

# Place as displacement in P.K.Page's "Brazilian House"

Sigrid Renaux

*Resumo:* dentro da perspectiva de "place" (lugar) e "displacement" (deslocamento) como características do discurso pós-colonial, como também do conceito de "estranhamento" de Shklovski, este trabalho faz uma leitura de "Brazilian House" de P.K.Page, a fim de discutir como este poema reflete não apenas sua sensação de "deslocamento" em relação a seu "eu" canadense, ao confrontar o novo espaço físico que irá habitar no Rio de Janeiro e sua estranheza ao se deparar com o "outro" – os empregados da casa, com os quais irá interagir. O poema, como construção verbal, também irá se libertar do "eu" do poeta e, ao ultrapassar suas "memórias e associações pessoais", seu "desejo de auto-expressão", irá adquirir "sua própria realidade", ampliando deste modo as implicações teóricas de "lugar" e "deslocamento" e, conseqüentemente, seu potencial interpretativo.

*Abstract:* within the perspective of place and displacement as features of post-colonial discourse, as well as of Shklovski's concept of "defamiliarization", this paper presents a reading of P.K. Page's "Brazilian House" in order to discuss how this poem reflects her sense of displacement, in relation to her Canadian self, as she confronts the new physical space she is going to inhabit in Rio, and her sense of estrangement as she confronts the other – the intriguing staff of servants she is going to interact with. The poem, as a verbal construct, will also free itself from the poet's ego and, by moving beyond her "private memories and associations" and her "desire for self-expression", it will acquire "its own kind of reality", thus amplifying the theoretical implications of "place" and "displacement" and, consequently, its interpretive potential.

(...) poems, like poets, are born and not made. The poet's task is to deliver the poem in as uninjured a state as possible, and if the poem is alive, it is equally anxious to be rid of him, and screams to be cut loose from his private memories and associations, his desire for self-expression, and all the other navel-strings and feeding tubes of his ego.

Where we see a landscape, a painter also sees the possibility of a picture. He sees more than we see, and the picture itself is the proof that he really does see it. The standard of reality does not inhere in what

is there, but in an unreal and subjective excess over what is there which then comes into being with its own kind of reality.

Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity*

## Introduction

It is already a well-known fact that P.K. Page's stay in Brazil from 1957 to 1959, as the wife of the Canadian ambassador Arthur Irwin, has become registered not only in her *Brazilian Journal* but also in several poems, such as "Brazilian House", "Brazilian Fazenda", "Macumba: Brazil", and "Conversation". As Page acknowledges in the foreword of *Brazilian Journal* (PAGE, 1987), the *Journal* is a "period piece", for it describes events that had taken place more than thirty years before it was published and is based mainly on letters to her family and extracts from her journal. The poems, on the other hand, even if they can also be referred to as "period pieces", for they retrieve events and situations found in the *Journal*, nevertheless transcend these same situations and events, through Page's ability to "defamiliarize" them – showing them in a new, unexpected way by means of her verbal art. In this way, besides being documents of the cultural contacts established between Page and her new environment, the poems also furnish the reader with other possibilities of interpretation, while the *Journal* continues to be the best key to contextualize them.

Within this perspective, this paper presents a reading of Page's "Brazilian House" in order to discuss how this poem not only reflects her sense of displacement in relation to her Canadian self, as she confronts the new physical space she is going to inhabit in Rio, and her sense of estrangement as she confronts the other – the intriguing staff of servants she is going to interact with. The poem, as a verbal construct, will in the end also move beyond her "private memories and associations", and her "desire for self-expression", as Frye argues in the epigraphs, as it frees itself from the poet's ego and acquires "its own kind of reality" (FRYE, 1963: 11, 151).

Notions, definitions and discussions of place and

displacement have been in vogue for quite some time now in post-colonial studies. Although not “‘essentially’ post-colonial” as argued by ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS and TIFFIN (1995:2), place and displacement are nevertheless considered to be “crucial features of post-colonial discourse” (1995: 391) and therefore, like the very term ‘post-colonial’, they are also pregnant with different shades of meaning. If definitions of “place” include space, room, a particular area or locality, the part of space occupied by a person or thing, situation, position or standing as determined by others, and if definitions of “displace” include removing from its place, removing from any state, condition, office, or dignity, while a “displaced person” is one left homeless in a foreign country as a result of war, then what these theorists argue is that by ‘place’ they do not simply mean ‘landscape’ – an expanse of natural scenery seen by the eye in one view, which implies that the objective world is separated from the viewing subject. ‘Place’, in post-colonial societies, is “a complex interaction of language, history and environment”, and “is characterized firstly by a sense of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies, or the more widespread sense of displacement from the imported language (...), and secondly, by a sense of the immense investment of culture in the construction of place”. They go on to argue that, both in the case of those who possess English as a mother tongue and those who speak it as a second language, “the sense of dislocation from an historical ‘homeland’ and that created by the dissonance between language [and place]” makes the experience of ‘displacement’ generate “a creative tension within the language”. Nevertheless, if “place is thus the concomitant of difference”, it is also simultaneously a reminder “of the hybrid interpenetration of the colonizer and colonized”(1995:391). Another major feature which these theorists point out in relation to post-colonial literatures is the concern to develop an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place, because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted (1995: 392).

By adopting and adapting some of these concepts to

Page's poem, it will become clear that, although Page is speaking from the perspective of a "traveler" from a developed country in contact with a still underdeveloped country, and thus as one who has "moved to the colonies" – in this case, Brazil, a former colony of Portugal – in a stance that reminds us of that of a colonizer in relation to the colonized, what really matters is that in this new "place" her sense of displacement will generate in her poetry "a creative tension within the language", as she tries to establish a relationship between her "self", the place and the other, thereby corroborating the concept of "place" as "a complex interaction of language, history and environment".

This creative tension engendered by her sense of displacement and of estrangement becomes, in its turn, projected in the poem through a similar process of "estrangement" or "defamiliarization"<sup>1</sup> (SHKLOVSKY, 1990: xix), operating not only at the level of language, by making it difficult and deliberately impeded, but also at the level of content, as it distorts accepted concepts and ideas, showing them from a different perspective, and at the level of literary form, by defamiliarizing literary conventions. In this way, the concept of "defamiliarization" allows "the establishment of a hierarchy of elements within the literary work itself, with the principle of 'defamiliarization' acting as the central one and subordinating all other elements to itself" (SHKLOVSKY, *apud* Kolesnikoff, 1995, p. 528-9).

Thus, as will be demonstrated, while the categories of place/displacement will initially act as levers to highlight and articulate other binary categories which are embedded in the poem, such as self/other, identity/alterity, center/margin, dominance/ subordination, they will all simultaneously also become subordinated to the concept of "defamiliarization". As an organizing principle, this in turn will also become the theoretical equivalent of the sense of estrangement and

---

<sup>1</sup> As the translator argues in the Introduction, "estrangement" and "defamiliarization" do not translate Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* properly. For this reason, he has coined the words "enstrange" and "enstrangement". Nevertheless, as "defamiliarization" and "estrangement" are better known among scholars, I shall be using these two words in my analysis.

displacement conveyed in the poem, leading the latter as a cultural document to acquire, as a verbal artifact, its own kind of reality.

## “Brazilian House”

On her way to Brazil, as she was watching “the skyscrapered skyline of New York recede”, Page’s feeling that “everything familiar was receding with it” already anticipates the sense of displacement that would overwhelm her on her arrival in Brazil: wondering if she “would master the language”, Page was simultaneously “appalled by the grandeur of the house we were to inhabit. (...) We learned that it was beautiful; that it had been built by a wealthy Portuguese and modeled on his *palacete* in Portugal” (PAGE, 1987:2). This feeling of expectancy is further contextualized by Page’s description of her arrival at the “Palacete Rosa”, her official residence in Rio, and will serve again as an introduction for the reading of “Brazilian House”. As she writes in her *Journal*, on January 21st, 1957,

Our *palacete* – and it is indeed that – is in one of the city’s western suburbs on Estrada da Gávea (...). From street level, the house is hidden behind a high wall – hot pink, and stained with continents of the mildew and mould which flourish in this steamy climate” (...) there – beyond a lotus pond and a stretch of quite extraordinary lawn – stands the equally extraordinary house: rectilinear façade, hot pink again with chalk-white trim, three-layered, with two tiers of rounded arches” (PAGE, 1987: 5).

Although the sense of displacement is already apparent in the title “Brazilian House”, which presents the poem as written by a foreigner, visiting a house in Brazil, with all the cultural implications “Brazil” carries with it for an English-speaking visitor or traveler (as the inside blurb of *Brazilian Journal* emphasizes, Brazil is referred to as “a rare and distant world” and as an “exotic land”), the title simultaneously foreshadows a literal in-betweenness. Page, as an English-speaking persona

living in a foreign country, is between two worlds: the ambassador's official residence and thus Canadian territory, but simultaneously the place where Brazilian servants interact with her.

The poem itself is made up of three strophes, with six, seven, and eight run-on lines respectively, in free verse, which points to the fact that, as befits the modernist tradition, Page is not trying to fit the poem into a conventional literary form. This unevenness, nevertheless, can also suggest her search for a form that would convey the sense of strangeness which the new environment would cause in her:

In this great house white as a public urinal I pass my echoing days Only the elephant ear leaves listen outside my window to the tap of my heels	Downstairs the laundress With elephantiasis Sings like an angel Her brown wrists cuffed with suds And the skinny little black girl Polishing silver laughs to see Her face appear in a tray	Ricardo, stealthy lowers his sweating body into the stream my car will cross when I forced by the white porcelain yammering silence drive into the hot gold gong of noonday.
---	--	---

As **stanza I** reveals, the impact of the new home becomes projected in the very first line of the poem – “in this great house white” – an image that will dominate not only the whole setting but even the poetic “I”, inserted in the third line of the stanza and thus in subordinate position to the prepositional phrase headed by “in”.

The adjective “great”, more emotional than “large”, besides suggesting that the “great house” is above average in size and thus connoting grandeur, seems to express the speaker's feeling of admiration, which is at first sight further confirmed by the adjective “white” that follows it – a “great house white”. This portrayal can be further contextualized by Page's description of the main reception room of this house in *Brazilian Journal*, “a great, cold, white-walled, green-ceilinged room”(1987: 6), in which the adjective “cold”,

although not present in the poem, is nevertheless implied in “great” and “white”.

Nevertheless, if in architectural imagery the house carries an overall symbolism of shelter and security, as well as being a reflection of the occupant’s life, and, as a *palacete*, it is also related to the symbolism of the castle – safety from intrusion, grandeur, wealth, sovereignty, authority – these positive associations are overturned in line two by the simile “white/as a public urinal”, which removes any quality of privacy and individuality connoted by “house”, and of “safety from intrusion” connoted by “castle”. This “great house white” now becomes related not only to emptiness and impersonality (also implicit in “great”) nor cleanliness and coldness (implicit in “white”), but also to loss of privacy and individuality. The displacing of “white” from its usual position before the noun “house” to the end of line one thus performs two functions: besides accentuating the whiteness of the house and simultaneously reinforcing its size, it also removes the connotations of majesty, solemnity and purity associated with great white houses, through the simile that follows it: white/ as a public urinal.

The shock of this comparison is further corroborated at the level of syntax, for the enjambment “white/as a public urinal”, sets up a tension between the expected pattern and what actually occurs (LEECH, 1971: 123), as well as a tension in terms of rhythm, with the playing off of the expected rhythm – In this great white hóuse – against a rhythm caused by the displacement of accent – in this great house [pause] whíte. The sense of disorientation caused by deviation from the normal word order, without a comma or hyphen to indicate that “white” is part of the simile of line two, also seems to corroborate the displacement/disorientation which Page – the poetic I – feels in this “great house”, in which “house” has lost its connotations of privacy and home: it is psychologically empty, too large and too public to be hers.

This sense of emptiness which emerges from the whiteness of the house compared to a public place can also be retrieved from Page’s *Journal* – “this is a very public house – in

part because we are over-run with workmen, but it is also something to do with Brazilian life, I think, (...) Curiously, even though I speak of the house as public, at the same time I wonder about its ‘emptiness’.” (1987: 18) – thus further stressing the feeling of displacement projected by the simile in the poem, for this public house, as a place, cannot be a reflection of the occupant’s life.

It is only in line three – “I pass my echoing days” – that the poetic I appears, in an inversion of the expected subject/verb/complement word order, the fronted prepositional phrase “in this great house(...)” thus emphasizing not only that the inside of the house is the place from which the persona speaks – visually foregrounded by the “I” being in the middle of the stanza – but also the fact that Page is in a subordinate position in relation to the house, which seems to dominate her, as if the two preceding lines were weighing on the “I”.

The simple present tense in “I pass”, denoting a habitual action, prepares us for “my echoing days”, with “echoing” (the repetition of a sound made when sound waves are reflected back) creating a synaesthetic effect in relation to “days”. As it attributes sound to a period of time, it simultaneously highlights the repetitiveness or continuity of these days, as if one day were the echo of the day before.

The enjambment between lines two and three, occurring between parts of the same clause, is now less startling than “white/as a public urinal”, which occurred between parts of the same phrase. But, again, the grammatical overflow from one line to the next, characteristic of the whole poem, as mentioned, projects a tension in the state of affairs, suggesting the persona’s sense of estrangement, as seen above. The subtle sound parallelisms which permeate these lines, such as the alliteration in public/pass, assonance in great/days, white/I, consonance in great/white, despite conferring a certain unity to the lines and enhancing the sonorous quality of the stanza, are not enough to soften the sense of estrangement the first three lines project.

This lack of intimacy between the poetic I and the house continues in the next three lines: “Only the elephant ear leaves/



listen outside my window/ to the tap of my heels". The personification of the begonias (called "elephant's ear" because of their large, ornamental leaves) listening to the sounds inside the house, again confirms that the speaker is in a foreign place, for this genus of plants is native to the tropical regions of America. As if prefigured by "echoing", the elephant's ear leaves – reminding us through the symbolic connotations of "ear" as inquisitiveness and eaves-dropping (VRIES, 1971: 154)<sup>2</sup> – thus prepare us for "listen", thereby superposing the shape of the leaves with the function of the ear. But these leaves, instead of listening to a conversation, can only hear the tap of the speaker's heels, which re-echo, like the days, in this great white house, corroborating its sense of emptiness and loneliness. This personification of the leaves, like strange human beings listening to the sounds inside the house, is further corroborated by the symbolic connotations of leaves as people as well as by sound parallelisms: if "elephant ear leaves" is already announced by "only", through the re-echoing of /l/, the alliteration leaves/listen brings out their semantic proximity, as if listening were an inherent characteristic of leaves, while the assonance in ear/leaves emphasizes their sharing a similar shape, as mentioned above, which thus corroborates the transference of the function of ears to leaves.

The fact that these plants are "outside my window" – this gateway to air and light and the aperture through which the elephant ear leaves can "listen" to the tap of the speaker's heels – starts, in its turn, a confrontation of place between inside and outside. This confrontation is further enhanced by the contrast suggested by the colorful leaves with the cold whiteness inside the house. Although "my window" also connotes ownership, this positiveness is again removed by the sound of emptiness or loneliness suggested by "the tap of my heels", which echo inside the house with nobody to listen to it, for a tap can only be heard in a silent place. The suggestion of authority implicit in "heels" – the shoe as symbolic of power and of royalty – also seems to be lost, for the same reason. These three lines are

---

<sup>2</sup> All further symbolic connotations are taken from the same source.

further foregrounded by subtle sound parallelisms, such as the repetition of /l/ in elephant/heels as well as the assonance in leaves/heels, which, besides binding the overall sound texture of the lines, also bring out the contrast between the object that produces the sound (heels) and the subject (the ear-shaped leaves) that listens to it. The quicker rhythm of line three, projected through two anapests, further increases the suggestion of quick movement implicit in “tap”.

Thus, although the possessive “my” appears three times (“my echoing days”, “my window” and “my heels”) in relation to time, place and person, the sense of displacement pervades the first stanza, and it becomes clear why Page, as the poetic I, does not feel at home in this new environment, for the house has not yet become a home.

If Page’s sense of displacement and loneliness is projected in stanza I through her contact with the house as a building, expressing the contrast between the house as a private place and as a public one, as well as by silence and emptiness, a sense that is further increased by the inside/outside contrast and by the repetitiveness of time, in **stanza II** this sense is further deepened by her contact with the staff of servants, and thus the contrast between her Canadian “self” and the Brazilian “other”, since she is unable as yet to evaluate or understand the servants’ behavior.

The spatial image of “downstairs”, which starts the stanza, brings out the implicit height symbolism of “upstairs” in the first stanza, which also implies the poetic I speaking from a superior place in relation to what follows. “Downstairs” therefore foregrounds the house this time in relation to its lower floor and to its inhabitants, anticipating the contrasting relationship of rank/authority/ownership which will be established between the “I” and the servants. The disappearance of the poetic I in this stanza, as if it had remained upstairs, looking out of the window, hearing the sounds and watching the servants working downstairs, corroborates the change of emphasis from the “I” to the “other”.

The figure of the laundress introduces us to the world of the servants, with the corresponding contrasts of

rank/humbleness and owner/servant established with the first stanza. However, the description of the laundress “with elephantiasis” disturbs us, not just because of the suddenness with which the word is presented to us, reminding us of the shocking contrast of the simile “white/as a public urinal” after “this great house”. It also “defamiliarizes” us because “elephantiasis” reminds us of the transformation the word “elephant” undergoes – from the beauty and size of the begonia leaves to the hideous, deforming skin disease which has affected this woman, characterized by the enlargement of certain parts of the body, and by the hardening and ulceration of the surrounding skin, causing the part affected to resemble an elephant’s hide. It also reminds us of her underprivileged condition, as she continues to earn her living by washing and ironing clothes in spite of the disease. There is no doubt that Page’s further comments in the *Journal*,

Today I fired the laundress with elephantiasis. Hated doing it but she was not a very good laundress and eighteen sugar bananas and five kilos of beef unaccountably disappeared on Saturday. Unfairly, perhaps, I suspect her. Yet I am sorry to see her go. It is unlikely I shall ever again employ a grotesque: elephantiasis of the legs and breasts (...) certainly Lourdes, for that is her name, is pure Baudelaire. Ready for the clothes-line, her great brown arms full of white sheets, rows of clothes pegs clipped to her dress like rows of nipples on some gargantuan sow, she was a truly awesome figure” (PAGE 1985:14).

again shock the reader, as already pointed out by Sandra Almeida in relation to Page’s stance towards the laundress:

É no contato com os empregados do “Palacete Rosa”, fruto obviamente de sua posição privilegiada em contextos de raça e classe social no Brasil (...) que se encontra freqüentemente a prevalência de imagens tipicamente derogatórias e mesmo[s] cruéis. (...) Chocante também é a posição de Page com relação à empregada com elefantíase, uma imagem que volta a assombrá-la mais tarde no poema “Brazilian House”, em mais uma descrição estética do evento Brasil. (ALMEIDA, 2001: 114).

Nevertheless, Page also presents the laundress, in the poem, in an oxymoronic combination of high and low, of angelicness and ugliness, aware that this woman, in spite of her chronic skin disease, “sings like an angel”. The act of singing, in contrast to the silence in the house and the lonely tap of the heels projected in stanza I, seems to lighten the burden of the laundress’s work, with its symbolic connotations of fertility and enticement but also as a powerful weapon. Moreover, singing “like an angel” seems to erase any derogatory reference to the laundress’s disease, or to race – as “her brown wrists cuffed with suds” could suggest – thereby removing, in the poem, the blemish implicit in the description of the laundress in the *Journal*. The symbolic implications contained in “angel” – as a created spirit essentially inferior to God and superior to man in natural endowments of intellect and will, as well as the bearer of divine grace or messages (*anggelein* = to announce) and a winged deity – suggest that the beauty of her voice needs to be taken into account in spite of her grotesqueness, or, looking at it the other way round, her grotesqueness does not prevent her from singing out in joy, thus superposing the beauty of the act of singing with that of the spirituality of angels. The repetition of liquids and nasals in “sings like an angel” also reinforces the semantic similarities that can be established between angel and song.

Although Page is aware that, in spite of elephantiasis, the laundress does not just sing, expressing her joy, but sings like an angel, as if announcing a divine message even if Page cannot understand the words uttered in the song, she cannot yet reconcile herself to this startling amalgamation of poverty, disease, deformity and joy. She can only show her sense of wonder, and thus her stance in the poem contrasts with that of the *Journal*, more intrigued than privileged, more displaced than derogatory.

By stressing the work of the laundress’s hands and arms, the next line – “her brown wrists cuffed with suds” – emphasizes her unending activity, as the description above from the *Journal* also does in a more detailed way: “ready for the clothes-line, her great brown arms full of white sheets, rows of

clothes pegs clipped to her dress(...)". Moreover, the suds on her brown wrists, by reminding us through their whiteness of cuffed sleeves (the ornamental bottom part of the sleeves that the white owners would wear) establishes an ironic difference between owners and servants, further enhanced by the contrast between her brown skin and the whiteness of this froth of soap and water. Furthermore, from these "brown wrists cuffed with suds", with the assonance in cuffed/suds increasing the semantic proximity between the two words, there also emerges the embedded image of handcuffs, so symbolic of slavery and thus reminding us of our own past history of slavery, and of its social consequences, as the laundress's blackness, poverty (she has stolen food) and disease confirm. The fact that she is nameless in the poem, in contrast to the *Journal*, emphasizes her anonymity as a laundress.

Yet, in an astonishing inversion, these small bubbles that cuff the laundress's wrists also retrieve, in their whiteness and lightness, a suggestion of potential wings, as if through her work she is able to overcome her condition of inferiority as if she is able to become the bearer of divine grace through her song.

The next sentence continues this sense of estrangement that the poetic I feels in relation to the servants: now, in contrast to the laundress's blend of deformity and angelicness, we have the image of the "skinny little black girl" polishing silver and laughing as she sees "her face appear in a tray". This new image is further enhanced in terms of sound, for the sequence of the plosives /k, t, b, g/ in skinny/little/black/girl, by making the articulation of these words more difficult – /k/ is even repeated in skinny/black – causes us to give more attention to each of these four words, while the repetition of /l/ in little/black/girl and the assonance in skinny/little also bind the image in terms of sound, as if the adjectives were inherent characteristics of the noun. By presenting a contrasting combination of awkwardness, frailty and happiness – and thus suggesting that polishing silver is not hard work, but play, for the little black girl has transformed it into an act of playfulness, as she can see herself in the silver – this image again projects Page's astonishment in

contact with her new “place”, in which the blacks, in spite of their awkwardness or grotesqueness (Lourdes, the laundress, even being referred to in the *Journal* as “pure Baudelaire”) can make work and joy in life overlap.

The act of polishing, in addition, carries the folkloric association of transfer of magical power from an object charged with vital force, for the purpose of healing and the prevention of evil charms, thereby suggesting that, by making the silver tray shine, the little girl’s face becomes suddenly transformed into a bright, shining one, a transfiguration that makes her laugh. The mentioning of the silver tray, besides referring back to the “grandeur” of the house – referred to in the *Journal* – also contains symbolical connotations, for, as a precious metal, silver resists spirits and magic, and by being related to purity and innocence, it also reflects the spirit of the little dark-skinned girl in a superposition of the face with the soul. This overlapping is confirmed by the tray itself, which, by recovering through its flat surface the image of the mirror – and therefore its symbolic connotations of reflection of one’s inner self, soul, and life – transfers to the face reflected in it the symbolical implications of the mirror and of silver, thereby amalgamating once more the image of the face reflected in the tray with the very symbolism of the mirror and the silver tray, as if both have become one surface. Consequently, the girl’s face – this most distinctive part of man, and, in folklore, symbolic of the heart – reflected in the silver tray, becomes an “objective correlative” of happiness itself, as it reveals her inner self, her innocence and, through laughter, her happiness. This superposition of different images is further enhanced by the assonance in face/tray and the repetition of /s/ in see/face, while the repetition of the liquids and sibilants in “polishing silver laughs” further associates the girl’s actions in meaning, as if polishing silver and laughing formed a single action.

As the sense of displacement and estrangement is thus transferred from upstairs to downstairs, from the “self” as isolated to the “others” – the people who inhabit and work in the house – the house as place suddenly becomes the home not of the owner as “self”, but of these dark-skinned servants, while

the incongruous combination of the opposites deformity x song, awkwardness x laughter in the “others” destroys any monolithic view of the world that the poetic I seems to incarnate or possess. The house as “place” thus remains as “displacement” for the owner who, decentered as a stranger, enters and then leaves it, while it remains the servants’ home and, thus, their “place”.

Although **stanza III** continues with the description of the servants – “Ricardo, stealthy/ Lowers his sweating body/ Into the stream(...)” – this time a name is mentioned: Ricardo. Identified in the *Journal* as “the gardener who worked for the original owner” and “still in charge of the grounds” (1987:3), one wonders if the mentioning of his name is related to the fact that he is Portuguese, like his former owner, and thus European, in contrast to the two black females in Stanza II, suggesting that Page feels less of a stranger with him than with them. But due to the different implications in “stealthy”, which follows his name, this hypothesis seems to collapse.

“Stealthy”, with its double meaning of stealing and also of secret or furtive action or behavior, a going secretly, can be first of all related to the description and characterization of the gardener in the *Journal*. As mentioned above, the fact that he had worked for the former owner of the place and was still in charge of the grounds could suggest that his stealthiness comes from his still being attached to the original owner, to whom he continues to owe allegiance, and also to the fact that both are fellow-countrymen – and therefore belonging to the nation that discovered and colonized Brazil.

His stealthiness could also be associated with the fact that in the *Journal* he is described twice as a dwarf, not only in the sense of being undersized – “a minute gnome of a man who sleeps in the gatehouse and spends much of his waking time weeding the dark green grass out of the light green and vice-versa” (1987:7) – but also in the sense of visualizing in him characteristics of the dwarf as a small supernatural being – “Ricardo, a tiny Portuguese like one of the Seven Dwarfs”(1987: 39) – thereby reminding us of the symbolical connotations of “dwarf”. Dwarfs are the Little People, variously

described as elves and fairies, who may have originated in a smaller cattle-breeding race being subdued by tall invaders, which may explain the hatred shown by these dwarfs towards the manifestations of superior power of the invaders as well as the fear the invaders had of these shifty, half-glimpsed people, hidden in woods and in underground mountain-caves, where they were still supposed to have their cattle. In addition, they symbolize, psychologically, the personifications of the hidden forces in nature. These connotations may explain Ricardo's stealthy behavior as typical of one belonging to this small race, subjected by the tall "invaders /owners", but simultaneously hating them. At the same time, "stealthy" could also be linked to the fact that the "invader" – Page as the new "owner" of the house – would also fear this "half-glimpsed" tiny man, hidden in the stream of the garden and thus personifying, as a gardener, the hidden forces in nature.

Consequently, "stealthy" could further imply that Ricardo, in spite of his apparent subordination to the new "owner", has his own "jardin secret" – the need to protect something that is entirely his own, his innermost secret – as he also "owns" the garden from former times and considers the new owners as "invaders" or intruders.

As Ricardo also "lowers his sweating body into the stream", in order to cool himself – suggesting not only his intimacy with nature but also his exertion as a gardener, "weeding the dark green grass out of the light green and vice-versa", as quoted above – "stealthy" would imply that he does it secretly, hoping that nobody will see him. As he bends himself into the stream, to "lower" again foregrounds his dwarfish size, as well as his humble rank or position as a gardener, for, although his profession is not mentioned in the poem, he is also characterized as a servant through his sweating body, and thus, like the woman and the girl, through the work he carries out in the property. The alliteration *stealthy/ sweating/ stream* once more brings the three words together in meaning, by suggesting the habitualness of this action of lowering his sweating body stealthily into the stream.

Although a garden is not explicitly mentioned in the



poem, the reference to the stream in the *Journal* includes the description of the garden –

If you drive in through the second of the two street gates you pass the gatehouse where the gardener lives; peer through the garden's fretwork of tree ferns, the ruler-straight trunks of palm trees, and the intense black of their shade; cross a little stream over a bridge (...) (1987:5).

– and, as such, the garden surrounding the house in the poem, with its connotations of fertility and ordered Nature. The stream itself thus serves not only as a place of leisure and refreshment for the gardener but, by being a natural barrier, like the river, it also marks a division of realm, the place of transition from the outside world to the property and vice-versa, and thus prefigures the action that will be performed by the poetic I in the following lines: “(...) My car will cross when I / Forced by the white porcelain / Yammering silence drive/ Into the hot gold gong/ Of noonday”.

The sudden turn in the poem, marking the reappearance of the poetic I – through the mentioning of “my car”, which, as a status symbol indicating ownership, is also related to the grandeur of the house – seems at first sight to retrieve Page's position in stanza I. But although at the beginning of stanza III the poetic I continues to be in an authoritative position in relation to the servant, who “lowers his sweating body/ into the stream / my car will cross”, implying, through “lowering” a situation of inferiority and, through “crossing”, one of superiority, this position will nevertheless be overturned through the dislocation of the poetic I to a subordinate position, in terms of content and syntax.

In stanza I the poetic I comes at the beginning of line three in “I pass my echoing days”, thus characterizing not only its ascendancy in the line, but also the normal order in a simple sentence. Similarly, line four in stanza III initially gives us the impression that we are dealing with a main clause (lines 1-3) followed by two subordinate clauses (lines 4-8), but we then suddenly realize, in lines 4-8 – “[that] my car will cross when I /forced by the white porcelain yammering silence/ drive into the

hot gold gong/of noonday” – that the poetic I seems to have lost its commanding position or place in the sentence, through the fact that it is in an adverbial clause at the end of the line and separated from the main verb “drive” by a participial clause. Likewise, it seems to have lost its position or place in the house, for the “I” is compelled or “driven out” of the house by the “yammering silence”, as if the speaker could not bear to hear this sound, and is thus forced to “drive into” the heat of noon; in other words, she goes from one strange place (inside) to another (outside), even if the mention of “my car” suggests some kind of protection for the “I”. Even so, the future tense in “my car will cross”, followed by “when I (...) drive into (...)” is describing an event yet to happen, suggesting that the poetic I continues to be inside the house and upstairs, from where it watches the actions of the gardener. The assonance in my/I/drive, identifying the poetic I with the action of driving, confirms the implications of the exertion of power that directing the course of a car and controlling its speed convey, and will simultaneously be put in contrast with the assonance in white/silence in relation to the house, with its negative implications, leading the poetic I to be forced to leave the house and “drive / into the hot gold gong / of noonday”.

As lines 5-6 corroborate, if silence connotes stillness, absence, lack of sound, and absence of speech, the silence here is so intense that it has become concretized and personified by sound (the clamoring or whimpering sound of yammering contrasting with the songs and laughter in stanza II), by color (its whiteness retrieving the public whiteness of stanza I and contrasting with the green leaves and the black servants), and by texture (“porcelain” suggesting the fragility of this silence which can be broken or cracked at any minute, while the repetition of the unstressed syllables of “porcelain” in “silence” seems to prepare us for its appearance, besides bestowing its concreteness on the silence, thus binding both words once more in meaning).

The image of the “hot gold gong”, in its turn, brings out the very shape of the sun through the round concreteness of “gong” as a metal disk with a turned rim, giving a resonant note

when struck, and thus becomes an iconic image of the sun itself. This isomorphism or structural analogy is further confirmed by its golden color, symbolic of the sun, fire and heat. As the image of solar light, “gold” is also implicit in “noonday”, or the middle of the day, thus adding to “noonday” the symbolic connotations of twelve o’clock as cosmic order, perfection, and sun, and corroborating the amalgamation of the words “hot gold gong of noonday” into superposed images of the sun. The fact that sound is also inherent in “gong” again brings out the resonance implicit in “noonday”, as if heat itself, through its capability of transmitting energy, is not only felt but can also be heard in its intensity. This overlapping of form and sound is further confirmed at the level of sound, through the assonance in hot/gong, alliteration in gold/gong, and the repetition of nasals in gong/noonday. Furthermore, it is even corroborated visually through the seven-fold repetition of the letter “o”, in “into the hot gold gong/of noonday”, again an iconic image of roundness in miniature and thus of the sun itself.

In this way, the persona’s sense of displacement - which started on the upper level in relation to the house, is transferred to the lower level, where the servants work, and then into the garden – covers not only a vertical spatial imagery, from above to below, but also a horizontal spatial imagery, from inside to outside. It is further enhanced by Page’s sense of estrangement or decentering in relation to the “other”, reminding us of Foucault’s words “there is no center, but always decenterings, series that register the halting passage from presence to absence, from excess to deficiency” (FOUCAULT, 1977:165), as her Canadian self – her existing center – is confronted with the black woman and girl working in the house, as well as the Portuguese gardener in the stream. Displacement and estrangement, therefore, lead to her potential displacement from the house when, compelled by its painful silence, and by her “deficiency” in deciphering the “other”, she will cross the stream and drive away into another placeless territory – the resonant heat of noonday.

## Conclusion

Although the question that Page asks in her *Journal*, “Disturbed and excited by Brazil. Why? What is it all about? Does place alter person?” (1987:46), has been answered at the end of her stay with “Sorry, too, to leave my Brazilian self, so different from my Canadian self – freer, more demonstrative. (...) Hard to leave so much beauty, so much sun, so sweet a people. And to leave this house, which I have come to feel is mine” (1987:238), thus confirming that place does alter person, for she has discovered a Brazilian self and the sense of owning a Brazilian home, it nevertheless presents a much deeper and consequently more disturbing perspective in “Brazilian House”.

If in Page’s *Journal*, the purpose of which “seems to be to decipher and interpret Brazil to her Canadian audience” (NENEVÊ, 2003:168), one can already detect, in between the lines, “sua voz conflitante, assimétrica e dualística, simultaneamente crítica e cúmplice do privilégio de sua posição social, cultural e econômica, inerente ao próprio locus de enunciação visualizado através da retórica de um certo relato de viagem” (ALMEIDA, 2001:116), in “Brazilian House” this voice does not simply retrieve memories and situations from her stay in the “Palacete Rosa”. As our reading has brought out, this voice reveals the poem to be much more than a period piece, or a document of cultural contact, for, in “as uninjured a state as possible” – as Frye remarks in the epigraph – it simultaneously presents the enigma of place and of the “other” still unresolved, still untouched by any effort to come to terms with it.

This enigma, projected through the persona’s sense of displacement and estrangement, becomes concretized in the poem through a process of “defamiliarization” at the levels of language, content and literary form, thus making the verbal text as an artifact become equivalent to the very concept of defamiliarization, while, at the level of content, it confirms how “place” in “Brazilian House” has become the locus itself of this “complex interaction of language, history and environment” as defined above. Thus, the poem is not only a document of Page’s

early sense of estrangement, trying to cope with an enigmatic reality which she cannot yet decode. As a verbal construct, and therefore with a life of its own, “equally anxious to be rid of him [the poet](...) to be cut loose from his private memories and associations, his desire for self-expression” (FRYE,1963: 11), the poem has become a conceptual analogy of displacement itself, in its transcendence of the poetic I.

Last but not least, the discourse of place – as displacement – confirms it to be “a process of a continual dialectic between subject and object”, and, as “the ‘place’ of the ‘subject’ throws light upon subjectivity itself” (ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS, TIFFIN, 1995:392). What emerges from the poem, as from a painting, is Page’s ability to see in a place “more than we see, and the picture itself is the proof that [s]he really does see it”. If “the standard of reality does not inhere in what is there, but in an unreal and subjective excess over what is there which then comes into being with its own kind of reality”, as Frye asserts in the epigraph, the concept of place in the poem, in post-colonial terms, again retrieves overtones of place as a literal and metaphorical landscape, thus intermingling the different shades of meaning of “place” through this “unreal and subjective excess” over what is there in this picture of “Brazilian House”, which has come into being with “its own kind of reality” by way of Page’s subjective and visionary eye.

## Bibliographical references

ALMEIDA, Sandra. “O Brasil de P.K.Page”. In: *Interfaces Brasil/Canadá I*. Porto Alegre: UFRGS /ABECAN, 2001.

ASHCROFT, Bill; GRIFFITHS, Gareth & TIFFIN, Helen, eds. *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

FRYE, Northrop. *Fables of Identity: studies in poetic mythology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.

KOLESNIKOFF, Nina. “Defamiliarization”. In: MAKARYK, Irena

R. ed. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

LEECH, Geoffrey. *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longman, 1969.

NENEVÉ, Miguel: "Translating back P.K.Page's work *Brazilian Journal*". *Interfaces Brasil/Canadá* 3. Belo Horizonte: UFMG/ABECAN, 2003.

PAGE, P.K. "Brazilian House". In: *The Hidden Room*. Collected Poems, v. II. Erin: The Porcupine's Quill, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Brazilian Journal*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1987.

SHKLOVSKI, Viktor. *Theory of Prose*. Elmsood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

VRIES, Ad de. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974.