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# Difference and proliferation: race in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop

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**ABSTRACT.** The current paper deals with the whole imagination of race in the work of a major American poet. The very subject of race intersects with the question of national identity, also neglected in Bishop's work, although not in the same way. The aim of the discussion is to align the racial text with the national text. How can we understand Bishop's consistent interest in race throughout her poetry, and what effect can be observed in it as a result of her exposure to racial constructs in Brazil that are so different from those of her native United States? We can see this effect manifest even in the controversy over her 1965 magazine article on the quatercentenary of Rio de Janeiro. What does this controversy demonstrate, finally, but that national experience with respect to race turns out to be mutually exclusive? One cannot be in this respect both Brazilian and American—in prose. In poetry, however, it is quite another matter. The subject of race is all of a piece, and has been all along conducted in Bishop's work according to a logic ultimately apart from national construction.

**Key words:** Elizabeth Bishop, 'race', United States, poetry, Brazil, identity.

**RESUMO. Diferença e proliferação: o conceito de raça na poesia de Elizabeth Bishop.** Analisa-se a imaginação de raça na obra de Elizabeth Bishop, uma poetisa importante da literatura estadunidense. O assunto 'raça' cruza com o problema da identidade nacional, também negligenciado na obra de Bishop, embora de modo diferente. A presente discussão alinha o texto racial ao texto nacional. Como pode-se compreender o seu interesse constante sobre 'raça' e quais são os efeitos em sua poesia como resultado de sua exposição às construções raciais no Brasil, as quais são tão diferentes daquelas nos Estados Unidos? Este efeito manifesta-se também em seu artigo numa revista de 1965 referente ao quatercentenário do Rio de Janeiro. Esta controvérsia parece mostrar que a experiência nacional sobre 'raça' é mutuamente exclusiva. Na prosa não se pode ser brasileiro ou estadunidense ao mesmo tempo. Na poesia, parece que os parâmetros são diferentes. O problema deve ser abordado em sua totalidade e, na obra de Bishop, tem sido conduzido de acordo com uma lógica desligada da construção nacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Elizabeth Bishop, 'raça', Estados Unidos, poesia, Brasil, identidade.

## Introduction

The reason that race has not been of much concern to critics of Elizabeth Bishop is not only because the number of her poems markedly about it are relatively small and mostly minor. In addition, race intersects with the question of her national identity. Bishop is simply presumed to be an American, in spite of being raised in Canada or her many years living in Brazil<sup>1</sup>. She is presumed to be an American because she apparently comprehended

herself as such. For example, Bishop comments as follows in a letter to Robert Lowell while rewriting her introduction to the *Anthology of Twentieth Century Brazilian Poetry*: "It's awful to think I'll probably be regarded as some sort of authority on Brazil for the rest of my life" (apud MILLIER, 1993, p. 424). Who else could she be, after all, but an American? Her biographer notes how important it was for Bishop "to restrain her urge to impose a North American, even a New England, standard of judgment" in order to sustain "her strongest writings about Brazil" (MILLIER, 1993, p. 311).

Yet one could cite another letter to Lowell, in which she remarks enviously concerning the assurance his family history gives him, and mentions that once he merely puts down the names "it seems significant, illustrative, American etc." (apud

<sup>1</sup> Bishop's Brazilian experience in terms of a specifically national formation has been the subject of much comment, but her Canadian experience much less so. For an unusually acute reading of the latter, see Jarraway, who explores "Bishop's later positioning as a lesbian" as "one of the possibilities that accrue to her construction of sexuality by virtue of her sliding between cultures from an early age" (JARRAWAY, 1998, p. 246). "In essence", he later remarks, "she proposes to turn a blind eye to universalist (i.e. natural, normal) notions of selfhood, constructing in their place hypothetical (i.e. synthetic, artificial) versions, whose endlessly rhetorical prospect makes true selfhood—even a genuine lesbian selfhood—unattainable, hence spectral" (JARRAWAY, 1998, p. 250). In Jarraway's account, "Canada" is the song of this hypothetical selfhood; in my account, the 'hypothesis' of race takes place under both an 'American' and a 'Brazilian' sign.

HARRISON, 1993, p. 183). Bishop, by contrast, commands no such authority as a national subject. If she is an American, she is not one in the same sense as Lowell. Consequently, the easiest way to understand her consistent interest in race—from the early *Coochie*, *Songs for a Colored Singer*, and *Faustina* to the later *Twelfth Morning; or What you Will*, *Under the Window: Ouro Prêto*, and *Going to the Bakery* is an attempt to rewrite the conditions of her own identity, according to a script whereby racial attitudes either need not be dictated by nationality (and more than by race or class) or else can be expanded to include other perspectives from different historical circumstances.

For the most part, critics have not been kind to this attempt. James Longenbach, for example, finds money given so self-consciously to the beggar by the speaker at the end of *Going to the Bakery* to represent “the complicity of the American tourist” (LONGENBACH, 1995, p. 478). Bishop—the implication goes—could only be writing of such a situation as an American. Similarly, C. K. Doreski writes that “in her poems in ‘North & South’ drawn from the black American subculture, Bishop exposes her lack of comprehending ear for culturally derived language distinctions, especially those still energized by oral rhythms and wordplay” (DORESKI, 1993, p. 121). These songs, she continues, “written by a poet who never psychologically braved the ghetto, sound like cribbings from an imperfectly heard [Billie] Holiday recording” (DORESKI, 1993, p. 123). The implication is, I think, clear: Bishop could only be writing these poems as a white American; when it comes to race, she may as well be a tourist, even in her own country.

Why ‘did’ Bishop write these poems? Why did she write about race? These days, there seems to be a wide consensus about Bishop as one of our supreme poets of fluid selfhood, resisting boundaries, celebrating difference, and seeking out identification with marginalized and dispossessed figures of all sorts, both human and non-human. What is striking, however, is the uneasy presence of race in this consensus. That Bishop wrote about an imaginary Man Moth is all very well. That she wrote about an actual beggar is more troubling. It is one thing to write about a sandpiper. It is another thing to write about a small black boy buried under a load of laundry. One wonders, indeed, if *Manuelzinho* would have drawn the critical attention it has if the man, who could well have been black, was not in fact described in the second line as white, or if *The Burglar of Babylon* would be quite so praised a

performance if the race of Micucù, who is almost certainly black, was in fact mentioned. Race constitutes such a disturbing presence in the Bishop canon because the very subject seems to be treated by the poet as if it “did not matter” as an “issue”, except insofar as still another subject to be treated in the “self-forgetful” way in which poetry is ideally created (apud MILLIER, 1993, p. 346). As a white American – not to say, a New Englander – Bishop should have known better.

#### Logic: Binary and Other

Betsy Erkkilä’s fine discussion of Bishop in the context of the literary and political radicalism of the 1930’s is essential for our understanding of such poems as *Jerónimo’s House*, where race is not marked, as well as *Cootchie*, *Faustine*, or *Rock Roses*, and of course *Songs for a Colored Singer*, where race is quite explicitly marked (see also LONGENBACH, 1995). “As in Bishop’s Brazil poems”, Erkkilä writes, “these Key West poems conjoin active displacements in scale and perspective with a dialectical representation that poses contradictory, alternative, and resistant points of view” (ERKKILÄ, 1996, p. 294). Indeed, perhaps most especially in *Faustina*, it is as if the poem is in on sense ‘all’ points of view, and no particular ‘point’. Or else, to put the question another way, the morally fraught relation of black servant to white mistress is ultimately treated not so much as a political or historical ‘conundrum’: as such an example of a question whose ‘hopelessly proliferative’ nature is itself the deepest concern of the poem.

In a stimulating reading that restores its suppressed erotic text (only alluded to in the subtitle), Susan McCabe is no doubt correct to maintain concerning the relation between servant and mistress that “genuine care threatens to evaporate in the context of social inequality” (McCABE, 1994, p. 125). There is no question this context exists in the poem; the only question is about its development. More provocatively, McCabe suggests something more reflective and theoretical that is not so much absorbed in racism as the construction of race itself; here, she states, just as in *Coochie* (where the servant lies in marl, “black into white” (BISHOP, 1983, p. 46), “whiteness appears as if it might eliminate difference”. The concluding trope of proliferation, then, “means to lose complete control over limitedness and finitude, to see oneself in a more generative scheme” (BISHOP, 1983, p. 126). McCabe is somewhat unclear as to what precisely is so valuable about this scheme, unless it be that the ability to see ‘doubleless’ itself is an absolute good.

What seems to me is most compelling about race in *Faustina* is the way Bishop at once inscribes a binary logic, fixed by the relation of servant and master, while she strives to locate another, more proliferative logic. Having seen a human relation in black and white, can one see 'beyond' it? But how? In *Faustina*, this other logic is, exactly, 'helpless'. A visitor – as if the personification of some structure of seeing not pre-established by the immediate domestic circumstances of the scene – can only leave. However, the need for a viewpoint beyond binarism, and the hegemonic whiteness that supports it, has been representable by Bishop in terms of colors, from her very first poem. (For a theoretical background of this hierarchy, see Derrida (1982), *White Mythology*). "Are they assigned", the speaker wonders at the end of "The Map, or can the countries pick their colors?" (BISHOP, 1983, p. 3)

Deborah Weiner has a spirited criticism of Bishop for continually reestablishing the very binarism that I find her striving to open up, expand, and transform. "[F]or Bishop people and places are often either one or the other" – that is, superior or inferior, self or other, here or elsewhere, especially with respect to Latin America (WEINER, 1989, p. 211). But this seems to me to get Bishop all wrong, right from the start, where question of representation are in fact prominent and the specific subject of color is immediately written out as one form through which to question everything we get 'assigned' to us by our various countries. Weiner's critique amounts to a consideration of *Faustina* (a poem she never mentions) without its proliferation. Or it gives us a Bishop with no mention of her sandpiper, obsessed with 'something' amid another hopeless proliferation: "The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and grey/mixed with quartz grains, rose, and amethyst" (BISHOP, 1983, p. 131).

Victoria Harrison states as follows about this sand: "its grains can ever only partially meet the terms of this world" (HARRISON, 1993, p. 41). Just so, I believe, there is a certain scandal that abides in Bishop's treatment of race, and that surfaces particularly in discussions of individual poems. It is as if she would treat black as merely one color among many, even when embodied in the person of a servant. How can this be, we ask? About what subject is an individual – as opposed to a sandpiper – expected to be *less* particular? Country by country, everywhere on earth, each one of us is assigned a place in a nation's historical development, behavior patterns, and classification systems with respect to race<sup>2</sup>. We can't ignore this place. Thus,

Cornel West writes that each group of European immigrants "had to learn that they were 'white' principally by adopting an American discourse of positively valued whiteness and negatively charged blackness" (WEST, 1993, p. 20). There was no other way to 'be' American then, and – West would argue – there is no other way to be American now but to relearn the purely constructed, nation-specific nature of our discourse on race.

The trouble is, the subject in Bishop refuses to be absorbed the terms of this discourse, and therein lies the strangeness of her poems about race. In them, neither is white positively valued nor is black negatively valued. Black remains black, and white white. The categories are neither inverted nor deconstructed. What a small group of poems on the subject of black and white does accomplish is even more mysterious, I believe, and perhaps more disturbing. The poems simply 'describe' race as if on the model of epistemology rather than social critique. Although, as I have indicated – and as Bishop's critics have abundantly demonstrated – elements or dimensions of such a critique are not absent from the poems, their accent ultimately falls elsewhere, usually on a dialectical synthesis that does not, or cannot, take place, before the appearance of a myriads of discrete particulars, such as the wave upon wave at the conclusion of *Cootchie*. The seeds at the end of the last of the *Songs for a Colored Singer* present these particular in a more generative (if still enigmatic) light, while the "hopelessly proliferative" nature of the 'problems' at the end *Faustina* recreate particulars in a more abstract, darker vein<sup>3</sup>.

### Confounding national boundaries

It may well be the case that Bishop's life in Brazil enabled her to realize blackness as a more authoritative subject in her poetry. But this is a difficult assessment to make. Would *Twelfth Morning*; or *What You Will* have been inconceivable without the experience of Brazil? At the end of a carefully composed scene, we recall, the young black man, Balthazàr, eventually appears, fresh, in sheet phenomenal force of particular being, "flashing that the world's a pearl, and I, I am/its highlight!" (BISHOP, 1983, p. 110-111). He is merely,

tied into painful knots by virtue of legislative, social scientific, and media practices of racial classifying persons. These practices are evinced in racial descriptions of past and contemporary social relations and socioeconomic conditions and experiences as well as in explanations of behavior in terms of either nonwhite biological deficiencies or a white moral deficiency, racism" (WEBSTER, 1992, p. 2). Once these practices are omitted, however, it is not clear what is left to the nation, with the exception of many social scientists now with nothing to do.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison reads the seeds in political terms: "A remarkable poem for Elizabeth Bishop in 1944, the song is necessarily confused because it does not have white confidence that it has mastered the threat of rebellion, nor does it have black confidence in the unshakable strength of its 'conspiring root'" (HARRISON, 1993, p. 102). Dorescki reads the proliferation in the same way: "The inability to pierce the successive layers of our ignorance of class, race, language, and history heightens the vaguely sinister and hostile closure" (DORESCKI, 1993, p. 116).

<sup>2</sup> See Webster, for example, for an argument not against racism but against racial classifications itself. As he writes in his introduction: "American society is being

if gloriously, who he is. Balthazàr is not, like the sandpiper, obsessed; that there is a connection between them, though, is evidenced by the mention of the possible cries of sandpipers in the third stanza of *Twelfth Morning*. Instead, Balthazàr is that rarest of figures, a thoroughly singular being not even a national one, unless we insist upon reinstating the social and political framework in which he has his life and being.

As a poet, Bishop has no interest in this framework. This is so not because she had no interest in the condition of blacks in Brazil but merely because, as Longenbach suggests, she was unusually comfortable (in contrast to, say, Lowell) with what he terms “the reduction of political valence to poetic form” (LONGENBACH, 1995, p. 482). (Her one direct treatment of slavery can be found in *A Trip to the Mines—Brazil*, rather significantly, I think, unpublished, surely at least in part because unfocused). In order to understand this comfort, we might look at a well-known example of discomfort, which arose when, at the conclusion of an article on Rio de Janeiro’s quatercentenary for the *New York Times Magazine* of March 7, 1965, Bishop attempted to contrast the self-consciousness of American race-relations with the unselfconsciousness of Brazilian race relations. She gives an example: a billboard showing a young Negro cook, overcome with her pleasure in having a new gas stove, leaning it to kiss her white mistress, who, in turn, leans across her side of the stove as they kiss each other on the cheek.

Granted that the situation is not utopian, socially speaking, and that the advertisement is silly, Bishop asks, “but could it have appeared on billboards, or in the newspapers, in Atlanta, Ga., or even in New York? In Rio, it went absolutely remarked upon, one way or the other” (apud HARRISON, 1993, p. 167). Upon publication of the article, however, a Brazilian critic was moved in a Rio newspaper to remark, charging that the very unself-consciousness Bishop was praising was in fact an example of racism on her part, simply by noticing the billboard as a racial text, as well as by failing to understand that neither cook nor mistress is actually unaware of race in the way Bishop presumes. What are we to make of this incident—the one public moment of Bishop’s life in Brazil and the only one in her whole life involving a social issue? Harrison notes that, in her notes for her *Time-Life* book, *Brazil*, the poet was much taken by the theories of the great Brazilian historian of race, Gilberto Freyre, and then mentions a subsequent public rejoinder to the newspaper by Bishop herself, in which she cites in defense of her own progressive racial views *Songs for a Colored Singer*, published over twenty years earlier.

Alas, however, if Bishop took her views on race to be continuous throughout her career, this incident

demonstrates that the views cannot be stretched across two continents. Part of the reason is that, just as the earlier ‘Songs’ discloses that American attitudes about race are not uniform (whites, for instance, presume to write about black experience), Bishop’s attempt to politicize her own poetry only reveals that Brazilian attitudes about race are not uniform either—it depends upon class; Harrison very astutely argues that Bishop effectively falls between the cracks separating upper-class and lower-class Brazilian racial attitudes (as characterized by the poet in the *Time-Life* book). The rest of the problem of boundaries is simply that national experience with respect to race turns out to be mutually exclusive. Rather than some putatively freer or more careless Brazilian attitude on race acting as a corrective to Bishop’s more troubled, guilty American (or New England) conscience, the one, if anything, confounded the other. That is, when they were situated as respective national practices (as apart from poetry they inescapably had to be). The conclusion from this episode is inescapable: one is either American or Brazilian with respect to race. In society, one cannot be both.

However, I would argue that this is precisely what one *can* be in the poetry—and more. In this very public moment where Bishop was forced to take some sort of ‘stand’ on race as an American in Brazil we can detect that the subject of race in her poetry had all along been conducted according to a logic ultimately apart from national constructions. According to it, one need not be either one thing or another. Instead, both things can proliferate into a third thing, on the model of the triple ‘something, something, something’ that Bishop’s sandpiper is looking for, or rather that he is enacting as the basis of how to look in the very process of looking. Of course, this is, if one likes, a ‘utopian’ way of seeing, especially with respect to a subject that each country on earth variously insists upon situating as literally either black or white<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, I agree with Longenbach’s reading of Bishop’s words in the *Times Sunday Magazine* describing and then commenting on the advertisement as “being closest to Bishop’s sensibility” because of its transgression of the social boundaries of race as well as gender and class. “More idealistic than ‘Going to the Bakery’, (but not as utopian as ‘Under the Window’),” he continues, “it offers an image of the freedoms that Bishop yearned for and too rarely found” (LONGENBACH, 1995, p. 483). To him the words (if

<sup>4</sup> For the standard account in English about Brazilian racial attitudes, see Degler (1971). For a less polar, more current view, see the *Afterword* of Hess and Da Matta (1995), where Hess speculates upon Brazil’s relation to the United States as “a different mix of general characteristics share by each country in different mix of general characteristics shared by each country in different ways and to different degrees”. Thus, thinking about the huge American underclass and the enormous gap between rich and poor, he concludes thus: “I also think about Brazil as I puzzle through discourses on multiculturalism in the United States and our transition from a relatively bipolar system of black/white race relations to a system with multiple and mediating categories” (HESS; DA MATTA, 1995, p. 297).

not the episode) become, in effect, part of the poetry, even if the poetry cannot become part of social life, which, with respect to race, is manifest as national practice or it is not manifest at all.

This practice starts very early. Perhaps it begins, for example, when one is nearly seven years old, one day with one's aunt, waiting in a dentist's office and reading a magazine. Race is only an explicit presence in Bishop once more after *Questions of Travel*, in the first poem of her last published volume, *Geography III*, when the child of "In the Waiting Room" sees "black, naked light bulbs" (BISHOP, 1983, p. 159). Is there an allusion here to the 'eighty watt bulb' of "*Faustina* that illumines so many shades of white and betrays us all" (BISHOP, 1983, p. 72)? Race functions as a trope for illumination in Bishop, and what it illuminates is always in excess of the social codings that would contain it. (Is this why, to Bishop's Robinson Crusoe, Friday's race is simply ignored?) All critics of *In the Waiting Room* agree that the poem is about boundaries, though only McCabe (1994) and Lee Edelman (1985) emphasize the specific 'valence' of race.

The 'horrifying' breast of the African women do not only unhinge the girl. This reading is too narrow for a poem where the whole racial and national ground for a white, American girl to behold a black, African woman is expanded. "We can deny our connection with those in Africa", McCabe writes, "but Bishop recommends that we examine our 'unlikely' likenesses. Place disappears through the child's imaginative sympathy, and Worcester collapses, temporarily, into Africa" (McCABE, 1994, p. 227). The waiting room, that is, at the end "was sliding/beneath a big black wave/another, and another" (BISHOP, 1983, p. 161). We return once again to the sea at the end of *Coochie*, but with two differences. First, where wave upon wave is seen as desperately 'proffering' the space of the black woman's grave in the earlier poem, the sea in the later poem is simply implacably present as its own immensity. Secondly, where *Coochie's* grave lies at the very outside in marl 'black into white', the child's waiting room becomes immersed in currents whose coloration is reversed.

Are we entitled to suggest from this comparison that Bishop's views on race somehow changed or evolved over the course of her career? I don't think so. The most we can say, it seems to me, is that the subject was increasingly seen more expansively and encompassingly, as benefits someone whose whole sense of life was presented to her as a series of questions of travel, and whose questions of travel arose from a conviction of a plenitude of possibilities founded upon a dearth of choices. We are always, for better or worse, as at the end of *In the Waiting Room*, in one place, at one time, and in one country. In this

scheme, race functions in two ways. It represents both a part of the map through which we represent our connections as well as our divisions to each other, and the ruin of the connections. Insofar as we have to grow up, we must suffer these connections to be lost in the fateful division between black and white that our separate and respective nations force us to endure. But the best of our poetry allows us to imagine that we might posit a racial subject beyond them all.

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