

Eco-Geologies of Queer Desire: Elizabeth Bishop's Love Poetry and Charles Darwin's Beagle Geology Travel Narratives

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Abstract

This essay explores the impact of Charles Darwin's often poetic, largely geological travel narratives – the Diary and Voyage of the Beagle – on Elizabeth Bishop's queered travel poems “Crusoe in England”(1976) and “Vague Poem”(circa 1973), in the context of recent feminist theory's materialist ecological “turn.” I survey Bishop's shift from her early Freudian, “primordial” rocky landscapes, projecting submerged desires for a seductive mother figure, to her later deliberate materializations of these psychosexual realms in “the real” of geology's unfolding forces and flows. Adapting Darwin's similarly haunted, dark, Romantic accounts of his voyaging into crustal earth, Bishop's “Crusoe” and “Vague Poem” variously enact an immersion in earth's unfolding volcanic or crystalline ancestral past, which successively opens out “eco-geologically” to enmesh queer human intimacy/ the body. Theoretically, Bishop's Darwinian love poems richly materialize the queer body while redefining our enmeshment in nature as the wellspring of achieved being, intimacy, and desire. Further, Bishop's poems offer a newly relevant feminist ecology within our so-called Anthropocene era of humanly caused, unnaturally accelerated geology. Bishop effectively inserts a “differently” sexed/gendered relation to geologic forces and materialities, thereby countering the neglectful patriarchal anthropos currently scarring our planet.

Critics have associated Elizabeth Bishop's eco-poetics and her attraction to Charles Darwin with his often poetic *Origin of Species*' story of entanglement in our biological, evolutionary ancestral past. They trace her speakers' epiphanic

movement in “The Moose” (1976) or “The Fish” (1945) from a Darwinian eye on minute detail instilling the animal’s “strange” physicality to sudden felt affinity with all humanity and the object world (Knickerbocker 71–72; Pickard 110). However, from her early childhood spent on Nova Scotia’s rocky coastline, Bishop professed a primary attachment to seascapes and rocky, watery geographies. Throughout her career, she was a self-described restless traveler and rapt observer of rocks and waters’ coastal encounters. Further, her meditations on watery rockscapes often evoked a queer, maternal, rocky “primordial” ancestral past in travel poems to alluring crustal or glacial female rockscapes – from “At the Fishhouses”’ epiphany of earth’s primordial “rocky breasts” to the late “Vague Poem”’s flagrantly lesbian “vision” witnessing an ancient “rock rose crystal” unfolding across a beloved’s emergent, nude body, “flesh beginning, crystal by crystal (Poems 52, 225). Here I explore Bishop’s profounder debt from 1953 onward to Darwin’s lesser known, darker, yet parallel geological poetics winding through his early travel narratives – chiefly the *Diary* and *Voyage of the Beagle* – composed during his first career as a geologist and global explorer. Darwin’s frequently lyric geologizing brought to bear the famous observing eye for detail on *crustal earth’s* telling “clues,” ushering his geologist-poet into an often visionary affinity with its rich, layered, elemental past. Broadly, I argue, Bishop’s queered “Crusoe in England” (1976) and “Vague Poem” consciously shifted away from her early poetry’s psychic, “primordial” rockscapes, imaging submerged Freudian desires for a maternal body, toward Darwin’s similarly haunted quest-poetics, grounded in *the real* of earth’s forces and flows. These travel poems variously recreate an unfolding, richly materialized primordial past she extends to encompass her lovers’ emergent, bodily intimacy/desire.¹ In accord with the nineteenth-century convention of geographic travel narratives, Darwin’s *Diary* and *Voyage* merge the Romantics’ dark “sublime” visionary quests through volcanoes, islands, and mountains with geological speculation. Darwin casts his geologist after Percy Bysshe Shelley’s haunted travelers, seeking earth’s occult, “primordial” origins (“Mont Blanc” and “Alastor”). However within Darwin’s dark quest-narratives, his geologist moves from rapt scientific focus on actual granular-crystalline “clues” inscribing earth’s past processes to lyric epiphanies of the landform’s ongoing physical changes across “deep time” after Charles Lyell’s modern geology. Overall as ecological texts, the largely geological *Diary* and *Voyage* elaborate our primary connection to crustal earth’s dark ancestral ur-history, effectively opening out to embrace its (more casually observed) living animals, plants, and indigenous peoples. Correspondingly, in Bishop’s queered “Crusoe” and “Vague Poem,” the travelers/lovers’ bodily attunement to earth’s volcanic or crystallizing ancestral past opens out “eco-geologically,” here embedding the lovers’ human desire/intimacy. Thus, Crusoe’s queer-island-memory of his sojourn on a crystalline, lava-baked volcanic island with “[his] dear Friday” elicits an impassioned “vision” of its molten birth erupting from his body’s “blood” and “brain” (Poems 156). And in Bishop’s “Vague Poem,” the

1 For an examination of biological Darwin’s influence on Bishop’s “queered” animals, see McCabe.

lover/traveler's geologic meditation on an ancient "rock rose" crystal prompts the striking epiphany of its full evolution across her naked lover's emergent "unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal" (255).

Briefly, Bishop's Darwinian poems resonate with recent feminist materialist theories urging critics to create much-needed space for both ecology and bodily materiality within postmodern feminist work on psychoanalysis and other, exclusively human, mental constructs of the body/desire. Accordingly, what I term Bishop's "eco-geologies of queer desire" at once densely materialize the queer body and redefine our enmeshment in nature's environmental surround as a wellspring of achieved desire/intimacy.² Moreover, within our Anthropocene epoch of humanly accelerated glacial melt, floods, and droughts, Bishop's Darwinian poems offer newly environmentalist narratives demonstrating humans' interdependence on geologic forces and materialities (Ellsworth and Kruse 9).³

Bishop herself appeared to reject the Freudian psychological models of desire/creativity she associated with her early poetry's female "primordial" rockscapes for a materialized, ancestral past she would discover in Darwin's geology writings. Critics have variously interpreted Bishop's glacial or promontoried she-rocks in "The Imaginary Iceberg" (1945) and "Fishhouses" (1955) as psychic landscapes portraying Bishop's yearning for the "absent mother", who disappeared into a mental institution when she was five years old. Both Lorrie Goldensohn and David Kalstone detect in "Fishhouses" epiphany of earth's primeval "rocky breasts" and "cold hard mouth of the world" "the flicker" of her maternal psychodrama (qtd. in Goldensohn 65). Goldensohn particularly links the ominous "disturbing power" of Bishop's rocky "seductive, eroticized female body" to her poetry's "theme of the abandoning mother" (65). And while Bonnie Costello does not relate "Iceberg" to Bishop's queer impulses, she divines a self-destructive "principle of mind" in the "enamored sailor's" desire for an alluring, shipwrecking glacier. Further, Costello rightly ties the icy pinnacled glacier to Bishop's own youthful fascination with Shelley's "Mont Blanc," whose ruinous glaciers frequently mirror his poet-traveler's internalized creative-erotic powers (94). I would add that both Bishop's family romance and the traditionally Sapphic, occult crystals of female power she encountered in H. D. inform her sailor's fantasies of the "fleshed, fair" she-rock's secret, gem-like crystallizations, "cut[ting] its facets from within" (*Poems* 4).⁴

Bishop's recently released 1947 letters to her psychiatrist Ruth Foster reveal that she was aware of intensely Freudian, sexual feelings toward her mother. Bishop's description of "Fishhouses" particularly as inspired by a dream of her psychiatrist's breasts illustrates her acknowledged debt to Freudian definitions of desire/creativity entailing unresolved longings for the mother and the operations of transference revealed by dreams (Treseler 69). However, in Bishop's developing poetics, she increasingly rejected psychoanalytic conceptions of desire-creativity for the "material" exemplified by Darwin's geologic travel narratives. As early as 1937, Bishop wrote emphatically in a notebook that creative concentration "proceeds from the material," dismissing the impulse to dwell in isolated,

2 See Alaimo's discussion in "The Material Turn in Feminist Theory" (237–50).

3 Their anthology *Making the Geologic Now* elaborates how "recent insights about just how deeply the bio is intertwined with the geo make it necessary for any concept of 'the environment' to now acknowledge the roles and power of the geologic in terrestrial life" (24).

4 Bishop read both Shelley's complete works and H. D.'s Sapphic, imagist odes to crystallized rock-flowers the summer on Cape Cod she turned sixteen years old. She described H. D. as an "important" influence, and wrote a passionate "Appreciation" of Shelley's poetry for her school publication *The Blue Pencil* (*Conversations* 20; *Poems* 639–41).

internal “emotion” as a “perversity” (qtd. in Harrison 3). Crucially, this essay rejects neither psychoanalytic theories of desire nor the effects of Bishop’s family romance on her poetry. Rather, I argue in part that Bishop moves toward a different, environmentalist definition of being/desire/the body while retaining those early, haunting, erotic associations between the maternal body and primordial earth. As recent literary eco-critics stress, for humans the ecological relation is necessarily permeated, even facilitated, by prevailing psychological and cultural narratives as well as personal, mythic, literary “stories” (Iovino and Opperman). Indeed, “Vague Poem”’s intricately materialized Darwinian scenario of naked female “flesh beginning, crystal by crystal” resonantly echoes her early poems’ psychic preoccupations with earth’s maternal “rocky breasts” and the “fleshed, fair” glacier cutting its crystal “facets from within.”⁵ For Bishop, Darwin materialized and mobilized those queer psycho/sexual realms; while his dark, Shelleyan narratives sustained the perilous, occult mysteries she linked to the beloved maternal body from her own early Shelleyan poems.

Notably, Bishop’s famous 1964 Darwin letter to her biographer Anne Stevenson directly posited Darwin’s visionary grounding in crustal earth’s unfolding against surrealism’s Freudian conceptions of art/creativity. Her letter was occasioned by Stevenson’s suggestion that like surrealist painter Max Ernst, who famously subscribed to Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, Bishop’s often strange visual effects she superimposed on the “conscious world” issued from “subconscious” “hallucinatory and dream material” (Stevenson). Bishop objected to Stevenson’s comparison, rejecting Ernst’s deliberately “irrational,” often-nightmarish distortions of the object world for Darwin’s creative enmeshment in real, crustal earth. Critics usually interpret Bishop’s ensuing depiction of “the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking . . . into the unknown” as indexing the more famous Darwin thinking up species evolution. However, Bishop’s little known follow-up letter glossing these remarks refers Stevenson to Darwin’s geological work (discussed below). In Bishop’s letter’s defense against the “irrational” surrealists, she indicates the haunting “strangeness” of Darwin’s scientific, personal, and poetic mission. And her “lonely young man” clearly resembles his geology’s lone, Shelleyan traveler fixating on the “minute” geological clue ushering him into the alien rocksphere’s vast, “unknown” history. Bishop protests:

I can’t believe we are wholly irrational – (and I do admire Darwin!) [In Darwin’s writing, there] comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one *feels* the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. [It is] [w]hat one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful . . . concentration. (Letter [8 Jan.]

Elsewhere, Bishop equated surrealist poetry with “the mind being ‘broken down,’” declaring, “I want to produce the opposite effect” (qtd. in Goldensohn 123–24).

⁵ Bishop remained interested in Freud even as she discovered Darwin. In 1953, she wrote that she had read “all of Freud” in Soares’s “large psychological library” (*One Art* 283). She also read Melanie Klein’s *Psychology of Children*, which extended Freud’s oedipal fixation on the mother to female children (Harrison 224).

6 Here I refer to Bishop's editions of the *Voyage, Diary and Autobiography*, housed in the Elizabeth Bishop Library at Vassar College.

7 See Sandra Herbert's scientific biography of Darwin's fifteen-year career as a geologist. Herbert surveys the "Romantic thread" in his travel narratives and elaborates his relationship to Lyell's theories, while stressing the forward-looking implications and unique contributions of his geology volumes, notes, and papers.

Bishop here indicates her growing conviction that enforced inwardness and estrangement from the environment may breed a pathological, self-referential art. By contrast, her letter implies, full erotic-creative realization depends on tactile continuity with nature's unfolding processes. In effect, from the Brazil poems onward, Darwin's crustal, evolutionary poetics became her "dream material," evoking creative-erotic realms obedient to nature's infinitely varying laws. In Bishop's later letter, she refers Stevenson specifically to Darwin's "beautiful, highly specialized" geology volume on the *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs* (Letter [23 Mar.]). And while Bishop never alluded to Darwin's more famous *Origin of Species*, following her 1953 immersion in Darwin she would reread the *Diary* and her heavily underlined copy of his *Voyage* for the rest of her career.⁶ Further, Bishop directly attributed her queer volcanic-island poem "Crusoe" to Darwin's geology in his *Voyage* and "Field Notes" on Galapagos volcanic-island formation. Indeed, Bishop must have inwardly associated her letter's "lonely young man" sliding into earth's "unknown" with the recently begun draft of "Crusoe," recounting her lone voyager's wanderings through the birthing volcanic islands of Friday's love.

Theoretically, both Darwin's geological travel narratives and Bishop's ensuing love poems may be termed "eco-geological" narratives for the Anthropocene epoch. Confronted by the humanly induced, unnatural acceleration of geology rendering our planet increasingly uninhabitable, eco-theorists such as Jane Bennett and the editors of *Making the Geologic Now* are calling for a new attention to earth's "geoaffect." Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* strives to dislodge our conception of nonorganic matter, including geology, as "inert" "dead" matter existing "out there." Rather she urges our coexistence with the vibrant, autonomous creative "life" of [rocks]: "a shimmering, potentially violent vitality intrinsic to [earth's] interstitial field[s] of . . . ahuman forces, flows and trajectories" (61). Darwin's palpable, visionary scenarios depicting Lyellian earth's ongoing, incremental flux over immense time spans richly elaborate Bennett's "geoaffect." Indeed, Lyell's famous *Principles of Geology* (1830) ushered geology into the material flux of "modernity," reclaiming it from relatively static premodern deluge theory, which attributed earth's changes to unmappable single "catastrophic" events followed by long periods of quiescence. In contrast, Lyell theorized that earth's slow, incremental, ongoing changes extending across vast, prehuman time spans – or "deep time" – could be recovered by the geologist's keen observation of elemental motions and past traces in the present landform.⁷ Thus plying the landscapes' flows and crystalline "clues," Darwin's geologist may be seen to intercept bodily/imaginatively earth's vitally shifting, crustal motions and various molten, watery, crystal mediums over deep time.

Bishop's Darwinian travel poems effectively queer Darwin's "geoaffect." Her ensuing spectacles of queer desire/the body as coextensive with earth's ongoing flows suggest further implications for feminist materialist and Anthropocene criticism. In accord with feminist materialism's intent to bring "the materiality

of the human body and the natural world into the forefront of feminist theory,” Bishop vibrantly materializes the female body/queer desire while demonstrating the importance to fully achieved being/loving of ecological enmeshment in nature (Alaimo and Hekman 1). Particularly relevant to this essay, Elizabeth Grosz asserts that Darwin might be as “rewarding” to materialist feminist theory “as Freud has been” to postmodernism in his species theory’s accounts of “nature,” “the body” and “the genesis of the new from . . . evolutionary change” (28–29). Moreover, “Crusoe” and “Vague Poem”’s respectively vexed and achieved aspirations toward a queered eco-geology perform further, important feminist work for Anthropocene feminists seeking to counter the appropriating, patriarchal sexual politics scarring out planet (Colebrook; Gibson-Graham). Claire Colebrook and others claim that equating the implicitly male, hierarchical *anthropos* with an undifferentiated human species forecloses the possibility of a “differently” sexed/gendered interrelation to our planet. Colebrook, therefore, seeks narratives inserting the “female” (or queer) body in planet earth, thereby countering patriarchal “industrial man’s” history of neglect (7). Both “Crusoe” and “Vague Poem” variously mix and mingle geologic forces/materials with queer libidinal flows and bodies.

The remainder of this essay reads relevant excerpts from Darwin’s *Voyage, Diary* and “Field Notes” on the Galapagos against Bishop’s “Crusoe” and “Vague Poem” with particular attention to their implications for Bishop personally, poetically, and within Anthropocene/materialist feminism. “Vague Poem” fully enacts the above-described eco-geology of lesbian desire. However, perhaps ironically, “Crusoe,” which Bishop completed after the dissolution of her intimacy with architect Lota de Macedo Soares in Brazil, becomes a cautionary eco-tale elucidating the costs of (Freudian) psychological self-absorption implied by her Darwin letter.

Darwin’s Beagle Travel Narratives and Bishop’s “Crusoe” and “Vague Poem”’: Anthropocene Eco-Geologies

Bishop considered her first decade in Brazil the happiest years of her life. Settled in the mountainside house built by Soares, she discovered Darwin’s *Diary* accounts of his continental travels through Brazil almost immediately after her 1953 move to South America. Identifying exuberantly with the continental traveler, she determined to “begin right away on all his other books” (*One Art* 257). And over the next decade, Bishop plotted her own (never-completed) South American travel narrative she described as part “memoir,” part “travel book” after Darwin’s “close observation[s] . . . of Brazil” (*Conversations* 29). In her Brazil poetry Bishop’s unfolding evolutionary spectacles of mountain rockscapes and lichens often directly open out to enmesh Soares’s emergent, beloved body (“The Shampoo” and “Song for the Rainy Season”). However, Bishop’s deliberate poetic turn away from her earlier psychosexual landscapes toward Darwinian evolutionary “dream

material” is most evident in her 1965 Brazil volume *Questions of Travel*’s titular poem. The overriding “question” posed by Bishop’s speaker in “Questions of Travel” ponders whether she should have traveled to Brazil or simply “stay[ed] at home” like Pascal “*just sitting quietly in [his] room?*” Bishop refers to Blaise Pascal’s famous belief that all humanity’s miseries might be allayed if each man could simply meditate “quietly in his room” (38). Bishop’s traveler/lover’s opening, sensuous epiphany of Brazil’s geologically forming mountain waterfalls, followed by her eco-geological embrace of its embedded wildlife and human history implicitly challenges Pascal’s insistence on the mind-in-isolation. The poem begins as the traveler drifts dreamily into a mountain prospect’s imagined erosive, forming waterfalls:

. . . the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.
–For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren’t waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be. (*Poems* 74)

The traveler’s slide into imagined clouds and waters spilling sensually over rock recalls Bishop’s Darwin “sinking or sliding giddily off” into a geologic “unknown.” Further, the “vision” evokes a tearful homecoming to the Brazilian ancestral past mutually enfolding Bishop and Soares’s developing intimacy. Ever-forming mountain falls, “those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,” suggestively enact the lovers’ *jouissance* welling over untold past and future “ages.”⁸ Moreover, as “Questions” proceeds, the traveler/lover’s felt enmeshment in Brazil’s eons-long ancestral past further opens out Darwin-like to embrace a spreading affinity with the mountains’ embedded living creatures and human history: “The tiniest green hummingbird . . . centuries / [of] the crudest wooden footwear / . . . [and] whittled fantasies of wooden cages.” “Questions” concludes with the travel diarist’s entry in her “notebook” weighing Brazil’s foregoing plenitude against Pascal’s self-enforced isolation in his “room”: “*Is it lack of imagination that makes us come/ to imagined places . . . / Or Could Pascal have been not entirely right/ about just sitting quietly in one’s room?*” (75).

Bishop had begun a short fragment of “*Crusoe*” the same year she wrote her 1964 Darwin letter. Just months earlier, Robert Lowell expressed his eagerness to read the finished “*Darwin*” fragment he had seen in draft during a recent visit (Bishop and Lowell 530). When she resumed the poem again nearly a decade later in the early 1970s, her overtly Darwinian allegory of the Brazil era with Soares had become an elegy. Years of personal and political turmoil had separated the women, culminating in Bishop’s move to New York and Soares’s tragic suicide (1967). It is impossible to know where Bishop’s fragment was headed during the happy years in Brazil that produced *Questions of Travel*. However, Bishop’s

8 *Jouissance* is the term Freud uses for female orgasm, as Bishop noted with delight in a letter to Robert Lowell (Bishop and Lowell 78).

“Darwin” poem became an anti-Darwin poem. Her completed “Crusoe” appears to lament the effects of Bishop’s depressive self-absorption and internalized homophobia on what might have been an enduring homecoming to the unfolding landscape of Soares’s love. Briefly, “Crusoe” begins auspiciously, as Bishop’s lone, queer traveler follows Darwin’s footsteps through a Galapagos volcanic island. Like Darwin, he moves from dark sublime yearning amid a steaming, parched, volcanic landscape toward rapt fixation on the island’s crystalline, lava-baked “clues” and imagined teeming, erosive, molten flows. However, for Bishop’s lover/traveler, the quest is aborted by Crusoe’s relentless self-obsession. And he conspicuously fails to enter the Darwinian evolutionary stream of island-birthing inducting him into Friday’s love until after he has lost both his island and Friday. Perhaps intentionally, Bishop’s increasingly delusional Crusoe illustrates the “mind ‘being broken down’” she had ascribed to surrealist poetry. Accordingly, as an eco-geology of desire, Bishop’s finished “Crusoe” elaborates the impoverishing consequences for desire/ the imagination of allowing internalized “hallucination and dream material” to override nature’s creative surround. Critics have acknowledged “Crusoe”’s debt to Darwin’s Galapagos volcanic-island setting and Bishop’s queered conflation of Robinson Crusoe with the *Beagle* voyager she directly describes as “registering” the island’s “flora,” “fauna,” and “geography” (Rognoni 246). However, beyond noting Bishop’s fondness for naturalist aesthetic detail, no one has yet traced the impact of Darwin’s volcanic-island geology, nor its role in the poem’s queer, personal narrative. Before turning to “Crusoe,” I begin here by surveying the Romantic quest pattern of Darwin’s Galapagos Island geologizing in relevant excerpts from the *Diary, Voyage*, and “Field Notes” with an eye toward their professed influence on Bishop’s “Crusoe.”

Darwin’s Dark “Sublime” Volcanic-Island Geology

Harold Bloom’s “The Internalization of Quest Romance” first identified the proto-Freudian desires informing Romantic poets’ psychological “quests” through eroticized, dark “sublime” rockscapes. Bloom interpreted Shelley’s and Blake’s “lower paradises” in particular as projecting the child’s unrequited, submerged “longings” which Freud later associated with family romance (4). Accordingly, Shelley’s “Alastor” traveler pursues an elusive, demonic “fair fiend” in the shape of an alluring woman spirit, through primordial icy Alps, secret caves, and molten volcanic islands,

. . . where bitumin [lava] lakes
On black bare, pointed islets
ever beat . . . (72)

And indeed, Bishop’s early promontoried, glacial maternal landscapes of unrequited desire find a source in Shelley’s “Alastor,” as well as “Mont Blanc.” By

9 Darwin's friend Henry Matthew urged him to read Shelley's "Alastor" and "become inspired by the Spirit of Shelley."

contrast, Darwin's repeated invocations of the dark "sublime" before desolate rockscapes serve to incite his reader/geologist toward the Lyellian mysteries of earth's unexplored continents and landforms. Darwin famously brought on board Lyell's *Principles* (1830), which struck the aspiring geologist as a revelation from the Beagle's first stop on São Tiago's volcanic island (*Autobiography* 29, 31). Throughout the *Diary* and *Voyage*, Darwin skillfully entwines dark "sublime" personal narratives with an artfully rendered Lyellian attention to the landform's present "clues" inscribing earth's constant, shifting, slow changes over deep time. Darwin's use of the dark "sublime" pervading the *Voyage* and *Diary*'s lyric geological passages drew both on his own readings in Romantic poetry and his admiration for Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*'s geography of America, which frequently invoked Goethe's haunted rock "sublime" (*Autobiography* 24). Darwin appeared to have read Shelley's "Alastor" a few months before his sail,⁹ and critics have discussed Darwin's citation and multiple echoes of "Mont Blanc" informing the *Voyage* (Paradis 97; Smith 109–12).

However, for the post-Freudian Bishop, Darwin's Shelleyan, dark "sublime" yearnings before desolate rockscapes must have recalled her own early travelers' queer longings toward mythic landscape/bodies. Indeed, the "lonely young man" of Bishop's letter is palpable in Darwin's *Voyage*'s concluding "Retrospect" on the journey's most memorable landscapes. We recall Bishop's allusion to Darwin – "one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man . . . sinking . . . into the unknown." In his "Retrospect," Darwin's lone, introspective traveler wonders at length why he remains possessed by the "sublimity" of Patagonia's haunting "arid wastes" and other deathly rockscapes, which "continually cross before [his] eyes." "I can scarcely analyze these feelings," he continues, "but perhaps it must be partly owing to the free scope given to the imagination. The plains . . . are boundless, for they are scarcely passable, and hence *unknown* . . . who would not look at these last boundaries to man's knowledge with deep but ill-defined sensations?" (501).

Among the darkest of his travels, Darwin's passage through the Galapagos' Chatham Island begins by suggestively conjuring Shelley's ancient steamy, molten, volcanic islands in "Alastor." Although there is no indication of a "fair fiend," Darwin sensually depicts his waking after a night spent on the beach to wander a parched, hellish, primordial landscape. He discovers a black, fissured, "broken country," "studded" with sixty burned-out cinder cones, "the ancient chimneys for . . . subterranean melted fluids" (*Diary* 334–34). And the entire island resembles a porous "sieve" permeated from below by "subterranean vapors" he pronounces "what we might imagine . . . the Infernal regions to be" (*Voyage* 375; *Diary* 334). Simultaneously he feels eerily transported back to earth's antediluvian past. Encountering a pair of two-hundred-pound tortoises, one of whom "stared at him" and the other "gave a deep hiss," he observes, "these huge reptiles, surrounded by black lava . . . seemed like . . . antediluvian animals" (*Voyage* 376).

However, the mood shifts once Darwin begins geologizing, as the island's seductive, mysterious forces seemingly compel the geologist to refocus on a newly revitalized surround. In accord with Lyell's *Principles*, Darwin engages the island's present formation and minute crystalline "clues" toward accessing its incremental, ongoing changes. Chatham Island's black crustal surface now assumes an alternative "life," appearing to move or flow under Darwin's gaze. He perceives a dazzling marbled "frozen ocean" of once-molten glossy red and black basalt, "petrified in its most boisterous moments" (*Diary* 335). Following the trajectory of winding, sloping, arching streams eroded by tides over immense time spans, Darwin discovers the radiant Lyellian "clue" in the coast's sifted "pure and true gravel" – a pied constellation of marine deposits, red/black "basalt" and crystals ("Galapagos Notebooks" 18B). These finely delineated grains induct him back into the Galapagos' history Darwin variously conjures in the *Diary*, *Voyage*, "Field Notes," and *Origins*. He envisions the archipelago rising from erupting undersea volcanoes, surfacing as "lava-streams . . . extend[ing] into the open ocean," and slowly, incrementally "worn" and "pared all round" "by the waves" into each island's "hard rocky beds" (*Origin* 230).

From its closely scoped, marbled, pied surface to implied watery, molten, causal chains and final honed emergence, Darwin's teeming scenario of birthing volcanic islands focuses on the "life" of crustal earth – suggestively fleshing out Bennett's "geoaffect" and attendant "shimmering, potentially violent vitality" of "ahuman forces, flows and trajectories" (61). Further, Darwin vividly recreates his experiential journey through unexplored rock terrain while actualizing Lyell's theory of earth's constant, ongoing flux over immense time spans. And eco-geologically, Darwin's journey into the Galapagos' Islands' crustal origins may be seen as intrinsic to his more famous, separate studies of the Islands' embedded tortoises, birds, and plants he mined for his later species theory.

"Crusoe in England"

Bishop's completed, queer "Crusoe" deliberately makes a travesty of Darwin's Galapagos voyage through a volcanic island's stunted cinder cones and pied, marbled sands. Lowell termed the completed work, published in *Geography III* (1976), Bishop's "Ode to Dejection," referring to Coleridge's famous lament on how in his despondency he could merely "see," not "feel," nature's rhythmic surround (Bishop and Lowell 755). Accordingly, "Crusoe" presents a failed Darwinian quester who recalls *seeing* the island's teeming geological phenomenon during the lovers' island-life without *feeling* its rich, layered history. Commenting on the poem's queer narrative, friend James Merrill objected that neither Friday's body nor the lover's "relationship" emerges until its "touching" elegiac ending (qtd. in Harrison 191). As an Anthropocene, eco-geological love poem gone wrong, Bishop's self-sequestered "Crusoe" might be said to critique the

self-obsessed, patriarchal *anthropos*, even as it suggests a “differently” sexed/ gender counternarrative in the bereft Crusoe’s belated epiphany of queer, birthing volcanic islands erupting from his “blood” and “brain.”

The opening stanzas of Crusoe’s island-memory, derived from Bishop’s first 1963 draft, closely replicate Darwin’s wandering passage through Chatham Island. Despite Crusoe’s more casual, careless tone, like Darwin, his dark “sublime” longings give way to keener observations of the island’s suddenly vibrant, glittering, and marbled flows. As the section begins, Bishop’s Crusoe is Darwin’s solitary explorer waking after a night spent on the beach to survey a dark “sublime” volcanic island, studded by precisely fifty-two – rather than sixty – cinder cones sunk in a vaporous, hellish “cloud dump.” However, in this queer poem, Darwin’s “ill-defined” sensations before haunted, burned-out volcanoes embody Crusoe’s pronouncedly parched, erotic longings:

Well, I had fifty-two
miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
with a few slithery strides –
volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
.....
naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.
.....
My island seemed to be
a sort of cloud dump. All the hemisphere’s
left-over clouds arrived and hung
above the craters – their parched throats
were hot to touch. (*Poems* 152)

Parched, naked, “their throats . . . hot to touch,” Crusoe’s volcanoes hearken back to Bishop’s earlier Shelleyan poems embodying the traveler’s unrequited yearnings toward an elusive, all-powerful beloved. However, like Darwin, Crusoe’s attention now broadens to focus raptly on the island’s suddenly teeming, erosive, pied, and marbled surface. Bishop strategically implants in Crusoe’s opening meditation Darwin’s finely delineated geological details, albeit cut and spliced to accord with Bishop’s spare, imagist poetics. We recall Darwin’s attention to the Lyellian “clue” in the island’s finely ground, black/red sand crystals prompting intimations of its once-molten lava streams “exten[ding] into the open ocean” and successively “pared all round by the waves”:

. . . [I had] overlapping rollers
– a glittering hexagon of rollers
closing and closing in, but never quite,
glittering and glittering, though the sky
was mostly overcast.
.....

Was that why it rained so much?
And why sometimes the whole placed hissed?
The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,
hissing like teakettles.

.....
The folds of lava, running out to sea,
would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove
to be more turtles.

The beaches were all lava, variegated,
black, red, and white, and gray . . . (152)

Crusoe's eyes fix hypnotically on each of Darwin's Chatham Island's telling details in turn. Glittering hexagonal "overlapping rollers" slowly hone the island's circumference all around, "closing and closing in, but never quite." In the lumbering, rugged trajectory of Darwin's hissing turtles, Crusoe intimates ancient "folds of lava, running out to sea." And he "turn[s]" to see the dazzling Darwinian "clue" of "variegated" sand-crystals flaring out grain by grain – "black, red and white, and gray."

However, strikingly, here Bishop's Crusoe stops short of Darwin's bodily immersion in emergent volcanic islands. And Bishop's equation of Darwin's aborted quest with thwarted love is evinced by the poem's recurring metaphor for queer desire of unreachable islands variously "born," "bred," or "spawning" from erupted lava streams. The following lines show a suddenly detached Crusoe wearily dismissing nature's exquisitely pied, eroded sands as merely a still-life artifact: "the marbled colors made a fine display." Correspondingly, Crusoe's self-absorbed estrangement from the island's ancestral past extends to his perception of Friday. When Crusoe's lover finally appears in the island section, he is not the beloved object of Crusoe's earlier anguished desire but of his mild contempt and internalized homophobia. Moreover, Crusoe's flat, disinterested depiction of Friday's body – "pretty to watch" – mirrors his unresponsiveness to the island's glittering, marbled sands:

Friday was nice, and we were friends.
If only he had been a woman!
I wanted to propagate my kind . . .

.....
–Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body. (155)

Crucially, Crusoe does not (yet) recognize the birthing volcanic-island potentialities of Friday's queer love. In keeping with Lowell's comment on "Crusoe"'s "Ode to Dejection," the poem's traveler/lover sees but cannot feel his connection to the marbled, molten, emergent ancestral past that might have enfolded the lovers. Rather, in Crusoe's attendant scorn for the infertility of their queer union and preoccupation with furthering his own lineage, Bishop's

self-absorbed Crusoe (unwittingly) enacts the conventionally male sexual politics of Anthropocene feminism's neglectful *anthropos*.

For the remainder of the island section, Bishop's personal and poetic critique of the creative mind, mired in its own psychic "hallucination and dream material," becomes increasingly pronounced. Crusoe morbidly retreats from the beckoning island surround into his psyche: a dissociated space pervaded successively by blankness, depressive fatigue, and finally nightmarish delusion. Recalling the pathological "mind being 'broken down,'" which Bishop attributed to surrealist art, Crusoe now encounters birthing islands only in nightmares where unattainable islands spawn perversely out of his control "like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs":

... I'd have
nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs . . .
.....
... knowing that I had to live
on each and every one, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna, their geography. (155)

Nightmares taunt Bishop's anti-Darwin with his failure to make the leap from "registering" seemingly worthless natural details into achieved eco-synthesis with his island's material, evolutionary flows. During his waking hours, Crusoe lapses entirely into paranoid delusions, his fears leaking out from the confines of nightmare and "surreally" distorting the conscious world. Accordingly, Crusoe's overwrought psyche remakes the island in the image of his own paranoid fantasy. Once keen observations give way to a perceived melee of conspiratorially hissing rain, lumbering turtles, and shrieking gulls:

The[ir] questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies
Over a ground of hissing rain
and hissing ambulating turtles. (154)

"I still can't shake / them from my ears; they're hurting now," Crusoe protests (154).

The poem's final elegiac stanza finds a bereft Crusoe. Self-enforced solitude has given way to actual physical isolation. Returned to England and Friday long dead, he sits alone in his prefabricated London room "surrounded by uninteresting lumber." Confronted by loss, Crusoe realizes his deep love for "Friday, [his] dear Friday" and belatedly undergoes a passionate/creative island rebirthing:

Now I live here, another island,
that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?

My blood was full of them; my brain
bred islands. But that archipelago
has petered out. . . .

— And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
seventeen years ago come March. (155–56)

The stanza is marked by two revelatory cries of pain, one attending Crusoe's professed passion for "[his] dear Friday" and the other his acute recognition of creative/erotic island birthings emitting from his "blood" and "brain." Bishop finally activates the poem's recurring trope of birthing islands from erupted lava as an outpouring of Crusoe's queer desire for Friday. However, Crusoe's momentary epiphany remains only a distant intimation of irretrievably lost connection. He tuned out the beckoning elemental history that might have brought him home to Friday's love, and now "that archipelago [of desire] has petered out."

As an Anthropocene narrative, "Crusoe" devotes its full (imagist) aesthetic and naturalist attention to the island's pulsing, living geologic "body." From the island section's opening stanzas, we are enmeshed in the crisscrossing and self-touching of its multidirectional, textured flows and pointed geometries. Hexagonal rollers "closing in," thick, hissing, marbled lava-folds "running out to sea," leave pied, sifted points of light – "black, red, and white, and gray." Even at its most surrealistic moments of hissing rain and perambulating turtles, Crusoe's Galapagos Island is more vibrant than he; its beckoning surround multiplying endlessly beyond his reach. Perhaps intentionally, "Crusoe"'s conclusion in the emptiness and stillness of a prefabricated apartment refers back to "Questions" implicitly impoverished, homebound Pascal "just sitting quietly in one's room" in that happier Darwinian allegory of the Brazil years. With regard to Anthropocene feminism, Crusoe's felt enmeshment in the planet's geological ancestral past is directly linked to the "differently" defined queer desire he belatedly discovers coursing through his "blood" and "brain." As mentioned above, Bishop's unenlightened Crusoe might be a type of the patriarchal oblivious *anthropos* discovering the consequences of his neglect only after it is too late. Within the poem itself, "Crusoe's" conclusion effectively forms a counternarrative, opposing the appropriating patriarchal *anthropos* with a "differently" sexed, ecological relation to our planet.

"Vague Poem"

Roughly a year after completing her elegiac "Crusoe," Bishop composed her most brazenly lesbian and Darwinian travel poem. In the interim, new-found love with Alice Methfessel, an actual trip to the Galapagos Islands, and her encounter with Oklahoma's famed geologic "rock rose" emboldened Bishop to improvise her own queered, scientific travel account. "Vague Poem" shares "Crusoe"'s overall form, moving from a Darwinian travel memory to the geologic epiphany of

emergent queer bodily love in the poem's final stanza. However, "Vague Poem"'s culminating epiphany enacts fully achieved desire in its full-blown "vision," here, of a definitively lesbian geologic ancestral past unfolding across the beloved's body – "flesh beginning, crystal by crystal." Crucially, the poem's occasion is the traveler/lover's long unspoken glimpse of her female beloved's breasts as she undresses in their bedroom. The bulk of this slight, yet exquisitely layered poem Bishop never published in her lifetime, however, focuses on a Darwinian travel narrative, recounting a female voyager's geologic plying of a glittering, rose-shaped lump in the sand. Only in the final stanza does she return to the present and acknowledge her beloved's nude body, envisioning the mysterious rose crystals' full formation through multiple geologic mediums across the beloved's "unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal." As mentioned, Bishop returns to her early preoccupation with an elusive, all-powerful maternal body in "Fishhouses" and "Iceberg." "Vague Poem" evokes the mineralized imagery variously of earth's primordial "rocky breasts" and "fleshed, fair" glacier cutting its occult, crystal facets "from within." We recall that Bishop attributed the final image of "Fishhouses" to a dream of her psychiatrist's breasts and transferred mother-love. However, crucially within "Vague Poem," the spectacle of a beloved's breasts does not implicate the loop of repetition-compulsion in a psychic reenactment of mother lost or mother regained. Nor does the strange rosette-shaped crystal serve merely as a fetishistic metaphor for the female body's erogenous zones. Rather, Bishop's traveler/lover is impelled outward by desire to contemplate the proliferating flows of earth's geologic ancestral past. As we will see, Bishop's traveler slowly amasses key regional and specific "clues" to the half-formed "rose-like" shape's formation. Simultaneously, the poem's ensuing unfolding geologic ancestral past remains pervasively constructed as queer by its association with these earlier Freudian works and mythic female imagery. Bishop's equation of female occult crystals and primordial landforms with an all-powerful maternal body is surely among the interwoven human "stories" compelling "Vague Poem"'s impulse to limn the crystal's actual forces and trajectories. Indeed, "Vague Poem" particularly demonstrates Bishop's relocation of those early rocky Freudian psychosexual realms in the real of Darwinian geologic history. Correspondingly, if "Crusoe" chronicled the self-referential mind ultimately "broken down," "Vague Poem" sought to achieve "the opposite effect." Here Bishop reclaims for emergent lesbian desire/the body Darwin's slide into the "unknown" of earth's constantly shifting crustal history.

Poetically, "Vague Poem" fully adapts her Darwin letter's quest pattern from facts and "minute details" to Romantic epiphany. I therefore read "Vague Poem" against Darwin's striking visionary passage depicting South America's elevating Andes Mountain chain, in which he models his geologic account after "Mont Blanc"'s prophetic vision of the forming Alps. In addition, this passage suggests a further affinity between Bishop's attraction to the curious, intricately crystallizing rose-shaped crystal and Darwin's well-known eye for nature's evolving, "hybrid"

details. In his geology, this trait frequently informed his entranced imaginings of once molten landforms' delicately crystallizing and petrifying plant life. Bishop would have recently reread the *Voyage*. In preparation for her 1971 trip to the Galapagos, she studied Darwin's *Beagle* travel narratives anew, remarking to James Merrill, "[I] now read only Darwin (and again, he is one of the people I like best in the world)" (*One Art* 543). Further, Bishop's underlined copy of the *Voyage* shows particular attention to his travels through South America's mountains, which first attracted her following the move to Brazil.

Darwin's Vision on the Andes Coast

Critic Jonathan Smith has discussed Darwin's derivation of this dramatic passage's poetic form from Shelley's "Mont Blanc," whose traveler experiences a "vision" of the Alps' ancient, glacial origins (105). Notably, Darwin updates Shelley's premodern catastrophic "flood of ruin" to accord with Lyell's modern theory of earth's constant, ongoing flux over vast time lapses. Darwin begins this passage by casting himself as the Shelleyan wanderer aspiring to cross a mountain range after a night spent at the Villa Vicencio: "The solitary hovel . . . mentioned by every traveller who has crossed the Andes." On his morning climb, Darwin distantly glimpses the dark "sublime" prospect of a ravine's "bare slope" with "some snow white projecting columns" (*Voyage* 333). Upon entering the ravine, he discovers a forest graveyard of petrified trees turned to stone by volcanic flows. Darwin briefly summons familiar dark "sublime" conjurings of a haunted, "irreclaimable desert." However, here Darwin stresses the glittering "clue" discovered in the crystallized trees' delicate tracery that perfectly "retained the impression of the [former] bark."

Overall, these marks will provide the key to the Andes Mountains' volcanic emergence. However, Darwin's pervasive aesthetic attraction to the Andes' petrified forests' strangely crystallized "bodies" compels him to visualize their internal processes of petrification; and he wonderingly reenters their ancient molten scene of transformation. "How surprising it is," he exclaims, "that every atom of the woody matter . . . should have been removed and replaced by [quartz fluids] so perfectly *that each vessel and pore* is preserved!" (353; emphasis added). Here Darwin dwells on the odd, fleshly emergence of these trees' delicately crystallizing vessels and pores seemingly forming anew from a subvisible exchange of atoms. As in Darwin's volcanic-island geologizing, the formerly dormant, "desert" landscape assumes fluid motion, actualizing geology's vibrant "geoaffect." And Darwin's close plying of the trees' delicate glittering imprints suggestively recalls Bishop's Darwin on the brink of vision, "his eyes fixed on facts and minute details." Accordingly, Darwin's palpable entrance into the trees' internal molten fluids inducts him successively into the Andes' large-scale volcanic, oceanic past. He launches into "vision," pronouncing, "It required little geological practice

to interpret the marvelous story which this scene at once unfolded.” Darwin’s ringing prophetic epiphany may not overtly resemble Bishop’s quieter depiction of the “lonely young man” “sliding giddily” into “the unknown.” However, Darwin here adopts the incantatory, Romantic prophetic form to which Bishop alludes. Assuming Shelley’s well-known prophetic rhetoric – “I saw . . . I now beheld” – Darwin envisions a once low-lying forest bordered by an ocean, successively pulled undersea by earth’s sinking crust, and reemerging over staggering time spans as a mountain range:

I saw the spot where a cluster of fine trees once waved their branches on the shores of the Atlantic . . . (now driven back 700 miles) . . . I saw . . . that subsequently this dry land, with its upright trees, had been let down into the depths of an ocean. In these depths, the formerly dry land was covered by sedimentary beds, and these again by enormous streams of submarine lava. . . . The ocean that received such thick masses must have been profoundly deep . . . and *I now beheld* the bed of that ocean forming a chain of mountains more than seven thousand feet in height . . . and the trees now changed into silex, were exposed projecting from the volcanic soil, now changed into rock. . . . (333–34; emphasis added)

Darwin’s “vision” follows the delicately crystallizing trees’ passage through multiple earthy, molten, stony mediums. Envisioning their once living outline pulled undersea by subsidence, he revisits the ocean floor. There Darwin witnesses the trees amid vast lava streams and accumulating marine sediment just as he earlier imagined their internal molten fluids simultaneously exchanging subvisible wood atoms for stone. Tracing the trees’ rising rebirth through large-scale sliding displacements of land and sea, Darwin’s meditation returns to their present configuration, now entirely crystallized and elevated atop a mountain range, “seven thousand feet in height.” Notably, Darwin’s use of the trees as markers for earth’s sliding, undulating crust demonstrates his more radical interpretation of Lyell’s theories, which biographer Sandra Herbert observes anticipated contemporary “plate tectonics” (356).

Before examining “Vague Poem,” it would be useful to summarize both the salient geologic details of the “rock rose”’s formation Bishop cryptically encodes in the poem and its continuities with Darwin’s Andes account.¹⁰ The so-called “rose rocks” or “rock roses” occur in Central Oklahoma’s dry tracts of yellow-red sandstone, where these crystals – resembling glittering, petrified roses – are now embedded. Apart from their petrified appearance, they share with Darwin’s crystallized, vesseled, and pored trees a similar undersea history and subsequent uplift atop elevated sea bottoms. Formed millions of years ago during the Permian age when Central Oklahoma was submerged under a shallow sea, the crystals percolated around quartz grains, creating their odd rosette-shaped “blooms” and acquiring shades of red from the surrounding yellow-red sediment. Over time, the land uplifted, and the sea retreated westward, leaving behind these rose-like geologic “clues” embedded in Oklahoma’s dry sandstone bands.

10 For a brief description of the “rock rose”’s geology, see London.

“Vague Poem”’s travel narrative begins as a casually uttered memory describing its speaker’s encounter with a half-formed “rock rose” in Oklahoma (where Bishop gave a reading). The details of the voyage dawn slowly as she muses out loud, “The trip west—/—I think I *dreamed* that trip / They talked a lot of ‘rose rocks’ or maybe ‘rock roses.’” In accord with Bishop’s everyday “sublime,” her traveler’s Darwinian exploration through remote desert wastes occurs “by the back door” of a female student’s “ramshackle house.” However, Bishop cryptically lays the geologic groundwork for her speaker’s quest in the interstices of the women’s opening conversation as they sift distractedly through dry sands. The traveler’s wondering astonishment at the student’s description of her now “far inland” shack as a “Navy house” suggests the region’s once close proximity to the sea, and the women puzzle over the processes of “geology” and crystal formation. These fragmented exchanges strategically draw Bishop’s traveler/reader toward her first intimations of underwater, percolating crystals and retreating seas, leaving a half-formed rose-like shape implanted in yellow-red sandstone bands:

She said she had some at her house.
 They were by the back door, she said.
 —a ramshackle house.
 An Army house? No, “A Navy house.” Yes,
 that far inland.

.....
 Later, as we drank tea from mugs, she found one,
 “A sort of one.” “This one is just beginning. See —
 you can see here, it’s beginning to look like a rose.
 It’s — well, a crystal, crystals form —
 I don’t know any geology myself” . . . (255; ellipses in original).

Following her host’s hastily abandoned attempt to describe how rose crystals “form,” “Vague Poem” shifts into the traveler’s rapt, solitary Darwinian meditation on the tiny glittering cross-kingdom “clue” unearthed amid dry “sepia” tracts. Here Darwin’s often horrifying, dark “sublime” prospect appears only monotonous: “There was nothing by the backdoor but dirt / or that same dry, monochrome sepia straw / [she’d] seen everywhere” (255). However, Bishop’s traveler/lover receives her first intimation of “sublime,” occult female powers emitting from deep within the crystal itself:

Faintly, I could make it out — perhaps — in the dull
 rose-red lump of, apparently soil [?]
 a rose-like shape; faint glitters/ Yes, perhaps
 there was a secret, powerful crystal at work inside. (255)¹¹

Again “Vague Poem”’s allusion to “a secret, powerful crystal at work inside” echoes Bishop’s reference to the “Iceberg’s” all-powerful she-glacier “cut[ting]

11 The question mark was inserted in an earlier draft (quod in Harrison 204).

its facets from within.” Further, “Vague Poem”’s (as yet unspoken) opening glance at her beloved’s breasts lends the same perilous *frisson* attaching to “Fishhouses”’ primordial, maternal “rocky breasts.” However, even as Bishop conjures the psychosexual longings inhering to these early maternal rockscapes, “Vague Poem”’s traveler does not dwell on the inner complexities of maternal loss and lack. Rather the ensuing stanzas move outward, Darwin-like, toward an increasingly ardent desire to limn the crystal’s geology. Indeed, the traveler’s above tender exchange with the rose crystal recalls Darwin’s wondering gaze at “each vessel and pore” of his petrified trees appearing in stony relief as he ponders its molecular laws of petrification. Bishop’s voyager similarly queries the emergent earthen contours of this “rose-like” shape whose tiny inset crystals glitter answeringly to her gaze – bespeaking actual, subvisible processes “at work inside.”

The traveler’s longing to grasp the precise causal chain behind her crystal’s growth pattern intensifies in the penultimate stanza:

I almost saw it: turning into a rose
without any of the intervening
roots, stem, buds, and so on; just
earth to rose and back again.
Crystallography and its laws:
something I once wanted badly to study,
until I learned that it would involve a lot of arithmetic,
that is mathematics. (255)

Bishop palpably strains to amass the telling geological “clues” that would enable her to enter the rose crystal’s earthen, evolutionary flowering. Here Bishop’s traveler resembles her voyaging Darwin fixing his eyes on “facts and minute details” before sliding into geologic vision. And while Bishop’s amateur geologist despairs over the seemingly impenetrable math of “Crystallography,” she struggles to synthesize the more experiential Darwinian “clues” dropped in earlier stanzas: intimations of retreating seas leaving a crystal-studded landscape “far inland, and a tiny rose-like shape pulsing with faint crystals.”¹²

In the final stanza, “Vague Poem” returns to the present and the beloved female body. Looping around to reference its opening lines – “[out west] they talked a lot of ‘rose rocks’ or ‘rock roses’” – Bishop’s traveler/lover first acknowledges the occasion of her travel memory: “just now when I saw you naked again, / I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock-rose . . .” (255). The renewed sight of her beloved’s now fully aroused “roses” catalyzes Bishop’s lover into the longed-for “vision” of crystal formation. Mentally gathering up and synthesizing all foregoing “facts and minute details,” like the Darwin of Bishop’s letter, she “sinks” or “slides giddily” into the “unknown,” here, of a powerful, still-forming female ancestral past:

12 Bishop was delighted to learn that Darwin failed Algebra. She underlined Darwin’s discussion of his “repugnance” to Algebra in the *Autobiography* (18).

Just now, when I saw you naked again,
I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock rose.
Rose, trying, working to show itself,
forming, folding over,
unimaginable connections, unseen shining edges. (255)

Again, Bishop's sparer imagist epiphany appears less boldly prophetic than Darwin's "vision" on the Andes coast. However, her seer assumes the same rhetoric – "I saw" – and, albeit more languid and sensuous, incantatory rhythms signaling a plunge into geological time's layered "body." Like Darwin, she revisits ancient sea beds, here witnessing the flash of petal-like laminate blades," "forming, folding over," emitting from "unseen" internal flows and "connections." And Bishop's scenario recalls Darwin's trees' similarly emergent, crystallized vessels and pores quickened by subvisible atomic fluids. Simultaneously, "Vague Poem"'s looping structure poetically relocates the crystal's formation within the vaster evolutionary sweep of Oklahoma's elevating ocean floors, retreating seas, and "far inland" tracts. We recall Darwin's delicately crystallizing trees transforming through large-scale molten, watery flows and rising atop the elevating Andes. With "Vague Poem"'s final lines, the traveler's newly forged connection to a female, queer ancestral past opens out and extends to intimacy/desire/the lesbian body. Here feminist materialist Stacy Alaimo's definition of "trans-corporeality" provides a useful concept for interpreting Bishop's "vision" of fluidly coextensive "bodies." Alaimo encourages feminist readings of those narratives in which human identity, desire, emergence are "inseparable" from our enmeshment in the nonhuman world. She conceives of this "trans-corporeality" as a real or imagined movement across bodies or a "contact zone" interfusing physical human and nonhuman processes (238). "Vague Poem"'s conclusion evokes a "trans-corporeal" spectacle, in which the rose-crystals' ongoing geologic formation through time flows into her beloved's increasingly aroused human "unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal" – enjoining her desires, stiffening breast-buds and dark "sex." The lover intones:

Rose-rock, unformed flesh beginning, crystal by crystal,
clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline nipples,
rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses
exacting roses from the body,
and the even darker, accurate, rose of sex – (255)

Unlike the troubled "Crusoe," Bishop's lesbian geologic narrative offers a rich, "differently" sexed/gendered alternative to the neglectful, appropriating history of the *anthropos* currently vexing geology's natural arc. Read in tandem with her early primordial psychic landscapes of queer desire/the female body, Bishop's poem illustrates how socially and culturally constructed narratives – literary, mythic, and psychological – may facilitate our ecological relation to crustal earth's creative flows and trajectories. And in keeping with Darwin's Lyellian modern scenarios,

Bishop effectively embeds both lovers in an ongoing, fluctuating geologic past, enfolding their immanent sexual intimacy and beyond.

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