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Forces with Trajectories of Their Own: Thing-Power, Form, and the Brazilian Landscape in Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel"

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Abstract— *Ecocritical readings of Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel" (1965) have recently shown how the formal accuracy of the poem captures a nonhuman world beyond human comprehension but have tended to regard its waterfalls, rain, mountains, and streams as objects of representation. We argue in this article that these elements are better understood as actants in Jane Bennett's sense, forces with trajectories, tempos and propensities of their own which condition, disrupt and reorient the traveller's perception. Reading the poem via Bennett's notion of 'thing-power' reveals four kinds of elemental agency: the anticipatory interruption of the waterfall, the durational saturation of the rain, the withdrawal of the mountains, and the kinetic velocity of the streams. It demonstrates how the sequencing of these incommensurable registers in the poem enacts a critique of the traveller's epistemological mastery. The article also claims that Bishop's formal restraint, her proleptic conditionals, kinetic syntax, and refusal of totalising description do not merely illustrate new materialist claims but test and arbitrate them. The Brazilian setting of the poem is not a neutral backdrop in the analysis but a landscape located in history. The question of what it means to deploy a Euro-American theoretical lexicon to read a non-Euro-American place is woven throughout rather than added as a late qualification.*

Keywords— ***Elizabeth Bishop, "Questions of Travel", New Materialism, Nonhuman Agency, Postcolonial Ecocriticism***

Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel" (1965) resists the conventional framing of landscape as a passive backdrop to human experience. The poem's sustained focus on the agency of non-human elements, waterfalls, rain, streams, and mountains, has been increasingly read by critics as a site of intersection between Bishop's formal precision and her engagement with the natural world. This article furthers that inquiry by reading the poem through Jane Bennett's articulation of "thing-power" in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010). For Bennett, material objects and forces have a vitality that allows them to shape events and to affect human behavior in ways that cannot be reduced to human intention (Bennett, 2010, p.8). This framework provides one interpretive lens, among others now at work in Bishop's scholarship, through which "Questions of Travel" can be read as a site of negotiation between materials, in which the landscape functions not as an inert object of description but as a co-participant in the experience the poem records.

Scholarship on Bishop has long been preoccupied with her craft of observation, her geography of exile, and her nuanced representations of displacement and belonging (Costello, 1991, p.112; Travisano,1988, p.73). In the last

decade, there has been a clear move towards explicit ecocritical and posthumanist readings of her work. In "Elizabeth Bishop's Evolutionary Poetics" (2016), Sarah Giragosian theorizes the queer Darwinian and biopolitical dimensions of Bishop's poetics, tracing her engagement with the aesthetic-political philosophy of John Dewey and with Darwinian evolutionary thought in the radicalized literary culture of the 1930s. Giragosian argues that these affiliations shaped a "queer posthuman politics" in Bishop's early work (Giragosian, 2016, p.480). While Giragosian does not employ Bennett's terminology of "vibrant matter" or "thing-power," his argument is theoretically related to Dewey and Darwin, rather than new materialism. Nonetheless, Giragosian establishes a useful precedent that Bishop's poetics can be read productively as engaging non-human vitality and posthuman politics in ways that exceed the conventional biographical or psychoanalytic frames. This article takes a different theoretical route to a related destination, asking what becomes visible in "Questions of Travel" specifically when its elemental actors are read through Bennett's twenty-first-century vocabulary of material agency rather than through Giragosian's Dewey-and-Darwin-inflected genealogy of Bishop's earlier biopolitical commitments.

The closest precedent to this article is the study of "Questions of Travel" by Yazdanmehr Gordanpour and Tahereh Rezaei, published in *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* in 2021. Gordanpour and Rezaei argue that Bishop's poetry is "acutely form-conscious" and that this form-consciousness registers a nature that is "ontologically independent from human understanding" (Gordanpour and Rezaei, 2021, p.284). In their reading, they pay close attention to Bishop's formal subversions, her use of repetition, simile, and shifting grammatical subjects, to show how the poem's form enacts an ecopoetic sensibility attuned to the ethics of human presence in a nonhuman world. This is a substantial and directly relevant treatment of the same poem from an ecocritical viewpoint, and any subsequent reading of "Questions of Travel" through new materialist theory must take its measure rather than treat it as a minor precursor.

What this article argues is not that the account of Gordanpour and Rezaei is incomplete in some general sense but that it is working at a different level of description than a thing-power reading does and that the difference matters. The argument of Gordanpour and Rezaei is mainly formal: how Bishop's poetic technique registers an awareness that nature exceeds human comprehension. Their analysis is still, in an important way, an account of human representation of nonhuman independence. A thing-power reading, in contrast, does not see the waterfalls, rain, mountains, and streams primarily as objects of representation whose formal treatment reveals an ecological ethic but as entities that are themselves ascribed, in the poem's own terms, a kind of operative agency forces that act with "trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett, 2010, p.viii). The difference is not always clear-cut, and the two approaches are compatible rather than opposed, but it does lead to a different set of questions. Importantly, this article does not base that compatibility on assertion; it argues that Bishop's own poetic form, the use of the conditional mood, the kinetic syntax, and the refusal of totalizing description offers a linguistic methodology for precisely the negotiation that the theoretical dispute between Gordanpour and Rezaei's formalism and Bennett's vitalism stages. The poem is not simply a site to which we bring the theoretical dispute; it is a site in which that dispute is actively worked out in language.

It is worth mentioning another, more genre-specific precedent. In a 2022 study of material agency in the travel narratives of Dorothy Wordsworth, April McGinnis draws on James Gibson's theory of environmental affordances and Andrew Pickering's concept of nonhuman agency to argue that the "cluttered" landscapes in Wordsworth's travel writing "persistently conduct" the traveler's attention toward the material continuity between human traveler and nonhuman environment (McGinnis, 2022, p.44). McGinnis's study demonstrates that the pairing this article pursues material agency theory and the genre of travel writing is in itself an active area of inquiry. Does "Questions of Travel" pose a related, but distinct, question? Whereas McGinnis's "cluttered" landscapes operate cumulatively, through an accumulation of obstacles that slowly reorients the walker's attention, Bishop's poem stages four separate elemental encounters: waterfall, rain, mountains, and streams, each operating through a different register of material force.

A word is also needed about the relation of a thing-power reading to the psychoanalytic and biographical approaches to Bishop's landscapes, which remain influential. For example, Cassandra Laity links Bishop's rockscapes to "primordial" maternal desire and queer longing (Cassandra, 2016, p.430), a reading that still packs quite a punch for sections of Bishop's work, especially poems like "At the Fishhouses." A new materialist reading does not replace this tradition. It is working at a different register, asking not what the landscape reveals about the speaker's interiority, but what the landscape is staged as doing. The rhetorical energies of the poem in "Questions of Travel" are devoted to the latter question: the waterfalls blind, the rain saturates, the mountains dwarf, and the streams set the pace. These are not exclusively tropes of human feeling, though they are not exclusively independent of it either and the tension between these two possibilities is, this article suggests, part of what

the poem stages. The poem's placement of this tension in a specifically Brazilian landscape, one encountered by a traveler coded by biography and by the volume's own cultural positioning as a visitor from a North American frame of reference, means that the theoretical tension between human representation and non-human vitality cannot be neatly disentangled from the political tension between the traveler's interpretive resources and the landscape that resists them. This entanglement, which the poem stages without resolving, runs through all four of the close readings that follow.

Four careful readings, each devoted to one of the poem's major elemental figures, waterfall, rain, mountains, and streams, develop the argument. These four elements are conceived as exerting "thing-power" through various modes and temporalities: the waterfall through a sudden perceptual interruption; rain through indiscriminate saturation and the subversion of navigational technology; the mountains through monumental, withdrawn immobility that transcends human comprehension; and the streams through kinetic velocity that dissolves boundaries and exerts its rhythmic pressure. A fifth section brings these four modes together in a structural argument about the poem's sequencing and juxtaposition of them. The choice of waterfall, rain, mountains, and streams as the elemental set that organizes this article is not arbitrary, although it must be explicitly defended against the fuller inventory of nonhuman actants that populate Bishop's Brazilian poems among them, "the toucan", the "fat brown bird," and the "fire balloons" of "Brazil, January 1, 1502" and "The Armadillo." These four elements were chosen for two reasons. First, they occupy structurally significant load-bearing positions in the poem: the waterfall and streams in the establishing description of the opening stanza, the rain at the volta that turns toward the poem's central question, and the mountains as the recurring backdrop against which the human "trip" is staged. Second, each is subject to the proleptic or agentive grammatical treatment ("would be," "must have," "keep traveling") that this article identifies as the formal signature of material agency in Bishop's work. Animal figures, on the other hand, are usually syntactically subordinated as objects of address or apostrophe ("Sure are big creatures." "Look! It's a she!"), rather than being ascribed the independent verbal agency that this study traces. This is not to say, to be clear, that an analysis based on faunal rather than elemental agency would be illegitimate in fact, such an analysis, sensitive to the poem's "noble pantomimist" trees and its "self-pitying mountains," could fruitfully extend the present argument but rather to clarify that the four-element typology traces a particular grammatical phenomenon (the proleptic construction) rather than purporting to cover the poem's nonhuman population comprehensively.

The Waterfall's Interruption: Perceptual Agency, Formal Anticipation, and the Limits of the Gaze

In "Questions of Travel" the line 'the waterfalls would be blinding' foregrounds the waterfall as a force that can overwhelm human perception, not merely as a scenic ornament (Bishop, 1965, p.93). The verb "blinding" dislodges the human mastery of sight, placing the waterfall as a conditioning entity of the traveller's sensory horizon rather than submitting to the traveller's contemplative gaze. The blinding action of the waterfall is consistent with Bennett's idea of thing power: it does not simply break the speaker's vision but, within the logic of the poem, asserts its own material momentum against the traveller's desire to see. The phrasing of the bishop refuses to domesticate the waterfall into a picturesque spectacle. The formal mechanism by which it does so deserves attention. The conditional mood, 'would be blinding', does not diminish the threat but enhances it. This construction works rhetorically as prolepsis, a figure of classical and Renaissance poetics in which the speaker anticipates an event that has not yet happened, admitting the force of the waterfall before any encounter happens. The speaker does not narrate a past blinding; she is already, in the present of the poem, structured by the effects of the future blinding. This is the more specific thing that Bishop's poem does in its formal way that Gordanpour's and Rezaei's accounts cannot fully capture. Where that account registers the mood of conditionality as a grammatical choice that encodes the traveller's awareness of a nature she does not control, attention to prolepsis reveals a tighter argumentative structure: the waterfall does not wait to act on the traveller when she arrives at it. It has already performed, via the proleptic conditional, a reorganisation of the traveller's perceptual stance in the present tense of the poem. This is not form as a symbol of an independent nature but form as the act of material agency itself.

A thing-power reading adds another dimension: the proleptic conditional makes an non-actual anticipated waterfall already exert actual perceptual force on the traveller's present. This is not the same as 'the form registers the speaker's awareness of nature's independence'. It is closer to what Bennett means when she attributes 'trajectories, propensities, or tendencies' to nonhuman entities (Bennett, 2010, p.viii). Regardless of whether one accepts Bennett's ontological claims about the vitality of matter, the interpretive effect of reading the proleptic conditional as a site of material agency rather than simply a grammatical marker of the speaker's psychological stance is

to emphasise a temporal structure in the poem that a formal account alone can describe but not fully account for.

Here the postcolonial dimension of the poem needs to be named rather than deferred; named, that is, through Bishop's own lexical choices rather than simply asserted as a general framework laid over a universal material event. The poem's central question: "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? Where do we stand today? (Bishop, 1956, Complete Poems, p.93) casts the whole Brazilian landscape experience as one of touristic deliberation, a matter of whether or not to have been "here", not a description of inhabited ground. This framing is pointedly extended to the poem's treatment of sound and history: birdsong, elsewhere in Bishop's work a marker of ambient or intimate nature, becomes here "the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages" (Bishop, 1956, Complete Poems p.93), an image that renders the nonhuman world as a form of inscription, one the traveller can recognise as writing without being able to read it. The following simile is equally revealing: rain sounds "so much like politicians' speeches: / two hours of unrelenting oratory" (Bishop, 1956, Complete Poems p.93), reducing meteorological excess to the register of national political discourse the traveller cannot understand. The "blinding" of the waterfall is therefore not simply an excess over perception in the abstract but an excess over a perceptual apparatus that the poem has already designated by means of its imagery of illegible "calligraphy", untranslatable "oratory", and its structuring question of whether to have come "here" at all as the apparatus of a North American visitor trying to understand Brazil through the inherited categories of travel writing. To read the agency of the waterfall only through Bennett's universal lexicon of thing-power, without attending to this lexical marking of the gaze as foreign and interpretive, risks what scholars working in the frame of "tropical materialisms" have identified as a characteristic move of new materialist theory: importing a Euro-American theoretical vocabulary to narrate encounters with non-Euro-American landscapes in ways that may obscure rather than illuminate the colonial and touristic histories that structure those encounters (Benitez and Lundberg, 2022, p.3–5). The article is not suggesting that Bennett's framework cannot apply to "Questions of Travel" but that the framework's situated dimension is authorised by the poem's own diction: its illegible calligraphies, its untranslatable oratories, and its constant weighing of having "come" against having "stayed at home". The article argues that the proleptic construction Bishop uses for the waterfall is continuous with this lexicon of the foreign-as-text, not separate from it.

It is important to recognise that this reading rests on theoretical commitments that are not uncontroversial. Benjamin Boysen has argued that the new materialist trend of "strategic anthropomorphism" (the ascription of intention-like "trajectories" and "propensities" to matter) violates its own logic and can obscure the specifically semiotic and linguistic character of the phenomena it describes (Boysen, 2018, p.228-32). Boysen's view is that the article's description of the waterfall's 'agency' could simply be seen as a feature of Bishop's grammar and the reader's interpretive activity. The fact that Gordanpour's and Rezaei and Bennett's approaches are "compatible rather than opposed" does not suffice to answer this objection. Instead, we want to argue that Bishop's formal restraint, her famous impersonality, her refusal of Romantic apostrophe, and her syntactic preference for constructed passives and conditionals over active assertions are just the linguistic methodology that Boysen's critique implicitly demands. Bishop's poetic form does not anthropomorphise the waterfall by endowing it with desire or intention; it does something more demanding. The verb "blinding", Bishop places in a proleptic conditional to register the material force of the waterfall without attributing consciousness to the force. On this reading, the formal restraint of the poem is not an occasion to abandon the thing-power framework but a model for how that framework can be held with the analytical precision that Boysen's "semiophobia" critique requires, attending to the genuine causality of non-human elements without collapsing that causality into the grammar of human agency. The formal analysis does not just illustrate the theoretical claim; it judges it.

A brief engagement with a body of thought largely external to the Euro-American new materialist canon this study otherwise surveys would help sharpen the decolonial stakes of this article's argument. Such is the case of Amerindian perspectivism as developed primarily through the ethnographic work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in Amazonia. The perspectivist argument is that Western cosmologies separate humans from animals on the ground of better cognition, while Amerindian cosmologies claim that humans and nonhumans share an underlying "human" subjectivity in which each species sees itself as human and other species including humans as animals (Eduardo, p.23). This framework does not map onto "Questions of Travel" in any direct ethnographic sense. Bishop's poem is not an Amerindian text, and its speaker is explicitly positioned as a North American visitor and not a participant in Indigenous Amazonian cosmology. Here, perspectivism is relevant comparatively and diagnostically, not ethnographically: it foregrounds the cultural-historical specificity of the "thing-power" that Bennett and other new materialists attribute to matter. Amerindian perspectivism distributes subjectivity symmetrically: nonhuman beings have interior viewpoints commensurate with human ones, mediated by figures like the shaman who can move between perspectives, with the

gap in perspective bridged by shamans whose gift of adopting nonhuman subjectivities enables them to see other species as they see themselves. Bennett's vital materialism, by contrast, grants agency to matter but in an asymmetrical way: things "act" upon a human observer who remains in the position of the one acted upon, the one for whom the waterfall is "blinding". Viewed through this comparative lens, Bishop's poem does not fit neatly into either slot. The speaker lacks the perspectival mobility of the shaman, as well as the command of the landscape in its totality; the proleptic grammar identified by this article matter's actions narrated in advance of and independent of the speaker's perception indicates, but does not realise, the symmetrical distribution of agency that perspectivism describes as already constitutive of Amerindian relations to the nonhuman. This comparison is offered not to assimilate Bishop's poem to an Indigenous epistemology it does not inhabit but to specify, by contrast, the historically situated and asymmetrical structure of the "vital matter" the poem's grammar stages a structure that remains legible as the apprehension of a visitor, however much that apprehension strains against its own limits.

Rain: Saturation, Duration, and the Compromising of Cartographic Mastery

Where the waterfall works by sudden, expected interruption, rain, in "Questions of Travel", works by pervasive, indiscriminate saturation. Bishop conceptualises rain not as a passive weather event, but as an environmental presence that realigns the conditions of travel. The poem's catalogue rain falling on "the travellers, the animals, the children" (93) effaces distinctions of kind by situating all beings within a common field of exposure, reducing hierarchies of significance into what Bennett would call an "assemblage," a confederation of human and nonhuman elements held together by a shared material condition (Bennett, 2010, p.23–24). Repetition emphasises the temporal nature of rain, as Bishop states, "The rain is falling" (93), which lengthens duration and creates a rhythm of unfolding in the poem, which disallows the reader and the traveller to set the pace of experience. Rain's mode is this durational quality versus the waterfall's anticipatory, episodic mode. Rain is a condition, not an event, a presence sustained that the poem keeps in view instead of passing.

One of the most significant images in the poem is the rain-compromised map of the traveller. Thus the postcolonial reading, urged above, is not optional but inescapable. The map is not a neutral instrument of orientation; it is a historically specific technology of spatial mastery. In the context of a poem staging a North American traveller's encounter with Brazil, the map bears the full weight of what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "imperial eye," the organising, classifying gaze through which European and North American travellers have historically transformed unfamiliar places into legible, manageable spaces. Rain makes the traveller's map less reliable. It does not just inconvenience her; it actually undermines the instrument through which she has been trying to domesticate and navigate a Brazilian landscape on her terms. The indiscriminate rain falling as much on "travellers", "animals", and "children" as on one or the other, regardless of hierarchies of observer and observed, accomplishes exactly the levelling of anthropocentric categories that Bennett's assemblage-thinking exhorts, but in a landscape whose relation to the traveller is not simply ontological but also historical and political.

Where this article gestures to the "map" as a colonial and imperial technology, that observation becomes historically specific in the context of scholarship on the cartographic history of the Americas. Colonial-era maps were not just documents of land but were tools for the rhetorical and political construction of territory: early cartographic representations of the Americas operated as literary and visual maps that not only did not simply represent the land but also helped to write the space into existence for a European audience, constructing a cultural perspective through which the territory was viewed and demonstrating power over the conquered space and people. More generally, the 'linguistic turn' in Latin American colonial studies has demonstrated that structures of spatial perception and representation which are culturally based have been an important part of the colonial process, with maps and conceptions of geography serving as one of the main cultural forms in which power was exercised. Read against this scholarship, a moment when a rain or volcanic event makes a landscape "unrediscovered" or resistant to inherited nomenclature is not merely an illustration of a generic encounter between human technology and nonhuman force; it is a staging, in miniature, of the failure of the cartographic apparatus that Craib and others identify as constitutive of the colonial relation to Latin American territory, an apparatus the poem's speaker, as inheritor of that tradition of travel writing, carries with her even when she does not explicitly invoke it.

This echoes Timothy Morton's description of weather as part of a "ecological mesh" that resists any fantasy of human mastery over natural systems (Morton, 2010, p.274). Rain, for Morton, is precisely the sort of thing that defies localisation and intentionality: it is everywhere and nowhere, affecting everyone equally, indifferent to the traveller's desire to stand outside it and watch. But it should be said straightforwardly, rather than with more confidence than the text warrants, that the poem's treatment of the map is suggestive rather than emphatic: the compromised

reliability of the map is read best as one example among several of the poem's more general attentiveness to the limits of human instruments of orientation in conditions that the poem does not frame as fully within human control. What can be said with greater confidence is that the instrument that rain compromises the reliability of the map is not a culturally neutral object and that rain's indifference to the map's organising categories is not here a mere ontological fact. It is a political fact, too, enacted on a landscape with its histories of being mapped and measured and made navigable for outside eyes.

The manner of rain's operation in the poem has a distinctively wide reach. Rather than the expected singular force of the waterfall, rain reorders the shared conditions experienced across the poem's catalogue of beings. It is a kind of indiscriminately reaching reach where rain performs something like Bennett's "vitality of matter" a vibrancy the poem stages as operating outside of any one figure's intention or desire (Bennett, 2010, p.3). Bishop's rain is a present, enveloping thing, making the traveller's movement dependent on conditions that the poem does not suggest are under her control. Crucially, at the same time, it also makes the traveller's interpretive frame contingent in the same way as the apparatus of observation, cartography and classification she has brought with her from North America. The rain doesn't care where the map comes from or any of its theoretical pretensions; this, the poem seems to say, is the most politically consequential thing about it

The Mountains: Scale, Withdrawal, and the Colonial Uncanny

If the waterfall functions by predicted cessation, and rain by saturation, the mountains in "Questions of Travel" have a third, qualitatively different way of being present: an imposition of scale that the poem depicts as beyond ordinary perception. Bishop does this with her usual precision: the mountains are "too big to be seen" (93), a phrase that registers not merely a failure of appreciation but a more radical problem an object that, on the terms the poem provides, cannot be organised as an object of perception at all. This formulation has an obvious affinity with Graham Harman's object-orientated ontology, which posits that objects 'withdraw' from full apprehension, maintaining a depth which exceeds any relation in which they are engaged (Harman, 2018, p.12). Bishop's mountains can be read as dramatising something like this withdrawal: their vastness is not only quantitative but, in the terms of the poem itself, a kind of refusal to be assimilated into the frame the traveller brings to them. The phrase "piling up, piling up" (93) is repeated, reinforcing this sense of accumulation and ongoing process: the mountains are not static scenery but a slow, continuing accretion, and the repetition itself enacts, at the level of the line, something of the effect it describes a formal device characteristic of Bishop's technique more generally, in which sonic and syntactic repetition performs the phenomena the poem names. This article does not add to the first discovery of this device; rather, it reads its effect specifically through the vocabulary of withdrawal: the repetition not only mimics accumulation but also enacts a failure of closure, never arriving at a final, totalising image of the mountains. A couple of caveats are in order here. First, however, a note on citation practice: Here cited is Harman's *Object-Orientated Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2018), an introductory synthesis of arguments developed with more technical apparatus in earlier works such as *Tool-Being* (2002) and *The Quadruple Object* (2011). This earlier writing develops the notion of "withdrawal" more fully and connects it to a particular argument about the relation between the "real" qualities of an object and its "sensual" qualities as they appear in any relation. The present article takes the 2018 synthesis as a point of entrance for a readership that might not be specialists in object-orientated ontology, but the more rigorous formulation of the concept in Harman's earlier work would repay further engagement in any extended treatment of withdrawal as it operates across Bishop's geological imagination more broadly.

Second, and more consequentially, the application of a theoretical vocabulary constructed largely in dialogue with Western philosophical traditions, Heidegger in Harman's case, Spinoza and Deleuze in the case of much new materialist thought to a poem set in Brazil and concerned with a traveller's encounter with a landscape coded as foreign to her raises a question this article cannot and will not pass over. Scholars working under the rubric of "tropical materialisms" have argued that new materialist and posthumanist theory has been developed largely from "European temperate contexts and is informed by Western philosophies" and that its application to tropical and postcolonial settings requires a "decolonising" attention to "Indigenous cosmologies, ancient philosophies, and 'animist materialism'" that have understood "matter's liveliness" in ways that long precede Bennett's and Harman's formulations (Benitez and Lundberg, 2022, p.3). In this vein, Neera M. Singh has argued that the "celebration of liveliness and entanglements" at the centre of the new materialist and posthumanist "nonhuman turn" is a gesture whose "healthy corrective" already exists within "feminist, Black and Indigenous scholarship and practices", but whose Western-genealogied iteration too often proceeds as if these alternatives did not (Singh, 2022, p.85).

These critiques bear directly on this article's reading of the mountains. "Questions of Travel" stages a traveller coded, by the poem's own biographical and textual context, as a visitor from a temperate, North American frame of

reference encountering a Brazilian landscape whose scale exceeds her interpretive resources. Reading this encounter through Harman's withdrawal, without further examination, risks reproducing precisely the gesture Singh and the contributors to Tropical Materialisms describe: importing a Euro-American theoretical vocabulary to narrate an encounter with a non-Euro-American landscape in a way that may obscure the colonial and touristic histories that structure that encounter in the first place. This article does not claim to resolve this tension and a full accounting of it would require engagement with scholarship on Bishop's Brazilian writing and its relationship to mid-century U.S Brazilian cultural and political relations that lies beyond this article's scope. What can be said, more modestly, is this: the mountains' "withdrawal" in this poem may be read not only as an instance of a general ontological condition (Harman's claim is that all objects withdraw, regardless of context) but also, more specifically, as a formal registration of the travelle' s position her inability to read this landscape according to the interpretive categories she brings with her. On this more modest reading, "withdrawal" names not a universal property of objects but a relational failure specific to this traveller in this place. The poem's interest may lie precisely in not specifying which of these two readings the universal-ontological or the situated-relational it intends. The mountains' "too big to be seen" is not only an ontological statement about the limits of perception; it is also, in the context of a poem concerned throughout with what it means for this person to be in this landscape at all, a statement about the limits of her perception, in this place, shaped by this history of looking. What refuses to be organised as an object of perception is also, this article proposes, what refuses to be made available for the North American traveller's mode of appropriating landscape as knowledge. The poem's formal refusal the repetition that never closes, the phrase "too big to be seen" that names failure without resolving it is the poem's way of holding these two readings without deciding between them, and flagging this ambiguity, rather than resolving it in favour of the universalising reading that an unqualified application of Harman's framework would suggest, is the more responsible critical procedure.

Streams with Kinetic Agency, the Mesh, and the Limits of Lyric Scale

The streams of "Questions of Travel" achieve the elemental quartet of the poem in a fourth mode: kinetic velocity. The streams are pictured in perpetual motion, as opposed to the waterfall's expected pause, the rain's constant saturation, and the mountains' immense immobility. "Streams and waterfalls tumbling, tossing" (Bishop, 1965, p.92) emphasises the ceaseless energy of those flows; Bishop's kinetic diction "tumbling, tossing" enacts in its syntax something of the movement it describes, the paired participles running on without a connecting pause. The phrase "streams and waterfalls tumbling, tossing" (92) and the waterfall in the first section of the poem ("the waterfalls would be blinding" (93)) are not necessarily the same textual instance, and the above analysis does not depend on it. The article thematically organises the poem's elemental quartet of waterfall, rain, mountains and streams for the purpose of analysis; it does not claim that each element appears only once within the poem's text. The argument is not that there is some one-to-one correspondence between an element and a single line. It is about the modes of agency each element has as a recurring figure. These flows can be read through what Bennett calls "vital materialism": the recognition that nonhuman entities have trajectories and tendencies that do not wait upon human recognition (47). The mountains assert themselves in resistant stillness, whereas the streams are depicted as pure motion, their pace setting a tempo the traveller does not control. Their velocity also indicates a breaking down of boundaries: the streams 'hurry too rapidly down to the sea' (93), taking the attention of the poem with it on its way, in a way that does not pause for the contemplative gaze of the traveller.

The idea of the 'strange stranger' from Timothy Morton is useful here: a figure that is 'familiar as a category... but fundamentally alien as an entity' (Morton, 2010, p.277), encountered again and again but never fully grasped. This article is not the first recent application of Morton's "mesh" and "strange stranger" vocabulary to poetry; Alwyn Roux's 2021 study of Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now* in the Journal of Literary Studies uses precisely this vocabulary to read Spahr's poems of "inter-connectivity", asking, in Morton's terms, "Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom?" and showing how the "strange stranger lives within (and without) each and every being" across Spahr's collection (Roux, 2021, p.8–9). Roux's study demonstrates both the continued relevance of this vocabulary to contemporary ecopoetry and a model for how it might be extended beyond a single citation: Roux traces the "mesh" across an entire collection's network of human and nonhuman relations, rather than applying it to an isolated image. In contrast, the usage of "strange stranger" in this article is more restricted, following primarily one recurring image, rather than mapping a network of relations through the poem, as Roux does for Spahr's collection. This distinction is, in part, an issue of genre and scale: "Questions of Travel" is a far shorter and more tightly composed text than the collection Roux analyses. But it is also a limitation of the present analysis, to be acknowledged rather than elided: the streams' 'strange stranger' quality, as read here, names a local effect the traveller's momentary

encounter with a familiar-yet-alien current rather than a structuring principle operating across the whole of the poem's network of human and nonhuman relations. Read in its entirety, with the companion poems in the 1965 volume, whether "Questions of Travel" might sustain a more extended "mesh" reading along the lines Rather than answering the question of what Roux develops for Spahr, this article asks, perhaps fruitfully for future work on Bishop's Brazil poems read as a sequence.

Scale, Sequence, and the Poem's Structural Argument

The four previous sections have treated some elemental figure, each one by itself. It asks a different question: not what each element does in isolation, but what work the sequencing and juxtaposition of these four figures in the poem itself perform. This question is usefully framed by Jakob Olsson's study of "posthuman ecologies" in contemporary poetry in *Studia Neophilologica* (2021). Olsson examines how recent poetry enacts 'shifts in scale' and 'intermediations' between radically different orders of nonhuman entities, arguing that such shifts are bound up with a 'problematisation of anthropocentrism' that operates through the experience of scale-shifting itself, rather than through any single image (Olsson, 2021, p.143). Olsson's main texts are contemporary digital-age poems with an idiom that is quite unlike Bishop's; yet the structural insight that scale-shifting between registers of nonhuman agency can itself be a vehicle for posthumanist critique, regardless of what any one register represents can be carried over to "Questions of Travel."

Seen in this light the shifts between the four elemental figures within the poem might be considered a systematic shift across scales and temporalities: the waterfall's anticipated, nearly instantaneous perceptual event; the rain's durative, continuous state; the mountains' geological, nearly static deep time; and the streams' rapid, surface-level movement. None of these temporalities is privileged as the poem's 'true' register; the traveler moves among them without the poem providing a stable vantage from which all four could be held in view simultaneously. This is a kind of 'intermediation,' in Olsson's terms, not a synthesis that resolves the four registers into a single coherent picture but a structure that holds incommensurable temporalities in proximity, with the traveler as the figure who must move between them without the benefit of a perspective that would unify them.

This reformulation addresses a structural problem in earlier versions of this argument, where the relation between the four elements was primarily characterized as a "dialectic" that ended in a conflict between mountains and streams. The problem with that formulation was that it implied that the poem's argument goes somewhere that the mountains/streams pairing is a sort of thesis toward which the poem's structure progresses. The present formulation, based on Olsson's account of intermediation, makes a more modest claim: that the structure of the poem is one of unresolved scale-shifting, where the cumulative effect is not a synthesis but an accumulation of incommensurable encounters that the traveler and the reader must hold without final reconciliation. So the mountains and streams are the most extreme pair, geological stillness versus kinetic surface motion, but this juxtaposition is one instance of a general structural principle. Through this lens, what the structural sequencing of the poem exposes is a structural argument about the epistemological position of the traveler. Any change of scale, from the single, instantaneous experience of the waterfall to the durative condition of rain to the geological withdrawal of the mountains to the kinetic surface motion of the streams, precludes the possibility of a stable, unified observation post. The traveler cannot see all four time registers at one go; she is only able to travel through them, one after the other, never reaching the synoptic view that the conventions of travel writing, with their characteristic distancing and totalization of landscape, would require. So the poem's formal sequencing is also a formal critique of the traveller's epistemological assumptions and, by extension, of the genre conventions she brings from a North American tradition of travel writing to a Brazilian landscape that the poem stages as actively resistant to those conventions.

CONCLUSION

This essay has read "Questions of Travel" through Jane Bennett's concept of 'thing-power', paying attention to the way the poem's waterfalls, rain, mountains and streams are staged as entities with their own trajectories, tempos and in the case of the mountains in withdrawal from the traveller's interpretive frame. The article has sought to build upon rather than replace the form-conscious ecopoetic reading of Gordanpour and Rezaei (2021) by asking what becomes visible when the poem's elemental figures are read not simply as objects whose formal treatment registers an independent nature but as entities the poem's grammar and structure stage as exerting force themselves. The key methodological move has been to demonstrate how Bishop's formal restraint her proleptic conditionals, her kinetic syntax, and her refusal of totalising description operates not simply as illustration of new materialist claims but as a linguistic practice that performs, tests, and arbitrates them in significant ways.

Importantly, this article has also sought to deliver on a promise that much new materialist literary criticism makes,

but does not keep: to weave the postcolonial and decolonial dimensions of analysis into the readings themselves, rather than relegating them to a late-section acknowledgement. In each of the four elemental readings a co-present concern has been sustained whose perception is being reorganised, whose cartographic mastery is being compromised, and whose interpretive resources are being exceeded. The Brazilian landscape in this poem is not an ontological abstraction. It is a historically situated geography with its relations to the mode of arrival, observation and classification of the North American observer. Reading the rain's compromise of the traveller's map as merely one example of material agency, without considering the type of instrument the map is, in this place and time, would reproduce precisely the unmarked universalism that Singh and Benitez and Lundberg identify as the characteristic limitation of new materialist theory in its Euro-American genealogied form (Singh, 2022, p.85; Benitez and Lundberg, 2022, p.3–5).

What this reading yields is not a univocal overarching claim about Bishop's "proto-posthumanism", a frame this article has intentionally eschewed, both on account of the term's potential to produce an anachronistic claim about Bishop's own intellectual investments and because, as the discussion of Giragosian's actual argument makes clear, Bishop's documented intellectual investments in biopolitics and evolutionary thought followed a very different theoretical genealogy (Dewey, Darwin) than the one this article has employed (Bennett, Harman, Morton, Alaimo). This article proposes instead a more limited claim: that reading "Questions of Travel" through Bennett's vocabulary of thing-power brings into focus a set of temporal and modal distinctions among the poem's elemental figures anticipation, duration, withdrawal, and velocity that a reading focused on form as the register of nature's independence, while compatible with these distinctions, does not foreground in the same way; and that attending to the poem's proleptic and syntactic formal resources reveals

This article has also sought to model a mode of engagement with new materialist theory that takes seriously the critiques that theory has made. They are not objections external to the project of reading Bishop's poem through new materialist theory: Boysen's objection that new materialism's attributions of agency to matter may amount to an unacknowledged anthropomorphism and the objections of Singh and the contributors to Tropical Materialisms that the theoretical vocabulary this article deploys carries an unmarked Euro-American genealogy whose application to a Brazilian landscape requires more than passing acknowledgement. They are considerations, as this article has suggested, which the reading itself must sustain, from the first elemental encounter to the last.

Future scholarship might usefully extend this enquiry pursued here in a few directions: a fuller engagement with Kim Fortuny's chapter-length treatment of "Questions of Travel" and its account of the poem's politics of travel; an extension of the "mesh" reading of the streams along the lines Roux develops for Spahr's collection, considered across the full sequence of Bishop's Brazil poems, not a single text; and, most importantly, a sustained engagement with the postcolonial and decolonial critiques of new materialism that this article has only been able to partially integrate, asking what an account of "thing-power" in Bishop's Brazil poems might look like if it began from the "tropical materialisms" Benitez and Lundberg call for, rather than arriving at that question – as this article still partly does – only partway through. "Questions of Travel" does not answer the question of how a traveller perceives the forces of the landscape through which she moves, nor the question of what it means for a Euro-American observer to use a Euro-American theoretical vocabulary to describe a Brazilian landscape that has its own histories of being theorised, surveyed, and made available for foreign observation. The poem uses questions again and again and without resolution in four different registers of elemental force. In this article I try to read that unsettledness as significant in itself, as a feature of the poem's structure rather than a gap to be filled by theory, while being attentive both to the possibilities and limits of the theoretical vocabulary used to do so.

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