Crying War: Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”

The psychopathology which the poet makes her own is not a sinister little accident of personal destiny, or an individual, unfortunate accident. It is not the milkman’s truck which has run over him and left him disabled. It is the horsemen of the Hundred Blacks carrying out their pogroms against their ancestors in the ghettos of Vilna…. The blows received to the head did not happen during a street brawl, but when the police charged the demonstrators. If she cries out like a deaf genius, it is because the bombs of Guernica and Hanoi have deafened [her].

Maurice Blanchot (qtd. in Deleuze, “Ethics” 82)

Elizabeth Bishop's “In the Waiting Room,” from her 1971 collection, Geography III, registers the violent and traumatic history of twentieth-century warfare, which reverberates beneath the tremulous surface of modern subjectivity. The profound nature of Bishop's text emanates from its effectiveness at transparently rendering the paradigmatic late-modern sense of alienation, a powerful feeling of abjection and uncanniness in psychoanalytic terms. While recent criticism has focused on the psychological and textual uncertainties active in Bishop's writing, not enough attention has been given to the style with which she registers the impact of modern warfare on poetry and its relationship to social reality. According to Gertrude Stein, the horrors of World War I and World War II forever altered the very idea of what poetry could do and how it could exhibit the world. Stein argues, “there is no point in being realistic about
the here and now, no use at all not any, and so it is not the nineteenth but the twentieth century, there is no realism now, life is not real it is not earnest, it is strange which is an entirely different matter” (17). In contrast to Stein’s assessment, though by no means dismissive of it, Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room” embodies a struggle to begin thinking earnestly again about what it might mean to be realistic about the here and now in a world unhinged by industrialized violence and mechanized death. In the wake of the horrors of the twentieth century, Bishop’s art stands as a reminder that the antagonism between poetic transparency and its imperative negation is essentially dialectical: the failure of meaning is inherent to meaning, giving meaning the structure of identity-in-difference. Thus the narrative style of “In the Waiting Room” cannot be said to revert to a naïve or kitsch form of representation. It (re)locates the destruction of representation within the coordinates of representation, and thus it demonstrates with unflinching precision how the failure of meaning is internal to signification itself.

In “The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘In the Waiting Room,’” Lee Edelman effectively sets the terms for any contemporary reading of Bishop’s poetry, isolating what he calls a “war cry” (196) at the heart of her text, an unbearable “… oh! of pain” traversing the narrative boundary that delimits our sense of interiority from exteriority, sense from non-sense. However, Edelman never actually analyzes the one line in which Bishop explicitly references war in the poem, “The War was on. Outside” (7).

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If “In the Waiting Room” issues a cry, as Edelman argues, which throws into question conventional distinctions between inside and outside and the meaning of this war cry cannot be determined in isolation from Bishop’s location of war on the “Outside.” While Edelman’s article remains laudable for critically challenging the conventional reception of Bishop as a relatively uncomplicated, “female” poet (181), it does not go far enough. Edelman’s deconstruction of the “system of reading as mastery” (190) and unleashing of the polymorphous possibilities of gender and sexuality misses how the “Outside” of “war,” instability (nonsense), is internal to the stabilization (sense) of narrative in Bishop’s poetry. This oversight repeats the systematic trivialization of Bishop’s subject matter at the epistemological level. By ignoring how war is essential for locating “the locus of the interpretive issues raised by the text” (183), Edelman’s essay suggests Bishop’s poetry can be read in isolation from the trauma of the historical real, as a “reading of reading” (182). Symptomatically, however, the repressed reality of war returns with a vengeance in his conclusion. Edelman writes, “as a figural subversion, [Bishop’s text] wages war against the reduction of woman to the status of a literal figure…. It is against that text that the cry wages war, becomes a war cry to unleash the textuality that rips the fabric of the cultural text” (196, emphasis mine). Now perhaps we can understand what is at stake in Edelman’s repression of the place of war in the poem: acknowledging the problem of war here shows that “textuality” is not what “rips the fabric of the cultural text.” Rather, the trauma of the real, the disruptive exterior that is internal to symbolization, as well as the material history of violence—is what “rips” the symbolic order of the “cultural text.” If this internal moment of interruption
is taken into account, as “In the Waiting Room” insists on, it reveals the final impossibility of intertextually dissolving the subject, and it undermines the uninhibited free play of language. In relation to this critical point, “In the Waiting Room” obstructs deconstruction and presents a challenge to Edelman’s claim “that Bishop’s is a poetry … conscious of the inevitable mediations of selfhood, the intrusions of the ‘I,’ that make direct contact with any literality—with any ‘truth’—an impossibility” (180). Far from relativizing truth in sliding chains of signification or simply problematizing unreflected immediacy, Bishop’s poetry indexes the real pain of history. “In the Waiting Room” registers the fundamental deadlock of antagonism inherent to the structure of symbolization—and thereby gains its effectiveness by exposing its readers to the truth of this violent impasse: in Bishop’s text it is war, the irruption of the outside on the inside, which is ultimately a manifestation of the death drive, which ruptures textuality. Bishop’s exhibition of an outside on the interior of representation is what constitutes the most radical aspect of “In the Waiting Room.”

Rather than issuing a war cry, then, “In the Waiting Room” cries war. Considering that Bishop lived through all the world-changing wars of the twentieth century—both world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War—it should not be surprising to find a reference to “War” at the center of this poem (7). “In the Waiting Room” is premised on the memories of a six-year-old “Elizabeth” sitting in a “dentist’s waiting room” (3) while she waits for her Aunt Consuelo, patiently reading a “National Geographic” dated “February, 1918” (5). Often read as a poem about the transition from childhood to adulthood, “In the Waiting Room” invokes the traumatic events of the
twentieth century in a second, more fundamental way, as a psycho-social moment of 

passage. In Why War? Jacqueline Rose describes WWII as “something like [English 
psychiatrist Donald] Winnicott’s transitional object” because, she argues, “it straddles 
the space between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between childhood and 

adulthood, between the realist and the modernist literary text” (16). In connection with 
this claim, Bishop’s “Elizabeth” in “In the Waiting Room” enacts a metonymic 

 displacement, an obsessive conceptual neurosis: rather than symbolizing or 
representing the trauma of war, her character/narrator function performs the repetition of 
deferred recognition itself. While perusing her magazine, “Elizabeth” starts to lose her 
sense of stable boundaries, to make the distinction between self and other, and to 

experience a sensation of “falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black 
space” (5-6). Suddenly the once comfortable waiting room appears “bright / and too 
hot” (7) and “sliding / beneath a big black wave, / another, and another” (7). What is 
significant here is that this uncanny episode only comes to an end, “Then I was back in 
it” (7), “Elizabeth” says, at the exact moment she realizes “The War was on. Outside” 
(7). Everything in the poem gravitates around these lines. They are an indication of 
the real power of history/war or Bishop’s “Outside,” at the core of representation. This 
is the traumatic core of truth that ruptures the narrative. 

Although the text locates itself temporally on the “fifth / of February, 1918” (8), and thus 
explicitly invokes WWI, there is nonetheless a way in which “The War” also implicates 
WWII along with all of the other major conflicts that occurred between 1918 and the 

poem’s publication in 1971, for the simple reason that the effective meaning of WWI
changed with each succeeding war. This is because the way we remember and write about WWI is shaped by those subsequent events with which it enters into relation for us. Thus the presence of WWI in Bishop’s poem is augmented, at the virtual level, by the history of twentieth-century warfare. When we take into account this power of later events to change the meaning of earlier events, then we can see how Bishop’s reference to WWI must also invoke the memory of other modern mechanized wars, along with the sense of unreality associated with each.

According to Rose, “what characterizes the twentieth century and distinguishes it from the one that came before it is randomness, coincidence, and chance” (17), spurred by the socio-symbolic absorption of rapid development in the natural sciences, technology, and industry, which all of course exponentially increased the violence of war. In short, modernity’s experience of the world can be summed up in a single word: instability. Everything stable and secure was displaced by a pervasive sense of unreality and, in terms of literature, that meant the end of nineteenth century “realism” (Rose 17). Thus Stein could write apropos of WWII, “this coincidental war this meaningless war, this war that put an end a real end and entire end to the nineteenth century there were so many coincidences and they were the only reality in this time of unreality” (12). In relationship to this crisis of meaning, Bishop’s writing functions as a persistent attempt to (re)incorporate the instability of the modern world while acknowledging its necessity, without fragmenting beyond all recognition. The tensions thus created reverberate throughout Geography III in poems such as “One Art” for example (“The art of losing isn’t hard to master” [40]). Although my focus here is restricted to “In the Waiting

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Comment [20]: Nice paragraph, Eric. I can see the changes implemented here, and they make a big difference in comprehension.

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Comment [21]: Can modernity experience something? Maybe say something like the people of modernity’s experience or choose a different word than experience.

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Room," it suffices to say, I think, Geography III as a collection only really makes sense situated in terms of this poem and its explicit reference to war.

At the heart of "In the Waiting Room" lies the basic antagonistic structure of representation, which reveals the precondition for violent conflict. This structure of antagonism emerges as “Elizabeth” recalls reading a National Geographic in which she encounters a startling succession of images, starting with “the inside of a volcano, / black, and full of ashes” (3). “It was spilling over” (3), she says, “in rivulets of fire” (4). (I return to the importance of the volcano below.) Next she describes a seemingly benign married couple: the naturalist adventurers “Osa and Martin Johnson,” (4) who appear simultaneously strange and familiar. Bishop dresses them identically in “…riding breeches, / laced boots, and pith helmets” (4), but no such image can be found in the actual magazine. Edelman points out the unsettling discrepancy with the original: “There is a picture of Osa and Martin Johnson in which she appears in such a costume, but her husband, interestingly enough, does not wear an identical outfit” (189). What “Elizabeth” encounters in this apparently mistaken recollection is the logical problem of the self-doubled in its otherness. In Bishop’s poem, Osa appears in men’s clothing, performing a typically masculine activity, exploring new lands. Yet the man she doubles is a symbolic fantasy posited by “Elizabeth” precisely, it appears, so Osa can copy him. Significantly, if Osa is a copy of the adventuring man who is already a simulacrum in himself, then this image exposes “Elizabeth” to radical contingency. Following this unconscious insight, the images grow more disturbing: “A dead man slung on a pole” (4) with the “caption” (4) “Long Pig” (4) and referencing cannibalism,
“Babies with pointed heads / wound round and round with string” (4), and “black, naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs,” and “horrifying breasts” (4). Moved by an inexorable force, “Elizabeth” begins to feel unnerved by the immediate strangeness of her conditions; everything familiar in the poem starts to shift slightly. As she attempts to withdraw from her intuition of the primordial uncanniness of existence, the same problem recurs on the conscious level in the voice of her aunt. This time “Elizabeth” cannot miss the contingency of her situation: “Suddenly, from inside, / came an oh! of pain / —Aunt Consuelo’s voice—” (4).

“What took me / completely by surprise” (5), “Elizabeth” explains, was that it was me: my voice, in my mouth. Without thinking at all I was my foolish aunt. (5)

“Elizabeth” recalls not being “at all surprised” (5) because “even then [she] knew she was / a foolish, timid woman” (5). The structure here is the same as the copy/original relationship in the image of Osa and Martin Johnson, but now “Elizabeth” finds herself confronted by her own limitation, the fact that the “foolish” and “timid” Other is another version of the outside, is an essential moment of her own being. We might say she is not surprised by her aunt’s cry because she knows it is slightly ridiculous, even a little melodramatic or something inessential, like Martin’s made-up outfit. Except “Elizabeth” now recognizes herself as a copy of this inessential Other, the “family voice” (6), and therefore cannot finally tell who cried out. This last insight sends her reeling.
and grasping for a marker by which she could again locate herself: “I—we—were falling, falling, / our eyes glued to the cover of the *National Geographic*” (5). This feeling gives rise to the temptation to disavow dependence and is essential for understanding the desire for war, a phenomenon Carl von Clausewitz claims must be construed “by allowing room for everything of a foreign nature which mixes up with it and fastens itself upon it—all the natural inertia and friction of its parts, the whole of the inconsistency, the vagueness and hesitation (or *timidity*) of the human mind” (82, emphasis mine). As everything secure in the poem dissolves, the world becomes a strange place and “Elizabeth” a stranger in it. Her encounter with the Other as an internal negative moment is reminiscent of Hegel’s analysis of negativity in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel writes, “This pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity” (117). Freud similarly sees the encounter with negativity (death), or mourning, as the initial condition of self-consciousness, or representation, but he adds a twist that is crucial for Bishop’s poem. In “Death and Us” Freud argues that “what released the spirit of enquiry in man [sic] was … the conflict of feeling at the death of loved yet alien and hated persons” (24). Although Aunt Consuelo remains alive as far as we know, “Elizabeth” nonetheless experiences the same existential ambivalence described by Freud in her discovery of an internal alien element. Thus it is no wonder that her “spirit of enquiry” is “released” and her initial response is an attempt to reason her way back to reality: “But I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*” (6). This thought fails, however, to restore stability because to be an “I” means...
to be an “Elizabeth” who is one of “them,” and thus her “I” has difference from itself as its essential feature. This split designates the basic antagonism in the symbolic texture of social reality.

“In the Waiting Room” follows the logic of this primal presupposition of speculative knowledge to the end through the destabilization of the boundary between inside and outside, between reality and fantasy and right to the temptation of war as an answer to the deadlock of representation. Rose explains how such a transition works, how the desire for war is produced by the paranoia that results from an encounter with death (negativity), or the internal other. She writes: “We project on to the alien, or other, the destructiveness we fear in the most intimate relations or parts of ourself. Instead of trying to repair it at home, we send it abroad” (Rose 18-19). This paranoiac projection of war outside the self is exactly how “Elizabeth” finally finds stability: “Then I was back in it. / The War was on. / Outside” (7). This process also accounts for the disturbing images in the magazine, the dead man on the pole, and the deformed bodies of children and women, which are all manifestations of abjection, of internal turmoil projected, or of reified in an exterior form that is to be mastered and killed. In Rose’s words, War makes the other accountable for a horror we can then wipe out with impunity, precisely because we have located it so firmly in the other’s place. This saves us the effort of ambivalence, the hard work of recognizing that we love where we hate, that, in our hearts and minds at least, we kill those to whom we are most closely and intimately attached (19).

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Thus “In the Waiting Room” demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the way war emerges as an effect of antagonism or as a making-positive of the negativity at the heart of representation. This is how Bishop’s writing exposes us to the real at the same time as it blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy. Every appearance of a stable “reality” already masks a violent attempt to suppress the traumatic fantasies that embody the deadlock of representation. Truth, then, as the structure of negativity in self-consciousness is the unbearable question to which the violent paranoia of war attempts to respond.

If war is an answer that fundamentally destabilizes the boundaries of inside and outside, knowledge and reality, self and other, then it is inextricably bound up with the liminal experience of uncanniness and abjection. Bishop’s poetry figures these experiences prominently in images of volcanoes, geographical points of rupture, and thus can be located in the category of writing demarcated by Julia Kristeva as “abject literature” (141). This mode of writing emerges, in Kristeva’s words, when the “unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain h[er] can no longer be narrated but cries out or is described with maximal stylistic intensity” (141). For Kristeva it is the abject uncanny that haunts us “when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain (141). Accordingly, “It is … not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In the final analysis, then, war, the uncanny, and the abject are problems of bordering, and
Bishop’s *Geography III*, with “In the Waiting Room” as its introductory poem, is preeminently about bordering, location, and displacement and all of their interrelated anxieties. The mode of abjection first appears in the epigraph to *Geography III*, following a somewhat mundane excerpt taken from “First Lessons in Geography,” *Monteith’s Geographical Series, A.S. Barnes & Co., 1884,* in the rhetorically unsettling question, “In what direction is the Volcano?” Thus, to know where one is at in the modern world, the text suggests, means to locate oneself in relation to this liminal figure.

In Bishop’s poetry, the volcano occupies an interstitial space of volatilized becoming, where inside erupts on outside, maps rend under tectonic force, and destructive power reigns. Here the volcano is the ultimate sign of the disruptive stranger in our midst, the ultimate figure of war, psychologically and historically; it emits horror and suffering, placing its readers in contact with the painful traumatic core of representation, the real of history.

If the volcano symbolizes war as a visible figure marking the location of nonsense in the heart of sense, then knowing where one is at in *Geography III* is a matter of knowing oneself in relation to war. As the modern world struggles to relate itself to the violent conflicts of the twentieth century, Bishop’s poetry—with its transparent style, strange stabilities, and frightening inconsistencies—insists on the uncanny internal relationship between projected violence and subjectivity. The startling conclusion to be drawn from “In the Waiting Room” is that the hard work of historical questioning must occur from inside representation itself, at the painful point where meaning encounters its other. At this juncture Bishop’s poetry invites us to ask:
How—I didn’t know any
word for it—how “unlikely”…

How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn’t? (7)

The spirit of enquiry, “In the Waiting Room” suggests, must continue here or not at all.
Works Cited


