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Crossing over: Encountering Materialist Entanglements in Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Poems 'The Monument' and 'The Weed'.

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In a journal that poet Elizabeth Bishop kept between 1934 and 1937 we witness an approach which anticipates new materialist thinking where, as Stacy Alaimo insists, matter is the “vast stuff of the world and ourselves” (*Bodily Natures* 1). In its pages, Bishop reflects upon the methods and purpose for poetry writing in a way that resonates with new materialist concerns, arguing that “[i]t’s a question of using the poet’s proper materials, with which he’s equipped by nature” (Costello 3). Bishop’s belief that poetry “proceeds from the material” estranges it from the Romantic method that she considers a “great perversity” (Costello 3-4) in its insistence upon a lofty, transcendental I/eye that presumes mastery over non-human ontologies.

Cassandra Laity’s essay “Eco-Geologies of Queer Desire” (2016) observes an inherent materialism at work in Bishop’s poetry suggesting that an inter-dependence of human life and the natural world exhibited in her work challenges the “neglectful patriarchal Anthropos currently scarring our planet” (Laity 429). More specifically Laity argues that Bishop’s poems “Crusoe in England” and “Vague Poem” enmesh queer intimacy in geological history suggesting that these works evoke the queer body whilst asserting the human species’ interconnection with nature. Laity draws parallels between Charles Darwin’s geological travel narratives and Bishop’s poems, placing them in context with the ecological turn in feminist theory. David Farrier’s *Anthropocene*

Poetics (2019) shares Laity's interest in the geological themes of Bishop's poetry writing, arguing that she exhibits a preoccupation with deep time that in turn has the capacity to help us think through our current ecological crisis. He explores how Bishop has much to offer "to a study of Anthropocene poetics" (Farrier 23) in the manner that her geologically concerned poetry "shifts the emphasis from a linear, teleological temporality to one that is more pliable and open" (Farrier 23). Beginning with a reading of Bishop's "Sandpiper" he observes in particular her capacity to unsettle humanist scale and perspective in the manner that the bird's gaze finds "the planetary in the particular" (Farrier 24). For Farrier, "thinking across radically divergent scales, as the primary work of the geologic as well as the geographical imagination, is part of a necessary response to uncertainty" (Farrier 24) – an uncertainty that speaks to our attempts to navigate the challenging terrain of an environmental crisis.

The geological intersections highlighted by Laity's and Farrier's analyses provide an apt introduction to the entangled matter implicating human and non-human ontologies that I examine in Bishop's work in this article. Whilst I share their assertions that Bishop's poetry is underpinned by a perspective that destabilizes presumptions about human mastery, I focus more upon the way in which her poetry achieves this via motifs of entangled matter, both organic and inorganic. I argue that Bishop's poetry hones in upon the world's molecular and constituent parts in a way that implicates human and non-human interconnections, unsettling anthropocentric perspectives by highlighting the common materiality of all, where, as physicist Karen Barad explains, "we too are phenomena" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 206). Bishop's belief that the poet should "express something not of them" (Costello 3-4) is manifest in the manner that her poetry of description etches a world from its raw materials, eschewing Humanism's dictates by pointing instead to matter as a horizontalizing force. In other words, a dynamism that overrides and thus dismantles

the hierarchies imposed by anthropocentrism, pointing instead to matter that is intrinsic to the composition of all ontologies, whether human, animal or object. In this way, I will argue that Bishop's surrealist poems "The Monument" and "The Weed" are prescient evocations of the interconnecting and intersecting matter that resonates with new materialist frameworks, theorized by Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad. In these poems I will demonstrate how Bishop shows how "Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 137).

A New Materialist Lens.

A key tenet of new materialism is that "matter" is intrinsically multiple, self-organizing, dynamic, and inventive, criss-crossing between nature and culture, the animated and automated, bodies and environments. In Barad's words, matter is "a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations, rather than [...] a property of things" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 224). Materiality is, therefore, always already open to, or rather entangled with others – whether human or non-human. Barad warns against the continual perpetuation of the nature/culture binary, urging a more material approach to the world which instead acknowledges these binaries as co-existent, mutually implicated phenomena. Instead of reinforcing the boundary lines between matter, characterized as inert, and culture, defined as the Cartesian space of the thinking human subject or "cogito", Barad argues for a post-human account that questions the given-ness of human and non-human categories altogether; she examines instead how "the world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which "mattering" itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 135). In other words, Barad is underlining how all matter is implicated in a web of interconnections and entanglements, where human and non-human ontologies are never discrete individual entities but caught up in an ongoing, metamorphosing

dynamic with other matter. Referring to what she coins as “intra-activity” Barad argues that not only are humans’ phenomenal matter that inhabit the natural world as much as a cultural one, but that we are also implicated in the universe’s ongoing “becoming” in our continually evolving dynamic with multiple phenomena around us:

Phenomena are entanglements of spacetime mattering, not in the colloquial sense of the connection with intertwining of individual entities, but rather in the technical sense of ‘quantum entanglements’ which are the (ontological) inseparability of agential ‘intra-acting’ components. The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’ which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) marks an important shift, reopening and refiguring foundational notions of classical ontology such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, discourse, responsibility and accountability (“Nature’s Queer Performativity” 125).

Barad dispels with Humanism’s “classical ontologies” in her intra-active and post-humanist visions, where the foregrounding of all phenomena’s materiality - including the human’s - enables identities beyond the nature/culture binary. The concept of intra-action is central to Barad’s new materialism and refers to the movement generated in an encounter of two or more bodies in a process of becoming different. This is a post-human process in that it recognizes how all ontologies are constantly metamorphosing into evolving shapes in their shifting dynamic with other phenomena, exploding the boundaries of fixed individualism presumed by Humanism. In the context of her work, the term “entanglement” refers “not simply to be(ing) intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* ix). Entanglement, therefore, indicates how entities are always relational and how such relationality is fundamental to their constitution; an affirmative post-humanist mode that I argue is exhibited in Bishop’s surrealist poetry.

In *Diffractive Reading New Materialism, Theory, Critique* (2021) Kai Merten explores how Barad’s study of the diffractive process more specifically is one which can be applied to the process of reading a text or matter where the way in which waves spread, overlap and bend together

speaks to new materialism's foundational themes of entanglement. Merten defines diffractive reading as "not a particular method of literary analysis but rather a wholly new understanding of reading in general (text, matter, etc.), which sees reading/reader as participating in, not representing, what they read" (*Diffractive Reading* 16). In this way reading itself creates new matter which is, as Merten explains, "always readable and hence expandable" (*Diffractive Reading* 13). This diffractive model demonstrates how "there are no preexisting separately determinate entities called "humans"" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 338) as Barad posits and so, as Merten further explains the Baradian approach of "reading text and reading matter diffractively, should be united" (*Diffractive Reading* 7). He sums up this method in a manner that I suggest resonates with the entangled approach exhibited by the speaker of Bishop's poem "The Monument":

Measuring-cum-reading the phenomenon co-creates it by entanglements. This is diffractive reading in the wider sense of working out the entangled/wave-like nature of something, while at the same time partaking in the very creation of this entanglement (*Diffractive Reading* 6).

Alaimo similarly departs from nature/culture dualisms in a manner that resonates with Barad's work and the diffractive models that Merten harnesses for literary analysis. She argues that the key to reconfiguring a Cartesian appraisal of matter and nature is to view them as agentic forces that act, where "those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world" (*Material Feminisms* 4). Drawing upon Barad, she construes the human ontology as a dynamic one in a manner which implicates its resonance with nature and culture, rather than simply one or the other. To this end, Alaimo proposes a "trans-corporeality"; a map of transit which traces the "routes from human corporeality to the flesh of the other-than-human and back again" (*Material Feminisms* 253), pointing to the interconnectivity of all life. Alaimo's modes of entanglement emphasize the porosity of all bodily boundaries in a manner which threatens the presumed inherent wholeness of

the human, thus fracturing the hierarchical frameworks of Cartesian, humanist models which repeatedly prize individualism:

Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human-world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment.” [...] By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human (*Material Feminisms* 238).

Such “interchanges and interconnections” unsettle androcentrically mapped Cartesian boundary lines and harness a kinship with nature and lively matter; not simply as a passive refuge from Humanism, but as a dynamic and kaleidoscopic space providing a portal out of its reductive confines. The human body’s radical open-ness to its environment where it can be revised and reconfigured by other bodies in the manner that Alaimo’s trans-corporeality and Barad’s diffractive “intra-actions” highlight, resonates with Bishop’s materialist visions as this article posits.

My analysis of matter as a force with an agency of its own and how it is manifest in the surrealist work of Bishop, extends to a study of culture, objects and things, as well as human and non-human nature in her poetry. Most specifically I suggest that Jane Bennett’s conception of “Thing-Power”, described in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), resonates with Bishop’s poem “The Monument” (1946), where the supposed *inanimate*, exhibits itself as *animate* in a manner that re-evaluates human centrality and supremacy. Bennett’s study focuses upon assemblages of seemingly random vibrant materials that are catalyzed by their shifting interactions (or intra-actions) with other entities and agencies. She explains the vivacity of shifting material components whilst referring to a walk by the river, suggesting that co-mingling between diverse entities infuses each item with new life in a way that the anthropocentric eye is habitually blind to:

When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me [...] In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them (Bennett 5).

Such a “contingent tableau” resonates with the entangled crossovers which recurrently occur in Bishop’s poetry both in connection to the “Thing Power” exhibited in “The Monument” but also in her most surrealist of works, “The Weed” (1946). In the intense entanglements of human and non-human life exhibited in this poem, I will argue that Bishop anticipates the “trans-corporeality” that exists between ontologies in their common materiality. In “The Weed”, Bishop exposes how Humanism’s belief in borderlines delineating human and non-human life is a fiction. The slippages she forges between the human speaker and organic matter, which create intra-active contact zones, rupture such borderlines for a more fluid and balanced milieu. In these poetic visions I will explore how Bishop’s work resonates with Alaimo’s assertion that “human corporeality in all its fleshiness, is inseparable from “nature” or “environment”” (*Material Feminisms* 238).

New Materialist Encounters in “The Monument”.

Published in Bishop’s first collection *North & South* in 1946, “The Monument” exhibits new materialist sensibilities in the glimpses of the frottage technique initiated by surrealist Max Ernst. This praxis – one which involved using the floorboards to make a series of rubbings with a pencil – is visible in the poem in the manner that the speaker describes the grainy woodwork of the monument inflecting the sky in “long-fibred clouds” (“The Monument”, line 30). This resonates with the way in which Ernst similarly details the frottage process impacting upon his own lens of perception. Whilst Bishop did not identify as a surrealist writer directly and repeatedly refused to be categorized altogether, critics including Richard Mullen, and Susan Rosenbaum more recently,

have pointed to a surrealist sensibility at work in her early poetry. Rosenbaum observes that “Bishop joined other women artists interested in Surrealism – such as Eileen Agar, Lee Miller, and Leonor Fini –in looking beyond Freud to natural history, indicating a common desire for an expanded view of nature” (Rosenbaum, 71-72). She adds that “Bishop has much in common with other female and queer poets and artists who were inspired by Surrealism” and that in particular she “addresses Surrealism in the context of natural history” (Rosenbaum 71). Bishop spent time in Paris after Vassar College in 1934 and acknowledged that she had studied the work of surrealist painters in particular, sharing their interest in explorations of the unconscious. A number of her poems from this period exhibit a fascination with dream-worlds as the poems “Sleeping Standing Up” and “Sleeping on the Ceiling” from *North & South* demonstrate. Bishop owned a copy of Ernst’s book *Histoire Naturelle* (1926) which contained a volume of his prints exhibiting the frottage method, and in a letter to Anne Stevenson, she acknowledges the impact that the surrealist technique had upon “The Monument.” Her Key West notebooks, contained at Vassar Library, detail a sketch of a monument with notes above it saying “Pound out the ideas of sight –”, and, in a clear reference to Ernst’s method, “Take frottage of this sea” (Bergmann 1). This technique appealed to Bishop in its capacity to render tightly detailed and textured surfaces, thereby communicating her fascination with the dynamic between what can be seen and touched, as well as her belief that poetry “proceeds from the material” (Costello 3). The monument’s ontological ambiguity in the poem is suggestive of the poet’s own metamorphosing perceptions and speaks to a diffractive reading; Bishop invokes what Merten would call “the entangled co-creation of matter by observing or reading it” (*Diffractive Reading* 6) as her poetic praxis does not seek to represent or construct a copy of the monument but rather partakes in its evolving configuration.

Bishop labels the monument as an “artefact” which is potentially estranged from the earth, but also one whose decorations “give it away as having life, and wishing” (“The Monument”, line 67) thereby materially reconnecting it as an agentic phenomenon. Bishop conveys a sense of its animation and vivacity in its dynamic interaction with the material environment in which it is embedded, where “the light goes around it/like a prowling animal” (“The Monument”, lines 70-71). Bishop’s invocation of a more tactile approach speaks to a kinesthetic, inter-connected strategy in her work, intimating an earthy and grounded perception of the world and its contents; a materialist landscape that she does not wish to subsume into an anthropocentrically appropriated sphere. In this materialist reading, I posit that “The Monument” conveys the “curious ability of the inanimate to animate” in a manner that points to the materiality of all matter, where human encounters with supposedly inert phenomena – including a monument – have the potential to “chasten [...] fantasies of human mastery” (Bennett 122) in their ontological cross-over. Bishop’s granular description, deftly accruing the details of the monument and its setting, etches a poetic image in such a way that for the readers of the poem, she simulates the process of its construction as she writes. In the opening stanza, she draws out lines of material immanence between building her poem and the monument itself, forging a cultural and material cross-over which speaks to diffractive and intra-active modes of writing and reading that dissolves humanist dialectics of power:

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood
built somewhat like a box. No. Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.
Each is turned half-way round so that
its corners point toward the sides
of the one below and angles alternate.
Then on the topmost cube is set
a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood (“The Monument”, lines 1-9).

The speaker's opening line asking if a companion can "see the monument?" is a provocative one, functioning more as an invitation to begin to see the structure differently and to interact with it. In this way Bishop immediately engages with a materialist mode, perceiving the monument beyond the anthropocentrically anchored configuration that claims a monopoly on its meaning. In this opening stanza, the poet is fostering a new receptivity to the monument, adopting a diffractive lens that escapes humanist appropriation by focusing instead upon its material agency, anticipating Bennett's "Thing-Power". Not only does Bishop identify the agentive potential of the monument's components, she also alludes to their entangled co-existence where they are connected both in their tactile proximity to each other, but also in the manner that she employs a simile to draw parallels between them. The structure comprising of an assemblage appearing "like several boxes" speaks to materialism's multiplicity over humanist individualism as well as Bishop's provisional appraisal of what she sees, indicative of her own materialist lens that recognizes the potential for the monument's metamorphosis. Such a post-anthropocentric approach, which eschews Humanism's repeated claims to mastery, conflates with Friedrich Nietzsche's insistence that humans must begin to see the world anew to enable a more receptive wakefulness to the environments in which we exist:

Learning to see – accustoming the idea to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides... Learning to see, as I understand it, is almost what, unphilosophically speaking, is called a strong will: the essential feature is precisely not to 'will' – to be able to suspend decision. (Nietzsche 6)

Cultivating a new receptivity in the manner that Nietzsche extols has the capacity to over-come the sense of self that characterizes attempts at human mastery, giving way instead to a mode that experiences matter as generative and agentive. This is precisely the manner in which the speaker of "The Monument" expresses their experience of the structure, eschewing epistemological

reflections upon its cultural symbolism for a materially driven understanding that implicates human and non-human ontologies collectively. Bishop shares Nietzsche's approach in the way that she grasps "each individual case from all sides", swerving to correct initial presumptions about the monument's singularity to express instead its assembled plurality. Such epanorthosis – a process of rephrasing something said in order to emphasize or correct oneself – underlines how the monument itself is similarly subject to change and thereby not a fixed, inert entity. Its material and intra-active potential underlining a dynamic more-than-human ontology, is manifest in Bishop's description of its "weathered" appearance, demonstrating a shape-shifting phenomenon at the mercy of temporal and meteorological elements. As a result, Bishop situates the structure not as a separate unit, but one enmeshed in a wider, inter-connected environment, further speaking to an entangled mode and a diffractive reading as this first stanza extract intimates:

A sea of narrow, horizontal boards
lies out behind our lonely monument,
its long grains alternating right and left
like floorboards – spotted, swarming-still,
and motionless. A sky runs parallel,
and it is palings, coarser than the sea's:
splintery sunlight and long-fibred clouds. ("The Monument", lines 24-30)

Whilst the reference to "our lonely monument" has the potential to anthropomorphize it, such a description could also suggest that the poet is in fact finding a kinship with this spectacle; not as a vision that is controlled by the human eye but as one that exhibits further signs of our connection with it. Here we witness, as Barad highlights, how humans "emerge as having a role to play in the constitution of specific phenomena" doing so as "part of the larger material configuration [...] of the world" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 338). So proximate and alive is the material agency of the wooden monument that the second speaker of the poem imagines its grainy effect spilling and crossing over into the sky and sea space, where clouds are "full of glistening splinters" and the sea

becomes a series of “horizontal boards.” Bishop’s “a sky,” rather than one preceded by the definite article, demonstrates how it is both an evolving shifting phenomenon itself, as well as a space that eludes the concrete permanence that the anthropocentric I/eye attaches to it. Rather, in its denotation as *a* instead of *the*, Bishop conveys how “sky” is a metamorphosing and plural phenomenon which slides between many variables and versions. The paradoxical “swarming-still” of the sea speaks to the illusory appearance of the monument’s own stasis which Bishop shatters via her lively evocation of the structure; in this way she anticipates Bennett’s postulation that there is no point of pure stillness in a materialist landscape. Bishop’s recurrent sibilance in the “splintery sunlight” and “glistening splinters” conveys a textured effect to her language, thereby creating a material resonance between poetic form and subject matter, pointing to a further spillage across phenomena. The reference to splintering similarly invokes a vision of how ontologies cross over and become caught up in one another, entangling and embedding within their material layers in a diffractive process. The tactility of this space, suggested by a “coarser sky” and “long-fibred clouds,” speaks to Bishop’s synesthetic praxis which resonantly enmeshes the sensorial experience in a materialist manner.

The second speaker of the poem, who remains anonymous, observes that the “dryness in which the monument is cracking” even inflects the quality of the air, now described as one that is “eroded” as it is breathed in. The speaker is identified in the second person in the opening line of the poem and is made present through their detailed observations and interrogative enquiries about the monument’s existence which are directed at the lyric “I”. In this knotted assemblage, Bishop evokes a poetry inflected by Ernst’s frottage technique. Bishop’s scene constructed from “floorboards” and “long-fibred clouds” clearly speaks to the materiality of this practice. In the following quotation, Ernst describes how in the process of making these pencil rubbings, he

becomes aware of transformations taking place within the media he is studying, as well as how this aesthetic approach triggers a consciousness of other matter that surrounds him:

[...]the fact that the drawings thus obtained steadily lose, thanks to a series of suggestions and transmutations occurring to one spontaneously[...]the character of the material being studied – wood - and assume the aspect of unbelievably clear images of nature [...] I was led to examine the same way, but indiscriminately, many kinds of material happening to be in my field of vision – leaves and their veins, the unravelling edges of sackcloth, the palette-knife markings on a “modern” picture (Mullen 66).

In this account, Ernst evokes an intricate web of material happenings in a manner which Bishop recapitulates in her poem, where the speaker’s awareness of the “many kinds of material happening” in the world becomes heightened and intense in mutually implicated cross-overs. Ernst also intimates a “ThingPower” where a list of seemingly inert objects including the “sackcloth” and a “modern’ picture,” radiate an agentic energy which catalyzes his own artistic powers. In the same way that Ernst’s own frottage process prompts a post-anthropocentric lens of perception within him, so too does Bishop’s poetic eye forge an increasingly shifting picture in her poem. I suggest that she details overlapping and material entities in such a way that they spill like waves, beyond the borders of the monument itself in diffractive manoeuvres. This preoccupation with the materiality of the monument’s existence indicates how the speaker does not quest for definitive proof of its historical purpose or significance. Rather, she appears to deliberately obfuscate the specificities of its past as though charting its genealogy in humanist terms is secondary to its ongoing, vibrant materiality. This dynamic, forward movement is manifest in the final stanza where Bishop conjures a vision of the monument’s capacity to forge new lines of immanence towards other entities, both human and non-human. Part of the monument’s capacity to affect is the manner in which Bishop conveys it as a malleable and transversal entity with the ability to seep into the human imagination, intimating a diffractive approach to material phenomena; a concept

which Bennett discusses in response to the lively matter she encounters on her river walk that impacts upon her as much as the objects she observes. In this final stanza, Bishop etches a vision of not only what the monument may be, but also what it could further become, thus unravelling humanist presumptions of it as an inert and stationary ontology anchored in the past:

The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.
But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen).
It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely. ("The Monument", lines 74-81)

The "artist-prince", mentioned vaguely in the second stanza, is similarly only given a passing reference here, his whereabouts unknown and not of major consequence. Of greater interest is the monument's future capacity to shapeshift, where Bishop's reference to a "beginning" is significant. Such a "beginning" dislodges the monument from a finite history skewed by anthropocentrism, instead speaking to what physicist Karen Barad describes as matter that is "produced and productive, generated and generative" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 137). In this way the structure is evoked as an on-going force, projected as a possible "sculpture, or poem, or monument," malleable both in its physical materiality as an entity "all of wood", but also in its capacity to stir an observer's imagination, becoming other art forms. Whilst these other art forms could be construed as a reference to an anthropocentric approach I posit that Bishop is speaking to the malleability of the arts and culture; shifting forms that underline their intrinsic materiality which demonstrates a kinship with non-human matter and nature. In the metamorphic visions that Bishop imagines, we see how the monument exhibits intra-active dynamisms in a way that affirmatively displaces anthropocentrically conceived notions of a fixed, classical ontology. These

mobile entanglements that implicate the speaker as much as the monument itself, speak to Rosi Braidotti's post-humanist argument that "we live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadism" (*Metamorphoses 2*). She adds that "these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation" (*Metamorphoses 2*). The evolving and transversal interconnections between the monument and its environment, as well as its relationship to the human observers are a precise embodiment of this becoming mode showing how, as Barad explains, all matter constitutes "not a thing but a doing" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 139).

Bishop's final imperative regarding the monument, "Watch it closely," is key to understanding the mobility of all matter and our relationship with it as matter ourselves. It marks the processual and mobile nature of the speaker's thoughts, who at the beginning of the poem talked of attempting to "see" it instead. The move to *watch* rather than simply *see* demonstrates a growing materialist approach to the monument, where by actively observing the structure and its phenomenal cross-overs she emerges from the linear boundaries that result in androcentric myopia. This is precisely the approach that characterizes Bishop's poem where the monument's material elasticity – both as a cultural and as a physical entity – demonstrates a "Thing-Power" that horizontalizes human and non-human relations. Most significantly this understanding exhibited in the poem intimates how humans are themselves embedded within the materiality of their environment, rather than independently situated upon an imagined hierarchical throne. Barad discusses this post-human mode of affirmative entwinement between all matter in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007):

Human practices are not the only practices that come to matter, but neither is the world...independent of human practices...In other words humans (like other parts of nature) are of the world not in the world, and surely not outside of it looking in. Humans are intra-actively (re)constituted as part of the world's becoming (206).

Recognizing how the human species is of the world and therefore matter amongst matter rather than outside of it is a position that the speaker of Bishop's "The Monument" adopts, articulating her belief that poetry begins with "the material". Rather, as we witness in the poem, the human viewer is a virtual component in a shifting assemblage of material entities, bringing these forces into a tangled proximity in a swirl of metamorphosing relations. Such *becoming* demonstrate how bodies – human and more-than-human – are agentic ontologies in the manner that new materialist Moira Gatens posits. Exhibiting a post-human thinking that resonates with Barad's, she explains how the "body does not have a truth or true nature since it is a process, and its meaning and capacities vary according to its context" (Gatens 57). It is an understanding which is pertinent to "The Monument" but also introduces Bishop's poem "The Weed"; a work which moves from concepts of "Thing-Power" towards human-nature entanglements thereby anticipating Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeal modes. In the following analysis I will investigate the manner in which "The Weed" anticipates Alaimo's postulation that human's "material fleshiness" makes it inseparable from the environment, eschewing androcentric presuppositions that the body is a sealed unit, divorced from the world around it.

Trans-corporeal Entanglements in "The Weed".

Also located in the early poetry collection *North & South* (1946), Bishop's oneiric and most conspicuously surrealist poem "The Weed" sees the speaker dreaming that "dead and meditating" a weed bursts forth from her heart. Bishop immediately establishes the porosity of boundaries between human and nature as their ontologies fuse together in a vibrant and ontological cross-over. In this poem we see how, as Gatens explains, human identity "can never be viewed as a final or finished product", since it is "in constant interchange with its environment" (Gatens 110).

Beginning in a mode of stillness, where the heart is “cold”, and all is “frozen” and “unchanged”, the mood shifts as the weed explosively stirs both the psychological and natural landscape to life:

A slight young weed
had pushed up through the heart and its
green head was nodding on the breast.
(All this was in the dark,)
It grew an inch like a blade of grass;
next, one leaf shot out of its side
a twisting, waving flag, and then
two leaves moved like a semaphore. (“The Weed”, lines 15-22)

The weed of the poem is immediately characterized by the vital dynamism of its urgent movements, thereby contrasting with the initial stillness and singularity of the human speaker at the beginning. The poetic landscape shifts from one of inertia to one that is fractiously mobile; here the weed is “twisting” and “waving,” tenaciously surging on. Like the monument, it is a processual entity identified by its component parts of “stem,” “leaf” and “nervous roots” in a description which anthropomorphizes it thus bringing human and non-human into close proximity. The agentive powers of the poem’s weed are less surprising than the monument’s given that it is organic matter, but this article argues that nonetheless, both poems share a kinship in their prescient vision of the agency of all matter. Bishop’s comparison of the leaves to a “semaphore” intimates the weed’s communicative powers, establishing this organic life as an inter-connecting force which thereby implicates other matter. Bishop’s reference to the weed “nodding on the breast” simulates an image of maternal sustenance and therefore a slippage between the boundaries of a human and non-human ontology, etching a palpable trans-corporeal dynamic. The weed embedding itself within the human body suggests that it erupts from an anthropocentrically allotted background position, instead thrusting itself into the realms of human consciousness and speaking to all matter’s iterative entanglement. Such dynamic reconfigurations depict the criss-crossing slippages

which occur between human and environment, where the weed's and the human speaker's shifting materialist ontologies spill over to forge new becoming in the manner discussed regarding the monument. In the same way as the structure is imagined in the new guise of a poem or painting, so too does the vision of the weed and the human speaker begin to metamorphose and evolve in fertile new directions:

The rooted heart began to change
(not beat) and then it split apart
and from it broke a flood of water.
Two rivers glanced off from the sides,
one to the right, one to the left,
two rushing, half-clear streams,
(the ribs made of them two cascades)
which assuredly, smooth as glass,
went off through the fine black grains of earth. ('The Weed', lines 28-36)

Here, I suggest that the weed exhibits a post-humanist performativity where its many intra-actions and crossovers with its environment convey how it is an organic life that does not operate in a sealed vacuum any more than a human does. Whilst the speaker is a nurturing force for the weed as I have explained, so too does the weed foster growth in a reciprocal dynamic, eschewing humanist frameworks of Cartesian individualism for a vision of nature's agentic plurality and fertility. Emphasizing the significance of the "fine black grains of earth" recalling Bishop's imperative that the poet "proceeds from the material", the poem signposts the collective materiality of all matter – including the microscopic - as well as botanic life, all too often myopically consigned to non-human otherness. Rather than dismissing these grains of earth and the weed to the realm of a passive, subordinated nature to be choreographed at the hands of man, Bishop's poetics instead forges them as powerful and catalyzing forces. Such agentic movement is manifest in the manner that Bishop describes "a flood of water" and streams gathering pace to become "cascades." This watery world is conjured as a vital and borderless space, where the weed's

agentive materiality identifies it as a metamorphosing phenomenon that criss-crosses in a web of trans-corporeal visions. The oscillating and unpredictable shifts in the weed's movements speaks to an instability that is similarly exhibited by the human speaker, pointing to the world that operates beyond the illusion of man's mastery over nature. The speaker is both dreaming, but also meditating; she is in a "grave" or a "bed" ("The Weed", line 2). The incidental rhymes eschew any clear patterning and so emphasize the sense of an unpredictable material agency of both the human speaker and more-than-human world which are aligned in their erratic materialism. It is a praxis which resonates with what Bennett identifies as a "primordial swerve," recognizing that the "world is not determined" and "that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things" (Bennett 18).

The synchronous and symbiotic relationship which exists between the human speaker and the weed becomes heightened and intense in the final section of the poem where an increasingly trans-corporeal dynamism enables the speaker to begin to see differently in the manner of the human observer in "The Monument":

A few drops fell upon my face
and in my eyes, I could see
(or, in that black place, I thought I saw)
that each drop contained a light,
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed-deflected stream was made
itself of racing images. ("The Weed", lines 40-47)

The water from the weed's leaves, now "fringed with heavy drops" ("The Weed", line 39), continues to evoke the sense of botanic life's fertility and its capacity to provide sustenance for the human speaker; not just in a corporeal manner but also in the way that Bishop arranges her lines emphasizing that these drops allow her to see. Here Bishop conveys a shift of perspective as though the speaker has experienced a post-human awakening as a result of her entanglement with the weed. Themes of birth, iterated earlier in Bishop's reference to a flood of water, return here with

drops upon the speaker's face, indicative of a quasi, post-human baptism. In seeing anew, Bishop further estranges the speaker from the epistemic habits of the glaring anthropocentric world, instead concentrating upon themes of diminution as if to reconnect with the earthly essence of "a small, illuminated scene." In this granular, materialist vision she depicts the stream as a series of "racing images" thereby comprised of a collage of miniatures in the same way as she portrays the sea in "The Monument" as consisting of "horizontal boards". These visions are not of homogenized surfaces but speak to the earthy raw matter that underpins human and more-than-human existence, as lines 48 to 51 of the poem suggest:

(As if a river should carry all
the scenes that it had once reflected
shut in its waters, and not floating
on momentary surfaces.) ("The Weed", lines 48-51)

The entanglement of human and non-human spaces are emphasized here, where brackets are indicative of the speaker's inner thoughts beneath exterior observations in the same way as the river itself contains scenes below what is captured beyond its "momentary surfaces." Brackets also highlight the spontaneous agency of the speaker's reflections, resonating with the agentic intensity of the river's own forward propulsions which operate outside of androcentric mastery. Bishop's poem here suggests that the speaker processes her thoughts synchronously with the river's own everyday happenings, entwined in a current of scenes which overlap and co-mingle together as lively matter. Bishop intimates in this poem that a compendium of scenes can be traced through the river's history, forging it as a collective assemblage of vibrant matter that muddles epistemologically carved categories of time and space. As a result Bishop conjures the river as a living entity akin to human matter, one that implicates the speaker within it as a similarly vibrant ontology, eschewing Cartesian notions of nature's passivity to evoke instead a trans-corporeal

realm. As this analysis argues, the human speaker in “The Weed” attests to the reciprocal and intra-acting dynamic between human and non-human worlds in a way that presciently speaks to materialist thinking. Bishop suggests that there is the sense that the speaker is “recomposed” by the weed whilst also enabling its own growth; she serves as fertile and dynamic ground on which the weed can flourish, where even in death, human corporeality is a metamorphosing and affective entity as this final stanza indicates:

The weed stood in the severed heart.
“What are you doing there?” I asked.
It lifted its head all dripping wet
(with my own thoughts?)
And answered then: “I grow,” it said,
“but to divide your heart again.” (“The Weed”, lines 52-57)

Here, Bishop evokes a disaggregated body entangled in a knotty, trans-corporeal assemblage, where the collective ontologies of weed and speaker are intimated in the vision of the weed dripping wet with her “own thoughts?” In this line there is the sense that these two entities have become interchangeable ontologies, or “compost” in the manner that Donna Haraway discusses. Haraway’s insistence that all material entities “become-with” each other in what she coins as “hot-compost piles” resonates with the vision of the entangled speaker and weed in Bishop’s poem. In this way I suggest that Bishop anticipates Haraway’s belief in a “kind of material semiotics” where all beings are “always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and worldly” (Haraway 4). The weed’s exclamation that it grows “to divide your heart again” demonstrates how these ontologies are constantly enfolded in ever becoming reconfigurations affirmatively distanced from Cartesian thinkers’ propensity for human individualism. The weed here is an agentic and fertile interconnected force in Bishop’s poem where we witness how “Matter’s dynamism is inexhaustible, exuberant and prolific” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 170).

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the materially-grounded contact zones that Bishop evokes in “The Monument” and “The Weed” intimate the entanglements between human and non-human ontologies in a manner that anticipates contemporary new materialist thinking. The vibrant and agentic dynamic between humans and nature, as well as humans and objects, points to the collective materiality that characterizes all matter in a manner which destabilizes anthropocentric positions. I have suggested that whilst not necessarily categorized as a surrealist herself, Bishop does however share certain surrealist sensibilities with women artist contemporaries who similarly evoked empowering visions of females interconnecting with the natural world in a manner that anticipates a post-human and feminist politics. In this way she corresponds with surrealist scholar Whitney Chadwick’s observation that Surrealism was committed to the “complete transformation of human values” (Chadwick 13), where women surrealists in particular looked to natural history in a manner that gave voice to a feminist and prescient ecological perspective. In both “The Monument” and “The Weed” we witness how “humans are part of the configuration or ongoing configuration of the world” where “we too are phenomena” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 206). Bishop’s belief in proceeding from the world’s raw materials when writing poetry, which she conveys in her early diaries, points to her connected approach revealing her as a writer whose work resonates with the new materialist frameworks of Alaimo, Barad and Bennet. In the poems investigated here I have considered how she hints at what Bennett defines as “this sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side” (Bennett 18), both in relation to “Thing” ontologies but also to the natural world. This sense of a “strange” interconnection is harnessed in the surrealist moments of Bishop’s writing where a static structure becomes unexpectedly mobile in “The Monument” and botanic life fuses itself with the human body in “The Weed,” conjuring a

post-anthropocentric approach that destabilizes humanist hierarchies. Bishop's speakers and the subject matter she discusses are radically open to metamorphosis and diffractive processes, more often exhibiting an in-between positioning in their constant state of flux rather than settling upon a fixed physical and cultural space. Most significantly, I have argued that Bishop's poetry is founded in molecular matter that implicates and entangles us all, where, as the speaker of her "Sandpiper" poem wisely asserts, "no detail is too small." In this way, she eschews Humanism's preoccupation with surface representations for visions which highlight the intricate webs of matter that connect and entangle all phenomena, whether human or non-human, organic or inorganic.

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