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BISHOPNESS

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Bishopness

1. “Bishopness”

The April, 2006 release of Elizabeth Bishop’s unfinished work in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* is creating a heated debate among some of this country’s most recognizable names in poetry. At the core of the dispute is Helen Vendler, the notable poetry critic, and Alice Quinn, poetry editor at *The New Yorker* and editor of this new volume. The 200-plus page book of unfinished poems, fragments, drafts, essays, and even drawings, presents selections from Bishop’s archives located at Vassar College, the poet’s alma mater. While the poems in this new volume remain unfinished for reasons even the most casual readers of Bishop could likely distinguish, the material found in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* challenges the established notion of Elizabeth Bishop as a poet of modesty and restraint—a perception that Bishop as well as her readers, editors, and publishers had considerable part in promoting.¹ Indeed, much of the writing in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* openly deals with subjects Bishop historically took great care to conceal or obscure in her published poems—most notably her sexuality.

Though Vendler does draw attention to some examples of what she deems mediocre writing in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box*, she takes most heated issue with the casual handling of troublesome subject matter. In her unfavorable review which appeared in the April 3 issue of the *New Republic*, Vendler praises the uncompleted love poem, “it is marvelous to wake up together,” as worthy of publication, then posits that Bishop probably chose not to publish the poem out of “prudence.”² And yet the poem is arguably compatible with many other poems in Bishop’s accepted body of work. Indeed,

“it is marvelous” serves as an example not only of one of Bishop’s recurrent attempts to write the love poem, but also of the way her inventive and elegant descriptions often obfuscate eroticism.

Both the language and the narrative of “it is marvelous” are erotically charged. In the poem two lovers lie in bed, “the light falling of kisses” “below,” listening to an “electrical storm coming or moving away.” Safe inside quarters that could also be read as a kind of prison, together the lovers imagine the “whole house caught in a bird cage of lightning.” Though the speaker in the poem claims that a lightning strike to the house would be “delightful rather than frightening,” she also calls hers a “simplified point of view.” Indeed, outside of their warm shelter more than the weather threatens—open wires wait, “warn[ing]” them to stay put. As the poem concludes:

And from the same simplified point of view
 Of night and lying flat on one’s back
 All things might change equally easily,
 Since always to warn us there must be these black
 Electrical wires dangling. Without surprise
 The world might change into something quite different,
 As the air changes or the lightning comes without our blinking,
 Change as our kisses are changing without our thinking. (17-24)

The poem is an exploration of emotional and physical love in general. However, if it is about two women, its statement regarding the danger of being “out” within hetero-centric American society is a powerful and important one. As many poems in *Juke-Box*, but also in *The Complete Poems*, it is thus possible to read “it is marvelous” as a poem about the

danger and isolation associated with lesbian sexuality. In this way, the poem supports as well as contradicts what we have come to expect from Bishop. For example, consider the first stanza of “Cold Spring,” a well-known poem from *The Complete*:

A cold spring:
 the violet was flawed on the lawn.
 For two weeks or more the trees hesitated;
 the little leaves waited,
 carefully indicating their characteristics.
 Finally a grave green dust
 settled over your big and aimless hills.
 One day, in a chill white blast of sunshine,
 on the other side of one a calf was born.
 The mother stopped lowing
 and took a long time eating the after-birth,
 a wretched flag,
 but the calf got up promptly
 and seemed inclined to feel gay. (1-14)

The poem, set in Havre de Grace, Maryland on the farm of Bishop’s friend, Jane Dewy, depicts the “ambiguity” (Miller 147) of the beginning of spring—a time when trees “hesitat[e]” and leaves “wait.” Bishop chooses to cast spring not as blooming and beautiful, but rather as a season of vulnerability that accentuates the certainty of mortality in all living things—even as they are born. In Bishop’s vision of spring, “violets” are “flawed,” “green” settles over the landscape as a “grave,” and when the sun finally does

appear, instead of warmth, it shoots a “chill white blast.” In ways that are similar to “it is marvelous,” Bishop dramatizes the threat of the world outside even as she transposes from people to animal. Indeed, the stanza closes with the birth of a calf that “seems inclined to feel gay.” Bishop deliberately unfocuses the calf’s gesture—it only “seems inclined to feel” instead of directly, “feel[ing].” The word “gay” is obviously doubly suggestive; it speaks both to the instinct—or “inclin[ation]”—to pursue happiness, as it simultaneously states the fact of inborn sexuality. Both steps have their consequences. The mother stops communicating—it stops “lowing”—but perhaps it also stops loving.³

Poems like “Cold Spring” and “it is marvelous” show that Bishop did not resist writing about sexuality, even if in *Juke-Box* her approach is generally more forthright. But while “it is marvelous” may be plainer in its allusion to the ostracization associated with lesbian sexuality and also in its treatment of physical love than a poem such as “Cold Spring,” it still, too, resists full disclosure. Even so, “it is marvelous” is one of few examples Vendler uses to support her harsh criticism of the collection. In a pointed statement, she suggests that those looking for “the new book by Elizabeth Bishop” should be advised to return to *The Complete Poems* “where the poet represents herself as she wished to be known” (*New Republic* 33). But it is worthwhile to resist the urge to fall into the “simplified point of view” such a statement demonstrates. Considering the material of *Juke-Box* alongside *The Complete*, it is crucial to acknowledge the limited influence Bishop—or any artist, for that matter—has over the various inquiries into her project and, more importantly, over the public response that project invokes.⁴ While the artist controls the presentation of her work, the audience finally judges it. More

accurately, then, Bishop as she “wished to be known,” may in fact be the way critics have wished themselves to know her.

Interestingly, those critics taking part in the debate over the merit of *Juke-Box* seem sometimes unaware—or, at least, inattentive—to the measures by which they are drawing their conclusions. For instance, consider David Orr’s review, which appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* a day before Vendler’s review in the *New Republic*. He writes, “it’s no criticism of this collection to say the virtues of Bishop’s finished poetry—style and poise chief among them—are often missing from the writing gathered here” (par. 6). Arguing for what he calls the “great[ness]” of Bishop he writes, “that she was a woman doesn’t matter. That she was gay doesn’t matter. That she was an alcoholic, an expatriate and essentially an orphan—none of this matters” (par. 1). Because of the control she demonstrates in her established work, paradoxically what matters in Bishop for Orr is that these biographical details do not matter. Judging from this dispute, however, it becomes clear that in the construction of “Bishopness” all of this matters very much.

The publication of *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* modifies Bishop’s established oeuvre in ways that demonstrate the anxiety throughout her work regarding the concealment of sexual difference—a concealment she often takes part in. As the poems reveal, by putting emphasis on particular kinds of clothing, Bishop emphasizes the necessary—but flawed—methods for that concealment. Indeed, black stockings, gloves, sailors hats, and other garments of traditional gender representation work as useful metaphors, symbolically engaging the construction of the literary image accepted in the academy which has produced the unified notion of “Bishopness” some critics still wish to

uphold. When themes of gender and sexuality are most at crisis, articles of clothing such as stockings become important signs of what Bishop deemed necessary to put on—both figuratively and literally—in order to uphold the “style” and “poise” she continues to be celebrated for.

But the strategy of concealment is a presentation whose failures are frequently overlooked. The controversy surrounding the publication of *Juke-Box* reveals the tension between the pressure Bishop felt to “put on” “Bishopness” and the pressure we continue to put on her poems to maintain that image. As Adrienne Rich notes in her important essay, “The Eye of the Outsider: Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Complete Poems, 1927-1979,’” while much attention has been paid to Bishop’s “triumphs [and] perfections,” critics and readers have historically been less keen on focusing on “her struggles for definition and her sense of difference” (125). The formation of “Bishopness” has been a result, in part, of claiming this struggle under the banner of modesty and reticence.

As Bishop herself writes in *The Complete*’s “Exchanging Hats,” “Costume and custom are complex.” By associating costuming with concealment, metaphors of clothing demonstrate the complexity that complicates the binary opposition between *The Complete* and *Juke-Box*. The challenge, thus, is not to resolve the inconsistencies of *Juke-Box* and *The Complete*, but rather to welcome the possibility of acknowledging the dialogue between these two texts on issues of gender, sexuality, and concealment. Representative instances of the tendency to “costume” or “put on” “Bishopness” are in both collections. Because she recurrently addresses the crisis of the woman in American society who must clothe herself in the prescribed—and often uncomfortable—attire of her culture in order to survive, considering Bishop “as she [didn’t] [wish] to be known”

will surely result in a more complete understanding of the work. By donning elaborate costumes in her poems, Bishop explores the idea of concealment, performing and putting on “Bishopness” as one would a long black glove.

2. “I love you just the way you are”

Despite the controversy surrounding it, the material brought to light in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* has in fact been available at Vassar for years, acquired from Harvard, the original purchaser. Before her death Bishop assembled her papers and wanted them appraised. So, though the work in *Juke-Box* is certainly not finished, this book is also not just a collection of dusty foundlings. Bishop may or may not have ultimately approved of the publication of *Juke-Box*, but she certainly was not opposed to making the work public; indeed, she had hoped her papers would fetch a good price (Miller 540). And yet, though the poems in this collection have been available to scholars for some time, and though some in particular have been part of the critical discourse for years, Quinn’s assemblage of them in book form has still lent the work almost revelatory status.⁵ With the revelation, then, of this “new” material, is it possible to adjust our ways of reading Bishop? Does the controversy over the volume question the way we define, and hence, *preserve* our authors—especially the celebrated ones? The receipt of *Juke-Box* suggests that sometimes these means can be discouragingly static. While the negative reception of the volume is certainly due in part to concerns over authorial intention, those concerns reflect Bishop’s readership’s intuitive and particular expectations regarding the sorts of poems they are ready to encounter. (Billy Joel’s lyrics “I love you just the way you are” seem appropriate to mention.)

Defining the oeuvre in general presents an irresolvable problem in literature. Because of the difficulty in delineating the boundaries of a given body of work we may never be able to conclusively define any body of work, leaving us to understand the concept of the oeuvre through an image like Bishop's "Monument," made of wood, petals, sky, and—especially—holes. We will fail to conclusively fill those holes. Perhaps, as Vendler suggests, Bishop's response to the publication of *Juke-Box* would have been a "horrified 'No'" (*New Republic* 3)—we simply cannot know. However, we can be sure that if Bishop was around to resolve inconsistencies this volume's reception would surely be less captious. Because the recurrent departure in the unfinished work from her accepted thematic draws attention to the polemic discourse surrounding her published work, in the end, "Bishopness" is inconveniently confounding—not nearly as delineated as some critics might hope.

In his essay, "What is an Author?", Foucault attempts to address the complex activity of attempting to "designate" the boundaries around a given author's work. "Of what elements is it composed?" he asks (207). His question becomes almost impossibly expansive when one is compelled to consider the entirety of a given author's written material—the juvenilia, notes, letters, speeches, drafts, etc. Complicate this with the spectrum of different thematic concerns an author addresses over a lifetime—concerns which one could not possibly expect to remain consistent. "How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after [her] death?" (Foucault 207). When the author is no longer available to address—even resolve—questions of uniformity, their whole thematic can finally come up for grabs. Indeed, the totality that critics create out of

the notion of the author masks a more indeterminate set of texts that circulate around an author's name.

Barthes, in his famous essay, "The Death of the Author," is less concerned with classifying the oeuvre than with drawing the line between the author as individual and the author as the work they produce. Because for Barthes, the work exists independently of the author—and their given intentions—the author becomes removed from the work or, in essence, "dead" once her work is disseminated. His proposal that the author is "never more than the instance of writing," extends into comprehending the biography of the writer as a series of further instances of writing (*The Death of the Author* 1457). Then for readers of Bishop, whose biography is so connected to how we have come to read her poems, the details of her life are relevant—even "textual." For instance, James Merrill's famous statement regarding Bishop's "lifelong impersonations of an ordinary woman" is so well-known, so habitually quoted (I've just done it myself), that the sentiment behind it has absorbed itself both into the scholarship as well as into every Bishop reader's brain. And yet by challenging her performance of "the ordinary," this new volume causes us to question Bishop's stated disregard for confessionalist poetry, forcing us to reconsider the motivations at the root of her supposed discretion.

Indeed, if we allow that she was more "ordinary" than we thought, *Juke-Box* calls on critics to reconsider popular assumptions about Bishop. In his favorable review of the volume, David Orr also discusses one of the most recognizable poems in the collection, "Vague Poem." Here, Bishop's typical strategy of self-correction begins in the first stanza ("rose rocks"/ Or maybe "rock roses"—I'm not sure") and progresses by creating a swirling momentum that is both corporal and intellectual. Orr draws particular attention

to the final stanza, making the point to call the following lines—which are clearly erotic—“decidedly un-Bishopian” (par. 6):

Just now, when I saw you naked again,
 I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock rose...
 Rose, trying, working, to show itself,
 forming, folding over,
 unimaginable connections, unseen, shining edges.
 Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal,
 clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline nipples,
 rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses,
 exacting roses from the body,
 and even the darker, accurate, rose of sex— (34-43)

Referencing this poem in his important and celebrated biography of Bishop, *Life and the Memory of It*, Brett Miller similarly notes the difference between Bishop’s rendering of physical love in the published and unpublished work. He writes that her “physical passion...in unpublished poems and in discarded drafts...tend to franker and more positive eroticism than any of her earlier verse” (437). Unlike many of Bishop’s poems in which clothing works literally and symbolically to “cover up,” the woman here is naked—yet her body still needs to “wor[k] to show itself.” Indeed, the nude body remains “unimaginable,” “unseen,” “unformed” even as the speaker’s eyes probe.

The pull and tug of “Vague Poem” culminates in a rhetorically familiar conclusion that echoes the movement of poems in *The Complete* like “At the Fishhouses,” and “The Fish,” where language ultimately fails.⁶ Indeed, just as “At the Fishhouses”

pulls the narrative “down and down” physically anchoring the reader into the “cold dark deep and absolutely clear” sea which comes to represent knowledge, “Vague Poem” churns into orgasmic conclusion. By the last stanza the ability to “prudent[ly]” articulate (to recall Vendler’s observation) is finally unsuccessful as repetition and unrelenting commas transport the speaker into a more surreal realm of expression. In her essay, “The Body’s Roses,” Lorrie Goldensohn characterizes this conclusion as a “dream chant” that celebrates the female body without “fear” or “false shame” (81). Yet while the closing lines may be celebratory, they simultaneously draw attention to Bishop’s vision of “sex” as “darker.” Goldensohn’s reading supports the notion that sexual “prudence” was expected of Bishop, but also that Bishop herself fostered this by concealing autobiographical detail. Thus, when compared to “Vague Poem,” the closing lines of a carefully measured love poem in *The Complete*, such as “The Shampoo,” seems almost doubly erotic:

The shooting stars in your black hair
 in bright formation
 are flocking where,
 so straight, so soon?
 —Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
 battered and shiny like the moon. (13-18)

While love and sex are themes which Bishop explores both in her published and unfinished material, often in the “publishable” material those themes are more difficult to identify. For example, though washing a lover’s hair is an intimate activity, in “Shampoo” Bishop’s tone is removed and unsure (“where/so straight, so soon?”). She

decides against the confident “accur[acy]” of “Vague Poem.” Even though “The Shampoo” describes, essentially, a moment of touching, Bishop removes the speaker from the literal situation by comparing the lover’s white hairs to distant shooting stars, and thereby detaching from the close and tangible.

Orr’s particular word choice (“un-Bishopian”) in relation to “Vague Poem” is more significant than he may have intended. His statement implies that the available discourse with which to evaluate Bishop is fixed. As Foucault discusses, the name of the author holds tremendous significance as a word that represents an individual to whom we have been trained to attribute a very particular meaning. Unlike other proper names, the author’s name “does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it” (211). Instead, Foucault states the authorial name and function “seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being” (211). It follows that when Vendler suggests that the writer at work in *Juke-Box* is not the “real Elizabeth Bishop,” she is therefore making a bold and broad statement not about what the “real” Bishop *is*, but—and more importantly—about what she and others—including Orr—have *allowed* her to be (82). “Vague Poem” challenges that allowance by straying from Bishop’s typical strategies for containment.

Is it not possible, through *Juke-Box*, to explore how the poet is an author “show[ing] [her]self” in a way that pushes back the edges of her signification, disrupting the concept of “Bishop” that the proper name is expected to uniformly define? Marit J. MacArthur explores this question in her paper “Boxes, Slots, and Roses: Revealing Bishop’s Eroticism,” given at the 2006 MLA conference, asking what kinds of poems

were the publishers at *The New Yorker* most interested in, and what kinds of poems did Bishop have trouble finishing? “Vague Poem” is one of many instances in the new volume that undermines terms critics have ascribed to Bishop—especially her famed “reticence.” And so, considering her unfinished work alongside published poems, we learn that reticence was, in many ways, devised. To appropriately enact one’s designated gender and sexuality in American culture involves clothing one’s self literally and symbolically in the garments that mask or conceal—and hence, protect.

3. Strategies of Survival

Judith Butler writes, “one is a woman...to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call that frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one’s sense of place in gender” (*Bodies that Matter* xi). As a poet who is also female, Bishop fits into the role of woman to the degree that she fits—and executes—the accepted model of the feminine. Butler’s recurrent assertion that “gender is performative” is consequently vital to understanding Bishop’s representation of women (including herself) in her work and poems. Indeed, according to ideas suggested throughout Bishop’s work, to correctly enact one’s designated gender involves what could even be labeled as theatrics. “As a strategy of survival,” Butler writes, “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (*Performance* 903). The role of woman requires a convincing performance—the kind Bishop’s published work often self-consciously demonstrates. Because “gender is constructed through relations of power” (*Bodies that Matter* x), Bishop’s anxiety is not only located generally in the demands of heterosexual society, but also in the specific hierarchy of controlling entities—publishers,

editors, critics, readers—that influenced her work and life. Her sometimes adequate and sometimes inadequate public performance of her own gender becomes a theme she recurrently addresses in her poems, a theme that the *Juke-Box* poems allow critical discourse to investigate.

Consider “Exchanging Hats,” one of Bishop’s most peculiar published poems, significant for not only its candid exploration of gender power relations, but also for its convoluted publication history. “Exchanging Hats” did not appear in *The New Yorker*—the first site of most of Bishop’s publications—but instead was published in the April 1956 issue of *New World Writing* (Miller 277). “Exchanging Hats” stands out from other published poems in its willingness to “dare” to challenge gender stereotypes without employing her otherwise typical methods of concealment. As Brett Miller observes, this poem was “utterly anomalous in her oeuvre” (277). Not only was “Exchanging Hats” inconsistent with her other published work, it was downright radical in its candid propositions concerning conventional gender rules and roles, challenging, finally, the essentialism of gender itself (Miller 277). In the poem, these roles are embodied by the physical exchange of clothing and costume. To test the limits of gender, Bishop suggests dressing up in the attire of the opposite sex:

Unfunny uncles who insist
 In trying on a lady’s hat,
 —oh, even if the joke falls flat,
 we share your slight transvestite twist

in spite of our embarrassment.

Costume and custom are complex.

The headgear of the other sex

Inspires us to experiment. (1-8)

As the poet contemplates the inherent restrictions of gender in “Exchanging Hats,” she explicitly speculates on the restrictions of gender stereotypes, considering the possibility for altered perspective through cross-dressing (Miller 277). The authority behind her observations is located in the various exaggerated theatrics of the poem. “The headgear of the other sex/ inspires us to experiment” she states, as if the physical representation of gender alone could inspire taking risks one could not take when dressed in one’s own “headgear.” Indeed, as the poem advances, “Anandrous aunts” try on blatant symbols of male power such as “yachtsmen’s caps,” “Indian’s feather bonnets” and “crowns.” In the plain context of this poem—its form of short, eight-beat lines—Bishop seems to be suggesting that testing the guiding principles of gender could be as straightforward as putting on a hat, and that social power and gender identity are located in basic—external—symbols. Attempting to obscure the autobiographical details of her life through various gestures of the imagination, including gender substitution and identifying with the masculine ideal, by confessing to a “transvestite twist” in “Exchanging Hats,” Bishop likewise acknowledges the powerful association between costume and perceived identity.

Bishop never chose to reprint “Exchanging Hats” after its initial publication, demonstrating her unease with the subject matter. Indeed, the poem never appeared in any of her books except for *The Complete*, which was published after her death in 1979. Miller suggests that in retrospect the poem “embarrassed her in some way,” though it took her many years to realize its frank indication of her own apprehension over the

issues it introduces (277). While a rare set of circumstances resulted in the publication of “Exchanging Hats,” similar factors could have led to the publication of many poems we now find in *Juke-Box*. More importantly, “Exchanging Hats” indicates that Bishop’s approach to difficult subject matter—especially gender and sexuality—is not only complicated, but inconsistent. This complexity reflects the danger of an oversimplified division between the published and unfinished material.

The poem which has perhaps received the most critical attention concerning gender anxiety is “In the Waiting Room.” This fierce, and finally devastating, examination delivers another challenging example that calls into question the supposed fastidiousness of *The Complete*. The first poem in Bishop’s last single volume, *Geography III*, published in 1976, “In the Waiting Room” is a rigorously assembled poem, which unlike many of her published work, does not attempt to place the experience of the poem outside the experience of the poet (Miller 23). “In the Waiting Room” stands out for many reasons, but especially as the only instance in Bishop’s work in which she dares to use her own name. Lee Edelman, in his influential essay, “The Geography of Gender; Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘In The Waiting Room’,” specifically describes the poem’s crisis as a “girl’s moment of awakening to the separations and the bonds among human beings, to the forces that shape individual identity through the interrelated recognitions of community and isolation” (182). The child’s realization that she is “an *Elizabeth*” expresses the specific recognition of her fate to *be a she*—and therefore to act within the margins conscripted to her.

The poem is set in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1918, against the backdrop of the First World War. The child sits in a room of adults as her aunt undergoes some sort of

painful dental procedure. Too shy to look the adults in the faces, “Elizabeth” instead notices their clothing as well as the general surroundings. As the poem begins:

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
 I went with Aunt Consuelo
 to keep her dentist’s appointment
 and sat and waited for her
 in the dentist’s waiting room.
 It was winter. It got dark
 early. The waiting room
 was full of grown-up people,
 arctics and overcoats,
 lamps and magazines. (1-10)

Waiting for “what seemed like a long time,” the child turns her attention to the magazine, *National Geographic*. Sucked in by the photographs, “Elizabeth” takes note of various examples in the magazine of violence found in nature (volcanoes erupting, fire, ashes) and violence in human society (a dead man on a pole). As the poem unfolds, the worst violence is located specifically in heterosexual society (Edelman 194). Bishop’s tendency to associate things that are black and often burned with trauma or vulnerability warns us to expect this danger:

while I waited I read
 the *National Geographic*
 (I could read) and carefully
 studied the photographs:

the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.

Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.

A dead man slung on a pole
—“Long Pig,” the caption said.

Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.

Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.

I was too shy to stop. (13-33)

The description of a photograph of the famous explorer couple from Kansas, Osa and Martin Johnson, recalls “Exchanging Hats” in its statement regarding gender substitution through dress, acknowledging again the connection between costume and perceived identity. By dressing in the same clothing as her husband—“riding breeches,/ laced boots, and pith helmets”—Osa Martin thus assumes power. The women in Africa, from “Elizabeth’s” perspective, don’t have such an option. Indeed, the image of the

appropriately dressed married white Americans is put in direct contrast with a disturbing photograph from Africa in which naked black women are made a grotesque spectacle for the foreign adult audience of the glossy magazine. The child “Elizabeth” is repulsed by the constrictive apparel of the African children and women: the babies’ heads are “wound round and round with string” and the necks of the women similarly wound with wire—like “light bulbs.” Edelman calls this image the “patriarchal writing of woman’s sexuality on her body” taking the form of the “garrote”—“an instrument of strangulation that prevents the victim from uttering any cry at all” (192).

In reading the *National Geographic*, then, “Elizabeth” grows to comprehend the cultural burden of female sexuality; all at once, the speaker grasps the overstated sexuality of the breasts and the cultural association with breasts as the stereotypical location for accepted male desire. As Edelman suggests, “they evoke an eroticism that undermines the institution of heterosexuality—the institution that determines sexual difference as well as its inscriptions (194). And yet, “Elizabeth” cannot bring herself to turn away from these pictures—not only because she fears making a connection with the adults in the room whose attention she is trying to avoid, but also because she is suddenly conscious of her interest in the female body. “Their breasts were horrifying./ I read it right straight through./ I was too shy to stop.” “Elizabeth’s” interest is simultaneously erotic; she is equally horrified at her reaction to the seductive, female anatomy. Exoticized, this moment of sexual awakening is perhaps also an awakening of her internalized homophobia.

The stream of disturbing, violent images that transpire in the poem leads into another kind of cruelty being conducted in the dentist’s chair towards Aunt Consuelo

who cries “oh!” in pain. The women in the magazine with “necks wound round” with wire are silenced, and yet Aunt Consuelo, who has the power to speak, can only put on a ridiculous display of female vulnerability. Tellingly, Bishop is not sympathetic with her aunt, who she describes as a “foolish timid woman” (42). Aunt Consuelo’s represents the ineffectual cry of the woman, and “Elizabeth[‘s]” devastation at being associated with the female gender builds as she eventually loses all sense of place, orientation (Miller 27):

What took me
 completely by surprise
 was that it was me:
 My voice, in my mouth.
 without thinking at all
 I was my foolish aunt,
 I—we—were falling, falling,⁷ (44-50)

The important leap from “I was my foolish aunt” to the following stanza’s “you are an *Elizabeth*” is highlighted by complementary sentence structure. Bishop makes the association that she can be “one of them” and “Elizabeth” at the same time, yet she still questions this connection, proclaiming her disinterest with the feminine, “Why should you be one, too?”

I said to myself: three days
 And you’ll be seven years old.
 I was saying it to stop the sensation of falling off
 the round, turning world
 into cold, blue-black space.

But I felt: you are an *I*
 you are an *Elizabeth*,
 you are one of *them*.
 Why should you be one, too?
 I scarcely dared to look
 To see what it was I was. (54-65)

Just as she was “too shy” to stop looking at the images of breasts in the *National Geographic*, now “Elizabeth” can “scarcely dar[e] to look/ to see what it was I was.” Bishop’s choice of syntax is also deliberate here. Rather than stating, *my name is Elizabeth*, instead the speaker employs the second person, stating “you are an Elizabeth,” acknowledging forced inclusion in the female gender the name “Elizabeth” represents. The statement suitably has the tone not only of disclosure but of uncomfortable, physical exposure into a “cold, blue-black space” as we encounter, again, Bishop’s tendency to associate crisis with being consumed in darkness or blackness.

Interestingly, at this point the speaker of the poem turns back to the mundane details of the waiting room. Though she is not able to commit to her observations (she can only give a “sidelong glance”) she returns to making note of what the adults are wearing, finally scrutinizing their exposed hands which seem being prepared for some sort of dissection:

—I couldn’t look any higher—
 at shadowy gray knees,
 trousers and skirts and boots
 and different pairs of hands

lying under lamps. (66-70)

Up to this very late moment in Bishop's published poetry, the "Elizabeth" was potentially absent. Thus, the most important revelations of "In the Waiting Room" are the connections it makes between name and gender, costume and culture. Just as the African women are forced to outfit themselves in exaggerated—perhaps painful—attire, so must "Elizabeth" finally put on her name as well as the associations that go both with the girl and object in question—a "what." Butler writes, "The name takes the place of an absence, covers that absence, and reterritorializes that vacated position. Inasmuch as the name emerges as a site of loss, substitution, and phantasmatic identification, it fails to stabilize identity" (156). "Elizabeth" is uncomfortable with identifying with the female gender role, and "scarcely dare[s] to look/ To see what it was [she] was." Finally, the poem ends in complete submersion. Trapped within the "big black wave" the child has not only realized her inability to emerge from femalehood, but also the impending threat of her own sexuality:

The waiting room was bright
 and too hot. It was sliding
 beneath a big black wave,
 another, and another. (89-92)

Finally, formal resistance to complete disclosure—obfuscation of narrative logic through waves of disconnected images and sensory description—in "Waiting Room" recalls the progression of unfinished poems like "Vague Poem." Indeed the climax of "Waiting Room" occurs in a "sliding" "wave" of disorientation, and thus recollects the "unimaginable connections" which by "forming" and "folding over" culminates in

“Vague Poem.” Thus, revisiting—and re-questioning—our established notion of “Bishopness” helps us read one of Bishop’s most canonical poems in a much richer context. In “Elizabeth[’s]” suspicion of the designating apparel of the female gender in “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop questions the materiality—and honesty—of traditional representations of femininity, so showing how some of the poems of *The Complete* challenge the notion of the poet as modest and reticent as much as the work in *Juke-Box* do.

The “Elizabeth” of “In the Waiting Room” resists assimilation of the female into a gender role. Bishop’s unfinished fragment in *Juke-Box*, “A mother made of dress goods” also specifically tracks the significance of clothing associated with that role. Though the poem is barely strewn together and is obviously composed of unfinished parts, “A mother made of dress goods” attempts to come to terms with the apparel a woman is forced to wear in order to transform into the undesirable—but inevitable—woman in the dentist’s chair—vulnerable and open-mouthed.

In “A mother made,” Bishop again draws the connection between the material performance of gender and properly enacting the role of woman. She rejects fully formed metaphor and instead equates the mother with some of the specific garments we remember from poems in *The Complete* (such as dresses, hats, things that are gauzy and black). Indeed, exploring the physical and metaphysical act of dressing up, “A mother made” repositions themes that were difficult for Bishop to write about without an elaborate conceit. Again, the presence of black objects hints at crisis:

A mother made of dress-goods
white and black polk-dots,

black and white “Sheperd’s Plaid.”

A mother is a hat

black hat with a black gauze rose

falling half-open

A long black glove

The swan bit

In the Public Gardens (1-9)

Is to be a mother to wear a hat? Bishop considers. No, to be a mother—the most clearly designated woman’s role—is to *be* a hat. Indeed, “a mother [is] *made* of dress-goods.” Without the option of “exchanging” hats, the mother is clearly defined as the signifying garment itself; there is no subject beyond the garments of gender.

As the unfinished poem unfolds, it makes gestures towards other poems that more conclusively take on issues of gender performance, lesbianism, and misogyny. In this way we might continue to consider the work in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* as starting points, or, seeds. Indeed, as “A mother made of dress-goods...” continues, we again see echoes of “The Shampoo,” Bishop’s disciplined exploration of an intimate moment between women, the “Hair being brushed at night” that reflects the stars in the washing basin:

Hair being brushed at night

And brushed

“Did you see the spark?”

Yes, I saw the spark

And the shadow of the elm

Outside the window. (10-15)

Unlike the eventual realization of “The Shampoo,” however, “A mother made” boldly depicts an unclothed figure, vulnerable, trembling—and yet free from clothing—inside the frigid wash-basin:

A naked figure standing
 in a wash-basin shivering half crouched
 a little, black and white
 in the sloping-ceilinged bedroom
 with the striped wall paper
 A voice heard still
 Echoing
 Far at the bottom somewhere
 Of my aunt’s on the telephone—
 Coming out of blackness—the blackness all voices come from (17-25)

Indeed, with its swirling blackness, its “big black wave” set against the disconnected sounds of Aunt Conseulo’s voice, “A mother made of dress-goods” shows us a possible beginning of Bishop’s most fully realized exploration of “Elizabeth[’s]” fall into the gender awareness. Realization does not come with a cry as it does in “In the Waiting Room,” but instead with the more ambiguous “echoing/ Far at the bottom somewhere.” In the final line of the stanza we are sunk into the sexless “blackness” of the womb. Here, we learn that the darkness we have come to associate with crisis for Bishop is the origin of “all voices.” In this fragment is a place from which we “all” are eventually expelled—

propelled into the genders that define us. We double back then to the cry of pain—the “voice heard still”—that so terrifies “Elizabeth.”

4. “And all I’m telling you may be a lie...”

Familiar biographical knowledge is itself part of the construction of “Bishopness.” The poet was separated from her mother at the age of six following her father’s death and her mother’s subsequent breakdown. Throughout her work, the absence of the mother results in the absence of a permanent sense of location. As Helen Vendler comments in her important essay, “The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop,” the absence of Bishop’s mother is the “inaccessible blank at the center of all of Bishop’s travel” (82). Because exile, isolation, and the incapacity to fit in or be “at home” are familiar themes within Bishop’s oeuvre, the thematic of one of the most important pieces in *Juke-Box*, “A Drunkard,” is at the core of issues explored in *The Complete*. In this poem Bishop explores physical and social isolation from a child’s perspective; the child repeatedly attempts to contact the mother and is ignored. Finally, a gesture that exposes the child’s sexual “curiosity” gets her mother’s sharp attention. In this way, “A Drunkard” further challenges critics’ easy demarcation between the published and unfinished material when it comes to matters of gender and sexuality.

“A Drunkard” is one of many examples of Bishop’s exacting—and often incredibly lengthy—revision process. She worked on the poem for about ten years. Started in 1959 or 1960 and in various stages of revision until around 1970, the poem speaks in interesting ways to “In the Waiting Room” which opens *Geography III* published six years later. “A Drunkard” is similarly constructed and depicts one of

Bishop's first tangible moments of "curiosity" about her lesbianism and sexuality. Both poems explore the tension of "fall[ing] into gender consciousness" (to recall Miller's phrase) by dramatizing the distance between the child "Elizabeth" and the adult female figures to whom she looks for guidance—figures who tragically disappoint or dismiss her. In "In the Waiting Room," of course, this is the feeble Aunt Consuelo. In "A Drunkard" it is the mother herself. Within the first lines, the poem explores these themes within the context of the 1914 Salem fire in Massachusetts in which more than 1,000 buildings were destroyed:

When I was three, I watched the Salem fire.

It burned all night (or then I thought it did)

and I stood in my crib & watched it burn.

The sky was bright red: everything was red:

out on the lawn, my mother's white dress looked

rose-red; my white enameled crib was red

and my hands holding to its rods—

its brass knobs holding specks of fire— (1-8)

The speaker is a three-year-old who watches from the barred confinement of her crib as the tremendous fires burn outside, destroying all in its path. The fires are presented as both magical and sinister, with the power not only to annihilate but also to cast their red glow on all things visible to the child. Interestingly, "In the Waiting Room" also starts to establish the crisis in the poem with eruption and fire. Here, the flames cast their light into the sky, on the lawn, on the speaker's mother's white dress, and, finally, on "everything." As the poem continues, black ash and cinders swirl.

While the child of “In the Waiting Room” is caught within the confines of the dentist’s office, the child in “A Drunkard” is forced to experience the fires trapped within the walls of her crib. While a crib’s high-barred walls are meant, of course, to keep the child safe, the speaker is still in harm’s way, proving the actions of the mother to be misguided. Indeed, the child, bound within a prison-like structure, figuratively burns alongside the buildings. From the crib, the child’s observations are noticeably erotic: the “white dress” that looks “rose-red,” the “rods” and “knobs.” Again, like other poems, “A Drunkard,” refers to clothing to dramatize moments of gender and sexual crisis.

As the poem develops, the speaker describes feeling amazed as the scene unfolds around her, specifically as people attempt to extinguish the fires by “playing hoses.” Though she is removed from this adult activity, she is utterly absorbed by it. Everything continues to burn, as the sky fills with redness, “scorched black burnt” ashes and “bigger things”:

I felt amazement not fear
 But amazement may be
 My infancy’s chief emotion.
 People were playing hoses on the roofs
 of the summer cottages on Marblehead Neck:
 the red sky was filled with flying motes,
 cinders and coals, and bigger things, scorched black burnt. (9-15)

But what are the “bigger things” really burning in the poem? As the speaker watches people “escape” from their own burning houses, the infant comes to realize her inability to free herself from female-hood—from being “one of them too”—while at the same time

acknowledging an anomalous sexuality. We come to learn that it is the idea of security that is ablaze, first as the child burns within the space meant to keep her safe, then as she calls out to the absent mother who either ignores or is unable to discern her child's cries:

I was terribly thirsty but mama didn't hear
 me calling her. Out on the lawn
 she and some neighbors were giving coffee
 or food or something to the people landing in the boats—
 once in a while I caught a glimpse of her
 and called and called—no one paid any attention— (23-28)

The mother is too busy attending to the adults, serving food and coffee, to attend to her child. Indeed, the frantic and exhausted speaker is imperceptible not only to the mother, but also to the crowd: "I caught a glimpse of her/and called and called—no one paid any attention." While in "a mother made" and "In the Waiting Room" an adult female figure calls out into the void, here, this ineffectual cry comes from the child.

Finally, the beach is scattered with an odd catalog of charred black material propelled there by a wild—almost supernatural—wind generated by the heat of the flames:

The beach was strewn with cinders, dark with ash—
 Strange objects seemed to have blown across the water
 Lifted by that terrible heat, through the red sky?
 Blackened boards, shiny black like black feathers—
 Pieces of furniture, parts of boats, and clothes— (32-36)

The most significant piece of this debris expelled from the burning houses is part of this “cloth[ing]”—a woman’s black stocking. The stocking is black and thus threatens just as the “blackened boards” and other “scorched black burnt” material, but it is also a sensual object—gauzy, stretchy and soft. And just as “Elizabeth” could not bring herself to turn away from the simultaneously erotic and grotesque pages of the *National Geographic*, so the speaker in “A Drunkard” cannot resist this stocking:

I picked up a woman’s long black cotton
 stocking. Curiosity. My mother said sharply
 put that down! I remember clearly, clearly— (37-39)

While Bishop does establish this scene on the beach during the “brilliant morning,” the mother still seems to appear from out of nowhere. In previous scenes, the mother could not hear (or did not acknowledge) her child’s cries when she was in apparent physical danger. But in the relative calm of morning, it only takes the child’s silent gesture of picking the stocking up—“clearly” an intimate female garment—to get her mother’s quick attention. The mother reprimands the child not only for a careless and self-indulgent action—picking up trash—but also castigates and embarrasses her for her first expression of “abnormal” sexual “curiosity”—her attraction to a woman’s stocking.

Miller posits that Bishop recalled this incident as “a profound rejection of herself, her curiosity, her observant eye, and, because the forbidden object was a piece of woman’s intimate clothing, perhaps some aspect of her sexuality as well” (5). The result of this event—according to the speaker in “A Drunkard”—is Bishop’s eventual surrender to alcoholism. The conclusion makes it clear that the poem obviously was still in draft.

But since that night, that day, that reprimand

I have suffered from abnormal thirst—
 I swear it's true—and by the age
 of twenty or twenty-one I had begun
 to drink, & drink—I can't get enough
 and, as you must have noticed,
 I'm half-drunk now...

And all I'm telling you may be a lie... (40-47)

Bishop concludes that this event in Salem was a direct cause of her alcoholism—an illness which partially contributed to the slim number of poems she saw through to publication.⁸ Simultaneously, the poem seems to suggest a different, even more “abnormal” thirst. While the refugees of the Salem fires were physically expelled from their burning homes, Bishop's exile is even more devastating.

Though “A Drunkard” is unfinished, Bishop decides to end the poem—even within the safe quarters of a draft—with the rather unconvincing disclaimer, “all I'm telling you may be a lie...” In this line, the speaker directly contradicts her statement from just a few lines earlier, “I swear it's true.” Such simple, insistent, syntax suggests a child speaker still caught within the conflict of the poem, not a reflective, distanced, adult. The opposition between truth and deception puts even more pressure on the tensions at discord in this draft. By addressing the reader directly, Bishop also makes the rather “half-hearted disclaimer” (“The Prodigal: Elizabeth Bishop and Alcohol,” Miller 55) that we recall from the title of “Vague Poem”—a poem that is decidedly *not* vague.

Finally, the conclusion of “A Drunkard” complicates Bishop’s stated stance on confessionalism while at the same time enforcing it. Though she routinely criticized popular confessional poets like her friend Robert Lowell, famously commenting, “You just wish they’d kept some of these things to themselves,” (qtd. in Goldensohn 71); one cannot help but wonder if she was in some way envious of the possibilities of the confessionalist project. We also might posit that Bishop noticed that Lowell’s authority did not only originate in his formal approach to poetry, but also in his correct—even exaggerated—fulfillment of his expected male gender role.⁹ As Alice Quinn, editor of *Juke-Box* suggests, in Bishop’s unfinished verse we often perceive a more “naked” exploration of issues related to gender and sexuality, a bareness that calls into question Bishop’s noted deviation from the popular confessionalist trend of her contemporaries” (*Atlantic Online* 3). Bishop’s rejection of confessionalism in her published work, and movement towards it in her unpublished material, affirms that she was pressured to obscure such subjects. In this way, Bishop’s famed “modesty” and “restraint” evidently became part of her signature style.¹⁰ Because “A Drunkard,” offers an account of Bishop’s early awareness of her lesbianism and ensuing alcoholism it is evident why the poem remained in perpetual draft.

Finally, Bishop’s published poem, “Pink Dog,” composed in the year of her death, explores the pressure Bishop felt to write the kind of poem that opened only as it concealed. In her essay “‘Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!’: The Body in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Pink Dog,’” Catherine Cuncinella supports the assertion that Bishop’s more formal poems often have the most to conceal. Instead of the “black stocking” of “A Drunkard,” the hats of “Exchanging Hats,” and the “garrote” of “In the

Waiting Room,” in “Pink Dog” we have an entire garish uniform. Indeed, this late poem is one of many important examples in Bishop’s published work in which the poet explores sensitive subject matter by way of a sometimes subversive poetic process.

As a ballad, “Pink Dog,” is one Bishop’s more obviously formal poems. Its frustrated response to sexual, as well as social, artifice is “cloaked” in the formal pattern of rhymed triple tercets. Cuncinella holds that “Pink Dog” can be seen as “a warning regarding the dangers of overtly flaunting the body, particularly an “unnatural” or deviant body” (73). For Cuncinella, this poem demonstrates Bishop’s fascination with “expressions of sexuality and gender as they play out on and through the body” (73). This fascination culminates in an expression of the grotesque, resulting in one Bishop’s most powerful explorations of gender performance. She engages this tension from the first deceptively straightforward tercet:

The sun is blazing and the sky is blue.

Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue.

Naked, you trot across the avenue. (1-3)

Bishop presents the exaggerated seascape in Rio de Janeiro: a “blazing” sun against a blue sky, a beach outfitted—literally “clothe[d]”—in the umbrellas which are meant to shield/cover up the people beneath them. While we learn that the dog is signified as the second person addressee of the poem, Bishop simultaneously engages and challenges the reader, equating the “you” with what is naked and shamed, walking down the street in an embarrassing “trot” which draws the attention of onlookers. Stripped of the natural clothing which is meant for her—her fur, and perhaps, her dignity—the female dog or “bitch” is shorn and dyed pink, creating a monstrous spectacle for an intolerant crowd:

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!

Naked and pink, without a single hair...

Startled, the passersby draw back and stare. (4-6)

As the poem develops, the simple rhyme scheme cloaks the devastating situation as it unfolds. The nursing dog that “has a case of scabies” has been forced away from her children and left to fend for herself in streets where “beggars” are thrown into “tidal rivers”:

Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,

to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?

They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites

go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights

out in the suburbs, where there are no lights. (13-18)

As the poem explains, the term “beggars” can apply to a wide variety of outcasts and exiles, implying that in this community anyone dissimilar is a “problem” to be casually discarded. Here, Bishop suggests a parallel between her life and that of her shorn subject. Notably, the darkest and most menacing landscape of the poem is the filth-strewn waters of the suburbs, significant as a site of exaggerated homogeneity. The dog, in her euphemistically articulated “condition,” “would not be able to float” if thrown into the river of suburbia, and would therefore inevitably meet her demise. While the poem is literally referring to the dog’s “condition” as a nursing mother, it is more generally referring to the “condition” of being marked as an outsider. Indeed, the solution for the

dog is to put on the costume that will allow her to stay safe. Bishop draws attention both to the problem of gender performance and to its necessity. This tension directly speaks to the problem of what to publish—especially if she and her publishers wished to preserve her reticence. Again we recall Butler’s assertion that gender performance is a “strategy of survival.” The “sensible solution,” is thus the only acceptable solution: conceal the self by dressing the mandatory part.

As the poem nears its conclusion, the tone shifts from careful to maniacal as the speaker wildly—frantically—calls out to the doomed dog. The following exclamations are not of enthusiasm for the festival, but rather of desperation as the speaker orders the dog to put on the appropriate “headgear,” thus exaggerating the character she has been forced to adapt in a humiliating, public dance. One can almost hear Aunt Conseulo’s hysterical voice:

Carnival is always wonderful!

A depilated dog would not look well.

Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival! (37-39)

As the last poem written before her death to be included in *The Complete*, Bishop’s concluding statement in her public work is more courageous than coy, more subversive than shy. While “Pink Dog” is, indeed, carefully composed, it clearly does not back away from making the point—perhaps more strongly than any other published poem—that her experience as a woman, lesbian, and poet, was in many ways distorted by the strict hetero-centric culture which monitored not only her work, but her life. In both her published and unfinished work, it is Bishop’s persistent—but guarded—exploration of this theme that highlights its significance. She knew that pursuing such subjects would

result in some sort of censorship—even self-censorship—and yet themes of gender and sexuality are returned to again and again.

5. Impersonating the Ordinary

In the interpretation of art, it is crucial to dedicate oneself to ongoing study of the work itself. But such an ideal is difficult to put into practice when it comes to accounting for contradictory material by an artist as popular as Elizabeth Bishop. However, if we do not acknowledge the essential unpredictability—the unknown energy—behind the work, we are shading ourselves from its ongoing possibility. For the most part, however, the reception of *Juke-Box* demonstrates that a collective opinion of Bishop has already been formed; “Bishopness” is a construct created as much by those who read her or have written about her as by the works themselves. If we are willing to encounter the unfinished work in *Juke-Box* without ready assumptions about Bishop’s “prudence” we will be equipped to go back to the familiar “complete” poems of *The Complete* as more able readers. In revealing more clearly the specific manners by which Bishop enforced her critical perception as a poet of “restraint” and “modesty,” *Juke-Box* opens up new and more systematic readings of the established poems, finally challenging their supposed fastidiousness.

Alongside many poems, “Pink Dog” suggests that “impersonating the ordinary” can prove to be a subversive activity. And yet Bishop’s refusal to group herself with other women, especially her refusal to be included in all-women anthologies, was a quality difficult for many feminists to come to terms with. The most famous example is, of course, Adrienne Rich. In the early 1970’s the young Rich was searching for role models

in what she later called, the “clear female tradition,” and she was disappointed not to find such an example (at least initially) in Bishop. Rich explains that she was both “drawn” and “repelled” by Bishop’s work; “repel[led]” both in “the sense of refusing access” and in “seeming to push away” (124)¹¹. Furthermore, Bishop’s poems were popular with the white, heterosexual, and often—male—literary institution and so could not clearly voice the kind of feminist politics Rich was most interested in at the time. Later, however, Rich came to associate Bishop’s recurrent theme of exile and dislocation specifically with a lesbian identity, eventually coming to view Bishop’s work as “honest and courageous” (125).

This honesty, obviously, is not straightforward or frank. Bishop’s hesitancy to associate herself both with women and with lesbian culture seems evidence either of her internalized misogyny and homophobia, or the very accurate realization of the academy’s unwillingness to entertain such subjects.¹² Probably, it is both. As a lesbian operating within a strongly male tradition delimited by a strictly heterosexual American culture, Bishop makes a recurring effort to obscure identification in her published poems with her sexuality—even her own gender—in ways that make this tension in both *The Complete Poems* and *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* stand out. That tension creates the exciting potential, now, for re-envisioning Bishop’s established body of work and restoring innovation in our consideration of Bishop, an activity has become standardized and—on occasion—stale. Again, Rich notes that while Bishop’s “triumphs” have been celebrated, critics and readers have not paid adequate attention to her “her struggles for self-definition and her sense of difference” (125). To study Bishop we must consider this important struggle as it takes shape on the page (or, sometimes, on napkins), now in

Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box. It is possible for the careful, controlled, Bishop to enter into a dialogue with the Bishop who might write about spending the morning with her lover in bed; naked, perhaps, in precisely the way the “bitch” of “Pink Dog” could never be.

Indeed, this new volume causes us not only to question Bishop’s supposed stance on confessionalism, but also to rethink the motivations behind that stance; while Bishop may have wished the confessional poets had “kept some of these things to themselves,” she also was clearly interested in writing the kind of work that allowed for the disclosure of personal information. That she never saw many poems through to publication seems to be a product both of her own self-censorship and the restrictive nature of the industry that has grown up around Elizabeth Bishop, feeding her mystique. As a lesbian writer, Bishop was in many ways contained by the powerful tradition of male writers assigned by a strict hetero-centric culture. And while Bishop’s stance toward that relationship was ambivalent, it must be considered the central anxiety that brings cohesion both to the noted material in *The Complete*, as well as in this new volume. Her continual endeavor to veil recognition in her published poems of her sexuality—even her own gender—makes this tension throughout her body of work remarkably apparent, however we might come to settle the question of the oeuvre.

Finally, the tension between *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* and *The Complete Poems*, should be celebrated—not simplified or overlooked. Her “lifelong impersonation of an ordinary woman” involved constructing complicated—and, often, brilliant—apparel, both in her work and in her life. Compelled by a society that could only support certain parts of her writing and character, Bishop became restricted by societal norms.

Like the women in the *National Geographic*, their necks constricted, “wound round and wound with wire,” Bishop was bound, coerced by many forces into the “restrained” character we continue to celebrate—perhaps with simplified enthusiasm. Gender and sexual anxiety are a feature of Bishop’s work that function as a decisive organizing principles, and the re-introduction of these themes into the critical discourse in light of *Juke-Box* has created an occasion that should be embraced. While it certainly makes sense to qualify the work in *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-Box* as what it is—a set of incomplete drafts—it does not make sense to discount the work simply as a means to hold on to the accepted concept of “Bishopness.”¹³ In the end, why would we attempt to streamline and simplify her work when, as the new volume helps to reveal, there are many sides to Elizabeth Bishop—all of them quite “real”?

Notes

¹ Many have written and spoken of Elizabeth Bishop's "modesty" and "reticence," working to establish this perception. For example, in her 1946 review of *North & South*, Marianne Moore famously commented, "Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular at being unspectacular. Why has no one ever thought of this, one asks oneself; why not be accurate and modest?" (qtd. in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* 177).

Likewise, in his 1975 essay, "Elizabeth Bishop, or the Power of Reticence," Octavio Paz writes, "We have forgotten that poetry is not what in words say but in what is said between them, that which appears fleetingly in pauses and silences...The enormous power of reticence—that is the great lesson of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop" (qtd. in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* 213).

² In an interview with *The Atlantic Online*, Alice Quinn notes the tension between the published and unfinished work, reinforcing the idea that Bishop was a poet of modesty and restraint. She comments, "a lot of what is [in *Juke-Box*] is very personal" (3).

³ Many have drawn attention to the importance of the absence of the mother in Bishop's work and life. As Lorrie Goldensohn notes in her essay, "The Body's Roses," "the fascination with the female seems as closely linked to the theme of the abandoning mother as it does to the...eroticized female body" (73).

⁴ Gillian White draws attention to this concern in her paper responding to *Juke-Box*, "'Uncalculated Waves of Influence': Afterlives of Elizabeth Bishop's Uncollected Work," delivered December 27 at the 2006 MLA conference.

⁵ Of course, the work in *Juke-Box* is still a careful selection—not the complete archives. Thus, Quinn has chosen work according to her own sense of cohesiveness and subject matter. In her paper, "Boxes, Slots, and Roses: Revealing Bishop's Eroticism," delivered

on December 27 at the 2006 MLA conference, Marit J. MacArthur notes the tendency of *Juke-Box* to draw particular attention to issues of sexuality.

⁶ In her essay, “Elizabeth Bishop: Stops, Starts and Dreamy Divigations,” Barbara Page describes this tendency in Bishop’s poetry as a “dreamy divagation,” when “language erupts because language or argumentation will not suffice” (13).

⁷ Brett Miller specifically describes “In the Waiting Room” as Bishop’s “fall into gender consciousness” (*Life and the Memory of it* 26).

⁸ Indeed, Bishop saw only about 90 poems through to publication—a number one might expect to find in a single volume of contemporary poetry.

⁹ Bishop seems to have felt that if she had been a man, like her good friend Robert Lowell, she would have been equipped to write more poems, and more important ones. As she commented, “I wish I had written a great deal more. Sometimes I think that if I had been a born a man I probably would have written more. Dared more, or been able to spend more time at it. I’ve wasted a great deal of time” (qtd. In Goldensohn 71).

¹⁰ In her essay, “Elizabeth Bishop: Text and Subtext,” Margaret Dickie suggests that for Bishop, “style becomes a means of expressing an identity where positive identity with the dominant heterosexual culture is denied” (4).

¹¹ Rich continues, “In part, my difficulties with her were difficulties in the poetry, of Bishop as a young poet finding her own level and her own language. But in part they were difficulties I brought with me, as a still younger woman poet already beginning to question sexual identity, looking for a female genealogy, still not yet consciously lesbian” (125).

¹² The concept is gleaned from Eve Sedgwick’s, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

¹³ However, Vendler is correct to condemn *The New Yorker* for publishing Bishop's unfinished poem, "Washington as a Surveyor" without any explanatory note, simply signing the poem "Elizabeth Bishop."

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