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Questions of Travel: Elizabeth Bishop as a Tour Guide to Brazil

When the American poet Elizabeth Bishop arrived in Brazil in 1951, she came as a tourist, not intending to stay. Life had other plans for her. She fell in love with an upper-class Brazilian woman, Carlotta de Macedo Soares, who invited her into her home in Petrópolis, a rich mountain resort outside of Rio, and Bishop did make her home there, for fifteen years. While she lived in Brazil, in the midst of the nation's elite intellectual and artistic circles, Bishop continued to write poems for an American audience. For much of the fifties and early sixties, her poems were published first in *The New Yorker*, with whom she had a first-right-of-refusal contract. When she began to feel that its audience might find her poems too unconventional, she ended the contract in 1962, but continued to publish many of her poems there (Millier 323). As her reputation grew, Bishop became known as a poet concerned with florid landscapes, with travel and tourism, who reliably delivered exotic Latin American subjects. Although many American poets were writing touristic poems in the 1950s and '60s (see Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980*), most of Bishop's contemporaries were writing about Europe, and could assume that their American readers shared a certain amount of cultural and ancestral knowledge about the places described in their poems. Traveling in Europe, American poets could feel some sense of cultural inferiority and economic superiority. In relation to postcolonial Brazil, Bishop was writing from a less clearly defined position. The task of writing about Brazil to Americans placed her in a somewhat awkward relationship with her Brazilian friends and readers, which would end in acrimony in 1965.

In writing for *The New Yorker* about Brazil, an uncommon tourist destination for even affluent Americans tourists in the '50s and '60s, Bishop was placed in a unique position as a guide for her readers. It is not only natives who must play the guide to tourists, as Dean MacCannell puts it in *The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. The situation of modernity constantly requires members of the upper and middle-classes worldwide to play the tour guide to one another: "when[ever] we travel with others to a place we have been and they have not, we play the tour guide" (191). Bishop's poems about Brazil function, in effect, as a contact zone on the page, to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, where many American readers of *The New Yorker*, who had not traveled to Brazil nor

perhaps given much thought to it, encountered representations of the country and its history for the first time.

In postcolonial Latin America, tourism has replaced colonialism as the dominant mode of interaction between the diverse native citizenry on the one hand, and American and European visitors on the other. In this context, the contact zone seems to persist in new forms. The ports and major cities, most frequented by international travelers, still function as contact zones, which Pratt described in the colonial era as “space[s] in which peoples historically and geographically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (7). In comparison to the relations of colonist to colonized, interactions between the tourist and the native may vary from mutual curiosity and mild prejudice to extremely asymmetrical power relations. The contact zone is a useful concept for thinking about literary representations of encounters between such distinct peoples, with the added complication that the whole weight of colonial history comes to bear on the interactions between tourist and native. Bishop’s poetry displays the full range of such relations in three poems I discuss here, two from *Questions of Travel* (1965) and one late poem, all of which were first published in *The New Yorker*. She ventriloquizes the naïve, prejudiced tourist in “Arrival at Santos,” published first in 1952; invokes a darker colonial history for the tourist in “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” published in 1960; and finally in “Pink Dog,” which was published in 1979, satirizes tourists’ willed ignorance, and natives’ fatalistic acceptance of, extreme poverty in Rio as they enjoy the Carnivale (Millier 239, 301, 545).

As a tourist who became a resident of Brazil, Bishop had a difficult transition to make in becoming a guide to the country for American readers. She chose to open her 1965 book, *Questions of Travel*, with “Arrival at Santos” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” which set the political tone of the collection by juxtaposing the perspective of the tourist and the colonist from the outset. In “Arrival at Santos,” she ironizes the perspective of the American tourist amid some of her own first impressions of the port of Santos. “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is also a poem of arrival, but here Bishop goes back to an earlier beginning for her American readers, self-consciously choosing a more problematic point of entry into the landscape through Brazilian colonial history. The point she chooses is the day when Gaspar de Lemos allegedly arrived in Rio de Janeiro in January of 1502, and gave it a name based on his ignorance of the region’s geography – he mistook the bay for the mouth of a river.

In “Arrival at Santos,” the speaker, who has been on ship for eighteen days, has been longing to see land. Now that she has arrived, she perceives the landscape as arbitrary and disappointing. The insistent repetition of “here” and the use of indefinite articles and adjectives (“a” and “some”) fail to recognizably locate us in Santos:

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
and some tall, uncertain palms. (CP 89)

The landscape is judged harshly in terms that might indirectly refer to its natives as well; the mountains are inconveniently steep and inhospitable, and they are hard to read, hiding mysterious sorrows beneath a gaudy costume of foliage. “Feeble” efforts have been made to decorate the landscape, which the arriving tourist wants to interpret as intended to provide her with a charming view. But she is not charmed. The church, which is the only hint in this poem of Portuguese Catholic colonization, is unimpressively “little,” the paint on the unpicturesque warehouses is too pale, and even the native palm trees lack confidence.

Part way through the second quatrain, however, the speaker turns on the tourist, whose disappointment she has just articulated:

Oh tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, and immediately,
after eighteen days of suspension?

Finish your breakfast. (CP 89)

Here the speaker chides the tourist, bringing her up short for expecting to appreciate and understand this new country instantly, and to be immediately transformed by it. What she should do, instead, is focus on immediate, practical tasks – eating her breakfast, and then boarding the little boat that will take her to land. Then, she begins to notice a few more specific details about the port:

The tender is coming,
a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag.
So that’s the flag. I never saw it before.
I somehow never thought of there *being* a flag,

but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
and paper money; they remain to be seen. (CP 89)

With frank naiveté and ignorance, the speaker re-aligns herself with the perspective of the tourist. This impractical and self-absorbed American tourist, seeking exotic scenery, never gave much thought to the modern nation of Brazil, and is startled by its most superficial manifestations: the national flag, whose existence she never suspected, and the Brazilian currency.

The speaker then turns her attention away from the landscape surrounding the port to “a fellow passenger named Miss Breen,” “a retired police lieutenant,” who partly represents the fact that Americans from all classes now travel. Together the speaker and Miss Breen descend awkwardly, even foolishly, into the commercial port of Santos, as a boat hook catches Miss Breen’s skirt. They descend among “twenty-six freighters / waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans,” and thus the coffee trade would seem to be more important business than tourism for the port of Santos. The pair of tourists then prepare themselves to face “The customs officials,” and, not speaking Portuguese, hope they “will speak English” and “leave [them]” their American necessities, “bourbon and cigarettes.” Finally, the speaker quickly dismisses the port, for not “car[ing] what impression [it] make[s].” In the last line, they head inland, perhaps hoping that the country there will try harder to impress tourists, but also with the implied intention to penetrate more deeply into the country: “We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior” (CP 90).

Longer residence in Brazil complicated Bishop’s views of the country and her desires to represent it more accurately to American audiences. In 1961, after Bishop had been living in and writing about Brazil for nearly ten years, she was asked to write an informative, promotional book about the country for Time-Life Books in the U.S. The editors hoped she would provide a picturesque, anecdotal portrait of modern Brazil, and Bishop accepted the project, which was very well-paid, with reservations. It turned out to be a miserable experience. Sentence by sentence, she fought her editors’ desire to portray Brazil, for an American audience, in the mode of Alexander von Humboldt, as a “frontier” of untapped natural resources populated by charming, happily modernizing people, de-emphasizing the complexities of Brazil’s colonial history and contemporary politics. In 1961 and 1962, she complained in letters to her aunt Grace that the editors wanted “ALL of Brazilian history, geography, and politics reduced to pill-form – and all in two or three months.” And further, she swore “never again” to do such a project, “not for Time, Life, etc. - they are incredible people and what they know about Brazil would fit on the head of a pin - and yet the gall, the arrogance, the general condescension!” (Vas-

sar 25.9). In short, the editors seemed to assume that a landscape poet could be counted on to serve up a picturesque Brazil, not its problematic history.

In *The New Yorker* in the '60s, however, Bishop did seem to find an audience that was somewhat more receptive to moral and political complexity. In transforming the conventionally picturesque tradition of landscape poetry, Bishop transformed herself from tourist to a somewhat reluctant guide, and found ways to guide her American readers into the political intricacies of Brazil's past and present, which she took as a primary subject the longer she lived there. "Arrival at Santos" really ends with the date noted after the last line — January, 1952 — which provides an explicit transition to "Brazil, January 1, 1502," which in turn marks a defining initial moment, in temporal and spatial terms, for the contact zone in Brazil. It is also a date whose significance most American readers would not be aware of. The parallel dates, I think, ask us to consciously compare Bishop's narration of the arrival in Santos of a tourist in January of 1952 to the arrival of the Portuguese in Rio in January of 1502. The poem includes an epigraph from Sir Kenneth Clark's study, *Landscape into Art*, which describes Brazil as "embroidered nature... tapestried landscape," from the perspective of a European who had found the tropical vegetation to have the rich density of tapestry. The tapestry metaphor, of course, also implies that the landscape was artistically designed to "greet" the European viewer, as the port of Santos was not:

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...
 monster ferns...
 ...and flowers too...
 fresh as if just finished
 and taken off the frame. (CP 91)

This is untouched, unnamed Nature with a capital "N," with hints of the Garden of Eden that European explorers long hoped to discover in the so-called New World. The phrase "our eyes" implicitly refers to the eyes of the American tourists, who in some ways perceive the jungle landscape around Rio "exactly" as the Portuguese did. Both are overwhelmed by the fertility of the tropical climate and vegetation, and are surprised by the size and variety of the leaves, which are implicitly compared with the lesser variety and smaller size of leaves on trees native to Portugal and North America. In the tradition

of picturesque landscape poetry, Bishop provides a vivid description of the Brazilian landscape for her American readers who probably would not have seen it and who would find it exotic, as the Portuguese did. But with the uncomfortable suggestion that tourists first see the landscape in the same manner as colonists, the poem then subtly turns toward a more political theme.

As with many early European accounts of South America, native peoples are conspicuously absent in the first two stanzas of this poem, and wild Nature is characterized as fresh or pure, designed by the hand of God. But in the second stanza, native plants and animals begin to appear, described anthropomorphically:

a few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;
... the big symbolic birds keep quiet,
each showing only half his puffed and padded,
pure-colored or spotted breast. (*CP* 91)

A sexual element creeps into the description, as stereotypical adjectives for short and dark-skinned natives, “swarthy” and “squat,” are used to describe “a few palm” trees, but their “delicate” beauty — perhaps a more European aesthetic value — is also admired. The “big symbolic birds,” possibly parrots or macaws, are provocatively silent, and provocatively bare just one breast. Here the colonial reading of the landscape, according to the Garden of Eden plot, ironically comes to the foreground. “Sin” with a capital “S” appears, personified in a group of lizards who are transfixed with desire for “the smaller, female one” whose “wicked tail” sticks “straight up and over, red as a red-hot wire.”

From this point, into the third stanza, Bishop slyly introduces the problematic question of the sexual Conquest of Brazil. The Portuguese Knights of the Order of Christ go beyond their divinely sanctioned mission in pursuing native women with their aggressive sexuality. Hard and pointed as nails, yet tiny and even ridiculous in their noisy, awkward armor, they advance into the overwhelming, enormous jungle landscape:

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. (CP 92)

Just as the Portuguese imposed their Christian ideas of the Sinful temptations of wild Nature on the Brazilian landscape and natives, so they impose their desires for land and a more or less feudal society, and hypocritically indulge themselves in Sin, pursuing the native women with an energy that is suggestive of rape:

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— (CP 92)

The metaphor of the tapestry, “taken off the frame” in the first stanza, returns, as the Christians aggressively penetrate the jungle. It is hard to say how we are to perceive this aggression, but we do know that Bishop did some research into allegations about the early sexual relations of colonist and colonized. In the Time-Life book *Brazil*, she quotes Pedro Vaz de Caminha, a scribe on Pedro Alvares Cabral’s flagship, who describes the appeal of the native women. She concludes that the Portuguese were “eager miscegenationists almost immediately” (28). It is difficult to know whether this phrase can be ascribed to Bishop or to her editors, who changed her language in many instances. Whatever the case, she is more ambiguous in the poem, suggesting the fear of native women, like hunted birds, who call out to each other as they flee the Christians, and disappear further and further into the jungle to escape:

those maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it. (CP 92)

In these closing lines, there is a faint echo of the end of “Arrival at Santos.” Like the Portuguese colonists, the American tourists are “driving [into] the interior.” Presumably the intentions of the tourists are more benign; they hope to find and appreciate a different world that might lead them to a better life than the one they left behind in America, as Bishop in fact did. Of course, Bishop does not resolve the questions posed by linking the figures of the tourist and the colonist as she does in these two poems. But the link itself is important and suggestive, posing problems about whether the tourist can avoid mimicking the attitudes of the colonist, in whose footsteps she inevitably follows. This ambiguous presentation, of sexual interaction between the conquer-

ing knights and the native women, places the tourist-reader in the uncomfortable position of interpreting one of the most charged and problematic interactions of the contact zone.

As it turned out, Bishop left Brazil after the suicide of de Macedo Soares in 1967, for which some friends and family cruelly blamed Bishop. But a debacle with another article about Brazil for the popular American press had already soured her relations with many of her Brazilian friends in 1965. *The New York Times Magazine* commissioned a short piece about Carnivale on the 400th anniversary of the city of Rio. Her persistent attempts at subtlety and historical scope in this article led the editor to send her a curt telegraph: “WE[']RE NOT INTERESTED HISTORY OF RIO” (Vassar 42.14). The reaction in Rio to the rather critical article, however, was fierce. She had complained of the commercialization of Carnivale and at the same time celebrated the event’s, and Rio’s, harmonious racial and religious diversity. Bishop’s biographer argues that her “chief literary tools—irony and understatement” had been missed, and more progressive Brazilian readers found her celebration of racial harmony in Brazil to be acceptance of a racist social structure. For a time, Bishop avoided Rio entirely because of the reaction to the article (Millier 362-366).

A more successful evocation of the problems of Carnivale was, again, a poem. Bishop had begun “Pink Dog” in 1963, but did not manage to finish it for *Questions of Travel* or her last volume, *Geography III*; it was published in *The New Yorker* in 1979 (Millier 545). The addressee of the poem is an almost invisible figure at the Carnivale, a hairless dog. The speaker urges the dog, who stands in for Brazil’s picturesque poor, to be entertaining for the tourists or she will probably be drowned:

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?

....

Now look, the practical, the sensible

Solution is to wear a *fantasía*.

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? (CP 190-191)

The speaker, surely, is the only person paying any attention to the dog. Her satiric tone echoes that of "Arrival at Santos," but it signifies a purely grim irony here. Like the people of Rio who dress up and dance the sambas, the dog has emerged from the slum to have a good time and to amuse and please the tourists, but the life they all will return to is one of dire poverty, squalor and neglected children.

In deciding what to explain to the uninitiated tourist in an unfamiliar place, every tour guide necessarily selects some historical facts or myths for attention and omits others. What should we make of the fact that Bishop followed up "Arrival at Santos" immediately with "Brazil, January 1, 1502"? In introducing her American readers in *The New Yorker* to Brazil, Bishop seemed to decide that the sexual conquest of Brazil by the Portuguese Catholic Knights, in parallel with their "tearing into" the Brazilian landscape, was the fundamental historical knowledge on which to base a further acquaintance with modern Brazil. Her last word on Brazil, in "Pink Dog," returns to the present and evokes the darkest view of the relationship between tourist and native. With equal skill, Bishop evokes the naïve, prejudiced touristic attitude to Latin America, the dark history of exotic geography, invisible to the superficial touristic gaze, and the radical inequalities of the present that the tourist would rather overlook. The fact that she sought to juxtapose these perspectives, at the start of *Questions of Travel* and in her oeuvre as a whole, begins to indicate the awkward position of the American poet abroad, who is also, at times, a post-colonial tourist.

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