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Towards an Eco-Curiosity: The Politics of the Gaze in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry.

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'Oh, tourist,/ is this how this country is going to answer you/and your immodest demands for a different world,/ and a better life' (Bishop 89)

The politics of the gaze has historically been tied to processes of otherization, often shaped by asymmetries of power and rigid binaries. In ecological discourse, the gaze constructs the "ecological other" as an object of curiosity—silent, passive, and anthropomorphized. Heather Anne Swanson points out that these curiosities are often sanitized versions of deeper colonial desires, disguising power dynamics as mere fascination (20). Elizabeth Bishop's poetry interrogates this politics of the gaze by casting her eye toward both human and non-human subjects. Her work reveals not only ecological landscapes but also the complex, often troubling, nuances that underlie them. Scott Knickerbocker argues that any ecocritical reading of Bishop must begin with her keen attention to the visual details of the world, which act as a lens through which both natural beauty and colonial histories are seen (56). This creates a site of tension for Bishop's ecopoetics, marked by a decisive detachment, complicating her position as an observer and questioning the boundaries between objective distance and emotional engagement.

This paper will examine the politics of the gaze in Bishop's poetry, focusing on "Arrival at Santos" (1965), "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (1960), "The Moose" (1972), and "The Fish" (1946). I argue that Bishop's portrayal of the ecological other, whether in the landscapes of Brazil or the animals in her poems, is filtered through what I term "Eco-curiosity." This type of curiosity has two modes: one that depersonalizes the subject, turning it into an object of fascination, and another that strives for a more relational, ethical engagement with the non-human world. By applying a postcolonial ecocritical lens, I aim to uncover how Bishop's gaze both reflects and critiques the imperial undercurrents in her depictions of the natural world, particularly in relation to her position as a white, economically privileged woman navigating Brazil's chequered colonial history. Bishop's work destabilizes binaries such as human/ non-human, anthropocentrism/ ecocentrism, and

cultural imperialism/ cultural appreciation, offering a meditation on ecological relationships grounded in wonder.

Bishop's poetry challenges the colonial gaze while complicating the boundaries between ecological engagement and cultural imperialism. By exploring "Eco-curiosity," her work reveals the tensions between observation and relationship, objectification and respect. I will begin by tracing her tourism aesthetic in her poems about Brazil, focusing on her historicising of place as an outsider and the tensions between cultural appreciation and imperial nostalgia. The second section will examine Bishop's portrayal of animals, exposing the contradictions in how humans engage with the non-human world as subject, object, and other. This complex gaze reflects both ecological curiosity and postcolonial tensions, ultimately challenging traditional binaries and suggesting the possibility for more ethical, relational engagement with the ecological and animal "other." Through a postcolonial ecocritical framework, this paper will demonstrate how Bishop's poetry interrogates and disrupts the binaries that govern ecological and cultural identities, proposing a more fluid, ethical understanding of the relationships that bind humans, animals, and the environment.

A Cultural Encounter

Elizabeth Bishop's relationship with Brazil is fashioned around her romantic relationship with her Brazilian partner Lota de Macedo Soares, whom she lived with for fifteen years (Green 817). Critics have often overlooked how Elizabeth Bishop participated in American globalization and how her work reflects a certain socio-economic privilege. Some scholars have suggested that her letters from Brazil offer an alternative to mainstream narratives, providing a personal counterpoint to the often distorted portrayals found in the media. While this reading suggests an empathetic gaze, it does not fully address the politics of privilege embedded in her work. During her time in Brazil, Bishop wrote for *The New*

Yorker, a magazine aimed at a readership with a taste for luxury, including foreign travel, positioning South America as a site of touristic curiosity. In the post-World War II context, regions like South America became increasingly attractive to American tourists, who were drawn to the remnants of imperialism, thus mimicking the "Grand Tour" tradition of 18th-century British imperial culture in a modern global context.

In “Arrival at Santos”, Bishop writes: Oh, tourist,/ is this how this country is going to answer you/and your immodest demands for a different world,/ and a better life” (89). Here, Bishop’s touristic gaze informs her abstract critique of Brazil which both fractures her detached poetic aesthetics and complicates her position as an outsider. In addition, these lines, and indeed the rest of the poem, do not account for Brazil’s colonial past, which creates a sense of unease around the autonomy of power Bishop ascribes to “this country”, and the context that demands an “answer”. Her disappointment toward her first encounter in Brazil is further elucidated in the lines:

> The customs officials will speak English, we hope,
> and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.
>
> 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— (Bishop 90)

Here, Bishop's lines evoke a moment of disillusionment, revealing a layer of cultural tension within the speaker’s first encounter with Brazil. The use of “English” as a lingua franca in this context is telling—it functions as a symbol of neo-colonial dominance. The hope that the customs officials will speak English implicitly aligns the speaker with a privileged Western perspective, where the expectation that Brazil should cater to the customs of

English-speaking tourists speaks to an inherent imbalance in the power dynamics at play. The “port” becomes a symbolic threshold, not just geographically but culturally. It is a boundary that simultaneously connects the violent histories of the colonizer and the colonized and also reveals the inherent tension of this crossing. The port is depicted as “necessary,” a point of passage that is reduced to something transactional, like “postage stamps” or “soap”—things that can be easily exchanged or consumed. This marks the beginning of a critical examination of Brazil, not as a place to understand in its own right, but rather as a destination to be encountered, evaluated, and consumed through the lens of the colonizer’s standards.

Moreover, the attitude toward Brazilian goods is revealing. Bishop describes these objects as having “unassertive colors” and a lack of concern for “impressions,” an evaluation that fits neatly into a colonial discourse of aesthetic and cultural inferiority. The “soap” and “postage stamps” are not just “unassertive”; they fail to meet the expectations of a refined, cosmopolitan world that the speaker comes from. In this way, Bishop’s critique of Brazilian material goods reflects a consumerist, Western gaze that diminishes the cultural and economic complexity of Brazil by reducing it to its failure to meet Western standards of "assertiveness". This suggests a subtle form of cultural imperialism, in which the natural, indigenous qualities of Brazil are belittled, often unconsciously, by the speaker’s privileged perspective.

That said, Betsy Erkkila argues that Bishop mocks her own imperialist and ‘Orientalist’ gestures, noting that the poet’s dialectical approach destabilizes and ironizes the colonial gaze (297-298). Bishop’s self-awareness of the colonial dynamics at play in her interaction with Brazil is crucial. Her depiction of Brazil through these everyday objects is not just a critique of the country itself but a recognition of the way in which such critiques

are rooted in imperialism. The seemingly neutral observation of material goods can be read as a subtle commentary on the colonizer's tendency to reduce an entire culture to its consumer products, thereby rendering it an object of commodification.

However, while Bishop might be ironizing the colonial gaze, there is a deeper, more troubling undercurrent. The "port", "soap", and "postage stamps" become metaphors for the separation between the speaker's world and the land she inhabits. The customs and goods exchanged across these ports are marked by a transactional and extractive logic: Brazil, in Bishop's depiction, is something to be passed through, to be consumed, without truly being understood or appreciated on its own terms, echoing her detached poetic aesthetic. The very act of crossing the port and dealing with these goods reflects the continuation of colonial attitudes under the guise of postwar tourism and indeed, curiosity. The goods are not seen for their own worth but only for how they fulfill the needs of the tourist. This reinforces a dynamic of cultural alienation where Brazil is both seen as a resource and as something "other" to be critiqued and consumed. This critique, however, does not fully escape Bishop's own complicity. As Erkkila points out, Bishop's self-reflexive tone, while it recognizes the colonial structure, is also inextricably linked to her position as a "white middle-class North American woman," (304) which inevitably limits the full disavowal of the colonial gaze. In this sense, Bishop's critique is never fully liberated from the historical and racial imbalances inherent in her position. By critiquing Brazil from the vantage point of privilege, Bishop still works within a system that continues to normalize the Western gaze as the standard against which all other cultures must be measured.

Having said that, Bishop's poetry about Brazil is not static. One such example of forward momentum and transgressive potential is exhibited in the lines: "… a strange and brilliant rag./ So that's the flag. I never saw it before./ I somehow never thought of there

being a flag" (Bishop 89). The "strange(ness)" of the flag evokes curiosity, and the untethering from preconceived ideas, of never having "thought" of an allegorical representation of territory as well as the spatial and symbolic belonging. The term "rag" carries dual weight: it could be seen as a casual, almost dismissive reference to the flag, overlooking the grandiosity of nationhood; yet it also suggests something weathered and enduring, symbolising the cultural and historical weight carried by the flag. This contrast deepens Bishop's realisation that the flag, once unfamiliar, represents more than a mere object; it embodies stories. This shift informs the "brilliance" with which Bishop's ecopoetics reflects a growing awareness of, and attempt at, symbiosis with a culture that is foreign to her own as she "(drives) into the interior" (90). As such, a more ethical and sensitive mode of curiosity begins to temper its hitherto colonial character.

In "Brazil, January 1, 1502", there is a distinct tonal shift that marks a departure from the detached, disillusioned observer in "Arrival at Santos". Bishop writes of "every square inch filling with foliage" (91), "solid—but airy," and "gray moonbursts / splattered and overlapping" (91), where her gaze now embraces the landscape, engaging with its complexity and particularity. The imagery here is rich with tactile and visual texture, suggesting not only a physical absorption into the environment but also a deeper, almost spiritual immersion in its details. Moreover, the consonance created through these lines, particularly the soft "splattered and overlapping", enhances this sense of harmony and fluidity. These sounds evoke a sense of ease; a gentle unfolding of nature rather than a violent rupture. Unlike the harsher, more fragmented tones of the earlier poem, this section carries a sense of interconnectedness and belonging. The landscape is no longer a site of disappointment, as it was in "Arrival at Santos," but rather a space to be explored and understood, a shift that repositions Bishop from a "disappointed tourist" (Ribeiro de Oliveira

43) to a more compassionate and respectful observer. Eco-curiosity thus becomes relational rather than objectifying.

Furthermore, Bishop confronts Brazil's colonial past with a nuanced engagement with land. The poem reveals an Eco-curiosity that is simultaneously historical and philosophical, using the landscape to interrogate the intersections of colonialism, environmental degradation, and the poetics of encounter.

> 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). (92)

The consonance established in the beginning is broken by "massy rocks," "lichens," and "scaling-ladder vines," which introduce fricative sounds. These elements, particularly the "scaling-ladder vines," evoke the imagery of ladders used to scale fortress walls during invasions. The vines seem to "attack" the rocks in a way that mirrors the physical and symbolic process of human encroachment—just as scaling ladders were used to breach strongholds, these vines climb the rocks, consuming and transforming them. The "sooty dragons," too, may be seen as vestiges of colonial architecture, invoking the remnants of imperial structures and the violence tied to colonial expansion. This juxtaposition between the purity of nature and the presence of these invasive, almost militaristic images roots the

anthropocentric destruction of ecology in colonization, drawing attention to the dissonance between nature's purity and human encroachment. The use of "Sin" as a foregrounded concept critiques both the material and political violence of colonization, marking the land as forever altered by human presence. This is emphasized by the use of "theirs" in Bishop's poem, which signals the possessive claim of the colonizer. By invoking this possessive, Bishop positions herself as both observer and participant in the negotiation of history, culture, and geography. The curiosity in Bishop's eco-poetics now interrogates what is "threatened from underneath," probing the persistent effects of colonial violence on the land and its ecology. This interrogation positions her work within a framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, which, as Huggan and Tiffin argue, "preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness" (14). Bishop's depiction of the landscape's beauty, the "lovely hell-green flames" and "oblique and neat" vines is thus marked as inseparable from its history of exploitation.

Through both poems, Bishop takes on the role of what Inhoff calls a "liminal tourist" for having "produced work that describes a very specific kind of encounter that creates a presence that is not quite tourism… but does follow the beaten paths of travellers and travel-writers" (114). Bishop's position thus complicates conventional notions of exoticisation and otherisation by disrupting the colonial gaze often shaped by race, privilege, and the objectification of foreign lands. Her poetry resists the reductive anthropocentric tendencies that seek to categorize the natural world through simplistic, human-centered language. This complicated relationship with Brazil also carries an implicit gesture of belonging—one that navigates the tension between outsider and insider, tourist and native. The subtleties within this dynamic create a space for a more fluid, expansive understanding of geographic identity, where Bishop's poetics challenge fixed binaries and

argue for a more multitudinal, relational approach to that which is “other.”

“The Animal in General, What Is It?”

When considering the function of the eco-curious gaze, it is important to examine Bishop’s animal-centric poetry as well. Iris Shu-O Huang argues that “an ecocentric vision is seen in Bishop’s poetry, in which other creatures register autonomy, while man is a mere component rather than the dominant protagonist of the landscapes. Such an egalitarian reading discounts the politics of the human gaze that functions to contain the non-human other and thus necessarily posits a hierarchical relationship, however. In “The Moose”, the presence of the human is persistent:

> A man's voice assures us
> “Perfectly harmless . . ."
> Some of the passengers
> exclaim in whispers,
> childishly, softly,
> "Sure are big creatures."
> "It's awful plain.”
> "Look! It's a she!” (Bishop 172)

The “man” is not only a spectator but takes on an authoritative role, speaking on behalf of the moose. There is a clear demarcation between the passengers and the moose delineated through the use of “us”, which marks a distinct other. Moreover, the symphony of voices that follow contributes to the spectacle of the moose, eliciting a carnivalesque quality. The moments before “—Suddenly the bus driver/ stops with a jolt” (Bishop 172) are feathered with mundane details of everyday life: a bus driver navigating the countryside, “New Economies”, conversations on the bus, “half groan, half acceptance,/ that means ‘Life's like

that./We know *it* (also death)'" (172). Once the Moose becomes a part of the scenery, there is a disruption to this order, which further contributes to the carnivalesque tone. The "otherworld[liness]" of the moose makes it a marvel to gaze upon; a "curious creature", that is meticulously observed "for a moment longer" (173).

Bishop's eco-curious gaze does not remain straightforwardly hierarchical or binary, however. The shift in the moose's depiction in Bishop's poem, from "otherworldly" to "homely as a house" (172), creates a tension that points to the uncanny. The term "homely" suggests familiarity, yet the creature's otherness, in its imposing presence, disturbs that familiarity, evoking a sense of strangeness that is characteristic of the uncanny. The uncanny, as Pramod K. Nayar notes, is not merely a feeling of discomfort; it's about the perception of something as both familiar and unfamiliar, something that resists easy categorization or understanding (115). By the end of the poem, the moose remains elusive, embodying both the domestic and the alien, yet tentatively suggesting a neglected commonality. Furthermore, this duality carries postcolonial implications. The moose, though part of the natural world, is displaced from its environment and placed on a "gravelly road," an industrial setting that hints at colonial and capitalist intrusion. The road, a man-made construct, sharply contrasts with the moose's wildness and natural habitat, symbolising the imposition of human order on the natural world. This inversion of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the unhomely, also resonates with the colonial experience, where the indigenous and the native are both familiar and yet subject to ongoing displacement and distortion by colonising forces. In this context, the moose becomes more than just an animal; it becomes a symbol of the larger tension between coloniser and colonised, human and non-human, anthropomorphism and ecocentrism.

Michael Malay suggests that Bishop's approach to animals in her poetry is not about

mastery or control; rather, she creates a space where her animals become more enigmatic and strange by the end of the poem (62). The moose, much like the fish in “The Fish,” is not an object to be understood or conquered, but a presence that challenges the speaker’s ability to define it. Bishop’s poetic strategy is to complicate our relationship with the animal subject, to confound rather than clarify. The spectacle of the moose is not one of triumph or domination but of disruption, indeed a rupture in the speaker's ability to fully comprehend the non-human subject. This rupture, in turn, reveals the limits of human understanding and underscores the impossibility of ever fully grasping the complexity of the animal other. In this way, the poem moves beyond mere observation, using the moose to question the ethics of representation and the politics of the gaze, offering a transgressive shift that demands a more nuanced, humble engagement with the non-human world.

Similarly, “The Fish” also introduces ideas of the indigenous canny and postcolonial uncanny.

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. (Bishop 42)

Here, “homely” suggests a familiarity towards the fish—yet later on in the poem, it is anthropomorphised: “And then I saw/ that from his lower lip/—if you could call it a lip—”

(43). Malay argues that this "points both to the limitations of the description … as well as the impossibility of avoiding anthropomorphism …In rhyming 'lip' with 'lip', the poem seems to acknowledge this dead end: 'lip' is not quite right and yet the only word at our disposal" (66). According to this line of argument, Bishop's eco-curiosity is shaped and constrained by the limits of language itself, entailing an unfamiliarity with articulating the familiarity of the animal Other: a distinctly uncanny experience. Moreover, the fish is uprooted from its home, "half out of water", implying an unhomeliness in a literal sense, and is held by the speaker who continues to look at it with a perverse curiosity. This further contributes to the uncanniness of Bishop's eco-curious gaze, a consequence of the estrangement resulting from colonial perspectives.

Furthermore, the words "grunting", "battered", and "venerable" all suggests a recognition of the fish's suffering, yet the contemplative pause between having initially "caught a tremendous fish" and "let[ting] the fish go" emphasizes a tension between curiosity and compassion, suggesting that the speaker's engagement with the fish is more about exploration than ethical responsibility. The act of releasing the fish is presented as a "victory" (Bishop 43), symbolising a return to the fish's home and, by extension, a return to freedom from the colonial gaze. However, this gesture fails to account for the harm inflicted in the initial encounter.

I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
. . . . . .
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping

of an object toward the light. (Bishop 43)

Having been plunged out of its habitat and placed firmly as an abject "object" with "shiny entrails, / and the pink swim-bladder" (43), the fish is recognised only for what it survived—exoticising the pain enacted upon it. In this way, Bishop explores the colonial and anthropocentric lens through which we relate to the non-human world, exposing the tussle between human curiosity, ethical responsibility, and what becomes irretrievable in the process. The fish's suffering becomes an object of curiosity rather than genuine empathy, and in this tension between human curiosity and ethical responsibility, what is lost is not just the fish's agency, but a broader sense of ecological engagement.

Derrida's reflections on animal studies, particularly his engagement with his own cat, offer a philosophical framework that resonates here. Regarding "the animal in general", he ponders, "what is it? What does that mean?", and, importantly, "Who is it?" (418)—which blurs the lines between human and animal in accordance with his deconstructive approach. Derrida's deconstructionist thought challenges binary oppositions, arguing that distinctions must be problematised in order to criticise hierarchies of power. This method implies a refutation of essentializing, hierarchical binaries such as human/animal, and as such demonstrates a recognition of the limitations of traditional humanist ideology which prioritises human over animal as a distinct and superior category. By extension, this implies a deconstruction of the binary between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, thereby undermining the perspective of extractivist colonialism. Bishop's poetry, as I have demonstrated, exhibits a similar concern with complicating oppressive binaries, despite (or perhaps as a result of) their entanglement with them. As such, the line "And I let the fish go" (Bishop 43) becomes symbolic of a letting go of limiting ideologies, tools, and subjective frameworks. It represents a shift towards a more complex, relational

engagement with the non-human world, one that acknowledges its autonomy and resists the impulse to dominate or define it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Elizabeth Bishop's poetry serves as an important case study for exploring the politics of the gaze within the context of the ecological other and a postcolonial critique. "The Moose," "The Fish," "Brazil, January 1, 1502," and "Arrival at Santos," uncover the intricate interplay between visual representation, imperial subtexts, and the nuances of perception that are rooted in an inherent curiosity of revealing the other, and indeed, a “postcolonial uncanny” (Nayar 89). Bishop's keen attention to visual detail and her ecopoetic sensibility invite readers to navigate complex power dynamics of observation, undermining dualisms of cultural imperialism/ cultural appreciation, human/ non-human, and anthropocentrism/ ecocentrism. While the poems reflect imperialist narratives and gazes, they also offer opportunities for resistance and critique. Bishop's poetry examined through a (post)colonial ecocritical lens underscores the activist potential of the poetry. Ultimately, Bishop's work calls for a reimagining of our relationships with both the environment and one another. Her work shifts from a straightforward inquiry to a more introspective exploration. The multiple voices in her poems are not distinct characters but projections of a complex, evolving self—one that is constantly questioning, revealing the contradictions and nuances that lie at the heart of human engagement with the ecological other. This self-reflexive approach fosters an eco-curious gaze, one that interrogates the limits of our understanding and challenges the assumptions we bring to our interactions with the non-human world.

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