
‘Seeing the sun the other way around’: Elizabeth Bishop’s explorations of self and other in her Brazil writings

José Rodríguez Herrera*¹

¹Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria – Spain

Abstract

On the afternoon of the twenty-sixth of November (1951), Elizabeth Bishop caught, from the deck of the SS Bowplate, her first glimpse of the coast of Brazil, on her trip, as it was initially conceived, to Tierra del Fuego and the Straits of Magellan, and eventually around the world with Europe as its final destination. On the deck of that ship, Bishop recorded in her notebook the thrilling sensation of seeing the world now from the other side, ... "the rush / to see the sun the other way around" ("Questions of Travel"). She would remain in Brazil for fourteen years. Bishop published all but one of her Brazil poems in *The New Yorker*, which, as Fiona Green argues "did its best to sell her as a travel-poet, adding place names after the titles of her Brazilian poems" (Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil and the *New Yorker*.) Her poems were juxtaposed to advertisements for luxury commodities associated to travelling (airlines, traveller's cheques, cameras, binoculars, etc.). Ironically, in "Questions of Travel," one of the first Brazil poems published in *The New Yorker*, Bishop problematizes the ways in which we approach "the exotic," whether at home reading advertisements like these or abroad: "Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?" Integrating personal experiences and new anthropological concerns, evermore present in Bishop's life, her 1958 essay "A New Capital, Aldous Huxley, and some Indians," explores one recurrent motif in her Brazil writings: the encounter with the other. In essays like these, however, the image of a primitive, childlike Brazil enacts too a personal revision of her uprooted childhood. In this work, I would like to show how Bishop's Brazilian writings ultimately question and destabilize the colonizing gaze whilst proving, on the other hand, that her geographical and emotional distance allowed her as well to cauterize painful memories of her displaced childhood.

*Speaker