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A Sense of Place II

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The author discusses how her family history helps her build the writing engine in her plays and her first novel. For her, family is that space-world, the writing engine and the core of narration.

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A SENSE OF PLACE

A Sense of Place

By Cynthia Edul (Argentina)

What is the land of writing? Juan José Saer, in a debate about the themes and specificities of Latin American literature provides a compelling answer to this question. “The biggest mistake a writer can make is to believe that the fact that he is Latin American is reason enough to start writing (...) His specificity derives not from the geographical accident of his birth, but from his work as a writer.” What is, then, the work of the writer? How does the relationship between writer and his space and time come into being? What is the space of narration we can call our own, our own specificity?

Since the origin of my experience, I have encountered a series of spaces that are foundational and that I often revisit in my writing. My father, an affluent Argentine businessman and the son of Syrian immigrants, bought an apartment in South America’s most luxurious beach resort, Punta del Este, confirming his definitive upward mobility in the social ladder. His birth land, the land of my grandparents, was strewn with poverty and lacked basic necessities. Conversely, Argentina offered immigrants a fertile land of promise. Argentina is one of the countries that, together with North America, received the largest migratory wave during the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th. Argentine identity is based on the hybrid of cultures that populated the country from that moment on. It can be said that immigration stories founded an epic narrative: one of prosperity, but one that also came to be about failure and disillusion. For my father’s generation, this new land only meant material advancement and sudden fortune, which led him to a life of luxury. But the family debacle was soon to come.

Punta del Este: the most luxurious beach resort in South America. My parents leave me in the city center, in an arcade, and go to the Casino. My mother is late, hours and hours late; hours that turn into eons in that nocturnal wait. My mother cannot leave the Casino because my father is gambling compulsively. I wait in the street. And the episode recurs the following night, and for many nights after that. That is the opening scene of my first novel, *La Sucesión*. I am a little girl and, in the nocturnal landscape, I wait for my parents to return from the Casino. An empty street here, and a few blocks away, the Atlantic, the same ocean that led them to Argentina many years before. The beach, the sea, the country, the racecourse, the big avenues, the hotels, the Casinos and the luxury spaces, I revisit all of them in chapters or scenes in my work. Far from being appeasing or leading to vague observations, those big spaces associated with the family fracture are the places of disquiet and helplessness that give origin to the void, a space for writing to analyze. Family is then that space-world, the writing engine, the core of narration.

Addictions and successive political and economic crises in Argentina ruined the men in my family (father and uncles), who lost that very fortune they had managed to make as immigrants in the American dream. If childhood is, according to Walter Benjamin, the origin of experience, in my case the founding experience is locked within that space and time: I am a little girl lost in the coastal night, witness to the downfall of a family due to the ruin to which my father’s gambling inescapably led; gambling that, throughout the years, cost him his life and his fortune. Family conflict is the writing engine in my plays and my first novel. Spaces that I revisit in the praxis of writing.

Between my grandparents’ birth land and their acquired land, the land of my father, there exists a chasm, a void through which passions, temperaments, addictions as well as dreams and progress seep. The family history has left behind a bleak land. How is it possible to build a bridge towards that land? In exploring the space of a real of our own; founding, in the writing space, a land of our own.

In going back to Saer I ask, what is the work of the writer? Where is his land, if the specificity of his land does not derive from any geographical accident, from nationality?

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Narration is a mode of relating to the world, says Saer. Being a narrator demands a great capacity for availability, uncertainty and abandonment, and this is valid for all narrators, whatever their nationality might be. All narrators come from the same motherland: the thick jungle of the real.