

ALAS, FOR THE TROPICS OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship on Elizabeth Bishop's works considers mostly discrete deliberations of her life and writing, or concentrates on new and expanded editions of her writing. In addition, much contemporary criticism on Bishop has been preoccupied with responding to Alice Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*. Because of this new focus, Bishop criticism has neglected equally necessary studies on the author's original work. Through close examinations of *Questions of Travel*, Bishop's diary translation *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* and the Brazilian writing of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Elizabeth Bishop, this project revivifies contemporary Bishop scholarship by focusing on the multiple, significant impacts the country and people of Brazil had on Elizabeth Bishop and her work.

PREFACE

Upon recollection, my introduction to Elizabeth Bishop's poetry was sadly lackluster. I remember being in an undergraduate-level English course and reading "The Map," which was placed in an obscure location within an enormous anthology's nearly transparent and wrinkled pages. I also remember being distinctly disappointed with the instructor's rapid interpretation of the poem, the way our class was forced to careen chaotically from one author to the next, one poem to the next, never appreciating one before compulsorily proceeding to yet another. It was, after all, a sixteen-week semester; we had a schedule to keep. Even now, after several years have passed, I cannot say this particular way of reading poetry – more of a bounding through poems, really – cultivated much intellectual curiosity or engagement. Couldn't we have savored, waited ever so slightly, let the words sink in longer than the duration of a single class meeting? Considering the painstaking *decades* Bishop frequently spent on a single poem, sometimes altering only a line or two, a word here or there...our class could have spared, I think, more than such a brief and dissatisfying moment on her work.

What I now consider my actual introduction to Elizabeth Bishop's work in a graduate course at Montana State University is what ultimately led – however eventually, however meanderingly – to this project. We didn't just read, but lingered over various poems such as "Cirque de Hiver," "Brazil, January 1, 1502," "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," "Arrival at Santos," and others. These winding, slow, close appraisals – in the somewhat forgotten vein of new criticism – of Bishop's writing proved much more satisfactory than the previous sweeping interpretations and swift

glimpses I had experienced prior, and I loved them. I enjoyed meticulously observing Bishop's poetry – similar, I would like to think, to the way in which she herself was constantly examining and re-examining her world and her unique place within it.

I became especially drawn to Bishop's writing after spending the better part of a summer delving into her letters, in both the *Words in Air* and *One Art* collections. Morning after morning, I prepared a fresh pot of dark coffee, poured a mug, and indirectly lived Bishop's travels, writing fears, unexpected awards, close friendships, and humid years spent in Brazil. Perched on the worn concrete stairs outside my own overheated third floor apartment, waiting for a breeze to come, I quietly turned the pages, experienced the intimate proceedings of her daily life. Reading letters, an art so thoroughly neglected by so many in our contemporary world of ceaseless technological dependence, supplied that breeze I was waiting for, provided a daily exercise in slowing down my own frenetic life for a few hours. The sheer number of letters Bishop wrote during her lifetime is staggering to think about now; her missives fascinated me during the dry months of a Bozeman summer in 2013.

And so, my project began to take shape. Originally I had planned on merely writing separate papers, all on Elizabeth Bishop, as she quickly became a large portion of my research interests. After a few months, however, I realized it was Bishop's incessant searching for home while in the midst of seeking travel, her eventual finding of a home in Brazil, her Brazilian writings in particular, which held, for me, the most intrigue. So it was that a first small seminar paper for a poetry class on Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Frost transformed into a few longer and connected papers, then chapters, then the pages

now before you. Brazil, I discovered, Brazil and Bishop's time there, Brazil and its significant influence upon her and her writing, her translating...Brazil was where my writing on Bishop actually began to take on the silhouette of a more extensive project.

I am struck by the complex motifs of home and travel which recur in Bishop's writing. For her, home was nearly always an elusive and ever-shifting impression, and travel essentially became a substitute for home, or at the very least a form of continual anxious searching for it. Perhaps because home and family were well-defined for me during childhood (a large family of ten, we only moved twice in my formative years, and my family has lived in the same small, sweltering southern city for over 25 years) it is travel and instability which never cease to ignite my imagination. The very travel in which she engaged and the instability with which Bishop perpetually grappled I suppose you could say I envied.

Curious that Bishop's haphazard landing in Brazil at age 40, just as she was attempting to make a much longer journey, is what led to her first home in decades. Since being uprooted from her native Great Village in Nova Scotia as a small child, the unhealthy and shy Elizabeth Bishop bounced from house to house and city to city, from one set of extended family members or one small group of literary friends to another. Bishop moved frequently and lived in numerous places during her lifetime, among them Nova Scotia, Maine, New York, Key West, San Francisco, Seattle, and, of course, Brazil. The number of places where Bishop lived makes the distinction between the "Brazil" and "Elsewhere" sections in her book *Questions of Travel* undeniably significant. The importance of Brazil in allowing Bishop to find roots, to finally *stay* somewhere, cannot

be overemphasized. There is, however, more to Brazil than the home it provided for Bishop. The all-encompassing influences of such a vast land and its people on Bishop's life and writing are what I explore in the following chapters.

Though George Monteiro's *Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil and After: A Poetic Career Transformed* is supposed to consider the profound influence of Brazil upon Bishop, the chapters unfortunately essentially get lost in trivial arguments about Bishop's actual knowledge of Brazilian culture and complex, rather forced connections between her life and her poems. Monteiro notes derisively that, in "Arrival at Santos," Bishop "may think she is going 'to the interior,' but she isn't, at least not in Brazilian cultural terms" (37), and erroneously contends that "it cannot be said that Bishop ever demonstrates a poet's rage for order" (44). While Monteiro's chapters thus hinge upon constrained interpretations of Bishop's work, the recent collection of essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, though often thought-provoking, provides mostly discrete considerations of Bishop's life and writing, lacking in ebullience. Furthermore, *Elizabeth Bishop in the 21st Century: Reading the New Editions* (new and expanded editions of her writing that flourished in the years surrounding the centenary of her birth) is entirely dedicated to providing "a timely, in-depth, multifaceted exploration of the impact of these...major new editions on our understanding of Bishop as a writer, a person, and a cultural icon" (3). But what, I wonder, has happened to our exploration of Bishop's original work?

Prior to these most recent critical forays, much current scholarship on Elizabeth Bishop has been concerned with responding to *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box*:

Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments, a collection edited by Alice Quinn and published in 2006. Quinn's book was the first of these new Bishop books, followed by the updated *Prose and Poems*; *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*; and *Elizabeth Bishop and the New Yorker*, all of which have inspired various critical reactions, various new topics for excavation, discussion and illumination. The swirl of activity around these recently published works is logical; excitement over posthumously published and edited literature in particular is nothing if not predictable, and the remarks on Quinn's publication, especially, range from animated praise to scathing criticism, making it a magnet for widespread appraisal. David Orr effuses, "[t]he publication of *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*, which gathers for the first time Bishop's unpublished material, isn't just a significant event in our poetry; it's part of a continuing alteration in the scale of American life...This is the devoted editing this material needed and deserved" (*TNYTBR* Online). On the other side of the debate, in "The Art of Losing," the acclaimed poetry critic Helen Vendler claims that this collection "should have been called 'Repudiated Poems'... Students eagerly wanting to buy 'the new book by Elizabeth Bishop' should be told to go back and buy the old one, where the poet represents herself as she wished...The eighty-odd poems that this famous perfectionist allowed to be printed over the years are 'Elizabeth Bishop' as a poet. This book is not" (*The New Republic* Online). In short, Bishop enthusiasts have been swept away in a mad dash to elucidate, critically analyze, and pontificate on her uncollected fragments and new editions, and I am left with Vendler wondering why it seems we have all but abandoned the works Bishop chose to publish during her lifetime, works which

constantly invite deeper scrutiny and connection-making. Yes, analyzing posthumously published, incomplete drafts is a necessary and thrilling enterprise. It is an exciting thing to visualize Bishop, the perfectionist, working through unpublished drafts line by line, moment by moment. However, I would argue that taking up a tattered copy of one of Bishop's deliberately published works and picturing this poet tirelessly tweaking her craft, perhaps as Lota de Macedo Soares passes through an adjoining room in their home in the Brazilian countryside, Bishop's toucan Sammy perched nearby, is still the more vital enterprise.

All this is to say that up until this point the multiple impacts on Bishop from living in Brazil have not been explored in a satisfyingly cohesive manner. Why have we not yet discussed some of Bishop's Brazilian poetry, prose, and translating, specifically of *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* as these works are inextricably connected to her time and experiences in Brazil and the more famous poems that came from them? In "Bishop and the Poetic Tradition," Bonnie Costello aptly writes that "Bishop is more a poet of questions than of dogmas, and the question of the presence of the past...informs her work from beginning to end" (*Cambridge Companion*). This very phenomenon, the past's presence and the continuing significance of Bishop's original works, especially now, is the focus of this project.

I'll begin my discussion of Elizabeth Bishop's Brazilian life and writing with a detailed reading of her third collection of poems, *Questions of Travel*, which will then continue to be a subject of focus throughout these pages. Upon first perusing the poems within this volume, I became fascinated by the pronounced dichotomy between southern

warmth and abundance and northern coldness and absence. I am also drawn to Bishop's arrangement of this collection and feel its singularity invites speculation far deeper than dismissively chalking it up to merely being a savvy marketing decision.

And one cannot, or at least should not, look at *Questions of Travel* without simultaneously broaching the subject of Bishop's childhood traumas. Through interwoven examinations of her prose works concerning childhood memories, as well as an in-depth look at Bishop's translation of a Brazilian childhood diary titled *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* I will emphasize in my second chapter how shortsighted it is of us to neglect Bishop's past works in favor of her present fragments. These published works, though now thoroughly reviewed and appreciated, continue nevertheless to invite fresh analysis and imagination. Their current misplacement is unfortunate, especially in light of the fact that not all angles of inquiry have been exhausted. On the contrary, some have yet to even be broached.

In particular (and this is my third chapter), I am especially interested in how the perpetual question regarding the presence of the past in Brazil meaningfully shapes both Bishop's *Questions of Travel* and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, published ten years before Bishop's book. The Brazilian connections between Bishop and Lévi-Strauss invite examination, but no current work looks explicitly at these meaningful links. Though Bishop made few references to Levi-Strauss in her correspondence and prose, we do know she read and respected his work. In a letter to Robert Lowell which discusses her desire to write some "entertaining and informative, and, with luck, a bit surprising" prose on Brazil, she notes, "[t]he old naturalists are the only good writers on the subject

I've ever read – and perhaps Lévi-Strauss" (*Words in Air*, 584). Both authors traveled extensively, spent years living in the impoverished warmth of Brazil, and wrote profusely on the disillusionment which accompanies the unmet exotic expectations of the traveler. Notably, *Tristes Tropiques* has its own kind of "Brazil" and "Elsewhere" division that is comparable to the one found in *Questions of Travel*. Bishop's and Lévi-Strauss' unattained expectations, anxieties about observation, and continued attempts to accurately record others' lives mark these singular poet-ethnographers' works in an important way which necessitates vigorous study. Alas, indeed, for the currently neglected tropics of Elizabeth Bishop.

I have attempted, in the ensuing pages, to take a lingering look back at Elizabeth Bishop's "Brazilian" works. Bishop once remarked that the best way to get to know an author is to read the original works, the letters, and the biographies, not the criticism. Though I read many critical works on Bishop in preparation for these chapters, I have tried to stick to close readings of her poetry, prose, letters, and the biographical works *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* and *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. This seemed a fitting choice based on Bishop's own wariness regarding writing criticism throughout her life. What better place to go, after all, than the source? How in particular, I wondered, did *Questions of Travel* and Bishop's time in Brazil, her recollections of childhood and her examination of another's childhood years, and her own perusals of and guidance from Claude Lévi-Strauss' work...how did these numerous facets of her life converge so intricately and influence her so deeply? I hope to have at least skimmed the surface of answering that question, and I hope in the process to have

revivified and altered our understanding about some of Elizabeth Bishop's original work.

Much remains to be seen, valued, and written about one of the 20th century's most masterful poets.

NORTHERN RECOLLECTIONS FROM SOUTH OF THE EQUATOR: THE
DIALECTICS OF “BRAZIL” AND “ELSEWHERE”

“It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia -- geography must be more mysterious than we realize, even.”

-Elizabeth Bishop

In “Alice in Wonderland: The Authoring and Editing of Elizabeth Bishop’s Uncollected Poems,” Jonathan Ellis discusses Bishop’s ability to write about “the traveler [who] never sees things as those at home see them” and argues that Bishop’s “general habit” is to show “travel as an activity that destabilizes and unsettles human identity” (*EB in the 21st Century*, 13). It is ironic, then, that Bishop’s own voyage to Brazil led to her most stable sense of identity. In this chapter, I want to focus on how Bishop, in her newfound Brazilian stability, appears to have experienced flashing, brilliant moments of detailed childhood memories which were previously unavailable to her in her writing. Her short story titled “In the Village,” and the period in which she wrote and first published it (the early 1950s), make this recollection apparent.

Brazil served as the catalyst for Bishop to write explicitly on her childhood, especially those long-ago years in Nova Scotia. The compelling arrangement of *Questions of Travel* accentuates the significant contradictions of Brazilian warmth and of “Elsewhere” coldness, of South American lushness as opposed to Northern absence. That is, the warmth (of both Brazil itself and of Bishop’s relationships there) is presented frequently in direct opposition to the cold, deficient elements of the “elsewheres” Bishop writes about in the second portion of the book. Why this striking arrangement? Why this

conspicuous dichotomy? Essentially, when we view both Brazil and the people to whom Bishop became closely connected there as the sudden facilitators for these childhood memories, for the subsequent writing Bishop embarked upon, we can satisfactorily pose a possible answer to this question.

Bishop did not write extensively about her challenging childhood until after landing unexpectedly in Brazil at age 40. A severe allergic reaction and her resulting lengthy recuperation time combined to thwart previous travel plans. In a typically humorous letter to her physician Dr. Anny Baumann in 1952, Elizabeth explains her unanticipated predicament:

Happy New Year...I have a long tale of woe to tell you – about three weeks ago I suddenly started having a fantastic allergic reaction...The doctor thought it was to the fruit of the cashew...I only ate two bites of one...and the next day I started to swell – and swell and swell; I didn't know one *could* swell so much. I couldn't *see* anything for over a week...I haven't been able to write or type because of my hands. (Giroux 231)

As she recuperated, Bishop spent time describing the fascinating Brazilian wildlife to far-away friends; in a letter to Marianne Moore she writes, “I found a hummingbird in the pantry...I got it out with an umbrella...the butterflies have come for the summer – some enormous, pale blue iridescent ones, in pairs...it is all wonderful to me and my ideas of ‘travel’ recede pleasantly every day” (Giroux 238). The irony here – her ideas of travel receding only after Bishop moved away from the United States, and her ability to feel at home only amidst the exotic – cannot be over exaggerated.

Bishop's sheer contentment remaining in Brazil is made increasingly evident upon further perusal of her correspondence with friends. In a letter to Kit and Ilse Barker, Bishop becomes tickled upon receiving her “lifelong dream”: the gift of a toucan

she decides to name “Uncle Sam, or Sammy” (Giroux 234). Later, in the same letter, she asks, “[i]s everybody working? – more than I am, I hope, but I have been so happy that it takes a great deal of getting used to. My troubles, or trouble, seems to have disappeared completely since leaving N.Y.” (Giroux 235). Bishop weathered an extremely difficult (though professionally productive), alcohol-fueled stay during her time at Yaddo, not long before she left for Brazil. A friend named David Weimer recollects Bishop’s anxious time in New York City, as well: “Once the question arose as to why she had left New York to come to Brazil, and she said something about the intellectual group in New York being so small and so full of gossip that she just couldn’t stand it anymore” (Fountain and Brazeau, 179). In another letter to Dr. Baumann, she notes Brazil “is really a wonderful country in some ways...when you arrive, the janitor and the porter and the cook all hug you tenderly and call you ‘madame, my daughter’...” (Giroux 244). Through the formation of sincere relationships – with Lota, with household helpers such as the cook and her husband (who was Lota’s gardener), Lota’s large extended family, Mary Stearns Morse, and later, people like their maid Joanna Dos Santos da Costa and the young intellectual and poet named Flavio – Bishop’s sense of living within a connected, *warm* community was undoubtedly stronger in Brazil than it had previously been in America. In short, the country and its people provided Bishop with a stronger sense of acceptance, which was no small matter in the shy poet’s life. In particular, Bishop’s budding relationship with her hostess Lota de Macedo Soares provided a newfound security.

In the early period of Bishop's acquaintance with Lota de Macedo Soares "[t]here were telephone calls, then more frequent visits by Lota once Bishop was feeling better [after the allergic reaction], and, slowly and genuinely, [their] affection for each other grew" (Fountain and Brazeau, 128). James Merrill recalls a significant moment early in the couple's relationship:

Elizabeth went into the whole story of how she settled in Brazil...Lota had invited her to stay. Lota said she could very, very easily add a little studio apartment for Elizabeth...That was really what began the tears [as Elizabeth was telling me this story]. [She] said, I've never in my life had anyone make that kind of gesture toward me, and it just meant everything. (Fountain and Brazeau, 128)

Bishop, an individual who had been relentlessly fleeing her own life and identity for many years, accepted Brazil as a home because it accepted her.

Shortly after Bishop settled down in Brazil and began forming these intimate relationships, she started writing – quite uncharacteristically and in earnest – about her life as a young child in Nova Scotia. In a letter dated October 12, 1952 to Kit and Ilse Barker, Bishop writes, "I am stumped about two [titles] right now. A story was to be called 'Clothes. Food. Animals.,' which I still kind of like, but finally decided was a little chichi – so now it's simply 'In the Village' . . . To my great surprise – I hadn't finished a story in ten years, I think – I suddenly started writing some..."(Giroux 249). At this point, Bishop had been living in Brazil for a full year, during which time she had become noticeably compelled to write about her previously avoided, troubled youth. It seems Brazil, with its "highly impractical mountains... waterfalls...[and] orchids on the trees" (Giroux 248), somehow provided Bishop with the necessary backdrop to write about her

past. In particular, the new and exotic geography of Brazil appears to have been a vital catalyst for Bishop's intensely personal and prosodic "In the Village."

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Questions of Travel* is its decisive, divided arrangement: "Brazil" poems are followed by the "Elsewhere" section, which begins with the prose piece "In the Village." That "Elsewhere" begins with prose concerning Bishop's childhood in Nova Scotia makes "In the Village's" setting the pivotal scene, in a sense, out of all the other "elsewheres" which comprised Bishop's life. And it begins remarkably and unforgettably with "[a] scream, the echo of a scream, hang[ing] over that Nova Scotian village" (*PPL* 99). Since Nova Scotia was one of Bishop's early childhood homes, it might initially come as a shock when she first recalls the sound and ensuing echo of a scream, a scream, we later find, which comes from her mentally unstable and grieving mother. While Lota's invitation to Bishop to stay in Brazil was one of wholehearted tenderness and warm welcome, Bishop's recollection of her early childhood home in the North is plagued by the aching memory of her own mother's chilling and terrifying scream.

The narrator's unsettled ownership of herself and of people who were present in these tumultuous years of her childhood plays a significant role in "In the Village." For instance, while the ladies are at the dressmaker's she notes, "The dress was all wrong. She screamed. The child vanishes" (*PPL* 100). Here, the "she" is Bishop's mother, and "the child" is not an unknown youth, but Bishop herself; these sentences create an intentional, rather cold and palpable separation. David Kalstone aptly observes in *Five Temperaments*, "[t]he child vanishes literally, and metaphorically as well, in that moment

of awakening and awareness of inexplicable adult pain. From this point on the story is told in the first person and in the present tense, as if she had been jolted into reclaiming something first seen as a distant tableau and dream” (24). (Years later, Bishop was still exploring a similar “awareness of inexplicable adult pain” with Aunt Consuelo’s own “Oh!” of pain in “In the Waiting Room.”) Throughout “In the Village,” Bishop refers directly to her grandfather, her grandmothers, and her older and younger aunts. When her mother appears, however, Bishop writes with an obvious disconnect and cold aloofness: “She is with them...she comes and feeds me... ‘Stand up now and let’s see how tall you are,’ she tells me” (*PPL* 106). Bishop bonds with her grandparents and her aunts – the relatives who have taken care of her in the shaky past and who will continue to do so – but persistently isolates herself from her mother both emotionally and physically.

This deliberate distancing from and explicit lack of connection to her mother becomes even more readily apparent when we consider Bishop’s otherwise detailed descriptions concerning additional components in her life and village. After her mother leaves home again, for the last time, Bishop notes succinctly, even curtly, “The front room is empty. Nobody sleeps there. Clothes are hung there” (115). On the same page, Bishop utilizes an *entire paragraph* to describe their “new pig”:

He was very cute to begin with, and skidded across the kitchen linoleum while everyone laughed. He grew and grew...it is unusually hot and something unusual for a pig happens to him; he really gets sunburned, bright pink, but the strangest thing of all, the curled-up end of his tail gets so sunburned it is brown and scorched. (115)

Perhaps the most heartrending aspects of “In the Village” are the repeated, intricate details recalled by Bishop – the meticulous depictions of sounds, objects, neighbors, the new pig, even the family cow named Nelly – which both separate and protect Bishop from clearly remembering and recording the undoubtedly painful details of her mother’s descent into madness. At the end of the story, Bishop mentions simply, “[n]ow there is no scream. Once there was one...But surely it has gone away, forever” (*PPL* 118).

Though the scream and Bishop’s memory of it have clearly not gone away forever – if anything, the scream has effectively become endlessly remembered because of “In the Village” – the intimate particulars of the village are all Bishop seems to need; or, maybe, they are all she can bear to need. Either way, after settling in Brazil, Bishop began to actively recall and write about her years in Nova Scotia, half a lifetime later, and she chose to focus on the details of daily village life during her childhood reminiscences, similar to the way in which her many letters from Brazil included descriptions of daily life in a new country.

Elizabeth Bishop’s decision to place “In the Village” at the start of “Elsewhere” is an intriguing one. Though Robert Lowell’s work on what would eventually become *Life Studies* and his influence in Bishop’s life undoubtedly swayed this specific choice, Ashley Brown also recalls having “a little bit to do with [the arrangement of] *Questions of Travel*: “I suddenly had an idea...My suggestion was that Elizabeth take that wonderful story ‘In the Village,’...which was not very well known outside *The New Yorker*, and put it in the middle, have the Brazilian things first, and then have other poems...follow the story” (Fountain and Brazeau, 192). Despite the clear guidance of

Brown and Lowell, however, we can and should still look at this placement more thoroughly. “In the Village” was first published in December of 1953 in *The New Yorker*, while *Questions of Travel* was not published until 1965, yet Bishop still chose, despite this large gap in time, to place “In the Village” in the middle of her book. Bishop’s urge to write about Nova Scotia, her childhood years, her “elsewheres,” was impacted and even, I would argue, made possible by her close-knit relationships with Lota de Macedo Soares and her household workers; they became more like an extended, communal family than they would (or possibly could) have in a North American setting. Her unplanned residence in Brazil, and the warmth and abundance she found there, ignited a spark in Bishop to write about her childhood. The two were inescapably linked; they had to be represented as such.

More than just a casual choice originally suggested by others and later made by Bishop, “Brazil” and its placement in Bishop’s book is the literal and metaphorical stepping stone to her recollections of earlier times. Brazil – both the geographical location and, more figuratively, the segment of Bishop’s book – had to come *first*, it seems, before Bishop could look, intently, at the “elsewheres” of her life. Seen this way, Brazil is the cause, and Bishop’s ability to write about her past elsewheres becomes a curiously reversed effect. We can even see Bishop’s unanticipated habitation in Brazil and the subsequent relationships she enjoyed there, perhaps, as Bishop’s personal Proustian madeleine. Something as small as a dessert served Proust as a memory jolt; for Bishop, the country and people of Brazil served a similar purpose. The warmth and community of Brazil, that is, somehow shocked Bishop into recollecting (and writing

about) the disparate coldness of her time spent “elsewhere.” This awareness of past coldness, both literal and figurative, defines “In the Village,” where continual recognition of and clashes between warmth and coldness transpire. Before looking closely at the story, though, I would first like to examine the pervasive warmth Bishop depicts in her “Brazil” poetry.

Though the warmth and lushness of the “Brazil” section in *Questions of Travel* is arguably evidenced by most – if not all – of the poems Bishop included in it, for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on three particular poems. “Questions of Travel,” “Squatter’s Children,” and “Song for the Rainy Season” especially depict the sultry, lush elements of the country in which Bishop, at last, was able to settle.

In “Questions of Travel,” we are instantly made aware of the considerably exotic and natural landscape. There are “so many clouds on the mountaintops” they proceed to “spill over the sides in soft slow-motion” (*PPL* 74). Bishop interprets the trees of Brazil as overtly “exaggerated in their beauty” and cozily “robed in pink” (74). She asks whimsically about packing up “one more folded sunset, still quite warm” (74). While the speaker wonders, obviously, at our strong determination and desire to journey to places unknown – a question undoubtedly applicable to an individual who had travelled as much as Bishop had – accompanying these tricky “*never wide and never free*” questions is a backdrop of lushness, of pouring rain deliciously described as “two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence” (75). The absence of a real home, or at the very least the lack of knowing what to call or how to define one’s home, presents itself in the poem as a yearning, final note. However, when we recognize the lushness of the

overall poem – the excess of clouds, mountains, rivers, even the capricious mention of a “still quite warm” and “folded sunset” – we can focus on the clear abundance and warmth Bishop discerns and begins to appreciate in the country and people of Brazil.

In “Squatter’s Children,” the warm elements become less about actual temperature and more about the intangible warmth of close-knit familial relationships. Though the environment around the “specklike girl and boy” is one comprised of “the unbreathing sides of hills,” the children happily “play at digging holes” (*PPL* 76). The children’s innocent and unencumbered happiness is made evident even as “[c]louds are piling up; / [as] a storm piles up behind the house” (76). Strikingly, as the sizeable storm looms on the horizon, “[t]heir laughter spreads / effulgence in the thunderheads” (76). Regarding the impoverished children in this poem, Jonathan Ausubel affirms, “[t]he children’s happy obliviousness to the oncoming storm is not shared by the [speaker],” but I am not inclined to agree (89). Rather, though the speaker is observing from a distance, she also seems to be drawn to the children, *especially after* watching them laughing happily in the face of a fast-approaching storm with their “dancing yellow spot, a pup” who “attends them” (76).

Though the children are destitute, playing in the hard-packed dirt, and forced to listen to (or really, ignore) their “Mother’s voice, ugly as sin” as she “keeps calling to them to come in,” the children are notably *together* throughout the entirety of the poem (76). This togetherness, in the face of such daunting and truly harsh circumstances, is what provides the underlying and surprising warmth of “Squatter’s Children,” and can also be appreciated throughout Bishop’s translation, *The Diary of “Helena Morley,”* as I

will discuss in Chapter 2. Whatever these children do encounter, the speaker of “Squatter’s Children” subtly insists, they will remain “wet and beguiled” with the aid of their own persistent imaginations and merriment (*PPL* 76). The warmth of the squatter’s children is simply acknowledged in their tight, shared bond and their remarkable ability to find joy, however deprived their material circumstances may be.

Moving on from the warm familial connections of “Squatter’s Children,” Bishop’s arguably even more tropical “Song for the Rainy Season” presents lavishly lush observations of the natural world of Brazil, a humid, embodied realm in which “the brook sings loud / from a rib cage / of giant fern” (82). In “Song for the Rainy Season” Bishop enchantingly combines the warmth of the landscape in “Questions of Travel” with the human warmth depicted in “Squatter’s Children”; the poem discovers its simmering strength in Bishop’s relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares. Bishop finds herself sheltered with Lota, “[h]idden, oh hidden / in the high fog / [in] the house we live in” (81). The lushness which pervades this cozy and veiled relationship makes for stunning imagery. The “magnetic rock” which, along with the fogginess, hides their home is both “rain-, [and] rainbow-ridden” (81). This intense vignette of wild nature continues on with “blood-black / bromelias, lichens, / ...[and] the waterfalls cling[ing]” (81). The speaker then ethereally affirms the delectable presence of a “vapor [which] / climbs up the thick growth,” a steamy vapor which holds “them both, / house and rock, / in a private cloud” (81). Though the vapor securely holds onto the house and rock, we can also see the vapor “holding...both” Elizabeth Bishop and Lota de Macedo Soares in their own “private cloud” (81), a cloud which shelters and keeps them together in their house

through the duration of the lengthy rainy season. A touch of fantasy blankets this poem – a warm, vaporous fantasy indicative of Bishop’s hazy and long-in-coming acceptance of just how happy she had become in Brazil.

Even the “fat frogs” in the next stanza harbor contemplations of closeness and desire as they are “shrilling for love” during the soaked night (PPL 81). The house then proceeds to open itself up to the “milk-white sunrise”; a light which is usually blinding is instead “kind to the eyes,” and the mildew on the walls reminds us of the utter dampness of this season (81). The speaker excitedly notices “the warm touch / of the warm breath” and demands that we “rejoice! / For a later / era will differ” (83). It will not always be this way; this season, too, shall pass. The “great rock” will not always be cloaked in “rainbows or rain,” and eventually, “the high fog” will be no more; at the rainy season’s end, even the numerous “waterfalls [will] shrivel / in the steady sun” (81). Though the end of this poem focuses on lack – lack of rainbows, rain, the mysterious fog, and even of the owls who have decided to fly somewhere else – it is imperative we remember what has *not* been removed or altered as the rainy season comes to a close. The house, and the people who live there “in a private cloud” are still very much present. The lasting warmth, then, of Bishop and Soares’ relationship, persists long after “the high fog [is] gone” (81).

Where Brazil signifies warmth and overabundance for Bishop, her “elsewheres” are defined by stiff (and sometimes comical) propriety, coldness, and absence. The first poem of the section, titled “Manners,” perfectly exemplifies some of these characteristics. In “Manners,” the grandfather’s staid emphasis on public decorum and respectability

weighs down “*a [c]hild of 1918*” during a wagon ride (*PPL* 119). The child is told gravely, “Be sure to remember to always / speak to everyone you meet” and to “[a]lways offer everyone a ride” (119). The sedate grandfather in this poem is even impressed by Willy’s crow, who “answers / nicely when he’s spoken to.” The grandfather then makes sure the young children understand that, “[m]an or beast, that’s good manners,” and that they should follow this refined crow’s admirable example (119). The focus on manners becomes even more ridiculous when the children and grandfather must yell through dust to passerby in cars “at the top of [their] voices” simply to say politely, ““Good day! Good day! / Fine day!”” (119). In the last stanza, the grandfather informs the children their horse is tired, and the speaker humorously notes, “we all got down and walked, / as our good manners required” (120).

Throughout “Manners,” the intense focus on correctness outweighs other equally valid considerations. Though it would be practically impossible to “speak to everyone you meet,” particularly when their faces are obscured by dust and cars, the grandfather merely sticks to following (and parroting) these constraining rules (119). The lack comes in when we recognize there seems to be no *actual* warmth or closeness between the people in this poem; they are all merely following the approved rules of a polite society. In sketching characters who follow rules to such a severe degree, Bishop both mocks and brings attention to the absence of the real feelings of community – feelings, she suggests, that have been replaced by an insubstantial set of silly, rather deficient procedures. (As much as some of the manners in this poem may have already been outdated, however,

Bishop's childhood lessons from her Nova Scotian grandparents later deeply influenced both her own sense of etiquette and her work as an adult, as I will discuss in Chapter 2.)

Immediately following "Manners" is the poem titled "Sestina." In this poem, we are barraged with images of cold, wet rain (as opposed to the warm rains of Brazil), unhappy, salty tears, and an unavoidably "rigid house" (*PPL* 120). The poem opens with "September rain" and an "old grandmother" who is "laughing and talking to hide her tears" (120). In the midst of this domestic yet obviously sad scene, propriety again becomes significant when the grandmother "cuts some bread and says to the child, / *It's time for tea now*" (120). The physical house in which the grandmother and child are sitting "feels chilly," and the child draws both a "rigid house" and "another inscrutable house" as "the grandmother / busies herself about the stove," and tries not to give in completely to her own sadness, one which emanates from a mother's palpable absence (119-20). Tears are noticeably mentioned in "Sestina" seven separate times, in the recognizable form a sestina generally takes. We see "her tears," "equinoctial tears," "the teakettle's small hard tears," a "teacup full of dark brown tears," "buttons like tears," "little moons fall[ing] down like tears," and the almanac saying it's "*[t]ime to plant tears*" (119-20); the tears of this poem literally tumble all the way through the interactions between the child, grandmother, and even the inanimate objects in the house.

The overt, cold sadness in this poem becomes easy to understand when we link it back to Bishop's own childhood. Notably, the multiple houses in "Sestina" do not offer secluded, cozy protection as did the house described in "Song for the Rainy Season," or even the questionable shelter of the "specklike house" in "Squatter's Children" (76).

Rather, the “Sestina” house is made “chilly” from a “September rain... [i]n the failing light,” and the houses drawn by the imaginative child are peculiarly recollected as “rigid” and “inscrutable” (*PPL* 119-20). The mysteriousness of the multiple houses mentioned in “Sestina” does not leave us, then, with a feeling of safety and intimacy, but of a puzzle eerily unsolved, of a tear-filled, cold, lacking, and troubling space. Lifeless decorum is upheld here in the form of afternoon tea – or at least, the charade of tea time attempts to reinforce traditional and comforting civility – but warmth is undeniably absent as is the mother, the missing tie in the family’s generations – and this house, it seems, will always cry out for “more wood in the stove” (120).

The poem “Filling Station” evokes a lack similar to that found in “Sestina” – both poems are founded on the striking absence of a mother. What the filling station has no shortage of, though, is dirtiness. The poem begins with the memorable exclamation “Oh, but it is dirty!” and the speaker instantaneously brings our attention to the station’s “disturbing, over-all / black translucency” (123). We are informed this is “a family filling station” run by a “Father [who] wears a dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit”; he has “several quick and saucy / and greasy sons [to] assist him” (123). After detailing the exceptionally filthy surroundings (even the furniture is “grease-impregnated” (123)), the speaker finally notices “a big dim doily,” “a taboret,” and “a big hirsute begonia” coexisting unexpectedly in this “quite thoroughly dirty” setting (123). The speaker’s surprise at the domesticity implied by “the extraneous plant,” the taboret, and the doily turns to unexpected nostalgia and longing (123). This longing becomes directed toward the “somebody” who cares for these unmistakable markers of home life, even in a dirty

filling station. This longing is for the nameless person who silently and selflessly “loves us all” (*PPL* 124).

The marked lack in “Filling Station” exists simultaneously with its abundance. The abundance of dirtiness, for example, can certainly remind us of the abundance of poverty, dirt, and mud in “Squatter’s Children.” However, the closeness of the children in that poem contrasts with the visitor’s early haughty attitude toward the father and sons who work in the filling station. Moreover, the lack becomes multifaceted here: obviously, a lack of cleanliness is present, but more interesting is the lack of a physical mother figure. Where the mother in “Squatter’s Children” is at least mentioned as a voice heard calling to her children, if only briefly, the speaker of “Filling Station” continually shies away from defining the “somebody” as more than just *anybody* who “loves us all” and is willing to water a begonia (123). After all, “somebody embroidered the doily” just as “[s]omebody / arranges the rows of cans” (123), but this “somebody” is never explicitly named.

If we place Bishop, as I think we must, into the speaker’s role, and remember her own mother’s nonexistence during most of Bishop’s childhood and the entirety of her adulthood, the “Filling Station” absence becomes markedly more upsetting; however, it also becomes that much more understandable. As Robert Dale Parker notes in “Bishop and the Weed of Poetic Invention,” “The unseen but much pointed to mother of ‘Filling Station’ thus seems part of a private obsession, perhaps unacknowledged, but still urgently felt as central to Bishop’s world” (*MAPS*). The lack of a physical motherly presence in “Filling Station” is second only to the lack in “Sestina” as the most

insurmountable and cold absence we see in the “Elsewhere” poems. In “Sestina,” the grandmother is physically present and trying her best to care for the child during the mother’s absence, an absence which will never be filled. In “Filling Station,” at least, the unseen mother figure may possibly return to water the plant and rearrange the Esso cans once again. “Sestina” distressingly offers no such hope.

With the poem “First Death in Nova Scotia,” death and coldness are rendered inescapable, but not from a singular emphasis on aspects we might at first expect. Intriguingly, the dead body of Arthur “laid out” in the rather “cold, cold parlor” does not constitute the poem’s real focal point (*PPL* 121). Instead, our attention moves toward the chromographs which depict the inanimate likenesses of “Edward, Prince of Wales, / with Princess Alexandra, and King George with Queen Mary” (121). Under these chromographs stands “a stuffed loon / shot and stuffed by / ...Arthur’s father” (121). The loon summons the speaker’s (and thus, our) concentration from the rather regal position of “his white, frozen lake, / the marble-topped table” (121). The loon’s want of warmth becomes increasingly profound when we read of his “cold and caressable” breast and his chilling “red glass” eyes that leave “much to be desired” (121).

Only at the speaker’s mother’s insistence do we focus again on “little cousin Arthur,” but this attention shifts rapidly from the “little frosted cake” of Arthur’s coffin to rest right back on the “red-eyed loon” that “eye[s] it / from his white, frozen lake” (122). Repeatedly in the next stanza the speaker draws attention to the whiteness of Arthur’s “very small” body (122). The speaker informs us that “Jack Frost” has already “started to paint him” but “had dropped the brush / and left him white, forever” (122). In other

words, Arthur, just like the lifeless chromographs and dead loon, will be forever cold, forever lacking in both color and vitality. The only warmth which appears occurs late in the poem and is artificial; the chromographs show Arthur's cousin some "gracious royal couples" who are "warm in red and ermine" with "well wrapped up feet" (*PPL* 122). In an attempt at fantasy during such dark circumstances, the speaker imagines the warm couples in the chromographs asking little dead "Arthur to be / the smallest page at court" (122).

As opposed to the cold, red, false loon eyes, the color red in the chromographs becomes warm and allows the speaker to visualize a vastly different conclusion for Arthur's young life. Even this hopeful thought leads nowhere, however, and any attempt at escaping the reality of Arthur's death is quickly abandoned by the speaker. Indeed, how can Arthur flee his coffin "with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?" (122). Moreover, even the warmth of the "red and ermine" in the chromographs is unreliable: the heat provided comes from the fur of a now-lifeless animal (122). Warmth, or any anticipation of potential warmth, cannot exist when we take into account the icy realities in this Nova Scotian recollection: Arthur's dead, white body in the cold parlor; the stuffed and motionless loon; even the static and ever-watchful royal party in the chromographs provide no room for lasting warmth in such a glacial setting.

The poems in *Questions of Travel* share an undeniably dialectical connection: "Brazil" poems flood the reader with warmth, abundant relationships, and security, while "Elsewhere" poems project an overall sense of frigidity, propriety, and absence. Notably, "In the Village," lodged between them, constantly evokes and sways between *both*

extremes; this provides the most important reason for its central, bridge-like placement in *Questions of Travel*.

As previously mentioned, Bishop employs numerous, detailed descriptions regarding village life: the recording of sights, sounds, and smells plays a significant part in “In the Village.” After beginning the piece with “[a] scream,” the narrator likens this scream to “something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky...It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps...Its pitch would be the pitch of my village” (*PPL* 99). From the onset of this story, Bishop makes the scream, and the dark memory of it, settle over and color everything in her childhood years. The scream comes from a woman who “was very thin” with “thin white hands,” an uncertain woman who “wasn’t at all sure whether she was going to like the dress or not” (99). The mother lacks color, substantiality, and even the ability to make decisions. Attempting to change from black mourning clothes to purple becomes symbolic: though purple is still a cool color, it is nowhere near as lacking and negative as black. This forward-moving attempt away from the grief following her husband’s death, however, proves to be unfruitful, and the mother’s scream – a petrifying and inescapable recognition of lack – scares the child. Before and after the scream occurs, though, the child becomes entranced by the “beautiful sounds” coming “from the blacksmith’s shop” (100).

The blacksmith named Nate, his heated shop, the “smell of red-hot metal and horses’ hoofs,” and the “pure and angelic” sounds heard by the child fight against the power of absence represented by the scream. After the utterly unsuccessful visit to the dressmaker’s, the child decides to go “visiting the blacksmith” (100). Nate is the polar

opposite of the mother, sure, solid, and “sweating hard”; we can envision his hands as strong, dirty, and always working – not like the child’s mother’s helpless “thin white hands” (*PPL* 99). The child is intrigued by the work Nate does in the shop: she sees “horseshoes sail through the dark like bloody little moons...to drown in the black water, hissing, protesting” (100). *Warmth* is the part of the blacksmith shop which continually entices the child to come visit and delightedly observe the environment; the “granite discs” lying on the ground outside the shop, notes the narrator, “are too hot to touch” (101), and immediately after seeking out and detecting the heat, the child realizes the scream “is settling down” (101). The blacksmith and his shop provide the intangible warmth and safety the child has been seeking, her first in what will likely be a string of unconventional houses. Perhaps Nate’s work in the warm shop, that is, can be seen as a significant precursor to Elizabeth Bishop’s secluded, warm Brazilian writing studio, where decades later, she spent many hours forging her own craft.

Later in the story, we realize that home, at least while the child’s mother occupies the space, does not provide the same longed-for warmth that the blacksmith’s shop does. The child returns home and is not “allowed to go upstairs” (105). In a moment unquestionably related to Bishop’s “Sestina,” the child notices “[m]y grandmother...sitting in the kitchen stirring potato mash for tomorrow’s bread and crying into it. She gives me a spoonful and it tastes wonderful but wrong. In it I think I taste my grandmother’s tears; then I kiss her and taste them on my cheek...nothing much happens...We are waiting for a scream. But it is not screamed again...” (105-6). During breakfast time, the child attempts to flee the house before she is again forced to see her

mother. When she hears “talking on the stairs” she tries to leave and take the cow out to pasture, but her grandmother admonishes her to observe a kind of propriety a la “Manners” and wait (*PPL* 106). Only after escaping from the adults, but most specifically, her mother, is the child happy to take the mischievous Nelly to the pasture.

Outdoors, away from even the possibility of hearing another chilling scream, the child imagines staying away: “For a while I entertain the idea of not going home today at all, of staying safely here in the pasture all day, playing in the brook...” (110). The child, alone and outside, fears her mother’s scream, whereas the children in “Squatter’s Children” happily ignore their mother’s calls. While the squatter’s children enjoy being together outdoors, loneliness creeps up on the village child, and she heads back home; in the afternoon, another dress-fitting attempt occurs. The narrator recollects her mother “twitching the purple skirt in her thin white hands” and saying ““I don’t know what they’re wearing any more. I have no *idea!*”” (111). This exclamation of indecision “turns to a sort of wail” as the child again becomes dreamily distracted by the “[l]ight, musical, constant sounds” radiating from Nate’s warm shop (111). The child bolts from home again on an errand and gleefully ignores the adults’ constraining instructions (as opposed to following them in “Manners”) about not running: “I do run, by Nate’s shop, glimpsing him inside, pumping away with one hand. We wave” (112). The child then hastily finishes her errand because she feels a responsibility to “get back quickly, quickly, while Miss Gurley is there and everyone is upstairs and the dress is still on” (113). If the dress is still on, the cold, aching absence her mother becomes affected by might be kept at bay for a moment longer.

Later, after the night of the village fire, the child's mother goes away to a sanitarium. Implicit here is the idea that the overpowering warmth of the fire is too much, in a sense, for the lack and coldness of the mother. Obediently, the child takes a package prepared by the grandmother "every Monday afternoon" to be sent to her mother; when she passes Nate's shop, she makes sure to hide "the address of the sanitarium with [her] arm and [her] other hand" (*PPL* 117). During this weekly errand, she cannot endure any offers of warmth. She affirms, "[g]oing by Nate's I walk far out in the road and hold the package on the side away from him. He calls to me...But I pretend I don't hear him" (116). Here, the child violates the command in "Manners" to speak to everyone; her difficult task is based on absence – the echoing absence of her mother – and the child is unable to accept the warmth and kindness of Nate and his shop while on such an errand.

At the close of "In the Village," though, the persistent conflict between warmth and lack appears to end. The last two lines of the piece read, "Nate! Oh, beautiful sound, strike again!" (118). Though throughout the story the child struggles between her mother's strangely absent presence and the allure of warmth from the shop, in the end, her mother is completely removed and the child can revel in the "beautiful sound" and richness of the blacksmith's workshop. The scream is gone now; indeed, "it has gone away, forever," and only the memory of it lasts (118). Next to the warmth of the blacksmith and his shop, the memory of the scream becomes dull; it is not dull enough, however, to remain buried forever. Conspicuously, Bishop began writing about these

particular and undoubtedly painful memories only *after* she had settled into the warm security of Brazil.

The continual clashes between abundance and absence in “In the Village” make it a perfect choice as the connecting work between the “Brazil” and “Elsewhere” sections which comprise *Questions of Travel*. While commercial considerations for the book certainly shaped its arrangement and length, the arrangement was formed based on indisputably more meaningful reasons. The book’s organization becomes even more significant upon consideration of the fact that “In the Village” was initially published over a decade before the book was assembled and printed. Bishop’s choice of arrangement was a savvy one: it highlights both her unanticipated, significant flash of childhood recall and her subsequent ability to focus on the distinctly oppositional elements of her life up to that point. In the next chapter, I focus on both the oppositional and strangely mirror-like features between Bishop’s childhood years in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts and the childhood of “Helena Morley” by looking carefully at Bishop’s translation of a child’s late-nineteenth century Brazilian diary.

THE BRAZILIAN REVERSAL: ON *MINHA VIDA**DE MENINA* AND FINDING HOME

“All my life I have lived and behaved very much like the sandpiper just running down the edges of different countries and continents, looking for something.”

- Elizabeth Bishop

Upon settling into a warmer climate and a stronger, more tightly connected community, Elizabeth Bishop recollected and wrote about her childhood in the North, the near polar reverse of her new world in Brazil. Ensnared in the warmth of Brazil, Bishop was able to take a fresh look at her own youth while simultaneously delving into a particularly intriguing Brazilian childhood account, as well. In a letter to U.T. and Joseph Summers, dated September 17, 1952, Bishop wrote that she had “decided to do a translation. There’s a book here that has become a sort of Brazilian classic – the diary of a child... – brought up in a big & very Brazilian family in a very backwards diamond-mining town about 60 years ago. It is really wonderful...” (*One Art*, 248). Initially written and published in Portuguese by Senhora Augusto Mario Caldeira Brant, *Minha Vida de Menina* (My Life as a Little Girl) quickly became more than an opportunity for Bishop to build on her Portuguese aptitude. The *Diary*, which records events from the years 1893 to 1895, enthralled her with its frequently funny and often heartbreaking stories; much of Bishop’s early time in Brazil was thus consumed with translating young “Helena’s” entries and writing about her own Nova Scotian years, the two enterprises no doubt driving each other.

Brett C. Millier accordingly notes in *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* that “Brazilian culture as Elizabeth was able to glimpse it early on, attracted her...for its population of relatively primitive, uneducated people” (242). Millier also argues that the typically large and interconnected families in Brazil “took her back to her warm memories of Great Village and the extended household of her grandparents” (243). Intriguingly, while Bishop’s first attempts at writing poems on Brazil floundered, she worked diligently on translating the *Diary* and looking back at her own childhood. While the warm charms Bishop observed within the principally feudally structured country of Brazil – both as she lived with Lota de Macedo Soares and as she worked on her translation – certainly seem to have provided an environment conducive to her rapid recollections of childhood, the youthful lives of Elizabeth Bishop and “Helena Morley” themselves could not have been more dissimilar. Bishop’s financially stable but traumatic childhood years in Great Village of Nova Scotia and then in Worcester contrast sharply with Helena Morley’s life in 1890s Diamantina, Brazil.

In this chapter, I contend that Bishop was captivated to work on translating *The Diary of “Helena Morley”* from the Portuguese for several complex and interconnected reasons. Though Bishop was undoubtedly interested in refining her language skills, this was by no means the most noteworthy factor in her decision to translate the *Diary*. Translating it was, essentially, an extensive and not at all lucrative labor of love. Most importantly, I argue the stark differences and mirror-like reversals Bishop noticed between her own and Helena Morley’s childhood when she first read the *Diary* stoked Bishop’s recurring fascinations with the abundant warmth of Brazilian life in the face of

incredible poverty, her perpetual desire to observe others, and her interminable questioning of what “home” signifies. Bishop was perhaps most motivated to translate the *Diary* because, while reading it, moments from her own life and memories of her own youth revealed themselves. These unexpected and previously dormant recollections motivated Bishop to devote several years of her life to working on the *Diary*. Lastly, I contend that Bishop’s early years in Brazil, as she worked persistently on *The Diary of “Helena Morley”* in her secluded writing studio, provided a necessary stepping stone to some of her later poetic works concerning Brazil and its people, which I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 3. The translation was at least partially, if not largely, responsible in providing Elizabeth Bishop with a crucial perspective from which to compose writings about Brazil which exhibit an undeniable authenticity, an authenticity reminiscent at times of the great structuralist ethnographer Claude Lévi-Strauss. Discovering a solid definition of home, both within her new life in Brazil and within the *Diary’s* pages, enabled Bishop to write from a different and necessary perspective: that of a frequent wanderer who has finally found home.

Though the story of Elizabeth Bishop’s grim childhood is well-known, details of her shifting family relationships help shed light on just *why* she might have been so absorbed with Helena’s diary entries. Bishop’s father died when she was just eight months old, and Fountain and Brazeau note in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* that Bishop’s mother “...suffered her first recorded mental attack in 1914, when Elizabeth was three. The following year [they] went to live with the Boomers [Elizabeth’s maternal grandparents] in Great Village, where Gertrude became

uncontrollable” (3). In 1916, Bishop’s mother was becoming increasingly violent, and her family was forced to commit her to an institution in Dartmouth.¹ Fatherless *and* motherless – Gertrude spent eighteen years in the Dartmouth institution and died before Bishop finished her education at Vassar College – Bishop was raised for a time in Great Village by the Boomers. Being surrounded by her grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other villagers like the town’s blacksmith, Nate, suited her; Bishop’s extended family was as eclectic as Helena’s, if lacking the crucial ingredients of father, mother, and siblings. Additionally, “Mrs. Boomer was the source of her namesake granddaughter’s strong domestic impulse” (Fountain and Brazeau, 6), so that many years later, in Brazil, Bishop enjoyed cooking and baking in the kitchen so much that Lota de Macedo Soares referred to her endearingly as “Cookie.” Similarly domestic in nature, Helena often writes about how much she enjoys cleaning her family’s home and helping with day-to-day chores.

In addition to learning domestic and farm life skills during her time in Great Village, Bishop also learned all about the manners required in polite society. Sayings and behaviors from both her grandfather and grandmother resonated with Bishop throughout the rest of her life. In “Memories of Uncle Neddy” Bishop remembers her grandfather saying “[t]o Billy and me, when we quarreled... ‘Birds in their little nests agree,’ a quotation I have never been able to place and even then didn’t altogether agree with, from my observation of birds in their little nests” (*PPL* 628). Furthermore, Mrs. Boomer frequently utilized ominous and mysterious sayings such as “Nobody knows... *nobody* knows...” (*PPL* 628), and Bishop later acknowledged “that when she had trouble

¹ See especially “Childhood, 1911-1927” and “Walnut Hill, 1927-1930” in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* for a more detailed account of Bishop’s turbulent formative years.

translating some of Helena's grandmother's pithy pieces of advice, she tried to remember what her own beloved Gammie [Grandmother Boomer] would have said" (Millier, 257).

In her Introduction to the *Diary*, Bishop notes, "The longer I stayed on in Brazil the more Brazilian the book seemed, yet much of it could have happened in any small provincial town or village, and at almost any period of history..." (x). As Bishop spent five years persistently translating the *Diary*, she "said specifically that Diamantina reminded her of Great Village" (Millier 257), and according to Cassilda Chisholm Forbes, "Bishop often said that life in Great Village was like living in the nineteenth century" (Fountain and Brazeau, 9). The initial childhood security with extended family and neighbors in a provincial and slow paced life was cut short, however, when the six year old Bishop was relocated to Worcester, Massachusetts: her paternal grandparents wanted to provide a better education than they thought would be possible if she stayed in Great Village. The forcible move seemed destined to fail, and it did; years later, Bishop wrote in "The Country Mouse" that she felt as if she "had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes...to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, perhaps even from the inverted *r*'s of my mother's family" (Millier 20). Uprooted from Great Village, Bishop was unhappy and plagued by frequent asthma attacks and severe eczema outbreaks.

Less than a year after moving in with her wealthy paternal grandparents, Bishop moved again, this time to live in Revere, Massachusetts with her Aunt Grace Boomer, Aunt Maud, and Uncle George Shepherdson. The Shepherdsons "lived in a working-class neighborhood," and the "Bishops provided financial support for Elizabeth during

these years” (Fountain and Brazeau, 16). Time passed, and Bishop’s favorite aunt, Grace, eloped and moved away to Great Village; then her Worcester grandparents died, and Bishop’s new guardians Uncle Jack and Aunt Ruby Bishop enrolled her in summer camps and later in Walnut Hill, a boarding school. Bishop’s contact with family gradually and continually slipped away from and was lost to her; in contrast, Helena’s family members were tightly-knit and cared for each other the best they could in their impoverished circumstances.

After turning sixteen and beginning to attend Walnut Hill, Bishop began dreading formal family visits with her affluent paternal relatives. From this point on, she was essentially alone. Though the boarding school provided significant literary opportunities for Bishop, and she made a few friends there, one of her cousins, Nancy Orr Morrill, recalls that “Elizabeth was kind of odd. She wasn’t a girl who mixed very well” (Fountain and Brazeau, 32). Bishop, by all accounts, was constantly aware of being different and felt as if no one cared for her during her boarding school years; her continual movements from house to house, from city to city, between one set of relatives and another, account for this deep-seated anxiety. From childhood on, Elizabeth Bishop had no fundamental place to call “home.”

Where Bishop’s childhood was comprised of transitions in living situations, sicknesses, attempts at stability made by various relatives, and absent parents, Helena Morley’s childhood was instead marked by considerable familial stability in the face of genuine rural poverty. Though Helena’s grandmother was considered wealthy by Diamantina’s standards, Helena’s family struggled to make ends meet by selling the

small diamonds Helena's father occasionally managed to find. Throughout *The Diary of "Helena Morley,"* young Helena composes entries about her three siblings, her parents, grandmother, cousins, aunts, uncles, and ever-present financial issues. She often focuses on large religious celebrations in their village of Diamantina. Regarding preparations for a Catholic holiday, she writes,

On the day of the Santa Cruz we don't rest a minute. Each one wants to work and help...My brothers help cut and put up the bamboo poles. I and Luizinha gather the poinsettia leaves and coffee leaves. Ivo Arara lends the sticks and the boards. Seu Claudio's daughters fill the lamps with oil and set them on the shelves. Grandma orders a lot of sand, and I and Luizinha spread it on the floor and strew the coffee leaves over it...It is a happy day for us. All my uncles and aunts and cousins get together at grandma's. (31)

Bishop's religious recollections are much quieter than Helena's, whose diary entries swell with boisterous family gatherings to celebrate various saint's days. In "Gwendolyn" Bishop recalls her grandmother rocking her "vigorously in the rocking chair" and "singing me hymns, in her rather affectedly lugubrious voice, which suddenly thinned out to half its ordinary volume on the higher notes" (*PPL* 606). Helena's childhood was full of Catholic abundance, one might say, whereas Bishop's childhood resonated with more muted tones of Baptist austerity.

Unlike Bishop, Helena was a rambunctious, adventurous, and healthy child. Aside from daily accounts concerning numerous family gatherings, most of which center on religious ceremonies, marriages, deaths, and birthdays, Helena often melodramatically protests that "someone always wants to spoil our fun" (25). She writes about a daring game in which she, her cousins, and siblings slide down a bank next to a river by riding on a cowhide: "We take every opportunity we can to go sliding on the bank...We had

only slid once, we swear, when there were all the grown-ups at the top, watching...And that's how we lost the best game we ever discovered" (25). Helena's spunky and endearing attitude shines through in her entries, such as when, on Holy Thursday in 1893, she writes, "I admire good and holy people but I can't possibly stop being the way I am" (20). In another entry about her little sister, Luizinha, Helena notices, "It doesn't seem as if my sister and I could be children of the same parents. I'm impatient, rebellious, impertinent, lazy, and incapable of being obedient...Luizinha is as good as an angel...She never asks for anything" (54). A girl who is utterly opposed to regulation over having fun, Helena complains, "If there's one house where I don't like to sleep it's Aunt Aurélia's. I can't stand Uncle Conrado's being so orderly and methodical, with a set time for doing everything" (49). Rebellious and extroverted in nature – markedly dissimilar from Bishop's quiet and isolated childhood personality – Helena also endures constant admonishment and receives lessons in appropriate behavior from her Aunt Madge and grandmother, in which respect her childhood experience overlaps with Bishop's.

Helena tells her grandmother that Aunt Madge gives her daytime lessons on manners and nighttime lessons on being economical. Aunt Madge, she writes, is "always taking the opportunity of telling me about other people's bad manners and I see it's just in order to teach me. She talked about people who spit on the floor, scratch their heads in the parlor and interrupt other people when they're talking...And one shouldn't pick one's teeth at the table" (13). Aunt Madge and Bishop's Grandpa Boomer, it seems, were fairly alike in their attempts to teach children lessons on propriety; one can imagine Bishop

conceiving the idea for a poem like “Manners” while working on this portion of the *Diary*. Moreover, Helena’s grandmother has her own proverbial way of voicing her thoughts, just as Bishop’s grandmother did. Helena writes, “Grandma has her own way of taking things. First she says, ‘I never in my born days!’ Then she adds, ‘But it could be worse’” (35). In a moment evocative of Bishop’s maternal grandmother’s caretaker role, Helena writes about the love her grandmother has for her:

From the time I was little she’s done things for me that mama never does and she pays attention to everything I say. Without realizing it she favors me so much over the others that it seems to me that she’s the mother and mama’s the grandmother. I tell grandma everything I think; if I’m happy I tell her and if I’m mad I complain to her. (63)

Bishop’s relationship with her own grandmother in Nova Scotia had a similar, if less actively emotional quality. In “Gwendolyn,” Bishop writes, “My grandmother was very nice to me when I was sick. During this same illness, she had already given me her button basket to play with, and her scrap bag, and the crazy quilt was put over my bed in the afternoons” (*PPL* 605-06). Bishop’s grandmother would then tell her mesmerizing stories about the quilt pieces, where they came from. In short, it seems the intriguing similarities between Helena’s and Bishop’s grandmothers are at least partly responsible for Bishop’s engagement with the *Diary*.

While Bishop’s mother’s absence was due to a breakdown following her extended mourning period for her late husband, Helena’s mother is also noticeably absent in the diary entries. Helena’s mother’s absences are usually due to her leaving her children in order to go after her husband, who is away mining for diamonds. During one of her mother’s extended absences, Helena writes, “I like to have mama love papa so much, but

I think that my cousins, whose mothers don't cling to their husbands so, lead better lives than we do. I never saw one of my cousins have to leave her home and go to stay at the *chácara* [grandma's farm] the way we're always doing, so mama can go after papa" (58). Just as Bishop's childhood and home were disturbed by her mother's absence – an absence due to the extreme level of affection she felt for her husband – so was Helena's. As a result, Helena often writes about confiding in her grandmother and learning lessons from her, while her mother, though obviously more accessible than Bishop's, takes a less central role in Helena's upbringing.

A particular repeated worry in Helena's writings is that of financial instability. Bishop, who was never truly anxious during childhood about such things, notes in her Introduction to the translation, "Reading this diary, one sometimes gets the impression that the greater part of the town, black and white, 'rich' and poor, when it hasn't found a diamond lately, gets along by making sweets and pastries, brooms and cigarettes and selling them to each other" (xxix). The poverty and resourcefulness of Diamantina residents appears to have been another main reason Bishop became so fascinated with the *Diary*. As Millier notes, Bishop was attracted to Brazilian life, in part, because of "its population of relatively primitive, uneducated people" (242). This land and its people were, quite simply, *different*; they were intriguing subjects to the ever-observant Elizabeth Bishop due to both these arresting cultural differences (as I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 3 concerning Bishop's Brazilian writing) and the many unexpected similarities with Bishop's childhood in Great Village. Helena writes sorrowfully of failed family business attempts; she wishes her father was not so enchanted by the

illusory prospect of finding enough diamonds to support them; and she worries about the serious possibility of her valuable egg-laying chickens being taken by a thief. In short, while the incessant financial woes in Diamantina are something Bishop never experienced in her own childhood, observing others' diverse lives was an appealing ethnographic exercise for Bishop, as she was able to vicariously follow the ups and downs in the lives of Diamantina residents through Helena's colorful entries.

Helena's preoccupation with financial security is an understandable one, coming as it does from a girl in a mountainous and nearly inaccessible diamond mining village. In an entry from August of 1893, she acknowledges, "Grandma suffers, knowing what we go through, although we never tell her, but I think she guesses. The little diamonds that papa found didn't bring enough to cover our expenses. Now what shall we do? I'm so afraid papa will have to sell our house, the way he already speaks of doing" (48). Later in the same entry, Helena's grandma gives her "a folded piece of paper, to take to mama. When mama opened it there was a fifty *mil reis* bill" (48). Just as Bishop's grandparents provided for her, then, Helena's grandmother takes care of her family when Helena's parents cannot.

Bishop's early stability in Great Village, though she was an only child with no father and essentially no mother, was taken from her, ironically, by her much wealthier paternal grandparents. Helena's upbringing, on the other hand, was seen to by almost more family members and neighbors than can be counted; strangely, Helena's childhood is more reminiscent in this regard of Bishop's time in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares and a large extended family. Bishop appreciated, as an adult, the very familial

interactions Helena complains about as a child. Helena laments, “It’s my fate that everyone who loves me makes my life miserable. The only people who have any authority over my cousins are their fathers. Oh! If only it were like that with me! My father is the person who annoys me least of all. If it hadn’t been for grandma’s and Aunt Madge’s interfering, I’d have gone to the masquerade ball at the theatre” (7). Helena frequently complains about how much Aunt Madge and her grandmother love her, because, according to her, if they loved her less, they would not be as likely to meddle in her life.

In spite of Helena’s grumblings about having *too much* family interaction, though, she never seems mistaken about the inherent constancy offered by both her immediate family’s home and her grandmother’s *chácara*, impoverished though her family may be. She writes about enjoying completing her chores at home and at the *chácara*, though she knows her family is poorer than her friends:

I’m the poorest girl in my set. I see the differences between my life and theirs, but I don’t envy them. If they knew all the work I do at home and at the *chácara*, they’d feel sorry for me, even though I really like doing it. I have to iron clothes, clean house, and every Thursday I have to scour half the floors with sand...I have to clean the kitchen every Thursday, too...At the *chácara*...I help pick coffee and fruit. I help tie up bunches of vegetables to sell, and to make candles...I like doing all these chores... (117)

Bishop’s early opportunities for similar domestic chores, such as assisting Mrs. Boomer in the family garden or taking the cow, Nelly, out to pasture, disappeared after she was moved to Worcester, not to reappear again until she settled in Brazil. Helena’s home, her grandmother’s *chácara*, and her enormous family provide Helena, on the other hand, with a refuge she often takes for granted. Throughout the entries Helena, perhaps

unconsciously, connects her happiness with being at home and around family to the daily chores she is fond of doing. When her aging grandmother decides to rent the *chácara* and move into town, Helena writes, “Because I can’t forget the *chácara*, I go there every time Aunt Madge goes [to visit the new renters]” (216). For Helena, “home” is not an abstract, shifting, or mystifying concept: it is Diamantina, Brazil, her neighbors, and her close-knit family. Home is arguing with her siblings, receiving her daily blessing from her grandmother, excitedly preparing for village-wide religious ceremonies, and getting into mischief with her rowdy cousins. Helena’s youthful but deep sense of home, then, could have arguably been the most significant component of the *Diary* which inspired Bishop to translate it, as her own impressions of home – especially a childhood home – were distinctly less self-assured.

For example, in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Elsewhere” poems in *Questions of Travel*, her childhood houses are depicted as anything *but* stable and protective. In “Sestina,” Bishop’s mother has already been committed and is physically unattainable, tears abound, and the houses (not the *homes*) drawn by the child are both “rigid” and “inscrutable,” certainly not the same as stable (*PPL* 120-21). Moreover, the house in which the grandmother and child are preparing for tea time “feels chilly” and the grandmother attempts vainly to warm up the space with “more wood in the stove” (120). In “First Death in Nova Scotia,” death resides in the “cold, cold parlor” in the shadow of cousin Arthur’s lifeless little body and “a stuffed loon,” depicted hauntingly as “cold and caressable” (122). Outside the house, the roads are covered “deep in snow,” and surprisingly seem more protected than the cold, coffin-filled, and eerie parlor inside the

house (*PPL* 123). In short, Bishop's poetic descriptions of childhood houses leave one with the impression of a love which is forever lost, a yearning for warmth that simply cannot be satisfied – try though her grandmother does to heat the house in pouring Nova Scotian September rain.

While home for Helena is easily defined and safe, Bishop's childhood houses provided no similar sanctuary. Moreover, where Bishop's childhood – and much of her adulthood – was full of transitions from place to place, each one always lacking the consistent characteristics of security and home, Helena expresses no such anxious wanderlust or uncertainty. In a diary entry from March 24, 1894, Helena exemplifies a powerfully mature understanding of exotic or “foreign” things and the false allure they are capable of presenting to others. She asserts,

Everyone has the weakness of thinking anything that's foreign is better than what they have at home. They only doctor who is any good comes from someplace else. In order to make an impression on the girls, a boy has to come from out of town. What we have is worthless; only things from other places are any good. Even I used to think this way. But from now on I'm not going to. (107)

In this short passage, Helena nonchalantly puts to rest many of the issues regarding home and foreign travel that Elizabeth Bishop spent years of her life wrestling with and attempting unsuccessfully to understand. For Helena, whose home life is full of family, support, and security, it is a simple matter to appreciate the permanence and acceptance offered by life in Diamantina. For Bishop, no such stable support existed with any regularity during her tumultuous formative years, and she felt its lack for much of her lifetime.

In a review of Bishop's *North & South – A Cold Spring*, Randall Jarrell notes, “Her work is unusually personal and honest in its wit, perception, and sensitivity – and in its restrictions too; all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*” (*Poetry and the Age*, 235). As Bishop recollected her childhood houses, she had not yet *seen*, for any meaningful amount of time, what a home could mean or the type of security one could provide. Because of this, in *Questions of Travel* her “Elsewhere” poems and parts of “In the Village” are concerned with the difficulty of making mere *houses* into *homes*. These houses, Bishop seems to say, merely represent more temporary stopping places in an infinite and constantly fluctuating list of places to live. After working diligently on *Minha Vida de Menina*, writing about her lonely childhood experiences, and, at long last, settling down with Lota de Macedo Soares in a stronger home than she had ever before experienced, Bishop's desired poems on Brazil finally began to take shape. Her understanding of the initial warm experiences of what home *could* be, however, had to come first.

Perpetually, Elizabeth Bishop would question the subject of travel in her work and compare it to home, a place she had arguably not fully comprehended until living and working in Brazil, in her fifth decade. Bishop, while both living in Brazil and translating the *Diary*, was able to watch “strangers in a play” and to intimately “see the sun the other way around” (*PPL* 74). She was able to see, through Helena's eyes, that foreign and exotic people and places, and our incessant, curious determination to see them, cannot replace finding home. Bishop even spent time visiting and working with a much older Senhora Augusto Mario Caldeira Brant (“Helena Morley”) and her husband and visited

Diamantina, as well. The *Diary*, and Brazil, and interacting with its people, were Bishop's necessary reversals. As Millier so aptly puts it, "learning to see the sun and stars from the opposite side, though it was disorienting...was also liberating [for Bishop]" (240). In the closing lines of "Questions of Travel" the speaker famously ponders, "*Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*" (75). Arguably, not until living in Brazil and translating *Minha Vida de Menina* could Bishop have written a poem which so thoroughly sets up the contradictions between foreign travel and home, as her life before Brazil was arguably nothing *but* foreign travel from one location to the next.

Not until understanding her own childhood – with its prevalence of houses and shortage of homes – and delving into the childhood account of Helena Morley, a girl who experienced abundant happiness within an impoverished yet strong home life, could Elizabeth Bishop have started publishing poems on prevalent Brazilian issues such as "Manuelzinho" (1956), "Squatter's Children" (1956), and "The Burglar of Babylon" (1964). Bishop's time spent translating *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* thus played a significant role in her understanding of home, Brazilian culture, and her later ability to write so successfully about Brazil, its people, and the paradoxes inherent in foreign travel. This newfound understanding, however, did not alleviate the contradictions of foreign travel and Bishop's paradoxical and lifelong role in both explicating and perpetuating the complex tensions of expectation, disappointment, and degradation involved in travel. Rather, these dawning comprehensions altered Bishop's early views of Brazil as a place of total warmth and abundance, revealing it as a place which also held sadness and disillusionment, as I will discuss in Chapter 3.

“THERE GROWS A FEARFUL STAIN”: THE SAD TROPICS OF CLAUDE

LÉVI-STRAUSS AND ELIZABETH BISHOP

I need a virgin mirror
 no one's ever looked at,
 that's never looked back at anyone...
 – from “The Riverman”

Claude Lévi-Strauss was a man of multiple and complex contradictions. As the famously ironic opening sentence to the capricious travelogue *Tristes Tropiques* states, he “hate[d] traveling and explorers” (17). One of Lévi-Strauss’ main contentions with modern-day explorers hinged upon exploration becoming tainted as “a trade, which consists not, as one might think, in discovering hitherto unknown facts after years of study, but in covering a great many miles and assembling lantern-slides or motion pictures, preferably in colour, so as to fill a hall with an audience for several days in succession” (*TT* 17-18). Levi-Strauss wondered achingly at the pirating which occurred in the wake of contemporary expeditions, and wrote that, “...instead of doing his plagiarizing at home, [the explorer] has supposedly sanctified it by covering some twenty thousand miles” (18). Even as he struggled with these travel-related expectations and tensions, however, Lévi-Strauss was fully aware of his particular role in spreading them. His own expectations, he reveals, were no nobler than anyone else’s.

Preparing to go to Brazil for the first time with a group of fellow teachers, he acknowledged both their excitement and extreme naiveté: “...we were about to be translated...to tropical seas and luxury liners – all of which experiences, moreover, were

doomed to have only a very remote resemblance to the inevitably false picture we were already conjuring up, as travellers are always fated to do” (19). Despite his preliminary inexperience, Lévi-Strauss’ eventual compilation of *Tristes Tropiques* attests that his form of anthropological research was markedly singular and unexpectedly poetic. In *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory*, Patrick Wilcken notes that Lévi-Strauss’ brand of anthropology was also decidedly whimsical:

[His] early, impressionistic spells of fieldwork set the tone of Lévi-Strauss’ whole method as it later developed. He combined rapid assimilation of situations and ethnographic materials with boldly intuitive model-building. Time and again these hit-and-run tactics would pay off, bringing out fresh perspectives. [Other] anthropologists could get bogged down in detail...there was a tendency to lose sight of the overall design. In contrast, *Lévi-Strauss captured a culture through fragments, filling the gaps in his mind, conjuring models as if from thin air.* (75, emphasis added)

Whimsical as certain moments of *Tristes Tropiques* may be when viewed from the standard anthropological lens, Lévi-Strauss constantly struggled with expectation, serious disillusionment, and the impoverished, grim realities he observed in his travels. He wondered, “...what else can the so-called escapism of travelling do than confront us with the more unfortunate aspects of our history?” (*TT* 38). Lévi-Strauss also understood civilization’s apparent need or “mad passion for travel books and their deceptiveness. They create the illusion of something which no longer exists but should exist” (38). Preoccupied with the impossibility of fulfilled expectations and of objective observation, Lévi-Strauss consistently recognized his own unstable role as an ethnographer, acknowledging, “however honest the narrator may be, he cannot...supply [these observations] in a genuine form” (39). That is, though the ethnographer’s ambition is to provide an accurate, objective record of other people and the places in which they live,

this goal is always already an unrealizable one. Lévi-Strauss eventually conceded the incredible impossibility of his position:

In short, I have only two possibilities: either I can be like some traveller of the olden days, who was faced with a stupendous spectacle, all, or almost all, of which eluded him, or worse still, filled him with scorn and disgust; or I can be a modern traveller, chasing after the vestiges of a vanished reality. I lose on both counts...I am subject to a double infirmity: all that I perceive offends me, and I constantly reproach myself for not seeing as much as I should. (*TT* 43)

This passage echoes similar questions regarding travel and impossible expectations in Elizabeth Bishop's Brazilian poetry. As Lévi-Strauss confesses that he originally "imagined exotic countries to be the exact opposite of ours" (47), one can hear the plaintive and resonating tones in Bishop's "Arrival at Santos" as she asks, "Oh, tourist, / is this how this country is going to answer you / and your immodest demands for a different world...?" (*PPL* 71). The impossibility of fulfilled expectations, in short, remains a constant and vital part of both *Tristes Tropiques* and Bishop's Brazilian writing.

While Lévi-Strauss was hyper-aware of the tensions inherent in ethnographic study, he also, in a particularly uncomfortable way, simultaneously spread these tensions as he studied the native people of Brazil. As an ethnographer, he had a job to do, and felt the burden of studying and recording various tribes in as accurate a way as possible. Sometimes, however, the attempt to be ethical was sacrificed in order to produce results, compulsory as they may have been. While studying the nomadic Tibagy Indians who camped around Parana, for instance, he notes that "[m]ention must also be made of the *koro*, pale-coloured grubs which are to be found in abundance in certain rotting tree-

trunks. Having been jeered at by the whites for eating these creatures, the Indians deny the charge and will not admit to liking them” (TT 159). Lévi-Strauss felt a professional pressure to find the *koro*, and admitted,

[I]t is no easy matter arranging to be present at a search for *koro*. Like conspirators, we had to work out a plan at some length. A fever-stricken Indian, the only person left in a deserted village, seemed an easy prey. We put an axe into his hands, shook him and pushed him...he did not seem to grasp what we wanted of him. Thinking we were about to fail..., we used our last argument: we would like to eat some *koro*. We succeeded in dragging our victim to a tree-trunk. One blow with the axe revealed thousands of hollow little chambers...In each was a fat, cream-coloured creature, rather like a silkworm. (159-60)

As this passage indicates, a desire not “to fail” in their ethnographic exploration was the most influential factor in Lévi-Strauss’ decision to force an ill Tibagy Indian to catch *koro* for the researchers. Ethics were sacrificed in this particular moment: unable to observe Indians eating the *koro* as they typically would in their own homes, Lévi-Strauss commanded the *koro*’s delivery to the white researchers by their “victim.”

Though less aggressive, a comparable scheming event occurs later in the travelogue when Lévi-Strauss studies the Nambikwara. He writes, “[a]lthough the Nambikwara were easy-going, and unperturbed by the presence of the anthropologist with his notebook and camera, the work was complicated by linguistic difficulties. In the first place, the use of proper names is taboo” (278). While participating in a game with children, a little girl who was hit by one of her playmates approached Lévi-Strauss and, as a form of revenge, whispered her bully’s proper name in his ear. From that point on, Lévi-Strauss writes,

it was very easy, although rather unscrupulous, to incite the children against each other and get to know their names. After which...I had little difficulty

in getting them to tell me the names of the adults. When the latter understood what our confabulations were about, the children were scolded and no more information was forthcoming. (*TT* 279)

While openly conceding his unscrupulousness, Lévi-Strauss nonetheless manipulates the children into trespassing their tribe's norms; his method of accumulating data in this instance is professionally ambitious at best, and utterly deceitful at worst. Time and again, the “double infirmity” Lévi-Strauss mentions early in *Tristes Tropiques* is applicable to his recurring professional dilemmas: the capturing of ethnographic data at the expense of maintaining a requisite – though impossible – objective observation. Quite simply, Lévi-Strauss' war is a war which, though incessantly waged, can never be won.

Lévi-Strauss also frequently criticized the degradation of the environment during many of his expeditions, including those in Brazil. In a chapter titled “Parana,” Lévi-Strauss begins by concurrently imploring and admonishing future travelers:

Campers, camp in Parana. But no, on seconds thoughts, don't. Keep your greasy papers, indestructible bottles, and gaping tins for the last beauty spots of Europe! Cover European landscapes with the blight of your camping sites. But, during the short interval before their final destruction, respect the torrents plumed with virgin foam which cascade down the steplike sides of purple basalt rocks beyond the pioneer fringe. Do not trample the acid green of the volcanic moss; take care not to tread beyond the threshold of the uninhabited prairies and the great damp forest of conifers... (153)

The modern travelers who spoil the landscape and destroy the areas “beyond the pioneer fringe” create as much anxiety for Lévi-Strauss as does the destruction and exploitation of the native Brazilian tribes; these damages go hand-in-hand. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss paradoxically urges the traveler “not to tread beyond the threshold,” where *he* conducts his studies. Once more, Lévi-Strauss cannot accomplish his goals *without treading*

beyond; the fact that he is guilty of combing the Brazilian wilderness for research – though his intentions may be good – makes his inescapable culpability all the more evident.

As regularly as Lévi-Strauss understands and simultaneously perpetuates problems concerning travel and observation, he also constantly condemns, all the while participating in, modernity's absurdity. Writing about the abandoned and beautiful "tiny capital" named Goyaz, he noted, "I do not know whether one should regret or rejoice at the absurdity, but the administration decided to forget Goyaz...It was all too small and too old. A completely virgin territory would have to be found for the establishment of the gigantic scheme that was now envisaged" (*TT* 125). A modern city capital for the State of Goyaz, named Goiania, was planned on "a plateau covered with nothing but coarse grass and thorn bushes," and "no railway or road led to it; only tracks fit for carts" (125). During Lévi-Strauss' visit to Goiania in 1937, he saw only the ill-effects of illogical modern construction in a remote, previously untouched land. He wrote, "[n]othing could be more barbaric or inhuman than this appropriation of the desert," and equated the building of the bizarre, inaccessible capital with the occurrence of a "disaster" (126). Lévi-Strauss' obvious dislike of "this appropriation of the desert" strikingly aligns with Elizabeth Bishop's anxiety over the strange construction of Brazil's new capital, Brasília, in the late 1950s nearly two decades later.

In the prose piece, "A New Capital, Huxley, and Indians," Bishop's tone is one of sharp political commentary and thinly veiled dislike for the new Brazilian capital's construction. Bishop shrewdly links the building of Brasília to the ongoing and potential

utter destruction of an already-exploited native Brazilian population. The strange and removed location of Brasília is reminiscent of the odd placement of Goiania in the 1930s:

Bishop noted,

at present the railroad nearest to it ends...at a small town eighty-five miles away. It takes three days, and trains on both regular gauge and narrow gauge tracks, to reach Annapolis from Rio; from there trucks and jeeps can go on to Brasília...this attempt to build a city before building a railroad to its site is one of the most serious criticisms [of the new capital]. (*PPL* 366)

The government's irrational concern with expensive, modern design, after all, does not seem practical when, considering Brazil's "present desperate financial state," what the country *actually* needs are "schools, roads, and railroads, above all," as opposed to "a luxury capital, an extravagant show-place, three hours by plane from the fringe of cities along the sea-board" (367).

Of her arrival in and departure from what is evocative of the disaster of Goiania, Bishop remarked unflatteringly that "one's first and last impression of Brasília was of miles and miles and miles of blowing red dust" (367). Bishop was not prepared "for quite such dreariness and desolation" as she found in the new capital (368). The poor living quarters of the construction workers made her wonder why "for over two years thousands of workers have been left to build wooden houses or shacks...for themselves, while the first two buildings to be completed [in Brasília are] both...called 'Palace'" (71). Aside from feeling the contradictions around workers' exploitation as they toiled to create such an expensive city, however, Bishop was even more distressed by the fate of the decreasing native Brazilian tribes. In a decidedly ethnographic moment – one of many which echoes the precise observations of Lévi-Strauss – Bishop recorded that

[t]he Uialapiti are short but well-built, the men almost plump, with smooth muscles, broad shoulders, and smooth broad chests. They are naked except for shell necklaces and strings of beads or shells around the hips; the women wear a symbolic cache *sexe* of palm leaf folded into a little rectangle about an inch and a half long, secured by a fine string woven from the same palm. (390)

Throughout Bishop's work, similar ethnographically inflected sentences detail the author's careful observations of a range of individuals, from native tribe members to residents of urban areas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Prior to meeting the Uialapiti, Bishop noted that "we bought packages of cigarettes, boxes of matches, and *Salva Vidas*, Life Savers, to take to the Indians" (*PPL* 385). A more experienced traveler also purchased "fishhooks and nylon fish lines" as well as "a supply of sausage in case [the Uialapiti's] food supply should be low" (385).

After they had visited for a time with the tribe, Bishop recorded that they

pressed up against us, not exactly begging, but certainly eager for the presents they knew we'd have, and half-embarrassed, we handed out our miserable cigarettes, matches, and Life Savers. One woman kept pinching me gently asking *Caramelo? Chocolate?...* and I was sorry I hadn't known of this preference in sweets. (392)

Struck by the poverty and degradation of a once thriving tribe, Bishop was self-conscious about her party's paltry attempts to alleviate the harshness of the Uialapiti's condition.

Since the Uialapiti spoke some Portuguese, it was obvious the tribe had been changed by contact with outside individuals. While they visited with the Uialapiti, the group also met a graduate student from Cambridge who "was working on a thesis on the effects of contact between two different cultures" and had been staying at the Captain Vasconcelos Post for a month (385). Moreover, the party's translator, named Villas Boas, told the visitors "about his years in the Indian service, how hard it is to help the Indians...

[in] a losing battle against disease and corruption” (*PPL* 392). Bishop detailed that the “Indians own no land; there are no reservations for them to retreat to if the lands where they live should ever be sold,” and, though it might not be an issue for years, “the land is subject to speculation, and the founding of Brasília has brought the possibility nearer by six hundred miles” (392). The potential for further encroachment upon the native population, then, was magnified by the construction of Brasília. This potentiality was, for Bishop, emblematic of the sad tropics. She must observe these people, tell what she heard of their stories, and yet an impartiality and observation which was completely detached was, just as it was for Lévi-Strauss, an utterly unmanageable ideal.

Later during the visit, Bishop’s group was “invited to see a wrestling match put on for our benefit,” and she wrote that “[t]he quick, red-bedaubed, naked men, stamping and hooting in the urine-scented dust, resemble fighting-cocks more than anything else” (395). After realizing the impact outsiders had had on the Uialapiti, that everything the tribe did was actually “all for our benefit,” Bishop jadedly ended “A New Capital, Huxley, and Indians,” knowing full well her access and knowledge was in no way unmediated by modern culture’s rampant effects. At the close of her piece she notes, “[r]ather desperately and resignedly, [Brazilians] are hoping for the best. Perhaps we should also all spare a little hope for the Indians” (401). Here, one can just as easily substitute Lévi-Strauss’ lament when he visited the Tibagy: “to my great disappointment, the Tibagy Indians were neither completely ‘true Indians,’ nor, what was more important, ‘savages.’ But by *removing the poetry* from my naïve vision of what experiences lay ahead, they taught me a lesson...in prudence and objectivity” (*TT* 154, emphasis added).

For both Bishop and Lévi-Strauss, poetry and ethnography were essentially inextricable elements in the study of others, though Lévi-Strauss' inclination toward poetry was eliminated by the tribe members he observed. This tension surrounding ideas of accuracy, made palpable in numerous moments throughout both Bishop's work and *Tristes Tropiques*, is largely due to the complicated relationship between poetry, or artistic impression and reflection, and ethnographic study and its modern, forcible demands for precise knowledge. Both authors' recurring attempts at balance between poetic empathy and knowledge becomes clear in a particular passage when Lévi-Strauss notes of the Tibagy,

They were a perfect illustration of that sociological situation which tends to be the only one available to the observer in the second half of the twentieth century; they were 'primitives' who had had civilization brutally thrust upon them, but once the danger they were supposed to represent had been overcome no further interest had been taken in them. (*TT* 154)

Certainly Bishop would have understood this. Lévi-Strauss and Bishop were both cognizant that their anxious observation was, quite sadly, "the only one available" to them; arguably, this constant, recurring acknowledgment becomes a powerful incitement for their observations and writings to continue, even as they grasp the inevitably imperfect nature of their endeavors. This ever-present strain between accuracy and what Lévi-Strauss called a naïve vision of poetry epitomizes the complicated and contested spirit of poetic ethnography and, indeed, of the reality of the sad tropics. It seems Bishop attempts to weld accuracy and poetry together, while still being cognizant of the fact that her own naïveté – which has been changed by her encounters with others – needs to be present in her poetry. That is, after her contact with others, a naïve poetry which

accounts for neither her initial innocence nor her eventual complicity cannot be as accurate as it should.

In *Questions of Travel*, several “Brazil” poems bring to mind this precarious struggle between the desire for detached ethnographic knowledge and more poetic expectations. In “Arrival at Santos” Bishop explicitly tackles the disillusionment felt by travelers seeking exoticism in foreign lands. Of the ship’s long-awaited arrival at a mundane port, the speaker notes:

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...(*PPL* 71)

The coast and harbor are nondescript, and like any other coasts and harbors the speaker has already witnessed. This moment evokes Lévi-Strauss’ acknowledgment that, in actuality, travel “experiences...were doomed to have only a very remote resemblance to the inevitably false picture we were already conjuring up, as travellers are always fated to do” (*TT* 19). Even the mountains around Santos are “self-pitying” and “sad and harsh,” and these descriptions make the narrator’s immediately unrealized excitement plain. Allowing for the unfairness of such exotic expectations, the speaker then remarks on the sighting of the country’s “strange and brilliant rag”: “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” (*PPL* 71). That is, *of course* the foreign country has its

own flag, and coins, and money, even if the speaker did not previously spend time envisioning such commonplace details.

This anticipated glamorous destination is just like other ports, which “are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap, / but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,” and the speaker’s bleak disappointment shows (*PPL* 72). When the speaker hopes the “customs officials will speak English... / and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes,” one can see that the comforts of modernity have not been left behind on this trip (72). Paradoxically, as long as the travelers can carry the securities of home while simultaneously attempting to experience another culture, the speaker will be at ease. At the poem’s close, the speaker idealistically, and again unwisely, focuses on the potentiality for exoticism in future travels: “We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior” (72). Bishop skillfully sets the reader up here to know that the traveler will most likely be further disenchanted after “driving to the interior.” In other words, the speaker has not accepted the futility of exotic anticipations, and still places emphasis on the unrealized possibilities presented by the unknown and mysterious interior. Just as the Port of Santos was less than “the inevitably false picture” imagined by the traveler, the interior, Bishop hints, will provide more of the same disillusionment (*TT* 19).

In “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” Bishop is unmistakably concerned “with the question of the presence of the past” (*Cambridge Companion*, 79). While “Arrival at Santos” concludes with a future-oriented “driving to the interior” (*PPL* 72), “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is a poem *about* that interior, only it becomes both a historical and political interior as much as a geographical one. The opening lines directly equate “our”

eyes with “theirs” – that is, the travelers’ eyes are analogous with the early-sixteenth century explorers’ eyes (*PPL* 72). The poem’s beginning is fresh and plentifully natural, with “every square inch filling in with foliage” before “our” eyes. The flowers, notes the speaker, are “solid but airy; fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame” (72). As Bishop paints the peaceful scenery, however, it slowly changes from a view comprised of “[a] blue-white sky” and lush tropical “...palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate,” into dark and unmistakable “Sin: / five sooty dragons near some massy rocks” (73). Sin’s entrance into the Brazil of 1502 is equated with the arrival of “the Christians, hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting” when they lustfully “...came and found it all,” as if Brazil had not existed prior to their discovery (73). At the poem’s close, the speaker notes the Christian colonizers found Brazil “not unfamiliar” at all, “but corresponding.../ to an old dream of wealth and luxury” (73). The speaker claims then that “they ripped away into the hanging fabric, / each out to catch an Indian for himself” as the “maddening little women” keep “retreating, always retreating behind [the fabric]” (73). Finding the untarnished land of Brazil to be what they expected – that is, a chance to live “an old dream of wealth and luxury / already out of style when they left home” (73) – the explorers essentially break into the natural beauty of Brazil’s “hanging fabric” and decide to lasciviously chase and take whatever they desire, whenever they desire it.

In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss wrote of being “encompassed by a channel of greenery” and poetically noted that Brazil’s “tropical nature seemed to be of quite a different order from the kind of nature we are familiar with; it displayed a higher degree of presence and permanence” (*TT* 90-91). He was, however, also aware of the volatility

of the natural world, and claimed “[t]hat careful and reciprocal relationship between man and...earth...has never existed here, where the ground has been violated and destroyed” (*TT* 92). Whereas Bishop utilizes the rather fragile and haunting word “fabric” (*PPL* 73) to explain the unpolluted and unviolated blanket of greenery which protects the native people from the early explorers, Lévi-Strauss correspondingly notes, “[t]he area of activity exploited by the pioneers has been justly described as a fringe” (92). Whether fabric or fringe, the speaker of Bishop’s poem connects the “maddening little women” with the early, unspoiled virginity of Brazilian land. The colonizers of Bishop’s poem are never disillusioned with the fresh spectacle of the tropics; rather, they spend their time forcing the little women – and also, the natural environment, the wildlife – to continually seek shelter ever deeper in the interior of Brazil, an interior that has been very nearly completely consumed and exhausted by the mid-20th century.

In this poem, as modernity and its technological degradations in the form of “Sin” and “Christians” encroach upon both the innocent natives and their lands, one should be reminded of Bishop’s later anxiety about the Uialapiti Indians during Brasília’s controversial construction. Bishop reminds us that at some point, if modernity continues its wholesale domination and manipulation of native tribes, land, and natural resources, there will be nowhere left to retreat to. The “maddening little women” will have nowhere else to go, and the “hanging fabric” will be torn forever. As Lévi-Strauss noted, during colonial times in Brazil, “[a] rapacious form of agriculture appropriated what was readily available and then moved on, after wresting some profit from the soil” (*TT* 92). Though parts of Brazil’s environment initially seemed to have “a higher degree of presence and

permanence” (*TT* 91), in actuality, during both Lévi-Strauss’ and Bishop’s time in the country, this presence was ever-decreasing, exploited and industrialized.² For both authors, here lies the troubled essence of the sad tropics in the twentieth century: *there is only so much fabric that Brazil can hide behind.*

The disenchantment which modern travelers are likely to experience upon visiting an increasingly degraded and manipulated country can be directly linked to early colonization and the eventual violent appropriations of Brazil’s people and land by outsiders. In short, Bishop brilliantly connects modern travelers’ eyes and colonizers’ eyes from the 1500s in the beginning of “Brazil, January 1, 1502” in a way that requires one to recognize *one’s own involvement* in both inevitably exoticizing foreign countries and exploiting this exoticism. Individuals who travel to foreign countries with exotic expectations, then, are problematically perpetuating these tensions and are, like Lévi-Strauss first was, foolishly caught up in “imagin[ing] exotic countries to be the exact opposite of [theirs]” (*TT* 47). In reality, travelers are just as culpable as the Sin represented by both Bishop’s five sooty dragons and “the Christians, hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting” with abusive and unchecked desire (*PPL* 73).

David Kalstone fittingly notes that in *Questions of Travel* Bishop “imagines first the mere tourist, then the invader, and finally, in the title poem, faces what is actually available to the traveller” (*Five Temperaments*, 30). In “Questions of Travel,” one is continually reminded of the intrinsic absurdity of expectation; ironically, even with awareness, this expectation can never be completely eradicated from the traveler’s

² See especially Chapter 26 on the bizarre construction of the Rondon line, pages 272-280 in *Tristes Tropiques*.

experience. At first, the natural scenery viewed by the speaker is too abundant to comprehend. In the first stanza, the traveler is actually overwhelmed by what can be seen in this foreign environment and appears unable to fully take in the details. From “too many waterfalls” and streams which “hurry too rapidly” to the immense “pressure of so many clouds,” the speaker cannot fully process the exotic location and is forced, instead, to withdraw and imagine that “the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships, / slime-hung and barnacled” (*PPL* 74). Imagination, here, becomes a way to make sense of the mysterious landscape.

Immediately in the next stanza, though, the speaker encourages one to “[t]hink of the long trip home,” and it is here that Bishop asks some of the most challenging and enigmatic questions pertaining to the rationality of travel. Where, indeed, “should we be today” if we were not here, with our bourbon and cigarettes undoubtedly in tow, taking in these unfamiliar sights (74)? Bishop then tackles the strangeness of exotic pursuits when the speaker wonders at “[t]he tiniest green hummingbird in the world” and “inexplicable and impenetrable” stonework which is “always, always delightful” (74). Why, Bishop implicitly asks, are these things delightful? Do we *really* have space in our luggage “for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?” (74). When Bishop constructs hummingbirds, stonework, and even sunsets into packable and manageable objects, one can effortlessly recall Lévi-Strauss’ dislike of the pirating which took place during expeditions. He noted that “our modern Marco Polos now bring back the moral spices of which our society feels an increasing need as it is conscious of sinking further into boredom, but that this time they take the form of photographs, books, and travellers’ tales” (*TT* 38). In Bishop’s

poem, these modern Marco Polos even attempt to bring back neatly packed Brazilian sunsets, but to what end?

The tensions around foreign tourism in “Questions of Travel” occur because of continual anxiety surrounding fancifully enjoying exoticism in the forms of tiny green birds and sunsets while at the same time “watching strangers in a play” (*PPL* 74). Here, Bishop acknowledges the utter peculiarity of travelling around the world to observe strangers living their lives “in this strangest of theatres” (74); and here, one is again reminded of Lévi-Strauss’ unpleasant and inevitable double infirmity. When one wants strangeness, in one form or another, strangeness is what one gets. And what, Bishop asks candidly, is the point? Lévi-Strauss made his awareness of similar apprehensions explicit when he asked,

Is mine the only voice to bear witness to the impossibility of escapism? Like the Indian in the myth, I went as far as the earth allows one to go, and when I arrived at the world’s end, I questioned the people, the creatures and things I found there and met with the same disappointment: ‘He stood still, weeping bitterly, praying and moaning. And yet no mysterious sound reached his ears, nor was he...transported, as he slept, to the temple of the magic animals. For him there could no longer be the slightest doubt: no power, from anyone, had been granted him...’ (*TT* 42)

When what one searches for is mystery, and difference, and exoticism, what route should actually be taken? Escaping to a foreign country to essentially observe strangers living their own lives is not, after all, mysterious, aside from the fact that these people are initially foreign to the observer.

And yet, would it not “have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road” and “never to have had to listen to rain / so much like politicians’ speeches: two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence” (74-5)? Here is the rub:

the unknown and mysterious elements of places unseen and peoples unobserved always contain tantalizing fragments of *possibility* – for exoticism, for difference, for escapism. As the speaker notes in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance”: “Thus should have been our travels: / serious, engravable” (*PPL* 44). Surely upon experiencing such important journeys, if we *could* experience them, the opportunity to have “looked and looked our infant sight away” would be worth it (*PPL* 45-6). So wouldn’t it be a shame *not* to travel, even if we are most likely not to see what we’re at while we’re at it? In the italicized final stanzas of “Questions of Travel,” Bishop refuses to provide an easy answer to these questions. She instead forces the reader to acknowledge that satisfactory answers are not effortlessly reached in regard to questions such as those the poem has raised. Could it only be “*lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, and not just stay at home?*” (*PPL* 75). Certainly, the choice to travel “*is never wide and never free,*” but Bishop reminds the reader that the allure of travel is an incessant one when the speaker notes immediately, “*And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*” (75). The emphatic “*No*” here conveys the still travel-hungry speaker mentally back from “*here, or there*” while at the same time evoking the as-yet-unexperienced, mystifying possibilities held by these foreign places.

Appropriately, “Questions of Travel” ends with yet another unanswered question; the tension-filled complications about observing other people in diverse places are never answered, but the sheer asking of and grappling with these complex questions recurrently adds complicated substance to both Lévi-Strauss’ and Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazilian writing.

Though many of Bishop's poems in *Questions of Travel* reflect the anxieties of the conflicted traveling author who observes others, I want to look closely at "The Burglar of Babylon" to close. Because "The Burglar of Babylon" was written with Bishop as the poem's uncontested speaker, this poem proves a bit simpler to unpack than, for instance, "Manuelzinho," whose speaker remains somewhat disputed.

In "The Burglar of Babylon," Bishop drew inspiration from the observation of a criminal chase with a pair of binoculars. According to Bethany Hicok in "Becoming A Poet: From North to South," "[a]t both poles, Bishop openly situates herself in the position of the traveler in order to ask important ethical questions about encounters with the other" (*Cambridge Companion*, 111). With "The Burglar of Babylon," Bishop situated herself as the detached observer, the Northern foreigner with expensive binoculars who impassively, and from the safety of her upscale residence, viewed a criminal being chased. Moreover, Bishop utilizes the complicated scenery of Rio de Janeiro in order to criticize the aspects of Brazil with which she is uncomfortable but also somewhat complicit. Furthermore, Bishop uses the sing-song, whimsically rhythmic ballad form to ironically highlight the opposing aggression of law enforcement as they hunt down a violent criminal named Micuçu, who "was a burglar and killer, / An enemy of society" (*PPL* 91).

Bishop's main criticisms in "The Burglar of Babylon" are not aimed at the criminal Micuçu, but at the equally-criminal poverty of Rio, the aggressive soldiers, and the "[r]ich people in apartments" who watch the chase (93). At the poem's beginning and near the end, the speaker repeats the powerfully haunting lines:

On the fair green hills of Rio

There grows a fearful stain:

The poor who come to Rio

And can't go home again

[...]

There's the hill of Kerosene,

And the hill of the Skeleton,

The hill of Astonishment,

And the hill of Babylon. (*PPL* 90-91)

Micuçu's world is one stained by the poor, "a million people, / [a] million sparrows" whom Bishop likens to "a confused migration / [t]hat's had to light and rest" (90). These sparrows' houses are likened to "nests" made "[o]ut of nothing at all, or air," and should remind one of the house in Bishop's poem "Jerónimo's House," which is shakily comprised "of perishable / clapboards" and seems "abandoned" (*PPL* 26). The sparrows' houses continue to grow in number and "spread like lichen" on the Rio hillsides (90). The hillsides where the poor live are named after items suggestive of fire, death, bewilderment, and sin: there is no hope for the million sparrows who have tried vainly to find rest near Rio.

Bishop's criticism of the soldiers who hunt Micuçu down becomes clear when a dying soldier demands, "'Finish / [t]he job we came here for.' / He committed his soul to God / [a]nd his sons to the Governor" (93). The Army and government, Bishop emphasizes, will continue to search for and kill criminals throughout the poor slums of

Rio, as if these violent solutions alone will somehow eradicate the desperate impoverishment and crimes in the area. After the soldier's death, his comrades "wanted to stop the search, / But the Army said, 'No, go on'" (*PPL* 93), and subsequently Bishop incriminates rich people, including herself, as detached observers who perpetuate the problems in the Rio slums by passively watching and not necessarily attempting to change anything:

Rich people in apartments

Watched through binoculars

As long as the daylight lasted

And all night, under the stars... (93)

Micuçu, for the "[r]ich people in apartments" who observe "through binoculars" his attempts at fleeing, is simply a poor, foreign, and strange spectacle, something to while away time looking at "[a]s long as the daylight last[s]" and through the night (93).

Bishop accepts her own status as a rich and removed observer when, after Micuçu knows his death is imminent, the speaker notes that "[t]he rich with their binoculars / [w]ere back again," and now they are "standing on the rooftops" to guarantee a better view of Micuçu's death. Bishop reminds the reader that his death is one of emptiness and poverty; he died with "just the clothes he had on, / [w]ith two contos in the pockets, / [o]n the hill of Babylon" (95). Even in death, Micuçu remains trapped in poverty and forever caught in the slums. The poem ends with a new chase, and Micuçu has already been buried and forgotten, most of all, Bishop implies, by the soldiers and the wealthy.

“The Burglar of Babylon” implicates the structures of power in Brazil – the Army and its soldiers, and indifferent, wealthy onlookers – in the grim destitution found throughout the country, and especially on the outskirts of major Brazilian cities. Bishop’s anxiety here at being a rich observer appears as both inevitable and arresting. She does not and cannot, after all, understand the life of the poor or of people like Micuçu, but she also *cannot look away*. The fact that Bishop chose to write “The Burglar of Babylon” attests to her recognition of her own culpability in and inability to change one of the numerous wretched realities of the sad tropics. Bishop ambivalently considered the poem “last week’s news in the form of poetry” (*EB & The New Yorker*, 257) while she simultaneously acknowledged its complicated reception by the public. Bishop wrote to her editor in New York that “[s]ome think I’m helping Brazil, some harming Brazil – one thinks I’m morbid” (*EB & The New Yorker*, 267). Just as Lévi-Strauss continued to visit isolated, impoverished tribes and tell fragments of their stories, Bishop chose to tell the story of the terrible poverty of urban areas in “The Burglar of Babylon.” The personal disillusionment she must have felt, and the absurdity of her wealthy position as she juxtaposed it with the slums, make the observation all the more anxious; she does not, however, turn away.

Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* and Elizabeth Bishop’s *Questions of Travel* do not provide simplistic answers to the intricate questions and tensions inherent to foreign travel and the observing of others. Both authors’ works instead assertively focus on the fact that observation anxieties, issues churning around exotic expectations, and inevitable disenchantments comprise the real activity of foreign travel. As sad as the

tropics may have become for Lévi-Strauss and Bishop, their works remain significant because neither author looked away from these tensions; they chose, rather, to emphasize them. They chose to accept their own culpability, their own double infirmities, as travelers. Perhaps both authors did initially want or need “a virgin mirror / no one’s ever looked at, / that’s never looked back at anyone” (*PPL* 87), but if their time in the tropics taught them anything, it was that such a virgin mirror, such unproblematic escapism, such an unspoiled exotic location, cannot actually hold up under intense observation, or any observation at all. The reality of tarnished mirrors and tainted reflections, however, incessantly summons further beguiling and ill-fated attempts at observation beyond the fringe. In the midst of modernity’s impacts, it is the stained presence of both the past and the present which needs our recognition; as extraordinarily poetic ethnographers, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Elizabeth Bishop offer this difficult yet crucial concentration in their works.

In closing, where does our current focus lie, and where should it lie? Though it seems to have shifted decisively toward the perhaps more enticingly foreign and exotic remnants of Elizabeth Bishop’s relatively new fragments, I am apprehensive, lest our expectations lead only to disappointment and to rapid, leaping interpretations. I hope, in the preceding pages, to have redirected our focus back to the presence of Bishop’s own past works, her original volumes of poetry, in the pursuit of a greater understanding of and appreciation for works which undoubtedly still and will continue to inspire opportunities for significant scholarship and inquiry. This project’s attention has been directed at *Questions of Travel*; equally lengthy studies and considerations of Bishop’s

other three published volumes of poetry are still waiting, hidden perhaps under the far-reaching shadows of the current fragments, to be written.

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