

THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF TRAVEL: THE BRAZIL OF ELIZABETH BISHOP AND P. K. PAGE

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Does place alter person? It's like falling in love
– with the country itself.

P. K. Page, *Brazilian Journal*

Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Elizabeth Bishop, "Questions of Travel"

Elizabeth Bishop and P. K. Page, two North-American modernist women writers who lived in Brazil in the 50s and 60s, produced works that address and reflect upon the subject of traveling and dislocations, as the above quotes show. Both authors wrote about their experiences in Brazil and produced literary and artistic works that follow their gaze upon the country and its people. Despite the difference in the perspective adopted and the constant evocation of their love and passion for the country, both writers unveil, through their work, the inevitable ambiguity of the cultural encounter in what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the ambiguous and conflicting contact zone (4).¹

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This essay reads the work of these two writers as a means of mediating the ambivalent cultural encounter and it also attempts to map out the gaze that reflects and digests the foreign experience. Both Bishop and Page, when writing about their travels, as in the texts quoted in the epigraph, are often referring to the specific context of their journeys to and around Brazil. Bishop, an American who was born in Massachusetts and was raised by her grandparents in Nova Scotia, Canada, and also Worcester and Boston in the US, came to Brazil as a tourist in 1951, but having decided to stay, lived here with Lota de Macedo Soares, in Ouro Preto, Petrópolis and Rio de Janeiro until 1966. Page lived in Brazil from 1957 to 1959, following her husband who had been appointed Canada's Ambassador. She describes her experience in the country as something concurrently surreal and wonderful. Both writers, before coming to Brazil, were highly acclaimed poets, who, once in a new land, devoted their time and energy to writing about traveling in the country: Bishop set out to write *Brazil* (1962) for the *Life World Series*. She also wrote the so-called "Brazilian poems" and translated into English poetry by Brazilian authors and also the *Diary of Helena Morley*. Page, on the other hand, published in 1987, her *Brazilian Journal*, a book based on letters and extracts from her journal, written during her stay in Brazil, published in 1987. Besides those works, both authors wrote extensively about their travel experiences and their encounters with "the other."

Adrienne Rich in a poem from a collection entitled *An Atlas of the Difficult World* evokes the subjective nature of mapping and points to the relevance of the "gaze" as the determining element in spatial perceptions. The persona begins by stating that "This is a map of our country" and after describing a list of possibilities of visualizing this country in a critical way comments that "I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural / then yes let it be these are small distinctions / where do we see it from is the question" (6). Here, the supposedly objective rationality of the maps is replaced by a "mural" as a personal compilation of images. What is relevant in this case is "where we see it

from"—the direction of the gaze and the locus from which we look. In this sense, the "questions of travel" suggested by Elizabeth Bishop's poems relate to different perceptions and viewpoints. In a similar vein, P. K. Page's *Brazilian Journal* opens with a drawing of the map of Brazil entitled very suitably, "The Brazil of P. K. Page," which can be viewed as a subjective mural, rather than a precise map of the country. This personal (and some would argue, distorted) image of the map of Brazil is P.K. Page's mural and it immediately alludes to the several other individual impressions found in Page's diary, and such is also the case with some of Bishop's poems. The outline and the flag of the country in Page's mural are faithfully portrayed while inside the map Page inscribes not the Brazil described by cartographical marks, but rather "her" Brazil, that is, the territories that her foreign "eye/I" captures and reflects in a specular movement that creates other spaces and distorts proportions.

The metaphor of travel has been viewed as a relevant analytical category in contemporary critical discourse. For Caren Kaplan, the modern traveler is an agent of modernity who often confirms and legitimizes the socially discrepant realities of our times (5-10). Along the same lines, Eva-Marie Kröller claims that travel narratives, and here we might include the literary works produced as part of that experience, show "an insistence on the author's multiple persona, which allows him or her to be both accomplice in, and critic of" the experience of cultural contact (87). The contemporary traveler or the foreigner who is exiled in a host country partakes of this condition in the sense that he or she unavoidably assumes an ambiguous positioning that is typical of cross-cultural contacts. James Clifford stresses the paradoxical state of in-betweenness that awaits the modern traveler who lives in a world of transition, a "dwelling-in-travel," a "home away from home" (26). Or, as Rosemary George mentions regarding immigrant writing, these narratives of dislocation "suggest that traveling light or arriving with luggage are serviceable ways of entering the new location" as one is always carrying over some luggage—both in literal and metaphorical senses—to the new destination (173).

The metaphor of traveling plays a major role in both Page's and Bishop's works pointing to their geographical displacement and their condition as cultural mediators, "abait with some luggage carried over" (George 186). The image of traveling is a central concern in the title of most of the books published by Bishop – *North and South* (1946), *Questions of Travel, Geography III* (1976). Already in one of her earlier works (written in the 20s), published in her uncollected work (2006)², Bishop mentions her passion for traveling when she describes a character, Penelope Gwin, "who travelled much in foreign parts / pursuing culture and the arts," but who always "travels light" (3). One can read this desire to travel light as an attempt to take as little as possible of one culture into the other, to be open to the other and the experience of mobility. In fact, such a receptive stance is quite difficult or improbable to happen, given the nature of the traveling experience, as several critics have pointed out.

Both Page and Bishop criticize the expectations of tourists that they will find either something spectacular to take home from their travels, as an exotic experience, or that they will encounter elements of their own culture and customs abroad. As Kevin McNeill points out regarding both authors: "Neither writer wants to be a poetic tourist, in the sense of a mere visitor of images" (90). This questioning of the role of tourists can be observed in the poetic persona's comments in Bishop's famous poem "Arrival at Santos": "Oh, tourist is this how this country is going to answer you, / and your immodest demands for a different world" (89). This passage echoes the one cited in the epigraph, which was taken from the poem "Questions of Travel": "Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?" (94). Is travelling for these tourists just a means of searching for something that cannot be found at home while attempting to find "the same"? Here and elsewhere Bishop questions the tourists' unwillingness to be open to the experience of another culture and people, as if tourists "travel to other locations to view conditions or practices that might just as well be viewed 'at home'" (Kaplan 59). This

bleak view of the role of tourists and their futile efforts resonates throughout Bishop's poems as it also does in Page's "The Permanent Tourists":

Somnolent through landscapes and by trees
nondescript, almost anonymous,
they alter as they enter foreign cities –
the terrible tourists with their empty eyes
longing to be filled with monuments.

Verge upon statues in the public squares
Remembering the promise of memorials
yet never enter the entire event
as dogs, abroad in any kind of weather,
move perfectly within their rainy climate. ("The Hidden Room" poem 1, 113).

In this poem, Page accuses the "somnolent" and "terrible tourists with their empty eyes" of being incapable of feeling or participating in the scene observed from a distance and "never enter[ing] the event." Forgetting what they witness, they "lock themselves into snapshots" so that they can later "conjure in memory / all they are now incapable of feeling" ("The Hidden Room" poem 1, 113).

Both writers express their view of the potential of travel and the continuous possibilities of moving from one place to another in an endless list of "choices" that grant each journey a unique quality. In an essay entitled "Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman," P. K. Page stresses the inescapable subjective quality of the traveling experience: "I am a traveler. I have a destination but no maps. . . . One's route is one's own. One's journey unique" (36). Page's traveler is also a "conjuror" that performs clever tricks and makes things appear and disappear, a magician that uses art to create his or her own version of reality from the scenes observed while moving around (36-37). Traveling becomes

thus not only a trope for movement and transference, but also for translation, as James Clifford argues. The connection between traveling and the act of cultural translation inevitably marks the encounter of cultures and the interaction between individuals. For Clifford, the etymological duality of the term “translation” (from both *tradittore* and *traduttore*) simultaneously brings people together and distances them: “all translation terms used in global comparisons—terms like ‘culture’, ‘art’, ‘society’, ‘peasant’, ‘mode of production’, ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘modernity’, ‘ethnography’—get us some distance *and* fall apart” (39). Likewise, Mary Louise Pratt stresses the ambiguity of the interactions in the contact zones in the sense that in this process of mobility not only does the dominant center or the metropolis modify and interfere with the periphery or marginal groups, but very often, the latter influences, determines and alters the former, appropriating modes of representation by reading and translating them in a different light (7-9). Along the same lines, Avtar Brah, in her discussion of contemporary travel, claims that the processes of cultural mobility modify not only the traveler but also the native, those who “stay put” (209).

In *Questions of Travel*, a title directly taken from Bishop’s book of poems about her experience in Brazil, Caren Kaplan analyzes the metaphors of travel and displacement as crucial analytical categories in contemporary critical discourse, showing how references to “travel, displacement, borders, diasporas, and homelands abound in contemporary criticism” (22). The author sees the traveler as an agent and trope of modernity, literally and figuratively traversing various boundaries but also participating in creating these same boundaries. Kaplan argues that the concept of travel in the twentieth century cannot be disconnected from the historical legacy of the development of capitalism and the expansion of imperialism that have fostered cultural, social and economic inequalities. For her, this figure, which often coincides with that of a tourist, is an agent of modernity that confirms and legitimizes the social reality of dichotomous constructions such as First/Third Worlds, developed/ underdeveloped, center/periphery.

The tourist, she claims, “literally and figuratively traverses these boundaries” (58).

Both Bishop and Page, despite their different conditions as travelers and foreigners, reveal and translate through their gazes precisely this ambiguous perception of the host country that Kaplan refers to. If, on the one hand, they express their love, even passion for the country, on the other, they disclose their role as visitors who decode stereotypical images of an exotic country. In a poem, “Brasil, 1959,” published in her recent uncollected papers, Bishop expresses this duality as she criticizes the country’s political, social and economic problems: “Oh / crooks crooks, stupid stupid stupid crooks / . . . Shall we change the politicians? / An honest madman for a swap the playboy for the honest / madman? / And is he really honest? It’s a kind of joke” (123). Brett Miller states that this poem belongs to Bishop’s “second wave of poems about her adopted country. . . . Bolder and more overtly political than the poems she finished and published, they show her attempts and her frustrations with trying to speak in poetry about Brazil as a political entity” (qtd. in Quinn 322). Despite this critical outlook, the poem ends up revealing her passion for the country’s exotic natural landscape:

Meanwhile, you’ve never seen
a country that’s more beautiful.
—or this part of it, anyway—
The delicacy of the green hills
the new bamboos unfurl the edges
are all so soft against the pink watery skies
below, the purple Lent trees. (123)

Here the person takes refuge in the eroticized and stereotypical nature of the foreign country as a form of evading the political overtone of the first part. The poem enacts several other cultural encounters in which the tourist’s gaze transforms the experience in another country into an

aesthetic experience that in effect reveals the feeling of superiority that is conveyed by the visitor's gaze.

Likewise, in Page's *Brazilian Journal*, the experience in the country is often described as an aesthetic experience. The feeling of fascination for a natural landscape that is described in terms of abundance and excess permeates the whole journal, as it also does in Bishop's poem: "it is so excessive" (15), "I felt overwhelmed by beauty" (63), "I expect never to have so much again . . . so much beauty, so much sun, so sweet a people" (238), "golden, perfect, complete" (241). She also affirms, "On a rational basis I find it difficult to believe that *everything* is beautiful, and yet, to my eye, it is. The leaves, the beach, the sea. The streets with their lazy people and their racket" (174). Through these recurrent images, Page's travel journal as well as Bishop's poem evoke the famous discovery letter by Pero Vaz de Caminha, written in May 1500 to inform the King of Portugal of the discovery of Brazil in terms that emphasize the fascination with the natural scenery they encounter—the excess, the fertility and the beauty of the "*terra brasilis*." In fact, Page echoes Caminha's letter about the "discovery" of the country when she refers to "her discovery of their Brazil" (149). Bishop, on the other hand, re-enacts the scene of discovery in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," describing precisely this excess of nature: "Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs: / every square inch filling in with foliage" (91). Here, however, she shows, with a critical eye, the exploratory design of the so-called Christians who pursue "wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure" (92).

While revealing their foreign gaze, which is unavoidably attracted by the exotic, Bishop and Page tend to differ in the way they express their reaction to the social problems in Brazil. Page transforms even the most appalling event into an aesthetic experience of the sublime: "We drove today up over the hills an through the *favela*, which should make any sensitive, decent person devote his life to social reform, but I'm afraid my initial reaction was one of fierce pleasure in its beauty. . . . But my eye operates separately from my heart or head – or at least in advance of them – and I saw, first, the beauty" (70). As Heaps points

out: "Under this anaesthetic of art for art's sake, she hardly enters the political and socioeconomic 'events' of Brazil" (358). Pratt observes that aestheticization, and its opposite, are paradoxical characteristics of travel narratives that function as a poetic necessity to justify some kind of intervention in the visited country or, in Page's case, to create an excuse for not intervening (217).

Bishop, however, as attested in the poem cited above, her famous poem, "Pink Dog" and others ("Young Man in the Park," "A Baby Found in the Garbage") is highly critical of poverty in Brazil and the careless way it was handled by the government and accepted by society, despite the fact that several critics have pointed out that her "representation of the Brazilian poor and their dramas seem to lack sympathy" (Przybycien 67). In "Pink Dog" she compares the shabby dog to beggars whom, according to rumors: "They talk and throw ... in the tidal waves" (190). The solution comes in an ironic commentary: the beggars have to be equipped with "life preservers" in the same way that the shabby dog has to wear a "fantasia" (costume) because during carnival "A depilated dog would not look well" (191). In "A Baby Found in the Garbage" she concludes, also in an ironic and helpless tone: "Yours is a classic death, my dear" (112). It is interesting to observe, however, that most of these poems were only published recently in the uncollected works. Bishop kept them in manuscript form, not daring to publish them during her lifetime, as if afraid of expressing her views. Regina Przybycien however, observes that Bishop "may have been attracted to the Brazilian 'primitives' because they were thought to be closer to the natural world she loved" as an ethnographer (69).

As we analyze Bishop's and Page's works it is possible to notice the clear ambivalence, which travel theorists refer to, about their experiences in Brazil. Bishop in an untitled uncollected poem affirms: "Dear, my compass / still points north / to wooden houses / and blue eyes" (140). Despite her statements about the wonderful experience she has in Brazil and her love for the country natural landscape, Bishop concludes that she is still compelled to go north, to her North-America, to the cozy houses and to her white people. Page, on the other hand,

observes in a interview in 1987, "I think I had a vision of beauty when I was in Brazil. . . . Was it Jung who said when you're ready for a thing, it happens to you? Certainly Brazil might well have happened to me wherever I was" (Wachtel 54). Acknowledging that the experience "Brazil" might have happened wherever she was, Page becomes identified with Bishop's ironic traveler, the one who asks, "Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home? / . . . Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?" (43). As Silviano Santiago notes, "For Bishop traveling becomes an imperative need, and the cartography of displacement, of sliding, and of the unpredicted becomes a delight to eyes, body, and imagination" (19). Santiago's words could also be applied to Page, whose need for traveling and displacement, like Bishop's, seems to go beyond the actual experience. In both cases, what we observe is the crucial role of traveling in their aesthetic expressions, which is unavoidably part of the politics and poetics of travel. Bishop's and Page's traveling eyes reveal their inner "I/eyes" in the same way that the work of memory attempts to preserve the perceptions of a gaze rooted somewhere in time, bringing to mind images of the subjective and idealized "Brazil of P. K. Page" or the objectified "Brazil, where the nuts come from" (114) or "the country of coffee beans" (116), as Bishop often refers to it.

Notes

1. See also: Almeida, "Expanding Boundaries: Traveling Theories in the Americas" and "O Brasil de P. K. Page: deslocamentos, olhares e viagens."
2. The uncollected poems by Bishop, published in 2006, were mainly take from two notebooks dating from 1937-1947, which she gave to Linda Nemer, as she left Brazil in 1970-71.

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