

**Poetic Mapping:  
A Feminist Reading of Place and Movement with Elizabeth Bishop's Cartographic  
Imagination**

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**Abstract**

Following the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and her emphasis on geography within her cartographic imagination (Edelman and Bishop; Hollister; Murthy; Thoss), I develop a methodological approach as a critical mapping process, which is consistent with the post-representational turn in cartography (Kitchin and Dodge). What I consider “poetic mapping” follows a close reading of Bishop’s poetry, including “The Map” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” within the scope of literary cartography and geocriticism (Tally Jr.). I argue that Elizabeth Bishop’s poems already provide a post-representational turn, process-derived mapping methodology, that offers a feminist reading of place and movement. This methodology values the geography of bodies as their own political, social, and historical spaces, as influenced by Donna Haraway’s feminist objectivity, situated knowledges, acknowledging both the political and ontological processes of mapping, particularly as Bishop moves through the various macro and micro power constructions and relations within personal, geographical, and historical spaces.

Elizabeth Bishop’s (1911-1979) work is often linked to her “cartographic imagination” (Thoss), focusing on her interrogation of belonging or isolation as she maps out landscapes and geographies in poetic form (as seen in the work of Edelman and Bishop; Hollister; Murthy; Thoss). This eye towards the visual may also reflect her work as a painter. The focus of this article is Bishop's interrogation and interest in the geo-spatial, or even what we might call the

geo-social, in her poems. Acknowledging the work that others have done following Bishop's cartographic imagination and following her approach to understanding places and spaces, this paper introduces the possibilities of a "poetic mapping" process as methodology, enabling a cartography of situated and embodied knowledges via Donna Haraway's understanding of feminist objectivity.

Providing a close reading of "The Map" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502," this analysis of Bishop's poetry falls within the scope of literary cartography and geocriticism, but also suggests that her poetry is already consistent with the post-representational turn in geography (Tally Jr.). For me, poetic mapping considers the dualistic relationships between language and movement, narrative and place, space and bodies and the experiences of their liminalities. Although this particular investigation looks overtly at poetry as a mapping process, the implication is that if poems act as maps, then maps must also work through the poetic; therefore Bishop should challenge our material, narrative, and corporeal engagement with maps, and the resulting political implications of mapping a place. This is particularly important as we consider the historical articulations of geography and cartography as fields of Western, patriarchal knowledge production, developed within imperialism and colonialism (Edney; Harley; Jazeel), as well as what those histories might mean as we consider ongoing implications of mapping landscapes, places, and alternative spaces in modernity, including ongoing and even escalating issues such as refugee crisis, violence of non state actors, and changing climates.

For some time now, literary criticism and theory has concerned itself with the ways that poetics work as (or at times, is influenced by) the cartography or mapping of place (Crawford; Kaplan). Additionally, there is the development of *geopoetics*, which is associated with the work of Kenneth White (Italiano; Westphal). Geopoetics, as described by Bertrand Westphal, "focuses on the intertwining of the biosphere, poetry, and poetics, foregrounding these in a somewhat systematic endeavor. Geopoetics goes along with a certain ecological view of life, a certain inclusion in world culture" (xi). Further, connecting the intersections of place, landscape, and language Sten Moslund introduces the concept of *topopoetics*, as he states "[w]henver the question falls on literatures of a more place-specific nature...we may even be speaking of topopoetics as langscaping of literature or a reading that maps the work as a *landguage*" (30). Moslund further clarifies that "[t]he fusion of 'language' with 'land' or 'landscape' points to the way a work's language may be laden with the natural and cultural symptomologies of its setting,

endowed with sensory energies that are intricately evocative of things like the topography, flora, fauna, and climate of the place” (31). Geopoetics and topoetics are both theoretical endeavors attempting to pull together similar observations: our lived realities in places, landscapes, climates are equally mapped out in language as they are in space. Such frameworks are possible only as space and language already require the other in order to produce meaning.

Poetics account for individuals moving through or observing places and spaces in such a way that lays claim and provides information for particular purposes. These purposes parallel the information and use of maps, i.e. physical characteristics of landscapes, decisive and instructional movements through various spaces, indications of what a space contains that is valuable or significant, and laying claim and marking these spaces in such a way that delineates boundaries, articulating positions of “insider” and “outsider.” However, the difference between the two is that knowledge produced by poetry is often aligned with the individual experience and not objectified, but the knowledge production of maps is aligned with objectivity and not subjugated. But as observed by Heather Yeung, “[t]he map is a descriptive and navigational tool, just as the process of mapping is one of simultaneous recognition and creation” (*Spatial Engagement with Poetry* 1). The poetic can also work through simultaneous recognition and creation. For example, Yeung also offers the poetic I/eye as an alternative frame of vision (“Affective Mapping in Lyric Poetry” 209), which, I suggest, can be used alongside Haraway’s situated knowledges, as a feminist form of vision, one that does not transcend towards imperial gaze and point of view, but bridges the gap between subjective positioning and ‘objective’ scientific observations. As Haraway writes:

The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see (583).

This must include acknowledging and tracing where we are and where we are not. The poetic I/eye forms as “the ‘I’ (enunciating first person pronoun) and the ‘eye’ (or angle of poetic vision) of the poem become necessarily interchangeable, producing a blurring between landscape and

voice that the reader of the poem must subsequently negotiate, engaging affectively with the poem on a level different than that of its creator” (209). This perspective, Yeung suggests, brings a kind of freedom to the poet that the geographer or naturalist cannot, bridging “the gap between the ready-to-hand of the observer in the natural setting, and the present-at-hand of the geographer or naturalist’s detachedly observed phenomena or specimens” (“Affective Mapping in Lyric Poetry” 209). The poetic eye/I is already inclined to acknowledge partial perspective (the split between object and subject), but a feminist reading of space is also accountable and answerable for what and how we learn how to see. Such a perspective is crucial in also acknowledging the oppression by white feminisms that have historically marginalized Black, indigenous, and queer spaces and positionalities. As Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502” indicates, this means acknowledging instances of both oppression and privilege.

The subjective, poetic I/eye that is capable of both exploring, claiming, and questioning is uniquely suited to reveal the potential alternatives of mappings. Therefore, we can read maps in such a way that produces subjective and partial knowledge, allowing for radical alternatives to emerge, and we can read poems in such a way to gain objective knowledge, as long as objective is understood to operate within a situated knowledges framework, as a feminist methodology for reading place. As indicated by Yeung, the poet is already forced to negotiate between spatial orderings and narratives, which overtly situates the production of these mechanisms within the limited scope of the poet’s own position. It is the poetic I/eye which forces the individual to acknowledge their own distorted lens in a way that the cartographer or geographer, as positions that have been historically developed within the paradigm of “objective” scientific knowledge, are not allowed to claim, at least, traditionally. Therefore, this project aligns with Haraway’s insistence on partial perspective and situated knowledges, calling for a feminist reading of place. We can see how both maps and poems operate within strategic spatial and linguistic ordering systems. Both are performances, articulations between the material text and the corporeal body. Both are also situated within larger macro political and contingent historical orders.

Following Haraway’s critique of vision and positionality, I examine Bishop’s “The Map” (1946) and “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” (1965) respectively, to question both the politics and ontology of the mapping process. Together these poems serve as examples to question who gets to map, who gets to produce knowledge, how we read the map, and how we relate to the affects of mapping. Rob Kitchin, Justin Gleeson, Martin Dodge note on the post-representational turn in

geography that “[m]appings must never then be assumed to have innate ontological security, instead they are brought into being and made to do work in the world (e.g. inscribing territory, shaping discourse, producing knowledge, informing and framing decision making) through practices such as drawing, interpreting, translating, communicating, determining, denying and so on” (481). I contend that a poetic mapping methodology both requires embodied and multi-perspectives in the political process as mapping, but also acknowledges alternative ontological statuses, performances, and materialities in the co-production of experiences and places. I argue that Elizabeth Bishop’s poems already provide a post-representational, process-derived mapping methodology, acknowledging both the political and ontological processes of mapping, particularly as she moves through the various macro and micro power constructions and relations within global spatial narratives, as seen in her travels between various cultural spaces.

This methodological approach to poetic mapping combines Donna Haraway’s situated knowledges with the cartographic, poetic imagination of Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop provides a poetic example which approaches the map as poem, the poem as map, re-tracing, play-fully, alternative spaces. That is, Bishop provides a poetic-cartographic imagination that allows us to continually re-question, to re-trace, to re-question, to re-trace, and to re-map. As “Bishop’s geography...persistently refuses the consolations of hierarchy or placement; instead, it defines itself as the questioning of places” (Edelman and Bishop 42), so poetic mapping involves the questioning of places, but questioning our bodies in those places, as well. This feminist methodology also values the geography of bodies as their own political, social, and historical spaces. Finally, in conclusion, given the ecological focus of geopoetics and taking into account the concerns of ecopoetics, I briefly discuss the productive possibility of poetic mapping for alternative and necessary knowledges on spaces, landscapes, and natures in ongoing anthropogenic changes to environments. This brief allusion is not meant to take lightly the issue, but to give up one example of how such a methodology might be applied in additional context and contemporary concerns.

### **“The Map”**

Elizabeth Bishop wrote “The Map” in 1935, when she was 24. Richard Cureton suggests that it was her first mature poem (47). She describes the map with these opening lines: “Land lies in water; it is shadowed green” (“The Map” 5). This narration frames the map as an unnamed,

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unlabeled space. It could be anywhere. Observing the map's features, she also provides an unusual way to describe the relationship to land and water. "Land lies in water;" here, water does not touch the land or surround the land, but the land lies in water, shadowed green. Her close scrutiny of the map allows her to approach her object of study through a new perspective, and it only continues to make the map and its features strange, drawing more questions:

Shadows, or are they shallows, at it edges  
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges  
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.  
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,  
drawing it unperturbed around itself?  
Along the fine tan sand shelf  
is the land tugging at the sea from under? ("The Map" 5)

In her description of the map "the speaker animates and personifies the map's geometry and puts the normally fixed spatial configurations on the map into dynamic interaction" (Cureton 47). The poet, as indicated by this first stanza, is not satisfied with her original observation of the relationship between the land and water, how do they come together? How do their lines form the other? From where? What are the origins? Each of these questions signals that the map is not a fixed, scientific instrument, but instead is an opportunity to engage in dynamic interaction with its representation of space.

Bishop cannot give definitive conclusions to these questions. Instead, she refocuses her gaze further out, away from the continually blurring lines of land and water. Through further transcendence of her perspective, the spaces as territories become named, identifiable, locatable. A move, it seems, for objectivity: a definitive split between the object and subject in order to handle the unanswerable questions of space. Naming, and therefore claiming, she states, "The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still. / Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo has oiled it" ("The Map" 5). The different colors, tan, yellow, and green indicate the borders between countries (Cureton 47). Having taken a step back, the map is no longer something that she wants only to observe, but she wants to touch it, to tangibly and intimately know it. Bishop suggests that "We can stroke these lovely bays, under a glass as if they were expected to blossom;" the

lines and color are delicate, and pregnant with potential (“The Map” 5). Or, perhaps the glass might also “provide a clean cage for invisible fish” (“The Map” 5). In either circumstance, the speaker cannot help but to imagine life beneath the glass that she might place over to protect what lies underneath, whether they be flowers or fish. However, here the emphasis should be placed on the *potential* for life. The map allows the speaker to imagine the dynamic forms of life that might exist outside of its spatial representations. In her imagining of the presence of life, she actually writes of their absence: flowers that are expected to bloom and fish that remain in invisible cages.

Next, Bishop notes that the “names of seashore towns run out to sea, / the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains” (“The Map” 5). By focusing on the names of the towns and cities, she also makes a move to pull back and focus on what is actually printed on the map and not what she imagines. But before these towns and cities are populated with people and life, or we are given a view of the map that is not imagined from above, the map-reader is interrupted. Pulling us back to the present moment, Bishop exclaims “--the printer here experiencing the same excitement / as when emotion too far exceeds its cause” (“The Map” 5). The map-reader is not only producing the map in-present, but this dynamic making of space also calls to mind another situated perspective of the map, that of the map-maker. Adele J. Haft suggests that her reference to the printer of the map here also signals her relationships to maps in terms of touch, as well as connection. Haft contends that, “Bishop relates to geography by the ‘feel’ of a place on a map. Once again, the poet allies herself to cartographers who, in addition to their other skills, have been draftsmen, colorists, and printers. ‘The Map’ not only alludes to these facets of the map-maker’s craft but ascribes to land the sensation of touch” (Haft 49). We can see this move towards both connection and touch, when the map-reader follows up, observing that “These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods” (“The Map” 5). Peninsulas reach out of the land like fingers to touch the water, to feel its smoothness like women touching yarn. This also parallels Bishop’s own exploration of the map, wanting to feel this external space between and beneath her fingers.

While there are moments where Bishop describes the map through the objective, top-down view of the geographer, these kinds of moments also indicate a much more tactile, emotional relationship to viewing landscape. In order to keep away from the one-eyed view from nowhere that “fucks the world,” Haraway argues that we must reclaim vision (581). For Haraway, vision

“is the gaze that mythically inscribes all marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (581). Whether the scope is too far removed or too close to the subject, the details, connections, and contradictions get blurred. In order to reclaim how the vision machines work, both biologically and technologically, we must learn how “to see from the peripheries and the depths” (Haraway 583). How is this productively possible? Instead of having a “mastery theory,” we find value in “webbed accounts” (Haraway 585). We can think of knowledge production, here, as web weaving. As Haraway states, “[w]ebs can have the property of systematicity, even of centrally structured global systems with deep filaments and tenacious tendrils into time, space, and consciousness, the dimensions of world history” (Haraway 586). This theory of webs also gives us room to explore how situated knowledges can find a more empathetic relationship to ourselves, others, and the environments that we inhabit, while still being held accountable for different levels of privilege and oppression. While this accountability may be more overt in “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” (as discussed below), I suggest that Bishop’s emotional and tactile mode of reading “The Map” acknowledges and critiques the view from nowhere of the geographer, as well as exhibits forms of “web-weaving” as the speaker explores alternative perspectives and forms of knowledge, i.e. through touch or that which cannot be seen but only imagined.

Bishop further suggests that “Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is, / lending the land their wave’s own conformation: and Norway’s hare runs south in agitation, profiles investigate the sea, where the land is” (“The Map” 5). Bishop describes Norway’s borders as the path of an agitated hare. The land is unsettled, where the waters are quiet. The mapped waters have no lines, no man-made, arbitrary borders. She asks of the land, “Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors? /--What suits the character or the native waters best,” and attempts a conclusion of these questions by stating: “Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West. / More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors” (“The Map” 5). Susannah L. Hollister suggests of these lines that

[the] historian typifies acts of representation limited to a single scale, risking the collapse of the kinds of differences that are a motivating concern and a source of emotional intensity in her work. Bishop’s interest in space, that is, does not proceed at the expense of,

or in opposition to, an interest in time. Rather, she finds in geography (and even more in cartography) a model for the multiplicity of scales she values, and she makes history serve, at least in “The Map,” as a counter-model (405).

According to this reading, geography and cartography offer a model to explore or display more nuances of time than of the historian, who continually risks collapsing situated knowledges in order to fit a particular narrative. However, I would also note that this reading of cartography and geography only holds such potential for nuance of scale and accountability, with attention to the view from nowhere and effort to form more complex webbed relationships with the subject, as Bishop does in her poem. Topography *displays* no favorites, does not mean that it does not have them, and the delicateness of the map-makers’ colors does not mean make the cartographer any more objective than the historian. The map-reader asks if the countries pick their colors, indicating the arbitrariness of such decisions. I suggest that readers of the poem are also invited to ask about the arbitrariness of territorial borders of nation states, but also about the mapping process, more generally. For example, Saraswathy R. Murthy writes that Bishop “recognizes that the cartography of life is as provisional as human constructs like the map before her, where boundaries frequently dissolve in a series of acts of orientation, and where definition wavers between contrivance and choice” (48). The map is provisional as it is a human construction. Bishop explores this not only by questioning the map’s content, i.e. the arbitrary boundaries of states and the situated knowledge of individual perspective, but also by questioning its production, indicated by her acknowledgement of the printer and map-maker. Acknowledging that the map is produced through and by a particular lens, through its own situated knowledge, also seeks to hold it accountable for its relationship to people and places, and, subsequently, the power of representation.

I suggest that Bishop’s emphasis on geography over history does not indicate that cartography is the more appropriate narrative of place, but instead emphasizes the specific power relations of the map’s cartographic production, both materially (the printer) and socially (personal perspective). Looking below at the mapped landscape, her position is one of transcendence, the view from nowhere. And although “Bishop has no use for absolute or transcendent [or what we might call absolute transcendence], she is nevertheless not insensitive to the mystery and meaning of what she sees and experiences” (Murthy 49). She plays with the

idea and position of transcendence in order to critique it. It is the map itself which is operative through the view from nowhere, but it is also one that Bishop does not resist. Such a position allows her to critique the objective, transcendence which erases human presence in the map's representations. Hollister suggests Bishop's use of geography is "to confirm those allegiances, with a corresponding feeling," and investigates how Bishop "works to activate a sense of belonging within a multiple, persistent social context, often by estranging familiars or even emptying scenes of human presence. What looks like a way to avoid encountering or representing others with any specifics, in fact supports a social aim" (400). Here, Bishop makes both the map and the process of mapping strange by playing with human absence/ presence and human perspective.

Moreover, even as Bishop claims the position as the map-reader, she is also hesitant: her questions indicate that even as she speaks from the view from nowhere, from above, she is not truly able to master those places below her gaze and fingertips. Instead, her continual questioning and re-tracing of the map indicates the *desire* to master, to map, to intimately know a place. But a desire that is never fulfilled or actualized. We might also understand this through a geocritical approach of poesis - *the making of the map, the image, or even the poem*. Or, rather Bishop's unmaking of the image, a re-mapping that allows her corporeal experience of the place to be the point of departure and critique, simultaneously. Yeung writes of mapping that:

[t]he map provokes us to encounter, navigate, and vocalize language in demanding ways; it can bring attention to the vocalizing self as much as it can to the space of the page and to the form of the work in a manner more heightened than other forms of literature. Poesis is a project of creation which, through either practical or critical experience, can radically alter the manner in which we see the world subsequently unfold and how we articulate these unfoldings. Poesis as a project of creation and encounter through language is also a self-defining act (*Spatial Engagement with Poetry* 1).

I posit that we can see the ways in which poesis functions in both the self-critique of the map-reader and in the social production of the map itself, as a self-defining act. For example, Hollister also states that "[w]hen Bishop favors geography over history, then, she does not choose against human subject matter. Rather, her focus on geography as a major theme and source of imagery is

the most enduring example of a characteristic, counterintuitive move: turning away from the social in order to pursue it” (399). Bishop’s turn toward the cartographer, seemingly over the historian, is an attempt to critique and acknowledge her own position as the map-reader. While the landscape comes to fruition in the poem, human subjectivity within the poem is simultaneously erased. Connecting Haraway’s critique of the “god trick,” Bishop is simultaneously acknowledging her own position as the one that can see, and interrogating the social and even political position of those that produce knowledge, both the poet and the cartographer. Bishop’s work, therefore, attempts:

to activate a sense of belonging within multiple, persistent social contexts, often by estranging familiars or even emptying scenes of human presence. What looks like a way to avoid encountering or repressing others with any specificity in fact supports a social aim. Bishop’s poetics—through stylistic techniques of variable meter, semi-abstract diction, and metaphors that introduce human figures—create conditions for the imagining of strangers, the kind of imagining that theories of publics consider the very basis of society at scales beyond the familiar. But where social theorists focus on the forming of social groups, Bishop seeks the capacity for feeling social connections that she takes to exist, unfelt, already. The poems that demonstrate this most fully present an individual mind neither withdrawing from nor submitting to others but trying to feel relation (Hollister 400).

By acknowledging her own excitement and emotion over the map, Bishop makes the process of mapping strange. The poem reads as a confession, when the map-reader lets herself be taken by the seduction of the map itself. By comparing it against the text of the historian she alludes to the production of the map once more, and even makes it both historically and politically locatable by comparison. I posit that this does not disavow, at least overtly, her own position. But instead, just as the map itself is put into question, then so must be, by association, the position of the map-reader.

Through her confession, the speaker of the poem also reveals a position of power within the ability to read the map. The point of critique is made as she does not enter the space of the map, she stands above, and beyond its production. She touches it and wants to preserve it under glass, and is given permission to do so, not by the historian, but by the more delicate authority of

the map-maker. As the reader of the map, she lays subjective claim on these described places and landscapes, but the absence of the map's other human subjects is also revealed in the ending of the poem. There are different ways to narrate a space, here specifically the choices are between the historian and the cartographer, but neither position offers a way outside of the view from nowhere, and it is exactly this tension in "The Map" that indicates the potentially colonizing forms of objective knowledge production. It is only in the poetic relationship between the text and the map-reader, or the text and the poet that we see the potential for embodied knowledge or situated knowledges. Therefore, Bishop's "The Map" not only serves as a poem that connects the intimacies of geography and cartography for both people and places, but I also suggest that this offers a feminist methodology for how to read spaces that is measured contrast against the traditional, historically developed field of cartography whose scientific objectivity lays claim and knowledge on places from above.

### **"Brazil, January 1, 1502"**

The poem's title sets the stage for a specific geo-temporal relationship, the imperial encounter of the Portuguese in Brazil: "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (1965). The poem starts with an epigraph from Sir Kenneth Clark, "...*embroidered nature...tapestried landscape*," whose title *Landscape into Art* might be just as telling about the poem to come, as the quote itself ("Brazil, January 1, 1502" 89). Bishop begins by connecting this historical moment to her, or "our" present experience, "Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs: / every square inch filling in with foliage" ("Brazil" 89). With "every square inch," "frame," and "backing," as she will describe in the poem, Bishop, like Sir Clark, creates a tapestried landscape, embroidering nature, "borrowing language and techniques from the visual art" (Keller and Miller 541). Thomas Gardner also suggests that Bishop purposefully uses the tapestry motif to highlight our "desire for order" (15). It is this desire for order that Bishop puts into tension with her inability to accurately or concisely describe the landscape around her.

With this tapestry she attempts to first weave: "big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves, / blue, blue-green, and olive, with occasional lighter veins and edges..." ("Brazil" 89). Bishop becomes aware that her language does not quite fit, quite purposefully, into the frame she has constructed; it does not hold, it slips and struggles. Lee Edelman notes that Bishop's geography "persistently refuses the consolations of hierarchy or placement; instead, it defines itself as the

questioning of places” (Edelman and Bishop 186). Similarly, to her use of questions in “The Map,” we can see the struggle to describe, to name, to language or map the space around her, here, as seen with her use of dashes, or blanks: “and flowers, too, like giant water lilies/ up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves--/ purple, yellow, two yellows, pink...” (“Brazil” 89). This re-questioning of place and the uncertainty indicates a similar refusal. Again, the poet must continually re-trace the landscape in front of her, as her words cannot hold, as her language is not adequate, indicating blanks and spaces between perception. This is not only a refusal of the poet to definitively claim or map the space in front of her, but more importantly, she is prevented from doing so by the landscape itself.

The landscape continues to evade precise cartographic or narrative practice. As if Bishop is taking the tapestry off the loom, for a better look, she describes, “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;” The tapestry becomes animated (“Brazil,” 89). As “perching there in profile, beaks agape, / the big symbolic birds to keep quiet / each showing only half his puffed and padded, / pure-colored or spotted breast” (“Brazil” 89). The big symbolic birds are apparently watching, with mouths open ready to speak, but they remain silent. They remain half-puffed, as “[s]till in the foreground there is Sin” (“Brazil” 89). Lizards appear in the tapestry, “five sooty dragons near some massy rocks” (“Brazil” 89). Bishop again attempts to color in the scenery. The rocks are described as having lichens like “gray moonbursts / splattered and overlapping, / threatened from underneath by moss / in lovely hell-green flames, / attacked above / by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat” (“Brazil” 89). But her weaving cannot escape the frame from the Portuguese. *Still* there is sin, as the greenery spreads and speaks in Portuguese: “one leaf yes and one leaf no’ (in Portuguese),” she writes (“Brazil” 89).

Once more, the language, the landscape become strange, things do not seem to fit. Bishop’s gaze returns to the lizards where a mating ritual takes place: “The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes / are on the smaller, female one, back-to, / her wicked tail straight up and over, / red as a red-hot wire” (“Brazil” 89-90). Suddenly the tapestry becomes an art piece called, “Sin,” that is imbued with all of the images associated with the biblical Garden of Eden, a scene that she attempted to reproduce in its association with gardens-as-paradise imagery. But it was not until she was able to make a feminine connection with the female lizard, backed into the corner, that Bishop was able to relocate her own body, and simultaneously find the ‘real’ sin in the

situation. That is, in her attempt to describe and map the landscape she also colonized it. *Still there is sin.*

Bishop realizes that by framing and storying the landscape she had reproduced the same trauma done to Brazil in 1502 by the “explorers.” Keller and Miller posit that “the lizards’ fierce sexuality balances threat and desire” (540) and I would suggest that Bishop herself also balances between threat and desire. The desire to be able to name, describe, and tell the story of a place, but also the threat that is inherent in the violent cartographies of language. The poet is also at times the colonizer. This realization forces her to retrace and remap her experience of this place. She describes the trauma as “the Christians, hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting, / in creaking armor, came and found it all, / not unfamiliar” (“Brazil” 90). The Christians, they found it all, they found their entire story here, and framed this new land to match it. It was not unfamiliar to them. And the point here is that *it should have been*. Keller and Miller note that Bishop repeats the words “exactly so,” “Still,” and “Just so” throughout the poem, which “recalls the identification that begins the poem: we are like the Christians, the present like the past” (541). There were “no cherries to be picked, no lute music,” but they still weaved the pieces together of opulent, lush forest “to an old dream of wealth and luxury / already out of style when they left home—wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure” (“Brazil” 90). Bishop imagines the Christians coming back from Mass singing *L’Homme arme*, or a similar tune, and unable to see the irony of it all. Tearing back into the landscape, back into the tapestry and story they had framed:

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 (“Brazil” 90).

By first colonizing the landscape, fitting ‘wildness’ to a frame, the explorers pursue further into the picture; they “gave themselves permission to act on what their interpretive tapestries had offered them—a world ready for the taking, the inhabitants seen both as spoil and as players in an ancient sexual drama” (Gardner 16). In this way “the poem itself acts as a kind of secret call to other ‘madden-ing’ women” (Keller and Miller 541).

The violence done to both the landscape and Native women correspond exactly to an imperial project of mapping, where both place and a woman's body are seen, through imperial spatial imaginaries, capable of being penetrated, transgressed, and claimed. For example, Matthew H. Edney looks at the "parallels between pornography and cartography – and especially imperial cartography – in terms of the objectification of 'other' landscapes and cultures and their subjugation to an empowered imperial vision" (90). There is clearly much to critique in colonial forms of violence, both overt and epistemic. But what is additionally intriguing with Bishop's cartographic tapestry of violence is that is not just the space that Bishop occupies, her relative historico-present geo-temporality that she creates, but it is also the particularities of the landscape, the yellow flowers, the large leaves, and the lizards that signal Bishop to certain stories. That is, it is not the place that is necessarily being constructed, nor is Bishop independent from the landscape she narrates, but both are simultaneous. And it is the simultaneous co-production of landscape and identity that re-creates the experience of both the colonized and colonizer. In other words, Bishop is able to be colonized, but she is also the colonizer.

Situated knowledges, as feminist objectivity, work not only by claiming where we are and where we are not, but also through web-weaving. As Haraway suggests, we "need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate colour and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name" (581). I take Bishop's work in this poem to be exactly such an example as she views the world as a tapestry full of threads that connect pieces to one another, not just in the present, but through past injustices and exploitation. Her exploration of this space is not just physical, it is mental, emotional searching for spaces she hardly knows how to name. But the ignorance of such spaces is just as important, acknowledging what a position allows you to see, and what it does not. The same approach might also be appropriate in our understanding of the ontological conditions of maps. Hollister suggests that "[i]f [Bishop's] poems encourage readers to identify with her speakers, or to identify her speakers with her, they also alert readers to the presence of many, unknowable others and even turn presence into a reminder of strangerhood" (403-404). Here, Bishop also confesses of the continued erasure of others in the poet's, the map-maker's desire to weave, to paint, to draw, to label a place. In the pursuit of an objective and objectified nature the violent politics of imperial histories and visions persists. The body itself becomes a map, as it also is capable of highlighting

some elements, only as it erases others, including the erasure of the stranger that must continually retreat, eternally back behind the frame. But it is in the acknowledgement of her own ignorance, in her own sin that we are aware of the absence, and the silence of the big symbolic birds. This poetic mapping allows for the possibility of additional, embodied knowledges and the necessity of participatory mapping practices. Bjorn Ingmann Sletto, for example, says of participatory mapping practices that “by creating a proverbial stage for the speaking of the past, participatory mapping projects can be thought of as venues for both memory making and map-making” (361). Bishop makes room for the possibility of participatory or embodied mapping practices as her own story or mapping fails. Her own poetic mapping is exactly meant to trace the edges around her own ignorance and those alternative stories that she can imagine (they call to her like big symbolic birds), but they are not her own, nor can she know or tell those stories of their landscapes. Or, at least not without translation, which is always imperfect.

As Bishop realizes the limit of her own language to describe, to name, to map the places the spaces around her, she continually returns, re-tracing, re-questioning and therefore re-mapping the landscape around her. The blank spaces, the gaps between languages are the exact moments where she returns to her tracings, the ways in which we see the inability of language to remain, are the exact moments she gives us a re-territorialization. And it is in this constant renegotiation of space, between the self as an embodied experience and the landscapes or geographies that already contain their own social, cultural, and political histories that we can also find a feminist reading of space. Yeung states that “[m]apping can be linked with the space of the world, of the poem, of language, of the critical act, in any given combination. We can navigate the literary text by way of paying attention to the combination of language and effect in the wider context of the topology and temporality of the given narrative” (*Spatial Engagement with Poetry* 6). Poetics, as a particular form of narrative, can reveal the mechanisms within mapping that narrates not only the individual experience, but also that maps are produced out of large social, cultural, and political narratives. Following Haraway’s situated knowledges, it is important to situate personal, lived experiences from the experiences that are not your own. The times that you have been colonized, and the times when you have been colonizer. Poetics places individuals within their larger social contexts; thus, if applied to mapping, poetics becomes a strategy to fluidly negotiate various levels of spatial orderings. Therefore, through poetic mapping, maps are not limited to only an individual’s embodied experience, instead, it is exactly

this experience that becomes the entry point to tracing and critiquing perpetuated colonial visions, ideologies, and narratives within a globalized world, particularly as this globalized world is articulated within imperial and colonial histories, as well as their continued contested encounters.

A poetic methodological mapping situates both the textuality of the map and the corporeality of the map-reader into historical and contingent power relations. This methodology is ideally suited for investigations for encounters between the Global North and the Global South, particularly as these power relations are revealed in the mapping process, as residual and continual articulations of colonial imaginaries. However, as poetic mapping situates both the map and the individual, a more critical engagement of mapping is possible by acknowledging its particular colonial and imperial power relations and spatial imaginaries.

### **Conclusion: finding political and ecological possibilities in poetic mapping**

“The Map” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” make similar moves. First, knowledge fails. The poet, the cartographer are limited by their own knowledge of place. Place appears, at first, to be observable, definable, and masterable. When the speaker’s language, writing, or mappings fail they take a step back, and look at the image, the map, the tapestry, the poem they have outlined from a new perspective, a different angle. Bishop explores two dialectical positions in this transcendent motion of the carto-poet. In the first, Bishop allows herself to follow this desire from a masterful and privileged position, and in the second she resists and critiques this colonizing gaze by exploring her own ignorance. Each is a claim for situated and embodied knowledges. The writer, the poet, the cartographer are the experts, but the writer, the poet, the cartographer are also simultaneously, ignorant. The writer, the poet, the cartographer are at times the colonizer, and at times the colonized. A poetic mapping methodology, through the poetic I/eye is capable of acknowledging both within different times and places. This is not just important for the literary figure, but Bishop’s work also indicates the importance of the poetic on the mapping and claiming of spaces in other contexts, as well.

As noted earlier, I am not the first to use Elizabeth’s poetry to investigate issues of place, space, travel, mapping and displacement more broadly. Caren Kaplan’s title, for example, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, is directly inspired by Bishop’s poem, “Questions of Travel.” In the poem, Bishop inquires, “Should we have stayed at home and

thought of here? / Where should we be today? Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theaters?” (91). Kaplan, like Bishop, questions “the mystification of such figures [as ‘us’ and ‘we’], to historicize the notions of ‘home’ and ‘away’ in the production of both critical and literary discourses” (7). I extend these questions to ask how does the production and poetic narrative of maps help to facilitate such staged views of the stranger, as a narrative that was already choreographed, *cartographed*, through historical implications of those that are seen and those that see. Kaplan observes “[t]opography and geography now intersect literary and cultural criticism in a growing interdisciplinary inquiry into emergent identity formations and social practices” (144), and I suggest, with the help of Bishop, that we might engage more often, for a more ethical and social response to places not our own and the mapping of those spaces, literary and cultural criticism, at least within a methodological-poetic approach, to intersect topography and geography, as well.

Sujata Patel argues that “while the globalizing world has created challenges that allow a more complex theoretical framing of the world, institutional and geographical inequalities have not disappeared. Merely intervening in the world of knowledge will not displace Eurocentric knowledge; intervening in the practices that structure knowledge will” (189). Therefore, I suggest that a poetic mapping is capable and necessary for intervening in the geographic inequalities within our globalized world, particularly as our contemporary world has been structured through historical power relations of imperial and colonial histories. One potentially productive and needed intervention within the political and ontological production of mapping is increased engagements with alternative knowledges of places, environments, landscapes, and waterscapes, particularly as they are affected by human consumptions and productions. Poetic mapping, particularly through Bishop’s situated critique not only allows us to consider differences in terms of emergent identities but also environments. Environments are read through particular historical, social, and cultural lenses, and along with bodies and languages, are equally untranslatable. Poetic mapping allows us to consider multiple natures instead of a singular monolithic nature or landscape, environments instead of environment, which may offer, even, a more appropriate and ethical response to not only the differences among one another, but the differences in the natures that we inhabit, cultivate, move through, and change, perhaps most notably for the worse.

Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard have suggested of ecopoetics, for example, that:

[p]oems depend on unique formal qualities, and are perhaps even more than other literary genres animated by and able to contain open-ended, multiple and even contradictory levels of meaning. This makes them especially interesting to look to for images that challenge established patterns of environmental thought and address complex, labyrinthine twenty-first century human-environment relations between local and global, social and ecological, perception and imagination (37).

As we have seen through Bishop's cartographic eye, poetics and mapping work through similar textual, narrative, and spatial systems in order to navigate and make meaning. In its ability to interrogate oppressive histories and positions, poetic mapping has the potential for larger implications for alternative worldviews. But as the social is always tied to the political, poetic mapping might also provide a more ethical and affective response to current global perceptions and imaginations towards climate change that at times can disrupt and at times might complement and add to the traditional scientific knowledge production. Because the continued uncertainty of the relationship between the water and land, as they tug or hide or shadow one another, is not just a metaphoric blurring or altering of the map, but is also the present reality of numerous communities around the world in relation to rising sea levels and atmospheric conditions. And without more inclusive ways of understanding, relating to, and valuing embodied and alternative knowledges for landscapes, waterscapes, and environments not only are we risking the continued cartographic violence of colonizing space, but a colonizing of space that continues to erase, as the causes between consumption and production within exploitative and extractive practices both historically and contemporarily, continually retreat, back behind the frame, as the large symbolic birds wait with mouths agape, but remain silent. *Still there is Sin.*

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