

Writing Coastlines: The Operation of Estuaries, Islands and Beaches
as Liminal Spaces in the Writings of Elizabeth Bishop

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This paper examines instances in the writings of Elizabeth Bishop wherein coastlines are evoked in order to refer to a psychological subjective state – conscious or unconscious – of being on the threshold between places. I term these coastlines ‘writing coastlines’. Within this term, ‘writing’ refers both to the act of writing and to that which is written. The act of writing translates aural, physical, mental and digital processes into marks, actions, utterances and speech-acts. The intelligibility of that which is written is intertwined with both the context of its production and of its consumption. And ‘coastlines’ refers to the shifting terrains where land and water meet, always neither land nor water and always both. Coastlines are edges, ledges, legible lines caught in the double bind of simultaneously writing and erasing. These in-between places are liminal spaces, fraught with comings and goings. Echoing this back and forth movement, this paper ebbs and flows between analytical and lyrical modes.

Who is writing coastlines? The writer is writing coastlines. The writer writes, ‘coastlines’. The coastlines are also writing coastlines. They cannot do otherwise. They are coastlines. Waves have actions. Sands shift. “Siltstone cliffs crumble into catch-as-catch-can coves” (Carpenter 2008).

Elizabeth Bishop is writing coastlines. The first lines of the “The Map” – the first poem in *North & South*, Bishop’s first published book – write a coastline:

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green (Bishop, *Poems*, 1984: 3).

Bishop writes this coastline with words, with language, with poetry. Within the lines she writes, a map-maker writes a cartographic coastline with colours “more delicate

than the historians” (3) and a printer (re)writes those coastlines with emotion that “too far exceeds its cause.” We readers are invited to (re)write this poetic cartographic coastline in our minds with our fingers:

We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom (3).

Our imagined touch rereads and rewrites, searching for meaning.

No sooner are the opening (coast)lines in “The Map” written than the next lines call them into question:

Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself:
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging at the sea from under? (3)

This questioning does not presuppose an “either or” answer. Rather, it presents a problem: coastlines are “either and both.” Writing coastlines are always also erasing coastlines, turning tides, re-verse-ing. The lines writing coastlines in “The Map” perform that which has already been written by the coastlines’ own act of writing.

These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods (3).

Yes, this is a metaphor, but the coastlines it alludes to are not metaphoric – they are active, authorial: headland embayment morphologies written by foreshore erosion; high tides curbed by even higher lines of hard stone ridge.

A cartographic coastline is both fixed and abstracted, as exact an approximation as possible of a line that is always in motion, a legible line perforated by language, letters, words, signs, symbols, names. “The names of seashore towns run

out to sea” (3), their textual materiality obscuring the very coastlines they aim to name.

In “The Moose,” the names of seashore towns are strung along the coastal road that leads westward away from Great Village, Nova Scotia.

One stop at Bass River.
Then the Economies
Lower, Middle, Upper;
Five Islands, Five Houses,
where a woman shakes a tablecloth
out after supper.

A pale flickering. Gone.
The Tantramar marshes
and the smell of salt hay (Bishop, *Poems*, 1984: 170).

Part of the magic conjured by the incitation of place names resides in the narrative resonance between the now of the speech-act and the many pasts of the places named. Take this place – Tantramar. In Joseph Des Barres’s *Atlantic Neptune*, a collection of sea charts published in 1776, the Tantramar River is labelled *Tintamar River*. A Spanish spelling makes no sense given the Mi’kmaq, Acadian, English history of this place. But the meaning Red Sea does. The Tantramar River flows into the Cumberland Basin, which flows into Chignecto Bay, which flows into the Bay of Fundy, which has the highest tides in the world. When the tide goes out, it goes way out and keeps on going. It leaves behind acres of salt marsh, salt hay thriving in hard, rich, sticky, red soil, and beyond that, red mud flats glistening mile after mile,

where, silted red,
sometimes the sun sets
facing a red sea,
and others, veins the flats'
lavender, rich mud
in burning rivulets; (170)

Although it is possible to entertain for a moment the notion that the name Tantramar was assigned to this red mud glazed with sky by a cartographer of Spanish origin, or one who had previously written the coastlines of Spanish dominions, the name Tintamar written in the *Atlantic Neptune* is most certainly a miss-spelling of the Acadian French word *tintamarre*, which in turn was both a toponoimic transformation of the Mi'kmaq name Tatamalg, meaning “Scrambled River,” and a reference to the noisy flocks of migratory birds which feed on the Tantramar marshes to this day. Today the marshes are the site of two bird sanctuaries, one of which carries the old Acadian name Tintamarre.

In “The Moose,” Bishop writes a coastline of extreme contrasts to evoke the liminal condition of migration, of being in transition, of being of and in-between places, on a long bus ride along a coastal road stretching between home and away:

home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home; (170)

A red sea. Mud flats. Lavender water. Bishop uses strikingly similar language to describe a nearby coastline in her short story, *In the Village*.

There are the tops of all the elm trees in the village and there, beyond them, the long green marshes, so fresh, so salt. Then the Minas Basin, with the tide halfway in or out, the wet red mud glazed with sky blue until it meets the creeping lavender-red water... (Bishop, *Prose*, 1984: 264).

The site of this sight is geographically the furthest point from the epicentre of the story. The evocation of estuarine overlaps, mixtures and contradictions at this moment serves both to enunciate an internal emotional confusion within the narrator, and to project the narration beyond the geographical confines of the village. “We are in the “Maritimes” but all that means is that we live by the sea” (264).

This liminal coastline writes a possible future, a point of departure, a line of flight. If all being “in the Maritimes” means is living by the sea then one can be in or from the Maritimes living by any sea. Indeed, Bishop wrote *In the Village* in Brazil, a place that reminded her of Nova Scotia but, importantly, most certainly was not.

One coastline implies another, implores a far shore. This entreaty intrigues me. What happens between call and answer? Jacques Derrida asks, “Is not the writing of the question, by its decision, by its resolution, the beginning of repose and response?” (Derrida 1978: 76). In “Crusoe in England,” the far shore implored shifts, from England, in exile, to exile, in England. There is no repose for the questions Bishop’s Crusoe poses. “Do I deserve this?” (Bishop, *Poems*, 1984: 163). “Why didn’t I know enough of something?” (164).

Plagued her whole life by indecision, Bishop’s – often parenthetically inserted – questions perform more like preponderances. Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues,

A question is a temporarily suspended statement, the bloodless or ghostly double of the proposition it calls as its answer, whereas a problem, the site of creative thought, of the creation of thought, is never prepositional (it is formulated as a concept) (Lecercle 2002: 38).

In her writings and in her life Bishop returned again and again to coastal sites to explore in minute detail – through a combination of watching, walking, reading and writing – the problem of being in between places. The island Bishop exiles her Crusoe

to is a topical one, a textual topography, a collection of *topos* – a juxtaposition of places and topics Bishop visited, read about and wrote about elsewhere. Not surprising then, that Bishop’s *Crusoe* has nightmares of other islands:

... infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frog’s eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I had to live
on each and everyone, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna,
their geography (164).

This nightmare comes partially true with his rescue to the island of England, which “doesn’t seem like one, but who decides?” A thought echoed by Susan Barton in J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe*: “They say Britain is an island too, a great island. But that is a mere geographer’s notion. The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Cruso’s island” (Coetzee 1986: 26). As Hernán Díaz blithely observes, “Even being encircled by water no longer seems a sufficient condition for isolation” (Díaz 2010: 79).

Bishop both craved and dreaded isolation. “The End of March” traces the tenuous line between these two conditions in the temporary yet regularly recurring (writing and erasing) space between high water and low tide, in the month between winter and spring. The beach is a line in the poem.

everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken (Bishop, *Poems*, 1984: 179).

The beach is lined with lines: “a lone flight of Canada geese”, “a track of big dog-prints”, “lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string” (179). The narrator and her companion write the coastline by walking it, first in one direction and then – rewriting

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