

Commentary by Adele J. Haft

In "A Private Letter to Brazil" (1959), Gloria C. Oden (b. 1923) carries on a poetic dialogue with Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79).¹ Although Oden's poem opens by addressing a nameless "you," the lines "where it is you are (or often go), / RIO . . ." allude to Bishop, who was living in Petrópolis, just north of Rio de Janeiro.

Oden had reason to pay tribute to Bishop. A John Hay Whitney Fellowship, awarded to Oden after publication of her first collection,² led her, indirectly, to the older poet:

On my fellowship, I re-discovered Elizabeth Bishop's poetry.... I was so excited that when the very next day *The New York Times* announced that she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for 1956 in poetry, I sat down and dashed off a letter to her in Brazil never expecting a reply. But she did reply and even asked to see my poems. In her second letter she asked if I knew about Yaddo. I hadn't.³

Oden's 1956 residency at Yaddo, the prestigious poetry center in Saratoga Springs, introduced the budding African-American poet to a "literary world."⁴ Only afterward did she learn that Bishop had worked privately to secure the residency for her. Penned shortly after her time at Yaddo, "A Private Letter to Brazil" reveals Oden's gratitude and affection for her mentor.

"A Private Letter to Brazil" is also a meditation on a map in the tradition of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Map" (1935).⁵ Oden was inspired by Bishop's poem and devoted the first five stanzas to the image of mapped names exceeding their bounds: "The coastline bristles with place names. The pinch / in printing space has launched them offshore" to produce "the needle-pine alignment round SA." (Oden abbreviated "South America" to maintain the *aba, bcb* rhyme scheme of the *terza rima* measure.)

The beauty of this poem is that the map connects Oden to Bishop geographically and artistically: "The map shows me where it is you are." Oden composed her poem in New York City, where Bishop had written "The Map" a generation earlier. The map doubles as an alternative means of travel, allowing Oden a vicarious visit to Bishop's home. For both poets, land and sea interrelate so explicitly that Oden's oceanographic detail helps identify her source: the National Geographic Society's world map in the March 1957 *National Geographic Magazine*. The map has a political significance, one that further demonstrates what Oden and Bishop share. Though American-born, both poets had deep emotional ties to continents south of the Equator. Bishop lived in South America for twenty-three years, leaving only after her lover's suicide in 1974, while Oden regards Africa as her ancestral home.

By the poem's end, however, the relationship between poets gives way to an exploration of the fragility of human relationships. Racial issues become more

explicit. Oden "know[s]" the losses endured by enslaved Africans on "the roiling Middle Passage sea"⁶ as the trade currents brought them to the Caribbean and those "hopscoching islands that, loosely, moor / your continent to mine." Oden's description of the continental shelf off Rio – "Out there I know / the sounding is some deep 2000 feet, and the nationalized current tours so pregnant with *resacas*" – references the treacherous undertows that in turn remind her of the mythical lovers Hero and Leander, drowned in the Hellespont/Dardanelles while trying to bridge the currents between two other continents, Asia and Europe.

For Oden, Hero and Leander symbolized her own isolation. Although writing since she was six, she knew no other African-American poet until Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) began publishing his poetry in the 1960s. "A Private Letter to Brazil" records not only her geographical distance from Bishop, but also her fear of never really connecting, through poetry, with her own race or any other. Yet when this daughter and granddaughter of ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church gazed at her map of the world, she detected "the subtlety of God's great nature" beyond "man's terse grief." The world that the map allows us to imagine is no less a reflection than the map itself.

1. "A Private Letter to Brazil" was first published in the *Galley Sail Review* 1.4 (Autumn 1959), 7, although Oden – in telephone conversations with me on 9 August 1995 and 14 September 2007 – recalls having written the poem in 1956 or 1957. It has been reprinted in several anthologies since 1963, including Langston Hughes, ed., *New Negro Poets: U.S.A.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 91, from which, with minor changes and Oden's permission, our text derives.
2. *The Naked Frame: A Love Poem and Sonnets* (New York: Exposition Press, 1952).
3. Saunders Redding, "Interview with Gloria Oden," *Weid: The Sensibility Revue* 14.1 (March 1978), 17.
4. *Ibid.*, 12.
5. Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems: North and South – A Cold Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955); see also History of Cartography Project Broadsheet No. 5 and Adele J. Haft, "The Poet as Map-Maker," *Cartographic Perspectives* 38 (Winter 2001), 26-54.
6. Quoting C. K. Doreski, "Gloria Oden 'Looks' at Elizabeth Bishop," *Harvard Review* 16 (Spring 1999), 36-40.

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