

P. K. Page's and Ricardo Sternberg's Brazil poems: visitor's gaze and *sentimento íntimo*

*Poemas do Brasil de P. K. Page e Ricardo Sternberg:
olhar de visitante e sentimento íntimo*

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Abstract: Poets P. K. Page and Ricardo Sternberg depict significant traits of Brazilian culture in their writings. Page lived in Brazil in the fifties accompanying her husband in his posting as ambassador; Sternberg was born in Rio and left the country in the sixties, constantly returning to his roots since then. In their portraits of Brazil, private memories mingle with the country's cultural history. Considering implications of gaze and what Stuart Hall calls "positions of *enunciation*" in cultural representations, this study discusses Page's visitor's gaze and Sternberg's *sentimento íntimo* in their depictions of Brazil. The selection of poems extends from early publications to more recent ones – Sternberg's *Bamboo Church* (2003), and Page's *Hand Luggage, A Memoir in Verse* (2006).

Keywords: P. K. Page; Ricardo Sternberg; Cultural representation; Poetry; Brazil

Resumo: Os poetas P. K. Page e Ricardo Sternberg registram traços significativos da cultura brasileira em seus escritos. Page morou no Brasil nos anos 50 acompanhando o marido em seu posto de embaixador; Sternberg nasceu no Rio e deixou o país nos anos 60, constantemente retornando às origens desde então. Em seus retratos de Brasil, memórias particulares se misturam à história cultural do país. Considerando implicações do olhar e o que Stuart Hall chama de "posições de *enunciação*" em representações culturais, esse estudo discute o olhar de visitante de Page e o "sentimento íntimo" de Sternberg em seus retratos de Brasil. A seleção de poemas se estende das primeiras publicações às mais recentes – *Bamboo Church* (2003) de Sternberg e *A Memoir in Verse* (2006) de Page.

Palavras-chave: P. K. Page; Ricardo Sternberg; Representação cultural; Poesia; Brasil

Introduction: cultural representation and "positions of *enunciation*"

In comparing works of writers showing some correspondence of experience, criticism sometimes falls in the trap of labels or in the anxiety of boxes, ignoring what is unique. This happens, for example, in comparative readings of P. K. Page's and Elizabeth Bishop's writings about Brazil more concerned with their supposed common roles of outsiders or travelers than to singularities of individual experience and imagination. As Smaro Kamboureli notes, "that the writing of those who have a common heritage often echoes similar themes and just as often reflects different concerns, attests that cultural boundaries are porous, that cultural representation is contingent on the author's singularity of

imagination" (KAMBOURELI, 2007, p. xxi). There are yet contingencies of spatial and temporal displacement, and diversity of experiences motivating different kinds of gazing. All these implications make binary labels like foreign/native gaze insufficient when not inclusive of specific features and possible variables. Also on this issue, in the essay "Whose Gaze, and Who Speaks for Whom," Dionne Brand observes that "notions of voice, representation, theme, style, imagination are charged with [...] historical locations and require rigorous examination rather than liberal assumptions of universal subjectivity or the downright denial of such locations" (BRAND, 1994, p. 119). Brand's comment dialogues with Stuart Hall's well-known discussions about cultural representation in various studies. For Hall, practices of representation "always implicate the positions from

which we speak or write— the positions of *enunciation*” (HALL, 1989, p. 68). Hall argues that the “I” who writes must also be considered itself, “enunciated”, and concludes: “We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ *positioned*.” Attentive to these theoretical and critical views on the implications of positioning in cultural representations, this study considers Page’s visitor’s gaze and Sternberg’s *sentimento íntimo* in a variety of portraits of Brazil, each in its specificity. The selection of poems extends from early publications to more recent ones –Sternberg’s *Bamboo Church* (2003), and Page’s *Hand Luggage, A Memoir in Verse* (2006).

Page’s visitor’s gaze and Sternberg’s *sentimento íntimo*

The two poets’ positionings no doubt reflect their different experiences in the country. Page, a foreign visitor, lived in Rio de Janeiro in the late 50s, accompanying her husband in his posting as ambassador. Sternberg, born in Rio, moved to the U.S. in the early 60s, and later to Canada. Along this time, he has continually visited Brazil. Making use of James Clifford’s reflections on travel, Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida observes that Page occupies “the paradoxical state of in-betweenness that awaits the modern traveler who lives in a world of transition, ‘a dwelling-in-travel,’ a ‘home away from home’” (ALMEIDA, 2009, p. 107). For Almeida this also implies “the inevitable ambiguity of the cultural encounter in what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the ambiguous and conflicting contact zone” (ALMEIDA, 2009, p. 105). Both definitions apply to Page’s positioning in this analysis, predominantly revealing the detached gaze of the visitor, articulating differences between “self” and “other.” Each cultural representation shall demonstrate specificities and crucial shifts in this gaze. Not less complex than Page’s, Sternberg’s positioning cannot be simply reduced to the label of a poet of diaspora (in itself a polemic term) who has long been “away from home.” In discussing his family’s history of displacement in “Roots and Writing,” instead of “diaspora” Sternberg prefers the term “dispersal.” He explains that, as other Brazilian immigrants dispersed in different places in the U.S. by the time, his family did not live in a Brazilian neighborhood, therefore, did not have the collective experience of a diasporic community in a new land (STERNBERG, 2004, p. 1).¹ In the same essay, Sternberg attributes traces of Brazilianess in his poetry not so much to an explicit thematic but to what Machado de Assis calls “intimate connection” (*sentimento íntimo*). The expression is used in the essay “Instinto de Nacionalidade”: “What can be demanded of a writer is a

certain intimate connection that makes him a man of his time and of his country even when dealing with subject matter remote in time and in space.”² Considering this distinction between the two poets, the reading that follows will explore the dialogic relation between positioning and cultural representation.

Page’s and Sternberg’s depictions of Brazil

Page’s poems written after her return to Canada – “Brazilian House,” “Macumba: Brazil,” and “Brazilian Fazenda” – illustrate limits and ambiguities of the “contact zone.” In “Brazilian House,” the two stairs divide spaces between self and others:

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.
(PAGE, 1997, v. II, p. 120)

Ironically here, the juxtaposition of the poet’s silence to the servants’ voices, singing and laughing, reverses the traditional roles of those who have privilege of voice, and those who do not have access to voice. But of course this is not the case of giving voice to the servants in the sense of letting them speak for themselves. Objects of representation, the servants are essentially characterized by what is alien or exotic to the poet. The fact of both servants being black evokes what Page would later call “racial politics of employment” in Brazil at the time in *Hand Luggage*, as she revisits her former writings about the country in the *Brazilian Journal* and poetry.

In “Macumba: Brazil,” spatial limits between self and others are fluid, as servants are everywhere doing their house chores and preparing their offerings to *Iemanjá*, observed by an all-seeing poet. Instead, division

¹ Unpublished essay, originally presented at the “International Conference on Exile and Migration,” Queen Mary, University of London, November 2004.

² Machado de Assis cited and translated by Sternberg. The original reads: “O que se deve exigir de um escritor, antes de tudo é certo sentimento íntimo, que o torne homem do seu tempo e do seu país, ainda quando trate de assuntos remotos no tempo e no espaço”. STERNBERG, 2004, p. 1-2.

is established by a rhetorical detachment between the poet and “them”:

they are cleaning the chandeliers
they are waxing the marble floor
they are rubbing the golden faucets

[...]

they are changing the salt in the cupboards
they are cooking *feijão* in the kitchen
they are cutting tropical flowers
they are buying herbs at the market
they are stealing a white rooster
they are bargaining for a goat

they are dressed in white for macumba
their eyes are like black coals
(PAGE, 1997, Vol II, p. 121)

By detailing the servants' deeds, the poet acts out her cultural estrangement, not distinguishing between what is merely domestic activity or “macumba.” Ambiguity here implies the observer's omniscient position, yet alien to the unknown world of the other.

In the *Brazilian Journal*, when describing the practice of *macumbeiros* on New Year's Eve, Page recognizes the limitations of her knowledge and ponders on the political implications of the ritual. She writes:

I wish I knew more about *macumba*. It is a form of voodoo, of course, brought from Africa by the slaves. Today it has appropriated many of the symbols and artefacts of the Catholic Church –that Church having permitted and even, I believe, initially encouraged it as a way of bringing the Negroes into the “true faith” by easy stages. But the fact is, it is *macumba* that holds them– and steals from Catholicism to enrich itself.
(PAGE, 1987, p. 193)

Limitations are evident in the comparison of *macumba* to “a form of voodoo,” and in merely referring to the slaves' appropriation of elements of the Catholic Church, without considering the expropriation of their spiritual rituals. Also, the perspective of the Church's permission or strategy to indoctrinate blacks which presupposes their innocence ignores what this colonizing measure entails. Yet, there is some recognition of the power of “macumba” in subverting Catholic practices and becoming source of collective spiritual strength. As in the poem, this description of “macumba” demonstrates the view of an outsider or a visitor's gaze.

Different from the former poems, “Brazilian Fazenda” reveals the poet's temporal displacement in history favoring aesthetic contemplation. The poem initially evokes the time of slavery abolition, the coffee cycle and religious rituals:

That day all the slaves were freed
their manacles, anklets
left on the window ledge to rust in the moist air

and all the coffee ripened
like beads on a bush or balls of fire
as merry as Christmas

[...]

and bits fell out of the sky near Nossa Senhora
who walked all the way in bare feet from Bahia

and the chapel was lit by a child's
fistful of marigolds on the red velvet altar
thrown like a golden ball.

(PAGE, 1997, v. II, p. 123)

In these lines, what draws the poet's attention is the aesthetic quality of images. But somehow the intrusion of history disturbs contemplation, leading the poet to conclude:

Oh, let me come back on a day
when nothing extraordinary happens
so I can stare
at the sugar-white pillars
and black lace grills
of this pink house.

Of course history cannot be simply wiped out from landscape, thus the irony of the poet's desire. Almeida reminds us that, for Pratt, the aesthetic experience in travel narratives is paradoxical. It functions as “a poetic necessity to justify some kind of intervention in the visited country or, in Page's case, to create an excuse for not intervening” (ALMEIDA, 2009, p. 113). Page's aesthetic experience in her depictions of Brazil is largely present in her poetry, *Brazilian Journal*, and paintings. Unable to write poetry during her stay in the country, Page found in drawing an alternative form of expression. Detailing what fascinated her in the Brazilian landscape in “Questions of Images,” Page writes: “If I drew them all...? And I did. Compelled, propelled, by the point of my pen. And in drawing them all I seemed to make them mine, or make peace with them, or they with me” (PAGE, 2007, p. 37). This illustrates how the poet negotiates her sense of estrangement, here in the ambiguity of appropriation as a way to “make peace” with an alien culture. Page's initial poems about Brazil thus reveal a position of detachment, and the appeal of the aesthetic experience. Ironically, there is no comfort zone since history is all around and interventions in cultural representations are inevitable.

For Sternberg, inscribing Brazil in his poetry is a result of displacement and cultivation, as the poem “New Leaves” metaphorically expresses:

Brought from the tropics
 then in obedience
 to a sweet injunction,
 the closed fist of a seed
 unfurls a green banner
 among the cacti on a sill
 above my snowbound yard.
 (STERNBERG, 1990, p. 63)

Sufficiently ripen by time the migrant seeds unfurl childhood memories, revealing significant features of Brazilian cultural history.

While Page's initial portraits of Brazil demonstrate her sense of estrangement towards an alien culture, Sternberg's convey closeness, weaving personal inventory and collective history. Two poems about "aunts" recreate old roots of patriarchy and catholic indoctrination. In "Thread and Needle," the house is an "aquarium" where "Sinhá," "lost among the ferns, [is] sewing and muttering prayers / oblivious to bright fish / threading in and out her hair" (STERNBERG, 1990, p. 17). The female sanctuary contrasts with the great-uncle's world "policing the stones in his garden, / the mangoes on his trees" speaking of "the emperor."

The poem "Tia" also depicts the constraints of the female universe, here tinged with the humor of transgression:

A fragile thing, she was
 myopic, rheumatic, prone
 to spells of dizziness.
 Once, under the mango tree
 that shadowed the entire house
 she began to fall but reached
 for a trailing vine,
 regained her balance
 and from behind thick glasses
 smiled at me: Tarzan,
 she said, and shuffled away.

A believer in icons
 and in appeasing heaven
 with prayer and promise,
 she kept the household altar
 outside her bedroom door:
 A large niche painted blue,
 speckled with golden stars.

Her patron was St. Francis:
 A bird to each shoulder,
 the wolf curled at his feet.
 (STERNBERG, 1990, p. 50-51)

A mixture of sex symbol and romanticism, Tarzan was part of an imported popular culture in Brazil in the 50s and 60s. Tia impersonates a generation of women in their fantasies with Tarzan, escaping patriarchal and

religious indoctrinations. The poem's last image makes a tribute to transgression: "a parrot squawking on his shoulder, / Tarzan bows to St. Francis, / swings from a vine, / and steps to her back porch."

Sternberg's *sentimento íntimo* in regard to these features of Brazilian culture is also confirmed for evoking similar depictions in Brazilian poetry. "Tia" resembles Drummond's women in the poem "Image, Land, Memory," emerging from "the pool of time":

Look
 at the melancholic ambiguity of this woman's face
at the window
 that opens to impossible seas of freedom,
 while in cortege the little angel's white body passes by
 straight to heaven
 where with my Mother I shall be, all of us
 in the holy glory one day.

Girls, oh girls
 who emerge from the pool of time with no wrinkle
 to mark your faces:
 in the heavy grosgrain of mass dresses
 resurrect the abolished fashion, the ever fashion.
 In the glass sheet uncovering the large ark
 is engraved the beauty that familial oppression
 does not fade or destroy.
 Beautiful despite the ancient prohibitions
 that condemned you to marriage without love,
to stifling sex,
 to the uncle-with-niece, to the rich or promising
cousin,
 girls of *Rio Doce* of sylvan scent,
 today you repose on abstract ground,
 this ample ground that memory expands
 over the vacuum of extinct generations.³

As Silviano Santiago observes, one never knows whether that woman is at the window to look at the "little angel's white body or to muse about the road, waiting for the foreign Savior who may rescue her."⁴ One cannot forget that not precisely religiousness, but the church as repressive institution, especially in the context of Minas, has always been viewed in Drummond's poetry either with irreverence or ambiguity. Besides Tia's transgression, Sternberg's poem enacts irreverence in her brother-in-law's "threat to make out of [St. Francis's] niche, / a cage for his macaw," and finally in the ambiguity of Tarzan's (ir)reverence. This common trait with Drummond is also manifested in the poem "Paulito's Birds" published later.

Outside the family circle, Sternberg's "*sentimento íntimo*" in regard to the Brazilian culture and history is also found in poems like "Ana Louca" and "Peddler." In

³ The original of Drummond's poem is published in the collection *Farewell*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Record, 1996, 63 (my translation).

⁴ Santiago's afterword to *Farewell*, 129 (my translation).

the former, the position of closeness is evinced in the very act of naming and detailing habits:

Antic-prone and crazy
Breast-feeding her dolls
through the streets
or on Sundays marooned
by herself in a pew,
she offered her litany
of curses and profanities
to no one in particular

Thursdays she would come
demanding that which habit
had made hers by right:
the warmed leftovers
she wolfed down, standing
against the green backdoor.
Finished, she rattled thanks
From the gates and was gone.
(STERNBERG, 1990, p. 82)

The poet's complicity with Ana Louca's ritual evokes society's complicity with this kind of social drama. In the provincial Brazil of the time, habitual outcasts like Ana Louca circulated both in public and private territories, as described in the poem. At the same time they crossed these middle-class family thresholds as they were somehow domesticated or accommodated by routine itself.

Likewise in the poem "Peddler" habitual visit is what determines the sense of closeness: "He appeared each spring / to clap at our gate," and "chanted the merchandise: *French perfume, from Paris!* / In the palm of his hand / a vial the shape of a heart. *The exact same brand / used to advantage by Bardot!* A whiff glazes his eyes, / he stares hard at the maid" (STERNBERG, 1990, p. 83). In giving voice to this "man of foreign accent," the poem reenacts an old practice usually by Arabs and Portuguese who became regular visitors. As observer and participant, the poet once more reveals his intimacy with Brazil's cultural history.

More recent publications by the two poets – Sternberg's *Bamboo Church* (2003), and Page's *Hand Luggage, A Memoir in Verse* (2006) – reiterate their distinctions observed in the poems above. In *Hand Luggage*, Page's long account of her experience in Brazil retakes some episodes of *Brazilian Journal*, moving from trip preparation, arrival, to an inventory of Brazilian life. In the beginning, the clash of cultural differences: "Cariocas are noisy, the racket they make / to Canadian ears is cacophonous – cries, / ghetto blasters and horns and loud laughter and shrieks" (PAGE, 2006, p. 51). Then, the poet describes the dazzling beauty of Rio stirring "visual thirst," exotic pets, and the routine in the house, a pink palace surrounded by "a forest that

flowered with *ipês, quaresmas* (...) and shameless *marias*." Nonetheless, impossible to forget the contrast of *favelas*:

A congenital blindness afflicted the rich.
Those born to the purple had dye in their eyes,
Or so I concluded. How otherwise could
they have lived with the poor in their faces and paid
so little attention. Regrettably, now
I see in Canadian cities the same
disregard for the down-and-out. We have caught up!
(PAGE, 2006, p. 55)

The social consciousness initially criticizing the blindness of the rich ("they," Brazilian rich) ends up admitting complicity in a temporal and spatial displacement: "We [Canadians] have caught up!"

Skin color is another issue brought by the memory of "rules of employment" in Brazil at the time. "In staffing ones house / the rules were plain: upstairs maids / *must* be white; and *copeiros* who served us; the rest – / the cook and the laundress and cleaners could be / black, white or whatever" (PAGE, 2006, p. 61). The poet, who considered herself color-blind before coming to Brazil explains that, as a guest, had no choice but "to learn the ways of the country." Yet, she recognizes the complexities of color, exemplifying that, although the rich "prized" white skin, some were "proud" of having a black ancestor.

In a review of *Hand Luggage*, Sara Jamieson notes that

Page's habitual fascination with multiple selves is mapped across the life course in a way that stirs up questions concerning the politics of race and class in a global context. She repeatedly questions the extent of her former complicity with the racism of some of her peers in the "world-wide white club" of international diplomacy in the 1950s and 1960s, but the poem does not consistently destabilize colonialist ideology.⁵

Perhaps what prevents the poem to do this is a consistency of diplomacy. Yet, there is some change in this late gaze, in regard to the early poems about Brazil. No longer merely implied, social and racial issues gain space in critical reflection.

Except for this critical digression, *Hand Luggage* shows that an elegant Brazil, populated by memorable poets, painters and other artists, exuberant landscape and intriguing architecture is what appeals more to the poet's sensibility. This is confirmed in the final memory of the house with its paintings, flowers, chandeliers,

⁵ JAMIESON, Sara. Available at: <http://canlit.ca/reviews/the_privilege_of_age>. Accessed on July 18, 2008.

emblematically representing the loss of a “golden existence.” In the final lines, the poet ponders on what the Brazilian experience represents to her:

([...] Those years were as near
to perfection as earthlings are like to get.
Not perfect, of course. This planet is flawed,
along with its people. The apple has worms.
But living there, I was italicized. Some
curious alchemy altered my font.)
(PAGE, 2006, p. 70)

One may read the two final lines as emblematic for the development of Page’s art as a painter in the impossibility of writing poetry.

Curiously, it is a Brazilian canvas that alters Page’s visitor’s gaze, breaking with her usual detachment. The experience is revealed in an unpublished poem, “Some Paintings by Portinari”:

With the first lot flat
it was as if he’d cut off my breasts
and levelled my nose
like the side of a barn
I walked
and met them flat
flat on and one
up-tilted my chin.

with the others lord all the colours gone
strange but I wore
red when I came and green
and he made them grey
and painted the grey all over my skin
and the pain
pulled all the muscles and cords.⁶

Portinari’s painting, here identified by the grey hue, is part of his expressionist series, *Série Bíblica* and *Os Retirantes*. Inspired by Picasso’s *Guernica*, Portinari’s work of this period expresses his commitment in portraying human suffering, calling attention to Brazilian social causes. In *Os Retirantes*, disarticulated bodies, tears of stone speak for their saga of displacement. Although the poem may be one more example of Page’s interest in the aesthetic experience, this is a crucial moment in her poetry about Brazil in which limits between self and other are dramatically undone. As Cynthia Messenger notes, the pain in the painting becomes the poet’s pain: “the ‘I’s’ colours turn to grey; even her skin absorbs the grey of anguish, and her ‘muscles and cords’ pull taut in sympathy with the pain of the portrait. Portinari paints her” (MESSENGER, 1994, p. 113). Ironically here, the aesthetic experience does not allow a detached gaze, as in the previous poems; instead, it violently draws the spectator to the inside.

Regarding Sternberg’s poetry, Brazil is only apparently absent in *Map of Dreams*, his second book. In its confluence of voices, the long poem appropriates and reinvents seafaring myths and explorers’ travel writing, in particular the chronicles of Portuguese and Spanish navigation from the time of the great discoveries. Thus, as part of the explorers’ maps of dreams, the New World, Brazil is implicit in the adventure. Columbus’s hallucination for signs of land envisions the tropics: “Though I hear nightingales / smell the nectarines, / see honeycombs so laden / their gold overflows / in a long, continuous tear, / I fear I’ll not set foot / on that green shore” (STERNBERG, 1996, p. 43).

Sternberg’s few portraits of Brazil in the subsequent book, *Bamboo Church*, confirm the premise of the “intimate connection,” revealing other significant features of Brazilian culture. In “Paulito’s Birds,” the poet speaks of a great uncle who raised birds:

but the steeped bamboo church
with a nest in its hollow pulpit
he, the fierce atheist,
kept for the mating pair.

At his whim, admonished
not to speak, I followed,
acolyte with burlap bag
from which he doled out
ceremonious, almost sacramental,
feed to the fluttering tribe.
(STERNBERG, 2003, p. 4)

Rituals like this illustrate Rosemary Sullivan’s observation about the book, *Bamboo Church*, “a celebration of the sacred and sensual things of this earth.”⁷ Although this is a comment about the collection in general, it may be applied to a very specific trait of the Brazilian culture, widely depicted in art. Inheritance of primitive nakedness clothed with Christianity, the combination of the sacred and the profane persists even in the cliché of the Brazilian “cult” to sensuality. Here as in the poem “Tia,” irreverence subverts the religious, *à la manière* de Drummond.

In another poem, “First Dance,” personal memory once more weaves cultural features. Aunt Dolores, “such a wealth of buttocks,” was a dancer of all rhythms:

When music revved her hips
she moved and still would move
long after the exhausted boys

⁶ PAGE, P. K. cited by Cynthia Messenger in “But How Do You Write a Chagall?” Ekphrasis and the Brazilian Poetry of P. K. Page and Elizabeth Bishop,” 113.

⁷ SULLIVAN, Rosemary. Available at: <<http://www.mqup.ca/bamboo-church-products-9780773525665.php>>. Accessed on March 08, 2006.

had surrendered the floor, and more,
 even with the band gone silent.
 Her snapping fingers then the beat,
 Melody, her deep-throated hum.

Inveterate dancer,
 what dance didn't you know? (p. 6-14)

Among the poems in *Bamboo Church*, this is for Carmen Oliveira one of the most *brasilianos*. She points out the resemblance of Aunt Dolores to Chico Buarque's female character with "a typhoon in the hips."⁸ Correspondences here not only evoke the dancing sensuality of Brazilian women (*sambistas*, for example) but allegorically a country essentially musical.

In different perspectives, Page and Sternberg offer us this unique collection of images of Brazil. Page, a detached observer drawn by the aesthetic appeal, reverses this in contemplating Portinari's painting. Ironically, it is this gaze that leads her to experience the closest contact with the Brazilian culture in her poetry. Sternberg's "intimate connection" with Brazil unfolds along his poetry with the experience of spatial detachment and the rigorous clarity of time. In our incursion/excursion in their poetry, as passengers in old trains, we see a provisional country pass by the window. Yet, as Page says in the poem "Round Trip,"

something is hidden in the scenery still –
 the hero hovers just behind the curtain
 articulating the perfect unheard words
 and the changing country is only a view that swings
 [...] (PAGE, 1997, v. I, p. 31)

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⁸ Oliveira made this comment in an e-mail message, September 13, 2005.