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“‘Immodest Demands for a Different World’: The Portuguese Discoveries in U.S. Verse by Women”

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1. Introduction

“Januaries.” Thus begins Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Brazil, January 1, 1502.” This unusual plural points to the heterogeneity of the discourses of beginnings in historiography and self-reflexive artistic accounts. In the fabric of the poem, this reference encompasses time and space, since it both alludes to the date when the Portuguese arrived at the Atlantic coast of Brazil, near the Tropic of Capricorn, and to the fact that this place would then be named Rio de Janeiro. It also bears an iterative dimension, as the poetic enunciation reenacts, 450 years afterwards, the appropriative gaze before a ‘native’ landscape. The emphasis on primal nature, in turn, evokes a mythical time and the nostalgia of creation before the “Fall.” The three poems we wish to discuss in this essay all deal with narratives of inscription and inception, told by the voice of the subaltern — they are all written by women who, in one way or another, feel dislocated from a place of belonging.

Problematizing the representation of otherness, the three poems (see appendix) can also be read as diasporic accounts involving American-Portuguese exchanges. Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) obliquely refers to the period when she lived as an expatriate in Brazil, from 1951 to 1965. From this experience came the book *Questions of Travel* (1965), in which the poem we will scrutinize, “Brazil, January, 1502” (1960), appears as the second text, between “Arrival at Santos” and the title poem, revolving around a parallelism between artistic and linguistic appropriation of alterity and the Christian explorers’ imperialism on arriving in the new world.

Olga Cabral (1909-1997) and Nancy Vieira Couto (b. 1942) are both writers of Portuguese descent, though one generation apart and having a different degree of proximity to the descent culture. Born in Trinidad, in the West

Indies, Cabral usually vaunted her Portuguese ancestry on the jackets of her poetry books, but in her writing it assumes the distanced quality of lost origin and primal language, as is evident in “The Music of Villa-Lobos” (1970). This poem evokes an irretrievable language key to a primitive matriarchal identity, in an Edenic land contrasting with the Northern civilization where she feels exiled. Vieira Couto, in turn, never lost contact with her Portuguese roots, being the daughter of Azorean immigrants and often thematizing this hybrid identity in her poetry, namely in “Magalhães’s Last Testament” (1990). This poem describes the Portuguese circumnavigator as a pragmatic adventurer, not unlike the emigrant, willing to ply the routes of the world but unable to cross linguistic boundaries and bridge cultural difference.

2. The embroidery of the New World

All three poems may be read in intertextual dialogue with Early Modern narratives of overseas travel and quest, especially the accounts of the voyages undertaken by the Portuguese. Bishop was probably inspired by the letters attributed to Amerigo Vespucci, narrating the voyage of discovery commissioned by the Portuguese King Manuel I to the coast of Brazil, as well as by the celebrated Pêro Vaz de Caminha’s “Carta do Achamento do Brasil.” Both these chroniclers rewrote the world’s landscape, and their letters are inextricably associated with ~~the~~ coeval cartographic representations of the New World (e.g., the Miller Atlas, 1497, fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Map of Brazil, Miller Atlas, 1497. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

It is no wonder then that Bishop’s poem is both descriptive and pictorial, focusing on the textured landscape – that is, textual and textile, as alluded to in the epigraph – unfolding line by line, “every square inch filling in with foliage” (72). The interchangeability of Nature and tapestry fuses aesthetics

and episteme (Diehl 27), and questions the authority of the speaker. It is significant that, in the book sequence, the poem comes after the promise of “driving to the interior” announced in “Arrival at Santos.” Nonetheless, the equation of immersion in the jungle with the plunge into the inner self is denied in the first lines of “Brazil,” where the landscape reproduces an ancient view that frustrates fresh insights, in an excerpt that rephrases the Emerson homophony: “I become a *transparent eye-ball*” (Emerson 10). Thus the first stanza – “Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs ... fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame” (72) — is to be interpreted as an ironic and belated comment on the impossibility of knowing nature as an ontology.

We find in the text a struggle with the authority and anteriority of representation, which can be analyzed according to Gayatri Spivak’s double reading of the term —that is, representation as ‘re-presentation’ and ‘speaking for’ (“Can the subaltern” 70). If Bishop’s poem purports to speak about nature and natives, it cannot speak for them, as it is constrained to a discursive frame that purports to depict otherness. Bishop’s poem as tapestry not only superimposes layers of texts but also modes of figurative appropriations of natives and women — from those of the *conquistadores* to those of present-day tourists, including the poetic subject’s effort to voice alternative insights. This is by no means linear and the metaphor of tapestry itself replicates artistic endeavor as much as feminine labor. The foregrounding of aestheticization comments on the anxieties about the colonial possession being able to fulfill the colonizers’ dreams and demands (Roman 146).

On the other hand, the text suggests references to sources that are ultimately irretrievable, thus thwarting the gratification of finding a primary source as much as that of discovering a new word/world. The grid-like description of the forest as a tapestry will be implicitly read as ekphrasis, the comprehensive enumeration pointing moreover to the taxonomic ambition of the Western explorer. Other texts called upon are the aforementioned letters (Vespucci’s and Caminha’s), the 15th century battle hymn *L’Homme armé* accompanying mass in the third stanza (the only reference for which we have a tentative source, “humming perhaps / *L’ Homme armé* or some such tune,” 73), and the phrase “one leaf yes and one leaf no” (idem) quoted as a translation from the

Portuguese. The unreadable syntax parodies a language with which both poetic subject and reader are unfamiliar, and enhances, through the polysemy of the word “leaf,” the mismatch between nature and text, world and word. This foreignizing effect highlights the fact that language is a convention through which “our eyes” (the collective first person opens the poem, conflating reader and writer) appropriate reality. Thus, in “Tecendo e distorcendo o colonialismo da linguagem,” Graça Capinha remarks that all narrative becomes an act of colonization attempting to neutralize the menace of the unknown (69).

The fact that “the Christians, hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting, / in creaking armor, came and found it all, / not unfamiliar” discloses the discursive construct of the American Promised Land as an “old dream of wealth and luxury” (Bishop 73). These puny figures of steel contrast with the organic nature represented through the baroque technique of the *linea serpentinata*. Their miniaturization effects a discursive displacement that revises hegemonic historiography and rewrites the moment of ‘discovery’ as confrontational. The gendering of the natural world, so common in narratives of colonization where the conquest of virgin land is equated with the possession of the young female body (Przybycien 97), evolves from the opening personification of a hospitable nature to the imagery of the ravished land and body (Wolovsky 8). In the last stanza the Portuguese are metonymized into the generic category of Christians, who attend mass as a ritual of legitimization entitling them to their catch (Roman 65). The sequence exposes the complex relationship between evangelization, geographic expansion and imperialism, already present in the seminal text of Pêro Vaz de Caminha: “E, segundo o que a mim e a todos pareceu, esta gente não lhes falece outra coisa para ser toda cristã, senão entenderem-nos, porque assim tomavam aquilo que nos viam fazer, como nós mesmos” (46-7).¹ The Biblical intertext was already evoked in the second stanza, where Sin, “in the foreground,” is ascribed to the figure of the bestialized lustful female — “her wicked tail straight up and over, / red as red-hot wire” (73) — recalling the

¹ And, to judge from what it seemed to me and all, for these people to become Christians they need nothing else than to understand us, as they took that which they saw us doing, just as we did it” (our translation).

narrative of the Fall. The feminization of lust is also topicalized in the letter ascribed to Vespucci: "they go entirely naked, they are fleshy women ... they have no shame of their shameful parts anymore than we have in displaying the nose and the mouth ... they shewed themselves very desirous of having connexion with us Christians" (10-11).

The transition from the second to the third stanza is the moment when the layers of signification become most entangled, since Bishop resorts to the primeval figure of the lizard (formerly mythologized as dragon) and uses it concomitantly as a symbol for the figures of the male native, the female native, and the male conqueror. The description of male aggression, countered by female sexual elusiveness, is the point where textuality loses its grasp – "Directly after Mass ... they ripped away into the hanging fabric, / each out to catch an Indian for himself" (73). The threatened native women, ambivalently commodified by the conspicuous use of the possessive "whose," become impervious to representation, as they merge into the natural background and, unable to speak from their subaltern position, retreat into magic.

The allusion to bird talk as counterpoint to organized verbal discourse recurs in the three poems, and it is equated, both in Bishop and Cabral, with female expression. Bishop's biographer Goldenshon speculates that this association may have been prompted by the author's acquaintance with the novel by the ornithologist William Henry Hudson, *The Green Mansions* (1904), featuring the "good savage" Rima, conversant with birds and silenced by the hegemonic colonizing discourse. To prove her point, Goldenshon quotes Bishop's review of Hudson's book: "I wished that the book had been twice as long when I put it down, and I was filled with longing to leave for South America immediately and search for those forgotten bird-people" (203). The metaphor of the caged bird for the female artist is recurrent in U.S. literature (most famously in Dickinson), and must have triggered Bishop's imagination as she mused over Joseph Cornell's work, which inspired some of her own visual art.²

² See, for instance, by Joseph Cornell, *Fortune Telling Parrot (Parrot Music Box)*, ca. 1937–38, or *Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne)*, 1957. About Bishop's admiration for Cornell, see her interview to Elizabeth Spires, 120-121.

3. Archetype and primitivism

Cornell's boxes, in particular his bird series, might also have been a source for Olga Cabral's poetic imagination, as she owned an art gallery in New York for some time and was probably familiar with the artist's output. In Cabral's "The Music of Villa-Lobos," the poet's quest for a "lost language" chimes in with the mythical "hummingbird people," harmoniously at play in the different world this poet demands, both new and primeval. The recovery of archetypal representations and the conflicting natural elements set at play in the poem — "a god with a tower of green faces / comes striding across cities of permafrost" (28) — illustrate one of Cabral's major themes, which is arguably demonstrated by the sequence of titles of the poetry collections *In the Empire of Ice* (1980), followed by *The Green Dream* (1990). The longing for an "ancestral language" and a paradisiacal space inhabited by Protean gods and anthropomorphized creatures is in line with the aesthetics of primitivism (*Encyclopedia of Poetry* 975-976) and the fetichization of origins, once more located around the symbolic frontier of the Equator line.

If, in Bishop's poem, the contact with an alien culture leads the poet to wonder about the familiarity of expectations of foreignness, in Cabral's text the relationship with a culture that allegedly was once familiar is projected onto a mythical plane, revived by an exoticizing imagination. While Bishop's text frustrates the promise of the interior drive, showing how our "eyes" are conditioned by former visions and subjectivities, "The music of Villa-Lobos" transplants the Emersonian metaphor to an imaginative space of intra-uterine prescience: "that island of my birth / where the sun in his suit of mirrors / was seen once only with my vast fetal eye" (28). In further contrast with the other two poems, in "The Music of Villa-Lobos," the attempt to reenact discovery is not explicitly intertextual, since it is mainly pursued by non-verbal language, in particular symbols assigned to clothing, and music. Villa-Lobos's score evokes a different realization of Homi Bhabha's "third-space of enunciation" (37) not enacted through contiguity but through *reliatio*, a spiritual-aesthetic intuition of a common ontology, materialized in the tropics and the South.

Spelled out in the title and the body of the poem, the name Villa-Lobos introduces another instance of linguistic interference, the foreign Portuguese language (also alluded to in Bishop's text) that operates as a glossolalic charm in a couple of Cabral's poems (e. g. "To Spain").

4. Explorers and Exploited

Idyllic as it sounds, Cabral's attempt at (re)discovering is nonetheless tinged by a mercantile note, when the poet describes her dream of "leas[ing] the equator for life," highlighting the politics of power which underlie the colonial appropriation of the perfect primitive landscape. In "Magalhães's Last Testament," Nancy Vieira Couto presents an utterly dystopic vision of this negotiation, making a navigator agonize over his exploits in another line, that of the famous Strait, which he admits to have been traced by previous charts and texts: "The strait / was something else though, a line payed out in coils / before me. I take no credit for that" (51). The parodic assumption of the masculine protagonist's voice enhances a complex set of power relations, involving reversal of gender, ethnic and class roles. The feminine author appropriates the male narrative putting a full stop to his verbal diarrhea ("my language / splatters like birdshit", idem), a move emphasized by the redundancy spelled out in the title — "Last Testament." Once more, there is an intertextual link with early discovery narratives, most probably Antonio Pigafetta's journal, where Magellan is indeed a captain over-confident in his power of persuasion:

The captain did not wish to fight then, but sent a message to the natives to the effect that if they would obey the king of Spain, recognize the Christian king as their sovereign, and pay us our tribute, he would be their friend.³

Questioning such a master narrative, the poem's speaker admits a 'vested interest' that binds him to a hierarchy of superior powers: "I work for whoever pays, don't ask about life insurance, / and never keep promises," but now,

³ Nowell, Charles E. (1962). *Magellan's Voyage Around the World: Three Contemporary Accounts*. Northwestern University Press. The manuscript *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo* was only published in its entirety in the late 18th century, although parts of it had been divulged as early as 1525. As quoted in "The Death of Magellan, 1521." EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2001; accessed April 11, 2011).

caught in a double-bind, he is succumbing under the power of the “wide-eyed natives” he considered his subalterns (51).

We may presume that the adventurer’s injunction to the islanders, in a desperate attempt to save his skin, “make a *figo* / And I will go away” (which translates the Portuguese expression “fazer figas”, according to a personal communication with Couto), enacts a charm connoted with female genitalia, indirectly feminizing the natives, a topos recurrent in Bishop’s poem. Nevertheless the Filipinos will resist this strategy of appropriation, brandishing their “sharp”, phallic arrows, one of the weapons that guaranteed the victory to the Filipinos in the Battle of Mactan, in 1521, where Magellan was killed. Remarkably, the conflation of issues of ethnic and gender authority also surfaces in Fernando Pessoa’s poem devoted to this historical character in the book *A Mensagem* (1934), where the natives’ ritual dance celebrates the death of the man who “yearned to encircle the primal mother” and thus “ravished the Earth” (*violou a Terra*).

The conquistador’s soliloquy expresses strangeness, not the usual familiarity of western colonizers faced with the promised land (“Nothing was familiar – not breathing, / not seeing, not thinking”), and a complete dissociation from his body, reified in mechanical terms that evoke the dismembered proletarian bodies in the (forthcoming) Industrial Revolution (“but by then I was a machine, / all gears and pulleys, winding my own self up”, Couto, 51). Portrayed as a social climber, this historical figure may also stand for the (Luso-American) emigrant commenting on the hardship of a boundary identity away from home: “I think that if I’ve learned / anything from this, it’s that a man / can go halfway around the world, no further / or, in plainer words, can go in one / direction only: away” (*idem*). The impossibility of return seems to apply not only to the self-made man’s journey but also to the inexorable pace of history that hinders the utopian search for the primitive natural and human landscape, as Bishop’s poem also evinces.

5. Conclusion

Although these three poets use different strategies to address issues of power and claims over the body and the territory, they all assume a historical distance to undermine master narratives, while hinting at the limits of

expansion obtained through travel and language, both in their descriptive and communicative abilities. Besides, all illustrate their questions by referring to episodes, iconic evocations, or characters from early accounts of the discovery voyages, seminal to the discourse of Western colonialism. Hence these three poetic voices cross the boundaries of definite geopolitical and linguistic identities, proposing narratives that decenter ethnocentric and hegemonic representations of Western history and, to quote Bishop in "Arrival at Santos" (the inaugural poem of *Questions of Travel*), question our "immodest demands for a different world" (71).

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APPENDIX

Brazil, January 1, 1502

... embroidered nature... tapestried landscape.

—*Landscape into Art*, by Sir Kenneth Clark

Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
 exactly as she must have greeted theirs:
 every square inch filling in with foliage—
 big leaves, little leaves, and faint leaves,
 blue, blue-green, and olive,
 with occasional lighter veins and edges,
 or a stain under leaf turned over;
 monster ferns
 in sliver-gray relief,
 and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
 up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—
 purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,
 rust red and greenish white;
 solid but airy; fresh as if just finished
 and taken off the frame.

A blue-white sky, a simple web,
 backing for feathery detail:
 brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,
 a few palms, swarthy, squat, but delicate;
 and perching there in profile, beaks agape,
 the big symbolic birds keep quiet,
 each showing only half his puffed and padded,
 pure-colored or spotted breast.
 Still in the foreground there is Sin:
 five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.
 The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts
 splattered and overlapping,
 threatened from underneath by moss
 in lovely hell-green flames,
 attacked above
 by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,
 “one leaf yes and on leaf no” (in Portuguese).
 The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes
 are on the smaller, female one, back-to,

her wicked tail straight up and over,
 red as red-hot wire.
 Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
 tiny as nails, and glinting,
 in creaking armor, came and found it all,
 not unfamiliar:
 no lovers' walks, no bowers,
 no cherries to be picked, no lute music,
 but corresponding, nevertheless,
 to an old dream of wealth and luxury
 already out of style when they left home—
 wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure.
 Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L' Homme armé or some such tune,
 they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
 each out to catch an Indian for himself—
 those maddening little women who kept calling,
 calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
 and retreating, always retreating, behind it.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, Ed. Robert Giroux
 and Lloyd Schwartz. New York: The Library of America, 2008. 72-73.

The Music of Villa-Lobos

Someone is speaking a lost language.

It is the music of Villa-Lobos.

I try to remember: where was I
 born? And from what continent
 untimely torn? I might have been
 a priestess among the caymans
 guarding the eye-jewel of the
 crocodile god. I might have sailed

orinocos of diamonds, seas of coconuts,
leased the equator for life and learned
my ancestral language.

But I have only some old sleeves of rain
in a trunk with spiders
to remember my ancestors by.
They have left me
nothing, and I have forgotten
that island of my birth
where the sun in his suit of mirrors
was seen once only with my vast fetal eye.

But in the music of Villa-Lobos
a god with a tower of green faces
comes striding across cities
of permafrost, and I am summoned
once again to the jaguar gardens
guarded by waterfalls
where the hummingbird people are at play
far from the cold auroras of the north.

Olga Cabral (1909-1997), *Tape Found in a Bottle* (1971). Repr. *Voice/Over. Selected Poems*. Albuquerque: West End Press, 1993. 28

Magalhães's Last Testament

Having always been a person of more stamina
than energy, I'm not surprised to find myself
in the Philippines, although these wide-eyed natives
are surprised. By their faces you'd think
I was a ghost of some sort, or the evil eye

Make a *figo*, I tell them, make a *figo*
and I'll go away, I promise. But no,
something terrible must have happened, and I'm to blame.
Their arrows are sharp and my language
splatters like birdshit. I guess stamina
won't pull me through this time. Still, I'm not sorry
I work for whoever pays, don't ask about life insurance,
and never keep promises. The strait
was something else though, a line payed out in coils
before me. I take no credit for that.
It must have been manoeuvring that twisted,
rock-walled maze that did it – the smell
of something in the williwaws, something final
blasting down the fjords toward the ocean.
Nothing was familiar – not breathing,
not seeing, not thinking. The crazy thing
was even on short rations I felt full,
ready to burst, like a big glutton.
I said to myself, Fernão, this is too much,
and I knew it was over. If I had known the Pacific
goes on forever – but by then I was a machine,
all gears and pulleys, winding my own self up.
Better that way. I think that if I've learned
anything from this, it's that a man
can go halfway around the world, no further,
or, in plainer words, can go in one
direction only: away. Oh, natives,
listen to my words while they are liquid
testament to a workaday kind of travel:
I never meant to sail so goddamn far.
I was just doing my job.

Nancy Vieira Couto, *The Face in the Water*. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990. 51.

