
“Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!”: The Body in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Pink Dog”

Catherine Cucinella
California State University, San Marcos

Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Pink Dog” emerges as a blatant warning regarding the dangers of overtly flaunting the body, particularly an “unnatural” or deviant body. Yet this poem also makes clear that the attempt at hiding, disguising, or disavowing the body ultimately ends in failure. “Pink Dog” exemplifies more than any of Bishop’s other poems the Bishopian text’s fascination with the expressions of sexuality and gender as they play out on and through the body. Marilyn Lombardi argues that the “plight of the ‘depilated’ animal Bishop describes in ‘Pink Dog’ suggests the degree of dread that Bishop felt at the prospect of parading her body before the world.” Lombardi suggests that “Bishop uses the theatricality of verse to simultaneously unveil and disguise her unorthodox identity” (65). Lombardi’s argument closes the gap between Bishop, the writing subject, and the discursive subject of the poem, a gap that I insist must remain intact. An insistence on Bishop’s identification with the personae, speakers, or subjects of her poems limits rather than expands the possible significations that the Bishopian text promises. Rather than view Bishop’s “poetic personae—her masks [as] necessary” to shield her from the “world’s contempt” (65) as Lombardi does, these poetic personae, masks, masquerades, and performances combine to delineate the body with its attendant sexualities and desires. Specifically, “Pink Dog” presents a poetic body that occupies the site of the grotesque, a site that ultimately produces the abjected female body.

In this poem, body, sexuality, and gender all inhabit and embody the monstrous and the grotesque. Bernard McElroy identifies the grotesque as “something exceptional, something set apart or aberrant, and in its most extreme forms situated in the realm of fantasy, dream, or hallucination” (6). The representation of the body that emerges through the images in “Pink Dog” moves from the exceptional, a dog “naked and pink, without a single hair,” through the aberrant, a scabie-covered dog, to the fantastic, “a dog in *máscara*.” Bonnie Costello notes that “[i]n ‘Pink Dog’ Bishop makes her most complete and successful use of the grotesque;

its style, its imagery, and its tone are all intensely ambivalent” (*Questions* 86). This intense ambivalence attaches not only to style, imagery, and tone, but ambivalence also marks the poetic body in the poem.

The body in “Pink Dog” circulates within the realm of the grotesque, manifesting many attributes of the grotesque, but it does not become the grotesque body. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out that “[t]he grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context” (22). “Pink Dog” makes clear this intersection of the body with its “social or ecosystemic context” as it utilizes the realm of the grotesque both to expose and cover the body. Yet “Pink Dog” fails to represent the body as “a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange.” The body remains what Elizabeth Grosz calls “a most peculiar ‘thing’ . . . never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it ever quite manage to rise above the status of thing. Thus it is both a thing and a nonthing” (xi). The incongruity and inconsistency of this thing/nonthing accentuates the dynamic aspects of the body within “Pink Dog.”

Bishop’s poem emphasizes the mobility, mutability, and materiality of the body in the image of its pink and naked dog:

The sun is blazing and the sky is blue.
Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue.
Naked, you trot across the avenue.

Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare!
Naked and pink, without a single hair . . .
Startled, the passersby draw back and stare.

Of course they’re mortally afraid of rabies.
You are not mad; you have a case of scabies
but look intelligent. Where are your babies?

(A nursing mother, by those hanging teats.)
In what slum have you hidden them, poor bitch,
while you go begging, living by your wits? (190)

The body within this poem manifests as “naked and pink,” as a carrier of disease and contagion, “rabies” and “scabies,” and as “a nursing mother.” In addition, the representation of the body in “Pink Dog” presents a metaphoric connection between the female body and the body of a female dog, and it places that female body in all its grotesqueness in plain sight. The poetic body’s dependence upon excess visibility propels it to the limits of the grotesque and into the realm of abjection.

The grotesque's reliance on excess, multiplicity, distention, disproportion, exorbitance exaggerates the specular aspects of the body (Stallybrass and White 8, 23). The body, albeit a bitch's body, in "Pink Dog," both repels and attracts: "the passersby draw back and stare." The passersby "draw back" in order to distance themselves from, or to prevent physical contact, with the material body as they demand the spectacle of that body. As Guy Debord makes clear, the spectacle functions as a "means of unification," thus implying the existence of division and separation. Although Debord posits that "the spectacle appears at once as society [and] as a part of society," he does not argue for the marginalization of the spectacle (12). Indeed, the spectacle takes on the characteristics and the functions of the center as defined by structuralism. This spectacle as center governs the structure and limits the possibility of play within the totality. However, Debord goes on to stress that the spectacle places in view the mere appearance of human and social life: "[T]he spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances.... [I]t [is] a visible negation of life" (14). The spectacle, then, contains and enacts conflicting realities, coherence, and illusion. Thus the specular aspect of the body in "Pink Dog" engenders the repulsion and attraction felt by the passerby.

However, the very excessiveness of both the spectacle and the grotesque body draws on aspects of voyeurism and exhibitionism. I locate the move from the grotesque to the abject in this need to see and to be seen. The discursive body in the poem emerges as a site of ambivalence, a place that occupies both inside and outside, a location of shifting desires. "Pink Dog" utilizes the grotesque to present conflicting desires without any attempt to reconcile those desires. The speaker of "Pink Dog" revels in the visibility of the physical body while simultaneously abhorring intimate physical contact with the body. Costello argues that "[t]he grotesque style brings together (without resolution) the categories that our minds and our culture like to keep apart but that constantly converge in nature and in experience" ("Attractive Mortality" 126). "Pink Dog," however, refuses this moment of convergence by widening the gap between culture and the body. The body in the poem challenges social conventions not as a grotesque body, but rather as an abject being that refuses invisibility.

The pink dog defies cultural and social conventions by wandering the streets with "those hanging teats." The dog refuses to hide her femaleness as those teats serve as a constant reminder that the naked body, in the poem, is female. Within the Bakhtinian paradigm the grotesque concerns itself "with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth" (21). However, Bakhtin does not identify the grotesque as female. His concept of the lower

stratum refers not to a particularized, or even a universalized female body; rather, Bakhtin's lower stratum concerns "the fruitful earth and the womb" (21). The grotesque body within the Bakhtinian model represents the regeneration of life through processes of exchange, specifically through the cycles of birth and death. However, in "Pink Dog," this naked nursing mother materializes the grotesque body as a female body. By particularizing the grotesque body, the poem moves away from the celebratory aspect of the Bakhtinian model of the grotesque.

Scholarship on "Pink Dog," almost without exception, identifies the elements of the grotesque in the poem, and Bishop scholars (Costello, Lombardi, McCabe) examine Bishop's use of the grotesque along two lines. They identify a subversiveness in the grotesque, and they point to the marginalization—and Bishop's identification with that marginalization—of the grotesque. Lombardi places Bishop "on the border between male and female, right and wrong, life and death" (49), and Susan McCabe argues that "[a]s a poet who lived and wrote as exile, Bishop translates the marginal" (15). Costello argues, "[Bishop] writes from the margins, on the divide between culture and nature, a creature of both" (85). This critic offers the most clear cut statement regarding Bishop's use of the grotesque and her relation to it:

Bishop turns to carnivalesque images of the misfit who resists the social and cultural norms through which nature is disciplined and controlled.... Bishop takes on the stance of someone living within the fragile norms of the dominant culture, but susceptible to the challenge of the misfit, who embodies the expelled elements of the speaker's life. (80)

Once again a critic conflates Bishop, herself, with the speaker, personae or discursive subject of the poem. Clearly, Costello views the grotesque figure as a misfit, an outsider, and she insists on assigning Bishop that same outsider status. However, as Bakhtin points out, this notion of the grotesque as alien generates from Romanticism's perversion of the grotesque. These arguments also insist on the marginalization of the grotesque by locating the grotesque body on the periphery of society. However, the pink dog trots "across the avenue" in the blazing sun. The dog does not inhabit the margins; rather, the poem suggests that the marginal always already exists within the center.

In his work on the carnivalesque and the grotesque, Bakhtin argues that "[c]arnival laughter is the laughter of all the people ... [and] it is universal in scope" (11). Bakhtin also identifies "the grotesque body [as] cosmic and universal" (318). He does not marginalize the grotesque; instead, he finds it a means of materializing the "high, spiritual, ideal [and the] abstract" (19-20). As he disallows the marginal status of the grotesque, Bakhtin provides a way to read the grotesque as

celebratory and offers the carnival as a mode of liberation. However, Bahktin also points out that while carnival breaks down established order and suspends "hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" the liberation proves temporary (10). Nevertheless, for many critics, Bahktin offers a model through which to situate both Carnival and the grotesque in "Pink Dog."

However, the poem fails to depict a universalized or cosmic body, and it makes clear that any attempt to dismantle the status quo, however temporary, proves futile. The poetic body in "Pink Dog" becomes a very particularized body, and that body refuses the generative aspect that Bahktin locates in the grotesque. While Bahktin insists that "[i]n grotesque realism . . . the bodily element is deeply positive" (19) because the grotesque body represents regeneration, rebirth, and renewal, the body in "Pink Dog" seems neither positive nor generative. Instead, disease, contagion, and the feminine conflate in the naked body of the pink dog. At this intersection of fear of disease (rabies) and contaminated body (scabies), the abjected female body emerges. The poem does not present a marginalized grotesque body; rather, it represents an abjected body that inhabits both margin and center simultaneously.

Butler writes that the "matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (*Bodies* 3). In other words, subject formation demands non-subjects, "object beings" who both construct and remain outside of the "domain [of] the subject" in order to demarcate the parameters of that domain. Butler stresses that subject formation "requires an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex'" (3). This identification materializes the body, as well as puts in place sex and gender within regulatory and compulsory heterosexual practices. Subject formation, as well as a sexed and gendered identity, also depends upon a "repudiation which produces the domain of abjection" (3). The subject must cast away what becomes unthinkable and unlivable. This casting away suggests the centrality of the object to the subject. According to Butler,

The object designates . . . precisely those "unlivable" and uninhabitable zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (*Bodies* 3)

The domain of abjection contains all that the regulatory practices of patriarchy and heterosexuality prohibit. This object material comes from within the body, must be cast from the body, but more importantly, this refuse must remain visible. The body in "Pink Dog" does remain visible, and its visibility becomes a

reminder of a failed attempt to construct and control gender and sexuality. In other words, the abject female body in the poem carries with it not just the threat of disease and contagion, but also the threat of social upheaval. In addition, the poetic body complicates the binary structures of mind/body, sex/gender, male/female, and culture/nature because as the abject body it collapses meaning, signifies liminality, and refuses stasis. In her work on abjection, Julia Kristeva examines the construction of a proper social body within a psychological and subjective register. Although she argues that “[t]he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (1), for Kristeva abjection “does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*” (1). However, “Pink Dog” does imbue abjection with a representable object, the body. Kristeva’s theory of the abject locates the body, or more specifically, the orifices and products of these orifices, on the boundary between inside and outside. The abject disrupts identity, disturbs order and destabilizes systems. According to Kristeva the abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules. . . . [It is] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The abjected body resides in that Derridean space of play and *différance*. For Derrida the field of play becomes “a field of infinite substitutions . . . [because] there is something missing from it, a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions” (289). The substitutions or supplements that this field of play affords depends on the presence of “the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*” (289). Thus within Derrida’s paradigm, play’s potential for substitutions disrupts and defers meaning.

Abjection becomes “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). Thus abjection emerges as a place that makes possible multiple substitutions, subjectivities, and sexualities. The discursive body that circulates in “Pink Dog” invokes the abject and moves abjection from the realm of the psychological to the domain of the material body. Grosz points to the notion of abjection as the nexus between the “lived experience of the body and the social and culturally specific meanings of the body” (192). The poetic body in “Pink Dog” makes evident this linkage.

Bishop’s pink dog “trots across the avenue” in plain view and functions as a visual marker of a non-subject, an abject being. However, this very visibility and the dog’s refusal to occupy the margins prompts the speaker of the poem to offer both a solution and a warning:

Now look, the practical, the sensible
solution is to wear a *fantasia*.
Tonight you simply can’t afford to be a
n eyesore . . . (190-1)

Within the poem the pink dog poses a threat to the domain of the subject and to any certainty regarding a coherent sexual identity. Paradoxically, the advice to cover the body through masquerade further destabilizes subjectivity, gender, sexual identity, and traditional understandings of the body. In addition, a dog in costume becomes more noticeable, as Costello notes: "If a depilated dog does not look attractive, one in mascara, dressed up and dancing, is truly obscene" (86). However, obscenity does not threaten the sex/gender binarism; this challenge comes from the costuming or masquerade of the dog.

"Masquerade" suggests several possibilities: a disguise worn at a festive gathering, a false outward showing or a going about under false pretenses. In "Pink Dog" the speaker advises the dog to don masquerade in order to become invisible. The dog must cloak the body in invisibility in order to remove from view the threat of chaos and disorder that the abjected female body implies. By covering the dog's nakedness, the *fantasía* that the speaker proposes should disguise the feminine abject. However, the costume fails to mitigate the threat of the abject as it merely offers an illusion of conformity. Masquerade cannot and does not eliminate the chaotic or the disorderly; rather, it veils the threat in acceptability.

Masquerade serves yet another function as it unfixes gender from sex and sex from the body. Butler raises several questions regarding the link between masquerade and femininity. Her questions move toward detaching gender from the body and toward complicating notions of a coherent sexual identity. They also articulate the threat of the feminine, and perhaps the masquerade, to the stability of masculinity:

Does [masquerade] serve primarily to conceal or express a pre-given femininity, a feminine desire which would establish an insubordinate alterity to the masculine subject and expose the necessary failure of masculinity? Or is masquerade the means which femininity itself is *first* established.... (*Gender Trouble* 48)

The body, of course, emerges as the site on which and through which the expression of either masculinity or femininity occurs. Masquerade, however, offers an alternative to the body as a location for these articulations. In other words, the masquerade can enact gender independent from the sexed body. It can both conceal and express a sexed or gendered identity; this concealment and expression, however, rarely indicates a coherent or stable sexual identity. In "Pink Dog" masquerade serves to camouflage and to exhibit the body with its attendant sexualities.

The speaker insists that the dog cover her nakedness, her threat of contagion and her femaleness. Simultaneously, however, the speaker of the poem commands the pink dog to perform, to express her femininity through dance:

But no one will ever see a
dog in *máscara* this time of year.
Ash Wednesday'll come but Carnival is here.
What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?
They say that Carnival's degenerating
— radios, Americans, or something,
have ruined it completely. They're just talking.
Carnival is always wonderful!
A depilated dog would not look well.
Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival! (191)

In “Pink Dog” survival depends upon the dog’s ability to “dress up” and on her ability to “dance at Carnival.” In other words, the dog must assume a disguise and must also perform while in that disguise.

Although Bishop’s “Pink Dog” explicitly acknowledges the need for costume in order to render the abjected female body invisible, it implicitly recognizes that the masquerade renders female sexuality and female desire visible. However, without the masquerade the visibility of the body seems to threaten males within the Symbolic Order. Butler explains the threat that the exposed female body poses:

The [Symbolic] requires that castration is the “already having happened” for women ... whereas castration signifies as what is always almost happening for men, as anxiety and the fear of losing the phallus, where the loss that is feared is structurally emblemized by the feminine and, hence is a fear of becoming feminine, becoming abjected as the feminine.... (*Bodies* 205)

The feminine, “naked and pink” must be covered; unmasked this femaleness reminds males that they stand in danger of losing the phallus.

In the Lacanian paradigm, masquerade involves rejecting aspects of femininity in order for a woman to be “the signifier of the desire of the Other” (209). Lacan writes that “it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely all her attributes in the masquerade” (209). Lacan’s explanation suggests that the Other can desire the woman only when she hides the reminder of castration, in other words by masking both the body and sexuality. Unmasked female sexuality and female desire pose too great a threat to the male. Thus masquerade hides the female body allowing that body to stand in for the phallus, the signifier of desire, ultimately reinforcing the stability of masculinity.

However, as Butler points out, having the phallus generates from an impossible ideal and from an anxiety of masculinity. The dog in Bishop’s poem dons masquerade in order to lessen gender anxiety and to cover any reminders of loss,

yet the attempt fails. Butler argues that "[t]he having of the phallus as a site of anxiety is already the loss that it fears, and it is this recognition of the masculine implication in abjection that the feminine sees to defer" (*Bodies* 205). The naked and pink dog, walking the streets during Carnival in Brazil, symbolizes both loss and abjection. In Kristevian terms the dog's presence "represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that [filth] is a device of discriminations, of differences" (69). Loss, abjection and filth all construct and adhere to the poetic body in the poem; however, those elements are not the body.

The discursive body in "Pink Dog" emerges as female, as abject and as threat to the Symbolic within a psychoanalytical register. This poetic body also refuses relegation to the margins. The dog trots down the avenue, centering that which society deems marginal. Kristeva makes clear that the abject becomes "the jettisoned object [and] is radically excluded" (2). This exclusion occurs through the merger of the superego with the ego. This superego, according to Kristeva, requires the abject in order to solidify its own existence: "To each ego its object, to each superego its abject" (2). Finally, Kristeva locates abjection within the realm of desire: "I endure it [abjection], for I imagine that such is the desire of the other" (2). This abject both safeguards and annihilates. Its banishment consolidates the I, but its acknowledgment destroys the I. More specifically, the abject must remain in its place of "non-existence and hallucination" in order to keep intact the illusion of a unified subjectivity. Abjection also serves to stabilize the social order by siphoning off all bodies, all sexualities that exceed the limits imposed by cultural mandates.

"Pink Dog" foregrounds the dangers of excess within a society predicated on both patriarchy and heterosexuality. The warning the speaker issues to the hairless dog generates from an awareness of what Brazilian society does with those abject beings who insist on visibility:

Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,
to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?
They take and throw them in tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites
go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights
out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.
If they do all this to anyone who begs,
drugged, drunk, or sober with or without legs,
what would they do to sick, four legged dogs? (190)

Those who society attempts to confine to the margins, as well as the feminine, in “Pink Dog,” become “the jettisoned object” as they bob “in the ebbing sewage,” in the domain of the abject. In “Pink Dog” the feminine, as represented in the abjected body of a nursing naked dog, both threatens and solidifies culture, society, heterosexuality, patriarchy, and subjectivity.

The speaker’s insistence that the dog “wear a *fantasia*” carries with it an awareness of the cultural pressures to contain, control, and discipline the abject body and its excesses. However, this carefully chosen word, “*fantasia*” brings to the text a consciousness that costume, masquerade, and performance do not harness the body, sexuality, or desire. According to Carmen L. Oliveira, *fantasia* possesses a double meaning in Portuguese. It means both costume and illusion. This double meaning suggests masquerade always involves illusion, and, therefore, any attempt to cover the body becomes mere fantasy. Consequently, the body always remains visible. Ultimately, “Pink Dog” suggests the visibility of the body. It also points to the fantasy that underwrites notions of an unmediated body and to the fiction that insists on a coherent sexual identity. ✨

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Costello, Bonnie. “Attractive Mortality.” *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn Lombardi. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. 126-152.
- . *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Lombardi, Marilyn May. *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995.
- McCabe, Susan. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.
- McElroy, Bernard. *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.
- Oliveira, Carmen L. "Elizabeth Bishop and the Brazilian Genius." The Art of Elizabeth Bishop Conference. Ouro Prêto, Brazil. 21 May 1999.
- Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.