thus turns itself under, and frustrates any wishful thinking concerning the writer's supposed neutrality or detachment from the scene.

We have seen in “Manuelzinho” that the notion of time as an expansion from a linear sequence (tonal progression, or consonance) to intersecting sequences over time (sustained dissonance) is constructed when—even within the process of mapping the other into a past time, remote from the speaker's humanitarian and progressive vantage point—the poem's own dichotomous assumptions, of a modern self constituted against a backward other, do not cohere. Having set Manuelzinho's ways apart as being aberrant and senseless, the poem catches the speaker in the contradictions of a *humanist discourse which dehumanizes the other*. Shifting between these two incompatible frameworks which do not cancel each other out, the tension denaturalizes the speaker's tone of certainty, and calls attention to Manuelzinho's cultural values for once. In this light, the speaker's representation of Manuelzinho is self-defeating by the end of the poem. Their distinct frameworks can be read so as to resist merging into any univocal truth: they compose neither a hybrid nor a syncretic view, but what Derrida calls, as we have seen, a “bifurcated writing” in which is inscribed the silence as untranslatable noise—in a word, the *interval* of the release of “the dissonance of a writing within speech” (1981b: 42). Such meaning-making dissonance is irreducible to the progressive view of modernization and its implicit assumptions of naturally or evolutionarily hierarchized identities. These assumptions are also undercut in Bishop's texts addressing timing and memory, as we shall see in “Santarém”.

### 3.3. “SANTARÉM”

The maps can not be saved (I mean our coasts)  
 There's no saving them. Plant millions of pines,  
 dead Christmas trees; th'appropriate grasses  
 -All over th'escaping dunes. The dunes move on.  
 Cement's the worst. Whole forts go now.  
 Old railroad ties perhaps are a little better—  
 But no—the miles of beach don't want to stay...

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generations, of the “landowner's tolerance”. See Cândido 1977 for an analytical description of the socioeconomic positions and relations in the transition to a capitalist economy in rural Brazil.



Elizabeth Bishop, untitled, unpublished poem

There's nothing at all complicated about it. It's like making a map. Eventually, all the pieces fall in place.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1950 interview

The assumption that the foreign culture can be mapped onto a primitive past, or that it can be resolved into the speaker's supposedly evolved, central framework, is effectively shattered in Bishop's Brazilian poem "Santarém." Begun most probably in 1962, and finished and published in 1978, this poem is about the interpreter's failing attempt to evade, through selective recollection, the threatening encounter with a reality that resists being reduced to the consonance of a static form or formula. Faced with this disturbing threat, the afflicted persona tries repeatedly to contain into a received harmony the events that may disturb her habitual patterns of thought. After several frustrated attempts to otherize the place and its people, Bishop chooses to stop the poem precisely when the reader must contrast the speaker against *another foreigner* in Brazil, in their symmetrical responses to what is in either case an exotic souvenir. This difference defers the binary pattern of oppositions constructed so far in the poem. At this point, the reader experiences first-hand the movement of the mind acknowledging that reality must be experienced in the complexity of its dissonant geography rather than controlled by binary reductions of meaning.

### 3.3.1. Memory and Other Dissonant Geographies in "Santarém"

"Santarém" begins by addressing the arbitrary and ephemeral nature of meaning—requiring that "the *recognition* itself of what is being written must be kept fluid" ("Dimensions" 97-100). From the outset, the speaker emphasizes that her necessarily contingent perspective of the present is always already a reduction or distortion rather than a recovery of any original meanings of the past. In other words, despite its power to overwrite the past, memory does not succeed in obliterating the changing resonances of past experiences. This hierarchical conflict between present and past events disturbs the assumption of an evolutionary timeline inexorably containing the past into a present

resolution. By bringing past experiences into ever-changing perspectives, memory cannot fix meanings, so that even the mapping or description of the place, supposedly a product of objective observation, unexpectedly becomes an open-ended process instead. This is the sense in which geography cannot be reduced to stasis through mapping: because mapping itself is ephemeral. Even as they are written, places, like meanings, find ways of slipping away from fixity.

Aware of the impossibility of recovering the past, and that mapping, as writing, is inconclusive, Bishop nevertheless realizes the need to remember, to elaborate, to map—even if to compensate for the amnesia or loss of intensity of the meanings brought into the present by past experiences. Thus, in “Santarém” she writes, “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong . . .” and, having said that, actually “remembering it all wrong.” As an ephemeral act, mapping allows Bishop to implicate herself in the contradictions and mysteries of geography, emphasizing her poetic search to exceed a linear, hegemonic history. She is aware, as we shall see in “Crusoe in England” too, that remembering reality can only get it “all wrong,” as the necessary perspective of the present is always already a reduction of reality. Thus, her recollection of events is disturbed from the outset by the arbitrariness of re-presenting them: “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong . . .”

Recollecting moments when her steamboat stopped for a few hours in the small town of Santarém (where the Tapajós River flows into the Amazon), the speaker seeks to evade cultural diversity by idealizing a resolution of conflict, imposing the consonance of a familiar pattern of meaning on a *geography that insists on remaining dissonant*. The unresolvable confrontation between an irreducible past reality and the desire to represent it “truthfully” is thus the first difficulty the interpreter is afflicted with.

### **3.3.2. Conflict Unproblematized: Dissolution or Denial of Dissonance**

Aware of the impossibility of recovering the past, the speaker’s anxiety to protect her

familiar meanings leads her to seek refuge in the undisturbing contemplation of nature. Nature is traditionally presumed to be self-present, universal, and autonomous in relation to all contingencies—in other words, less resistant (less dissonant) to interpretation than culture, because governed by immutable laws that, for example, make rivers always flow in a certain direction (“flowing, flowing east.”): “I wanted to go no farther. . . . [but only] to stay awhile in that conflux of two great rivers”. (One might note here, in passing, that the desire to have *nature without people* is typical of the colonizer of new lands, as postcolonial studies have shown.) But dissonant cultural geography invades the desired isolation of speaker and nature: silence is disrupted by “houses, people, and lots of mongrel / riverboats” which, unlike the rivers, unpredictably skitter “back and forth.”

Though the speaker envisions her contemplation of nature as a resolution, a refuge from a cultural reality that resists representation, and though she thus associates nature with consonance, she gradually learns that this oversimplification of nature and of conflicting cultural perceptions eventually fails (by the end of the poem, nature is neither wholly reassuring, nor wholly threatening). No longer able to take refuge in Nature, the question becomes: How can the interpreter appropriate a dissonant reality that refuses representation? The first temptation is to rely on pre-established categories or, in other words, on replacing the *place* by the *idea of the place* (i.e., its memory or recollection), purifying (“demonizing”) it into the homogeneity of consonance.

But interpretation does not succeed in evading diversity. To replace the place by the “idea of the place”—its rivers the same that “sprung from the Garden of Eden”—would mean to destroy it, or to reduce it to the *consonant* stereotype of the new world as paradise. This would be the typical strategy of the colonizer to control the land by making it *consonant* with his previous knowledges, mythologies and desires. The idea must be rejected: “No, that was four / and they’d diverged.” In other words, the place rejects (is *dissonant* to) the idea of the

place, and, in fact, all easy *binary idealizations* (productions of *comfortable consonances*), because the “watery, dazzling dialectic” of cultural history, a permanent flux and process, cannot be stabilized by the monumental categories of language. Like a river, it cannot be grasped and fit into the idea of the observer.

The speaker’s desire that consonance could “stay awhile,” “grandly, silently,” as in epiphany, is thus an artificial respite from conflict—not at all the revelation, through imaginative insight, of a Garden of Eden. The interpreter is right “in the conflux” of two rivers, flowing to the east, in a dissonant “dazzling dialectic” that sets the two rivers in motion, indeed the whole economy and life of the place in motion. Thus, when Bishop argues for the dissolution of oppositions, she is talking about a romantic idealization: after all, if the rivers could dissolve “straight off” into one another, there would be no “dazzling dialectic”.<sup>69</sup> The contradictory and arbitrary idealization, though only initially forcing its way into the poem, remains unproblematized by the speaker, who claims to reject binary interpretations while she actually reinscribes them by setting nature and her idea of the place apart from the people and the place. Assuming an opposition between nature and culture, only to pretend to resolve it, the speaker attempts but fails to impose a framework of interpretation (consonance) into which contradictions might be dissolved.

In this “dazzling dialectic” in which containment proves unfeasible—in which dissolution is frustrated by the dissonant geography of “mongrel / riverboats skittering back and forth”—, it is hardly surprising that the speaker’s anxiety to efface the shattering of her framework of resolution is intensified. Having failed in her attempt to impose on the place the

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<sup>69</sup> In a letter to Octavio Paz in which Bishop discusses her translation of his poem, she makes explicit that the word *dazzling* suggests *surface* texture to her:

The word “dazzling” is correct - but somehow “dazzling” has taken on a slightly different meaning, I think - to me it suggests a surface dazzling or scintillation - which is not what I think you mean exactly. “Brilliant” is probably too vague . . . (from Lewis Wharf, Feb 8 1979, Box 37, Vassar, qtd. emphasis)

stereotype of the new world as paradise, where human imperfection might *resolve* into the exotic, idyllic, seemingly unproblematic harmony of nature, the interpreter next seeks to *dissolve* distinctions altogether, so that culture and nature mingle:

a modest promenade and a belvedere  
 about to fall into the river,  
 . . .  
 The street . . .  
 damp from the ritual afternoon rain,  
 . . .  
 and teams of zebus plodded, gentle, proud,  
 . . .  
 pulling carts with solid wheels.  
 The zebus' hooves, the people's feet  
 waded in the golden sand.

This is a strategy to generalize dissonant details, or to homogenize, dissolve them into the consonance of an absolute truth. Thus, *blue* is taken for granted as “coming together” with yellow (“blue or yellow”) like other binary “literary interpretations” that “would have resolved, dissolved, straight off.” While defining *blue* as antithetically dissonant, the color *yellow*, prevailing in the poem, indicates the comforts of consonance: “That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther . . . everything gilded, burnished along one side” (notice the suggestion of duality, the other side later filled by “blue”); “the dark-gold river sand”; the blue “zebus' hooves, the people's feet / waded in golden sand, / dampered by golden sand . . .” Bishop stresses the word *blue* in italics showing the speaker's *euphoric fascination with the harmony of its resolution into yellow* in “that golden evening” in Santarém. This moment is one of blindness to dissonance, as in denial. As *azulejos* is constituted by the word *azul*

(blue), both colors come together: the yellow tiles *contain* the dissonant color blue, producing an ideal dissolution of conflict. While apparently flexible to difference (“blue or yellow”) in coping with dissonant reality and its destabilization of oppositions, the speaker is anxious to co-opt dissonance so as to confirm consonance through its antithesis, imposing yellow as an artificial harmony on an unruly world.

The unruliness of such a world is thus associated with the “occasional blue eyes,” the corruption of paradise by the values of the foreigner. This conflation of the discourses of authenticity and xenophobia apparently redeems Bishop’s own foreignness in the place (unlike the other foreigners there, she values the indigenous) by assuming an essential purity which has failed to fulfill the sojourner’s expectations of a paradise of consonance—her “immodest demands for a different world / and a better life, and complete comprehension / of both at last, and immediately” (“Arrival at Santos”).

### 3.3.3. Dissonance as Particularization: Disabling Structures of Universality

The strategy of evading the particularities of blue shades in the consonance of yellow also fails: the proliferation and dissemination of details disable idealized generalizations instead (the place resisting generalizations with details, of course, is a *dissonant place that resists its reduction into consonance*). Each time Bishop “corrects” herself so as not to remember it “all wrong,” she does not dismiss her previous perspective, but confronts it. The impossibility to contain such meanings into stasis stems from the fact that details persistently disrupt rather than confirm consonance, disabling any subjugation of content under structure. In the poem, the interpreter’s anxiety to impose meanings thus begins to crack open the binary framework underlying the speaker’s discourse of a consonant geography.

In this light, the poem confronts rather than dissolves binary and cultural oppositions. Each added perspective, treated as antithetical at first, becomes irreducible or relational, disabling systematic reductions. Such a dissonant reality is no longer what Bishop had called

a “circus tent” decades earlier:

If I stretch my thought to Egypt, to India, downtown, it is in my thought I see them and they are not, at the time, reality for me. If I go to these places it is a different matter. Reality, then, is something like a huge circus tent, folding, adjustable, which we carry around with us and set up wherever we are. It possesses the magical property of being able to take on characteristics of whatever place we are in, in fact it can become identical with it. (qtd. in Costello 1991: 129)

To become identical means to resolve conflict by evading particularities, presuming that they should subsume, as if naturally, under a universal truth—and to reach stasis. But the conceptual suspensions and silences in “Santarém” constantly *delude* the poem from setting itself up as a systematic structure containing dissonance. While in the poem the speaker assumes a “circus-tent reality” of consonance by presuming the dissolution of binary “literary interpretations” into a “yellow” (tent-like) framework, the poem refuses or suspends resolution altogether, through the ambivalences of the word *blue*. Though apparently adapting itself to dissonant geographies, the “circus tent” (in the poem, the systematic construct of an idyllic consonance that dissolves conflict) ironically adapts those dissonant geographies into its framework instead—adapts *them* to *itself*. Unchanging, the tent merely moves from one place to the other, solipsistically, as “we carry [it] around with us and set [it] up wherever we are.” It is an equivocation, therefore, to assume that the tent harbors the “magical property of being able to take on characteristics of whatever place we are in, in fact [of becoming] identical with it.” Such a property is actually the solipsistic framework by which dissonance is presumed to be dissolved in the poem, by which the “circus tent” passes for a technology recovering (becoming identical with) an original conciliatory harmony, its systematic structure passing for flexibility while imposing the restoration of a pre-set order, a

ubiquitous one that can be “carried around” anywhere.

### 3.3.4. Consonance as a “Circus-Tent” Reality

In her important discussion of Bishop’s excursive sight, Bonnie Costello argues that the construct of reality in the mind is irreducible to a polarity between imagination and reality. However, when she elaborates on the fictionalizing quality of memory in “Santarém,” the only way she offers to read the historical implications of a discourse that transforms “facts of oppression” into the “charming oddities” of the “picturesque” is as a creative “disdain of social forces”:

In “Santarém” Bishop sets this inevitable fictionalizing quality of memory against the highly qualified idealism of the town. She entertains a certain nostalgia, that is, while remaining self-conscious about the difference between a memory and a reality, about memory’s power to transform what might affront one on arrival of what might be troubling or threatening realities. A lightning storm survived (“*Graças a Deus*—he’d been in Belém”) becomes part of a picturesque landscape. What were once facts of oppression are absorbed into charming oddities and local color: “(After the Civil War some Southern families / came here; here they could still own slaves. / They left occasional blue eyes, English names . . .).” (1991: 174)

This “fictionalizing quality” of a “circus-tent” reality is an attempt to transcend historical reality by imposing meanings, dissolving rather than confronting the conflicts of history. It transfers the “highly qualified idealism of the town” to another kind of idealization, where conflict becomes unproblematized through the exotic and picturesque, dis-implicating the speaker from her discourse of cultural insulation. In other words, it mistakes the imagination—a process of conceiving reality in flexible, unpredictable ways—for an idealized, fixed conception that evades historical contingency. Though passing solely as the



Barthesian “floating signifier,” still the tent suits the sojourner’s purpose to evade relationality with the place—except, of course, when it comes to feeding on the resources which the place provides for supporting the tent’s structure.

The tent must be set up, or assembled. Each time and place, the same structure is assembled differently, according to the resources each place provides. Yet the tent’s self-centralizing structure does not change, otherwise it would not be “folding, adjustable, [one] which we carry around with us and set up wherever we are.” In the poem, the speaker’s discursive “circus tent” is the framework of consonance which supports itself by producing binary distinctions between resolution and conflict, self and other. Passing for a “floating signifier,” propounding the dissolution of oppositions, such a conciliatory interpretive stand (the tent) evades the historical reality of cultural conflict, alienating the speaker from the historicity of the place, and of her representation insulating self and other. Evasion and alienation are thus taken for granted as “magical dissolutions” of oppositions through the technology of the traveler’s tent.

In the attempt to reduce dissonance into a “circus-tent reality,” conflict is initially taken for granted as being already implicitly resolved into consonance. Notice the past perfect tense in “there’d been,” suggesting that such a moment was short-lived. Notice also that dissonance is portrayed “under” the (apparent) consonance of the sky (“—or so it looked”):

Suddenly there’d been houses, people, and lots of mongrel  
riverboats skittering back and forth  
under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds,  
and everything bright, cheerful, casual—or so it looked.

What happens next, according to the speaker, is that visual and aural perceptions converge, resolving dissonant sounds into consonance: “. . . / so that almost the only sounds / were creaks and *shush, shush, shush*” (notice that she poem has left the “creaks” in, while

downplaying the word as irrelevant, silenced by “*shush*”.) But it is right when silence apparently subdues antithesis that unresolvable, dissonant details disrupt, Dionysian, uncontrolled, “crazy” in the poem, refusing to reduce the place into the interpreter’s idea of it.

This scene of human disruption threatens the interpreter’s pretension to resolve dissonant perceptions of the history and culture of Santarém by reducing and naturalizing them into a universalized, certain, predicatable pattern. The scene of *nature with people* is thus the third difficulty the interpreter is afflicted with.

### 3.3.5. The “Fortunate Fall”

In the anxiety to resolve the dissonance of culture shock into consonance, the next strategy is to assume that this “fall from paradise” or from an ideal timelessness (past) is the product of evolution, certain to produce an ideal reality or consonance yet to be developed in the direction of the interpreter’s culture. Though still latent in the primitive stage of the chaotic, picturesque, ornamental, or comical, the consonance to which the “fall from paradise” is bound seems certain to ensure the speaker’s position of centrality, statically and comfortably apart from dissonant cultural geographies.

Having failed to represent the new world as a *godly* paradise, the poem imposes its second strategy by representing Santarém as a fallen, *godless* paradise in need of restoration (as an antithetical dissonance, the loss confirms the existence of consonance, or of God). In “Santarém,” the new land is fallen from paradise because corrupted by the Latin church and by the blue-eyed U.S. Southerners who, as the interpreter explains, came to Brazil because “here they could still own slaves”.<sup>70</sup> Now such a restoration requires the poet’s aesthetic

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<sup>70</sup> Bishop’s subscription to the benign narrative of the supposedly anti-racial miscegenation in Brazil is filled with the anxiety of her own implication in the issue:

We’ve also been completely servantless for a stretch and that house does seem huge - well I shuldn’t say completely, since we have a little girl of 11, smaller than Mary, I’m sure, who comes and washes dishes (Manuelzinho’s daughter, if you happen to remember him!) - and washes dishes, and washes dishes, and stands on a stool to put them away, poor little thing.

labor, a shedding of the artist's internal light to foresee and reveal the dissolution of a "mongrel" reality back into consonance. Such an enlightened interpretation by the speaker pretends to provide the new land with a "fortunate fall," in which comforting products of progress such as *oars* are comically contrasted against the speaker's preferred backwardness of a supposedly original purity: now, corrupted by the *blue* eyes of the colonizer, "no one / on all the Amazon's four thousand miles / does anything but paddle." The interpreter thus seeks to legitimize, by essentializing and dehistoricizing the place, the arbitrary split between her cultural perspective, or her "idea of the place," on the one hand; and the "place" with its people, on the other. Ironically, however, she does this precisely while claiming the dissolution of binary interpretations.

Having created an opposition only to assume its dissolution, the interpreter nonetheless lays down a slash between herself and the people of the place. The unproblematization of this contradiction exposes in the poem the colonizer's anxiety to contain disruption into a systematic structure confirming instead of confronting the artificiality of the binary framework underlying her idealizations of a lost paradise. Thus the poetic persona produces the lightening in the poem, striking what corrupts the nature of the place—striking, that is, the religious structure symbolized by the Cathedral and the priest's house. But there is a problem: at this junction dissonance becomes unresolvable, for here violence comes from nature instead. Destabilized, the distinction between nature and culture

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She is so pretty I feel like a brute and expect the glass coach to show up for her at any minute (to U.T. and Joe, Apr 25 1961, Box 37, Vassar);

[They] look down on the Brazilians, just the way Ray does - and why? . . . I bet they live a lot better here than they could have in France. And E lives a lot better here than she would at home, of course - most "foreigners" do, & then they get spoiled. (to Aunt Grace, from Samambaia, Oct 28 1963, Box 25, Vassar);

He was brought up here and he ought to be bright enough to see there are very good reasons for the country's being backward [in the margin: "and he's making a good thing out of it, obviously!"] (to Aunt Grace, from Samambaia, Aug 26 1961, Box 25, Vassar)

is rendered as an arbitrary one.

That nature is portrayed as innocent and harmless in the beginning of the poem and violent and dangerous as the poem develops, signals the interpreter's process of facing nature *alongside* a complex process by which the contradictions of cultural and historical reality cannot be contained into ideal oppositions—nor dissolved, as the speaker had claimed explicitly at the end of the second stanza:

Even if one were tempted  
to literary interpretations  
such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female  
-- such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off  
in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

Bishop might have added “American/foreigner,” the binary her poem will not dissolve but rather suspend and question by its end, showing that Bishop's reconstruction of the past has come a long way from her split “us/them” that she evoked in her jacket blurb for Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*:

Whenever I read a poem by Robert Lowell I have a chilling sensation of here-and-now, of exact contemporaneity: more aware of those ironies of “American history,” grimmer about them, and yet hopeful. If more people read poetry, if it were more exportable and translatable, surely his poems would go far towards changing, or at least unsettling, minds made up against us. (1959)

In “Santarém” the speaker cannot so easily evade the need to relinquish her xenophobic (us/them) framework naturalized in the passage above as an interpretive harmonization of a foreign aggression (“changing . . . minds made up against us”). Thus, again and again, she seeks to confirm an ideal consonance, while the poem insistently breaks out in dissonant disruption, bringing the interpreter to a struggle “towards changing, or at

least unsettling,” her *own* discourse of reductionist exoticism or identity imposition. One example is her self-correction, repeatedly remarking “Cathedral, rather,” in the struggle with her own discourse of replacing historical contingency (the Cathedral as a changing cultural institution) with a disorderly form that should be controlled (a cracking building): “In front of the church, the Cathedral, rather . . .”

The “widening zigzag crack all the way down” the building is a metaphor of such a struggle: it does not demolish the Cathedral, purifying nature from its corruption by human institutions, but rather deconstructs the discursive structure that attempts to colonize historical processes into products of order and consonance. In other words, by demolishing the speaker’s pretension to construct resolution, the crack in the building is a crack *in the interpreter’s monument* or discourse, which does not succeed in evading the historicity represented by the cathedral:

(Cathedral, rather!). A week or so before  
there’d been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral’d  
been struck by lightning. One tower had  
a widening zigzag crack all the way down.

Rather than confirming through mimesis the autonomy of a self, the poetic persona’s selfcentric discourse gives away its own anxiety to cover up contingent reality. Bishop thus implicates herself in the very aestheticist discourse she had criticized through her earlier poem “The Monument.” The passage below shows Bishop’s elaboration on this notion of a discourse (monument) that cannot be discarded but whose faultlines crack open:

[The monument] is an artifact  
of wood. Wood holds together better  
than sea or cloud or sand could by itself,  
much better than real sea or sand or cloud.

It chose that way to grow and not to move.  
 The monument's an object, yet those decorations,  
 carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,  
 give it away as having life, and wishing;  
 wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.

### 3.3.6. Dissonance as a Threshold from Product to Process

In “Santarém,” the crack in the cathedral is also the crack in the discursive structure which splits the interpreter’s dehistoricizing “idea of the place” from the place of Santarém, and therefore from the changing history and culture of the people there. Frustrated by her attempt to seek refuge in nature, or even in the dissolution of the opposition between nature and culture, the speaker’s next step is to *heal* the pain of the absence of a reassuring framework to rely on. Ironically, then, the speaker by now is entering a pharmacy which feels like a nook when compared to the grandness of the initial scene. The compression of the pharmacy suggests a threat closing in, into dangerous closeness, leading to the speaker’s encounter with the empty wasps’ nest. This compression is reinforced by the ambivalence of the phrase, “in the blue pharmacy.” Unresolvable, the word signifies both the color and the mood, *blue*. Weary. Not, as much criticism has it, of the foreign culture, but of the shattering of her own framework of cultural barriers.

Unable to portray a Garden of Eden where all conflicts dissolve in the waters—the romanticism of such an epiphany veiled by a “dark,” “underlit” sunlight—, and unable to restore an original reality through intellectual labor or imaginative insight, as the opening line warns us “of course” may not happen, “Santarém” can no longer centralize the figure of the heroic, lone spectator of a fallen ideal. Instead, the poem highlights the disruption and refusal of what McCorkle calls “a failed ideology and one on the threshold of necessary transformation” (n.d.)—the framework of consonance defining binary distinctions between

nature and culture, self and other, which cracks toward the end of the poem.

Such a refusal is unexpected. Having entered the “blue pharmacy” (notice that *blue* no longer dissolves into consonance, but decenters it, shifting its ambivalent meanings, indicating both the color and the mood), the speaker sees a wasps’ nest, itself an ongoing process of nature and culture that confounds distinctions. The pharmacist gives it to her because she “. . . admired it / so much . . . .” in silence. This moment builds up expectations of resolution of conflict into a conventional, familiar perspective of silence as isolation, or the passive acceptance of a presumed impossibility of contact in the absence of cultural identification. However, once the speaker is “back on board,” all expectations that she has finally been restored to some set of cultural values that she need not question, fail. What happens next is not a step that she either takes or relinquishes, but an event, an unpredictable disruption of all expectations: a “fellow passenger” asks her, “What’s that ugly thing?” This question ends the poem in the same active silence in which the dramatic persona had looked at the wasps’ nest, allowing its materiality to shift and revise rather than petrify her perceptions of the relations between nature and culture—and between culture and culture. This silence is not a resolution, as in epiphany, but a sustained dissonance, challenging the desire for an unchanged, unpopulated “idea of the place”. As the poetic persona finally confronts her find of an unpopulated wasps’ nest, the ship’s whistle blows, disallowing resolution and signaling motion instead.

This final silence is not a withdrawal from language, but a disturbance put to motion. The resonant ending after Mr. Swan’s question is indeed intriguing, and destabilizes entirely the “literary interpretations such as . . . right/wrong” which Bishop challenges explicitly in the second stanza. This is a textual moment of relational dissonance which clearly departs from rendering reality as a “circus-tent”.

### 3.3.7. Active Silence: Shattering Consonant Geographies

The resonant silence at the end of the poem no longer imposes dehistoricized, consonant meanings on a dissonant reality, but opens unpredictable meanings instead. When Mr. Swan asks about the nature of what is unknown to him (“What is that ugly thing?”), he naturalizes the binary category beautiful/ugly on his own terms, so that what passes for a question is actually an imposition. But, as Bishop writes of Crusoe’s knife, the wasps’ nest “reek[s] of meaning, like a crucifix” (“Crusoe in England”). Mr. Swan’s phrase cannot reduce those meanings into any familiar category, and so it is left to an absence of words. It is precisely at this moment, “at the point of [its] development where [it is] still incomplete” (“Gerard” 7), that Bishop chooses to stop the poem.

This absence of words is not an absence of meaning, but an expansion: Mr. Swan’s need to aestheticize dissonance, projecting his discomfort toward the place which has not fulfilled his expectation of consonance, is analogous to the narrator’s need to spatialize dissonance, constructing an all-encompassing consonance without conflict in the opening scene, only to aestheticize it when consonance fails. Indeed, in the pharmacy scene dissonant reality closes in. The poetic persona lingers on, as if in need of a remedy to sustain her effort, still idealizing a shelter from the discomfort of dissonance and projecting it this time onto an intricate object. In other words, she sublimates dissonant reality by transforming an object of basic utility (the nest) into an aesthetic object to be possessed as a souvenir when it no longer serves its purpose.

The narrator’s withdrawal is thus spatialized from the opening scene as the word “blue” colors the particularity of detail throughout the poem, as the narrator’s process of inwardness gains the interior of the “blue pharmacy,” culminating in the intricacy of the wasps’ nest. Both foreigners—Mr. Swan and the narrator—must aestheticize the other culture as an expression of their judgmental perceptions, and it is this similarity between them, as



much as the difference between her construct of beauty and his construct of ugliness, which surprises the reader. By the end of the poem, the narrator's discourse of consonance with the place foregrounds instead her inability to resolve dissonance, thus her anxiety to aestheticize it. What on the surface discourse of the poem apparently distinguishes the poet from the executive actually provides the thread that makes them alike as well as unlike.

At the same time, the fact that dissonance now comes from a fellow traveler, rather than from the exoticized foreign culture, makes it no longer mappable onto a cultural other. Mr. Swan's interpretation of the place is thus not so different from her own. Her previous attempts to dissolve rather than confront her own binary framework of representation was an effort to evade a reality that disturbed her: a New World is populated by foreigners rather than Edenized.

Whether in the speaker's (covert, via the anxiety for consonance) or in Mr. Swan's (overt) rendering, ugliness is the reinscription of a selfcentric geography imposed on a dissonant reality: the foreign culture is just as uglified by Mr. Swan as it has been made picturesque by the speaker in the attempt to distinguish herself as an innocent foreigner in Santarém. The poem situates aesthetic values in the context of the speakers' own interests in exoticizing the other. In attempting to conclude the impossibility of intercultural contact, Mr. Swan actually cracks open the discourse of exoticism and decenters his own discourse of consonance, displaying the arbitrariness that naturalizes as certain the unrelatedness between cultures. Unrelatedness and certainty are thus displayed as the *anxiety* for unrelatedness and self-certainty, now revealed as inconclusive.

What follows is a silence that inaugurates the speaker's relationality with Santarém outside her "circus tent"—outside the discourse of a consonant geography that dissolves historical meanings. The speaker is no longer an American sojourner holding an exotic souvenir, but a participant in the discourse of exoticism, and of the historicity of its shattering

conceptual framework. Mr. Swan's question is therefore not only rhetorical (he affirms ugliness while apparently only asking about it), but also ironic (he deconstructs consonance in his anxiety to impose it). Resolution through a superior/inferior, outside/inside dichotomy is no longer possible—only intercultural contact without the dissolution of conflict—in other words, only the questioning of any conclusiveness as to the logocentric “unease with situations in which landscape, character, and language do not, for [Bishop], fully cohere” (Doreski 1993: 125).

By confronting instead of dissolving oppositions, “Santarém” disables its own systematic discourse that renders self and other unrelational. What the speaker learns by the end of the poem is the arbitrariness of her assumptions of dissolved conflict, of the anxiety to confirm the binary opposition that might detach or alienate her from the dissonant reality she ascribes—and proscribes—to the other. Though conflicted, Bishop's yearning to produce consonance in this poem is evident. Its recurrent failure to do so, however, can be read as an instance of her break from high modernism's aestheticization of conflict, that sublimates what cannot be resolved by insulating it within the aesthetic realm.

Along this aestheticist line from which I am arguing that Bishop departed is the common understanding of her verse “more delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors” (“The Map”). The line is ambivalent, I think, if only because *delicate* does not bear a necessarily positive value here as it would in a poetics of compensatory imagination or aestheticism. The word here means fragile, which means vulnerable, which means breakable—which means that it is bound to break. Simply put, there is no natural relation between what in “The Map” Bishop calls, on the one hand, “what suits the character or the native waters best,” and on the other, what determines their colors there, as she asks, “Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?”

The manageable geography that privileges the paradigms within which the map-maker is presumed to immerse herself in a given reality only to posit herself as a superior observer over it from then on—one who “from time to time go[es] back to the United States, returning to [her] linguistic sources, like a diver coming up to the surface,”<sup>71</sup> as she said of herself in reply to an interviewer’s question (Ribeiro 1996 [1964]: 14-15)<sup>71</sup>—is delicate indeed. It is, as Jim von der Heydt puts it, “an excess, a strange sort of potency in the world that results from focusing intently on its maps and exploring their inadequacy . . . [their] claim to be an immediate image of the world” (2002: 181); an attempt “to bring close by contemplating [this] remoteness” (182). von de Heydt refers to Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation:

If, however, these languages continue to grow in this manner until the end of their time, it is translation that catches fire in the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language. Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by knowledge of this remoteness? (1985: 74-75)

Heard in the midst of her more recent reputation for a poetics of estrangement of habitual perceptions of reality, Bishop’s reply puts into relief the very delicateness, the very vulnerability of any surface.

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<sup>71</sup> Léo Gilson Ribeiro had asked whether Bishop’s “voluntary separation from an English-language community has not caused her difficulties in her poetic development, surrounded as she is now by a language foreign to her” (14).



## Traces of Relationality: The Anxieties of Imperialist Discourse

I began to feel that I was on the edge: that I wanted to get to the center: that I was isolated, and that I wanted to share the common life . . . Instead of seeking therefore for a “relentless contact,” I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central.

Wallace Stevens, Letters

[Bishop] wrote of an intuition that those cultures regarded as weak may stand amused before what causes the rich and strong to quake.

Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture*

### 4.1. AUTHORIAL CONTROL IN NONLINEAR WRITING

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Bishop’s efforts to come to terms with clashing perceptions of reality in her Brazilian poems translate into the pressure of loosening identity borders. In this chapter, I want to show that this loosening and loss of borderlines is not a *remission*, but a *displacement* of authorial control. Indeed, as the poetic persona is faced with the impossibility of resolving incompatible frameworks of perception, she very often enacts conflict dissolution by emphasizing reassuring cultural givens that may compensate for the lack of a stable (or shared) perception concerning the intercultural meanings that now mark her experience as a writer. Such enactments provide the focus for the production of a common ground or shelter in her poems, allowing the poetic persona a ceiling under which to condense a “free” (read *safe*) play of signifiers and thus perhaps confront the anxieties elaborated in the deeper levels of her texts (as we have seen, for example, in the predominance of *yellow* dissolving the darker, more nuanced *blues* of an impinging twilight in “Santarém”).

I should mention right away that this oblique *poetics* is closely connected with Bishop’s oblique *politics* of dissent. This issue shall be more carefully addressed in the next chapter, but for now I want to point out that the anti-imperialist sentiment Bishop absorbed from the sociopolitical crisis that escalated to the so-called “Revolution”—actually, the

military coup—of 1964 in Brazil had built up at least from the time she wrote “Roosters” at the beginning of the Second World War (see Schweik 1991; Palattella 1993; and Roman 2001). This means that Bishop was in a tight spot when she sensed strains of her own imperialist discourse toward others, as is evident from her (just as oblique) identifications with the capitalist landowner in “Manuelzinho”—and, as we shall see, with the colonizer (“Brazil, January 1, 1502”) as well as the foreign consumer of exoticism (“Pink Dog”). The aim of this chapter is to show that the imperialist discourse Bishop had to revise for herself in Brazil, and for the rest of her life, is a source of anxiety and contradiction; and that her revisionist project problematizes humanist and solutionist strategies to the point of rendering them significantly vulnerable in her intercultural text.

Traces of anxiety show up more strongly in literature from the late 19th century on, according to Geoffrey Sanborn, when cultural practices that “articulate the undervoiced, to receive and retransmit the indistinct sounds of newness,” are effectively nourished by the post-colonial context (1998: 18). In reference to one such text, W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Sanborn points out that

we are not asked to hear an obscure but real note of resistance; instead, we are asked to hear in the voices of humanists, racists, and insurgents alike an obscure but real wavering (. . .) Even at the turn of the twentieth century, when the attention to the delicate ambiguities of colonial subjectivity was most likely to appear frivolous, DuBois was willing to declare that the revelation of *the intrinsic anxiety of colonial discourse* could make a material difference.

(12-13, my emphasis)

In this light, I want to consider the vulnerability to intercultural dilemmas in Bishop as an ethical disturbance interrupting the discourse of mastery by which she seeks to alienate herself from her Brazilian text. My point is that her Brazilian writings develop a suspicion of

the identity politics working to distinguish and thus protect the speaker from the cultural others drawn in, and into, her texts. What is interrupted by this ethical politics of suspicion is therefore the hegemonic, monolithic “front” of the self’s autonomy from history, or from a past recurrently projected onto those Bishop portrayed as “primitive” others.<sup>72</sup> What is interrupted, in other words, is the same humanitarian discourse that characterized the Cold War *victory narrative*,<sup>73</sup> the dangers of which Bishop knew all too well: a discourse envisioning the U.S. as the missionary hero, managing conflict and taming chaos by rescuing modernity’s dissonant others into an imminent global order of consonance, mapped in its own image.

This chapter will be focusing on the anxiety of losing authorial control that underlies Bishop’s positive (humanist, solutionist) textual strategies of conflict management (dissonance resolution and dissolution) that, in turn, back up (with just as positive euphoria) the progressive narratives of globalization and *aestheticized transculturation*.<sup>74</sup> Assuming an egalitarian, often hybridizing transit of cultural meanings across national borders, the

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<sup>72</sup> For example, in this passage: “This is a very simple, primitive couple whom we like very much . . . If we could send her to a good Finishing School, maybe—to U.T. [“& Joe, and everybody”], May 13 1960, Box 37, Vassar).

<sup>73</sup> I borrow the term “victory narrative” from Engelhardt 1995.

<sup>74</sup> I borrow this latter term from Sérgio Bellei who, in his discussion of the developments of the project of Brazilian anthropophagy, argues that the anxiety to dissolve frontiers between the powerful and the dispossessed has produced a split between the social and the aesthetic projects, “the latter only remaining as a valid emancipatory practice aimed at producing a world without at least some frontiers” (1998: 101)

This term is therefore to be distinguished from *transculturation* in Pratt’s perspective of travel writing:

[W]ith respect to representation, how does one speak of *transculturation* from the colonies to the metropolis? . . . While the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery (in the emanating glow of the civilizing mission or the cash flow of development, for example), it habitually blinds itself of the ways in which the periphery determined the metropolis—beginning, perhaps, with the latter’s obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself. Travel writing, among other institutions, is heavily organized in the service of that imperative. (1992: 6)

narrative of aestheticized transculturation, as part of a broader positive—even euphoric—narrative of globalization, emerges in both of Bishop’s poems discussed in this chapter. Specifically, I will be focusing on the poetics of dissonance that interrupts Bishop’s positive discourses of *solidarity* and *anti-conquest* in the poems “Pink Dog” and “Crusoe in England.”

#### 4.2. THE NAME OF THE MOTHER: “PINK DOG”<sup>75</sup>

I’m naked to the bone,  
With nakedness my shield.  
Myself is what I wear

Theodore Roethke, excerpt from “Open House”

The last poem that Bishop finished in the U.S. before her death in 1979 was actually begun in Brazil two decades earlier. Titled “Pink Dog” at publication (the earliest draft of 1959 carries the alternate titles “Naked Dog,” “Rio Blues,” and “Good-bye to Rio”), this poem is about an ailing dog, hairless because of scabies, that Bishop sees crossing Rio’s waterfront avenue Princesa Isabel. The scene takes place at a time when the newspapers had recently reported that the city police were sweeping beggars and other social misfits from the streets by throwing them into the Guarda river.

“Pink Dog” has been fruitfully read by Bishop criticism on the terms proposed by its speaker, i.e., of her urge for the *abject*<sup>76</sup> dog to disguise her illness through Carnival in order

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For the text in which the term *transculturation* was coined as a move to counter the hegemonic, unilateral notion of *acculturation*, see Ortiz 1995 [1940].

<sup>75</sup> A version of this section has been published in Ávila 2002.

<sup>76</sup> Julia Kristeva defines the *abject* as the *outflow of entrails, i.e., the overlapping of interiority and exteriority*. On the power of abjection in the construction of the self, Kristeva writes:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experience at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. (Kristeva 5)



to escape the police. It has been read and discussed chiefly as Bishop's critique of class degradation in Brazil, showing her empathy and solidarity with the other social misfits mentioned in the poem (for examples, see Costello 1991; Doreski 1993; McCabe 1994). This view has been extended to regard Bishop's last poem as her coming to terms with the need to disguise her lesbian outsiderhood upon leaving Brazil.<sup>77</sup> Such readings, however, do not begin to confront the underlying ethical *contradictions* in the speaker's discourse of solidarity; nor do they address *how* the poem works aesthetically to engage them. This is precisely my purpose in this chapter: to examine the poetics engaging the speaker's incompatible pretensions in "Pink Dog"—of offering, on the one hand, solidarity, and on the other, patronizing or even sarcastic advice—in her enactment of providing a solution for the other's protection: "Now look, the practical, the sensible / solution is to wear a *fantasia* . . . Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!" The next section addresses this disturbing incompatibility between representations of otherness in Bishop by considering her own assessment of the discourse of otherness in her Brazilian writings.

#### 4.2.1. The Exotic, Revisited by Bishop

As I mentioned in the previous chapters, Bishop persistently refuses to exoticize her Brazilian texts—and, as we have seen in "Manuelzinho," that refusal often takes the shape of exoticizing the others she represents in them. Clearly, Bishop is self-conscious of the reductionist force of the exotic, the way it shrinks cultural specificities into stasis or remoteness. The exotic is either the *object*, which lures the desire for signification (see O'Gorman 1961 [1958]; and Said 1995 [1978]), or the *abject*, which excludes and is excluded from signification altogether (see Kristeva 1982). An example of this polarity is in "Questions of Travel," which shows the exotic as a monolithic perception, the "inexplicable

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<sup>77</sup> I thank Helen Vendler for pointing out this latter interpretation to me when commenting, in writing and in conversation, on parts of this paper delivered at "The Art of Elizabeth Bishop: A Conference and *Celebração* in Brazil."

and impenetrable,/ at any view,/ instantly seen and always, always delightful,” or, just as monolithically, instantly seen and—an “ugly thing,” as Mr. Swan calls the empty wasps’ nest in the last verse of “Santarém”. On the other hand, this notion of the exotic is contrasted with the irreducible “ponder[ing], / blurr’dly and inconclusively, / on what connections can exist for centuries / between the crudest wooden footwear / and, careful and finicky, / the whittled fantasies of wooden cages” (“Questions of Travel”). This conflict posits an ethical question, which the speaker asks directly in the same poem: “Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?”—a question that reflects Bishop’s self-consciousness of her power to perpetuate, subvert, or problematize reductionist representations in her writings. It is the anxiety *not* to perpetuate a discourse of mastery which disturbs Bishop’s speaker in “Pink Dog,” because it conflicts with her other anxiety mentioned earlier: to overcome culture shock by asserting her centrality in the cultural encounter.

In light of this impasse, it is relevant that in “Pink Dog,” Bishop engages the exotic without hesitation, as we shall see, thus significantly countering her own initial refutation of exoticism in her writings. Indeed, her initial worries concerning the exotic had come a long way since she wrote to Robert Lowell, in 1960:

I worry a great deal about what to do with all this accumulation of exotic or picturesque or charming detail, and I don’t want to become a poet who can only write about South America, etc. - it is one of my greatest worries now - how to use everything and keep on living here, most of the time, probably - and yet be a New Englander-herring-choker-bluenoser at the same time. (qtd. in Goldensohn 1992: 17)<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Bishop refers to Manuelzinho’s counterpart on the New England shore: the local worker, specifically the herring fisherman, whose cold, blue nose inherits generations of white complexion. See Curry 2000 for a discussion of Bishop’s racial (un)markings.

Explicitly, then, Bishop had refused the exotic because of her own personal reluctance to identify—or to be identified with—what colonialist discourse calls “going native”, i.e., assimilating the culture of the colonized instead of accomplishing the colonial mission of “teaching” the colonized to assimilate aspects of the colonizer culture. Bishop’s aversion and preclusion of a possible interpretation of her “going native” suggests that in her initial view, the exotic was restricted to a marginalizing function she wished to absorb no further. (Notice that Bishop does absorb stereotypes for herself, as in the passage above, when it comes to asserting identity bonds with her Anglo-American readership.) Basic to this passage is the notion of “using everything”—a notion that is not simply one of *learning*. “Using everything” also presupposes a fundamental autonomy and self-referentiality, the insulation or, more blatantly, the “freedom from others” that Claude Lévi-Strauss posits and naturalizes in the passage below. Notice the striking resemblance of Bishop’s passage above with this excerpt from his *Tristes Tropiques*, which she read in Brazil:

Not that our own society is peculiarly or absolutely bad. But it is the only one from which we have a duty to free ourselves: we are, by definition, free in relation to others. We thus put ourselves in the position to embark on the second stage, which consists in *using* all societies—without adopting features from any one of them—to elucidate principles of social life that we can apply in reforming our own customs and *not those of foreign societies*. (1981 [1955]: 92, my emphasis)

That “we are, by definition, free in relation to others” is a worrisome proposition, especially when the liberal absolutism (both meanings intended) of such freedom is what is “use[d]” to feed one’s mobility and identity with an economy generating, for some, the privilege of being unbound to local communities. Indeed, Bishop’s purchasing power in Brazil relies on the asymmetry generated by inflation rates that are disparaging—though profitable for Bishop,

who capitalizes on her income in dollars, invested at Brazil's high inflation rates, and spent in Brazilian currency. What Bishop calls "one of [her] greatest worries" is not so much how to stay free from partaking of the social, economic, cultural and political constraints of—and responsibilities to—her locality, as how to go about preserving such a privileged configuration. Her concern is precisely how to sustain a readership for her exotic material "without adopting its features," in which case she might lose her audience for "becom[ing] a poet who can only write about South America, etc.". This is, in a tiny nutshell, the gist of the economically motivated anxieties of colonial discourse in Bishop.

In this context, I want to suggest that "Pink Dog" channels the poetic persona's ethical anxiety to confront the contradictions of a humanitarian discourse that seeks to polish "raw material" from Brazil for the foreign consumption of her authorial image, as constituted by contrast to that of the exotic (whether idyllic or abject) other. As we shall see, in this poem again the poetic persona both attempts and fails to unproblematize this ethical conflict by staging in her humanitarian poem an apparently equal exchange by which the other may *also* benefit from the cultural commodification of the exotic, in order to free himself from his own society. In this sense, Bishop's authorial outlook on Brazil in this poem can best be understood as configuring the problem Spivak raised in her sentence, "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (1994 [1988]: 92)—which can be extended, as we shall see in "Pink Dog" (as well as in "Crusoe in England"), to the feminist concern (see Patai 1994) with the problem of *First World women saving Third World women from Third World men*.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> I use the term "third world" with precaution, since it reinscribes monolithic representation (antithetical dissonance) despite the fact that it was coined precisely to designate not only the alignment of geographical and economically problematic areas, thus the *imaginary* spaces they are associated with, but also active, *imagining* communities. According to Spivak, the term initially referred to those emerging from the "old" world order:

[T]he initial attempt in the Bandung Conference (1955) to establish a third way—neither with the Eastern nor within the Western bloc—in the world system, in response to the seemingly new world order established after the Second World War, was not accompanied by a

We will return to this issue as it emerges in the poems; but before ending this introduction to a reading of dissonance in “Pink Dog,” I want to offer a brief outline of the *intercultural* discourse of exoticism as it is articulated through Carnival, a major theme in the poem.

#### 4.2.2. The Relevance of Clashing Perspectives of Exoticism in “Pink Dog”

The fact that “Pink Dog” calls for an intercultural perspective is made explicit by the speaker herself.<sup>80</sup> Bishop’s use of two words in Portuguese (*máscara* and *fantasia*) invites any reader, indeed all readers—including herself!—to do some learning of Brazilian culture. It should be clear that Brazilian cultural contexts need not be central to Bishop’s presumed intentions in the poem in order to be relevant for its criticism. Even so, the fact of the matter is that Bishop’s text does implicitly instruct us to share the poet’s acknowledgment of the interplay between the words *fantasia* and *máscara*, an interplay that is untranslatable except in its disguises as it transits between cultural contexts. This acknowledgment leads us to examine some of the meanings elaborated by the foreign culture in which Bishop immersed herself—specifically, in “Pink Dog,” in terms of *exoticism*, which imbricates these two Portuguese words in the context of Carnival. Indeed, *ex-otic* means *out of the scope of vision*, whether for being in the imagination, as in *fantasia* (in English, both *costume* and *fantasy*), or for being covered up, as in *mascara*—not to mention for the space of temporal dilation it opens under the Dionysian power of metamorphosis and renewal (see Bakhtin 1968), thus of dynamic dissonance (notice in the outline below that the exotic, as an intercultural trope of otherness and renewal, bears out the pivotal conception of dissonance).

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commensurate intellectual effort. The only idioms deployed for the nurturing of this nascent Third World in the cultural field belonged then to positions emerging from resistance within the supposedly ‘old’ world order—anti-imperialism, and/or nationalism. (1996: 270)

See also KumKum Sangari (1990), for whom the indiscriminate use of the term has performed the effect of homogenizing specific places and thus containing their peoples within discursively erected boundaries.

<sup>80</sup> I am responding to Vendler’s view that my reading of “Pink Dog” is grounded in a Brazilian perspective of exoticism which is not such a “serious question” once Bishop’s audience was an American one, to whom “‘fantasia’ and ‘máscara’ are not significantly different”.

### 4.2.3. The Exotic, Ltd.

As a pivotal conception, the discourse of exoticism is bifurcated. On the one hand is a *reductionist* discourse relying on the dichotomy between what is *archaic* and what is *progressive*—according to Gilberto Freyre, the two extreme ways in which foreign observers tend to see Brazil.<sup>81</sup> This is the *trope of paradise*, whether lost (thus the nostalgia for archaic, primitive, pure origins) or yet to be gained (the utopia of days to come). Obliterating present interactions between cultures, this objectifying representation alternates between past and future, and between oppositions in such dichotomies as the *backward/utopian*, in turn associated with the *ideal/its frustration*, the *pure/impure*, the *inoffensive/alien*, the *idyllic/atrocious*, the *attractive/grotesque*—in any case, relying on the logocentric *fantasy* of an *origin*—whether (inconceivably, sinfully) corrupted or not, in any case pure and incorruptible.<sup>82</sup>

### 4.2.4. The Exotic, Unlimited

On the other hand, though necessarily and paradoxically drawing on the reductionist discourse outlined above, is the conception of the exotic as an *anti-reductionist strategy*, or “the acceptable, mediating guise” (Wasserman 1994: 9)—the *máscara*—which dresses up, as in *fantasia*, the resistance to being tamed by reductionist discourse. In this latter sense, exoticism operates as a cultural tool of parody and mediation, “asserting a . . . self against an externally imposed definition as other” (259). *Macunaíma*, the character of Mário de Andrade’s homonymous book, personifies this rearticulation of the discourse of exoticism:

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<sup>81</sup> The passage reads: “Too many foreign observers tend to see only what is metropolitan or picturesque, what is progressive or archaic: São Paulo or Rio, naked savages or the Amazon river. But it is between these antagonistic extremes that the real Brazil lies” (Freyre 1959: 112).

<sup>82</sup> For exoticism as related to ethnocentric and logocentric discourses, see Derrida’s discussion of the arbitrary inscription of boundaries between nature and culture, speech and writing, presence and absence (1976: 101-40).

Mário de Andrade was aware that primitivism is not a representation of reality but a language . . . [Macunaíma] throws into question the qualities needed for success as defined in the world that calls him primitive . . . The result of the adaptation he performed was not the affirmation of an identity whose contradictions battled an overarching vision of national identity as coherent and stable; it was, rather, a vision of all identity as fragmented, all structure as unstable, that is, fictitious, and of a Brazilian national identity finally relevant within the discourse of power only insofar as it embodies the destruction that this discourse suspects it carries within itself. Bakhtin called this relation between stability and corrosion, center and margin, Carnival. Having carnivalized their own carnival into a huge tourist attraction for the developed world, Brazilians are amused. Macunaíma, rewriting Chactas, would probably roll on the ground with laughter. (Wasserman 1994: 228-43)

This is a bifurcated, double-voiced, or mediating discourse, one that undermines the notion that differences can be reduced or insulated into the *stasis* of remoteness. Unscathed by such a notion, the so-called “exotic other” appropriates the reductionist discourse of exoticism by turning it into a tactic of *mobility* across clashing cultural frameworks of identity (*Carnival*). In the case of “Pink Dog,” this carnivalesque double-voicing occurs when Bishop destabilizes the very gaze that reduces the other—as when Carnival itself is carnivalized into a spectacle for tourists: “radios, Americans, or something / have ruined it completely” (35-36). In light of exoticism as a parody of reductionist representations of otherness, this is not a mere inversion of values, as in the trope of “going native,” but an *allegory*—understood here as a correspondence, metaphor or definition (consonance) which is always on a collision course (dissonance) with itself (consonance)—of the reductionist function to which otherness is

put.<sup>83</sup> True, Bishop first reverses categories so that the positive (consonant) term is no longer the central subject over the marginal object of the gaze; rather, the positive term becomes the supposedly authentic “voice” of the “pure” exotic event (Carnaval) over its corruption and degeneration into a product of consumption (Carnival). Her next step, however, is to defer resolution into consonance, whether consonance is embodied in the position of observer or observed. By the end of the poem, she thus renders even the inversion (the positive valuation of an authentic Carnaval) inconclusive: “They’re just talking. / Carnival is always wonderful!”.

The asymmetric tension set off by this double-voicing does not dismiss the objectifying narrative of exoticism, but dehegemonizes it, and therefore enacts the potential flexibility of cultural boundaries. By the same token, the exotic in “Pink Dog” is also performative of the permeability between the poem’s aesthetic and political scopes, so that Carnival in its commodified form need not align with an exclusively commodified or commodifying content. The narrator taps into the fantasy of the dog’s social (*intracultural*) transit for her own *intercultural* transit, thus producing the imaginary mutual empowerment or alliance between the dog and the writer to subvert their co-optation into discourses of victimization.

#### 4.2.5. The Poem, from Crossing to Parading the Exotic Avenue

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<sup>83</sup> Paul de Man’s definition of *allegory* is closely related with Schöenberg’s conception of *constructive dissonance*, and Derrida’s notions of *pharmakón*, *dissemination* and *différance*: “a distance in relation to its own origin . . . renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (de Man 1983: 207). Christopher Norris emphasizes that “allegory works precisely by insisting on the arbitrary character of signs . . . To interpret a text allegorically is to read it as an artificial construct whose meaning unfolds in the narrative or temporal dimension, and where signs point back to no ultimate source in the nature of ‘organic’ or phenomenal perception . . . To read allegorically is always to recognize that understanding is a temporal process, one that takes place not on the instant of punctual, self-present perception but through a constant anticipatory awareness of what is lacking in the present” (1989: 318; 327). For a thorough study of allegory, see Whitman 1987.



So far, I have introduced “Pink Dog” as a poem that produces decentering by drawing on the poetic imagination to articulate exoticism as a strategic (rather than subordinating) guise, making room for transit between cultural and social boundaries. This transit occurs when the speaker’s seemingly descriptive, detached gaze is disturbed by her assimilation of the dialogic meanings of Carnival. By distinguishing between clashing cultural perspectives of exoticism, the poem creates a dynamics of antithetical perception that can be neither resolved nor even dissolved. This ongoing shift is what Derrida calls a *trembling* of movements that “do not destroy structures from the outside. [Movements which] are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it” (1976: 24). Antithesis, now put to the function of destabilization instead of fixity, disturbs the reader with uncomfortable contradictions in the reductionist discourse of exoticism. They are uncomfortable because they defy the monolithic representation of otherness which the voyeuristic gaze of the reader relies on to confirm the first-person’s power of interpretive closure that would provide the promised solution for the dog.

In this light, the introduction of Brazilian words and meanings in the speaker’s own discourse is crucial: it disturbs her self-centering gaze as well as assumptions of her detachment from the scene, which she initially appears to be merely describing. At stake in “Pink Dog,” then, is the poetic persona’s *urge to implicate herself* in the arbitrary discourse that “help[s] the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said 1983: 55).

As Bishop brings the words *fantasia* and *máscara* into the poem, she projects onto her English-speaking audience the same scenario of intercultural conflict, unresolvability and perplexity that challenges her: a scenario which undermines her authoritative ability and role to order within her own poetry the foreign scene of social chaos that requires interpretive

guidance in the poem. Bishop arranges the foreign words into a system which allows her to both address and defer the anxiety brought on by her dissipating authorial control. In other words, faced with the inability to control the dissonant reality threatening her humanitarian and civilized status, Bishop takes on the role of providing authorial guidance to her Anglo-American audience, through a solutionist rhetoric assuming her control, and transculturation, of the *aesthetic* system (*máscara/fantasia*) of the poem—only to leave her readers unassisted in the end. This system thus supplies the poetic persona with a *fantasia* under which to disguise her anxiety of authorial control—the *fantasia* being the commodity of *aestheticized transculturation*—as well as with a *máscara* allowing her to confront, or at least to articulate, intercultural conflict.

Now let us see in the poem how its assimilation of Brazilian cultural perspectives uproots the speaker's rejection of the exotic, which shifts from a reductionist perception of dissonance (an antithesis confirming cultural centrality), in the first moment, to a perception of ambivalence (between two centralities) in the second moment, and to one of sustained dissonance (resonance, i.e., continuous variation) in the third moment.

The poem opens by laying out an antagonistic relation establishing absolute consonance and negative or antithetical dissonance:

The sun is blazing and the sky is blue.

Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue.

Naked, you trot across the avenue.

Consonance is in the blazing sunlight, the blue sky, and the colorful umbrellas under which nature suggests sensuality. The word “naked” begins the second verse, addressing that expectation.<sup>84</sup> But the expectation is at once frustrated: nakedness establishes its antithesis, as

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<sup>84</sup> A slight, playful replacement of the letter *r* for the letter *x* in *exotic* forms the word *erotic*, and reminds me that the speaker here plays with expectations brought on by nationalist stereotypes (between the poles of the *sensual* and the *grotesque* exotic). The first stanza prepares the reader for the celebrated sensuality

it interrupts both the consonant world of appearances and the appearance of consonance, installing *crisis* as it *crosses* the avenue.

Images of absoluteness prevail on outspread two-dimensional surfaces: the blue sky, the blazing sun, and the wide span afforded by the many umbrellas clothing the beach, in *every* hue. Such absoluteness, which builds up universalizing assumptions of consonance, is undercut by the dissonant specificity of a naked creature who, drawing a specific line instead, idiosyncratically “trots across” the avenue. The dog’s specificity is presented as the negation of consonance and unity: this is the antithetical conception of musical dissonance, a construct justified in traditional harmony theory for its function in demanding resolution into the sovereignty of consonance.<sup>85</sup>

What has not yet affected the reader at this point in the poem is that this constitutive polarity (consonance/dissonance) is not only *activated* by the dog’s crossing the avenue, but also *problematized* by that move. This is because “crossing the avenue” is not only an *opposition* to the scene of consonances: “crossing the avenue” also *breaks* with those oppositions, by cutting into the surface scene, or the two-dimensionality of appearances. This disruption of antithetical structure is still obliterated, though, by the powerful aesthetic discourse that constructs dissonance as a mere deviation from an absolute truth. But although dissonance becomes central, still it is reductionist, as the focus of a hierarchical, objectifying gaze upon the dog—a gaze which works to naturalize repulsion and, therefore, exclusion.

The second moment of dissonance occurs in the second stanza:

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!

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of the scene depicted by Vinícius de Moraes’s lyrics to Tom Jobim’s tune in “A Garota de Ipanema,” describing a fabulous woman crossing the avenue—only to present the dog’s nakedness as the grotesque, in antithetical contrast.

<sup>85</sup> The dominant conception, by which “we know that the dissonances in themselves are altogether lacking the grace and charm of harmony; and that whatever pleasantness and beauty they may give the ear have to be attributed to the beauty of the succeeding consonances to which they resolve.” (Fux 97)

Naked and pink, without a single hair...

Startled, the passersby draw back and stare.

The third verse in this stanza creates a metaphor of deferral—a metaphor which ironically reverts dissonance, expanding it from the dog to the gaze itself: the simultaneous movement of drawing back, as aversion, and of staring, as attraction, is unresolved from then on in the poem.<sup>86</sup> It is this last line which reverts (without undoing) the reading of the entire two stanzas and installs dissonance as the dog's *inclusion* rather than exclusion. Here, in other words, Bishop shifts from voicing the exoticizing "I" that gazes at the dog (as in the reductionist discourse of exoticism) to the moving mark(wo)man who parodies their gaze (as in the anti-reductionist discourse of exoticism). This is a humanizing moment in the poem, when the reader is self-conscious of the subordinating gaze over the other. It is also a moment of discomfort, since disturbance is now *installed* by the dog, so far scrutinized for *embodying* all disturbance instead.

Dissonance at this moment is more clearly ambivalent—and problematic, because oppositions here are destabilized, so they cannot be contained within fixed categories. When the speaker's voice is interrupted by the dejected and dejecting gaze of the passersby, her

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<sup>86</sup> The gaze upon the "third-world" pink dog is not restricted to nationalist divisions in the poem: the gaze of the Brazilian passersby and of the Anglo-American speaker are one and the same. This connects also with Bishop's withdrawal from the scene of "Manuelzinho," as mentioned earlier: in its subtitle, Bishop ascribes the speaker's voice to that of "a friend of the writer." Both poems can thus be understood to demystify the geographical site of the so-called "first world," aligning the gaze of the Brazilian upper class with that of the Anglo-American writer; with this move, besides disabling monolithic representations of nationality, Bishop also keeps her readers from absorbing the direct "anti-Americanist" sentiment she mentioned in letters to her friends.

Notice also that *drawing back* here is supposed to be a "humane" reaction, one which in the related context of witnessing cannibalism means "experiencing an involuntary *physical* revulsion when confronted with the spectacle of savagery and disavowing any participation in the production of that spectacle." Thus construed, *being humane* is an ideological device justifying alienation—ironically, perpetuating cannibalism "in the space of representation, rather than experiencing [being affected by] it in the space of the body" (Sanborn 1988: 24-25). It is in this sense that Maggie Kilgour argues in "The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time" that "man-eating is a reality—it is civilisation that is the myth" (1998: 259).

own gaze becomes foregrounded to the reader. Her position is now ambivalent, wavering between protecting the dog from the gaze of the passersby; and reinforcing the voyeuristic gaze, as one of the passersby herself. But though it initiates destabilization, dissonance here is trapped in what is still a *paralyzing* rather than dynamic deferral.

It is only when the foreign culture inscribes the speaker's discourse that dynamic deferral occurs, in the third moment of dissonance, through the ongoing irresolution between *fantasia* and *máscara*. *Fantasia* works as “a front”: an imaginary resolution into an ideal harmony without fissures, a contained, con-verted dissonance. In this sense, it at once does away with social “eyesores” and erases the *máscara*, seemingly reducing conflict into the fixity of cultural stereotypes. But by doing so, it also unwittingly hides the dog in *máscara*, ironically rendering the *máscara* most effective: “But no one will ever see a / dog in *máscara* this time of year.”

*Máscara* is the double-edged force underlying *fantasia*. It is the force which offers a misdirection: a disguise in the guise of a resolved representation of identity. It both simulates and subverts resolution, whether to a reductionist representation requiring the disguise or silencing of truth, or to an anti-reductionist representation enacting provisional freedom. In this latter sense, it is “a newly critical discourse of the exotic which unmask[s] the earlier euphoric exoticism as an ideological construct” (Wasserman 1994: 14). In this light, the force of *máscara* is only possible because it does not *discard* oppositions, but *destabilizes* them. This is the case of the undecidable shift from *fantasia* to *máscara* and then back to *fantasia*, in an ongoing vibration that is not *resolved* in the poem, but *emphasized*—emphasis being strengthened by the disruption in rhyme and rhythm. After the repetitious rhyme, so far homogeneous in the poem, here it breaks apart—and breaks apart the rhythm, the diction, even the *words* in the poem:

Now look, the practical, the sensible

solution is to wear a *fantasia*.

Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-  
n eyesore. But no one will ever see a  
dog in *máscara* this time of year.

This is the only moment when the rhyme breaks away from regularity. It is also the first moment when dissonance is revealed not under the control of normative consonance, but in play with it. The rhyme “*fantasia*,” “be / a-” and “see / a” disrupts and complicates the poem’s initial alignment of form and content (as in “. . . the sky is blue. / . . . in every hue”). Now the sound works against the speaker’s argument, pointing ironically to its opposite. The irregular rhyme, in this context, suggests an artificial escape from social reality and pain. The rhyme is disturbing and dissonant in this sense: it complicates the “consonance” of the speaker’s proposition; it makes it problematic, and suggests questions of undecidability of meaning. In this reading, deviating from the (formal) norm produces an “estrangement” of sense.

The awkwardness of the insistent (or “stubborn”) rhyme produces an estrangement of sense and also, therefore, of the norm itself. The reality of the eyesore, which in a poetics of consonance would represent an antithesis to a confirmed norm, here undermines the norm of consonance instead (deviating from the norm would actually confirm it in the same breath). The anxiety to protect the norm (*stasis*) at all costs—as the forced rhyme mentioned above shows—turns its own force towards *mobility*. Such an unexpected use of rhythmic normativity punctuates this textual moment with surprise, as the stanza emphasizes the expansive, resonating quality of dissonance. The repetition of the indefinite article in the two verses below builds the weight and expectation as to the word that will follow:

Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-

n eyesore. But no one will ever see a

Few enjambments can exacerbate the expansive quality of the crisis (initiated, as we have seen, as the dog crosses the avenue) of consonance, consensus, or identity as this one which splits a consonantal indefinite article. “[A]n” is split to, or jammed into, the consonant of infinite symbolization, the mathematical value of “n” that far exceeds the optic perception and visual reduction which bedevil the *I* and its own eyesore.

Bishop’s drafts show how intense and powerful this moment of the poem was to her, as the difficulty of crafting a solution for the dog matched the difficulty of crafting a solution for the poem. The verses “n eyesore. But no one will ever see a / dog in *máscara* this time of year” remained long unfinished in her manuscripts while the entire rest of the poem had been completed. Furthermore, Bishop was undecided between using the word “costume” or “*máscara*” throughout the very last two drafts. She eventually opted for complexity rather than resolution, by confronting the tension generated by the intervention of the foreign language, and therefore by Brazilian cultural perspectives, in the poem—a tension introduced on the lexical level by the ongoing shift between the two Portuguese words.

When the regular rhyme comes back, Bishop uses the English word *Carnival*, without the emphasis of italics: “Ash Wednesday’ll come, but Carnival is here.” Why doesn’t she use the Brazilian word *Carnaval*, just as she had used *fantasia* and *máscara*? For one thing, the English word reflects the very Carnival of consumption which “[t]hey say . . . radios, Americans, or something / have ruined completely”—the very discourse which, rearticulated as a mask, as can be seen in the anachronism of anticipating atonement (“Ash Wednesday’ll come”) *before* indulgence (“Carnival is here”), should veil the dog’s “free” transit in the streets.

It is now clear, in retrospect, that the poetic persona disavows a perspective of the social misfits (mentioned in the sixth and seventh stanzas) either as a monolithic site of pain

(“a- / n eyesore”) or in a site reduced to pain (“a depilated dog”). Her perspective is now one which foregrounds, instead, what has been excellently phrased by Mary Beth Tierney-Tello as “these subjects’ most human resistance to dehumanization” (1999: 92).<sup>87</sup> Here the poem revises its monolithic representation of others—which had occurred through the wholesale portrayal of all social misfits as a homogeneous bloc, inscribing an opposition between *we* and *they*: “. . . beggars? (. . .) Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites (. . .) drugged, drunk, or sober, with or without legs (. . .) . . . sick, four-legged dogs . . .” The speaker herself, who obviously does not subscribe to dehumanization, had reinforced the opposition between *we* and *they* by contrasting herself against all others in the poem, from the passersby to the misfits, to the militarized civil authorities. This contrast had relied on a bond asserting the poetic persona’s identity with her Anglo-American audience, and a split from a *they* whose referent is alternately the lower social strata; the militarized civil class; all the Brazilian passersby; and those who assert the decadence of *Carnival* through mass culture.

The speaker is anxious to assert the notion, central to *Carnaval*, that oppression can be resisted by a refusal to reduce contingent experience into merely a site of pain. By referring to the pink dog through the pronoun *you*, the speaker begins to disturb the monolithic gaze on which the reductionist discourse of exoticism relies. She introduces an implicit *I* that in turn implicates the readers by aligning us with the dog (the readers and the dog are interpellated as *you*), rendering vulnerable the *we/they* construct previously insulated from that of the victimized dog.

#### 4.2.6. The Dog’s Nakedness as Mask

Though latently failing, as we shall see, nevertheless the poetic persona’s “practical . . . sensible / solution” reflects the anthropophagic dream that cultural constraints might be put

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<sup>87</sup> This phrase refers to the work of Diamela Eltit, whose texts representing the subaltern “refuse to be fixed and defy an identitarian politics,” and are thus “aligned with postmodernism, which has typically attempted to revalorize what master discourses traditionally excluded.” (See Tierney-Tello 1999).



to the use of mediating tactics. In this sense, it is a performative attempt to acknowledge the dog's agency of resisting victimization through the very illness which oppresses her.<sup>88</sup> The appearance of Carnival ("at this time of year") as a fantasy of euphoric exoticism allows the dog's very illness to provide her with a mask of her own: the illness itself is her veil (*máscara*) and vessel (*fantasia*), the strategic means for her transit. More tellingly, the fantasy of the dog's pinkness as costume veils the *máscara*, allows the *máscara* to go unseen; and, as the *máscara* goes unseen, so does the *vessel* it produces: the strategic means for the dog's transit.

By imagining her power to turn the contingent reality of the dog's ailment into a costume, the poetic persona produces the dog's veiled mask of nakedness as the very reality of the costume—its fantasy, a tool. The fantasy of reductionist exoticism is put to use, now as the reality itself of escape. The ill-conditioned dog, who cannot afford life-preservers, and cannot float or dog-paddle on its own, floats in the poem's *allegory* of the dog's Carnival costume instead of drowning (*alegoria* is the same word in Portuguese for *allegory* and *Carnival float*). The articulation *máscara/fantasia* allows the poet to shed meaning on the pink dog as both veil and vessel—as both a product and producer of culture. At this point, the space offered by the poem to the other (and to the other language) posits the foreign consumption of cultural produce as the very condition for the dog's escape from the violence of her own nation. This is the same discourse which opens space for the dog to enter the

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<sup>88</sup> An unexpected semantical pattern adds to my argument that Bishop was anxious to assert the dog's strategic and contingent cultural agency in "Pink Dog." It is intriguing to note that *dogged* meant "ill-conditioned" (14<sup>th</sup> Cent.), and that a *dogger* was a "two-masted fishing vessel" (14<sup>th</sup> Cent.) These words share the same unknown origin of the word *dog*, "prob. orig. denoting a large or powerful kind," and joining, under the *exotic*, both the 'low,' pessimistic characterization of *dog* as the "grotesque" and the optimistic *pink* as the "ornamental." Both notions of the exotic co-exist in one of the etymological meanings of *pink*: "pierced ornament" (all quotes on etymological meanings are from *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*).

poem as he dog may also use foreign consumption in order to free herself from her own society.

#### 4.2.7. The Utopian Cruise in “Pink Dog”

It is remarkable to what extent the speaker’s perspective has changed so far, from the moment the foreign language inscribes the poem—and precisely through what Bishop had refused: the exotic, now clearly a strategic force. The poem expands her initial perspective of the exotic from the view shared by some critics (a view which connects closely with Bishop’s own initial worries as we have seen) of her subscription to the dog’s *máscara* as evidence of a “brutalized narrator . . . lacking moral attractiveness,” showing conformity, tasteless humour and indifference, and lacking the shrewd “sting of political narrative . . . [and] the strong sense of purpose found in even the weaker of the earlier exile pieces” (Doreski 1993: 131)—a view which characterizes Carnival in this poem as “a decadent world . . . the manifestation not of freedom but of repression” (Costello 1991: 86).

Bishop’s change of perspective on exoticism enacts the logic of transculturation, an aestheticist ground on which the poetic persona can imagine her freedom from the alienating framework of cultural insularity and authenticity:

They say that Carnival’s degenerating.  
—radios, Americans, or something,  
have ruined it completely. They’re just talking.

In this context, she resumes the alienating gaze over the exotic (interpellating the other as antithetically dissonant) with which the poem had started—this time, however, the dog’s abjection is overridden (rather than confronted or resolved) by aestheticization:

Carnival is always wonderful!  
A depilated dog would not look well.  
Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!

This well crafted utopian cruise is made more complex as it fails: the hierarchical relation between the poetic persona's self and other is only protected, reasserted, and intensified by her authorial position. By positing pinkness as an aestheticization of abjection, she posits her own imagination as the condition for the dog's transcendence of objectifying discourse.

Though effectively redeeming the poetic persona from the reductionist discourse of exoticism, this lyrical imagining invested by the speaker does not help her to confront, much less to interrupt, the contradictions which become more visible and problematic in the failure of her heroic role of saving the other. Therefore, Bishop equivocates, in skeptical sarcasm. Having emphasized her intention to refuse the discourse of abjection and to seek a solution to the problem instead, she chooses to stop the poem when her privileged position, and the failure of her pretense solution, is latent.

In retrospect, the poem's euphoric tone of final resolution, whether patronizing or sarcastic in representing the speaker's encounter with the other, ironically exposes the contradiction of a humanitarian discourse that employs the artistic imagination with the assumption of either resolving or dissolving conflict instead of confronting it. In this light, it resembles the action of the police, which sweeps all beggars out of sight as a means of "eradicating poverty" instead of addressing, if not its causes, at least the effects by which poverty is reproduced and naturalized. By exposing the solutionist discourses of positive politics by which we, as speakers, assert our innocence over social problems, the poem *also* subverts itself, but *not conclusively*. Any apparent resolution merely functions to eradicate, further still, the problems of representation that the poem raises. There can be no resolution, of course, to such an impasse. To take Bishop's word for the resolution of conflict sublimates her writings instead of engaging them with the different readings they potentialize. In this context, "Pink Dog" can be read as the speaker's ongoing attempt and failure to evade ethical tensions in her anxiety to overcome the limits of the poetic imagination.

#### 4.2.8. To Dissolve, to Resolve, to Absolve

Indeed, the poem only apparently assumes the dissolution of the conflicts of the speaker's position as an "American" viewing Carnival through the lens of reductionist exoticism, while at the same time suggesting her anxiety to assimilate meanings from the culture in which she has immersed herself. Hence the reader must go back and re-read the poem so as to examine more closely its disturbances, accentuated in the last stanza despite its surface appearance of a dissolution of conflict between the shifting discourses (*fantasia / máscara*) of Carnival: on the one hand, "radios, Americans, or something / have ruined it completely"; and, on the other, "they're just talking. Carnival is always wonderful!"

This sarcastic passage on the arguable degeneration of Carnival opens a disturbing fissure, as the meanings of "they" (and, thus, also of the implicit "we") are made ambivalent and unresolvable in the stanza, both foregrounding and blurring distinctions based on nationality and other boundary-constructs. This dynamics suspending identity closure confirms itself when re-reading expands the homogeneous representation of outsiderhood, occurred earlier in the sixth and seventh stanzas of the poem, as a satire of monolithic representation. Such emphasis on loosening identity borders puts forth the view that there can be no resolution, no consonance or homogeneity, between different experiences of outsiderhood, including that of the speaker's own outsiderhood as one of the "Americans" mentioned in the passage. Clearly, outsiderhood (dissonance) in "Pink Dog" is more complex and layered than Adrienne Rich may have assumed when she pointed out that

Bishop's experience of outsiderhood [is] closely—though not exclusively—linked with the essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity, and with how the outsider's eye enables Bishop to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify, with them. (1983: 17)

As I mentioned earlier, though the poem does draw on the narrator's empathy with an other's outsiderhood, it does so at the expense of either patronizing the other (arrogating to herself

the role of *resolving* the other's problem) or of inflicting sarcasm on the poem's social project (reasserting the inexorability of the dog's victimization, and therefore the *dissolution* of conflict). Because she cannot detach her representation of the pink dog from her own mediation, she perpetuates the violence she initially claims to (re)solve—and which by the end of the poem she only apparently dissolves. In either case, whether of her speaker's anxiety to resolve or dissolve conflict, Bishop enacts the power of aesthetic representation which *distinguishes* her outsiderhood from that of the other, thus also enacting a move *away* from trying to identify with the other.

It is only in this light, of *both* identification and contrast, and of re-reading the poem retrospectively—in other words, only in light of a nonlinear, dissonant aesthetic—that Bishop “identifies, or tries to identify” with other kinds of outsiderhood. By using the illusion of the speaker's centrality as a mask, Bishop transforms the suspicion over her cultural bias (which endorses Carnival) into the costume (itself a reality much more privileged than that of the dog's nakedness) of escaping homogeneous cultural identities: She thus elaborates on the conflicts of her position, now clearly sharing Brazilian *antropofagia's* “abiding dream of a world in which frontiers should either be abolished or vulnerable to trespassing” (Bellei 1998: 95).

In light of this dissonance which brings out both lyricism and skepticism in Bishop's poetry, it is hardly surprising that “Pink Dog” ends up foregrounding the artificiality of the very “solution” which mirrors her own masqueraded *fantasia*, elided in the poem. This foregrounding of skepticism threatens to become a new ground for privilege over the other, but privilege is again restrained as it becomes increasingly displayed. Thus, even while expanding perceptions of exoticism, the speaker occupies a more complex, layered, and contradictory position than any apparent resolution would allow.

#### **4.2.9. Dissolution of Conflict: Bishop's Veil and Vessel**

Bishop used the term “puritanically pink” to describe the liberal outlook of the literary magazine which she co-edited at Vassar, *Con Spirito*, and which, according to biographer Brett Millier, did not submit itself to any *fixed* political position (1993: 49). This choice for non-definition is related to Bishop’s political strategy of oblique dissent also later in her life. As Camille Roman has argued consistently, Bishop saw the spreading of a national discourse of persecution (of all those outside the nuclear family framework: orphans, refugees, singles, divorced, homosexuals) triggered by McCarthy and the House on Un-American Activities Committee offensives. As a U.S. government employee, she felt the closing in of the Administration’s terror-ridden dismissal of homosexual employees in the discourse that linked the terms “homosexual” and “Communist” as interchangeable.<sup>89</sup>

In this context, the word *pink* was—from the time of Bishop’s cold-war experience in the U.S.—a derogatory word said of someone who gives *little or veiled support* to political parties and positions, as contrasted against the communist *red*. Euphemistically, the word could mean either “communist” or “homosexual”. In this light, it can by extension contrast against any definition that forces down barriers in nationalistic comparisons, or, likewise, in identity politics involving class, gender, or ethnic boundaries.

In the sense of *veiled support*, both the dog and the poetic persona are imagined as *transiting* under such a veil (*máscara*) as the vessel (*fantasia*) of exoticism.<sup>90</sup> The motion set

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<sup>89</sup> On the interchangeability of these discourses of persecution, see Roman 2001; Edelman 1992; Berubé 1990; Mosse 1985; Schweik 1991; and Cooke 1993. Both Mosse and Roman situate the discursive justification and legitimation of U.S. militarism in the naturalization of the heterosexual and homophobic narrative—inherited from the European nation-building project—by which the nation, represented by the white heterosexual female, is in need of protection or rescue by the white heterosexual male.

Still alive and well today, of course, this narrative explains much of why women firefighters attempting to rescue (U.S.) civilians from the World Trade Center site after 9-11 received virtually no news coverage on their heroism, whereas the heroism of the male firefighters was intensely stressed, and momentarily merged with the belated discourse on the need to rescue Afghan women from the Taliban.

<sup>90</sup> Unlikely to have been intended, of course, the etymological meanings of *pink* as both *ornament* (*costume*, strategic exoticism for the dog’s transit) and *vessel* (*fantasy*, euphoric exoticism), alongside those of

off by this mediating, “pink” subtext highlights the arbitrary contents to which forms can be put. No longer aligning the form *pink* with the optimistic content it initially suggests—until the negative start of the second stanza: “Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!”—, nor with it’s the pessimistic sociopolitical content of *poverty-stricken and diseased*, the text feeds on instability, bringing into question the consistency of its logic of solutionist reasoning, and ultimately questioning the speaker’s own rhetorical choices. In the case of the phrase “no one will ever see a dog in *máscara* this time of year”: Is it that no one will see a dog if it’s in *máscara*, so that the fact that the pink dog is in the streets, dancing instead of drowning, in other words instead of being victimized in the tidal rivers, will go unnoticed in the *fantasy* world of Carnival? Or is it that no one will see a dog wearing *máscara*, so that the fact that her grotesque pinkness passes for a *costume* will go unnoticed? Through this unresolvable shift, the meaning of *máscara* is expanded to include *both* the obliteration of social violence (illness and hunger) *and* the dog’s capacity of “living by her wits” (12): rather than providing the reader with authorial guidance, in hindsight the speaker’s discourse *adds to* the reader’s disorientation in the text.

#### 4.2.10. Disorientation: Remote Meanings Now Visible

Looking back and considering the acknowledgment of the dog’s practice of “living by her wits,” the reader need not assume the speaker’s benevolence in offering a solution that may strategically, if only provisionally, protect the dog from the threat of social cleansing. Such an assumption overrides the fact that the speaker has set up a structure of hierarchy which replaces physical violence with the violence of an aestheticized hierarchical representation which, whether on a patronizing or sarcastic tone, disables the narrator’s

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*veil* as both *mask (máscara)* and *sail (fantasia)*, show how these meanings can extend the play between the two Portuguese words in the poem as well as between their textual intervention and the title. In this context, even the meanings related to the word *pink*, by which the dog is embodied with a fantastic characterization in the poem, challenge reductionist representation.

pretensions of affirming her mouth-to-ear solidarity with the other. In other words, the narrator's (re)solution is expected but frustrated because, although what she calls "the practical . . . sensible / solution" does provide a contingent strategy for the dog's resistance to oppression, it also reproduces patronizing discourse in the same breath. Therefore, the reader must confront the fact that hierarchies are only forced down further in the very situation of inequality by which the speaker imaginatively provides a solution for the other.

At this point, it becomes impossible to continue reading the poem without an awareness of the dehumanizing choice of figuration in Bishop's representation of otherness as an abject "four-legged" dog: that dogs *do* have four legs suggests a composite of two semantic clusters: *woman* and *dog*. The two clusters are joined together in the word *bitch*, by which *woman* becomes *prostitute*. Such mysogeny is further degrading as her *sickness* is incongruously looked down on as *madness*:

Of course they're mortally afraid of rabies.

You are not mad; you have a case of scabies

but look intelligent. Where are your babies?

By the end of the poem, the disoriented reader has no resort but to suspect of the hierarchical assumptions underlying the poem so far. Instead of finding out whether the speaker's promised solution is coherent and effective, the reader is now implicated in engaging the contradictions of the discourse of solidarity, and the new questions that emerge through them. This is precisely what makes Bishop's text political within (asymmetrical to) its own structure. According to Wolfgang Iser's theory of reader-response,

[a]s the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too. (1978: 21)

In rejecting the speaker's "solution," the reader



gradually realiz(es) the inadequacy of the perspective offered him, turning his attention more and more to that which he had up to now been taking for granted, and finally becoming aware of his own prejudices. The ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ will then apply, not to the narrative framework set up by the author, but to those ideas that had hitherto oriented the reader himself.

(8)

#### 4.2.11. Limits to the Poetic Imagination

Namely, in the case of “Pink Dog,” the reader must be suspicious of the structure of hierarchy by which the speaker would reveal the “solution” for the victimized dog. This structure is noticeable as the narration masks and thus intensifies its sarcasm under an appearance of growing intimacy with the dog, first presented as a stranger and later as a protégé.

There is a deep discrepancy between, on the one hand, her close bonding with the dog (“What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?”), and on the other, her growing emotional distance from the anxiety which generates the bond in the first place (“—radios, Americans, or something, / have ruined [Carnival] completely. They’re just talking. / Carnival is always wonderful!”). Furthermore, the reader’s feeling of disorientation is punctuated by the fact that the poetic persona has attempted to represent the pink dog while at the same time she is a spokesperson for the “Americans” whose degenerative influence over Carnival she sarcastically denies (35). These discrepancies do not allow the poetic persona to disimplicate herself from the conflict through her lyrical imagination: it is ultimately her own mediation that the poem must engage in order to perform the transit between incompatible cultural perspectives.

Now, it is the *poem* which has a problem: it has promised the *(re)solution* of one problem (the dog’s) only to deliver the *dissolution* of another (the speaker’s) by

authenticizing and globalizing Carnival): “They’re just talking. / Carnival is always wonderful!”.

The discrepancy functions like a backlash: the very discourse that aestheticizes the dog’s abjection becomes abject, not only in Bishop’s choice of figuration, as mentioned earlier, but also in her choice of such diction as embodied in the word “depilated”, in the closing verses: “Carnival is always wonderful! / A depilated dog would not look well. / Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!”. By the end of the poem, the reader, conventionally in a position of mastery over the printed page, occupies an unsettling position instead, realizing the inconsistency of what was thought to be the coherent and sovereign structure of the speaker’s text. The author’s disclosure of her solution does not bring forth a resolution, but rather the chaotic-like perception of more complex orders between meanings in the text.

Such terms as irresolution, destabilization, mobilization, anti-reductionist discourses, and so on, can only be understood through their binary counterparts, i.e., resolution, stabilization, fixity, reductionist discourses. In other words, if conflicts can rearticulate fixity into strategies of mobility, in ways that are temporary, contingent, relational, so that mobility is ‘always already’ in transit through fixity, or what Frederic Jameson calls the “prison-house of language,” the reverse is also true. In this sense, the poem keeps the resonating tension of *both* the inevitability of always falling back again on logocentric structures (resolution) *and* the dream of escape from logocentrism (irresolution.)

This tension is not resolved, but relational: it lingers on in temporary, transitional, contingent, strategic articulations of new meanings. In this sense, “appearances are no longer the veil concealing the substance of a meaning; now they are the means to bring into the world something which has never existed at any other time or place before” (Iser 1978: 6). Thus, the veil under which the speaker’s patronizing discourse passes for a humanitarian solution to social oppression is a fantasy, or “appearance,” that leads the reader to transit

between intercultural meanings—not to dissolve conflict, but, on the contrary, to re-read the poem in light of the conflicts it pretends to dissolve. Besides the contradictions of the discourse of representing others, the dissonant dynamic of “Pink Dog” also exposes limits to the performative action of the imagination.

In light of the enactments of hierarchy which we have seen so far, the speaker’s initial authoritative discourse of coming up with a solidary (re)solution crumbles. The performative empowerment of the imagination as a strategic force is further problematized when the poem ends in a double-view perception not only of Carnival, but also, by extension, of the poem itself. As the speaker incites the social misfit to create a *máscara* out of *fantasia*, the poem is itself performative of a masqueraded *fantasia*: out of the *fantasia* of “the free” speaker telling “the victim” what to do, the poem exposes its apparent dissolution of conflict as performative of the poetic persona’s own *masqueraded fantasia* of solidarity. Thus, the reader infers the generalizations implicit in the speaker’s discourse (for example, her benevolence toward the dog; or, her sarcastic dissolution of intercultural conflict) only to engage the seemingly remote implications and contradictions between those generalizations. By the end of the poem, its discourse of mastery becomes delusive, so that its structure of hierarchy points to the speaker’s (and the reader’s) anxiety to assert interpretive author-ity over the other (the text, the world, reality).

From such a position, Bishop ends the poem precisely at the moment when she is enacting her superiority over the aestheticized (pink) dog and, thus, her anxiety of authority over the poem itself. Self-conscious of arbitrary representations of the other, Bishop developed an underlying poetics that moves perception, and moves away from authorial centrality. Such efforts to break away from solipsistic practices of confessional poetry in her time found expression as she sought to formulate through her poems, as the pink dog’s

contingent resistance exemplifies, a subjective agency that could adjust to the new possibilities and limitations she encountered in her own transit between cultural perspectives.

Millier rightly points out that Bishop was hardly satisfied by the results of her efforts to write a poem about poverty in Rio (1993: 388-89). My suggestion, which derives from the conflicts we have examined in “Pink Dog,” is that Bishop’s difficult task was to write the poem in such a way as not to minimize the negative experience of poverty while, at the same time, not reducing the social misfit to “a site of pain.” Her task was also to craft a poetics which might capture her changing perspective of the other in poverty, while implicating herself in the process of representation. It is my view that she succeeded in such an attempt, in writing “Pink Dog.”

What fails in the poem is its closure on the terms of the speaker’s supposed intention to either resolve the dog’s problem or dissolve intratextual conflicts by homogenizing them into a single discourse—namely, that which claims equal and free transit between social and cultural frontiers. However, it is precisely through the narrator’s failure that the poem can accomplish the tasks mentioned above. By taking the discourses of resolution and dissolution to the point of self-consumption in an apparent consonance, the poetic persona conveniently enacts the closure of meaning while the poem interrupts her self-absolving discourse of aestheticized transculturation and anti-conquest.

#### 4.3. THE NAME OF THE FATHER: “CRUSOE IN ENGLAND”

But how is one to establish finally that the Caribbean is not just a multiethnic sea or a group of islands divided by different languages and by the categories Greater and Lesser Antilles, Windward Islands, and Leeward islands? In short, how do we establish that the Caribbean is an important historico-economic sea and, further, a cultural meta-archipelago without center and without limits, a chaos within which there is an island that proliferates endlessly, each copy a different one, founding and refounding ethnological materials like a cloud will do with its vapor?

Antonio Benitez Rojo, *A Isla que se Repite*

And this for a start: no one at all will know what my name is.

Compère, G.

Intervening within the two decades it took for Bishop to complete “Pink Dog,” “Crusoe in England” was started in the mid-60s in Brazil and published by *The New Yorker* in 1971. I would like to propose a reading of this poem as Bishop’s translation, to the site of the colonizer, of the allegory of aesthetic transculturation developed in “Pink Dog”—in other words, in the perspective of the unresolvable dissonance of Crusoe as Bishop’s disguise in the guise of anti-imperialism. In the pages that follow, I will address how the intertextuality between this poem and “Pink Dog” opens up a reading which foregrounds the dissonant strains of the poetic persona’s anxiety and desire to defeat her imperialist narrative on Brazil.

Jon Whitman has argued that the medieval technique of allegory is often dismissed as an archaic, obscure, and elitist mimetic device reducing processes of signification to received signifieds and alienating texts from their own materiality. Following de Man, he emphasizes that, nonetheless, allegory actually politicizes the dissonant play between meanings by ceaselessly undermining hegemonic elements that co-opt dissonance into the implicit consensus or consonance of metaphor. It is on this understanding that I view Bishop’s choice to revise the Crusoe narrative (of travel writing and world-making) by incorporating it into an allegory. Her authorial image, constructed as that of the self-reliant travel writer and mapmaker who cultivated humanitarian and moral soundness amid the dissociating experiences of culture shock, is construed in precisely the same currency (though now in the postmodern scale and guise of the anti-hero) of Defoe’s colonial narrative legitimizing the superiority of the triumphant, civilized hero over the cannibal other. In this context, rather than replicating the reception of Bishop’s Crusoe as the original, god-like, self-made man, “the writer of Adamic poetry, which names things” (Millier 1993: 450), the rest of this chapter will be focusing on how this poem works intertextually with “Pink Dog” to activate a nonlinear poetics undermining imperialist discourse from within it.

As we have seen, in “Pink Dog” Bishop disguises her imperialist narrative in a discourse that progressively alienates her from the other as if transcending conflict, space and time. Her guise takes the shape of an allegory of euphoria, projected onto her protagonist’s nakedness: the abject dog is imagined as floating (instead of drowning in the tidal river) as the poetic persona devises, in solidarity, an *alegoria* (an allegory and Carnival float) out of the very social oppression that disturbs her. This is the point where the connection between this poem and “Crusoe in England” comes up. It is precisely in the guise of the quintessential imperialist *Robinson Crusoe* that Bishop seeks to revise the authorial tradition of consuming the island landscape, thus revealing (and re-veiling) her discourse of anti-conquest. Millier’s argument, though meant to authenticate Crusoe’s imperialist figure for Bishop, shows how the guise works well:

Most important for Elizabeth’s [autobiographical] purposes, Defoe’s Crusoe is a solitary man who has built his life and work from materials at hand, taking no more than needed but observing all. He is, by implication, a geographer, mapmaker, discoverer, and possessor of colors “subtler” than those of the time-bound historian. He has stepped out of time for the twenty-eight years of his solitude. . . . His greatest accomplishment on the island is supreme domestication, the making of a wilderness into a recognizably English household, the appropriation of birds, soil, trees, berries. (1993: 447)

My suggestion, instead, is that Bishop’s poetic persona trespasses into the patriarchal realm of the canonical narrative, whose self-aggrandizing protagonist she now attempts to render as an anti-imperialist.<sup>91</sup> And she does so divested from the pink dog’s marginal position and

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<sup>91</sup> This connects closely with the pattern mentioned earlier, which Rowe points out to be characteristic of U.S. imperialist discourse (see chapter 1 n32). I quote at length from the passage below by Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe because I want to show that “*our war*”-mourning is implicit in the loss of authorial-imperial clout that Bishop-Crusoe once gained through naming, while he was on the island, and then through “using

attire—yet, still like the pink dog, in the naked guise of her own liability (as imperialist author). Thus she releases herself of the role of imperialist author, in her nostalgia for relations that countermand authority.

This intertextual reading should be helpful to foreground the dynamics by which the abject other—this time in the shape of a barren *island* whose insides erupt sickly into volcano ash heaps—is appropriated as a material *máscara* for the *fantasia* of a solitary, now unprivileged colonizer. Instead of the poetic persona inciting the other to wear a *máscara/fantasia*, as in “Pink Dog,” now it is the poetic persona herself who wears the mask of the figure and stereotype of the exiled hero seeking to safeguard his position within the discursive framework of innocence. However, the poetic persona cannot eradicate what is an additional ground of privilege over the other: after all, Crusoe, unlike the pink dog, enjoys the privilege of abdicating his power. Even as Bishop’s Crusoe marks his difference within the discursive formation of empire, still he can represent himself in the material poem. With disturbingly grotesque irony, Bishop’s aesthetic transculturation of the pink dog, of Carnival, and of Crusoe, dares us to enjoy Crusoe’s advantages over the pink dog represented in her text. Crusoe as controlling author remains recognizable, that is to say, even as he renounces the imperialist role. In other words, though decentered, authorial control is alive and well, and in good moral standing: such a changed Crusoe does not run the risk of being identified with

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everything” in their ethnographic writings. Berg and Rowe describe the portrayal of a wounded self in need of healing the loss of myths and ideals in another, not unrelated context—the Vietnam war, during which time the poem was written:

The popular term for this public and often theatrical mourning suggests that we have not really come to terms with what we lost in Vietnam. American idealism didn’t die; we are simply in the course of “healing” the wounds those ideals suffered in *our* war.

We may speak casually of the “body politic,” . . . but . . . [m]yths and ideals can’t really be “wounded”. We are obsessed with the trauma and injury we have suffered, as if the United States, not Vietnam and Kampuchea, were the country to suffer the bombings, the napalm air strikes, the search-and-destroy missions, the systematic deforestation, the “hamlet resettlement” programs. (1991: 2)

the “eyesore” which, by contrast, reduces the pink dog or the red-painted goat to an aestheticized other that goes unrecognized. Thus, the double bind of Bishop-as-Crusoe not only inscribes Bishop’s exclusion from participation in a domineering tradition; it also incorporates her within that tradition.

This is the uncanny aspect of the paradox or double bind: covered by the robe of the mythical author, this narrator is in a safer position, one of innocently renouncing power, than that of the inadvertent witness or condescending narrator of “Pink Dog”. Through the mediation of myth, Bishop can more easily address her discrepant perceptions of reality without running the risk of losing ground—as will the poetic persona, whether as the speaker or as the pink dog, once “Ash Wednesday’ll come.” She can even masquerade as providing a solution to replace what she argues to be the wrong accounts of Crusoe (one of those accounts which, in “Pink Dog,” have questionably “ruined Carnival completely”).

#### **4.3.1. Aestheticized Transculturation as Resolution into Consonance**

The metamorphosis by which Crusoe is purified or emptied from his core historical roles of slave-trader, capitalist, missionary, and plantation-owner, and kept with only those of survivor, writer, inventor, and traveler, has made “Crusoe in England” into one of Bishop’s poems that have most reliably and effectively secured her canonical position—in remarkable resemblance to the authoritative positions of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Shakespeare’s Prospero—of a *master* able to “confront the necessities of life, surrendering neither to despair nor to a longed-for affirmation” (Travisano 1988: 7). This poem, as far as I know unanimously praised for its superiority among Bishop’s writings (a superiority which has been built over the presumed inferiority of “Pink Dog”),<sup>92</sup> has been fundamental for

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<sup>92</sup> The depreciation of “Pink Dog” has been made most explicitly in the statement (referring to Jarrell’s praise of Bishop’s moral attractiveness) that “[t]he lack of that moral attractiveness mars ‘Pink Dog,’ but the poem does remind the reader how convincingly that moral purpose occurs in her best work, like “Crusoe” (Doreski 1993: 131).



establishing Bishop's authorial clout above the fact that her upgrade from an imperialist to a nonviolent version<sup>93</sup> of the legendary author still produces a deeply problematic text. In this light, the wealth of laudatory criticism of "Crusoe in England" is evidence of investments in its power to strengthen Bishop within the canon of nationalist literature. This is to say that "Crusoe in England" has received much acclaim due to the "moral attractiveness" of associating Bishop's poetic persona with an *ameliorated version* of the quintessential author. Plainly, the poem appeals to canonization because it revises Crusoe, this time as a harmless, unambitious colonizer, while in the same breath retaining his and Bishop's role as "Master of His Business" (Millier 1993: 451), author of humanity and self-presence. Thus, as mythical author, Bishop-Crusoe can still preserve his status as the writer "re-inventing the world" (Kalstone 1977: 36).

This politically-correct (anti) imperialist move is counterbalanced by readings of Bishop-Crusoe-as-righteous-protagonist that presuppose yet another wishful resolution of intercultural dissonance in the poem. Bishop-as-Crusoe can only be consolidated, allowing for Bishop's embodiment of the heroic role, after his experience in the so-called primitive world gains perspective through a "return to civilization . . . [and] civilized values" (Doreski

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<sup>93</sup> Innumerable examples are available to support this argument. Here is one:

Most important for Elizabeth's [autobiographical] purposes, Defoe's Crusoe is a solitary man who has built his life and work from materials at hand, taking no more than needed but observing all. He is, by implication, a geographer, mapmaker, discoverer, and possessor of colors "subtler" than those of the time-bound historian. He has stepped out of time for the twenty-eight years of his solitude." (Millier 1993: 449)

Countering Millier's view of Crusoe's timelessness in Bishop, Thomas Travisano states that Bishop's last phase of writing, which includes the poems "Crusoe in England" and "Pink Dog," reverses the earliest phase which "renounces history for the ambiguous pleasures of enclosure. . . . Bishop dealt with more widely shared concerns than many have recognized, and she may be seen, not as an isolated—though brilliant—observer, but as a figure who has helped to define the subject matter of contemporary poetry and who has tried to identify the technical and spiritual resources it can order in response to inevitable human limitation" (1988: 7).

1993: 128-32; see also Goldensohn 1992: 51).<sup>94</sup> We will come back to this later; first, what Crusoe must confront rather than deny is the fact that it is not reality but his own perception of it which is chaotic. The realization haunts him, and leads him to breed

nightmares of other islands  
stretching away from mine, infinities  
of islands, islands spawning islands.

Dissonance, which the young Crusoe only perceives antithetically as anxiety and frustration, actually echoes his failed attempts to contain reality within his preconceived project, so suddenly turned nightmarish, of possessing the islands by “registering their flora, / their fauna, their geography.” This realization of the *uncanny*<sup>95</sup> that emerges in the insufficiency of language vis-à-vis the experience of the New World is legendarily epitomized by Columbus, whose obligation to assign positive meaning by naming items of the American scenario did not bring him a bit closer to it; on the contrary, as Tzvetan Todorov observes, “on certain days this obligation plunges [him] into a veritable naming frenzy” (1984: 27)—which we see being re-enacted later by Crusoe. The arbitrariness of such possession by naming is visible, and comically ironic, in Bishop’s pun by which Crusoe names a volcano “*Mount D’Espoir* or *Mount Despair*” when his ignorance of the meaning of the foreign word (unlike the speaker

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<sup>94</sup> For Doreski, what positive force lies in “Pink Dog” beyond its “sullied vision” is in that it confirms, as by antithesis, the supremacy of “Crusoe in England”: “The lack of that moral attractiveness mars “Pink Dog,” but the poem does remind the reader how convincingly that moral purpose occurs in her best work, like “Crusoe” (131). An example of laudatory criticism of the poem as Bishop’s self-making occurs in the statement, “A poet who has written this poem really needs to write nothing else: it seems . . . a perfect reproduction of the self in words” (Helen Vendler, qtd. in Doreski 1993: 127).

<sup>95</sup> As both the remote prolongation of consonance as well as its deferral, dissonance incorporates the *uncanny*, the English translation for Freud’s *das Unheimliche* (unfamiliar, strange, incongruous):

We can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through

in “Pink Dog”) leads him to associate it with similar sounds, assuming an inherent alignment between sound and meaning, form and content. On this misunderstanding, Crusoe lives within a mindframe in which processes of signification are contained under interlocked meanings, so that hope and despair, euphoric triumph and frustration, or still the idealized and the abject exotic, are one.

#### 4.3.2. Dissonance as Slippage from Authorial Control

It may seem innocuous to legitimize Crusoe’s abject representations of the “poor old island” and its people, let alone to authenticate those representations by grounding them in Bishop’s own on-site accounts of Cuttybunk and Aruba, not to mention Darwin’s recollections of the Galápagos as well (see, for example, Goldensohn 1992: 54). At best, however, the discourse of travel writing as cartography and ethnography leaves out an extraordinary aspect of Bishop’s writings. She wrote that what she finds most attractive in Darwin’s text is the way the very discourse of detached observation and scientific knowledge—the discourse of systemic authentication—shatters; and what is more, only by a mere, casual distraction! Ironically, what Bishop reads for in Darwin is his recurrent slippage from the positive perspective of a classificatory, evolutionary, hierarchical order under which he tries heroically to map what he perceives as a chaotic landscape. It is this discrepancy—this slippage (of dynamic dissonance) from the linear and dichotomous order (of consonance) posited by a superior observer, that shatters the gaze in the narrative of exoticism—that Bishop desires to read. She desires to emphasize these less visible personas—the old, unambitious Crusoe and the young, giddy naturalist—in order to deconstruct the self-centric prototype of the travel writer. In this sense, her writing project for “Crusoe in England” is to exceed the control of the authorial gaze, to rewrite the heroic narrative in such a way that she too can “slide giddily off” (qtd. from passage below) from her embodiment of the imperial

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the process of repression . . . the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed

self in travel literature.<sup>96</sup> It is not surprising, then, that it is this slippage from authorial control that she most appreciates in the evolutionary scientific discourse epitomized by Darwin's text. In commenting on *The Voyage of the Beagle*, she writes that what attracts her is the irony of

the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. (qtd. in Harrison 1993: 37)

Bishop has struck a dissonant chord here. Darwin as the lonely young writer in the self-imposed exile of a quest for knowledge “over the edge of the unknown”—as Bishop's canonization often portrays her, typically in association with her closing line in “Arrival at Santos”: “we are driving to the interior” (see, for example, Karpeles 2002)—closely resembles Defoe's Crusoe. The 18<sup>th</sup> century protagonist is most familiar to us in the first part of the description above: the self-made, self-reliant adventurer overcoming the solitude and challenges of what he perceives as a hostile or chaotic environment, one whose future order pleads for his authoritative vision. What Bishop looks to, let us keep in mind, is the slippage

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that *recurs*. (1955 [1919]: 241, qtd. emphasis)

<sup>96</sup> Bishop was not the first to introduce such discrepancies into the Crusoe tradition: the anxiety of authenticity is a central concern of Defoe's narrative as well. Though reception of the latter's text gradually evaded the narrative voices which might threaten Crusoe's authority, still the anxieties, uncertainties, and even the contradictions in the accounts of the travel writer were part of the author's project to protect each narrative layer from moral questioning. Bishop's task is, on the contrary, to *unprotect* the intercultural text from its discrepancies just as well. In light of the fact that Defoe's Crusoe rejects his previous narratives as not quite right, the case can be easily made that the complaints by Bishop's Crusoe that “no book ever got that right” actually parody Defoe's anxiety to assert authorial authenticity. For in-depth discussions of incoherence between Defoe's three books, between the narratives within the canonized book, and even between the narratives of its first-day events, see Goetsch 1990 and Downie 1996. Downie makes the point that the 18<sup>th</sup>

within that discourse, the “sudden relaxation” from systemic closure which actually interrupts its “beautiful solid” structure. Bishop thus comes very close to that “manner of timing so as to catch and preserve the movement of an idea, the point being to crystallize it early enough so that it still has movement,” as Bishop wrote of Hopkins (“Gerard” 7)—so that it is still incipient and changing (dynamically dissonant) rather than frozen into sameness (consonance). From this dissonant perspective, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century self-making author becomes, in Bishop, the self-*unmaking* author, the writer of anti-conquest. This desire for an ethical redemption, however, does not provide a solution, but adds to the complexity of the problems of representation. After all, as in “Pink Dog”’s discourse of solidarity, Bishop constructs in “Crusoe in England” an oblique narrative by which her speaker can masquerade as anti-conqueror while transiting in the authorial robe throughout the entire process.

#### 4.3.3. Slippage vs. the Uncanny Antithesis

Bishop’s oblique narrative of Crusoe thus consists of two distinctive discourses. The first, in the past, is one of antithetical dissonance which amplifies the superiority of the observer (“and if I’d become a giant, / I couldn’t bear to think what size / the goats and turtles were”), rendering the landscape abject and nightmarish. Ironically—and *uncannily*—, this Crusoe’s conquest and expansion is nothing but a span of “volcanoes dead as ash heaps,” its “rollers / closing and closing in, but never quite, / glittering and glittering, though the sky / was mostly overcast”. Definition slips away in this antithetical reality where the glittering of birds in flight comes not from the sky above but from the burning, hissing ashes below. Spinning into uncanny frustration, the idealization of paradise turns out to be a lot more like hell, but the hero is blind to his stake in constructing chaos, making use of it only to reify his own superiority over an environment thus deemed primitive. Antithetical dissonance shifts places when Friday comes, with his ease in merging with rather than controlling the

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century reception of *Robinson Crusoe* was by no means reduced to the canonized version into which it

environment (“He’d pet the baby goats sometimes, / and race with them, or carry one around”).

The second discourse, in the present, is one of relational dissonance, which engages the contradictions of the narrative of antithetical dissonance and subsequent resolution. In retrospect, the older Crusoe, speaking in the present, mocks his ancestor’s presumption of conquest-by-mapping, as well as his anxiety to impose consonance on a dissonant reality. Bishop sarcastically contrasts the young Crusoe against the expansionist and positivist technologies of knowledge (classification, quantification, source study, etc.) so as to depict the shattering self of a Crusoe very much like her own description of the Darwinian “lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.”

#### **4.3.4. Naming: “but who decides?”**

Anne Ferry points out in her remarkable essay, “The Naming of Crusoe”, that Bishop confers on her Crusoe a multilayered identity which allows her to engage questions about the ambivalent nature of reality and representation, marking the poem with that pastiche of self-authenticating quotations surrounding the source history of the Crusoe figure. Ferry shows that in parodying the claims for authenticity that mark even Defoe’s own revisionist accounts, Bishop introduces anachronistic references which, while rooting the myth in its authorial sources, also ironically uproot it from any source history, uprooting representation and reality itself from expectations of authenticity—confirming any stable, homogeneous identity. This is the issue discussed more recently in the context of feminist and postmodern theories (by such cultural theorists as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, David Harvey, Linda Hutcheon, Ernesto Laclau, Paul Smith, and others) which Bishop tackles in her poem, “Poem”:

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developed, and which “came increasingly to mean the first part only, if not indeed the island episode itself” (14).

Art “copying from life” and life itself,  
 Life and the memory of it so compressed  
 they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?

Ferry argues further that Defoe’s “masterful representation is interested in erasing the question ‘Which is which?’ whereas Bishop’s interest is precisely in the question itself” (1992: 199).

Bishop adds further to the complexity of her question above, about the authenticity of representation and the representational constructedness of reality through memory, by highlighting the persuasive intervention of the speaker, author, interpreter, etc. in the ongoing change of the text. Thus her allegory of the prototype author in “Crusoe in England” becomes most vulnerable in the following lines:

Now I live here, another island  
 that doesn’t look like one, but who decides?

Bishop is calling attention to the arbitrariness of affirmation in her own narrative.<sup>97</sup> She is calling attention, in other words, to the necessary vulnerability in nontransparency, that is, in one’s “own subjective investment in the narrative that is being produced” (Spivak 1990: 29). Whereas the first question, “Which is which?,” puts forward the impossibility of discerning between reality and representation, the second question, “but who decides?,” takes issue with the fact that all positive thought is manipulated by the perspective controlled by the author. These two questions can be understood in the terms of Alasdair MacIntyre’s distinction between the relativist and perspectivist approaches to reality:

The relativist challenge rests upon a denial that rational debate and rational choice among rival traditions is possible; the perspectivist challenge puts in

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<sup>97</sup> This is precisely the attentiveness Derrida proposes in deconstruction. According to Spivak, he said that “Deconstruction is not exposure of error, it is a vigilance about the fact that we are always obliged to produce truth” (1990: 46).

question the possibility of making truth-claims from within any one tradition”  
(1988: 352).

It is hardly surprising that Bishop should choose Crusoe, the very prototype of the self “re-inventing the world” by naming and other forms of truth production, to stage her perspectivist challenge, which becomes unresolvable. The older Crusoe parodies not only his younger version, but also his present enactment of it, as Bishop’s revisionist project only feeds into the continuity of the myth. In other words, Bishop adjusts Crusoe’s triumphalist narrative to the postmodern context of authorial skepticism, updating its credibility. She thus succeeds in mocking the assurance of finality assumed in Crusoe’s triumphal return to England, adding to the discrepancies on which the poem relies to hold up its mask of anti-conquest. As Crusoe’s triumphal return would indicate the final resolution of dissonance into the consonance of self-presence, Bishop suspends return or resolution instead, so that this Crusoe can only be on “another island / that doesn’t seem like one,” as s/he decides in the second to last stanza.

In stating parenthetically that “accounts of [Friday] have that all wrong,” Bishop-Crusoe offers another account of Friday even as s/he undermines it in the same breath. In stating that the island remains “un-rediscovered” and “unrenamable,” s/he implies that the discourse which has discovered and named the island cannot be eradicated. Bishop-Crusoe does leave Friday and the island un-renamed, by displaying all acts of naming as failing disguises for the lack of relational interaction and thus for the lack of knowledge, the pretension of which the poetic persona mocks in her opening lines on the impoverishing gaze of the mapmakers:

some ship saw an island being born:

at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;

and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—

rose in the mate’s binoculars



and caught on the horizon like a fly.

They named it.

One can sense a tone of sarcasm in the use of the adjective “poor” below, since *not* naming seems here to better serve a site of knowledge that wishes to remain private:

But my poor island’s still

Un-rediscovered, un-renameable.

None of the books has ever got it right.

Nor, Bishop knows, will hers. However, if language is insufficient, so is silence. The poem does offer more than one clue for Crusoe’s silence, though, since the word “solitude” is disguised in the conspicuous blank in Crusoe’s seemingly casual recitation of another poet’s verses—which are, in turn, Mary Wordsworth’s verses in the guise of her husband’s poem.<sup>98</sup>

This silence stands not only for solitude, but for its dissociation from bliss:

Why didn’t I know enough of something?

Greek drama or astronomy? The books

I’d read were full of blanks;

The poems—well, I tried

Reciting to my iris-beds,

“They flash upon that inward eye,

which is the bliss . . .” The bliss of what?

One of the first things that I did

When I got back was look it up.

Silence thus stands for the meanings that are fuller than those which are contained within unrelational acts of naming (“books full of blanks,” “poems . . . recit[ed] to [one’s] iris-beds”). It is only obliquely that Bishop offers a clue to her construction of this poem which is

her allegory of the canonical narrative. The dynamic dissonance which is activated by Bishop's quasi-autobiographical protagonist being named Crusoe while changing him radically calls attention to her refraction of the traditionally male role of the author as a rhetorical deployment toward a narrative of anti-conquest, and, therefore, to the distinction between, on the one hand, naming and identity as supposed resolution, revealing unmediated truth content, and, on the other hand, as rhetorical and arbitrary construction. In this light, it also calls attention to Bishop's nonlinear poetics of irresolution not as an exercise in the elusiveness of anachronistic, obscure or oblique language, but as a search for a process of composition that renders vulnerable its truth-claims by exposing its own rhetorical constructedness, and with it, therefore, its prolongational interruptions.

#### 4.3.5. “(What is the Place of ‘Love’ in the Ethical?)”

Concerning some of those interruptions. Though Bishop-as-Crusoe does not rename the island, s/he does rename Friday, as savior. This gesture is part of Bishop's revisionist deconstruction of the code by which Defoe's Crusoe dehumanizes the Caribbean people so as to appropriate and dispossess them—at the same time that he safeguards his moral standing by depicting them as being saved from cannibalism (or from being killed by their own nation, as Bishop said of Lota's death, in a colonialist discourse that still stands as a given). Crusoe saving Friday (and Bishop saving the pink dog) would re-enact the imperialist narrative, as mentioned earlier, of “*First World women saving Third World women from Third World men.*” So far, nothing new: once again the abject cannibal (the antithetically dissonant other) must be converted to the order of self-presence (consonance). However, what *is* new in Bishop's poem is that *it is Friday who saves Crusoe.* (To rename Friday as savior does not resolve or even dissolve intercultural conflict in Bishop's text; this discourse of newness displays its own problems and repetitions, as we shall see. Though Bishop enacts Crusoe's

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<sup>98</sup> Susan McCabe has pointed out that these verses, which W. Wordsworth defended as his poem's

split from imperialist discourse, still antithetical dissonance inverts but does not subvert the imperialist geography which fixes the other onto the flattened, remote site of exoticism.)

Naming is indeed central to all versions of Crusoe as mythic origin, and it provides an illustration of the problem concerning this chapter: the anxiety of colonial discourse to aestheticize itself into a discourse of anti-conquest. The problem stands out most conspicuously in the analogy pointed out by several scholars (an analogy which I also see) between the renaming of Friday and of Lota in Bishop's poem. The problem is not that the analogy should not be made, but that it is taken at face value, its conspicuous colonialist implications being starkly dismissed for over twenty years. The analogy that identifies Crusoe with Bishop, on one hand, and Friday with Lota, on the other, reinscribes the colonialist dichotomy by which the authorial self is identified with Apollonian order, while the other is identified with Dionysian disorder, transgression, and Eden-bound sensuality. In this discourse of exoticism, though "ameliorated" from Defoe's conversion of Friday to Crusoe's consonance, Crusoe converts himself instead to dissonance, which shifts from the pole of the antithetically grotesque (as Crusoe represents the land, the volcanoes, the animals) to that of the antithetically sensual (the idyllic and utopian), without, therefore, exceeding the dominant order.

Just so, Bishop's seeming transparency in performing authorial guidance—in Crusoe's parenthetical remark in the poem that "Accounts of that have everything all wrong"—is ambivalent. Just as s/he implies a revisionist critique, suggesting a definitive correction of previous accounts, s/he also distracts the reader from the broader suspicion that *no revision can possibly escape reinscription*. The caveat thus earns her the benefit of the doubt: we infer that this time, a representation coming from such an authoritative, reliable, transparent speaker is bound to warrant a timely, politically-correct resolution of the conflict

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"best lines," institute a tradition which renders female writers unnamable (1989: 59).

that marks the Crusoe-Friday relationship. In other words, the alibi set up by the speaker's caveat hides in its game of transparency the sardonic clue that among such accounts that "have it all wrong" is also her own. The reader's contribution to this interpretive leap—producing a kind of peace-making closure, overwriting colonial discourse with an ethics of anti-conquest—becomes a *carte-blanche* for the poem to cover up the colonialist dichotomies (culture/nature, outsider/insider, colonizer/colonized) allowing for the analogy between Friday and Lota in the first place.

Let us consider for a while the muted autobiographical subtext that would rename Friday as Lota: Bishop's ameliorated Friday becomes no longer the cannibal, but instead, the very victim of cannibalism (as the story goes, monologically overriding Bishop's contradictory statements, "the hypocritical Brazilian government had killed Lota Soares" [Millier 449]).<sup>99</sup> The discourse of cannibalism thus lingers on, and still reverts back, recovering the guise by which Crusoe (now once again) saves Friday—if not from the cannibalism of Lota's own kind (if not "from brown men"), at least from being "caught on the horizon like a fly" by the writer's own kind of readers (from white men). In either case, Bishop revalidates the colonial discourse of saving the other as a pre-text to protect the superiority of the colonizer within the guise of the humane author. Such is the imperialist subtext by which Bishop endorses Crusoe's conquest of the island—but with an upgrade: this time, the conquest is authenticated by the stamp of nonviolence.

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<sup>99</sup> Bishop's letters show that she was defensive to accusations regarding her responsibility over Lota's suicide—blaming it all on Brazilian corruption may have proven easier than recalling, for example, that she "didn't notice all the symptoms" of Lota's schizophrenia, though "apparently a lot of her other friends realized it long before [she] did - [she] was just used to it" (to Aunt Grace, Jan 20 1967, Vassar). Her request to Aunt Grace—"[p]lease just say she's had a "breakdown"- not that anyone where you are knows her"—suggests that she may have been concerned about her own association with yet another schizophrenic among her significant others. On similar statements by which her later partner blamed her recent problems with schizophrenia on Brazil, Bishop wrote to her friend Dorothee Bowie: "Brazil is far away; people will believe any strange thing about it, apparently—and paranoia is awfully convincing" (Nov. 2 1970, Box 27, Vassar).

To rename Friday as savior in the dominant text, by contrast, is to perform a symmetrical inversion. As Friday resolves dissonance into consonance, the poem foregrounds the speaker's anxiety to put an end to what is by now the antithetical dissonance of Crusoe's own arbitrary order, and with it the tortuous, endless repetition and failure of Crusoe's often ridiculous attempts to possess the land by homogenizing it into consonance—into his image and imagining, i.e., through his own names. Friday's salvation of Crusoe occurs because, rather than naming, classifying, or defining the island in terms of its resistance to his own arbitrary categories, thus reading himself, Crusoe's narcissism becomes vulnerable to relational interaction, free from the need to distinguish himself from the landscape. He breaks away from his insane project to impose a façade order, a classification into arbitrary categories, over a reality where “there is only one of each,” a reality of dissonance and *différance*. In this sense, Friday saves Crusoe by dissolving the logic of the self into the logic of the other. Thus Bishop's oblique politics of gender marks homosexual love as *difference* rather than, stereotypically, as *sameness*: Crusoe's love for Friday is a *facilitation*<sup>100</sup> toward the disruption of the logic of the self, a vulnerability which opens Crusoe to an *expansive* (rather than *expansionist*) perception of order in the loss of boundaries, which he now refuses to define within the language categories of an autonomous self. In other words, Bishop's Crusoe breaks away from Defoe's Crusoe by refusing the triumphal naming of the other of the self, a naming which would reduce the relational dynamics of dissemination of difference

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<sup>100</sup> Spivak points out that *facilitation* is the English translation of a Freudian term which is translated *frayage* in French. Here is her citation of the dictionary entry:

Term used by Freud at a time when he was putting forward a neurological model of the functioning of the psychical apparatus (1895): the excitation, in passing from one neuron to another, runs into a certain resistance; where its passage results in a permanent reduction in this resistance, there is said to be facilitation; excitation will opt for a facilitated pathway in preference to one where no facilitation has occurred. (Laplanche et. al. 1973: 157, qtd. in Spivak 2000)

(“I wanted to propagate my kind”) into a static, consonant perception of sameness. As Spivak puts it,

Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a *dissemination* cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages, we get perilously close to it. By juggling the disruptive historicity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations. Although every act of reading or communication is a bit of this risky fraying which scrambles together somehow, our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum except in the communication and reading of and in love. (What is the place of “love” in the ethical?) (2000: 398)

#### 4.3.6. The “Island Logic” of Relational Dissonance

In 1934, Bishop wrote in her notebook:

On an island you live all the time in this Robinson Crusoe atmosphere. . . . A poem should be made about making things in a pinch . . . . The idea of making things do - of using things in unthought of ways because of necessity - has a lot more to it. It is an *island* feeling, certainly” (qtd. in Costello 1991: 208)

Bishop actually started to make that poem, some thirty years later. The “*island* feeling” she foregrounds both in the poem and in the passage above can best be understood as a kind of knowledge that occurs *in transition* between distinct systems by which we order and perceive reality—systems which, to expand on Bishop’s metaphor, are caught in a “mainland feeling” of sameness (consonance). Considering that “England”—the mainland from which Crusoe’s

imperialist expedition departed—originally meant, plainly, “island,” Bishop ironically conflates the (original) mainland with the (new) island in her title, “Crusoe in England.” In doing so, she constructs an “island logic”<sup>101</sup> that foregrounds the slippages of thought through the potential reach of prolongational variation and interruption that is irreducible *because*, not *although*, it is even coextensive with consonance, and therefore cannot be proscribed through any inside/outside order. In this sense, though in another context, Bishop wrote that

There is no “split.” Dreams, works of art (some), glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. (qtd. in Harrison 1993: 37)

The conflation of island and mainland in Bishop’s title signals the reproduction in “Crusoe in England” of the same pattern of an aestheticized transculturation constructed in the title “Pink Dog.” This is not immediately obvious: by eliding the contradictions of her colonizer’s discourse of anti-conquest, Bishop posits her Crusoe as the spokesperson of the mainland (consonance) whose self-empowerment in incorporating or taming the island (antithetical dissonance) through art renders his knowledge absolute, and restores his sovereignty at the capital of power. This returning Crusoe can be seen in analogy with Shakespeare’s returning Prospero, whom Roland Greene portrays, in his reading of “island logic” in *The Tempest*, as

a singular figure who can draw the world together again into a unity—he is the protoglobalist, though whether he represents the capitalist, the humanist, the patriarch, or all of these is left tactically uncertain. However, he can be

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<sup>101</sup> I borrow the term from Roland Greene, for whom imaginative islands disrupt structured worlds and hence become worlds in and of themselves, subsequently disrupted by other islands. In this constant interplay between insularity and integrity, the island stands for “a distinctively partial knowledge that counters the

depicted only within and from the horizon of the island. A mainland Prospero would challenge representation: he would be power itself, seen without shadings or perspectives. (2000: 139)

The island, representing the yet-to-be-conquered knowledge of otherness (remote or antithetical dissonance), is thus anticipated as being resolved into the norm of consonance. Its antithesis is emphasized in the blindness to difference which leads to Crusoe's

nightmares of other islands  
stretching away from mine, infinities  
of islands, islands spawning islands,  
like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs  
of islands

On this island where each creature is an island in and of itself ("The island had one kind of everything"), the anxiety to control the proliferation of uncontrollable particularity takes shape in Crusoe's perceptual distortion of scale. Shrinking the elements he cannot control is a strategy to counter the painful realization that knowledge presumed as all-encompassing (consonance) is a "miserable philosophy" in a reality demanding the perception of difference (dissonance). Thus, the volcanoes are islands spawning their own dark entrails in an abject outflow. On top of them, "with their heads blown off," lie other islands, craters or cradles for the birth of yet other islands, their lava developing life endlessly, and ominously, as dark turtles hatching, ceaselessly disseminating liminal and latent knowledge:

The folds of lava, running out to sea,  
Would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove  
To be more turtles.  
The beaches were all lava, variegated,

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totalities of institutions and regimes . . . a trope that reliably undoes the world as [the] audience knows it" (2000:



Black, red, white, and gray.

The marble colors made a fine display.

To keep control the colonizer must reduce such variegation to a manageable framework of order, homogenizing diversity into the monolithic substance of “marble,” which is ironically also a metaphor for the lifeless consonance that takes shape in the anxiety for the authorial figure not to shatter. Unable to exert his superior role in ordering chaos, instead he renders chaos as too small and “too tame.”

In other words, Crusoe deploys the superiority of his physical scale in his accounts, in the anxiety to evade a relational dynamic between the island and the mainland, a relation which neither solidifies into connection nor dissolves into disconnection. Scale thus verges on the uncanny: above each crater lies yet another island, this time of vapor—another version of the abject overlapping of inside and outside, the outcast scraps of “elsewhere” closing into the “here”:

My island seemed to be  
 A sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's  
 left-over clouds arrived and hung  
 Above the craters—

Considering that Bishop associated her fledgling poems with volcanoes ready to erupt,<sup>102</sup> her depiction of young Crusoe's volcanoes as “dead as ash heaps” can be understood as

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138; 140).

<sup>102</sup> For a reading of the metaphor of (deferred or suppressed) volcanic eruption associated with creativity in Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop, see Keller and Miller 1984. In the passage below, on the scream of inarticulate pain in Bishop's poem “In the Waiting Room,” Keller and Miller's allusion to the metaphor of the abject volcanoes in “Crusoe in England” corroborates my reading of the theme of madness in Bishop (discussed more carefully in chapter 5) as what Kristeva calls, in her essay on abjection, “an attempt to tally with the incongruous” (Kristeva 1982: 188):

With equally jarring suddenness, a cry erupts “from inside” her that is at once Elizabeth's individual voice and that of her family, of all women, of all humanity. This volcanic voice

parodying the anxiety of authorial control and productivity. As the author Crusoe is reluctant to engage his shattering perceptions, and as he therefore sinks into self-pity, his unwritten poems haunt him, proliferating uncannily. Friday interrupts this uncanny text: preceding his arrival, the following verses foreground Crusoe's lack of self-confirmation through the response of an other:

The island smelled of goat and guano.  
 The goats were white, so were the gulls,  
 And both too tame, or else they thought  
 I was a goat, too, or a gull.  
*Baa, baa, baa and shriek, shriek, shriek,*  
*Baa . . . shriek . . . baa . . .* I still can't shake  
 them from my ears; they're hurting now.

By emphasizing the present tense, this passage foregrounds the disturbance felt by a Crusoe who does not wish to be identified by his lack of authorial control over the island:

The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies  
 Over a ground of hissing rain  
 And hissing, ambulating turtles  
 Got on my nerves.

"The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies" can be understood as the echoes of this Crusoe's revisionist difficulty, in his task to bring the logic of the island to the nationalist myth of *Robinson Crusoe*, thus de-nationalizing it. The phrases from the stanza quoted above, "I still can't shake / them from my ears" and "they're hurting now," in their difference from the alternative "they're still shaking" and "they're still hurting," points to the gap that emerges with Friday's arrival. By re-inflicting dissonance at the site of Crusoe's presumed

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from her inner being, however wondrous, threatens to hurl her off "the round, turning world"

return to a geographical mainland, Bishop attempts to bring the island logic to England, resembling a euphoric ideology of globalization by which island logic and mainland logic are re-united through the transcending-like presence of the go-between. Meanwhile, Friday, who supposedly “cannot survive in the larger world” (Curry 1991: 90), is sanctified and fixed into unrenamability. The intercultural hierarchy sustaining the Crusoe/Friday dichotomy is elided, and the elision justified by the impossibility of eradicating the historical name.

The stanza quoted above becomes more powerful, however, as it breaks narrative linearity. The account of past events is disrupted by the adverb *now*, which, in the context of uncanniness, suggests the transmutation of the same id-entity crisis, from one island to the next. Past and present are conflated in the phrases made ambivalent by the preceding and emphatic “now”—“The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies”. These phrases are also sentences, which take shape long before the reader gets to the verb phrase “got on my nerves”. In other words, “the questioning” and “the equivocal” now shriek and reply perpetuating a static, paralyzed time until they can consolidate into noun phrases, only after the poem has mapped an ominous place with the repetitive, recalcitrant participle in the present (“over a ground of hissing rain / and hissing, ambulating turtles”). In other words, what is depicted as a dwindling of Crusoe’s perception of “island logic” actually points to the potential birth of a new island, not in a remote distance this time, but in the present, in the here and now:

Now I live here, another island  
that doesn’t look like one, but who decides?

In this sense, “the flute, the knife, the shriveled shoes, / . . . shedding goatskin trousers / . . . the parasol” are semantic elements which must be cast aside if “island logic” is to be preserved. Bishop’s older Crusoe thus criticizes the nostalgia he had in his young years when

he thought of a tree—“an oak, say, with real shade”—as being real only in its mainland version. His struggle to make an ornamental “parasol” (mainland diction) rather than an instrumental “umbrella” (island diction) contrasts against his refusal to “want such things” here and now. Bishop’s anti-imperialist rendition must keep alive the islander Crusoe, who “Now [*lives*] here” (emphasis added). In refusing the discourse of nostalgia, Crusoe de-exoticizes the island: he decides to keep the island in his memory rather than remote in a museum (“moths have got in the fur”). He also decides to keep himself alive by deciding that, though it doesn’t seem like one, here is “another island”.

My suggestion is that the desire for the dynamic of *différance*, i.e. of “islands spawning islands,” to replace the binary mainland/island (consonance/antithetical dissonance) logic is an attempt to dissolve the dominant order which identifies and confines Friday to the island, in one and the same gesture of possession. In this light, Bishop’s replacement of “next March” with “come March” in her manuscript drafts (Box 60, Vassar) signals an imminent repetition, rather a re-writing of the narrative, of Friday’s arrival: the memory of the island experience felt when “Friday came,” and the anticipation of a renewed memory when March comes:

—And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles  
seventeen years ago come March.

Representations of Bishop as a morally-superior protagonist (a *Crusoe* in a *crusade* of knowledge) wishfully assume the resolution of her own intercultural dissonance into an imagined recovery of stability. Such a recovery is epitomized, as a start, in her geographical “return” to an “original” text: ironically, Bishop returns not only to (*New*) England, but also to the (*New*) Scotland (Nova Scotia) of her shipwrecked great-uncle William Hutchinson, a Baptist missionary in India (Millier 1993: 17). Hers is a symbolic return, also, to the land of the protagonist likely to be a main source of Defoe’s narrative—the elided immigrant

forefathers of *Robinson Crusoe*, perhaps the Scottish sailor Selkirk among them—in his construction of an unmarked, self-present, and “truly national spirit”.<sup>103</sup>

This trope of recovery of origins, however, is frustrated in this poem: Bishop’s Crusoe does not return, does not go back to England, but (decides that he) travels to another island. Thus more accurately understood as an allegory than a metaphor, Bishop’s revision of Crusoe is an oblique political statement rejecting the feasibility both of the imperialist “return” to England and of the authenticist representation of the island’s remoteness in the site of exoticism.

Concerning Friday, this poem is often mapped onto a conservative vision of identity by which Friday’s death of measles is explained as an incompatible exposure of the “primitive” to “civilization”: “Friday is enough for the island, but he cannot survive in the larger world” (Curry 1991: 90). Bishop-Crusoe, however, has come to see the larger world no longer as a mainland, but as an archipelago of islands. By making clear in her poem (and in her letters, as we shall see in chapter 6) that hers was not a closure in “returning” to the U.S., she breaks away from the logic of resolution, and declares the resonance of the “island logic” of discontinuity.

I have tried to problematize Bishop’s representational discourse in “Pink Dog” and “Crusoe in England,” keeping in mind that the privilege which exoticizes the Other is not limited to the narrator’s initially descriptive tone, but pervades the poems to the very end. If “Pink Dog” parodies the euphoria of the poetic imagination in redeeming itself of the consumption of modernity’s exotic outcast, “Crusoe in England” builds on that failure to

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<sup>103</sup> For a study on the sources of Bishop’s and Defoe’s Crusoes, see Ferry 1992; on the discrepancies between Defoe’s three *Robinson Crusoe* books, see Goetsch 1990; on the Near Eastern sources of Defoe’s narrative, see Pastor 1930. These studies refute the point made by James Joyce in a lecture delivered in Italy in 1912 that “the first English author to write without imitating or adapting foreign works, to create without literary models and to infuse into the creatures of his pen a truly national spirit . . . is Daniel Defoe” (Joyce 1964 [1912]: 7).

parody the victory narrative of the triumphal return of modernity's castaway, the lone writer and ethnographer.

## Chapter 5

## “Surprising Enough, or Un-surprising Enough . . . Real, Real Protest” in Bishop’s Poetry of Cold War Madness

There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing.  
That is when a political consciousness comes in.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*

How had I come to be here,  
Like them, and overhear  
A cry of pain that could have  
Got loud and worse but hadn’t?

Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Waiting Room”

### 5.1. THE COLD-WAR CASTAWAY MARTYR IN BISHOP’S DISSONANT CONFESSIONALISM

Modernity’s castaway martyr was anxiously and fiercely celebrated in the mainstream poetry of what is known as the “midcentury generation,” which came into prominence during the early cold war years (Sexton, Plath, Ginsberg, Lowell). Bishop’s letters show that she found those writings, termed “confessional”,<sup>104</sup> to indulge in solipsism, self-pity, and self-promotion, which she later called the “American sickness” (to Lowell, 5 March 1963, Harvard).<sup>105</sup> Seeking alternative directions for her poetics, Bishop rejected its identification with confessional writing, which she described as “more and more anguish, less and less poetry”.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> According to Karl Malkoff, the term “confessional” was first introduced in print by one of the most influential critical supporters of the “new poetry,” M. L. Rosenthal, who already in 1967 pointed out that “it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage” (1977: 25). For Malkoff, the term distracts critical attention from the social characteristics of the poetry it names: “If, as the social critics of the fifties and sixties continually asserted, society had invaded the psyche and displaced the autonomous self, . . . then one had only to look at one’s own suffering to find a symbol of historical crisis” (43).

<sup>105</sup> Bishop repeatedly pointed out that she admired Lowell’s poems, and that she found them powerful for their simplicity rather than egocentricity. This admiration dwindled in 1972, when Lowell wrote “The Dolphin,” the publication of which Bishop discouraged vehemently: she found it “cruel” for exposing and distorting the meanings written in his wife’s letters (see Millier 1993:462).

<sup>106</sup> Bishop to Stevenson, 27 October 1964, Washington University Library.

One of the reasons for Bishop's critique of confessionalism is that it implies an exaltation of identity, authorizing experience by defining, and confining, difference into a space of fixity. Besides reducing experience into an exalted identity, confessionalism also implies the writer's subscription to the notion of a "sin" to be confessed, so that non-confession is treated as a "lie" masking truth—in other words, as a sign of shame. These are notions that reflect the coercion and totalitarianism—not to mention the *fascism*, which Roland Barthes refers to as lying "not in what language *forbids* you to affirm, but in what it *obliges* you to affirm" (1978, my translation)—that lie at the root of the certainties, definitions, identities, in a word the *truths* we are obliged to produce.<sup>107</sup> In this light, Bishop's renowned statement,

I *hate* confessional poetry, and so many people are writing it these days. Besides, they seldom have anything interesting to 'confess' anyway" (Wehr 1996 [1966]: 45),

can be understood as a refusal to write a poetry bound by the solipsistic framework that turns difference into heroic martyrdom and even madness (as we will see later in this chapter). However, Bishop's adamant hatred of confessionalism is a conflict that cannot be dismissed as easily as she attempts to in the above-mentioned interview. A concise example of this conflict is that Bishop was also adamant about the fact that she "*always* tell[s] the truth in [her] poems" (Wehr 1996 [1966]: 42), a statement that clearly imbricates her discourse in that of confessional writing. Thus, notwithstanding Bishop's critique of confessional poetry, of the term that names it, and of a praxis she considered unethical, she nurtured a contradictory, refractory relationship with confessionalism.

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<sup>107</sup> For Nietzsche, "[t]o recognize untruth as a condition of life—that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way: and a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil" (1966 [1886]: 55).



Indeed, despite her famous rebukes of confessionalism, Bishop also wrote within the confessional paradigm, even if she did so indirectly, deconstructing its framework of solipsism and consonance. After reading her villanelle “One Art,” Octavio Paz exclaimed, “Why, it’s a confessional poem,” and he found it amazingly candid (Fountain 1999: 333). Also the poem “Crusoe in England,” as we have seen in the previous chapter, undermines the lone hero’s discourse of self-pity and victory, rearticulating the autobiographical *I*. While Bishop’s writings can be aligned neither with self-exalting confessionals nor with militant, public-statement poetry, still they develop in counterpoint with (and from within) them, as they are marked by the historical, political, and aesthetic context of her time. Moreover, her writings are aligned with confessionals not only in the sense that they fulfill a therapeutic function in an identity crisis, but also in the sense that, unable to change the terms of public war, they seek to fight it in the realm of private experience—in fact, it is in this realm that Bishop addresses the issue of war, and she does so extensively (see Barry 1999), albeit obliquely (see Schweik 1991; Roman 2001).

Bishop’s intercultural texts can be read to question and expand the range of confessional poetry from privileging a consonant self to foregrounding its very limitations instead, in the spaces where contradictory subject-positionalities collide. These are points of unresolvable dissonance, conflictual overlappings of the private and the public, experience and language, lyricism and skepticism—activating the confrontations, discrepancies, and difficulties which some critics have regarded as Bishop’s most important contribution to poetic innovation (see, for example, Shetley 1993). In this sense, Paul Breslin points out that

[t]he “conflating” of private and public experience, far from being the triumph of confessional art, is rather the problem with which the confessional poet begins. The question for the confessional poet is not how to relate self to

society, but how to unravel the tangled determinisms connecting the two.  
(1987: 43)

From this perspective, it is an oversimplification to regard confessionals in terms of merely exalting self-anguish; this poetry, caught in the post-war project of constructing alternative forms of agency from within the frustrations of modernism, can best be understood as an attempt to mediate, through language, an expansion of the boundaries of the self so that it becomes “impossible to isolate as a discrete entity” (Malkoff 1977: 103). In this light, the self becomes relationally, dynamically dissonant. It becomes impossible to be defined as an identity (consonance), or even as its negation (antithetical dissonance). This attempt to acknowledge the frustration of consonance as other than antithesis reflects the post-modernist delusion in the powers of self-expression, since artistic language is perceived as being itself imbricated in the very cultural constraints and reductive definitions it aims to overcome. Confessionalism can thus be understood as a process of perceiving the self as an ongoing construction on the ruins that ensue from the public invasion, and shattering, of what once was the illusion of an essential, private self.

Confessional poetry is informed by an identity crisis and quest. To confess, and deliberately so, may signal the self’s total surrender to public strategies of containing difference, to the point that cultural surveillance becomes internal, self-inflicted. However, to confess also has to do with flaunting one’s own connection with what has been concealed in the culture so far. In other words, confessional poetry confesses to bring difference to the center of experience and writing. It can also be seen, therefore, as a process of manifesting a subjectivity which is connective, claiming room in the self for what Bishop called “something *real* coming along like a piece of wood bobbing on the waves” (Notebook, 1950, Vassar). To confess is to *witness*, but in one’s own *experience*: to “disclose something which one has kept or allowed to remain secret as being prejudicial or inconvenient to oneself” (*OED*). In this

sense, the subject becomes implicated in the external reality of personal observation, i.e., no longer protected or insulated by the boundaries that define the self. The confessional writer posits that experience itself suffices as evidence of the actuality and reality of this conflict, thus warranting its validity.

Whereas mainstream confessional poetry seeks a break from judgment and craft, recovering the essential self from the confinements of an atrocious reality, Bishop's dissonant text seeks a breakdown in the very protective framework within which the confessional self raises arms against what is supposed to be the "outside" world. Bishop refused the stance of the writer as martyr, just as she refused to be the target of public assessments of her various marks of dissonance and uprooted queerness (a lesbian in the U.S. government, an alcoholic master of restraint, a jobless 'first-world' intellectual, and so on). In Brazil, her politics became more problematic; a unique ethical poetics was urgent for her struggle to acknowledge that the writer, not least in her case, is not merely a victim but also a perpetrator of violence, as I want to show in "Brazil, January 1, 1502." Indeed, as noted in chapter 3, Bishop's anxiety to embody the discourse of the civilized humanitarian merely materializes into the concrete situation of her work itself relying on victimizing representations of others; as mentioned earlier (Chapter 3), in referring to her poem "Manuezinho" in a letter to Ilse and Kit Barker, Bishop wrote: "I've earned so much money off the poor little man now I feel guilty every time he comes to the kitchen door with a bunch of monster radishes" (5 June 1956, Princeton). This guilt feeling (and its acknowledgment!) would not be possible without challenging the comfortable self-certainty that supposes itself benevolent while actually reproducing the violence it claims to denounce. This sense of accuracy shows up in one of Bishop's earliest poems (1927), one which suggests a dissonant way of thinking about her visual precision:

### **To a Tree**

Oh, tree outside my window, we are kin,  
For you ask nothing of a friend but this:  
To lean against the window and peer in  
And watch me move about! Sufficient bliss

For me, who stand behind its framework stout,  
Full of my tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves,  
To lean against the window and peer out,  
Admiring infinites'mal leaves.

The focus of such a vision engages the ethical concern Bishop pointed out in a letter to Lowell: “My passion for accuracy may strike you as old-maidish, but since we do float on an unknown sea I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way very carefully” (qtd. in Kalstone 1989: 213). This early poem anticipates Bishop’s critique of confessionalism, contextualizing it in her deeply-rooted concern that, in the anxiety to demystify the constraining other (the public sphere, the war, the foreign culture, the insufficiency of language), confessionalism too often mystified the self. In sum, the confessional trend Bishop took issue with was that *of valorizing self-suffering at the expense of self-criticism*.

On this understanding, the examination of “infinites’mal leaves” Bishop calls herself to is an ethical rethinking, challenging the self-centering, self-righteous stance of a cultural categorization which later, in the cold war period, culminated in the construction of a national identity against the dissonant, unpredictable realities of experiential life. It challenges, just so, the nationalist stance against private life which she saw from early childhood in Nova Scotia, the moment her mother’s grief for the loss of her husband to disease was suppressed by the patriotic glorification of the heroes of war, whose public mourning was “frowned upon”

(Gwyn 162). She saw it again in the arbitrary instructions she was given to replace the Canadian national anthem with the U.S. anthem and pledge of allegiance (see Barry 1999), and to forge the unfamiliarity of the former along with the supposedly superior familiarity learned from the latter. She saw it yet again in adulthood, in the public discourse of war as a necessary process to cure (the rest of) the world of evil (see Roman 2001). In bringing this examination to her intercultural texts, Bishop sought to refuse the comfortable, consonant self-making which couched confessional writing. In this light, Bishop's political endeavor can be understood as an attempt to change the way confessional writing protests the war and other adversities: like an outside enemy to which protestors suppose themselves unrelated, and from which they suppose themselves to withdraw "heroically," instead of conveniently. Bishop's project is thus to deal with the strangeness and vulnerability not of an outside enemy, but of the *self* instead.

To deal with the strangeness of the self is to challenge one's certainties. Bishop's politics which disagrees with that of mainstream confessionalism is to suspect of the effort to alienate the responsibility of the self in violence. I am thinking, for example, of exaltations of one's own suffering or of one's own innocence by projecting violence onto an outside; or while performing the civilized role of taming or dismissing one's role in violence—performing, in other words, self-exemption in the guise of a humanitarian heroism (as we have seen in "Manuelzinho," for example). But confessional poetry asserted itself so successfully as "a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis" (Rosenthal 1951: 15), a quest for a new identity, to the extent that it also succeeded in eliding different projects of change that were coming up at the same time. It is still crucial to acknowledge that the difficulties of asserting subjective agency amid the coercive powers of culture were, already then, articulated also by other poetic means.

What I am suggesting to be Bishop's distinctive confessional poetics can best be glimpsed in contrast with Robert Lowell's, perhaps the most representative example of the mainstream poetry of her time. Though I fear oversimplifying, I do think it is safe to say that Lowell attempts an *expansionism of the self* by stretching the range of his centrality or consonance—as in a process of psychic healing that makes room for those dissonant aspects that have been repressed. Bishop's project, by contrast, is to *expand perception* of the limitations of the selfcentric voice, constantly marking boundaries by which to suppress its inescapable complicitousness with violence and with chaos. Bishop thus displays the arbitrariness and equivocations of the framework of a consonant self, an illusory production to begin with. Though apparently stifling, it is the indeterminacy (dissonance) of the self which empowers Bishop's poetics to move away from the melodramatic obsession with a frustrated liberation from the coercive powers of culture, that which Fredric Jameson has called "the prison-house of language".

Rather than assume the possibility of an autonomous liberation, Bishop demanded awareness of the author's anxiety for separation from his or her predecessors, for self-exemption from authorial responsibility over an imprisoning thus projected onto the poets of the past. Hence she pointed out that "[t]he discovery, or invention, whichever it may be, of a new method of doing something old is often made by defining the opposite of an old method, or the opposite of the sum of several old methods and calling it new" ("Dimensions" 95). This critique appears in her poetic response to her peers' politics, which Bishop found lacking in self-criticism and self-implication. As Karl Malkoff argues in the context of New Left poetry, "one need not be a neoconservative New-Left-basher to recognize that for its predominantly white, middle-class constituency, the movement represented not only a genuinely political opposition to the war in Vietnam and to racism at home, but also a welcome escape from cultural guilt" (On the racial markings and implications of Bishop's

writings, see Curry 2000 and Axelrod 1999a, to my knowledge the only printed discussions so far of this important topic.) Like her speaker in the short story “In Prison” (1984a [1938]), Bishop invests in the limitations of an insufficient language and consciousness, of a precarious set of resources or language categories within which she must operate; she invests, in other words, in making room for a perception, within the prison-like experience of stasis (consonance), of that instance of crisis (dissonance) that uproots identity. This ethical project to distance language from itself, to challenge cultural reductions of experience from within the “prison” of language itself, politicizes processes of dis-identification and non-identity.

## **5.2. MADNESS DISPLACED: CULTURE SHOCK**

Bishop’s experiences of living in places she considered remote, such as Key West and Brazil, were avenues she found for relating to strangeness in ways that don’t fall back on making strangeness become sameness (resolving dissonance into consonance). As we have seen, Bishop was intent on disrupting familiar perceptions and habits of thinking by exposing self-certainties to the “unknown sea” of “other floating things that come our way”. As Roman has pointed out, Bishop’s faraway journey to South America during a serious professional and emotional crisis was also a period when cultural producers were often denounced and outcast as homosexuals, thus communist, “un-American,” ultimately “diseased” elements of society. However, this journey to South America unfolded into a change of residence which, apart from its political convenience as a protective shield for Bishop, and apart from the long-lasting love relationship which compelled her to stay in the foreign country, also allowed her to up-root her experience of strangeness, dis-placing her own otherness altogether. This slippage and deferral allowed her to come to terms with an unfamiliar strangeness of the self, and also to make sense of the overpowering force which too often led to traumatic ends (such as her mother’s schizophrenia and early death in a sanatorium) and losses of several relationships with significant others—not only with her mother, therefore, but also with those

she became closest with throughout her life: “I have been through this now just too many times with too many people I am fond of in recent years—I seem to have some kind of attraction for them, alas - ” (to Dorothee Bowie, May 27 1970, Box 27, Vassar).

Rather than dismissing such a powerful force by resolving or dissolving its impact, and rather than her access to it being forbidden as it was in childhood, Bishop makes room for the strangeness of the self by investing her texts with a reality resistant to the self’s resources of control and centrality, and open to the experiences of perplexity and uncertainty. Bishop’s Brazilian texts focus on language that may elaborate on such aspects of experience as provisionality, uprootedness, dislocation and unresolvability. This is the sense in which, in his discussion of the exclusion of literatures of exile from the literary canon, Edward Said points out that the search for unfamiliar aspects of language in such texts draws on “the force, the passion, the drive to write and invest texts *with* history and not the other way around,” and provokes in readers “an awareness of how language is about experience and not just about itself” (2000: xv-xxiii).

In this light, cultural strangeness for Bishop can be understood as the *pharmakón* —a term including the contradictory meanings of *remedy* and *poison*—for psychic disconnection or madness, an attempt to disable the reductive structure which justifies the production of the *scapegoat* or *outcast* (*pharmakós*): “the chosen victim whose sacrifice has a purging effect upon a community [but only contradictorily, since] the evil or corrupt is always already within the good and pure community” (Childers et. al. 1995: 226-27). My suggestion is that a way to discern Bishop’s confessional poetry from that of the mainstream writers of her time is in its responses to the issue of madness, which, in this reading of Bishop’s poetics of dissonance from antithesis to expansive perception, can be understood as developing from *pharmakós* to *pharmakón*: “a force whose effects are hard to master, a dynamics that constantly surprises the one who tries to manipulate it as master and as subject” (Derrida



1981a: 97). Though conventionally interpreted alternately as a mark of either resistance (inadaptability) or non-resistance (instability) of the self to the other, Bishop's Brazilian poems raise the issue of madness in ways that foreground and defer the anxieties under which it is defined *in the other*, projected onto the other by the imperial self. In "Pink Dog," for example, Bishop writes:

Of course they're mortally afraid of rabies.

You are not mad; you have a case of scabies

but look intelligent. Where are your babies?

Bishop also questions the construction of madness as a mark of essential illness, evil, or evil inheritance. "The Man-Moth" carries these examples:

He does not dare look out the window,  
for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,  
runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease  
he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep  
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

.....

If you catch him,  
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,  
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens  
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids  
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.  
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention  
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,  
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

There are countless other examples of references to madness in Bishop's writings. Malkoff has pointed out that madness is a central theme in confessionals, because they address the violence threatening the integrity of the self (1977: 95-102).

For my purpose of demonstrating the ethics of Bishop's dissonant poetics, it is helpful to consider how her treatment of madness deviates from that of mainstream confessional poets, the most representative of whom is Lowell. We have seen that he posits a "creative madness" as the liberation of an authentic self (consonance) by fighting the constraints of an outside culture (antithetical dissonance).<sup>108</sup> This process which passes for a preservation of "freedom"<sup>109</sup> constitutes the anxiety of the self to safeguard his heroic appropriation of (victory over) irreducible realities—a center of supposed integrity or consonance. In contrast, for the poetic persona in Bishop, madness is the very one-dimensionality of a seemingly consonant identity which alienates the self from her own strangeness. My suggestion is that for her, this one-dimensional, linear resolution of identity ensues from the subject's paralysis under the cultural coercion and surveillance that reduces dissonant reality to a constructed resolution into consonance passing for a natural totality. On this understanding, it is precisely this ideal of consonance, this one-dimensionality of experience, rather than a feared strangeness, which Bishop considered to threaten lucidity and even sanity—to threaten, that is to say, the mental and emotional flexibility to deal with the contingencies of reality with its "other floating things that come our way". Thus, underlying her letters from the U.S. to

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<sup>108</sup> It makes sense to infer from Bishop's generalizing remarks on foreigners in Brazil that, in general, their discourse of culture shock tends to establish the other as antithetically dissonant. Like in this passage:

One is always under a strain with visitors, though—here, I mean—because they do form, in a week or so, such very queer ideas of the situation.—They all do this—or all Americans do—Europeans are a bit more sophisticated politically and don't believe what they read in the papers or hear on the radio! We try to explain, etc.—but it is almost inexplicable, and the U.S.A. really does regard Latin countries as social inferiors, I think—or children, or ALL crooks, or something. (to Joe, Petrópolis, Aug 19, 1962 Vassar)

<sup>109</sup> Note the contrast with Bishop's conception of freedom in "In Prison" (see chapter 1 n32).

Brazilian friends is her admiration for those who develop the knowledge to enjoy happiness despite their sufferings, instead of indulging in self-martyrdom. Here is an excerpt from a passage in which she criticizes her students by contrast:

Most of them look quite well fed and rather well off. And what do they write about in their poems? *Suffering*, of all things! I don't think most of them know *anything* about suffering, but their poems are just filled with it. I finally told them that they should come to Brazil and see for themselves what real suffering is like. Then perhaps they wouldn't write so "poetically" about it. (Wehr 1996 [1966]: 41)

Bishop and Lowell diverge not only in their constructions of madness, but also in their strategies of sanity. To avert madness, Lowell's confession incites self-expansion, or a redefinition of the self so as to appropriate dissonance. What he seems to propose, then, is the recovery (in both senses)—as opposed to Bishop's demystification of—the Emersonian Imperial Self. For Lowell, sanity requires an ever-growing self-assertion. Each resolution requires a new, larger conquest: "Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small," reads his final line in "Home After Two Months Away," a poem on his return from the mental asylum in the book *Life Studies*. By contrast, Bishop does not so much avert madness as she exceeds it, by deconstructing ideal assumptions of consonance rather than appropriating or taming (resolving) dissonance. In this light, for Bishop "to confess the self is to lose it" (McCabe 1994: 2) instead of protecting it from its limitations. In other words, it is to change the very codes that define and install such binary, single-axis concepts as madness/sanity, resignation/protest, pain/healing.

### **5.3. POLITICS OF SELFHOOD VS. OTHERNESS**

I have been insisting on this particular change of perspective on Bishop's writings because I think her poetics of protest is rooted in attempts to overcome the split between

sanity/insanity, familiarity/strangeness. These are attempts that bring into question not only the conceptual certainties around which victory discourses of (triumphal, self-exempting) alienation of others are construed in politics, alongside salvationist discourses reproducing social victimization, but also the ways in which her own discourse of spatial representation replicates those certainties. Instead of exempting herself from the problems of representational discourse, or instead of pretending to insulate herself from producing violence, Bishop problematized her work in the very areas where she sensed her own blindness to “the other floating things that come our way”: in her position of intercultural supremacy, i.e., of representing others as inferior or deprived from an ordering ethos which she seems to self-evidently represent. As I noted in Chapter 3, she did not merely identify with other outsiders in Brazil; she also spoke t/here from her position as a poet of the U.S. cultural establishment. In doing so, she configured a complex, layered positionality, and at the same time a very difficult one from within which to craft the “real real protest” she mentions in a letter to Lowell as we will see in the pages that follow.

At the time of writing this chapter, the value of Bishop’s search for a more complex form of protest is still disturbingly urgent, as the discourse of patriotism and surveillance reemerges with full force in the U.S. The obsession with parading national flags, flaunting the anxiety for national identity, recalls the scene from Bishop’s manuscript notes for what she indicates as her “Washington poem”:

airplanes always setting themselves gingerly {poem} down  
Dome—also an elaborate sugar-tit for a nation that likes sugar  
. . . put the flags away  
. . . pull down the flags (Box 77, Vassar)

In the context of the proliferation of wars of the good self over the evil, primitive, or deprived other—a victory discourse, both in its midcentury emphasis on the Cold War and in its

current euphoric emphasis on globalization—, it is still urgent to acknowledge the powerful politics of Bishop’s poetics of dissolution of the victorious self. The public appropriation of cultural production for “good war” propaganda against an outside enemy resounds clearly today, echoing Woodrow Wilson’s famous 1917 statement that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” With ‘minority’<sup>110</sup> faculty members, most probably across the U.S., being profiled and receiving memos with instructions to avoid “un-American” political meetings due to be immediately reported to university authorities, the scrutinizing power of the media for collective surveillance seems ready to reproduce McCarthy’s containment policies. These policies produced outcast intellectuals in Bishop’s time, when artistic output was heavily commissioned and appropriated for war propaganda, and when uncontained poets and other cultural producers were ostracized under charges of communism and, what was synonymous with it then—within the cold-war discourse to legitimize, by naturalizing, hegemonic resolutions—, homosexuality.

It is no wonder, in this context, that Bishop developed a poetics of non-identity; her refusal to be marked into a gender identity is a political statement against having to identify herself at all, unlike those who represent the compulsory norm of gender, and whose identities do not, therefore, require authorization or markings.<sup>111</sup> The political context of Bishop’s time thus presses her to craft an oblique poetics of protest against identity politics. Roman has demonstrated consistently how Bishop’s poetry was politically engaged during the cold war years *because*, not *although*, she wrote politics obliquely. Roman’s analysis disables oversimplifications that Bishop’s poetry was merely reactionary or self-alienating— which, as I hope to be making clear in this study, I think they were, but irreducibly so: politics is always much more complex than a purported struggle between democracy and non-democracy, or between good and evil. True, Bishop not only bought the nationalist

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<sup>110</sup> I refer to the majority, i.e., those who are marked by identity politics.

discourse constructing the strategic enemy of an “us” or “inside” throughout the developments that led up to the Brazilian Revolution of 1964, but also sold it. She sold it, in fact, in the shape of a book published two years before the military coup—a book in which I, as so many others in the U.S., would see photographs of a remote Brazil for the first time in our lives. In this book for *Time-Life*, portraying Brazil as a welcoming land of cordial, nonviolent struggle, Bishop attacks what she calls in her drafts Getúlio Vargas’ fascist-rooted dictatorship, and its sequels of “illiteracy, slow communications and a consequent lack of awareness among the people” (Bishop 1962: 127). Her attack takes the shape of contrasting Vargas’s dictatorship against military interventions which she portrayed as benevolent: for her, the “Revolution” of 1964 was to be a short-lived takeover of power, actually avoiding military combat and war while warding off the “outside” enemy of communism:

The military in Brazil, unlike the military in other South American countries, has never wanted permanent power. On the occasions military men have seized control of the country, they have never kept it for long. But Brazil did suffer from a dictatorship. From 1930 to 1945 and from 1951 to 1954, one man, Getúlio Vargas, ran the country as president, dictator, or both. By imposing his dictatorship on the nation, Vargas interrupted orderly progression toward stable constitutional government.

Yet despite the fact that Vargas stopped the clock on the development of responsible democracy in Brazil, he did much for the country. . . .

What was to be short-lived was the naïveté of such a discourse of short-lived military dictatorship. Its politics of protection and benevolence which prepared public opinion (the *Time-Life* book played a major role in international propaganda, of course) for the so-called military transition government ended up lasting no less than 21 years, counting up to the

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<sup>111</sup> This issue will be discussed more carefully in section 6.2.

indirect elections of the first civil president Tancredo Neves, in 1985—or 25 years, up to the direct elections of Fernando Collor de Mello, in 1989 (an administration which cannot be said to represent any end to the dictatorship praxis). Of those years, she would see no less than 15 until her death in 1979.

My view is that Bishop's well-known horror in working under what she portrayed as the imperialist arrogance of her *Time-Life* editors amounts to more than her conviction that her text was manipulated by an editorial machine that, as she suggested in letters, stereotyped Brazil and made both the country and the book more sellable. Bishop's horror was much added to by the anxiety and doubts underlying her subscription to the positive political discourse of innocence that protected her and Lota's support of Carlos Lacerda's political affiliations: "no workers or students were arrested," she wrote in her all too certain defense of the army in 1964 (qtd. Millier 354), while she also wrote "The Burglar of Babylon" *against* it—and, more important, implicating her own binocular, theater-box view of, and *in*, a conflict worsened by the military spectacle of order. Her defense of the army is undercut by such statements as this one, just two and a half years later: "I CAN'T understand the [political] situation. . . . Everything seems worse, that's all" (to Ashley Brown, Oct 3 1966, Princeton). If ever the revolution produced any consonant resolution, it was in the parallel downhill of her relationship with Lota, whose nervous breakdowns were increasingly fueling, and fueled by, Bishop's come-back to alcoholism just then, though it had been overcome for over a decade of mutual strength. For all the positive thinking of the couple nearing the end of the revolutionary dream, Lacerda's inheritance of generations of struggle between the coffee and dairy ("café com leite") oligarchies in Brazil is much more complex than the binary narrative of a struggle of democracy over dictatorship—whether elected or not.

As I attempted to make clear in chapters 3 and 4, my view is that Bishop did reproduce discourses of imperialism in representing and constructing others in her Brazilian

writings. This is precisely why it is relevant to discern in her texts those forces by which she moves away from such discourses, disturbing the “good guys / bad guys” perception of violence and power to the point of her poetics being “acted upon” by what Paul Smith has called the agency of the “discerning subject”: “not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but . . . also . . . an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them—or not” (1988: 6).

To read for such disturbances is not an attempt on my part to redeem Bishop of her efforts to alienate herself from Brazil, much less to reintroduce her as the colonizer processing the raw material of third-world suffering, and packaging it into a civilized, humanitarian cultural produce. My attempt is rather to demonstrate how her imperialist self was *not* consonant, especially from her Brazilian experience on. What makes Bishop’s cold war poetry confessional, on this understanding, is her attempt to acknowledge the shallowness and arrogance implied (and implicating her) in hegemonic presumptions of a linear, one-dimensional order, since it is always already in ruins.

This oblique political text emanating from Bishop’s contradictory perceptions of intercultural reality has been undermined in her corpus—much in consonance with cold war discourses restraining women’s writings to the domestic sphere while trivializing or naturalizing such restraint (in this case, by equating Brazil with nature, and gendering nature as female). Her Brazilian writings, in which I find her oblique poetics most sophisticated and disturbing, have thus been banalized, reduced to their surface aesthetic. In other words, they have been measured by the binary yardstick of thesis/antithesis, authorial self/exotic other, and, likewise, set symmetrically against the prolific and inflamed rebellious poetics pursued by her confessional peers.



#### 5.4. THE OTHER, INSIDE

In 1961 Lowell—who, conversely, has been read as a political and pacifist poet (an image which was demystified recently by Steven Gould Axelrod)<sup>112</sup>—, was interviewed by the “Writers at Work” series of the *Paris Review*. On the occasion, he criticized what he called Moore’s “terrible, private, and strange revolutionary poetry” on the grounds that “there isn’t the motive to do that now”.<sup>113</sup> To his criticism, Bishop replied:

But I wonder—isn’t there? Isn’t there even more—only it’s terribly hard to find the exact and right and surprising enough, or un-surprising enough, point at which to revolt now? The beats have just fallen back on an old corpse-strewn or monument-strewn battle-field—the real real protest I suspect is something quite different—(If only I could find it. Klee’s picture called FEAR seems close to it, I think . . .) (25 June 1961, Harvard).

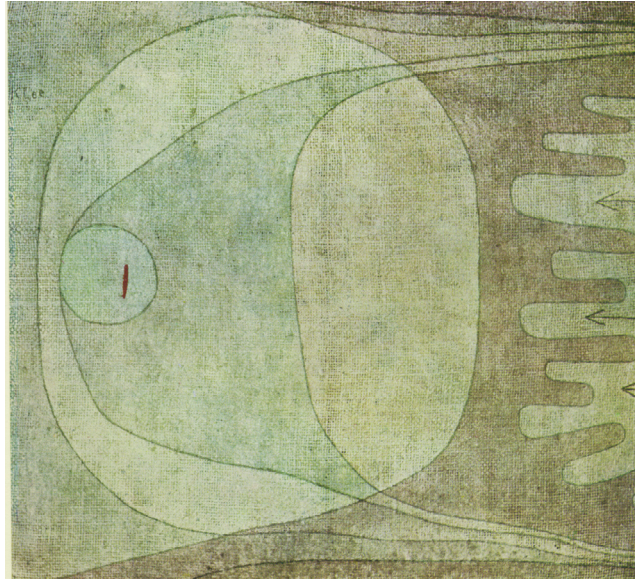
Victoria Harrison describes Klee’s *Fear* as depicting a creature with

a prominent eye and tentacles ambiguously both engulfing and escaping invasion by an amorphous figure to its right, whose imbedded (*sic*) arrows pointing directly left suggest the irreversibility of the imminent conflict . . .  
(1993: 30)

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<sup>112</sup> Axelrod (1999b) argues that Lowell’s “conscientious” draft refusal, for which he served a year’s sentence in jail, and his “Declaration of Personal Responsibility,” in which he accuses the U.S. President, government, civilians and military forces of treason in destroying Germany, are not the outcome of his objection to the bombing of civilians in Germany, but rather of his phobia of Communism—in other words, of his aim to preserve Nazi Germany.

<sup>113</sup> Lowell most likely refers to Marianne Moore’s “O to Be a Dragon” of 1959. See Moore 1981.



**Fig. 6. “Fear” by Paul Klee**

This is not a creature that confirms the figurative project but one which, on the contrary, foregrounds the shattering of figuration and identity. For this immanence of conflict brings into focus a process of mental and visual instability where movement is so impacting that spatial boundaries are blurred. This is an instance of visual dissonance, which explains much of why the figurative elements in the painting are undergoing a process of abstraction while movement and change become concrete, in the process of figuration.

Bishop’s perception of protest in this picture can be understood as a focus not on the figure that escapes us but on the habitual parameters of perception by which we attempt to define a central figure at all. The invader is all the more threatening precisely because it constitutes with the invaded an inter-related dynamics: the opposing forces in the picture are composites of one another, with their same color and malleable substance, therefore signaling an ‘always already’ yet undesired connection to be contended with. As the creature on the left tries to stretch out to what his *fear* construes as an outside, Klee explores a process of perception exceeding the inside/outside framework on which dominant senses of order are

based.<sup>114</sup> Rather than being attached to the “generalized principles” of consonance, Klee’s creature both absorbs and exceeds violence, which cannot be reduced to an antithetical ‘outside’.

Bishop’s reference to Klee’s picture is especially striking if we consider her canonical position as a poet of visual mapping, order, and description. It even estranges, therefore, her canonical image as mapmaker. Klee’s indeterminate, amorphous entity disturbs representations of identity, politicized as it is by a demanding urge to perceive the self in the ongoing constructive activity of transformation rather than in a stabilizing resolution by which either the public totally incorporates the private, or the private totally resists public

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<sup>114</sup> I find this notion of a dissonant subjectivity in Klee to be closely related to Altieri’s notion of the “scenic self” in his book *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*:

Its investments and judgments derive from the scenes that it has been attached to and the traces that those leave in its memory. . . . Because the self neither creates meanings nor can trust dominant cultural generalizations, its deepest powers and most intimate loyalties are shaped by the history of the adjustments it makes to those environmental forces. And because these adjustments involve the measure of time—of repeated connections to nature and other people, as well as a history of rewards and instructive failures—the energies they engage can be much more comprehensive, / and more immediately compelling and flexible, than anything that generalized principles can afford. (1989: 69-70)

Altieri apparently revised his notion of the *scenic style* or *mode* from 1984 to 1989. His earlier *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary Poetry*, as McCorkle points out, had cited Bishop as “one of the instigators of this dominant poetic mode” which carries an “insistence on defined and uninterrogated self and image” (McCorkle 1999: 259). The “scenic style” McCorkle refers to had been characterized in Altieri 1989 as having the central aim

not to interpret experience but to extend language to its limits in order to establish poignant awareness of what lies beyond words. There is virtually never any sustained act of formal, dialectical thinking or any elaborate, artificial construction that cannot be imagined as taking place in, or at least extending from, settings in naturalistically conceived scenes. (1984: 11)

This 1984 “uninterrogated self and image” cannot be the same “scenic self” of the first quote above, the self that makes adjustments to contingent, unpredictable environmental forces and marks its difference from “traditional humanistic and rationalist models of self [that] are categorical [rather than] attache[d] to a history of negotiations with an environment” (1989: 69). In this later conception, far from an “insistence on defined and uninterrogated self and image,” Altieri seems to refer precisely to the ongoing redefinition and interrogation,

coercion. Seeking instead to both “engulf and escape” the disruption of safe, visual boundaries, Bishop’s look to Klee’s creature situates protest not in shielding the self from an ‘outside,’ or imposing it to heroically supersede that ‘outside,’ but precisely at the intersection between self and other, where discourse is confronted by the principle of relational conflict.

### 5.5. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A DISSONANT SPACE-TIME

At this point, I am arguing explicitly against the view by which Bishop is most highly praised. Her canonical image as a visual poet, a poet of objectivity, description and impersonality (see Doreski 1993 and Costello 1991, among others), has tended to obliterate the aural (which is *not* to say prosodic) aspects of her writing—aspects which disrupt visual description in the most impacting moments of her poetry (best exemplified by the “scream” in “The Great Village”; the “*oh!* of pain” in “The Waiting Room,” and, as we will see later in this chapter, the shrieks and “piercing cry” in “The Armadillo”.) When criticism consolidates Bishop as mapmaker providing order to a chaotic reality, it evades the complexity of her geography, which is problematically a geography of dissonance, as we have seen in chapter 3: a geography that undermines rather than consolidates the imperialist project of spatializing the other onto a primitive past, a monolithic plenitude of timelessness.

Having briefly recapitulated Bishop’s dissonant geography, examined more closely in chapter 2, I hope to return to Klee’s painting with a broader perspective. That creature which attracts Bishop exposes the psychological coercion by fear, which at least from the cold war on has fueled U.S. totalitarianism in the guise of democracy protecting the individual—its victory narrative just as one-dimensional as the Soviet Union’s communism or ‘third world’ dictatorships. In Klee, the sinister tentacles of totalitarianism seem bound to seize control

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thus the historically-changing criticism of self and image, so that the “scenic self” is not reducible to stasis, but rather malleable in relation to both spatial and temporal environments.

even over the psyche. An urgent question arises from looking at the picture: How can the psyche resist—while operating within—a totalitarian, linear, teleological culture? How can the irreducible dissonance of the psyche resist the linearity (madness as one-dimensionality or consonance) that reaches into the self so deeply and inexorably, as shown by the disturbing arrows in the painting?

A poetics of “real real protest” demands the confrontation of conflict by which the other brings the self into question, since what totalitarianism incites is the expansionist insulation of sameness. Thus, it requires the confrontation of crisis within the self. It is relevant, then, to note that in both Klee’s picture and in Bishop’s allusion to it, the self both fears and absorbs alterity: while Bishop remarks that Klee’s *Fear* is desirable to her as it comes close to what she conceives of as “real real protest”, at the same time Klee’s abstract creature both “engulfs and escapes” the repulsive yet compelling other.

In Klee’s painting, conflict is not a resolution into the predominance of either self or other; nor is it a schizophrenic split, dissociation, or segregation between psychic entities, nor even a merging of self and other. Instead, it is a collision of the self with an irreconcilable otherness that threatens an already vulnerable ‘inside’ as much as it disrupts the self’s arbitrary insulation from a violent ‘outside’. It therefore questions the terms that would appear “to isolate the self as a discrete entity.” Klee’s creature is conceived in a relational rather than antithetical dissonance which also marks the abject figures of Bishop’s poetry, such as the dog in “Pink Dog,” both *fantasia* and *máscara*, both naked and disguised; Crusoe, both hero and anti-hero, both mainlander and islander; the landowner in “Manuelzinho,” both friend and enemy, just as the sun in “Roosters”; Mr. Swan in “Santarém,” both nice and unkind; the women in “Under the Window: Ouro Preto”, both lively and plastic; and the laundry carrier, both human and fantastic. These are abject representations because they blur the boundaries between intellectual and physiological responses, between inside and outside,

familiar and strange (see Kristeva 1982), all of which become questionable categories, no longer apt to map or identify a self.

Such an unfolding com-position of seemingly unrelated perceptions is precisely what marks Moore's "terrible, private and strange revolutionary poetry" apart from what Bishop called the Beats' "old corpse-strewn or monument-strewn battle-field," as we have seen in her private reply to Lowell's public rebuke of Moore. Whereas self-aggrandizing confessional writing portrayed otherness, or an 'outside' world, as antithetical, atrociously hindering a self which thus remained central and foremost, in Moore, Klee, and Bishop the self is challenged by an otherness which is irreducible. This is an otherness which cannot be resolved or dissolved into sameness, but which inflicts change on all the terms by which the hindrance to the self comes into view as such. This change implies a process of unpredictable movement rather than stability, in other words dissonant timing rather than consonant spatialization and stasis. This is the sense in which Klee wrote that "[t]he deeper [the artist] looks the more deeply he is impressed by the one essential image of creation itself, as Genesis, rather than by the image of nature, the finished product" (n.d.: 45).

It is in this sense, of questioning the discourse of coherentist identity and self-protection rather than opposing it, that Bishop's poetics of relational dissonance can perform "real real protest" rather than reactionary opposition. What makes Moore's "terrible, private, and strange revolutionary poetry" one of radical protest, in this sense, is its force, as Donald Hall puts it, of "giving as it takes away, folding back on itself the moment one begins to understand so that an exactly opposite meaning begins to seem plausible" (1970: 84-85).

Similarly, in Bishop the deferral of resolution makes her poetics of protest more effective. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller call attention to the empowerment brought on by the deferral of resolution in Bishop's poetics:

Postponing revelation, however, also protects her power. By holding secret the extent of her potential dangerousness, she can threaten the world more effectively and, at the same time, optimistically promise herself that “awe” will be the response to her eruption. (1984: 552)

Seen in the context of cold-war Manicheism, such inconclusiveness is precisely what makes Bishop’s poetry powerfully self-changing against the coercions of a totalitarian public discourse. Instead of being reduced to mere opposition confirming the establishment of consonance in its acts of exclusion and victimization (antithetical dissonance), Bishop’s politics of “real real protest” can be understood to question the very compulsory markings of identities and strategies, and to destabilize the discourse of consonance by which even so-called democratic acts of freedom and self-protection covertly converge with the dynamics of totalitarianism.

This inconclusiveness, this deferral of identity sought in different ways by Klee, Moore, and Bishop, seeks to expose the artificiality of the discourse of harmony as consonance, and the vulnerability of its protected framework of order. Far from being grounded in the castaway’s discourse of moral or righteous remove from a violent world, then, this subtextual poetics is an ongoing (dis)identification with the self. Hence Bishop’s understated stand is that of precisely *not* taking a (consonant) stand, which would resolve and centralize rather than question the self. As Harrison puts it, “if one is too convinced of one’s own moral truth, Bishop asserts, one can never allow the objects of the poem to do their work of surprising one into feeling or thinking” (1993: 30).

Interviewed by Ashley Brown in 1966, five years after Lowell’s criticism of Moore’s revolutionary poetry—and two years after the military coup in Brazil—, Bishop said that at Vassar she considered herself a socialist, but “disliked ‘social conscious’ writing . . . It was the popular thing . . . I felt that most of the college girls didn’t know much about social

conditions. . . .” In light of her additional remark, “I’m much more interested in social problems and politics now than I was in the ’30’s” (1966: 293-94), it is clear that she was then far from giving up her project of writing “real real protest.” Perhaps this might add to the reasons why Bishop “was one of the few who were taking the Korean War seriously while it would seem that Americans were encouraged to forget the war and did” (Roman 2001: 116).

The next sections of this chapter will examine two poems by Bishop, “The Armadillo” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” I will argue that indeterminacy (dissonance) in these poems is dynamic rather than paralyzing; and that it provides the means for the poetic persona to move away from the illusion of stasis (consonance) invested in systemic frameworks of space, time, art, and identity. I will also be arguing that Bishop’s dissonant text politicizes rather than alienates her writings, and that it does so in oblique ways that refuse to fall back on “monument-strewn or corpse-strewn battlefields.”

#### 5.6. “THE ARMADILLO”

Going insane is very popular these days, and it frightens me to see so many young people flirting with the idea of it. They think that going crazy will turn them into better poets. That’s just not true *at all!* Insanity is a terrible thing . . . a *terrible* thing! I’ve seen it first-hand in some of my friends, and it is not the “poetic” sort of thing that these young people seem to think it is. John Clare did *not* write glorious poetry while he was in the asylum, I’m glad to say. They have such narrow and sometimes destructive ideas about what it is to be a poet. I’ve been thinking lately that I really should say something to them about all of this. It’s a very serious matter.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1966 interview

“The Armadillo” is a poem about the fire balloons at the Brazilian St. John’s Feast, a religious celebration in which African saints, whose worship was illegal at the time of slavery, are disguised in the guise of Catholic saints. Thus founded on cultural dissonance, the feast itself is perceived dissonantly in the poem, which is ambivalent toward the illegality of the balloons. As we shall see, the instability through which the poem defers any protest against the violence of the fire balloons can be related with Bishop’s ambivalence toward confessionalism. By the last stanza, the reader experiences the perception of dissonance and instability which led Bishop to write in the passage below that she was “of two minds about



[the fire balloons].” Bishop starts the poem, published in June 22, 1957, by defining the fire balloons as *illegal*, yet she describes them in a letter of June 24, 1955 quite differently:

Fire balloons are supposed to be illegal but everyone sends them up anyway and we usually spend St. John’s night and the nights before and after watching the balloons drift right up the mountain towards the house—there seems to be a special draught; Lota has a sprinkling system on the roof just because of them. & They are so pretty—one’s of two minds about them. (Letter to Anny Baumann, Box 23, Vassar)

Timing is also ambivalent in the poem. The first stanza begins by associating the instability of the fire balloons with a seasonal (naturalized) timing, mapping them onto a primitive past<sup>115</sup> (a space where saints are “still honored”)—yet a past which has been displaced to an anachronistic present, as if *illegally*:

This is the time of year  
when almost every night  
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.

Climbing the mountain height,  
rising toward a saint  
still honored in these parts

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<sup>115</sup> In her discussion of “The Armadillo,” McCabe remarks that Bishop’s characteristic is her belief in and respect for “a world prior to one’s own,” arguing that her identification with the armadillo “does not only indicate ‘attraction and compassion’” (citing Kalstone) but also the realization that “the fire-balloons in this human celebration, which represent the persistent yearning for transcendence, . . . are dangerous; they interfere with the natural order of things”. Such a reading replicates colonialist discourse, which characteristically idealizes the land without its people such that this idealization passes for a *belief in paradise*, thus justifying and redeeming the appropriation of the land by what is portrayed as the superior self. In other words, in such a world corrupted by a primitive human culture, it is legitimate for Bishop, as for the armadillo, to pursue the ideal of

By this point, the first two stanzas have set up an equation by which the self, in the present, is contrasted against a remote other, and displaced to the past that is in turn equated with the other. This equation posits not only a definitive division between self and other, but also an imperialist resolution of the other's dissonant past into the consonant presence of the self. This linear notion of a primitive past *still* obtaining in "other" parts of the world is the framework that defines illegality and instability, which are thus produced to characterize societies other than that of the speaker and her audience. In other words, violence is alienated to a spatial and temporal remoteness where it becomes timeless, tamed into consonance, as if it were proper only to cultures other than that shared by the speaker and her readers. Violence is thus expiated into the pole of remoteness—naturalized and neutralized as an ethos of cultures that have frozen themselves within their own archaic religious beliefs—while at home the empire is understood to reign innocently and benevolently.

Because the pattern of seasonality (repetition with a difference) is highlighted from the outset of the poem as a characteristic of the archaic culture of the other, it is relevant that the poem contradicts that characterization. And it does so from the very start, since it begins by making that past or remote place *also* present: "*This* is the time of year", therefore, where the past is also present. As the poem fails to resolve the pattern of archaic seasonality into the pattern of linearity that would affirm the exclusion of the Other from contemporary modernity—and postmodernity--, it increasingly troubles all assumptions of linear evolution and resolution.

It is only at first sight, therefore, that Bishop has fused present and past to construct an ideal timelessness. She thus begins the poem by highlighting that her own centrality (consonance) has been displaced by that of the archaic other, creating a disorder or antithetical dissonance which sounds like a regression, a kind of looping or uncanny

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paradise, a quest toward which "[s]urvival of one creature seems impossible without the expense of others"

repetition. If we recall from Chapter 2 that the aesthetics of resolution requires a dissonant *seasonality*—made up of disturbing musical *accidents* to be resolved (either silenced or converted) into the cyclical return of consonance—, it makes sense to consider that this looping static (noise) constitutes, by polarity, the speaker’s consonance. The noise or chaos attributed to the Other constitutes, in other words, the meaningfulness of the speaker’s own framework of order. Otherness is thus represented as an ephemeral accident or madness, the antithetical dissonance in which even what is dangerous, frail, and illegal is naturalized, contained and harmonized by a timeless, universal consonance. Moreover, because this ideal timelessness is restricted to an unchanging, primitive society, it designates a past that is supposed to evolve or resolve itself safely into the present from which the poetic persona is speaking. However, this resolution clearly does not obtain in the poem. Instead of being resolved into consonance, the past oscillates between an ideal timelessness (consonance) and an illegal violence (antithetical dissonance) in such a way that violence threatens the speaking self who can neither keep it in the safe realm of remoteness nor see it in terms of the negative pole in the binaries inside/outside, present/past, good/evil.

Indeed, consonance is actually an effect: “Once up over against the sky it’s hard / to tell [the fire balloons] from the stars—planets, that is...”. The third stanza stresses this equivocation of absolute consonance with antithetical dissonance:

...with a wind,  
 they flare and falter, wobble and toss;  
 but if it’s still they steer between  
 the kite sticks of the Southern Cross

I have mentioned the strategy to infer consonance from disturbing events by assuming their seasonality as the stability of provisional, controlled accidents within cosmic harmony.

However, even within the season of fire balloons, such a harmony does not obtain in the poem. If the fire balloons are initially seen as stable planets, then stability (consonance) is suggested as being no more than an illusory effect. Whether or not the wind is still, in either case stability is ephemeral. In fact, only being ephemeral is steady: even if the wind is still, the balloons still end up

receding, dwindling, solemnly  
and steadily forsaking us,  
or in the downdraft of a peak,  
suddenly turning dangerous.

The rhyme “forsaking us, / . . . dangerous” forces slowness on the second syllable of “dangerous,” creating an effect of irony and humor made uncanny by the accelerated movement of the balloon’s action which is being described by contrast. Because the past reappears, also uncannily, in the present, the equation between past time and remote space is contradicted. Since the containment of violence in (past) time and (remote) space does not hold, the contradiction of the space-time equation extends to comment obliquely on the illegalities also perpetrated by the self-righteous beliefs of the speaker’s own society.

The vulnerability of consonance thus succeeds to trouble the surface of the poem, reverting its construction of an absolute timelessness to produce the imminent disruption of all stability. This is antithetical dissonance, merely negating the sovereignty of consonance—confirming its normality just as it laments its loss. By the middle of the poem, what was initially the seasonal harmony of the fire balloons, that spectacle of transcendence and consonance, is now perceived as the very antithesis to a timeless harmony. The uncanniness of such a reversion, when antithetical dissonance seeps into the unseen space where resolution into consonance had been expected, is the prevailing tone of the sixth and seventh stanzas:

Last night another big one fell.  
 It splattered like an egg of fire  
 Against the cliff behind the house.  
 The flame ran down. We saw the pair  
  
 Of owls who nest there flying up  
 And up, their whirling black-and-white  
 Stained bright pink underneath, until  
 They shrieked up out of sight.

The disruption of consonance, so far still and soundless, now culminates in the shrieking aural disturbance of the visual organization which guided the poem, framing it as well as the balloons by actually *steering* them, to fix them, “between / the kite sticks of the Southern Cross”. The upward movement which was initially a positive “rising to the saints” (possibly an allegory of the innocence of the bombs in what is repeatedly called a “good war”) has now become a terrifying death, the death of the *martyrs*.

*Witnessing* (a word etymologically related with martyrdom) had become overt only in the fourth stanza, when the fire-balloons turned dangerous. That was the first time the narrator referred to herself in the first person, and in the *plural*. The fact that witnessing is in the plural (“We saw”) suggests that the speaker is one of the animals that she describes as being forsaken, so that it is impossible to define the boundaries between the speaking subject and the described objects of representation—in other words, between culture and nature. Thus, the poetic persona introduces her “scenic self” (see note 11) into the subtext of the poem, disabling positivist readings by which Bishop’s speaker is a detached observer of a strange culture.

On the surface text, however, the stanza that follows the scene of the “ancient owls’ nest” is one which apparently empties it instead, as if it emptied the past—or as if it emptied itself of its own past. In doing so, the poem also reintroduces the other culture as the site of a past, contained violence, confirming the present as the site of consonance, albeit a frustrated one:

The ancient owls’ nest must have burned.

Hastily, all alone,

A glistening armadillo left the scene

Rose-flecked, head down, tail down

By leaving the scene not nakedly “bright pink” as the owls, but “rose-flecked” instead, the armadillo apparently withdraws from the scene of violence outside, shielded behind his armor. His resignation, “head down, tail down,” is the sign of his refusal even to look at the scene or the sky—a literal evasion of the fire balloons’ violence. Thus the poem is still in the boundaries of antithetical dissonance, or “the downdraft of a peak” consonance.

This emphasis on an emptied or absent consonance actually confirms the ideal of its self-presence, as of the closer overtones that dominate habitual perception. By contrast, the more remote overtones which drive out consonance are, like “ash” in the ninth stanza, “intangible:”

and then a baby-rabbit jumped out,

*short-eared*, to our surprise.

So soft!—a handful of intangible ash

with fixed, ignited eyes.

This is an emphasis on the desolation of the scene, emptied by the armadillo that leaves it, “head down, tail down”. However, while the “glistening . . . rose-flecked” armadillo leaves, a baby rabbit comes into the scene—rather, jumps out into it. Though in representation the rabbit has been reduced, “*short-eared*,” to “a handful of intangible ash,” the change of tone

and pace indicates that this reduction is merely a residue of what is obliterated in its irreducibility: the rabbit as an element of surprise for the narrator.

Surprise is held within the transfiguration of the rabbit's ears, as the word "surprise" itself is contained between the slowness of "*short-eared*" and the exclamation and dissonant diction of "So soft!" in "*short-eared, to our surprise. / So soft!—. . .*" But what is most surprising is that, as Gary Fountain has pointed out, "a part of the self—childlike, innocent, caressable, and imaginative (those "ignited eyes")—can survive, phoenix-like risen from, or actually composed of, the ashes of destruction" (1999: 123). However, the rabbit's intangibility is not an effect of its irreducibility, but of its very mimetic reduction (the "ignited eyes" reflecting the fire-balloon in flames) to the scene that transfigures it. Therefore, the rabbit's softness is uncanny rather than phoenix-like. Indeed, the rabbit is effectively blinded by its mimicry of (its consonance with) the light of the fire balloon. Just so, the armadillo reflects the light from its glistening armor. The poetic interplay between the imagined resolution of conflict and the real impossibility of resolution is not engaged but rather dissolved by what Wallace Stevens formulated as an "eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing, without reflection" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," 1964: 402). The only lights that defer such hypostasis are those of the event (the fire balloon and the poem itself) as unresolvable reflections that mobilize the light rather than freezing it into stasis.

It is ironic that the rabbit, which moves fast, is fixed into paralysis instead, whereas the armadillo, which moves slowly, here "hastily" leaves the scene. Those who can move do not, while those who presumably cannot—because their nest "must have burnt"—are those which effectively "engulf and escape" the scene of oppositions. (I am thinking of Bishop's notion of protest according to Victoria Harrison's phrasing on which I will comment soon). Bishop's use of the modal auxiliary "must" in "must have burnt" not only suggests a probable

conclusion which the reader may or may not take for granted, but also provides a disguise for the owls to effectively leave the scene of the poem itself by exceeding representation. As the owls “shriek up out of sight,” they indeed survive the fire—though not unscathed.

At this point, the relational dissonance of the poetic persona’s “scenic self” has not yet reached the reader’s perception. Antithesis still dominates the poem as the ashes frustrate the ideal consonance of softness. Relational dissonance is introduced in the last stanza through the indeterminate referent of “too pretty,” itself a phrase in which dissonance exceeds the ideal of consonance. Initially, the referent seems to be the rabbit, since it is the continuing referent of the preceding stanza. The fire balloons are the more logical referent, however, in their “dreamlike mimicry” of the stars, so that the last stanza, italicized already in Bishop’s manuscript (Harvard), repeats the linear sequence of referents in the poem in order to revise it, from consonant linearity to a dissonant cataclysm by which all characterizations interconnect all referents. Thus the balloons’ “falling fire” is juxtaposed with the ancient owls’ “piercing cry,” the rabbit’s “panic,” and, surprisingly, the armadillo’s “weak mailed fist”:

*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!*

*O falling fire and piercing cry*

*And panic, and a weak mailed fist*

*Clenched ignorant against the sky!*

The linearity of the poem’s narrative becomes disruptive in the third verse above, as the armadillo returns to the scene covertly, therefore surprisingly—demanding an active perception on the part of the reader. The armadillo’s “weak mailed fist” of protest contradicts its previous portrayal in sorrowful resignation (“head down, tail down”). That the “mailed fist” is also “weak” brings into question the effectiveness of defiant protest, a characterization likely to be just as delusive as the previous representation of the armadillo’s insulation from



the scene. It is through the indeterminacy of any singular identity for the armadillo that dynamic dissonance reaches the reader's perception, demanding at the very end of the poem the reader's suspicion and re-evaluation of the humanistic assumptions by which the shielded self (the armadillo) might be preserved in opposition to violence throughout the poem.

The perception of irreducible dissonance is thus constructed through the very difficulty of also locating the referent for "too pretty" in the armadillo, who had presumably left the scene for good. This covert, uncanny return of the armadillo reveals (and re-veils) that the "head down, tail down" resignation, perhaps even victimization, of the shielded self actually contains the "ignorant" evasion of violence performed in pretensions of protest. Indeed, the armadillo's protest serves precisely the same function of shielding him from the outside violence of the scene. In other words, the anthropomorphized armadillo, whose front paw is removed from the ground in the act of protest, ignores the failure of his detachment from violence precisely at the moment that he protests it.

Rather than "dwindl[ing] with this image of the armadillo," "the use or threat of power, as between nations" (McCabe 1994: 191) cannot camouflage its own relatedness to the effects of violence behind heroic discourses that either ignore it or banish it into remoteness. By contrast, the wise, ancient owls are the "scenic self" who disappear through, into, and out of, the "shrieking cry". The cry is therefore not antithetically but dynamically dissonant.

As the perception of dynamic dissonance disrupts antithesis and insulation, it is the entire act of consonance—in which violence has been made safe and naturalized by its apparent resolution into a past time and remote space—which is demystified as being "too pretty," just as the fire balloons have been undermined in their deceiving "dreamlike mimicry" of the stars. Toward the end of the poem, the irreducible, "piercing cry" resonates emphatically (and in ominous dramatic language, a device clearly avoided by Bishop in her

predominantly colloquial tone) above all hope, all anguish, all anger, all fear, and, ultimately, all closure of meaning.

### 5.6.1. The Piercing Cry: “Engulf[ing] and Escap[ing]” Madness

This resonance is a predominance of the aural over any attempt to determine fixed places for the animals and balloons, on the scene which can no longer be described in a framework of linear time and insulated space. The aural disruption here echoes Bishop’s brainstormed, sketched-and-crossed-out notes as she wrote under the persona of Lucius about her mother’s madness:

~~The hardest thing about it now—*the sadness of it must be borne*, of course—  
but harder to do—is to realize that it has happened. Sad things, sudden things,  
awful things seem always a minute afterwards, so necessary, so  
unreasonable. What I had done before, have done since, and what has  
happened to us all—it is understandable if you think about it long enough it  
makes sense and you feel, {?} like a light moving behind a window pane at  
night, a certain reason, to it—an illumination.—or like an inscrutable, aloof  
face, lit up by a smile. But this—what happened to her—throws the picture all  
off—all out the music all out of key—spoils the answer to every question.  
Gran, at the end of her life, thought suddenly it had all been wrong—and Aunt  
Grace could look ahead, thinking whatever came would be all wrong. Just  
things with an awful gray between.—yet both us. Grandpa thought God might  
step in between— (qtd. in Harrison 1993: 113, italics mine)~~

The first sentence above helps us to understand the poetic persona in “The Armadillo.” She acknowledges the “piercing cry” or the disruptive event (dissonance) that “has happened” or intervened in the visual scene (consonance). This acknowledgment seeks to distinguish itself, as does the “scenic self” represented by the rabbit, “spoil[ing] the answer to every question,”

from the absolute answers in the form either of antithesis confirming the rightness of consonance (as the ancient owls, Gran's and Aunt Grace's conclusive resolutions by which past, present and future are "all wrong") or of conversion into consonance (like the armadillo, with its "weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky," just so "Grandpa thought God might step in between").

Lucius seeks to neither alienate himself from the scene as a victim nor surrender to it. Instead, he seeks to come to terms with "the sadness of it," in other words to hold that sadness—not to suppress it, but to "examine the other floating things that come our way very carefully," that is, to challenge the idealistic self that gives the event its antithetical power. This is the move of the poetic persona, holding indeterminacy in order to suspend any closure of meaning on the referent of the last stanza, and in order to undercut the linearity of the narrative. The move, in other words, is to defer any definition of the disturbing event as merely an antithesis confirming the normality of consonance (which, in turn, defines and reproduces madness). This is a refusal of imaginative evasions, a search for lucidity rather than for conclusiveness or the madness of one-dimensional experience.

The poetic persona indeed holds sadness in this poem—in italics, which in the margin of Bishop's type-written draft of "The Armadillo" (Harvard) she explained as indicating slowness. Because this is a moment of expected resolution in the poem, slowness emphasizes a dissonant timing. It has the effect of a conceptual suspension—a counterpoint to the linear advancement of closure—which for Bishop is a tool for articulating loss, and also for deferring it. In her 1936 memoirs, Bishop had written:

When a certain feeling has been built up {?over?} a long period of time it creates a space for such feeling—a large space which must be filled and as the original excitement or emotion goes away another must come or must be made

to come to fill it. Only by a gradual shrinkage can the excitement ever die down.

Slowness, then, is a formal strategy of timing to create the space for the feeling that has been built up by the scream—a scream that Bishop seeks to articulate gradually, “shrinking” it—in the therapeutic sense, of realizing the limits to the totalitarian effect of the alter ego. Thus Bishop brings us back to the therapeutic, confessional vein of her writing.<sup>116</sup> That the fire balloons initially represent the hope that such a space may be dispensable—as if in the poet’s anxiety of spatial containment their visual resemblance to (consonance with) the stars could leave no room for aural dissonance, and thus gradually shrink the fear of another “piercing cry”—is suggested by a passage at the end of “In the Village,” first published in *The New Yorker* in 1953:

Now there is no scream. Once there was one and it settled slowly down to earth one hot summer afternoon; or did it float up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky”? But surely it has gone away, forever. (1984b: 274)

The overt certainty of the last sentence above is revealed as a covert anxiety instead, by the subsequent sentence. Rather than having gone away forever, the scream, as one of the “frail, illegal fire balloons”, is a “frail almost-lost scream”:

. . . All those other things—clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream—are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?

Nate!

Oh beautiful sound, strike again! (274)

The beautiful sound is the ironsmith Nate’s sound which Bishop is eager to represent as overscoring the painful scream—just as she is eager to represent the “too pretty” fire balloons

which she describes in her 1955 letter, as we have seen, as luring her and many others into being of “two minds about them.” The “piercing cry” in “The Armadillo” is not outdone by strategies of consonance (the representations of transcendence, via the fire balloons; of softness, via the rabbit; of insulation and protest, via the armadillo; of a “beautiful sound,” via Nate’s working hammer). Though ending in rage, the poem turns the rage back onto the observer in the subtle twist afforded by the single word, “ignorant,” its disturbance often dismissed by readings that buy the poem’s initial assumption of a morally inferior other. But before examining that word, I would like to reconsider the implications of the disruptive, dissonant, “piercing cry” of the ancient owls in the poem as a silent expression of a cultural, ethical, and political crisis.

As we have seen, the aural disruption in the final, yet inconclusive stanza follows a visual description that sought to “steer [the fire balloons] between / the kite sticks of the Southern Cross” (the cross alluding to the crisis of imminent danger, a crisis kept at bay by a still wind). Spatial containment into consonance dwindles: the collective “us” is “forsaken” into the pagan instant of aural disruption, “suddenly turning dangerous”. Danger, anxiety and fear ensue, because the disruption materializes at the instant of particularization, the threshold at which the poetic persona is anxious to deny the absence of the sacred (I am thinking of the armadillo’s armored idealization of meaning from an outside, “Grandpa thought that somehow God would intervene”). The armadillo’s armor signals its antithetical opposition, itself a mark of constraint within authorized forms of protest. This ironic loop, which leads to the skeptical tone of this last stanza, where the actual form of protest is itself a form of “ignorance,” has a long personal history for Bishop. If we take into account that when she wrote of violence and aural dissonance, she was drawing on the trauma of her mother’s scream, as we have seen, then it makes sense to consider the “fist . . . clenched ignorant

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<sup>116</sup> The word *shrink* is central to confessionalism, the therapeutic implications of which are epitomized

against the sky” as a gesture of disempowerment, producing rather than shrinking self-victimization. For Bishop, the scream of mad protest only replicated the violence imposed by—and imposing—an identity of madness, as shows her letter to Dorothee Bowie:

My life has been darkened always by guilt feelings, I think, about my mother - somehow children get the idea its their fault - or I did. And I could do nothing about that, and she lived on for 20 years more and it has been a nightmare to me always. (June 14 1970, Box 27, Vassar)

The scream, however, does not “shrink”: repressed, it returns uncannily: “The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever—not loud, just alive forever” (1984b: 251). The “piercing cry” is thus uncontainable only as it resonates through a slowness, a shrinkage, a silence which “hangs over” in its distance between received categories, and which cuts through the visual scene, disrupting any idealization of a homogeneous, collective wholeness (or holiness) of consonant meaning. In this light, Bishop reconceives and *politicizes silence* in “The Armadillo” just as she potentializes it in “In the Village” as the “scream” that “[n]o one hears” (Bishop 1984b: 251): it is what is unheard rather than what is unsaid. Thus perceived, silence is the mark of an obliterated yet active disruption of received meanings and identities rather than passive consent. The “piercing cry” is therefore a disturbance of identity and closure, building on the inaccessibility (irreducibility) of sound: a process of de-spatialization, when the process of *signification* (dissonance) interrupts the closure of *meaning* (consonance). Such a disturbance calls for a fuller view of reality, undermining both the reduction of particularized reality and its imaginary, idealized reconstruction; it therefore opens up a form of protest which, “private, strange, revolutionary,” is more real than those “corpse-strewn, monument-strewn

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in Anne Sexton’s writings, famous for having started by instruction of her *shrink*.

battlefields” that tend to produce self-innocence and self-aggrandizement by eliding the suffering of other victims of violence.

The “piercing cry” is thus placed in the last stanza as engulfing and exceeding existing forms of political agency which, founded on the anxiety of powerlessness (“weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky”), panic and fear (“fixed, ignited eyes”), justify acts that either dis-implicate the self or exalt its self-righteousness and victory. In this light, the cue in the poem which has been overlooked by criticism is the word “ignorant,” in the last verse:

*a weak mailed fist*

*Clenched ignorant against the sky!*

The word is disturbing because it does not allow for a reading by which the speaker might side with the victim—in this case, the mailed armadillo in the act of clenching his fist against the sky. It is not surprising that criticism which portrays Bishop as modernity’s castaway, proving her moral soundness and resiliency against a harsh reality—her poems as exemplary narratives, therefore, of a righteous remove from the chaotic world she encounters—should overlook the disturbance of this word in the poem. Bishop unexpectedly characterizes the armadillo’s “mailed fist,” which Penelope Laurans points out to be “a familiar figure of speech for threats of warmaking, represent[ing] the protective ‘armor’ of a soldier . . . suggested by the armadillo’s carapace” (1983: 81), as “ignorant” and weak instead of wise and heroic. In doing so, Bishop demolishes the martyr-making perspective of the armadillo and the other animals.

“The Armadillo” has been read predominantly as Bishop’s moral stand against the corruption of nature by a backward culture, a corruption in the ironic form of a religious-related act that is just as violent, though on a smaller scale, as the war bombings alluded to by the fire balloons, but which fixes violence as the ethos of “other” cultures.

It is relevant, however, that the word “ignorant”—itself easily ignored or sidestepped by readings anxious to leap over the slowness of the last stanza toward its expected climactic conclusion—signals a subtext underlying the dramatic stream leading up to the armadillo’s disparaged outrage and mad-ness, and his imaginary self-empowerment. The subtext I refer to is the deconstruction, in the last verse, of the moral discourse instructed so far by the poem. As the word “ignorant” deconstructs the reader’s assumptions of the speaker’s contempt for the traditional practices of the cultural other, it also signals the threshold at which the speaker’s position of moral superiority turns, in the verse where Bishop stops the poem, to implicate his or her own responsibility in what is so far the reductionist representation of the other culture. Thus, the danger inherent in writing about a culture over which one’s own has economic, political, or cultural power (or all of those) is paralleled with the aestheticization of the bomb, and with the frustration of writing politics through the self-disimplicating dynamics of positing the imagination as a compensatory relief over violence.

The word “ignorant” reinforces the surface meaning of the poem, a critique of violence in backward cultures. In Brazil, it is often used to characterize the backwardness of those who are resilient to progress, as personified in the “mailed fist” of those who launch dangerous fire balloons despite their illegality. However, underlying this meaning is the sensation of perplexity upon reading the last verse of the poem, which suddenly aligns the armadillo with those launching the fire balloons with their “mailed fist[s],” setting off an unpredictable pattern of correspondences between the characters in the poem. I want to examine this perplexity by considering the word “ignorant” in still another context, that of its poetic use in Bishop’s time, the impact of which was likely to make her particularly open to the dissonant meanings carried by the word. Published in 1947, the poem “Crude Foyer” by Wallace Stevens, whom Bishop referred to as “the contemporary who most affected [her] writing” in the 30s (Brown 1966: 9), portrays the “ignorant” self by equating ignorance with



self-certainty, imaginative evasion, and the reduction of all senses to eyesight, if not to the high modernist “mind’s eye”. Although this is a long excerpt to quote here, Stevens’s poem is helpful to contextualize Bishop’s critique of the armadillo’s final bravado:

Thought is false happiness: the idea  
 That merely by thinking one can,  
 Or may, penetrate, not may,  
 But can, that one is sure to be able—  
 That there lies at the end of thought  
 A foyer of the spirit in a landscape  
 Of the mind, in which we sit  
 And wear humanity’s bleak crown;

In which we read the critique of paradise  
 And say it is the work  
 Of a comedian, this critique;  
 In which we sit and breathe

An innocence of an absolute,  
 False happiness, since we know that we use  
 Only the eye as faculty, that the mind  
 Is the eye, and that this landscape of the mind

Is a landscape only of the eye; and that  
 We are ignorant men incapable  
 Of the least, minor, vital metaphor, content,

At last, there, when it turns out to be here. (1964: 270)

Stevens's "Crude Foyer" is a dramatic representation of the gap between "reality" and solipsistic representation, and of how we are powerfully seduced by language to forget it. Like Bishop, Stevens is concerned with the failure of the imagination and language to expand perception of reality through representation. Those are ignorant who pretend to represent the strangeness of dissonant reality ("there") by resolving it into the consonance or sameness of such limited resources as that of familiarity ("here")—to dissolve or underestimate the "critique of paradise" by safeguarding it within a frame of consonance to be perceived by "only the eye as faculty". Ignorance offers a respite from the need to change the terms of protest toward acknowledging the strangeness of the self rather than of the other—that is, to perceive what John Ashbery calls "the strangeness, the unreality of our reality" (1977: 10).

Both Stevens and Bishop distrust the politics of certainty and direction, and therefore make elusiveness—a focus on details rather than generalized meanings—a constructive force in their poems. Efforts to produce imaginary compensations for the poverty of reality, including the positing of clear-cut oppositions and other systemic reductions through language, are a deceptive but relevant part of reality itself, and are thus both useful and necessarily self-deceiving tools in their poems. Rather than echoing the Romantic lament of the insufficiency of language, these two poets use its insufficiency as a springboard to engage language further, mobilizing the text rather than freezing it into inactiveness. Thus can be understood Stevens's assertion that "[a] poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (1951: 32).

On this understanding, description is not posited by either Bishop or Stevens as a mimetic reproduction of reality, but as a display of how reality is reductively perceived, constructed, and so on. This is the sense in which Stevens refers to Henri Bergson, whom Bishop read widely as well, in the following passage on the ongoing representation-creation

of reality as constituted by its ephemeral perception:

Bergson describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states. He says: “The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant later than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. (Stevens 1951: 25)

Among the differences between both poets, perhaps the most radical is that Bishop seeks to refuse the poet’s authoritative role, while for Stevens, “what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (31). Nor does she take on—at least not without deconstructing—any “function” the poet may have, such as that of producing “a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration” or “the light in the minds of others”—let alone “the role . . . to help people to live their lives,” as Stevens does in these passages:

I think that [the poet’s] function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives . . . The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. (29; 32)

Instead, Bishop deploys poetic language to go against the grain of the very arguments and perceptions of reality that she posits in her texts as truths. In this light, the assumption of

an innocent self against an “outside” threat is a reduction of the complexity of violence. By exposing this reduction, “The Armadillo” can be understood to question the effectiveness of protest within the space of opposition that confirms cultural centrality. Rather than being political in the sense of taking sides on a public issue, Bishop’s poetics of dissonance is political in that she posits the suspension of the terms by which sides revolve around and resolve into arbitrary pivots of meaning. If there can be a “real real protest,” it must question the very terms of opposition which naturalize the normalcy of a consonant “us” insulated from an antithetical “them”.

### 5.7. “BRAZIL, JANUARY 1, 1502”

People seem to think that doing something like writing a poem makes one happier in life. It doesn’t solve anything. Perhaps it does at least give one the satisfaction of having done a thing well or having put in a good day’s work.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1966 interview

This search for a change of terms, this “forsaking us,” exposing the anxieties and limitations of the framed reality of the imperialist self, is what makes the apparently “mad” or unconvertible element of society become “maddening” instead, or disturbing to the imperialist *I*. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” the colonizers’ madness is the obsessive appropriation of the other, the reduction of dissonant reality into a frame that fails to fulfill the colonizer’s or the tourist’s sense of penetration, appropriation, and domestication of the other. The poem is about the deferral of a consonant framework that does not succeed, despite surface appearances, in producing fullness or absoluteness. What the poetic persona seeks in both “Crusoe in England” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is precisely the change of terms, the revisionist repetition, in order to challenge her speakers’ and readers’ framing, colonizing gaze over a dissonant, ungraspable reality.

Already in the epigraph quoting Sir Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art*, the poem begins by materializing framed representation itself as a tapestry, the surface of which only

apparently tames the dissonant, intricate reality of the foreign land: “. . . embroidered nature . . . tapestried landscape.” Rather than perceived in its reductionist act, the totalizing and aestheticizing framing of reality passes for inclusion, fullness, and diversity:

Every square inch filling in with foliage  
 . . .  
 . . . fresh as if just finished  
 and taken off the frame.

Published three years after “The Armadillo,” this poem begins also by introducing nature as absolute and timeless, in an attempt to tame or systematize its dissonant reality within a framework of consonance, provided by the gaze of the *I* of culture:

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes  
 exactly as she must have greeted theirs

The referent of “theirs,” inferred from the title, compares the speaker with the Portuguese colonizers. This anxiety for equation reflects the parallel attempt to confirm the idyllic consonance between past and present—and, therefore, to confirm the encounter with that edenic paradise expected to correspond to the tourist’s, as to the colonizers’, “. . . old dream of wealth and luxury / already out of style when they left home . . . .” This equation, which reminds us of the epic simile, does not succeed, however, in making the speaker an epic hero or producer of consonance: heroism is ironically exposed by satirical confession throughout the poem, implicating the speaker increasingly in an act of violence rather than exalting her rediscovery of a timeless paradise.

Here, the supposed hero is portrayed as the outsider—colonizer, tourist, reader—whose eyes are greeted as s/he endeavors to reach, conquer and domesticate the interior of the foreign land. The plural “Januaries” which “greet our eyes” in the poem refers not only to the recurring seasonality by which Nature repeats itself, so that the rediscovery (the recurrent

rape) of an idyllic paradise appears to be naturalized and legitimized, but also to the appearance which “greet[s] our eyes”: that of the river, Rio de Janeiro, presumed to lead the conquerors to the interior of the unknown land.

Thus operating under the surface text is a prefiguration that the poem itself is a woven fabric which cannot represent the otherness of Brazil. This is because the plural “Januaries,” which includes *January* as a metonym for “Rio de Janeiro,” frustrates the expectations of the colonizers: the plural *Januaries* can be understood to signal the colonizers’ realization that the body of water they had singularly expected to be a river is a bay instead, and therefore does not allow for their expected penetration into the “interior”—of the country and of the tapestry, through its “hanging fabric” (see Kalstone 1989: 194).

Thus, as the gendered pronoun already in the second verse shows, Nature is feminized as an other “greeting our eyes.” This genderization, which imposes or posits “our eyes” as masculine and “Nature” as feminine, also imposingly projects onto the women the act of inviting the men to penetrate them (Nature). What invites this rape, however, is not the native woman or the land, but the very anxiety of the colonizer to project or confirm his power in resolving the unknown into the apparent, self-reassuring totality of his surface frame (to resolve antithetical dissonance into consonance, even if that consonance is a postmodernist dissolution rather than a high modernist resolution of form). This anxiety is, of course, an evasion of the irreducibility of the otherness that defers reduction or appropriation. By the end of the poem, the women defer consonance by “retreating, always retreating, behind” the “hanging fabric” that constructs the illusion of surface space. In this light, what is “maddening” is precisely that the women are not tamed or “converted” by the Catholic

rapists, the travel writer, or the readers of the poem (the readers, that is, of the tapestry itself, titled “Brazil, January 1, 1502”).<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, the fabric (the poem) is always already torn by the impossibility of reducing—of framing, flattening, capturing the land with its fauna, flora, and women. Thus the birds are “perching there in profile,” each showing “only half” of its breast, and deferring, therefore, the poem’s ability to represent them fully. Moreover, here silence is not inactive; instead, as the birds “keep quiet” they prevent the men’s reach. When they are not quiet, their sounds and displace and camouflage the women’s signals to each other. Their signals misdirect the armored males by passing for the calling of birds behind the surface foliage:

Those maddening little women . . . kept calling,  
 Calling to each other (or had the birds woken up?)  
 And retreating, always retreating, behind it.

Once again, aural dissonance disrupts the homogeneity of the visual in Bishop’s writing, both through the women’s “calling” sounds (initially consonant with the men’s sexual pursuit, then disruptingly dissonant as they are calling “to each other” rather than to the men) and through the men’s “creaking armour”. Dissonant, impenetrable reality “greet[s] our eyes” only, since the visual is limited to the surface. Ironically, the men’s movements in the woods are stifled rather than strengthened by the armor, now pathetic, of the imperialist self:

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,  
 tiny as nails, and glinting,  
 in creaking armor, came and found it all,

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<sup>117</sup> Bishop translated (with Lota’s help, most likely) Clarice Lispector’s short story “A Menor Mulher do Mundo” which was published in the same year as her “Brazil, January 1, 1502”—so that, as Harrison argues, their resemblance is most probably unexpected. Rendering in her translation the phrase, “retreating, always retreating . . . hiding away in the heart of Africa,” so similar to the language of her own poem, Bishop acknowledges the intertextuality between Lispector’s and her own vision of the women who are “maddening” merely for eluding classification. See Lispector 1964 [1960].

not unfamiliar:  
 no lovers' walks, no bowers,  
 no cherries to be picked, no lute music,  
 but corresponding, nevertheless,  
 to an old dream of wealth and luxury  
 already out of style when they left home—

The anxiety and obsession to produce consonance at all costs is thus exposed by the “maddening little women,” precisely those who are presumed to be the primitive, hopeless, vulnerable victims subjected by the Catholic colonizers. This poem, clearly then, is actually satiric of the speaker's own cultural framework by which the exotic other is presumably about to be tamed (is preconsumed) into the consonant fixity of the imperial gaze.

I have argued that the linearity of time, in other words the continuity by which the past repeats itself in ways that are “not unfamiliar,” is dependent on the perception of a tangible surface, one that is close enough to be reached. This is a spatialized dimension of reality, the one-dimensional fabric and fabrication of consonance which is taken for a whole—a whole which only willfully appears to be real, “fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame.” But all the while, dissonant reality is “showing only half” of itself, “retreating, always retreating, behind” the tapestried landscape which is imaginarily framed.

My intent has been to clarify how, in both “The Armadillo” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” Bishop's intercultural poetics undermines the illusion of her speakers' dis-implicated spectatorship, and their anxiety to naturalize, legitimize and reassert their outsider status. Looking back, it is now clear, I hope, that Bishop's poetics of self-implication is precisely a rejection of the aesthetic of vision, ethnography, and “witnessing” for which she has been most celebrated. It is a rejection of the martyr-like “witnessing” professed by confessional writing.



## Chapter 6

## Bishop's Dissonant Poetic *Personae*: “Unmixedly Yours,” or the American “Part[s] of My Psyche”?

Writing poetry is an unnatural act. It takes great skill to make it seem natural. Most of the poet's energies are really directed towards this goal: to convince himself (perhaps, with luck, eventually some readers) that what he is up to and what he's saying is really an inevitable, only natural way of behaving under the circumstances.

Elizabeth Bishop, Notebooks, Vassar

Poetic discourse understood as rhetorical is inescapably political; by the same token, it makes taking any overt political position suspect. . . . Unless we want to do away with the category of the poetic, we have to give up ambitions of either completely aestheticizing or politicizing it.

Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry*

So at any given moment there would be a resulting sound that was unable to dispense with the first two, and yet would be neither one of them but rather their difference.

Antonio Benitez Rojo, *A Isla que se Repite*

I have argued in the previous chapters that Bishop's Brazilian writings do not reflect a coherent set of cultural positions, but rather extend processes of dissonant perceptions, carrying them through the crises under which habitual conceptual frameworks run up against—while also resisting—the recognition of their limitations. In chapter 1, I introduced Bishop's intercultural writings in the context of imperialist literature and criticism. In chapter 2, I traced out an outline of Schönberg's and Bishop's conceptions of dissonance, as well as some of their poetic, ethical, and political implications on the experience of culture shock that marks her writings. In chapter 3, I demonstrated that Bishop fails in her ethnographical efforts to map these conflicting perceptions onto a consonant, manageable geography that would privilege the paradigms within which she attempts to safeguard her position as a mere

outsider in Brazil. In chapter 4, I examined more closely some of the poetic figures construed by Bishop to enact these conflicts. The figures of the colonized and the colonizer, each of which occupies a more evident position in “Pink Dog” and “Crusoe in England,” respectively, allow Bishop’s speakers to enact their transit between shifting cultural identities on the surface order of her texts while setting a ceiling under which to manage and confront the imperialist anxieties elaborated in their deeper levels. Chapter 5 focused on these confrontations by exploring how Bishop’s anti-imperialist critique of confessionalism connects with her refusal of regulatory practices of identity that ostracize dissonance and difference to the monolithic categories of antithesis and madness. In this light, I argued that Bishop’s ostensible dislike for confessional writing can be understood to reconceptualize confessionalism, revising its mainstream narrative of self-aggrandizement (consonance) by flaunting the very constructedness of the self.

In what follows, I outline some of the ethical implications of Bishop’s dissonant poetics, deriving from and also extending the preliminary hypothesis of this study—namely, that compositional dissonance in Bishop’s Brazilian writings is unresolvable, and that it can be understood as an expansion of perception and relationality, i.e., an ethical confrontation between clashing cultural frameworks. In the process of examining this hypothesis, the present study has also become involved with Bishop’s use of dissonance as a poetic resource to move from the anxiety of culture shock—the struggle to overcome what threatens the centrality of the self—toward the construction of (a) dissonant poetic persona(s). This issue—the construction of a dissonant subjectivity, with its poetic and ethical implications—is relevant for criticism interested in de-hegemonizing the imperial self in intercultural discourses.

I do not propose this set as a sum-up, much less a result, of this study, but rather as refracting avenues which it points toward at its moment of stopping—not an ending or

conclusion, therefore, but a pause for revised questions and further explorations. Bishop's conflicting perceptions of intercultural meanings activate at least three major interventions in the imperialist canon of intercultural literature: 1) the construction of a *Brazilian poetic persona* interrupting Bishop's anglocentric gaze; 2) a critique of reductive analyses of *gendered discourses* of cultural consonance; and, perhaps most important for my purpose, because of its power to potentialize the arguments made throughout this study, 3) a revisioning of *social-conscious writing* by highlighting the selfcentric rhetorics of representation.

This chapter will be divided, therefore, into three sections. In the first, I will explore the collision of Bishop's poetic voices, as fragments of her letters and poems contradict each other. I will also be examining the full text of what Bishop stressed, in a letter to her Brazilian friend Linda Nemer, to be her only poem in Portuguese. The second and third sections will expand on the perspective of the previous chapter—i.e., Bishop's ostensible rejection of mainstream confessionalism—to foreground the important contradictions underlying two other ostensible statements put forward by Bishop in her inter-related critiques of discourses of textual identity.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Bishop objected to all kinds of systems under which to label writing: she was “opposed to political thinking as such for writers, . . . disliked social conscious writing” (Brown 1966: 8), “hate[d] confessionalism . . .” (Wehr 1996 [1966]: 45), and refused to endorse classifications of her writings by gender (Gilbert and Gubar 1985: 1739). Critical discourses (and by no means do I refer only to Anglo-American criticism) that homogenize her Brazilian texts within an exotic identity should not lose sight, either, of Bishop's anti-solipsistic concern that “‘foreign’ subjects, as such, aren't right for poetry. It's something I think about most of the time . . .” (to Dorothee Bowie, n.d., Vassar).

With regard to gender, Bishop's critique of identity politics can be understood in terms of her contention that her refusal to “separat[e] the sexes . . . came from feminist principles, perhaps stronger than [she] was aware of” (Starbuck 1996 [1977]: 90), and claimed to have “always considered [her]self a strong feminist” (Spires 1981: 80). In this regard, having been praised by Lowell as the “best woman poet” among their contemporary writers (qtd. Millier 331), she wrote in a letter to him that she would rather “be called ‘the 16<sup>th</sup> poet’ with no reference to [her] sex, than one of 4 women—even if the other three are pretty good” (Jan. 28 1972, Texas). Thus Bishop opposed gender-marking as a measure of either textual identity or value, whereas she

### 6.1. BISHOP'S CONSTRUCTION OF A BRAZILIAN POETIC PERSONA

In a letter from Cambridge, dated Oct. 13 1970, Bishop wrote, “You might care to keep some paintings . . . objects, etc. until I decide what to do with the American part of my psyche...” (to Dorothee Bowie, Box 27, Vassar), clearly implying a Brazilian counterpart.<sup>119</sup> Rather than indicating literally that her psyche might be split and categorized into monolithic, unrelated “parts,” or that it might be classified into discreet identities, Bishop’s statement calls attention to her disruptive experience of shifting cultural perspectives. In another letter from Cambridge, of the same period, she shows precisely that such a “split” exceeds clear-cut parts, dualities, and places:

Yes, I do know that American attitude towards “foreigners”—sometimes very strange. Polite and helpful to begin with, and then quite indifferent. But this isn’t always true, and also it works both ways, I’m afraid. I have had so much experience in being a “foreign resident” by now—and I feel like one here, now, too—that I’m afraid I see all sides of it. (to Mary Meigs, Oct 5 1970, Box 32, Vassar)

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engaged gender criticism by problematizing its reductionist representations, for example in such correspondences between the dichotomies male/female, culture/nature, order/chaos, reason/madness (see section 6.2). Acknowledging the performative and constructive politics and dynamics of subjectivity, Bishop considered that subject markings—whether of gender, race, class or nationality—unwittingly contribute to inequality. In “It All Depends,” her response to Ciardi’s questions to writers for his anthology-with-commentary, Bishop asserted that while political perspectives do “play their part” in writing, they may actually reduce it to the author’s or the reader’s solipsistic claims. Thus, she insists that “the poet’s concern is not consistency . . .”; and, on the question of subject matter, she concludes that applying closed theories to open texts “. . . mak[es] poetry monstrous or boring and . . . proceed[s] to talk the very life out of it” (Bishop 1950: 267).

<sup>119</sup> There is of course the highly significant “Canadian part of Bishop’s psyche” as well, which pervaded her entire life, and which, as her poetry and correspondence show, is closely related to her construction of a Brazilian poetic persona. For a thorough study of Bishop’s Canadian roots, see Barry 1996. See also Barry 1999 and Jarraway 1998. More specifically on the signification of Bishop’s Nova Scotian experience on her Brazilian writings, see Moss 1977 and Harrison 1993.

Indeed, Bishop invests in an ongoing process of conceptual disruption and demystification of cultural identity, disabling any discreet or monolithic intercultural perspective. The interplay between frameworks of conceptual knowledge associated with a “Brazilian attitude” and an “American attitude” comes to light in her letters, in which her cultural (dis)identification oscillates abruptly according to the register in which she is acting, i.e., to whom she is writing. In the next section I will be foregrounding this interplay in textual moments that rely on Bishop’s construction of a Brazilian cultural persona resisting the centrality of what she called “the American part of [her] psyche.”

### 6.1.2. From Bathroom Tiles to “Picasso’s Clowns, only Better”

I have no theories about Brazil, unlike so many people. Immediately upon arriving I did have theories and they were sharp ones. Little by little those theories evaporated. Brazil became my home.

It is awful to think I’ll probably be regarded as some sort of authority on Brazil the rest of my life.

Elizabeth Bishop, 1977 interview; 1969 letter

The following passage, of Bishop’s letter from Samambaia to Ilse and Kit Barker in England, conveys the pleasure she had in sharing in the task of creating color tiles that could not be found then on the Brazilian market:

Well - the new bathroom has three walls of white tiles - the only kind you can get here - and we thought we’d paint the third, back, wall, all pink to liven it up. Then L had an inspiration - it is going to be diamonds, harlequin style about 18” high - the wall is about 9” x 12” I guess - maybe longer - We’re preparing it for frescoe now. [. . .] We’re all going to paint diamonds until the wall looks like the legs of Picasso’s clowns, only better. (To Ilse and Kit Barker, from Samambaia, July 13 1953, Princeton)

Almost twenty years later, Bishop addressed the issue of tile-laying once again, this time from Cambridge, in what she called her only poem in Portuguese—“*minha poema só*

português . . . esta poema maravilhosa” (March 24 1970, Box 36, Vassar). Untitled, and written on a personal tone as part of a letter to Linda Nemer, this poem is about Bishop’s estrangement when confronting what she came to perceive, through the lens of her intercultural experience, as the contrived consonance, or uniformity, of her environment in the U.S. Constructing for herself an outsider’s perspective of her own lifestyle t/here, this poem can be understood as a performative statement of dis-identification and discomfort with what she now perceived as the predominance of finished products over the processes of making them—in her words, appearances which do not look human-made at all (“não aparecem humanos”). Her estrangement takes the shape of what she portrays, in characteristic understatement, as the all-too-perfect tiling of the bathroom in her new Cambridge apartment.

No banheiro

o torneiro de agua quente goteja.

Mas os azulejos, parede e chão,  
em verde cuidadoso, “decorador,”

estão collacados melhor

que no Brasil.

Em fato, não aparecem humanos.

Both passages above suggest Bishop’s awareness not only of the wider range of color tiles among which to choose from in the U.S. than in Brazil, but also of the better technique for laying them. Think of how curious it is, then, that the first passage, referring to what she might have called a ‘Brazilian way’ of handling the task, is written on a positive rather than negative tone; and that, also unexpectedly, the later passage, referring to a counterpart ‘American way,’ ends on a negative rather than positive tone.

What this inversion of values implies is that, in these textual moments (unlike those we have examined in “Manuelzinho,” for example), Bishop’s intercultural assessments

follow criteria other than those of labor efficiency and product availability—values which, intriguingly, are the only ones *foregrounded* in her poem in Portuguese.<sup>120</sup> Though the overlapping of positive and negative values makes the comparison inconclusive, Bishop conveys a personal commitment, involvement, and joyful attachment to those *understated* values and meanings by which what she associates with her Brazilian experience (in the letter quoted above) weighs positively on the scale: unpredictability, contingency, flexibility, creativity, surprise. These are “idea[s] of knowledge” which Bishop explored in the poem “At the Fishhouses,” started on her first trip back to Nova Scotia since her mother’s death almost fifteen years before. In the closing verses, evoking both Nova Scotia and Brazil, such ideas are associated with a contingent engagement with reality rather than its passive, self-absorbed reception:<sup>121</sup>

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
 drawn from the cold hard mouth  
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Notice that the phrase “what we imagine knowledge to be” implies the possibility of a mistake, therefore a standpoint of hermeneutic indeterminacy. Not surprisingly, Bishop’s opinionated comparisons between both cultures occur precisely around those issues which

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<sup>120</sup> This discrepancy alone is enough to disable the resolution the speaker enacts by the end of the poem, when she vows to be “un-mixedly [Brazilian]”.

<sup>121</sup> Bishop made a note to herself during the time she was beginning this poem in 1946: “Description of the dark, icy, clear water—clear dark glass—slightly bitter (hard to define). *My idea of knowledge*. This cold stream, half drawn, half flowing from ~~a great rocky breast~~” (Box 56, Vassar, emphasis added). Bishop’s inter-related notions of “freedom” and “knowledge” as contingent upon necessity were articulated also in her short story “In Prison,” as I have noted earlier (see chapter 1 n32).

she is most unable, therefore anxious, to resolve. It is from this standpoint that Bishop struggled endlessly to overcome the frustration resulting from unmet expectations and ideals which she saw being shared among foreigners in Brazil. Indeed, what the two passages below bring to mind is the recurrent anxiety to project onto a cultural Other the frustration and failure of a static, preconceived mindset:

Ray & E are 2 of a kind. His family has lived here for 35 years or so and are still completely French - and look down on the Brazilians, just the way Ray does - and why? Do you think if his papa had been a succesful hairdresser in Paris he would have emigrated to Brazil? He isn't even a succesful one here, but I bet they live a lot better here than they could have in France. And E lives a lot better here than she would at home, of course - most "foreigners" do, & then they get spoiled. (to Aunt Grace, from Samambaia, Aug 26 1961, Box 25, Vassar);

Remember how Uncle George used to get on your nerves at the farm telling everyone how things were done so much better in the U.S.A.? Well - Ray . . . does the same thing here - complains, complains complains - it is so boring, and rather tactless of him, I think. . . . He was brought up here and he ought to be bright enough to see there are very good reasons for the country's being backward [in the margin: "and he's making a good thing out of it, obviously!"] - and is it so AWFUL, anyway, to have to wait a few days for a car license, or whatever it is? These endless criticizers always pick on the unimportant things. (to Aunt Grace, from Samambaia, Oct 28 1963, Box 25, Vassar)

Bishop herself "complains complains complains" about Brazil in letters to her friends in the U.S., herself also an "endless criticizer" who very often conveyed a highbrow sort of intolerance of unmet expectations and idealizations of life in the foreign land. In conflict,



seeking to detach herself from this stereotype of the American foreigner in Brazil that she finds herself reproducing, Bishop's critique of the arrogant, self-absorbed tourist finds its way into her poems. Here is a finicky tourist placing herself in a position of fixed centrality, "pick[ing] on the unimportant things" in "Arrival at Santos," not caring any more than the "ports . . . what impression [she] make[s]," and contemptuous of the concrete reality which she only bothers to represent superficially:

Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,

or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,

the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps—

wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,

either because the glue here is very inferior

or because of the heat. . . .

In this context, the contradictions which emerge from the following passage of her correspondence are telling of the instability she maintained between cultural perspectives. Notice the discrepancy between her feigned hesitation and her compulsiveness to complain, for example when her decision not to do so is immediately followed by an additional complaint:

I am always sure my letters go glued in a solid mass, all together, or stick forever to the inside of the box - (Because of the tropical heat & damp, stamps can't have enough glue on them - they have a *little*, just enough to annoy - ) It is late in the day for me to complain of the tropics however - someone gave

me a beautiful little old wooden dish and I thought I'd put paper clips in it on my desk here. Inside a week they were completely rusted. I am composing a song, to the tune of Red Sails in the Sunset: Scotch Tape in the Tropics - (To U.T. & Joe, from Rio, Feb. 1, 1962, Box 37, Vassar)

The highbrow sarcasm with which Bishop ends this complaining spree is even more contradictory, however, when she “complains” not of the *tropics* but of the *tempered* part of the globe. An example of this is the entire second stanza of her 1979 poem in Portuguese (the first stanza of which we have seen above). Having complained endlessly of the lack of hot water in her house in Ouro Preto (in letters to friends in the U.S.), Bishop writes in this poem to her friend in Brazil that the water in her Cambridge apartment is too hot—so hot, in fact, that it has burnt her hand. Likewise, other features generally understood to provide comfort (consonance) only hurt her, or make her ill, such is her homesickness for the house she had only started to inhabit in Ouro Preto when she had to leave it in 1974:

A água está tão quente  
 que eu já queimei a mão.  
 Todas as luzes funcionam.  
 A cama está molle; os travesseiros  
 me dão asma.

This is clearly an inversion of values, a dislocation of consonance from a central to a peripheral, negative position. This is, clearly then, a move which, instead of conveying a resolution into the consonance of a return to a cultural origin, highlights precisely a further, unfolding displacement, after a full 5 years of living in the Boston area—indeed “another island / that doesn't look like one, but who decides?” It is only throughout the rest of the poem that Bishop feigns the resolution of her intercultural displacements into a homogeneous identity with Brazil:

Esta noite há alguma coisa  
 chamado “um misturador.”  
 Estudantes, machos e fêmeas,  
 estão misturando, misturando,  
 nas salas grandes e mortas.

Da orchestra,  
 só ouço  
*tump—tump—brrrump...*  
 muitas vezes, então  
 dois *tumps* finais.

Re-lendo sua carta,  
 ficou in-misturadamente

a sua

E.

Contrasting with the cultural oneness emotionally vowed in her signature is the rationally-settled, predetermined gathering of both men and women at a dance party taking place nearby. It should be noted that, just as in her Brazilian poems in English, in this poem too Bishop reproduces cultural stereotypes through those very “literary interpretations” which, as we have seen, she only apparently dissolves in “Santarém”: “life/death, right/wrong, female/male.” Here, she adds another received dichotomy: emotional/rational, assigning the first term positively to “the [Brazilian] part of her psyche”.

Bishop thus refers to this “mixer” as a “dead” environment—perhaps like that of a closed theory or identity which, applied to an open text, “. . . mak[es] poetry monstrous or

boring and . . . proceed[s] to talk the very life out of it” (“It all Depends” 267). In the context of the poem’s intercultural comparisons, this reassessment of her U.S. environment serves for Bishop to estrange herself performatively from U.S. culture after her move back, thus attenuating her loss both of Brazil and of an Anglo-American perspective which no longer prevails.<sup>122</sup> Showing up also in her personal correspondence in Portuguese, this unfolding estrangement contradicts widespread views that presume a resolution of Bishop’s cultural uprootedness by reading her ‘return’ to the U.S. as a ‘re-patriation,’ or a return to consonance—because it articulates Bishop’s *cultural uprootedness from the U.S.* as well.<sup>123</sup> Nor is it possible to read into this new estrangement as a successful resolution into a consonant oneness with Brazil: obviously, Bishop’s proclaimed oneness is merely wishful, once her identification with Brazil relies on a (negative) identification with the U.S. Furthermore, this performative wish is merely temporary, since Bishop produced a score of equally negative assessments of, and estrangements from, Brazilian culture as well, both in her poems and in her letters in English.

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<sup>122</sup> Bishop’s loss not only of Brazil but also of the U.S., precisely upon moving back, is expressed both directly and indirectly in her letters. Back in San Francisco and Cambridge after years away, Bishop wrote in Portuguese to her friend Linda Nemer that she no longer liked the U.S.; she also wrote, perhaps metaphorically, that she was “always lost these days, having to stop on the corners to look at [her] maps of Cambridge and Harvard” (Oct 11 1970; Sept 1 1970, Box 36, Vassar).

<sup>123</sup> The conventional view that Bishop returned to her “home” in the U.S. after Lota’s death because she had no relationship of her own with Brazil (after 15-20 years of residency there) is wrong in portraying that “return” as a recovery of her cultural roots, as if in a natural identification with an essential self through cultural origins (see at least Costello 1991; Goldensohn 1992; and Millier 1993). Bishop’s correspondence shows that among the major reasons she left Brazil was the accessibility the U.S. afforded her of immediate sources of income needed in order to pay Lota’s hospital bills. Moreover, it shows that she tried but could not live in her house in Ouro Preto because she finally learned that the relationship she had with the people of the place was more important than she had ever cared to realize. It took her long years to acknowledge that Ouro Preto was no longer liveable for her once her friendly but distant relationship with the people there fell prey to the hostility they felt from the emotionally unstable partner with whom she attempted to live in Brazil years after Lota’s death.

The deferral of cultural identity is even more intensified in this poem when read against a letter Bishop wrote only five months later, back in Ouro Preto, to her same friend in Belo Horizonte. She mentions “mixer” parties again, but this time she says that she *prefers* them. Though apparently trivial, this contradiction shatters in no time precisely the yardstick of those understated values that Bishop had relied on to define a positive Brazilian perspective for herself. Obviously, then, it is doubtful that she could ever have identified herself “un-mixedly” with the Brazilian perspective personified in the recipient of her earlier letter. Revising its apparent conclusiveness, her later statement opens up a faultline that leads us to acknowledge unrealized meanings that might either bring the contradiction to a resolution or expand perception of intercultural conflict altogether.

One tentative resolution can be imagined in the subtle distinction Bishop makes in both her statements: first, she calls the party “‘um misturador’,” (a mixer), that is, a party pre-arranged to mix both sexes. Next, Bishop says that she prefers “festas . . . um pouco mais mexidas” (parties that are a little more mixed, or stirred), which may lead us to conclude that the parties she prefers are those not pre-determined to be attended by either sex, or else by either a homosexual or a heterosexual identity, and, therefore, that eventually become mixed because of their unpredictable attendance:

Sesta eu convidei as 4 mulheres para almoço... outra vez, não muito interessante—e ontem eu fui para almoçar ai—a casinha perto—Ninita há cocido (?) assado? Mais um pato... MUITAS mulheres. É verdade que eu gosto muito de você, e você é mulher, sem duvida—mas eu prefiro as festas um pouco mais mexidas...” (To Linda, from Ouro Preto, Feb 22 1971, Vassar)

Quite understandably, Bishop’s later statement of preference is linked to the presence of a male acquaintance who may have felt awkward at a party where he was the only man. What Bishop calls attention to in her letter, however, is not the fact that her acquaintance was a

man, but that he was an “American”. She stresses this bluntly: “Americano. Perdido. Coitado.”<sup>124</sup> Thus picturing him as being culturally displaced (unlike herself, it should be noted), Bishop’s letter seems to suggest that he must have expected pre-set arrangements for the party, and that his expectations were frustrated. In this light, her preference for parties that are “a little more mixed” is actually unresolvable; it is, rather, a contradictory alignment with the expectation of some degree of pre-arrangement that would correspond to the “American mindframe” which, as we have seen from her poem in Portuguese, Bishop considered stiff, inhuman, or lifeless (“*não aparecem humanos*”) from the perspective of what she constructs as her Brazilian poetic persona.

Clearly, then, Bishop’s poetic voices do not converge into one that is either “unmixedly” Brazilian, or even “completely American.” While her overlapping poetic identities might be understood to perform a pragmatic, even solipsistic oscillation according to her purposes and interests at each given moment, this understanding fails simply because they also clash when read against each other.

What these contradictions show is that Bishop’s poetic personas are constructed so as to defer each other consistently. Instead of achieving the consonance of an absolute view by which she might have “see[n] all sides” to intercultural experience, or by which she might have seen Brazil “~~with more three dimensionally~~ than a travel or tourist would have seen it, or the Brazilians themselves”,<sup>125</sup> and instead of ever arriving at a removed state of “necessary elimination, sequestration, concentration” (letter to Ilse and Kit Barker, Oct 14 1963, Princeton) required for poetry, Bishop required—and was required by—her poetic persona to realize, ultimately, that meanings cannot be assimilated into any totalizing perception of order, since they are unsettled constantly by their different uses over time.

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<sup>124</sup> In English, “American. Lost. Poor guy.”

<sup>125</sup> Quoted from Bishop’s introductory note to an unfinished prose book, the title of which she drafted significantly as *Brazil-Brasil*.

Caught between “get[ting] away” from and confronting dissonant reality, Bishop sought for metaphors of conceptual disruption, as in the following passages:

I want to get away badly these days—I feel like those moments I’ve {just} been watching on the beach when two waves going at angles to each other meet and an immense confusion of helpless ripples and foam and upheavings (*sic*) result . . . (to Kit and Ilse Barker, May 2 1963, Princeton);

Oh God—poor Brazil—my feelings are so mixed. I read in an Eng. Review of Fellini’s “8½” that it was about someone—artist—who “was stuck because he was feeling too many things at once”—and realized that describes my state of the last two years exactly. The necessary elimination, sequestration, concentration, etc. have been harder & harder. (to Kit and Ilse Barker, Oct 14 1963, Princeton)

These excerpts demonstrate that Bishop’s cultural (dis)identifications, though nomadic, did not glide smoothly, linearly, or un-violently from one subject position to another, as if conveniently shouldering her around them. Quite on the contrary, they consistently refused the ideal wholeness of cultural identity which Bishop enacted. This refusal, while suggesting a bleak outlook on the experience of culture shock and dislocation, actually enhanced her sensitivity to the unrealized meanings that open up when self-protection has been severed. This is pretty much what Bishop articulates in her notebooks, when, in the struggle to overcome her friend Margaret Miller’s loss of an arm in a car accident, she wrote:

The arm lay outstretched in the soft brown grass at the side of the road and spoke quietly to itself. At first all it could think of was the possibility of being quickly reunited to its body, without any more time elapsing than was absolutely necessary.

“Oh, my poor body! Oh my poor body! I cannot bear to give you up.  
Quick! Quick!

Then it fell silent while a series of ideas that had never occurred to it  
before rapidly swept over it. (qtd. in Millier 1993: 129-30)

This passage articulates a search for expanding perception and signification rather than controlling or merely confounding meanings.

*Brazil-Brasil*, her tentative title for an unfinished prose book, provides another example of this quest for a dissonant sensibility. The title highlights a dynamics of ongoing conceptualization, triggered by the disruptive shift between the different spellings to the country's name in English and Portuguese. Bishop's title clashes together two signifiers and with them the cultural frameworks that back them up. These irreconcilable mindsets spark an ongoing tension and deferral between the received conceptions they represent regarding the country as well as her dissonant relationship with it. Her mistaken spellings are not merely accidental, therefore, in these sentences: “Everything is fine here—except that the Brazilian money is slipping so fast it's terrifying” (to Aunt Grace, from Petrópolis, May 20, 1958, Box Box 25, Vassar); “vou levar um pouco dinheiro brasileiro comigo para usar na volta” (to Linda Nemer, prob. from Ouro Preto, Sept 23 1970, Box 36, Vassar).

This investment in dissonant frameworks of meaning, thus denaturalizing received cultural perspectives, is also explored in Bishop's critique of gendered discourse, which is the subject of the following section.

## **6.2. BISHOP'S CRITIQUE OF GENDERED DISCOURSE**

In her 1977 letter to Joan Keefe, Bishop voiced her reservations against allowing her work to be defined under the restrictive category of “literature by women.” In that letter, she conditioned the inclusion of her writings in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* to the publication of her statement as follows: “Undoubtedly gender does play an important part



in the making of any art, but art is art, and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc., into two sexes is to emphasize values in them that are not art” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 1985: 1739). By quoting this statement, I do not mean to bind my argument (that Bishop’s texts criticize reductive analyses of gendered discourse) to the writer’s own terms of authorial intentionality—if only because, as is precisely the point of this dissertation, authorial intentionality is recurrently undercut by her dissonant poetics.

My point is that Bishop’s own intercultural discourse evokes gender criticism of her texts, when she states that for her, “Brazil is *she*” (Fragments, Vassar)—an equation that, substituting “Brazil” for “Nature,” opens the poem “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” In this regard, even Barbara Page—whose aim in her excellent discussion of Bishop as a gendered subject is to argue that she “struggled to find in her experience of discontinuities and marginality a valuable principle of composition”—cannot secure for the poet “a place corresponding to her own disposition for the margins” (1993: 107) of masculinist universals. While I follow Page’s view that such a search for a marginal location indeed motivated Bishop’s transit and poetics intensely, I think that this search must also be understood as one for consonance (a “corresponding” place), and that it fails. Bishop’s anxiety to base herself at the geographical margins of U.S. culture disturbs rather than confirms what Page regards as Bishop’s success in mapping herself on the periphery so as to value the margin as a positive pole. By inverting the signs of what is still the logocentric center/margin dichotomy, the peripheral location Bishop sought for herself by taking up residency in Key West and Brazil does not suffice to safeguard for her a dissonant place. Merely antithetical, such a place which “correspond[s] to her own disposition for the margins” (107) only confirms the logic of consonance. Not that such a logic might cease to operate, but it may be recognized for what it is: a rhetoric of centrality and humanization, the acknowledgment of which is what Bishop’s dissonant poetics presses for.

In this light, Bishop's "female" location in Brazil is disturbed instead by the fact that there is no monolithic position for her. Deriving tautologically from the self-produced centrality of her gaze over the other,<sup>126</sup> the authority of such a location necessarily implicates her own imperialist eye, which, not by accident, renders her narrators conspicuously male (the poems I have in mind are "Brazil, January 1, 1502" and "Crusoe in England"). In other words, while Bishop's seemingly idyllic, exotic location may place her in the periphery from the perspective of the center, it also places her at the imperialist center in the perspective of the margin. Thus, Page herself becomes inconspicuously entangled in the web of unwittingly reaffirming Bishop also as the stereotypical imperial hero and conqueror when she adds that "[at Key West, for example, Bishop] exercised her *spirit of adventure* and her *powers of observation*, while practicing the 'vagrancy' and evasions that gave room to her ambition as a woman poet" (107, emphasis added).

This geographical mapping of the margins, naturalized as a passive female gender, may give Bishop ample room for her ambition as a woman poet, but it reduces the margins—and the female gender therein reinscribed—even further into remoteness and fixity. Key West and Brazil are thus assumed to be explored, observed, and covered by an active female gender represented, needless to say, by the travel writer abroad. This is precisely the

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<sup>126</sup> Bishop remarked in an interview:

By the way, I lived in Mexico for a time twenty years ago and I knew Pablo Neruda there. I think I was influenced to some extent by him (as in my "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore", but he is still a rather "advanced" poet, compared with other South American poets. (Brown 1966: 5)

This remark shows Bishop's pretension of judging poetry in a language she never learned well enough, as her writings show, despite years of living in the country and "making a good thing out of it, obviously!" (qtd. from her above-mentioned letter of Oct. 28 1963, referring to an acquaintance who made a good living off Brazil while compulsively complaining about it). Although she avoided speaking and writing in Portuguese perhaps out of sheer caution and perfectionism, her letters show that she wrote Portuguese as she spoke it, interestingly with the idiosyncrasies of the illiterate servants she learned it from, and that she procrastinated studying or even reading it.

colonialist trope at the core of “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” readings of which have rendered exclusive its implicit male speaker and thus reduced to a binary paradigm the hierarchical ideologies encapsulated in the poem. Conflating colonialist and sexist discourses, the poem exposes the ideological quotations between the two: while Bishop seems to acknowledge that her narrator’s view of the foreign land is just as oppressive as that of the imperialist conquistadors, she also implicates herself and the reader in the historical trope of the construction of the speaker’s gender as male.

Indeed, Bishop displays and thus undermines the assumption (an artifice, like the framed “tapestry” in the poem) by which “Nature” (the jungle, the other culture) is, itself, naturalized as “she” (with its “women . . . retreating behind it”). This makes the gender of the implicit “we” in the lines “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs” become ambivalent within what is thus displayed as the arbitrary frame of its colonial discourse (culture/nature, male/female). The reader is now implicated in questioning whether “our” eyes are not possibly, also, the eyes of Bishop’s contemporary writers and readers who are still set out to genderize nature as female, and the other as nature—so that the speaker is greeted by a “she” that is merely an echoed construct, retreating as do the women by the end of the poem. In this sense, just as Bishop aligns her speaker with the men set out to rape the retreating women, the understated text also aligns her with the men and women set out to re-present them in a reductive binary dynamic. Thus the poem (just as the tapestry) conceals an understated critique (“retreating . . . behind it”) of acts of appropriation which presume its subversion of gendered hierarchy while actually evading its reproduction of the colonialist representation of Brazil as “she”. Rather than merely inverting or dismissing the hierarchical dichotomies of gendered-and-colonialist discourse (nature/culture, innocence/violence, active voice/passive silence), the ambivalence of the speaker’s gender

thus engages Bishop's poetic personas with her understated conflicts concerning her representations of Brazil.

In the pages that follow, I will focus on how dissonance between Bishop's contradictory subject-positions—constituting a “complicitous critique,” to borrow an apt term (Hutcheon 1988)—also re-conceptualizes social-conscious writing.

### 6.3. EXPANSIVE DISSONANCE IN BISHOP'S SOCIAL-CONSCIOUS POETICS

The third intervention in imperialist readings of Bishop's Brazilian corpus which this study has found to be activated by her uses of dissonance concerns her statement that she “disliked ‘social conscious’ writing”—which is how she classified her poem, “A Miracle for Breakfast”,<sup>127</sup> when she was interviewed by Brown in 1966. Notice how Bishop casually classifies and undermines her own poem while commenting on her political position at college in the 1930s:

I was always opposed to political thinking as such for writers . . . Politically, I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked “social conscious” writing. . . . The atmosphere in Vassar was left-wing; it was the popular thing. . . . But I had lived with poor people and knew something of poverty at first-hand. . . . [“A Miracle for Breakfast”], that's my depression poem. It was written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples, around 1936 or so. It was my “social conscious” poem, a poem about hunger. (8-9; 13)

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<sup>127</sup> “A Miracle for Breakfast” was written most probably in 1936, and first published in *Poetry* (July 1937): 182-4, in a period when Bishop felt pressed by the literary milieu to produce explicit “political writing” (see Roman 2001). An example of this pressure, which started in the 1930s as I mentioned earlier (quoting from Brown 1966), is that she requested her editor to publish the following apologetic statement in a preface to the volume *North & South*: “The fact that none of these poems deal directly with the war, at a time when so much war poetry is being published, will, I am afraid, leave me open to reproach” (letter to Ferris Greenslet, Jan. 1946, Harvard).

At the time of this interview, Bishop had worked on a good many poems conscious of social issues (“Squatter’s Children,” which, as I will demonstrate, resumes the project of “A Miracle for Breakfast,” had been published in Brazil in 1956, and in the U.S. in 1957; “Manuelzinho,” in the U.S. in 1956; “The Burglar of Babylon,” in 1964; and “Going to the Bakery,” started in 1960, was to be published in 1969). Think of how intriguing it is, then, for Bishop to suggest, as she does in the passage above, that “A Miracle for Breakfast” was her one and only social-conscious poem, a thing of the past, refuted and left behind by her more “progressive” work.

My view is that Bishop’s refutation of social-conscious writing can best be understood as her refusal to identify her later work with the reductive conception of “political writing as such” that she reveals in her 1966 interview. Yet, oddly enough, the poetics underlying “A Miracle for Breakfast” is not as reductive as it seems from Bishop’s blunt statement which reduces her “social conscious poem” to a “poem about hunger”. This discrepancy has led me to explore the ways in which dissonance makes the poem much more complex than Bishop cares to say.

Drawing on her interest in the *appreciation*—both aesthetic and financial—of her Brazilian writings in the U.S., I will be considering Bishop’s statement as a move, in the guise of criticizing her own early poem, to protect her Brazilian corpus from the reductive discourses within which she found her U.S. audience to be accustomed to reading travel writings on poverty and social injustice.<sup>128</sup> Thus understood, Bishop’s resistance to the label of social-conscious writing, as she knew it, is a “complicitous critique” of imperialism. Rather than a denial of the politics in her texts, or a refusal to work out an ethical poetics dealing with social issues, it signals an urge, from within the U.S. literary establishment

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<sup>128</sup> Bishop wrote in a letter that “the U.S.A. really does regard Latin countries as social inferiors, I think—or children, or ALL crooks, or something...” (to Joe, from Petropolis, Aug 19 1962, Box 37, Vassar); on the American Peace Corps workers, she remarked, “I think the whole idea is awfully condescending of us” (to

represented by Bishop in Brazil, to move social-conscious writing away from the imperialist presumption that the poet can speak from a condescending or prescriptive position, a position supposedly outside and above the discourses of social injustice.

### **6.3.1. The context of Bishop's Resistance to Social-Conscious Writing**

The question of how Bishop's Brazilian texts operate in a field of tension with the imperialist ambitions of social-conscious poetry is one that brings any facile answer to a quandary. The difficulty one comes across in attempting to answer it has to do with the very context that framed Bishop's early conception of political writing, and with its implicit contradictions—often elided by the anxiety to define a stable politics for Bishop.

The main difficulty I refer to is the fact that, as became evident for Bishop as early as the 1930s, the movement of what was called “revolutionary,” “social conscious” poetry had among its core motivations a self-aggrandizing future for those poets embracing a progressive ideology in their politics—i.e., assuming a transcendent truth-value encoded in its new forms and subject matter, and thus a victorious future over a primitive past. Malcolm Cowley, for example, pointed out the high demand for such poetry at the first American Writers' Congress when he said that, as M. L. Rosenthal puts it, “‘the movement’ would not bring a writer personal salvation or make him a political leader” but “it could give him an audience” and “a feeling of belonging to a rising rather than a dying culture” (1951: 298).

In her generation, Bishop inherited from Wallace Stevens the stigma of being apolitical, a stigma brought upon by such critics as Edwin Rolfe and Stanley Burnshaw. With such an example before her from her formative years, Bishop was too skeptical to join the kind of politics—a party politics, in her early career years, an identity politics later—that she was charged with lacking throughout her life. Apologizing to editors for not writing “poems [that] deal directly with war . . . for chief reason [being] simply that I work very slowly” (to

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Aunt Grace, from Rio, June 17 1965, Box 25, Vassar). My standpoint concerning Bishop's protection of her

Houghton Mifflin's editor, Jan 1946, Harvard) lest she might not get published again, or not so soon, Bishop plunged into bouts of nonproductivity, or so she felt. For Bishop, such movements as Rolfe's (later the leftist New York poets' movement), that idealize freedom and celebrate the victory of the consensus they oblige on dissenting conceptions of freedom, may be political, but their self-righteousness cannot be ethical. Their self-exempting political stance assumes that poetry is politicized not by the fact that there is no unmediated, disinterested construction of meaning to be questioned, but rather by what is taken for granted as its moral coherence: the degree to which it "shows the way" (as we have seen in "Pink Dog") to a unified, humanistic and humanitarian voice supposedly exempt from conflict and crisis. By contrast, the poetry she and others wrote, poetry that sets out to problematize its own political rhetorics, is not only political but also seeks an ethics—whether it deals with themes that are explicitly associated with politics and ethics or not. Bishop would reject the morally attractive militancy of "political thinking as such" in her writings not to evade her own politics by withdrawing imaginarily into some kind of neutral ground, but because she was aware of the *tensions* between political ideals and practice. What she sought, in sum, was a dynamic *poetics* that might engage those tensions.

That Bishop was disturbed by the controlling ideology of consonance embedded in mainstream political writings is indicated in her letter to Moore in which she contrasts herself as "a 'Radical'" against militants whose writings she considers "superficial" in their self-certainty, bearing "short-sighted and, I think, ignorant, views" (May 1 1938, Rosenbach). Most probably, then, she disliked her early social-conscious poem because, as Harrison puts it, it "does have its moralistic element, heavy-handed at times," due to the "sense of

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Brazilian writings derives from her statement quoted in section 4.2.1. (from Goldensohn 1992: 17).

assignment” it took on to counter what Bishop (and Moore) believed to be her lack of commitment to a political stance (see Harrison 1993: 74-106).<sup>129</sup>

It is remarkable, however, that the poem which Bishop shuns into her past during her interview with Brown is precisely one that resists the morally prescriptive statements that would conventionally define it as “political”. Rather than evading a social-conscious perspective (as Bishop does in Brown’s 1966 interview), the poem complicates it. It is also noteworthy that this is precisely the poem for which Bishop had asserted her own poetics in contrast to Moore’s. Indeed, what Harrison calls a “break” from Moore, which she attributes to Bishop’s self-assertive letter over “Roosters”,<sup>130</sup> in my view actually begins nearly four years earlier, in a letter discussing “A Miracle for Breakfast.” Bishop’s withdrawal from Moore’s mentorship through this poem, and therefore its importance to a study of her conflicted construction of a poetic persona, is signaled in this earlier letter to Marianne Moore, though on a more timid tone:

The “crumb” and “sun” is of course its greatest fault. It seems to me that there are two ways possible for a sestina—one is to use unusual words as terminations, in which case they would have to be used differently as often as possible—as you say, “change of scale.” That would make a very highly *seasoned* (*sic*) kind of poem. And the other way is to use as colorless words as possible—like Sydney, so that it becomes less of a trick and more of a natural theme and variations. I guess I have tried to do both at once. It is probably just an excuse, but sometimes I think about certain things that without one particular fault they would be without the means of existence. I feel a little that way about “sun” and “crumb!” (Jan. 5 1937, Rosenbach)

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<sup>129</sup> See Bishop’s letter of May 1 1938 to Marianne Moore (Rosenbach).

<sup>130</sup> See Bishop’s letter of Oct. 17 1940 to Marianne Moore (Rosenbach).



“A Miracle for Breakfast” thus carries on the project which had incited Bishop’s awareness of a point of rupture in her poetics in relation to Moore’s. This project stimulated her aesthetic and political self-assertion against her friend’s “corrections” of her writings, as well as from the products of “so nice, so humorless, so right, so boring” social-conscious poetry of her time.<sup>131</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, it signals her quest for a dissonant juxtaposition: to break away from perfection and consonance, and, instead of choosing between the “two ways possible for a sestina,” trying “to do both at once”.

Although it is the rhyme between “crumb” and “sun” which Bishop and Moore discuss in their correspondence, it is, rather, the imaginative metamorphosis from “crumb” to “mansion” which is eventually discussed in the poem, as we shall see. Now, in “Squatter’s Children,” the metamorphosis under discussion is from “rooms of falling rain” to “mansions,” signaling a very close intertextuality between both poems and, therefore, the impact exerted by Bishop’s first efforts at social-conscious poetry on her later writings, despite (and because of) her outspoken “dislike” of the genre.

#### 6.4. FROM “A MIRACLE FOR BREAKFAST” TO “SQUATTER’S CHILDREN”

Rather than saying that the native has already spoken because the dominant hegemonic discourse is split/hybrid/different from itself, and rather than restoring her to her ‘authentic’ context, we should argue that it is the native’s silence which is the most important clue to her displacement. That silence is at once the *evidence* of imperialist oppression (the naked body, the defiled image) and what, in the absence of the original witness to that oppression, must act in its place by *performing* or *feigning* as the pre-imperialist gaze.

Rey Chow, “Where Have All the Natives Gone?”

In the context of Bishop’s adamant dislike for social-conscious poetry, it is surprising, even fascinating, that she resumed work on that “particular fault” of “A Miracle for Breakfast”—the rhetorical “trick” of “change of scale”—when she wrote “Squatter’s Children” twenty years later. Bishop’s first published experiment with writing complexity into a poetic

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<sup>131</sup> This phrase was found among Bishop’s unfinished poetry review notes for *The New Yorker*, July 1970 (see Harrison 30).

perception of social conflict in Brazil, this poem elaborates on dislocation by decentering the speaker's perspective, and, ultimately, implicating her representation in the scene of poverty.

Despite its importance, therefore, in Bishop's poetic development, "Squatter's Children" has received scarce attention from scholarship, rarely if ever being mentioned at all even in the most thorough studies of her corpus. My purpose in the pages that follow is to show how this poem resumes not only the dissonant poetics of its forebear ("A Miracle for Breakfast") but also, by extension, the project that Bishop had started years before—namely, the project of reconceptualizing social-conscious poetry through "particular fault[s]" which disable consonance and expose the speaker's rhetorical strategies.

#### 6.4.1. Mapping the Other: Between Remoteness and Nearness

"Squatter's Children" begins by describing a girl and boy playing in the distance, out on an open slope near their house.

On the unbreathing sides of hills  
they play, a specklike girl and boy,  
alone, but near a specklike house.  
The sun's suspended eye  
blinks casually, and then they wade  
gigantic waves of light and shade.  
A dancing yellow spot, a pup,  
attends them. Clouds are piling up;  
  
a storm piles up behind the house.

At first, these "specklike" shapes in the distance may seem to be merely picturesque ornaments of an otherwise homogeneous landscape, but increasingly, they unsettle the uniformity of what has been arbitrarily construed as the consonant, undisturbed, "unbreathing

sides of hills.” Increasingly, the children’s playful movement, however “specklike,” humanizes the landscape, and disables the monolithic view of a foreign reality that is presumed to be lifeless for its relative remoteness—i.e., its distance from the observer’s eye.

This representation of exoticism, constructing the remoteness of what one does not see, or understand, as essentially ornamental, anomalous, evil, or threatening, is a self-centralizing strategy of the speaker’s imperialist discourse. Anxious to evade unknown meanings, she had already from the first stanza of the poem reduced to specks what lay out of control, out of the scope or reach of her view. The specklike portrayal of the children is thus a metaphor of the reductionism implicit in all representation, revealing the necessary limitation of the speaker’s perspective: the fact that the children are *like* specks signals the impossibility of seeing them in their real size and in their real life, which cannot be represented. Thus, what Bishop’s metaphor reveals is the children’s difference from or *unlikeness* rather than *likeness* with “specks”. Breaking the conventional use of the word (“like” obviously indicates correspondence), the poem opens its form to a meaning of non-correspondence instead. This rupture from metaphor therefore encapsulates Bishop’s dissonant poetics, since it dislodges ideological assumptions from her own discourse, connected with its seemingly unrelated meanings. This acknowledgment is what the descriptive narrator must by all means evade, by reasserting the clarity of view and order sought by her description.

She tries to reassert description by building up consensus, *eliciting readerly response to the danger of the children’s remaining in the distance* (I will come back to this move by which Bishop humanizes an implicit call for the children to come in). Thus, their remoteness not only constructs by polarity the centrality of the speaker’s position, but also elicits *the reader’s* anxiety to bring the children into that centrality as well. In this sense, the speaker relies on a bond with a humanist and humanitarian reader to make her self-centralizing discourse seem natural and self-evident. This is the mission that she takes on (and eventually

frustrates), in attempting (yet failing) to order the dissonant scene by re-asserting its need for being controlled under the poet's absolute, enlightened consciousness. In other words, implicit in the speaker's description is her anxiety to assert a moral position detached from, and therefore presumably able to map, a dissonant reality that she must construct as remote, morally dissociated from her own.

Ironically, although the children are represented reductively, as specks, their movements nevertheless require an expansion of the speaker's perception to view them. Increasingly, their "specklike" image becomes magnified until, suddenly, the narrator seems to have become omniscient, as she sees the children close up:

a storm piles up behind the house.

the children play at digging holes.

The ground is hard; they try to use

one of their father's tools,

a mattock with a broken haft

the two of them can scarcely lift.

This discrepancy, by which the children are simultaneously too far away to be seen ("specklike") yet so close that they can be described omnisciently ("[t]he ground is hard; they try to use / one of their father's tools, / a mattock with a broken haft / the two of them can hardly lift"), creates an ongoing dislocation in the point of view.<sup>132</sup> It is as if perspectives shift in the acknowledgment of their insufficiency: neither distance nor nearness can gain any

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<sup>132</sup> See Richard Mullen's excellent discussion of the dream-like effects of Bishop's dislocations as a legacy from surrealism, "sabotag[ing] rational connections by allowing for the haphazard intrusion of surprise relationships" (1982: 63). Mullen rightly argues, however, that unlike surrealism, Bishop's poetics of dislocation is an associative rather than a dissociative procedure; thus, "Bishop rejects the shapeless poetics accompanying the derangement of consciousness, and she enhances the mysterious oddity of things by her unique prowess for ingenious association" (64). This argument converges with my perspective on Bishop's poetics of dissonance as an expansive perception of the circulation rather than antithesis of centrality.

understanding of what our eyes see arbitrarily. I will note in the pages that follow how this disorientation is also devised in “A Miracle for Breakfast,” where the observer, presumably among the crowd of the physically hungry, shifts to the same privileged position which the poem criticizes, thus implicating the speaker in her own self-exempting discourse.

#### **6.4.2. The First Strategy of Self-Centrality (Consonance): The Poet as Mirror of Nature**

Both “A Miracle for Breakfast” and “Squatter’s Children” expose and demystify the naturalizing rhetoric of consonance by disallowing a stable perspective. They foreground the fact that they are framed in such a way that all positive representation—of hope, order, abundance, shelter, harmony—is aligned with the revelatory, epiphanic presence of the sun, in a tautological construction of organic order. In the case of the earlier poem, the sunrise is expected to reveal a miracle—the multiplication of bread (crumbs)—, to be performed by a man up on his balcony, overlooking the awaiting, hungry crowd. Here is the beginning of the earlier poem:

At six o’clock we were waiting for coffee,  
 waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb  
 that was going to be served from a certain balcony,  
 —like kings of old, or like a miracle.

In the case of the later poem, the absence of the sun is naturalized as the antithesis to the order of consonance. Figuring as a suspended revelation of light and safety, the absence of the sun brings about “gigantic waves of light and shade” and “clouds . . . piling up;” indeed, “a storm piles up” (and grows to be indicative of social chaos by the last stanza).

While accrediting the poet with the making of a consonant reality, this rhetoric of organic order also exempts her conveniently from engaging the disorder and confusion she projects onto the children, their mother, and their land. Thus, as misfortune, danger, and social injustice are made visible, the speaker unproblematizes such conflicts by naturalizing

them. The alignment of the scene with the sun's blinking eye is for sure a simplistic correspondence (a metaphor of the logic of consonance/antithetical dissonance) which the poem increasingly, and sarcastically, mocks.

Bishop's mocking correspondence of the sun with the consonance, order, and harmony interrupted only temporarily by an antithetically dissonant, "casually-blink[ing]," "suspended eye" offers a critique not only of the social injustice that will indeed become visible once the shade allows for a more nuanced vision of detail and particularity, but also, and more immediately, of the poet's arbitrary making of reality, legitimized by an ideology of consonance that works to link nature (the sun) with representation (the poet). Bishop thus flaunts the constructedness of her own speaker's representation, naturalized and self-empowered by its correspondence with organic orders, changes, and cycles.

This is the same display of constructedness that Bishop had exposed in "A Miracle for Breakfast". As we have seen, the earlier poem had aligned the figure of authority ("the man on the balcony") with the sunrise, so as to both naturalize and legitimize the privilege of representation, in a resolution into consonance which fails nevertheless:

He stood for a minute alone on the balcony  
 looking over our heads toward the river.  
 .....  
 .....  
 his head, so to speak, in the clouds—along with the sun.

Was the man crazy? What under the sun  
 was he trying to do, up there on his balcony!  
 Each man received one rather hard crumb,  
 which some flicked scornfully into the river,

and, in a cup, one drop of the coffee.

Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle.

#### 6.4.3. The Gendered Economy of Naturalized Consonance

The rhetoric of natural order—whereby harmony ensues from the apparition of the sun, and chaos, from its absence in the shade and storm—portrays the children’s lack of shelter as pertaining to a chaotic economy antithetical to the poet’s. Whereas her privileged condition is legitimized by a naturalized order, their homelessness is associated with their own “Mother’s voice, ugly as sin”.

This representation of the mother as an antithesis to the sun, however, is problematic in the poem. Having first elicited the reader’s consensus around the danger of the children remaining in the impending storm, now the descriptive narrator must account for the contradiction by which the mother’s call for the children to come in is “ugly as sin.” She does this by aligning her call with past, *retarded* meanings—at once disqualifying the past and reducing present signification to tropes of projected repetition (signaled below by added emphasis):

But to their little, soluble,  
unwarrantable ark,  
apparently the rain’s *reply*  
consists of *echolalia*,  
and Mother’s voice, ugly as sin,  
*keeps* calling them to come in.

By now, antithesis has built up gender difference in a clearly misogynistic structure. In the absence of the traditionally male authorial self with whom to identify the poetic persona as reifying what is supposed to be an original harmony, and in the absence of the father to fulfill the supplementary role of providing (harmony) for the family, neither nature nor culture offer

protection any longer. Instead, both nature and culture become blurred in the poem—and this blurring is gendered female. As Mother Nature, she is inept, sterile, lifeless (“unbreathing sides of hills”); as culture, she is the one who has disrupted natural correspondences, and is thus “ugly” (antithetically dissonant). This overlapping of what are supposed to be separate realms (female/male, culture/nature), this mutual disruption of borders thus associated with Kristeva’s notion of the *abject* (a visceral fusion with the sphere of the mother which must be violently outcast in order to protect the subject’s original self), genderizes as female not only the other culture but also the grotesque itself, xenophobically and misogynistically linking the two. The mother is thus depicted as being corrupt, “like sin”. In retrospect, it is the blurring of the boundary between nature and culture which en-genders danger, as unauthorized culture/untamed nature produces cultural havoc: unattended, the children play with one of their absent father’s tools.

In retrospect, playing is associated with a dehumanizing unconsciousness rather than with livelihood and humanization. The danger produced by untamed nature is a colonialist trope justifying the enforcement of order into the describer’s perspective, by confirming the native’s ineptitude to cultivation (justifying appropriation of land and cultures by the colonizer.) Bishop draws precisely on this stereotype framework of interpretation when she portrays the children looking down to the ground when they should be looking up to the sky. Because they cannot see the clouds “behind the house,” the children look down to the hard ground instead, trying to dig holes into it. When the broken haft of the tool falls, a dissonant sound follows—the children’s laughter is monstrous when sparked by the dangerous usage of the tool, and their laughter loses its contours to the scary sound of thunder:

a storm piles up behind the house.

The children play at digging holes.

The ground is hard; they try to use



one of their father's tools,  
 a mattock with a broken haft  
 the two of them can scarcely lift.  
 It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads  
 effulgence in the thunderheads,

By juxtaposing the children's laughter with the thunder of the storm, the storm is built up as the product of the dangerous *misuse* by children of their father's *idle* working tool. Bishop's imperialist poetic persona thus construes the storm as the natural outcome of a subversion of economic order. "Striking the sky," as Bishop wrote in a manuscript version of the poem (Vassar), the tool produces antithetical dissonance—the aural violence which disrupts the spatial *appreciation* (in both the aesthetic and financial senses) of the landscape.

#### 6.4.4. Aural Breakthroughs in the Landscape

We have seen in chapter 5 that Bishop's spatial configurations become vulnerable to aural breakthroughs of dissonance, which repeatedly echo her mother's scream of madness. "Squatter's Children" adds an important textual moment to this pattern, because it juxtaposes more clearly the constructed correspondence between discourses of socioeconomic backwardness and psychic derangement. Whereas in "The Armadillo" and "Pink Dog" the illness which disturbs consonance is physical (though "Pink Dog" carries a pun by which the word "madness" refers ambivalently to mental disease and to the physical disease of rabies), in "Squatter's Children" it is explicitly psychic:

weak flashes of inquiry  
 direct as is the puppy's bark.  
 but to their little, soluble,  
 unwarrantable ark,  
 apparently the rain's reply

consists of echolalia,  
and Mother's voice, ugly as sin,  
keeps calling to them to come in.

A psychiatric term (from the Greek *echo*, as sound, or noise, and *laleein*, as babble), “echolalia” (the senseless repetition of sounds) can be understood as conflating the “rain’s reply” from the sky not only with the children’s “Mother’s voice, ugly as sin,” but also with the grievous, traumatic and uncanny memory that Bishop once again retrieves of her own mother’s scream (see chapter 5 for a discussion of the scream in the context of “The Armadillo” and “In the Village”). Moreover, whereas in “In the Village” the “clang” of Nat’s properly-used tool prevents the child from hearing her mother’s mad scream, in this poem the “clang” of the misused tool is precisely what prefigures echolalia and, immediately, in the line that follows, “Mother’s voice, ugly as sin.”

The mother’s scream overwhelms the poem with antithetical dissonance: it confirms, by polarity, the normality of a presumably detached, inoculated, sane, ‘free self’: the sun, or the poet. This dichotomy is reconfigured, however. We have seen that the poem’s moral discourse builds up readerly response to the danger of the children remaining in the distance. Therefore, it conflates the mother’s scream precisely with the presumably consonant voice of the speaker, aligned in turn with that of the *reader*, who is interpellated to urge, *alongside the mother*, for the children “to come in”. Dissonance—in both mothers’ voices—is thus imbricated in the reader’s site of consonance, and so, can no longer be unproblematically naturalized as antithetical. Dissonance expands at this moment, but it is still ambivalent, barely suppressed by a powerful xenophobic representation that recovers the distance between the reader and the foreign woman (the mother, the other in the poem, the foreign culture) by associating her call with a mental disease in a context which, as we have seen in “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” juxtaposes misogynistic and colonialist discourses.

#### 6.4.5. The Disruption of Rhetorical Alignments between Form and Content

Afflicted by a reality that insists on remaining dissonant, the imperialist persona evades her vulnerability to the storm and to what now emerges as the potential dissonance of her own position—a position which, figured as that of the sun, was presumed to be one of consonance, but which now conspicuously fails to master chaos. In the imperialist anxiety to retain her position of mastery, the threatened narrator posits her humanist reassurance of lawfulness and safety against what she depicts as the anti-aesthetic, primitive carelessness of an alien, a woman whose children have been abandoned to dangerous, bad weather. Implicit in the contrast between self and other is the speaker's pretense safety from the shifting weather and impending storm, as if she were in control, mastering contingent realities into consonance—the poet, mastering the poem. Ironically, however, even her naturalized description finds itself entangled in the limitations and effects of its own changing textual perspectives, just as the children are vulnerable to the changing conditions of the weather.

Indeed, weather or climate (in Greek, *klimata*) indicates a reality in constant change, according to the shifts in exposure or position of the subject in situations that are not uniform, controllable, or possible ever to grasp into a totality, or into the fixity of a stable order. Climate and perspective also indicate the relationality between viewer and viewed, reader and speaker, speaker and text, which are together implicated by the conditions of discourse, so that even what appears to be highly objective description can only be biased and rhetorical instead.

Representation in the poem thus becomes inconclusive: by foregrounding the arbitrary functions ascribed to the mother's call to "come in" (first, it humanizes the bond between speaker and reader; then, it dehumanizes the mother), the poem disturbs its dominant conventions. Representation thus shifts from that of a consonant/antithetically dissonant nature to its very demystification. Now, what is highlighted is the distance rather than the

correspondence between the poem's naturalizing conventions and its arbitrary meanings. No longer able to claim a consonant alignment between form and content, the poem disables the narrator's self-legitimizing strategies, whether they appeal to organic cycles ("gigantic waves of light and shade") or to quotations from linear narratives such as those of biblical prophecy and fulfillment ("ark"; "mansions"), or those of epiphanic revelations and resolutions ("you stand among / the mansions you may choose / out of a bigger house than yours, / whose lawfulness endures"). In sum, "Squatter's Children" unsettles the legitimizing references on which poetry has traditionally relied for its authority.

#### **6.4.6. The Second Strategy of Self-Centrality: The Poet as Lamp, or "Inner Eye"**

Once the poet's voice is no longer convincing as a mirror of nature's presumed power to resolve conflict into the consonance of its own cycles, the speaker tries to resolve it into the consonance of an imaginary resolution, and thus retain for herself the poet's mythical shelter—under the sun, I should say. The imperialist narrator therefore shoots for a second strategy of self-empowerment. She interpellates the children directly, introducing an implicit first-person speaker who is thus personal rather than abstract. Indeed, she now seems to have mastered distance by addressing the children's imagination directly. No longer eliding her rhetorical clout in producing consonance, the narrator displays it openly—so that her address to the children is clearly a persuasive act by which, whether miraculously or sarcastically, the "drops of rain" become "mansions" among which they "may choose" their home:

Children, the threshold of the storm  
 has slid beneath your muddy shoes;  
 wet and beguiled, you stand among  
 the mansions you may choose  
 out of a bigger house than yours,  
 whose lawfulness endures.

Its soggy documents retain  
your rights in rooms of falling rain.

This last stanza of “Squatter’s Children” is rich in contradictions and inversions that disable enactments of resolution into consonance. In a euphoric inversion of values, the lyrical voice idealizes that “the threshold of the storm / has slid beneath [their] muddy shoes”. When this inversion is underlined by her interpellation of the children as “beguiled,” the text has created a mechanism of ambivalence that implicitly undermines the narrator’s representation of them.

By the same token, in the same breath in which Bishop suggests that the only real order remaining is that of the dissonant storm in “rooms of falling rain,” a home more real than the children’s supposedly “real” home, she also undermines this renewed pretension of a stable framework for resolution. By linking both steps seeking to centralize the speaker’s view of the children—first, the alignment of the poet’s eye with the sun; and, once this strategy fails when confronted by the poetic persona’s shifting perspectives, the alignment of the children with the natural phenomenon of the rain that subjects them—, she deconstructs her mapping of the scene, her xenophobic reprehension of the mother’s call, and, ultimately, her euphoric rhetoric which actually alienates her from the children’s “natural” place in the rain. Even the inversion performed by the second step, by which the falling rain (antithetical dissonance) becomes the positive term of the dichotomy with the sun (consonance), is thus highlighted as another self-centralizing move. In the context of the poem’s implicit critique of its own naturalized rhetoric, this shift makes it powerfully disorienting and inconclusive. By the end of the last stanza, this pattern of misdirection underlines a sarcastic reading that exposes the artificiality of closure (consonance): as if conflict could be resolved by metaphorical control, i.e., by reading the drops of rain as ideal homes (*mansions*) through the poet’s visionary eye.

As I have mentioned earlier, this strategy of disorientation is the same that flaunts and demystifies the position of privilege occupied by the oblivious man on the balcony in “A Miracle for Breakfast,” whose power of representation consists in suppressing the dissonant voice of physical hunger by pretending to resolve it symbolically. Rather than employing the poetic persona’s imaginative powers in order to produce stability and resolution on an abstract level, these poems expose how the political discourse of egalitarian representation actually thrives on and reinforces the material inequality between her speakers and their subjects in the poem. Subtextually, then, the last stanza of “Squatter’s Children” exposes how the imagination is employed ironically as a “beguil[ing]” voice, pretending to master nature’s “rooms of falling rain” (drops of rain) with godlike powers.

Now deferring closure, the dissonant voices of “Squatter’s Children” can no longer be represented as anomalous, as if confirming the normality of consonance. Unresolvable, the end of the poem requires a revisioning of the assumptions put forth by the descriptive narrator. Indeed, consonance had functioned to elide the poet’s biased rhetoric. Now, when read against the earlier poem, the rhetorical unity of “drops of rain” and “mansions” reproduces the forceful unity of “sun” and “crumb”—a desacralized “miracle”:

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.

A beautiful villa stood in the sun

And from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.

In front, a baroque white plaster balcony

Added by birds, who nest along the river,

—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—

and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb

my mansion, made for me by a miracle,

through ages, by insects, birds, and the river

working the stone . . . . .

Notice that in this earlier poem too, then, once the mimetic strategy has failed, the poetic persona adopts the strategy of dreaming up a consonant, naturally-evolved harmony between contingency (the condition of poverty symbolized by “crumb”) and resolution (a “miracle,” taking shape as an ideal “mansion”) so as to retain for herself the same privilege as that of the “man on the balcony” (the privilege of representation which both poems also deconstruct). Repeating the rhetoric of naturalized consonance, this resolution also sought legitimation in the authority of natural cycles:

My crumb,  
 my mansion, made for me by a miracle,  
 through ages, by insects, birds, and the river  
 working the stone. . . . .

Here Bishop’s speaker pulls out the logic of organic, evolutionary, progressive construction through linear time once again. This time, however, when she resorts to the “inner eye” (what M.H. Abrams calls “the lamp,” i.e., the Romantic alternative to the previous portrayal of the poet’s eye as a mirror of the sun) to craft an imaginary, visionary resolution of the condition of poverty into consonance, the poem has already made the reader suspicious of her self-centralizing rhetoric. In other words, once rhetorical naturalization has been exposed as a frustrated enactment of consonance, Bishop is in a tight spot to perform her presumed authority over the conflicts that have become increasingly disturbing in the poems for their resistance to any facile resolution.

The poetic persona is thus rendered complicitous with the social injustice she has so far projected on the other. It becomes clear, in the clash of shifting perspectives, that the speaker conveniently appropriates the rhetoric of naturalized consonance in order to legitimize the dislocation of privilege from the poet with “his head, so to speak, in the

clouds” to the poet of imaginary vision, “under the sun”—in other words, from the “mirror of nature” to “the inner eye”:

Every day, in the sun,  
at breakfast time I sit on my balcony  
with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

By now I hope to have conveyed that the narrators in both these poems are not exempt from the privilege and oblivion perpetuated by the social inequality that they appear to merely criticize. They cannot offer an alternative to the voice, “ugly as sin,” which “keeps calling to [the children] to come in” (“Squatter’s Children”) to where there is but an imaginary, symbolic shelter—nor to the naïveté of those who “stood around, waiting for the miracle” (“A Miracle for Breakfast”).

Also as in the Brazilian poem, by the end of “A Miracle for Breakfast” the reader must demystify the aestheticized resolution providing the underprivileged with a “mansion”:

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.  
A window across the river caught the sun  
As if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

“Squatter’s Children” also ends on a skeptical note. The change of scale, between “rooms of falling rain” and “mansions,” though rhetorically placing the children in a positive position of a hierarchical binary, demystifies the rhetoric of any correspondence between form and content. This is when the children’s dissonant reality becomes most disturbing—looming, uncannily even, and exceeding the narrator’s gaze. Here the poem foregrounds its “particular fault” of representation, as Bishop pointed out in her commentary to Moore on her earlier poem: the rhetorical “trick” of “change of scale” which, ironically, turns upon itself. It is precisely when the poetic persona enacts self-willed control at its extreme, that is to say its most forceful gaze over the object (namely, by portraying in the former poem “my crumb, my



mansion . . . in the sun,” and in the latter the “rooms of falling rain” which the poet’s eye decides are “mansions [they] may choose”), that she loses grasp of the poem, and of the mother’s scream that “no one hears. . . it hangs there forever” (“In the Village” 251).

#### 6.4.7. “There Are Limits to Imagination”

Both “A Miracle for Breakfast” and “Squatter’s Children” posit the rhetoric by which the (inner) eye can shed light on the chaos and dangers of nature—the rhetoric by which physical hardships can be transcended by the self-willed imagination. However, their shifting poetic personas actually implicate themselves in the very suspicion already installed throughout both poems in their critique of the rhetoric of consonance.

Both poems therefore expose the morally attractive pretenses of providing humanitarian resolutions of dissonance, by revising the criteria for reading those resolutions. They repeat patterns of rhetorical consonance in order to demystify them, changing paradigms to defer metaphorical closure and control. In other words, the failure of one strategy of resolution incites another, until new expectations of closure merely build suspicion in the reader regarding the meanings that have been elided in the poems.

Thus exposed, the speaker’s rhetorical resolution requires the poetic persona’s self-implication in the scene. This is the sense in which both “A Miracle for Breakfast” and “Squatter’s Children” foreground their speakers’ privilege of manipulating scales and perspectives. The words “miracle,” in the former poem, and “rights,” in the latter, can thus be understood as euphemisms for *privilege* and *disappropriation* (of representation), respectively. As Harrison puts it, the privileged

can define reality through their imagination’s turnings: power is available to the one who can choose, manipulate, and alter one’s perspective . . . a reality manipulable by the one writing it. Secular “miracles” serve and are retained by the wealthy, the powerful, and, in this case, the poet, who can, quite simply,

transform reality as they so choose. Bishop does not resolve the seeming contradiction: below the balcony (fourth stanza) there was no miracle; in possession of the mansion and then sitting on its balcony (fifth stanza), there is. (1993: 84)

Perhaps a quote from a less understated use of this technique of demystifying the poet's power of imagination and representation is helpful to discern Bishop's dissonant poetic voices. The example I have in mind is Robert Hass's poem "Heroic Simile" (1979: 2-3), which includes the following lines:<sup>133</sup>

The woodsman and the old man his uncle  
 are standing in midforest  
 on a floor of pine silt and spring mud.  
 They have stopped working  
 because they are tired and because  
 I have imagined no pack animal  
 or primitive wagon. They are too canny  
 to call in neighbors and come home  
 with a few logs after three days' work.  
 They are waiting for me to do something  
 or for the overseer of the Great Lord  
 to come and arrest them.  
 .....  
 I don't know

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<sup>133</sup> Speculations have been made concerning Bishop's influence on Hass. Vernon Shetley, for example, writes: "While I'm by no means certain that Elizabeth Bishop's work has exerted a significant influence on Robert Hass, his poems manifest a combination of virtues similar to hers: a highly precise vocabulary of observation with a richly nuanced sense of the way that conceptual categories shape perception" (1993: 172).

whether they're Japanese or Mycenaean  
and there's nothing I can do.

.....

There are limits to imagination.

“There are limits to imagination” indeed, as Bishop struggled poetically to acknowledge by engaging the conflicts between her dissonant voices.<sup>134</sup> That she sought to decenter the poetic persona in her Brazilian writings is corroborated by her notes: by writing “sun—Elizabeth self-centered” in the margin of her manuscript of “Squatter’s Children” (Vassar), she inscribed her suspicion of the very imaginary credentials of her own poetic “eye” that sees, describes, and resolves. Whereas Bishop builds up her suspicion by frustrating the reader with unmet expectations, however, Hass does not create any expectation of resolution at all. What happens in Hass is a surprise rendered directly by the narrator—namely, with the fact that he is powerless against all odds—, whereas the same surprise in Bishop is not delivered explicitly. Instead, Bishop’s perplexed readers are on their own to account for the dissonance between what the speaker says and what the poem does. This is not a finicky obscurity. Hass’s direct, apparent relinquishing of control misses the point that Bishop’s poetics makes so well: that to give up mastery is just another rhetorical intervention, just another way of keeping in control. At the end of “The Fish,” for example, the speaker must necessarily be in control enough to “let it go”:

I stared and stared  
And victory filled up  
The little rented boat,

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<sup>134</sup> Bishop wrote other social-conscious poems after “Squatter’s Children,” such as “Going to the Bakery” (started in 1960), “The Burglar of Babylon” (started in 1964), “Santarém” (started probably in 1962), and “Pink Dog” (started in 1964), all of which problematize the speaker’s self-exempting position of pretending to either resolve or dissolve social conflict.

From the pool of bilge  
 Where oil had spread a rainbow  
 Around the rusted engine  
 To the bailer rusted orange,  
 The sun-cracked thwarts,  
 The oarlocks on their strings,  
 The gunnels—until everything  
 Was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
 And I let the fish go.

Bishop's demystification of humanitarian discourses builds up a social-conscious poetics that does not fit the canonical frame of moral righteousness. In this light, it is not because "Squatter's Children" appears to privilege the lyrical endeavor to perform social harmony that it puts forth a social-conscious sensibility, but rather because it challenges such a facile resolution. What begins with the reprehension—typical of modernity's euphoric narrative of linear progress—of a 'backward culture' or of a 'primitive capitalism' in its dehumanizing abandonment of the children ends with a self-implicating perception of the move by which that violence takes unexpected shapes in the narrator's own strategies for self-consonant or innocent representation. Indeed, in the final scene the children are depicted as lifeless, obstructed by the poet's solipsistic eye yet uncannily looming through the rain, the closer the narrator brings them to the scrutiny of the reader and the speaker.

The self-implicating politics that Bishop consolidated in "Squatter's Children" reconceptualizes social-conscious writing so as to articulate an ethical rather than a missionary commitment. This shift in political sensibility is encapsulated in the collision of incompatible voices by the end of the poem, disturbing the framework of consonance that reduces the scene of poverty to a refuge for the self-exempting author. I refer to the refuge by

which, as we have seen throughout this study, Bishop's speakers posit aestheticist resolutions of social injustice in her poems, while preserving for themselves the humanist task of recovering order from chaos. In counterpoint, the contradictions interrupting such moments lead readers experientially to share with the poetic persona in the shattering of the framework of order that occurs in culture shock.

A brief generic conclusion from my arguments throughout this study is that Bishop's poetics of self-implication is precisely a rejection of the aesthetics of vision, ethnography, and authoritative "witnessing" for which her Brazilian corpus has been most celebrated, and that such a corpus is invaluable precisely because the author fails, and disturbingly so, to produce mastery or resolution over her dissonant perceptions of reality. We have seen in the previous chapters that Bishop's suspicion of any solutionist closure grows alongside her refusal to reduce dissonant reality to a delusive totality, or to the totalitarianism of certainties that threaten lucidity and even *sanity*—again, understood here as the mental and emotional flexibility to deal with the contingencies of reality that undercut representations of difference as antithetically dissonant. Bishop's poetics of dissonance thus takes issue with presumptions of consonance within identity politics. Whether by failing to posit linear timing in mapping otherness (chapter 3), to recover the myth of the authorial self (chapter 4), to redeem the imperial self (chapter 5), or to produce a coherent and unified poetic persona (chapter 6), these writings expose the self-defeat of conceptual systems that obliterate the flowing, ongoing changes of perception that engage dissonant reality. Making room for the defeat of self-centering narratives, this poetics can be understood as Bishop's powerful and lifelong response to Marianne Moore's expressed desire in a letter of 1938 in which she challenges Bishop to confront habitual conceptions of beauty and ugliness, of aesthetics, and of politics:

I feel that although large-scale "substance" runs the risk of inconsequence through aesthetic impotence, and am one of those who despise clamor about

substance – to whom treatment really is substance – I can't help wishing that you would sometime in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience; or since noone (*sic*) admits profundity of experience, some *characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable*. (From Moore to Bishop, May 1 1938, Rosenbach, my emphasis)

Bishop's critique of naturalizations of the rhetorics of ugliness (and beauty), and of dissonance (and harmony)—in representation is intensified throughout all the poems analyzed here, as they stretch assumptions and certainties to the point where they collapse and demand a change in perception. These texts are invaluable precisely because, rather than forging authorial mastery or resolution over dissonant perceptions of reality, they stop on the verge of acknowledging that no matter how the self can manipulate reality as she wills, it remains irreducible, unspatializable, experiential, historicized, dissonant. What Bishop's intercultural writings elaborate, then, is a desire for an ethical perception of the conflicting positions she came to straddle between cultures bound by hierarchized identities. The texts examined here respond to this desire requiring a transition in her conception of dissonance, from the sanction of consonance—whether through identity politics, globalization narratives, or the organicist progression of form-as-content—to the demystification of an order that does not quite fit after all. In this sense, underlying the ethical conflicts understated in Bishop's intercultural texts is a pervasive attempt or desire to shatter the centrality of the imperialist gaze that has canonized her—a desire to confront the reproduction, within discourses of freedom, of the colonialist ideologies we have not left behind.

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## Appendix

## Poems

by Elizabeth Bishop

**Manuelzinho***[Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking.]*

Half squatter, half tenant (no rent)—  
 a sort of inheritance; white,  
 in your thirties now, and supposed  
 to supply me with vegetables,  
 but you don't; or you won't; or you can't  
 get the idea through your brain—  
 the world's worst gardener since Cain.  
 Tilted above me, your gardens  
 ravish my eyes. You edge  
 the beds of silver cabbages  
 with red carnations, and lettuces  
 mix with alyssum. And then  
 umbrella ants arrive,  
 or it rains for a solid week  
 and the whole thing's ruined again  
 and I buy you more pounds of seeds,  
 imported, guaranteed,  
 and eventually you bring me  
 a mystic three-legged carrot,  
 or a pumpkin "bigger than the baby."

I watch you through the rain,  
 trotting, light, on bare feet,  
 up the steep paths you have made—  
 or your father and grandfather made—  
 all over my property,  
 with your head and back inside  
 a sodden burlap bag,  
 and feel I can't endure it  
 another minute; then,  
 indoors, beside the stove,  
 keep on reading a book.

You steal my telephone wires,  
 or someone does. You starve  
 your horse and yourself  
 and your dogs and your family.  
 Among endless variety,  
 you eat boiled cabbage stalks.  
 And once I yelled at you  
 so loud to hurry up  
 and fetch me those potatoes  
 your holey hat flew off,  
 you jumped out of your clogs,  
 leaving three objects arranged  
 in a triangle at my feet,  
 as if you'd been a gardener  
 in a fairy tale all this time  
 and at the word "potatoes"  
 had vanished to take up your work  
 of fairy prince somewhere.

The strangest things happen, to you.  
 Your cow eats a "poison grass"  
 and drops dead on the spot.  
 Nobody else's does.  
 And then your father dies,  
 a superior old man  
 with a black plush hat, and a moustache  
 like a white spread-eagled sea gull.  
 The family gathers, but you,  
 no, you "don't think he's dead!"  
 I look at him. He's cold.  
 They're burying him today.  
 But you know, I don't think he's *dead*.  
 I give you money for the funeral  
 and you go and hire a *bus*  
 for the delighted mourners,

so I have to hand over some more  
and then have to hear you tell me  
you pray for me every night!

And then you come again,  
sniffing and shivering,  
hat in hand, with that wistful  
face, like a child's fistful  
of bluets or white violets,  
improvident as the dawn,  
and once more I provide  
for a shot of penicillin  
down at the pharmacy, or  
one more bottle of  
Electrical Baby Syrup.  
Or, briskly, you come to settle  
what we call our "accounts,"  
with two old copybooks,  
one with flowers on the cover,  
the other with a camel.  
Immediate confusion.  
You've left out the decimal points.  
Your columns stagger,  
honeycombed with zeros.  
You whisper conspiratorially;  
the numbers mound to millions.  
Account books? They are Dream Books.  
In the kitchen we dream together  
how the meek shall inherit the earth—  
or several acres of mine.

With blue sugar bags on their heads,  
carrying your lunch,  
your children scuttle by me  
like little moles aboveground,  
or even crouch behind bushes  
as if I were out to shoot them!  
—Impossible to make friends,  
though each will grab at once  
for an orange or a piece of candy.

I see you all up there  
along with Formoso, the donkey,  
who brays like a pump gone dry,  
then suddenly stops.

—All just standing, staring  
off into fog and space.  
Or coming down at night,  
in silence, except for hoofs,  
in dim moonlight, the horse  
or Formoso stumbling after.  
or Formoso stumbling after.  
Between us float a few  
big, soft, pale-blue,  
sluggish fireflies,  
the jellyfish of the air...

Patch upon patch upon patch,  
your wife keeps all of you covered.  
She has gone over and over  
(forearmed is forewarned)  
your pair of bright-blue pants  
with white thread, and these days  
your limbs are draped in blueprints.  
You paint—heaven knows why—  
the outside of the crown  
and brim of your straw hat.  
Perhaps to reflect the sun?  
Or perhaps when you were small,  
your mother said, "Manuelzinho,  
one thing: be sure you always  
paint your straw hat."  
One was gold for a while,  
but the gold wore off, like plate.  
One was bright green. Unkindly,  
I called you Klorophyll Kid.  
My visitors thought it was funny.  
I apologize here and now.  
  
You helpless, foolish man,  
I love you all I can,



I think. Or do I?  
 I take off my hat, unpainted  
 and figurative, to you.  
 Again I promise to try.

### Santarém

Of course I may be remembering it all wrong  
 after, after—how many years?

That golden evening I really wanted to go no farther;  
 more than anything else I wanted to stay awhile  
 in that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon,  
 grandly, silently flowing, flowing east.  
 Suddenly there'd been houses, people, and lots of  
 mongrel  
 riverboats skittering backing and forth  
 under a sky of gorgeous, under-lit clouds,  
 with everything gilded, burnished along one side,  
 and everything bright, cheerful, casual—or so it  
 looked.  
 I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.  
 Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung  
 from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four  
 and they'd diverged. Here only two  
 and coming together. Even if one were tempted  
 to literary interpretations  
 such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female  
 —such notions would have resolved, dissolved,  
 straight off  
 in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

In front of the church, the Cathedral, rather,  
 there was a modest promenade and a belvedere  
 about to fall into the river,  
 stubby palms, flamboyants like pans of embers,  
 buildings one story high, stucco, blue or yellow,  
 and one house faced with *azulejos*, buttercup yellow.  
 The street was deep in dark-gold river sand  
 damp from the ritual afternoon rain,

and teams of zebus plodded, gentle, proud,  
 and *blue*, with down-curved horns and hanging  
 ears,  
 pulling carts with solid wheels.  
 The zebus' hooves, the people's feet  
 waded in golden sand,  
 dampered by golden sand,  
 so that almost the only sounds  
 were creaks and *shush, shush, shush*.

Two rivers full of crazy shipping—people  
 all apparently changing their minds, embarking,  
 disembarking, rowing clumsy dories.  
 (After the Civil War some Southern families  
 came here; here they could still own slaves.  
 They left occasional blue eyes, English names,  
 and *oars*. No other place, no one  
 on all the Amazon's four thousand miles  
 does anything but paddle.)  
 A dozen or so young nuns, white-habited,  
 waved gaily from an old stern-wheeler  
 getting up steam, already hung with hammocks  
 —off to their mission, days and days away  
 up God knows what lost tributary.  
 Side-wheelers, countless wobbling dugouts...  
 A cow stood up in one, quite calm,  
 chewing her cud while being ferried,  
 tipping, wobbling, somewhere, to be married.  
 A river schooner with raked masts  
 and violet-colored sails tacked in so close  
 her bowsprit seemed to touch the church

(Cathedral, rather!). A week or so before  
 there'd been a thunderstorm and the Cathedral'd  
 been struck by lightning. One tower had  
 a widening zigzag crack all the way down.  
 It was a miracle. The priest's house right next door  
 had been struck, too, and his brass bed  
 (the only one in town) galvanized black.  
*Graças a Deus*—he'd been in Belém.

In the blue pharmacy the pharmacist  
 had hung an empty wasps' nest from a shelf:  
 small, exquisite, clean matte white,  
 and hard as stucco. I admired it  
 so much he gave it to me.  
 Then – my ship's whistle blew. I couldn't stay.  
 Back on board, a fellow-passenger, Mr. Swan,  
 Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric,  
 really a very nice old man,  
 who wanted to see the Amazon before he died,  
 asked, "What's that ugly thing?"

### **Pink Dog**

[Rio de Janeiro]

The sun is blazing and the sky is blue.  
 Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue.  
 Naked, you trot across the avenue.

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!  
 Naked and pink, without a single hair...  
 Startled, the passersby draw back and stare.

Of course they're mortally afraid of rabies.  
 You are not mad; you have a case of scabies  
 but look intelligent. Where are your babies?

(A nursing mother, by those hanging teats.)

In what slum have you hidden them, poor bitch,  
 while you go begging, living by your wits?

Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,  
 to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?  
 They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites  
 go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights  
 out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.

If they do this to anyone who begs,

drugged, drunk, or sober, with our without legs,  
 what would they do to sick, four-legged dogs?

In the cafés and on the sidewalk corners  
 the joke is going round that all the beggars  
 who can afford them now wear life preservers.

In your condition you would not be able  
 even to float, much less to dog-paddle.  
 Now look, the practical, the sensible

solution is to wear a *fantasia*.

Tonight you simply can't afford to be a-  
 n eyesore. But no one will ever see a

dog in *máscara* this time of year.  
 Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.  
 What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?

They say that Carnival's degenerating  
 —radios, Americans, or something,  
 have ruined it completely. They're just talking.

Carnival is always wonderful!  
 A depilated dog would not look well.  
 Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!

### **Crusoe in England**

A new volcano has erupted,  
 the papers say, and last week I was reading  
 where some ship saw an island being born:  
 at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;  
 and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—  
 rose in the mate's binoculars  
 and caught on the horizon like a fly.

They named it. But my poor old island's still  
 un-rediscovered, un-renamable.

None of the books has ever got it right.

Well, I had fifty-two

miserable, small volcanoes I could climb  
 with a few slithery strides—  
 volcanoes dead as ash heaps.  
 I used to sit on the edge of the highest one  
 and count the others standing up,  
 naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.  
 I'd think that if they were the size  
 I thought volcanoes should be, then I had  
 become a giant;  
 and if I had become a giant,  
 I couldn't bear to think what size  
 the goats and turtles were,  
 or the gulls, or the overlapping rollers  
 —a glittering hexagon of rollers  
 closing and closing in, but never quite,  
 glittering and glittering, though the sky  
 was mostly overcast.

My island seemed to be  
 a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's  
 left-over clouds arrived and hung  
 above the craters—their parched throats  
 were hot to touch.  
 Was that why it rained so much?  
 And why sometimes the whole place hissed?  
 The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,  
 hissing like teakettles.  
 (And I'd have given years, or taken a few,  
 for any sort of kettle, of course.)  
 The folds of lava, running out to sea,  
 would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove  
 to be more turtles.  
 The beaches were all lava, variegated,  
 black, red, and white, and gray;  
 the marbled colors made a fine display.  
 And I had waterspouts. Oh,  
 half a dozen at a time, far out,  
 they'd come and go, advancing and retreating,  
 their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches  
 of scuffed-up white.

Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated,  
 sacerdotal beings of glass... I watched  
 The water spiral up in them like smoke.  
 Beautiful, yes, but not much company.

I often gave way to self-pity.  
 "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.  
 I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there  
 a moment when I actually chose this?  
 I don't remember, but there could have been."  
 What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?  
 With my legs dangling down familiarly  
 over a crater's edge, I told myself  
 "Pity should begin at home." So the more  
 pity I felt, the more I felt at home.

The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun  
 rose from the sea,  
 and there was one of it and one of me.  
 The island had one kind of everything:  
 one tree snail, a bright violet-blue  
 with a thin shell, crept over everything,  
 over the one variety of tree,  
 a sooty, scrub affair.  
 Snail shells lay under these in drifts  
 and, at a distance,  
 you'd swear that they were beds of irises.  
 There was one kind of berry, a dark red.  
 I tried it, one by one, and hours apart.  
 Sub-acid, and not bad, no ill effects;  
 and so I made home-brew. I'd drink  
 the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff  
 that went straight to my head  
 and play my home-made flute  
 (I think it had the weirdest scale on earth)  
 and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats.  
 Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?  
 I felt a deep affection for  
 the smallest of my island industries.  
 No, not exactly, since the smallest was

a miserable philosophy.

Because I didn't know enough.  
 Why didn't I know enough of something?  
 Greek drama or astronomy? The books  
 I'd read were full of blanks;  
 the poems—well, I tried  
 reciting to my iris-beds,  
 “They flash upon that inward eye,  
 which is the bliss...” The bliss of what?  
 One of the first things that I did  
 when I got back was look it up.

The island smelled of goat and guano.  
 The goats were white, so were the gulls,  
 and both too tame, or else they thought  
 I was a goat, too, or a gull.  
*Baa, baa, baa* and *shriek, shriek, shriek,*  
*Baa... shriek... baa...* I still can't shake  
 them from my ears; they're hurting now.  
 The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies  
 over a ground of hissing rain  
 and hissing, ambulating turtles  
 got on my nerves.

When all the gulls flew up at once, they sounded  
 like a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves.  
 I'd shut my eyes and think about a tree,  
 an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere.  
 I'd heard of cattle getting island-sick.  
 I thought the goats were.  
 One billy-goat would stand on the volcano  
 I'd christened *Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*  
 (I'd time enough to play with names),  
 and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air.  
 I'd grab his beard and look at him.  
 His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up  
 and expressed nothing, or a little malice.  
 I got so tired of the very colors!  
 One day I dyed a baby goat bright red

with my red berries, just to see  
 something a little different.  
 And then his mother wouldn't recognize him.

Dreams were the worst. Of course I dreamed of  
 food  
 and love, but they were pleasant rather  
 than otherwise. But then I'd dream of things  
 like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it  
 for a baby goat. I'd have  
 nightmares of other islands  
 stretching away from mine, infinities  
 of islands, islands spawning islands,  
 like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs  
 of islands, knowing that I had to live  
 on each and every one, eventually,  
 for ages, registering their flora,  
 their fauna, their geography.

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it  
 another minute longer, Friday came.  
 (Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)  
 Friday was nice.  
 Friday was nice, and we were friends.  
 If only he had been a woman!  
 I wanted to propagate my kind,  
 and so did he, I think, poor boy.  
 He'd pet the baby goat sometimes,  
 and race with them, or carry one around.  
 —Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.

And then one day they came and took us off.

Now I live here, another island,  
 that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?  
 My blood was full of them; my brain  
 bred islands. But that archipelago  
 has petered out. I'm old.  
 I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,  
 surrounded by uninteresting lumber.

The knife there on the shelf—  
 it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.  
 It lived. How many years did I  
 beg it, implore it, not to break?  
 I knew each nick and scratch by heart,  
 the bluish blade, the broken tip,  
 the lines of wood-grain on the handle...  
 Now it won't look at me at all.  
 The living soul has dribbled away.  
 My eyes rest on it and pass on.

The local museum's asked me to  
 leave everything to them:  
 the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,  
 my shedding goatskin trousers  
 (moths have got in the fur),  
 the parasol that took me such a time  
 remembering the way the ribs should go.  
 It still will work but, folded up,  
 looks like a plucked and skinny fowl.  
 How can anyone want such things?  
 —And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles  
 seventeen years ago come March.

**The Armadillo**  
 For Robert Lowell

This is the time of year  
 when almost every night  
 the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.  
 Climbing the mountain height,  
  
 rising toward a saint  
 still honored in these parts,  
 the paper chambers flush and fill with light  
 that comes and goes, like hearts.

Once up against the sky it's hard  
 to tell them from the stars—  
 planets, that is—the tinted ones:  
 Venus going down, or Mars,  
 or that pale green one. With a wind,

they flare and falter, wobble and toss;  
 but if it's still they steer between  
 the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

receding, dwindling, solemnly  
 and steadily forsaking us,  
 or, in the downdraft from a peak,  
 suddenly turning dangerous.  
 Last night another big one fell.  
 It splattered like an egg of fire  
 against the cliff behind the house.  
 The flame ran down. We saw the pair

of owls who nest there flying up  
 and up, their whirling black-and-white  
 stained bright pink underneath, until  
 they shrieked up out of sight.

The ancient owls' nest must have burned.  
 Hastily, all alone,  
 a glistening armadillo left the scene,  
 rose-flecked, head down, tail down,

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,  
*short-eared*, to our surprise.  
 So soft! – a handful of intangible ash  
 with fixed, ignited eyes.

*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!*  
*O falling fire and piercing cry*  
*and panic, and a weak mailed fist*  
*clenched ignorant against the sky!*

**Brazil, January 1, 1502**

... embroidered nature ... tapestried landscape.  
 —*Landscape into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes  
 exactly as she must have greeted theirs:  
 every square inch filling in with foliage—  
 big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,

blue, blue-green, and olive,  
 with occasional lighter veins and edges,  
 or a satin underleaf turned over;  
 monster ferns  
 in silver-gray relief,  
 and flowers, too, like giant water lilies  
 up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—  
 purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,  
 rust red and greenish white;  
 solid but airy; fresh as if just finished  
 and taken off the frame.

A blue-white sky, a simple web,  
 backing for feathery detail:  
 brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,  
 a few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;  
 and perching there in profile, beaks agape,  
 the big symbolic birds keep quiet,  
 each showing only half his puffed and padded,  
 pure-colored or spotted breast.  
 Still in the foreground there is Sin:  
 five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.  
 The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts  
 splattered and overlapping,  
 threatened from underneath by moss  
 in lovely hell-green flames,  
 attacked above  
 by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,  
 “one leaf yes and one leaf no” (in Portuguese).  
 The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes  
 are on the smaller, female one, back-to,  
 her wicked tail straight up and over,  
 red as a red-hot wire.

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,  
 tiny as nails, and glinting,  
 in creaking armor, came and found it all,  
 not unfamiliar:  
 no lovers’ walks, no bowers,  
 no cherries to be picked, no lute music,

but corresponding, nevertheless,  
 to an old dream of wealth and luxury  
 already out of style when they left home—  
 wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure.  
 Directly after Mass, humming perhaps  
*L’Homme armé* or some such tune,  
 they ripped away into the hanging fabric,  
 each out to catch an Indian for himself—  
 those maddening little women who kept calling,  
 calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)  
 and retreating, always retreating, behind it.

### A Miracle for Breakfast

At six o’clock we were waiting for coffee,  
 waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb  
 that was going to be served from a certain balcony,  
 —like kings of old, or like a miracle.  
 It was still dark. One foot of the sun  
 steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.

The first ferry of the day had just crossed the river.  
 It was so cold we hoped that the coffee  
 would be very hot, seeing that the sun  
 was not going to warm us; and that the crumb  
 would be a loaf each, buttered, by a miracle.  
 At seven a man stepped out on the balcony.  
 He stood for a minute alone on the balcony  
 looking over our heads toward the river.  
 A servant handed him the makings of a miracle,  
 consisting of one lone cup of coffee  
 and one roll, which he proceeded to crumb,  
 his head, so to speak, in the clouds—along with the sun.

Was the man crazy? What under the sun  
 was he trying to do, up there on his balcony!  
 Each man received one rather hard crumb,  
 which some flicked scornfully into the river,  
 and, in a cup, one drop of the coffee.  
 Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle.

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.  
 A beautiful villa stood in the sun  
 and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.  
 In front, a baroque white plaster balcony  
 added by birds, who nest along the river,  
 —I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—

and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb  
 my mansion, made for me by a miracle,  
 through ages, by insects, birds, and the river  
 working the stone. Every day, in the sun,  
 at breakfast time I sit on my balcony  
 with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.  
 A window across the river caught the sun  
 as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

### **Squatter's Children**

On the unbreathing sides of hills  
 they play, a specklike girl and boy,  
 alone, but near a specklike house.  
 The sun's suspended eye  
 blinks casually, and then they wade  
 gigantic waves of light and shade.  
 A dancing yellow spot, a pup,  
 attends them. Clouds are piling up;

a storm piles up behind the house.  
 The children play at digging holes.  
 The ground is hard; they try to use  
 one of their father's tools,  
 a mattock with a broken haft  
 the two of them can scarcely lift.  
 It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads  
 effulgence in the thunderheads,

weak flashes of inquiry  
 direct as is the puppy's bark.  
 But to their little, soluble,

unwarrantable ark,  
 apparently the rain's reply  
 consists of echolalia,  
 and Mother's voice, ugly as sin,  
 keeps calling to them to come in.

Children, the threshold of the storm  
 has slid beneath your muddy shoes;  
 wet and beguiled, you stand among  
 the mansions you may choose  
 out of a bigger house than yours,  
 whose lawfulness endures.  
 Its soggy documents retain  
 Your rights in rooms of falling rain.