

Cassandra Laity, “Eco-Geologies of Queer Desire: Elizabeth Bishop’s Love Poetry and Charles Darwin’s Beagle Geology Travel Narratives.” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 10. 3 (2016): 429-50.

Responding to recent calls to make more room for the study of materiality in feminist scholarship, Cassandra Laity reads Elizabeth Bishop as a poet whose work enmeshes queer intimacy in geological history. Her evidence is two love poems from later in Bishop’s career – “Crusoe in England” and “Vague Poem” – which she interprets in the context of Bishop’s reading of Charles Darwin’s *Diary* and *Voyage of the Beagle*. By articulating “Eco-Geologies of Queer Desire”, Bishop offers a “richly materialized” vision both of her lovers’ bodies and of the planetary history in which they are embedded (430). In so doing, Bishop shows the interdependence of human life and the natural world and thus challenges the “neglectful patriarchal *anthropos* currently scarring our planet” (429).

Consistent with Laity’s sense of a Darwinian “natural world” in constant flux, she places “Crusoe in England” and “Vague Poem” in the context of a number of shifts that occur in Bishop’s poetic career. Darwin, geology, the lover, and “the real” come to the fore, while Freud, psychology, the mother, and the surreal recede. These parallel shifts are deliberately undertaken: “Bishop’s queered ‘Crusoe in England’ (1976) and ‘Vague Poem’ consciously shifted away from her early poetry’s psychic, ‘primordial’ rockscapes, imaging submerged Freudian desires for a maternal body, toward Darwin’s similarly haunted quest-poetics, grounded in *the real* of earth’s forces and flows” (430). Laity’s examination of Bishop’s letters to her biographer Anne Stevenson shows the poet’s growing sense – based in part on her reading of Darwin – that “enforced inwardness and estrangement from the environment” makes for a “pathological, self-referential art” (433). The two poems register this ecological turn in different ways.

Bishop began writing “Crusoe” in 1964, around the time that she was writing to Stevenson about her reading of Darwin, so it is no surprise to find her meditating in the poem (as she also does in “Questions of Travel,” which is discussed along the way) on dangers associated with alienation from nature. According to Laity, Darwin helps to foster in Bishop an appreciation for what Jane Bennett calls “geoaffect,” which designates the turbulent liveliness of the non-human material world (qtd. in Laity 433). Laity makes the compelling case that Crusoe’s dejection derives from an ignorance of “geoaffect” that issues in a failure of ecological awareness. Crusoe learns too late what Bishop was learning from Darwin as she read him throughout the 1960s and 70s – that “full erotic-creative realization depends on [a sense of] tactile continuity with nature’s unfolding process” (433). The conclusion of “Crusoe” shows him paying the price in melancholy for having “tuned out the beckoning elemental history that might have brought [Crusoe] home to Friday’s love.” In this way the poem “forms a counternarrative, opposing the appropriating patriarchal *anthropos* with a ‘differently’ sexed, ecological relation to our planet” (442).

The possible relations – both to the planet and to his would-be lover – that Crusoe grasps only belatedly occur almost immediately to the speaker of “Vague Poem,” whose recollection of seeing rose rocks in Oklahoma prompts a “geologic epiphany of emergent queer bodily love” (442-43). Laity prefaces her analysis of “Vague Poem” with a discussion of Darwin’s account of seeing a petrified forest in the

Andes – an account that proceeds, much like a Bishop poem, from carefully observed particulars to sublime vision, one in which the “‘desert’ landscape assumes fluid motion, actualising geology’s vibrant ‘geoaffect’” (444). “Vague Poem,” likewise, visits a “desert” landscape shaped by ancient seas, and if Darwin’s account evokes crystallization as “fleshly” (444), then “Vague Poem” evokes the flesh as crystalline: the lover’s naked body appears in “Vague Poem” as forming “crystal by crystal...” (qtd. in Laity 431). It is not a coincidence that Bishop’s “most brazenly lesbian” poem is also her most “Darwinian”, as Darwin’s insights into evolutionary history evoke an unruly natural world profoundly resistant to normativity and the judgments that follow in its wake.

This ambitious essay highlights the interdependence of literary and scientific discourses, and it expands our understanding of Darwin’s influence on Bishop, who clearly got more from him than her oft-noted taste for detailed observation of nature. Bishop’s reading in Darwin inspired her understanding of nature as intrinsically queer: its ongoing metamorphoses, unimaginably vast and spanning countless millennia, ironically work to sabotage the authority of the same social norms that it has traditionally been invoked to legitimate. Teeming with adjectives, and informed by a de-centered vocabulary featuring “intimacy/desire,” “being/desire/the body,” and “art/creativity” among other hybrid terms, Laity’s writing itself reflects the “unfolding, richly materialised primordial past” that animates Bishop’s Darwinian travel poems (430-32). Though it offers rewarding readings of just two poems, the essay paves the way for new work on Bishop and Darwin, and it advances recent efforts to place the natural world and its materialities at the forefront of scholarly debate in sex and gender studies.

Jesse Zuba
Delaware State University