

Translating back P.K. Page's work: some comments on the translation of *Brazilian Journal* into Portuguese*

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Resumo: *Brazilian Journal*, da escritora e poeta canadense P. K. Page, é uma obra sobre o Brasil do final da década de 1950, que apresenta esse país a leitores canadenses. Neste trabalho, levanto algumas questões sobre a tradução dessa obra canadense para o português. Meu argumento é o de que a tradução de *Brazilian Journal* para leitores brasileiros, é, de certa forma, uma retradução, uma vez que a autora, ao escrever sobre o Brasil, “traduziu” o país para um público canadense. Discuto também algumas dificuldades de fazer uma tradução “fiel” do “original” canadense para o contexto brasileiro.

Abstract: P. K. Page's *Brazilian Journal* is based on the author's diaries written during the years 1957-1959 and depicts Brazil to Canadian readers. In this paper I argue that the translation of this work into Portuguese is an inviting and challenging task for a Brazilian reader, as the text is about the author's experience of Brazil and an attempt to translate the country for her Canadian audience. Her text reveals a respect and a love for the “original” observed content, which she wants to master and to which she wishes to be loyal. Page treats some questions of culture and language when she proposes to write about Brazil and these may bring some difficulties to the translator who wants to be “loyal to the original”.

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Anyone who really wants to translate must, first of all believe in what he translates (J. J. Breitinger)

The best way to love a text is to translate it
(H. Campos)

P. K. Page's *Brazilian Journal* is based on the author's diaries written during those "privileged years", 1957-1959, when she lived in Brazil together with her husband, William Arthur Erwin, who had been posted to Rio de Janeiro as Canadian ambassador. The book won the Hubert Evans Nonfiction Prize in 1987. The translation of P. K. Page's *Brazilian Journal* into Portuguese is an inviting and challenging work for a Brazilian reader, as I consider that the text is about the author's experience of Brazil and an attempt to translate the country for her Canadian audience. By translating her work into Brazilian, or the Portuguese language, one may have a translation back to the original world she perceived with Canadian eyes. Translating *Brazilian Journal* may then be seen as a way of juxtaposing, contrasting and approaching Canadian and Brazilian cultures. In her work Page teaches about Brazil to readers in English and translating her is a way of teaching a little of a Canadian text to Brazilian readers. Her reports on Brazil may not have lived up to the expectation of all Canadian audiences, but her text does reveal a respect and a love for the "original" observed content, which she wants to master and to which she wishes to be loyal. It is important to observe how Page treats some questions of culture and language when she proposes to write about Brazil.

Page reveals her yearning to translate the Brazilian world to her world, trying to define, and sometimes to name, what she sees in the country according to her worldview, her previous experiences that the novelty resembles, and her readings. In addition to this, one could claim that she sees and writes what she has words to shape, what her history of life permits her to describe and her privileged position as observer without being observed allows her to interpret.

The author converts Brazilian geography into Canadian comprehension. She informs, for example, that the difference between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo is "much greater than between Montreal and Toronto" (41). Referring to the state of Minas Gerais, she tempts the reader to "imagine Ontario being so named" (85). The Brazilian North-Eastern state of Bahia is "a tropical Quebec" (127) while

Curitiba, in Southern Brazil, “might have been Calgary” (142) and Brasília “dry and brown like Alberta or Canberra but with none of the redeeming features of either” (170). In order to give the Canadian reader an idea of the famous Iguçu Falls in Southern Brazil, the author writes: “it is a famous waterfall, more impressive than Niagara, we are told” (145). The New Year’s Eve festivities in Rio de Janeiro remind her “a little of Ottawa during the Marian Congress...” (192).

References to Canadian artists, writers and other personalities also fill Page’s work. *Brazilian Journal* is rich in references to painters, writers and personalities in general who are familiar to a Canadian audience, but who may be unknown to a non-Canadian reader. This also reveals the author’s tendency to transmit her Canadian view of Brazil back to Canada. The transition of this work into Portuguese will certainly require many footnotes with information about the names mentioned by the writer.

And how was this trans-lation or transference? What was the view that she transmitted to her audience or what was the image of Brazil that she “sells” to Canadians? These can be other important questions to be investigated in the book.

Briefly here, I would say that Page observes Brazil with glamour and grace, not only from the Official Residence and limousines, but, also from the football stadiums, theatres, museums and old churches.

On some occasions she is worried about not knowing Brazilians and she is careful in her judgments. She confesses at one moment that she is “much more interested in learning about Brazil than in talking” about herself (23).

There are a few occasions, however, when she assumes she knows Brazil and Brazilians, as for example when she writes that “we know what Brazilians like” (110). In this sense, the reader finds a certain ambivalence throughout the book. On one hand, one perceives a colonial vision of the country where she wants to experience her “tropical dream”. On the other hand, one reads her disapproval of foreigners who demonstrate having colonizing minds and do not acknowledge the value of the culture of the country. For instance, she criticizes members of North American communities; “for them Brazil is nothing but a series of smells — all unpleasant!” (67). This colonial and anti-colonial vision is perceptible throughout the book. Without making any excursions into Brazil’s economic problems or political situation, the country is, for her, full of colour and life and “alegre” (happy) people.

Another point the reader observes is that in her portrayal of

Brazil, Page reveals her worries of not being able to be “close to the original” Brazil. She knows that she is running the risk of being unfaithful to the Brazilian world and background. There are moments when she recognizes that she is incapable of depicting what she sees. For instance, Page says: “I wish I knew how to describe the vegetation, or indeed how to paint. It is so excessive” (15). She often reveals her desire to transmit to her audience what she sees and experiences in “the new world”, but feels incapable of doing it. At a moment she exclaims, “How could I possibly say that in English? I couldn’t. But in Portuguese...” (238). Telling her readers about the state of Bahia and its fruits, she tries to translate everything until she gets something untranslatable. She writes: “*jabuticaba*, this name is untranslatable” (134).

When she does not know the name of something, she reveals a wish to be precise in description. The details are colorful and pleasing to the readers as we see in the following example that there are “among the cerise flowers, six different kinds of small brilliant birds: one pair, finch like, of every conceivable shade and colour from turquoise through the jade-and yellow-greens to yellow” (24). Page also proves to be fond of defining and naming. When, for example, an insect found in the house is not “definable”, she keeps the Portuguese word “*bichos*” which means insect. She states that “in [her] bedroom at this moment there is a flying creature about two inches long. A cricket? A locust?... thousand of night insects – *bichos* – conjure up to Brazil” (15). Realizing that there is no way of translating into English a specific name, she opts in this case to keep the original non-academic language. She confesses that she has difficulty in naming and in defining things in this strange world when she notes that “the whole business of naming is curious” (209). Without knowing the language of the country well, she has some difficulties in exploring the whole meaning of Brazil. In her efforts to understand more Portuguese, and in being able to translate/ decipher what her curious eyes have been catching, she starts studying Portuguese and takes any opportunity to learn the language and its implications. She even writes receipts, notifications, speeches and notes in Portuguese. It is interesting to remember that she started painting after trying to fire a servant in Portuguese:

It [a pen] was on the desk when I gave Salvador his notice. My Portuguese still leans heavily on the dictionary. I was nervous. He was grand. It took me a long time. I doodled as I

talked and I fell in love with the nib, which is very black and totally indelible. "What's all this?" A. asked later, picking up the doodies from the desk. "That's me firing Salvador." "You could draw", said A. (59)

Language, or the lack of it, makes her partially disabled in revealing all her impressions of the country. "How crippled one is by the lack of language. Not only do I talk a kind of baby talk, with an appalling accent, but the things I actually say are often quite different from what I mean" (27). Her acknowledgements of the difficulties in decoding, interpreting and transmitting her feelings are visible throughout the book. On one occasion she makes fun of herself and tells us with loveliness of her misuse of the word *moça* (which in Portuguese means young girl) when she meant to say *maçã* (apple in Portuguese). She states, "Don't bring any more young girls, I say to the cook. Hours later I realize I meant *maçãs* (apples) not *moças*" (27).

Page's linguistic awareness is also visible when she makes the following interesting observation about the Portuguese language. "Portuguese is fascinating. In a country which, to us, seems to place small value on life there is little difference between 'to live', *morar*, and 'to die', *morrer*" (30). In another passage she comments on the word "papagaio" which means parrot: "The word for parrot sounds Like pappa guy". I wonder if that is what my grandfather meant when he said, "dressed up like a real pappa guy?" (34). Another very important observation is about a very popular carnival song in Brazil, *Se Amalia não quiser ir*: "Se Amalia não quiser ir, eu vou só – should Amalia not want to go, I shall go alone"; then the important remark: "future conditional in a popular song" (42). In fact, "quiser" is the future conditional of the verb "querer" meaning to want.

The author's observation of some words in Portuguese invites even Brazilian readers to think about their language. In this interesting observation about the word "arrumadeira" for house cleaner, for example, Page states: "employed a new upstairs maid, an arrumadeira – what a wonderful word. A room-adera. But that isn't what it means. *Arrumar* means to put in order" (109). What she does with Portuguese and English language manifests her fondness of language and names. Page also proclaims herself fascinated with the difference between texts and the spoken language: "Servants are not *criados* – a word originating with slavery, when a small child would be brought up in the house of the master and, in effect, "created" – but *empregados* or employees" (30). Her use of "meninos" (meaning little boys) when

addressing the academicians, those old and stern men of the Academy, is delightful (149). The very old members of the Academy of Letters might have felt praised or debauched.

It is very important to mention Page's interest in linguistics when related to the Portuguese language. One could argue that she reveals her consciousness of the value of language and keeps in her journal many the Portuguese words or expressions. The words in the original language help to illustrate what she cannot translate for the Canadian audience. This may suggest that she is aware that language is a mirror of the reality which she wants to portray. In this sense one could argue that by keeping the words in the original she escapes the danger of misinterpreting a culture and a vision of the world. On the other hand, one also knows that language may be interpreted as a means to manipulate reality and to emphasize only the aspects which are of interest to the observer.

Her awareness of the untranslatability of some expressions and words makes her register *saudade*, a word impossible to be translated into any other language; "And I felt certain *saudade* for the metal" (156). It is in this perspective that she keeps the words "favela" (slums), *cabra negra* (black goat), *quaresma* (lent), *alegre* (glad), *fazenda* (farm), *senhor*, *senhora* and "muito perigoso" (very dangerous), "promessas" (promises to saints) and many others in the original Portuguese.

One can also argue that on some occasions the names are given in Portuguese in order to portray the Brazilian view of the thing. When referring to a tree – new to her eye – for example, she writes that "from a distance the strangely bright *amêndoa de praia*" (5) and then she provides the reader with the translation in English in brackets. Sometimes she does not give the corresponding translation in English. Referring to the big house where they live she says that "it is [their] *palacete* and it is indeed that" (5). When referring to the work of the architect Niemeyer she says that it is "long, sinuous, low bridges on pylons, white as platinum against the green of the *mato* – with bright glimpses of the sea" (8). The word "*mato*" which means "forest" is not translated into English by Page. When she refers to Rio she exclaims in Portuguese "*cidade maravilhosa*" revealing also the Brazilian culture which has consecrated Rio as the most "wonderful city" within popular culture and in other means of communication (11).

Sometimes it seems that she even has a wish to teach the audience the Portuguese language which may have fascinated her. An example of this is when she says that "[they] drank a Brazilian

cocktail – made from *pinga*, a sugar cane liquor – which tasted very much like a daiquiri (13). She even reveals herself to be up-to-date with some terms: “...no *mordida* the little bite or bribe which makes everything possible” (45). Mentioning “painters, electricians, and plumbers” she notes that the word for these is *bombeiro* “which also means firemen and spies” (18). Here the author may be teaching Portuguese even to some Brazilians who are not from Rio de Janeiro; outside Rio “bombeiros” means only “firemen”. On some occasions, however, Page reveals that her desire to transmit the willingness to learn the language is deeper than her knowledge of some of the intricacies of it. When she describes the house she is supposed to live in she writes that “lavatories, record-player, and telephones *não trabalham* – don’t work yet” (16). One who is acquainted with the Portuguese language knows that, when referring to objects, we do not say “*não trabalham*” but “*não funcionam*”.

On another instance, intending to inform the reader about the title of a Nelson Rodrigues’ play *Perdoa-me por me traíres* she writes “which I think means *Forgive me my trespasses*” (124) when the real meaning is quite different, “*Forgive me for letting you betray me*”. This just shows how interested she was in the Portuguese language and a mistake such as this is quite forgivable if one considers the brief contact she had had with the language. Her restlessness about her difficulties in Portuguese reveals how much she wanted to plunge herself into Brazilian culture. To learn more, to describe more, to express better her feeling, and even to be more Brazilian, she states: “I could be a gaúcho. Only need to speak a better Portuguese” (96).

As Page gradually learns the Brazilian language, she talks in Portuguese not only to the servants, but to charitable organizations, to the “Academia Brasileira de Letras” (Brazilian Academy of Letters), and to governors such as Jorge Lacerda in Santa Catarina. She also informs the reader that she is reading a novel in Portuguese (55). Her translation of Emily Dickinson from English into Portuguese reveals her desire to use the language in literature as well. One can add to this the fact that she even wrote poems in Portuguese. One could argue that Page’s love for Brazilian culture and for the Portuguese language leads her to criticize those foreigners who had been living in Brazil, and who do not have interest in Brazilian people and the language. “They lived there twenty years as if on the point of retuning ‘home’, and so had taken little interest in the local people or sights. The manager’s wife, in fact, spoke hardly a word in Portuguese...” (99). She reveals her increasing interest and involvement in Brazil, and her anxiety to convert to a Canadian audience everything that her

“uneducated eyes” see and what her educated mind can interpret.

Page reveals the need to experience a new identity and to interpret the new reality at the same time that she shows her awareness of the danger of representation and of her limits as a singular viewer. She reminds the reader of her difficult position from which she is unable to decipher the others’ reality. In expressions such as “to my eye” or my “uneducated eyes” and “I wish I knew” she clarifies that she does not want to assume that what she writes about the country is the absolute truth about Brazil. She further clarifies that “[her] point of view may not represent that of most Canadian women...” (164).

For some critics the book lacks the moral indignation, or an interventionist position towards some social problems such as the favelas which, for Page, are beautiful.

Denise Adele Heaps, for example, states when referring to the favelas, that “one waits to hear from her heart and head, one waits for commentary on this social horror”¹. One could ask, however, does a travel book have to contain judgments, critique and interventionist positions towards the country visited? Similar to Denise Heaps, Janet Giltrow praises Page’s work but reveals a desire for a text that repeats some old stereotypes of the country: “Some readers of *Brazilian Journal* might want Page to make some excursion, a day trip at least into economic agonies... to view relics of genocide”². These critics may be overlooking the fact that Page had a diplomatic position and had to be neutral, avoiding any moral outcry or judgment. Besides, any censure of the country observed could also be interpreted as a “colonizing” view. It is important to mention that Page does make some comments on the social and economic situation of the country. For instance, after describing the beauty of Campos do Jordão, in the hills of São Paulo state, she observes that poverty in the region was more sufferable than in Rio because of the cold weather there. She mentions poverty in Bahia or the fact that she never met a black person at a party (76). At the Brazilian Academy of Letters she mentions that women writers are not as respected as politicians’ wives. Thus, more than reaffirming old “truths” or creating new ones about the country, Page seems to be interested in describing Brazil without any judgment. She ends up not living up to some critics’

¹ HEAPS, Denise Adele. P.K. Page’s *Brazilian Journal*: language shock. *Biography: an Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, v. 19, n. 4, p. 358.

² GILTROW, Janet. Foreign exchange: taking Brazil at face value. *West Coast Review*, v. 22, n. 2, p. 65-76, Fall 1987.

expectations.

Page is also aware that the country has transformed or, one could say, “translated” her. Referring to the heat in Brazil she mentions that she has often slept naked. For example, the following passage reveals sensuality and eroticism: “Sitting naked, immediately following a cold shower, I am covered with a profusion of valueless pearls of my own manufacture, cascading down my neck, breasts, and kegs” (211). In contrast to some critics, I would argue that it is impossible that this text is disembodied or asexual. In this sense I think Brazil transforms her, as she herself realizes when she asks “what is this revulsion in me against all the values I was brought to respect?” (65) At the end of her stay she confirms this transformation when she states: “Sorry to leave my Brazilian self, so different from my Canadian self – freer, more demonstrative” (238). One could argue that this is another instance of her “acclimatizing” to the Brazilian atmosphere. She really goes through a transformation (translation?) absorbing Brazilian sentiment and culture. “Disturbed and excited by Brazil. Why? What is it all about? Does a place alter a person?” (46).

Considering these questions of translation, translating and being translated in mind, there are some points worth thinking about when one considers the translation of *Brazilian Journal* into Portuguese. In my work of translating it into Portuguese I recognize that it is necessary to be aware of all these linguistic and cultural implications. Sometimes it is necessary to keep the words or expressions in English and in Portuguese following Page’s very example.

In addition to this, references to Canadian culture must be contextualized to Brazilian audiences. I believe that one can think of translation, in this case, as a very important instrument in the comparison of two cultures (Page’s text registers an important period of Brazilian life which deserves to be known by Brazilian audiences as well). In this sense, a translation may be a way of taking a position, or of giving the Brazilian audience the possibility of observing a Canadian view of our country.

It is important for Brazilians to know how a woman occupying a privileged position in a First World country sees and interprets their world and culture. Why not say that the translation can be a way of inviting Brazilians to remember and rethink a not-too-far past, and to get acquainted with some aspects of Canadian culture?

Gayatri Spivak affirms that in translating one should go through a process of “love and surrender” towards the original. This love for the original one feels in Page if one considers that Brazil was her original. I do believe that the text is really an important work which

deserves to be known by Brazilian audience as well. In this sense the translation of *Brazilian Journal* would be a response to a dialogue proposed by its author. Her goal seems to be to decipher and interpret Brazil to her Canadian audience. The aim of translating her work into Portuguese is to make it accessible and enjoyable to Brazilian readers.

This translation, besides the cultural aspects, involves some linguistic issues which are worthy of consideration. The task of translating un-gendered English language to the gendered Portuguese requires ability and creativity. The text contains several examples when referring to names belonging to the Brazilian fauna and flora. There is, however, a particular example in which does gender a bird but differently from Portuguese. Referring to “arara” which in Portuguese is generally designated with the feminine “ela” (she), Page writes that “He is a remarkable and comical bird and he smells slightly of pepper”. A translation in Portuguese will require that “he” be translated into “she”, as “arara” or macaw are generally designated in the feminine. Another similar example occurs when she refers to the small lizard “five inches from nose tip to tail tip, scurried about importantly with a green leaf-insect in his jaws”. In Portuguese this small lizard is named “lagartixa” which is generally feminine. When referring to an old tree she observes: “such an old of a grandfather tree” (24). Again she gendered an ungendered word and does so by giving it a masculine form when in the original language it is feminine. As Christine Klein-Lataud affirms, “une langue sans genre, comme l’anglais, peut, par le jeu de personification, opérer une catégorisation sexuelle d’un inanimé. Et une certaine liberté existe dans le choix du sex, malgré des traditions culturelles”³. When Page personifies some engendered words, most of the times, she converts them to the masculine. Questions such as these demand attention and care in order to keep the dialogue open between the two cultures.

The task of the translator here is also to provide the reader with footnotes which can explain what is unfamiliar to the target culture. It is necessary to listen to the author’s voice and to the Brazilian voice. If the translator can accomplish this, as well as keep in mind the audience’s requirements and maintain the writer’s world view, the translation of this work may facilitate a bond and love between the original and the target culture. As Samia Mehler claims, translation has to, in some way, form a bridge between the two cultures and “a

³ KLEIN-LATAUD, Christine. Le soleil a rendez-vous avec la lune... ou des problèmes posés par le genre dans la traduction vers le français. *TTR*, v. 9, n. 2, p. 156, 2. sem. 1996.

love which permits the rupture and that maintains the action of the translator and the need of his audience, real or imagined” (127)⁴. The translation of Page’s text may form a bridge between Canadian and Brazilian cultures. It is a matter of approximation and in this sense, one has to remember Barbara Godard’s statement that “translation is an art of approach” (81)⁵. Therefore, a work like this must be an enjoyable task with much relativization, dialogue, creativity, and mediation of differences.

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⁴ MEHER, Samia. In: CARBONELL I CORTÉS, Ovidi. *Traducir al Otro: traducción, exotismo, poscolonialismo*. Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla, 1997.

⁵ GODARD, Barbara. A translator’s journal. In: SIMON, Sherry (ed.). *Culture in Transit: translating the Literature of Quebec*. Montréal: Vehicle Press, 1995.