

“Seeing with a so-called fresh eye”: Revisiting P.K. Page’s writings on Brazil

“Vendo com os ditos novos olhos”: Revisitando os escritos de P.K. Page sobre o Brasil

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Submetido em 26 de maio e aprovado em 29 de junho de 2016.

Abstract: The work of Canadian poet P.K. Page is mostly known in Brazil due to her depictions of this country in essays, poems, and in her travel book *Brazilian journal*. Such representations have been approached by critics both as creative experimentations in Page’s artistic career, and as ambiguous and problematic portraits, as they rely on the exotification of the other. Thus, in this article, I revisit Page’s writings on Brazil from the very space of contradiction that usually marks narratives of geographical displacement. Yet, I attempt to demonstrate that her experience in Brazil propelled her to reflect more intensely about an intrinsic connection between place and identity.

Keywords: P.K. Page. Travel. Identity. Brazilian representations.

Resumo: A obra da poetisa canadense P.K. Page é conhecida no Brasil principalmente devido ao livro *Brazilian Journal* e a outros ensaios e poemas nos quais a autora retrata o país. Suas representações do Brasil têm sido abordadas tanto como espaços de experimentação na carreira artística de Page, quanto como retratos ambíguos e problemáticos já que baseados na exotificação do outro. Assim, neste artigo, revisito os escritos de Page sobre o Brasil partindo justamente deste espaço de contradição que geralmente marca as narrativas sobre deslocamentos geográficos. No entanto, procuro demonstrar que a experiência de Page neste país a levou a refletir mais profundamente a relação intrínseca entre lugar e identidade.

Palavras-chave: P.K. Page. Viagem. Identidade. Representações do Brasil.

*No wonder External plays musical chairs
with its diplomats. Leave them too long
and osmosis sets in. Over time they take on
another identity, even their look
imperceptibly alters. (Three years in Brazil
and I was Brazilian. Clothes maketh man.
Clothes maketh woman. And hairdos as well!)
'Born in an oven would you be a bun?'
a question my father would fling at his young.
I don't know about 'born in', but 'buttered' you would
willy-nilly belong to the world of the bun.*

P.K. Page, *Hand luggage*

The poet P.K. Page is one of the most well-known and celebrated Canadian writers, not only in Canada, but also in many other countries, such as Brazil. Since the publication of her first poem, “The Moth,” in 1934,² when she was still making her first attempts in poetry writing, until her death in 2010, Page secured an important position both as a writer and as a visual artist³. She published more than thirty books, including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, a journal, children’s stories and a memoir. Moreover, in the last few years, her uncollected work is being edited, and part of it published, mainly thanks to the work that has been done by the editorial team led by the Canadian scholar Zailig Pollock (who is Page’s literary executive). Page has also been recognized for her visual art, having guaranteed a space in some of the largest and most important galleries in Canada, such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

In Brazil, Page is mostly known for her depictions of this country in some of her poems and in prose pieces such as *Brazilian journal*. The latter is a travel narrative originally published in 1987, which received a revised edition organized by Suzanne Bailey and Christopher Doody and was published in 2011. Page’s writing on Brazil is mostly based on her experience living in the country between the years of 1957 and 1959, when her husband, Arthur Irwin, by then a Canadian diplomat, was assigned to a post in Brazil. During their stay, both Page and Irwin lived in the city of Rio de Janeiro, but they also travelled extensively in the country, visiting places from Pelotas, in Rio Grande do Sul, to Manaus, in Amazonas. Due to Page’s vivid descriptions of the Brazilian land and its people and to the kinds of effects that her experience in the country had in her creative work, her writings on Brazil have been approached in a variety of forms.

On the one hand, critics have seen it as a space for Page’s considerations regarding her turn to visual art. In fact, Suzanne Bailey suggests that even Page herself, when editing *Brazilian journal*, tried to emphasize her new interests in art: “As Page prepared her journals for publication, she had come to see Brazil as marking a significant turning point in her career, something which was not, of course, apparent to her at the time she was writing the journal” (2011, p. 8). On the other hand, critics have also pointed out the fact that, besides being a space for artistic experimentations, Brazil is also often depicted in

Page's writing as a place where the poet's "hungry eyes" (Page, 2011, p. 108) reconstruct and take pleasure in the exotic difference. Denise A. Heaps, for example, describes Page's approach to Brazil as a "voyeuristic experience" (1996, p. 357). According to Heaps, the aesthetic nature of Page's images and the lack of a deeper political commitment and social commentary are "disconcerting" and "distancing features" (1996, p. 357); she also adds: "Page's tendency to aestheticize has an anaesthetizing effect" (1996, p. 358), preventing her from deeply engaging with Brazilian social and cultural realities. In a similar line of thought, Sandra R. G. Almeida argues that, when living in and writing about Brazil, Page inevitably occupies an ambiguous position because, although she expresses her interest and admiration for the Brazilian scenery, her descriptions also reveal her position as a visitor or tourist "who decode[s] stereotypical images of an exotic country" (2009, p. 111)⁴. Also, as Bailey suggests, Page's reactions to and depictions of Brazil demonstrate "that she is drawn by some of the responses that have been seen as problematic in the study of travel writing, including the lure of the exotic and the aestheticization of spaces" (2013, p. 53).

Bearing such context in mind, in this article I revisit Page's writings on Brazil from this very space of ambiguity and contradiction that usually marks narratives of geographical displacement. However, instead of looking at Page's depictions as only a space for artistic creation and for the celebration of the exotic difference, I also see them as a space for the problematization of representational practices. One of the aspects that constantly re-appears in Page's writings and statements about Brazil is in regards to how much the country affected her. As she states in an interview from 1975, "Brazil was probably the real experience, the real geographical experience of my life" (apud BAILEY, 2011, p. 16). Such a strong connection with the country is not only reiterated in *Brazilian journal*, where she claims to be "falling in love with the world" (2011, p. 98), but it is once more recovered later in her life, in her memoir *Hand luggage*, in which she states: "But living there, I was italicized. Some / curious alchemy altered my font" (2006, p. 70). In fact, as the epigraph which opens this present work also suggests, it is possible to argue that Page's experience in Brazil prepared (or propelled) her to reflect about a more intrinsic connection between place and identity. In this context, I suggest that Page's writings on Brazil can be seen as a significant space to reflect about

such connection, particularly if we consider the interrelations among three different, but important, moments in her writing: her essay "Questions and images" (originally published in 1969), *Brazilian journal* (originally published in 1987), and *Hand luggage*, published in 2006⁵. By re-connecting these three writing pieces, it is possible to look at Page's representations of Brazil not only as a re-discovery of a South-American other, but also as a location for further elaborations on the interconnections between displacement, identity, and representation.

The luring of images: Page as a re-discoverer

Apart from a few poems on Brazil and Mexico Page published when she was already back in Canada after a ten year span living abroad with her husband, the essay "Questions and images" is one of Page's first attempts to publicly represent her experience living in different countries in the Americas. However, more than an account of her travels, this essay could actually be considered as Page's theoretical attempt to articulate notions about her poetical practices. In his introduction to Page's collection of essays titled *The filled pen*, Zailig Pollock argues that this might be one of her most important essays mainly due to its suggestive insights on Page's poetics. For him, both "Questions and images" and "Traveller, conjuror, journeyman" are what he would call "autobiographies of the imagination, the only kind of autobiography that Page is interested in writing" (2007, p. xiii). Indeed, particularly in "Questions and images", Page tries to articulate her considerations on the kinds of images the countries she lived in provided her with, but she also reflects on what is involved in observation and representation.

It is intriguing to note that Page chooses to start "Questions and images" with a connection. She opens her essay by stating: "The last ten years span three distinct places – and phases – in my life: Brazil, Mexico, Canada, in that order. All countries of the new world" (2007, p. 35). Brazil, Mexico and Canada, with possibly irreconcilable differences in their histories, traditions, and cultures, are united in Page's sentence through their locations as "countries of the new world". For her, the "new world" is indeed "new" to her eyes, which are not exactly accustomed to its cultural differences, and the notion of "re-discovery" seems to be inevitably connected to Page's travel experiences. In her

crossing of boundaries in South and North Americas, Page is overcome by images: from the Brazilian “flowering jungle” with its kapok tree, flamboyant, and Doric palms, together with “bands of multi-coloured birds” and “[b]utterflies as large as flying hands” (2007, p.35), to the “images of darkness” that “hovered for [her] in the Mexican sunlight” (2007, p.37). Also, when finally she returns to Canada, there is “the start of a new day”, which is permeated by “the culture shock of homecoming” (2007, p. 40). With these experiences, Page is in a way re-occupying the position of the travelling explorer, who crosses boundaries and encounters different peoples, cultures, and traditions. She discovers herself as a “re-discoverer” as well, realizing she is traversing North and South, finding and “cataloguing” new images.

Such “cataloguing” is also strongly present in *Brazilian journal*, particularly due to Page’s interest in observing and describing what she sees around her, mainly in nature. Throughout the book, she comments on the amazing natural scenery surrounding the ambassadorial house, and, as if a natural explorer, she tries to describe the newness of what she calls the “maze of tropical life” (2011, p. 61) in detail. There are many entries in her journal, especially from her first months in the country, in which Page takes notes about nature:

Notes on flora and fauna: in the garden a bird like a yellow-bellied fly-catcher. Trying to find it in the inadequate bird books we have acquired... (2011, p. 39).

Notes on fauna: yesterday, flying over the lotus pool, dragonflies of bright cerise with blue wings. A friend once said that cerise was hideous and not a true colour. When I asked what she meant by ‘true’ she said it was not found in nature. She had certainly not observed nature in the tropics... (2011, p. 45-46).

Fauna continue to be interesting. Tonight a small lizard, five inches from nose-tip to tail-tip, scurried about importantly with a green leaf-insect in his jaws. (2011, p. 47).

Nature notes: saw one other kind of bird in the hoary old tree – a creeper-cum-woodpecker – small, mottled, yellow-headed. (2011, p. 61).

Through such notes, Page seems to engage with a tradition of travel and exploration in which careful annotation of natural scenery would somehow authenticate the experience of travel. Such characteristic is also noted in the writing produced by

the North-American poet Elizabeth Bishop, who was a contemporary of Page, and who lived in and wrote about Brazil as well, experimenting with her descriptions of Brazilian scenery mainly in her letter (BECK, 2015, p. 64). Similarly to Bishop, Page's notes on nature demarcate her position as an external observer, gradually "learning" about the country. Moreover, besides these annotations on nature, in the journal, Page very often carefully describes the colours, the texture, and the impressions of a particular place or sight. It is, then, not hard to see the reasons why critics have pointed out Page's tendency to "aestheticize" her experience (HEAPS, 1996; ALMEIDA, 2009; MARTINS, 2015): "Home by the beach road again – the pounding sea on one side, the lagoon on the other, and an evening mist giving the impression that spume illuminated the dark land. Earlier it had been bathed in a smoky blue, translucent and luminous" (2011, p. 107). Brazilian scenery is, for Page, enveloped in beauty, and she does not tire of portraying it.

If we think about Page's descriptions as what Laurie Ann McNeill called as "postcards to her selves" (2004, p. 67), it becomes significant to perceive that the images collected in her journal somehow help her re-signify the Brazilian difference later in her life when she is back in Canada. Moreover, such "postcards" recreate Brazil to a foreign audience, particularly after the publication of the journal in book format. In this context, Page's writing in *Brazilian journal* becomes a narrative of re-discovery, which, as Sandra R. G. Almeida has suggested, "evoke[s] the famous discovery letter by Pero Vaz de Caminha, written in May 1500 to inform the King of Portugal of the discovery of Brazil in terms that emphasize the fascination with the natural scenery they encounter—the excess, the fertility and the beauty of the 'terra brasilis'" (2009, p. 112). Thus, the "amalgamation" of images collected in *Brazilian journal* absorbs difference and tries to order it in coherent portraits, revealing an interest in "looking out" and in gazing at difference.

This external gaze that "reports" on the other somehow echoes Page's role in diplomatic affairs. As Janet Giltrow reminds us, when Page and her husband move to Brazil, they "assume ambassadorial functions, perspectives and behaviours" (1987, p. 66), and it is from this position they observe and view Brazil. In this sense, Page's narrative is also informed by her diplomatic role in international relations, and by her negotiations between subjectivity and protocol, or between what is expected from her and

how she experiences her other. This awareness about the position she occupies in Brazil permeates *Brazilian journal*, where she dedicates many pages of her diary annotating all her duties and responsibilities as a diplomat's wife, from reporting on the house and its affairs to describing the kinds of job-related events she and her husband Arthur have to attend. Although diplomacy is not mentioned in the essay "Questions and images", in *Hand luggage*, her life as a diplomat's wife takes a stronger contour, even "framing" her descriptions of Brazil. This can be noticed in the following passage, where Page describes the kind of preparations they had to go through before moving to Brazil in their diplomatic roles:

We placed orders for foods to be shipped – this was part
of the ritual of going. Did Rio have none?
or was it that only Canadian food
was fit for Canadians? I didn't ask.
I followed the footsteps already laid down
in that as in other things. Hard to condone
how rapidly rebels comply and conform!
The Establishment smiles on quick studies and I
was a very quick study. I learned on the hoof. (2006, p. 47).

In this sense, the images of Brazil in Page's writings are, to a certain extent, filtered and framed by her position in external affairs, particularly if we consider what she writes about her first months in the country. One notices, for example, that the first entries of *Brazilian journal* are replete with comments on Page's domestic environment, describing their immense house with its unending problems, her many difficulties with staff, and her concerns with language and with how to perform her duties in such a new place.

The significance of Page's perspective and of her role as a diplomat's wife also demonstrates the tension involved in her travel experience. At the same time that her position guarantees certain privileges in terms of how she transits in the country, it also restricts her movements, as she has to follow protocol and to represent a particular social role. As she later suggests in *Hand luggage*: "[...] The car came and went / with me, like a parcel, delivered, picked up" (2006, p. 54). In this context, the pleasure she takes from the Brazilian beauty and its scenery could be translated into an attempt to take refuge from the constrictions of her position in the country. This tension is perceived, for example,

when she describes herself in the ambassadorial *palacete*⁶ as "...prowl[ing] about / in my cage. I was captive" (2006, p. 53); in opposition to such image, there is a sense of escape in her experimentations with Brazil's exuberance: "Whatever my sins, the ozone and sun, / balloon men, kite venders, the black boys who played / *futebol* for my pleasure against the pale sand -- / dissolved them like sugar in coffee. I soared, / a kite on a string. But I thought I was free" (2006, p. 55). If we consider Cynthia Enloe's suggestion that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the roles of women married to diplomats became much more visible since, although "[t]hey were not on the official payroll, [. . .] they were in their government's minds" (2000, p. 96), it is possible to argue that Page's position brings both privilege and tension to her experience in Brazil. It does allow her to collect the images she encounters in the new country, but it also confronts her with a "job" she would later describe as that of "Third Secretary's women" (2006, p. 49).

Such tension is also noted when Page contrasts her diplomatic experience to that of other diplomats' wives in Brazil. As we can see in *Brazilian journal*, some members of the "international political elite" would invariably try to caution Page about what to do or see in Brazil. For "Mrs. Argentina" (as Page calls these diplomats' wives), Brazil is "their hardest post—partly due to climate and partly because she cannot get good servants," and her practical advice to Page is "to have [her] ice made from bottled water, which freezes white; that way you know at a glance if it is safe" (2011, p. 59). For "Mrs. Israel," life in Rio was "difficult at first, but [...] after nine months, she finds it easier" (2011, p. 61), a comment to which Page adds, "Like a pregnancy?" (2011, p. 61). And for "Mrs. Swiss," it is not difficult to make Brazilian friends "if you let them know you like them" (2011, p. 63). Despite the fact that, by recording such views, Page also records the position from where she speaks, by bringing to the fore the more superficial aspects of what she calls the "make-believe" (2011, p. 56) game of diplomacy, she allows herself to leave her *palacete* and experience Rio de Janeiro and Brazilian life first hand.

In *Brazilian journal*, she records, for example, the fact that, differently from other wives who tell her "there is no point in trying to get to know Brazilians" (2011, p. 63), Page actually takes Portuguese lessons and tries to communicate with people around her. She also describes the many times she accompanies her husband in trips or meetings,

making an effort to get to know people. She records as well instances of driving by herself around Rio de Janeiro, and of making new friends, such as Helena, a Brazilian woman who shares similar interests with Page. Such experimentations in fact influence Page's views on the country. Thus, although I tend to agree with Giltrow's point that, in Brazil, Page "moves right into the house and witnesses Brazil of the late 1950s from that standpoint – from the pink palace, from the cortege of limousines, from the platform party" (1987, p. 66), it also seems important to note that she allows herself to be confronted by difference, be it related to "fruits [she] know[s] nothing about—taste, texture" (2011, p. 73), or to a party where she is the sole wife since "[o]nly husbands had been invited" (2011, p. 61), or even to the "intimacy" and "informality" of a "wood-burning sternwheeler" boat trip on the Amazon (2011, p. 272)⁷.

Page's encounters with the unexpectedness of Brazil gradually connect her to the country, leading her to suggest she is one of the few diplomat wives who adores Brazil since there is: "some indefinable element in the air [that] gives me a happiness I have never known before" (2011, p. 103). Such "indefinable element" is many times referred to as a special kind of vision, or as "[l]ife lived through a topaz" (2006, p. 58), which shows, as Almeida argues, that Page's experience in Brazil is "often described as an aesthetic experience" (2009, p. 112). For Almeida, Page's focus on beauty in *Brazilian journal* drives her away from social commentary about more difficult Brazilian realities. It is interesting to note, though, that this is an aspect later tackled by Page in *Hand luggage*. As if aware of the tension between her interest in scenery and a more socially engaged view of Brazil, Page writes in her memoir: "[...] To forget / certain things is impossible, even today, / some fifty years later – *favelas*—in fact. / A congenital blindness afflicted the rich. / Those born to the purple had dye in their eye, / or so I concluded. / How otherwise could they have lived with the poor in their faces and paid / so little attention?" (2006, p. 55). Yet, reflections such as this demonstrate the writer's attempt to distance herself from the privileged elite to which, in fact, she is a part of.

Another aspect that seems compelling in Page's descriptions about her connections with Brazil is her emphasis on the kinds of effects the country has on her. In this context, Brazil offers her both "artistic nurturing" and an inner sense of change and transformation.

There are many passages in *Brazilian journal* in which Page ponders about her changing self, and more than feeling able to impose her own meanings over the Brazilian other, she questions her background values, leading her to ask: “What is this revulsion in me against all the values I was brought up to respect?” (2011, p. 99). Such feeling is echoed in her memoir as well, where she writes: “Transformation. I changed. Someone in me was new. / Like an onion I seemed to shed skin after skin / or, more like a chart I had seen as a child / of the bodies – ethereal, astral and gross” (2006, p. 59-60). Thus, in her North and South-American crossings, Page does occupy the position of the traveller explorer, who collects images of an unexpected other. However, Page’s poetical “re-discoveries” are not only marked by a celebration of the exotic; they are actually permeated by a destabilized self, who observes and gazes, and who is also transformed during the travel experience.

“Roots exposed in the air”: Page’s inner transformations

In an essay about colonial travel writing, Brian Musgrove discusses about the political and ideological implications of geographical movement, suggesting that travel is not an unproblematic or transparent medium, not even for the traveller. Although Musgrove recognizes the ideological baggage carried by travellers, he reminds us that “the travel text is also a site of distress and unraveling” (1999, p. 31). Such recognition is a very intriguing aspect of Page’s writings on Brazil. As previously discussed, the country’s beauty fascinates her, possibly offering her an alternative space for her creative imagination. However, although Page’s writings tend to celebrate the fact that “Brazil pelted [her] with images” (2007, p. 35), it is exactly her attention to the details of these images and to the particularity of what she observes that leads her to unrest since it challenges her to re-think about her representational practices. In some passages of her journal, Page mentions her difficulty in writing, mainly in relation to her descriptions of Brazil. In “Questions and images”, such considerations are transformed into questions: “What was that golden shimmer, the bright pink shine of the anturias, the delicately and exactly drawn design of the macaw’s feathers?” (2007, p. 36). Brazilian nature nurtures Page as an artist; yet, unable to fully understand the foreign language Brazil as a whole represents to her, she is left with doubt and with a profound questioning of her poetical

voice, something that comes as a surprise for her, particularly due to the fact that, when she arrives in Brazil, she is already an award-winning poet. This paradoxical condition is also expressed in *Hand luggage*, albeit even more intensely: “How describe Ouro Preto (Black Gold), a small town / in Minas Gerais? And how come I can’t, / as a writer, find words? It is surely my job!” (2006, p. 62).

In this context, although Brazil is seen as a moment of “consummate bliss” (2006, p. 47), there is also a sense of loss or of something that cannot really be fully apprehended in the experience of difference, and it seems that Page recognizes the fallibility of her own language as a medium of representation. In *Hand luggage*, she suggests: “[n]o English vocabulary worked for Brazil” (2006, p. 59). But besides the idea of “translation”, Page actually becomes much more aware of the profound connections between language and identity, something she explores more deeply in “Questions and images”, when saying that Brazil was

[m]y first foreign language – to live in, that is – and the personality changes that accompany it. One is a toy at first, a doll. Then a child. Gradually, as vocabulary increases, an adult again. But a different adult. Who am I, then, that language can so change me? What is personality, identity? (2007, p. 36).

Looking back with my purely psychological eye through the long clear topaz of that day, I appear as a mute observer, an inarticulate listener, occupying another part of myself. (2007, p. 37).

As Michael Kowalewski has already suggested, the question of perception and the awareness of the limitations of knowledge in travel also “initiate,” according to him, “a humbling but not paralyzing self-examination” (1992, p. 10). Page’s travelling experience silences the writer. For most of the time she is in Brazil, she finds herself unable to poetically write about her experience; her own language fails her, but a new sense of self starts to emerge, possibly one that recognizes her own conditionings.

It is interesting to note, then, that according to scholars such Susan Bassnett, the connection between travel and transformation, especially regarding one’s identity, is a characteristic usually associated to the kinds of experiences portrayed by women writers. For Bassnett, “[o]ne of the themes running through many popular studies of

women travellers is the difference between their lives at home and life on the road. Women travellers are often presented as having been somehow able to break free of the constraints of contemporary society, realising their potential once outside the boundaries of a restrictive social order” (2002, p. 233-234). However, despite acknowledging the importance of experiences of travel for women as such experiences would allow them to more deeply explore new modes of identity, Bassnett also cautions the theorist or the critic who tends to celebrate geographical displacement as only a space of possibility (2002, p. 234). Based on Sara Mill’s discussion on women’s travel writing, Bassnett points out the fact that, for Mills, it would be problematic to approach women’s travel accounts as always liberating, since authors tend to fictionalize their writings, creating personas about their selves who might not be as free as they seem (p. 234). Although I do agree with both Bassnett’s and Mill’s cautioning regarding the romanticizing of travel experiences, it seems to me that the fictionalizing devices used by such authors do not necessarily de-authorize their searches for transformation and freedom, since still expressing a desire for liberation of domestic constraints. What seems significant in reading women’s travel narratives from the perspective of the recreation of identities is exactly the notion of revision or of confrontation in the face of difference. As Page suggests, in such process, one’s “roots [become] exposed to the air” (2007, p. 41), transforming the very ground where they used to be firmly planted.

This image of transformation connected to the experience of place is indeed key to a reading of Page’s writings on Brazil. Moreover, in *Brazilian journal*, change even takes a kind of metaphorical turn if one considers Page’s descriptions of nature, especially of trees. When she describes her observation of palm trees, more than once she refers to her fascination in looking at the ones which grow something like an “alien” element on them. In one of the passages, she writes:

Must write about the palms. Each palm at this season, regardless of its type, has grown a pair of antlers—one on either side of its trunk, and high up. [. . .] all the trees are turning into stags. [. . .] The traveller’s palm, however, which grows like a huge fan, squeezes an immense crested bird’s head of purple and white out from between its ribs. (2011, p. 204).

Page's imagery in relation to transformation and to the growing of different (or even alien) elements that modify the tree's "identity" shows how her observing eyes seem very much attentive to the possibilities of change. As the traveller's palm that grows a "bird's head between its ribs," Page also discovers a new set of "alien" elements departing from her, revealing some hidden aspects of her subjectivity.

In fact Heaps argues that Page's experience of Brazil "irrevocably transforms her" due to the cultural shock it provokes (1996, p. 359). For Heaps, Page's transformation is related to the discovery of a new medium of expression since, upon her arrival in Brazil, "she lost her access to the symbolic system of poetry, yet gained instead access to what was for her a new and different symbolic system – that of visual art" (1996, p. 359). Drawing and painting seem to come to Page from her inability to communicate, and she tells about her engagement with visual art not only in *Brazilian journal*, but also in "Questions and images" as well as in *Hand luggage*, where she writes: "I stared at blank paper, blank paper stared back. / Then, as if in a dream, the nib started to draw. / It drew what I saw. It was fearless – a child / approaching a fire not knowing it's hot / yet not being burned – a miraculous child" (2006, p. 59). As these verses demonstrate, drawing comes as a certain relief or salvation for the poetical mind, possibly offering Page a more objective means of expression. In "Questions and Images," she says: "I drew as if my life depended on it – each tile of each house, each leaf of each tree [. . .] And in drawing them all I seemed to make them mine, or make peace with them or them with me" (2007, p. 37). Drawing and painting become, for Page, ways to continue with her experimentations of Brazil, since the country seemed to defy linguistic translations.

However, even through drawing, the idea of a complete possession or comprehension of the other is frustrated, since representation is always a particular and localized experience. The objectivity Page seems to reach in painting or, as Almeida has called it, the aesthetic "re-possession" of Brazil (2001, p. 110), shows the poet's very dependence on what she sees around her. One example of this would be the description of an episode in *Brazilian journal*, when Page is in the countryside painting with her husband. Commenting on the way each one of them "sees" the natural landscape, Page says: "As I've noticed before, he is not the slave that I am. Before a canvas, he is God"

(2011, p. 245). By describing herself as a “slave” of her canvas, Page recognizes she does not feel completely free as a “creator of art”. There is something in her Brazilian surroundings that defies her sense of aesthetic comprehension; something which leads her, as the writer-painter-observer, back to her own means of representation.

This sense of “unfulfillment” is further discussed by Musgrove in his readings of travel narratives when he suggests that the traveller is usually caught between two worlds: “one of the concrete, of the objective, of desire satisfied through the written record of possession; the other is a world of frustration and derealisation, populated by mirages, spectres, ghosts, where the fantasies of possessing and occupying the other – of knowing, with any certainty – simply vanish” (40). Musgrove’s analysis echoes some of the concerns present in Page’s writing on Brazil. Despite her cataloguing of images, and of her “painterly” eye aesthetically reimagining Brazil, Page is also aware of the limits of her own representations. As she suggests in *Hand luggage*: [...] It is like Necker’s cube. / I catch it, and lose it. [...]” (2006, p.64). Such feeling of incomprehension is tackled in “Questions and images” as well, where more than seeing a lack of answers as interrupting her artistic imagination, Page describes it as leading her to a restructuring of her poetical practices: “I don’t know the answers to these questions but merely posing them moves more furniture” (2007, p. 41).

Concluding remarks

As it was possible to perceive through this revisited reading of Page’s writings, her experience of difference in South America, particularly in Brazil, deeply affected her, leading to a re-discovery not only of new surroundings but also of her own conditionings, both as a writer and as an artist. By being immersed in a culture where she has to learn everything anew, and by having to perform a new social role as a diplomat’s wife, Page turns to the Brazilian scenery for artistic nurturing, allowing herself to be “dazzled” by it (2006, p. 54). Yet, it is exactly the unexpectedness of this scenery that leads Page to the many layers involved in the acts of seeing and representing. According to Douglas Freake, in “Questions and images,” Page tries to formulate questions about the “mysteries of selfhood,” which are “crystallized in part by her experiences of life in Brazil and

Mexico, and then by the shock of her return to Canada” (1994, p. 94-95). Having to learn new cultural habits, new languages, new behaviours, and even new modes of artistic representation, Page realizes that her travel experiences deeply modify her, much more than she could have anticipated.

Moreover, considering Zailig Pollock’s argument that the essay “Questions and images” could be seen as a kind of “autobiography of the imagination”, it is significant to note Page’s considerations about her return to Canada after having spent ten years living abroad. In the essay, she writes: “[o]ne returns different, to a different place, misled by the belief that neither has changed. Yet I am grateful for the shocks. The conditioning process which turns live tissue into fossil is arrested by the earthquake. Even buried strata may be exposed” (2007, p.40). In Page’s travel encounters, there is a re-articulation of the positioning of the self in relation to its surroundings, revealing for her a more acute awareness about the connections between place and identity. Nevertheless, if, for many women writers, the experience of travel points towards the reinvention of identities, as Susan Bassnett has already suggested, for Page transformation is not so much connected to a sense of freedom, but to a better understanding of her own modes of representation. According to Freake, through the identity changes Page undergoes when living abroad, she recognizes the many layers involved in perspective. For him, this recognition becomes clearer when, in her essay, Page compares her own subjectivity to the small pictures she would find, as a child, in popcorn packages. Page tells us that these pictures would come with red and green celluloid filters which would make parts of the picture disappear. For Freake, these pictures suggested to Page the “tyranny of subjectivity,” since “it allows only partial glimpses of reality” (1994, p. 95). With such a realization, as Page herself writes, her “primary concern is to remove the filters” (2007, p. 42).

Indeed, by recognizing the masks and filters that envelop her imagination, Page recognizes as well the different roles her multifaceted self performs in her art of representation. Seeing becomes a question of positioning, or of understanding the inextricably relation between place and identity. Such filters are tentatively negotiated in *Brazilian journal*, but become more apparent in *Hand luggage*, where the speaker’s voice, by retrospectively recuperating past experiences, recognizes the constant

movement of the observer: from traveller, to diplomat’s wife, to writer, to painter, to woman, to observer again. In this context, in the act of revisiting Page’s writings on Brazil, particularly in the light of the most recent publications and re-publications of her work, one cannot escape the tensions involved in the connections between travelling and representation. Yet, in such tension, one finds not only the self-assured re-discoverer, but also, and maybe most importantly, the self-reflexive traveller, who ponders about her experiences of displacement.

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Notes

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² Reference about Page's first poem was found in John Orange's *P.K. Page and her works*. For complete bibliographical information, see References at the end of this article.

³ This paper was written during my time as a visiting scholar at Trent University. I thank CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil) for the scholarship received, which enabled me to develop this research in Canada.

⁴ In this article, Almeida presents a discussion both of P.K. Page's representations of Brazil as well as Elizabeth Bishop's writings on the country.

⁵ Although I have presented the original publication dates for "Questions and images" and for *Brazilian journal*, in this article I will be quoting from later publications of these works. Quotes from "Questions and Images" are from its publication in *The filled pen: selected non-fiction*, edited by Zailig Pollock and published in 2007. Quotes from *Brazilian journal* are from its 2011 edition, which was edited by Suzanne Bailey and Christopher Doody.

⁶ *Palacete* is the word Page uses to describe the ambassadorial house where she and her husband live in Rio. In one of the entries of her *Brazilian Journal*, Page writes: "Built for de Braga, reported to be a cousin of the King of Portugal, on a dramatic site, with imported marble for the floors, imported artists to pain the ceiling, it is architecturally beautiful" (2011, p. 46).

⁷ It is interesting to note that in a recent article on P.K. Page's and Ricardo Sternberg's poetry on Brazil, Maria Lúcia M. Martins also focuses on Page's gaze as a tourist, arguing for the poet's detachment from her Brazilian surroundings in her poetical writing on the country (2015, p. 206-207). Martins's discussion is precise in identifying Page's difficulties in engaging with the complexities of Brazil, particularly in her poetry. However, in my reading of Page's writings on Brazil, I argue that it is also possible to perceive how involved she was in "discovering" Brazil, even if that in itself could be seen as a problematic term. Differently from other visitors or tourists, who would baffle the poet for their lack of interest in the country (see, for example, her descriptions of the Canadian foreign minister's wife during their visit to Brazil, in *Brazilian journal*, p. 226-227), Page made an effort to immerse herself in her surroundings.