

Finding Answers while Losing North

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Data Sheet

Title of the book: Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self

Author: Nancy Houston

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Introduction

Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self was written by Nancy Huston in 2002. The book compiles a series of essays regarding Huston's thoughts and experiences as an expatriate, while living in different countries, that shaped her not only as an author, but as a human being. Born in Canada, Huston moved to the United States as a teenager, and wrote her master's thesis in France – entirely in French –.

The essays see Huston reflect on the many implications of being an immigrant. The author's reflections communicate what she refers to as "the truths, unbeknownst to others, that expatriates are aware that shape the human condition in general" (Huston, 2002). As McCance (2003) describes in his review, "The book is a rich meditation on memory and forgetting" (p. 350-351).

Development

A big part of Huston's book focuses on what she calls in her essays "contradictory identities" The author describes how spending her childhood in Canada left her unable to feel French, even after 25 years of living in France. As such, one of her main topics of interest, if not one of the main themes in the book, is the division of the self. Huston highlights living abroad as an experience that separates the expatriate into two halves of the same being: the one that belongs in the home country, and the one that was created while living abroad. This process is not only described as difficult, but also miserable or even traumatic.

Relationships of all kinds are also explored through the book: between expatriates, as well as between inpatriates and expatriates. Huston is a firm believer of the estrangement that inevitably happens between the people left behind in the home country and the immigrant, out of loss of memories and cultural differences.

Another big protagonist of this exploration of human interactions is the difference between languages. Huston explores in detail how it feels like to speak a different language; how a person adapts her speech, from the words to the accent, according to where she is and who she is speaking to and how words remain an "undefeated form of communication" (Huston, 2002).

The language analysis in her essays plays a significant role of the previously referred exploration of

different relationships. Especially when examining interactions between expatriates and inpatriates, Huston highlights the prejudice the first may experience in both the foreign country and the home country. In her case, she tells how people she talked to while visiting Canada point out she is not able to speak Canadian English "well enough" anymore. Huston also constantly references the difficulties in maintaining meaningful bridges between herself and the people she left behind in Canada.

Schaub (2016, p. 93-94) arguments that the essays explore's loss and disorientation borne of the choice to live in exile, especially when the expatriation involves both culture and language estranging. As such, bilingualism is dissected, especially when it comes to the use of both languages in speech and writing. Huston touches on her writing style, and how much Roland Barthes and her identity as a foreigner have influenced it. For example, the author mentions that for her, as foreigner, is easier to transgress literary norms when writing in French. Huston also narrates that her time under the supervision on Roland Barthes at university made her develop an extreme sensitivity to how she uses language and to her writing style: "He taught me to be wary of (...) "readymade" expressions, and it is to him that I own my penchant for parentheses, colons, semicolons, ellipses, and overlong sentences. I both appreciate and resent this influence" (Huston, 2002).

In addition to this, the author reflects if her ability to write in English and French may or may not mean that she has different opinions, worldviews and writing styles in her text depending on the language.

I am a Journalism student who constantly writes in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. As such, it is extremely interesting to reflect on how each one of these languages influences my writing style and the message I try to convey in my own work. It is baffling to try to understand through the book how the use (or lack of use) of certain elements when I

speak or write in different languages has probably shaped many aspects of my life.

I believe that, for any expatriate, “Losing North” obliges to analyze oneself must admit that as nineteen-year-old student who has lived in three different countries, and plans to live in many more, Huston’s essays were deeply touching. I don’t believe I had ever found testimonies on paper of people who have had led a similar life to mine until I read *Losing North*. It was surprising to discover how unknowingly many parts of my personality had been shaped by my experiences as an immigrant.

Huston’s prose is filled with sentimentality and a deep sense of self-awareness. Her sentences are long, passionate, almost as she were having a conversation with herself. Still, it is clear that her writing is directed to a public because she constantly makes questions to the reader through her texts. On some occasions, it is implicit that she believes that she has found the answer to those same questions, out of many years of self-insight.

Nonetheless, the author recognizes she still feels lost in many aspects of her identity as a bilingual expatriate. Hence the title, “Losing North”, a French expression akin to “losing track of what is going on” (Huston, 2002). As a result, the narration in her essays is filled with her insecurities.

Through the book, Huston is very descriptive. She continuously links different experiences with different emotions, with the latter being, most of the time, adjacent to suffering. Many elements in her writing – the choice of certain words and the tone they transmit, for example – point out living abroad as an experience equal to a maddening exile. In my perspective, the author may come across as unrelentingly hard in her descriptions because she is telling the reader what she considers to be the ugly, uncomfortable truths about living abroad.

However, it should be considered that the truth about being an expatriate is completely subjective because it is tied to the experience of each individual. For the author, this means difficulty, division, and a never-disappearing feeling of guilt and exile. As an international student, who comes from a different background and has lived in different countries than Nancy Huston the truth is slightly different. As stated by Schaub (2016) “People who inhabit more than one culture multiply these realities and experiences, thereby increasing the number of facets to the diamond of identity” (p. 107). This is to say, not all immigrants - including me - feel as if their identities are cut-clear and perfectly divided according to the cultures they have lived in.

Conclusion

Regardless of what was stated before, I acknowledge having experienced almost everything she describes. It is interesting to note how Huston managed to make me feel connected to her and her story. Just as she describes in her essay “The Mask”, her being an immigrant immediately quickens my sympathy and my empathy. I feel tied to this woman, even if I have never seen her.

As an expatriate who lives exactly 7,636 km away from home - if there even is such a concept as home - Huston’s book feels as an acknowledgment of my experiences abroad. Even if the book sometimes fails to recognize the joy tied to so many aspects of living abroad, in other ways it validated the pain I have experienced as an immigrant.

As a reader, I felt seen, valuable. Almost as if Huston herself had said to me: You’re not alone, even if we do not see the same experiences the exact same way. Someone has thought, done, and felt this before.

I do have to admit that knowing that is a relief.

References

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