



An Immigrant's Story

The House of Six Doors Abridged
for Limited English Proficiency Students

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Body, Emotions, and Culture

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Introduction

What we feel with our body plays a big part in shaping our cultural identity. We not only experience the world with our minds, but we also experience it through our bodies. With our minds we are able to think about our surroundings; with our bodies we sense and feel the world around us. The culture in which we were born greatly shapes the way in which do these things. Because our home cultures feel familiar to us, we often do not think about all the ways in which they form our minds and our bodies. Immigrants can often become disoriented when they leave their original cultures and notice that people in other cultures do not think or feel the same way as they did back home. In order to fit into our new cultures, we usually focus on learning to think in new ways without considering new ways to sense or feel. This guide will help those immigrants who want to better understand the way they experience the world through their bodies using their senses and their emotions.

Implicit Memory

Culture is both explicit and implicit. When we are aware of our memories and cultural practices, they are explicit. When we are unaware of them, they are said to be implicit. These implicit memories are senses and feelings that we perceive without thinking about them. As an immigrant engaging, reflecting, and exploring what one senses and feels helps bring light to one's cultural identity.

Discovering the Senses through Art

Expressing oneself in a new language and in a new cultural can be challenging. There will be many new explicit sensations and emotions for the immigrant even as many of the old sensations and emotions will no longer be present. But an even greater part of these emotions and sensations will be implicit and unexplored. It will help the immigrant in a new culture to discover these bodily perceptions. This can be done through exploring arts such as dance, writing, poetry, cooking, singing, playing an instrument, photography, sculpting, and sports. The arts can engage the body in ways that simply learning a new language or custom cannot. For myself the art form was writing, and my explorations can be found in the pages of *An Immigrant's Memoir*. It is my hope that the following passages from my story and their attendant questions will serve as a starting point for you to discover and explore your own cultural identities.

Smells in Writing

“Do you think they are drugs?” Mama said to the man escorting her. “They are not drugs, they are all natural herbs. They do only good.”

The officer kept walking and looked straight ahead, stone-faced.

“Those herbs have healing powers! They work for all kinds of problems. I could help you.” She tapped him on the shoulder and her pace picked up. “Are you having money problems, love problems? That is what these herbs are for. These herbs are to help, not to harm.”

The officers looked at each other and rolled their eyes. They led us through one of the brown doors into a cramped, stark room.

“You people from the islands are all the same, always trying to sneak things by us,” one of them grumbled. “Please sit down and wait here!” he ordered, shaking his head in an expression of disgust.

As the officers left, the last one locked the door behind him (p. 2).

Questions

1. What are the smells that evoke feelings about your culture?
2. How are these perceived in the United States?
3. How does this perception affect your identity?

Sounds in Writing

After another half hour, two of the officers returned. They spoke quickly, and I couldn’t understand everything they said. I hated the sound of English. To me, it sounded like cats fighting. I preferred the music of more familiar languages. I liked the sound of Dutch, which was spoken from the back of the throat and sounded strong; Papiamentu, the local language of Curaçao, which was playfully repetitious; and I loved the soothing and lyrical sound of Spanish (p. 4).

Questions

1. When Patricia first hears English spoken in America she says: “They spoke quickly and I couldn’t understand everything they said. I hated the sound of English. To me it sounded like cats fighting.” How does the English language sound to you?
2. How does American music sound to you?
3. What are distinctive sounds in the United States for you?
4. What are distinctive sounds for you from your country of origin?
5. What feelings do these sounds evoke?

Sights in Writing

When we arrived at the produce section of the market I just stared, but Hendrika was taking pictures of the emerald-green broccoli and asparagus, varieties of exotic mushrooms, fresh Brussels sprouts, plump strawberries, golden pears, and dewy peaches. Hendrika and I had never seen any of these before.

“Look, Hendrika, raspberries and blueberries. Do you remember reading about them in our Dutch schoolbooks?” Mama followed us around the store, beaming.

We walked around the display tables, each mounded chest-high with gleaming, fresh produce. We walked up and down the aisles, amazed at the fantastic variety of American cereals, snacks, drinks, toothpastes, shampoos, soaps, and cleaning products. “American grocery stores are much better than even the grocery stores in Holland,” Mama said.

I had never seen a grocery store in Holland, but there was one Dutch grocery in Curaçao. It was called Zuikertuintje, or Sugar Garden. We could only afford to shop there once a month while Mama was married to Papa, because it was very expensive. The store was in a blood-red landhuis, an old

plantation house, in the rich Dutch residential neighborhood of the island. All of the items sold there were imported directly from Holland. Zuikertuintje did not sell Dutch fruits and vegetables because they could not survive the long boat trip or the heat of the Caribbean.

In Curaçao, we usually shopped at Shon Bila's store. She was a seventy-year-old black spinster and her store was simply a room in her house with a door onto the street. The doorway had a glass counter built into it. Little shops like hers were found in each neighborhood. We'd stand outside and request the products off the shelves; Shon Bila's store was mainly full of dried and canned goods: canned vegetables, canned fruit, canned margarine, and canned milk. Four burlap bags sat on the floor: one filled with rice, one with black beans, one with cornmeal, and one with black-eyed peas. A wheel of old Dutch cheese sat in the corner, oozing fat in the heat; a salami hung above it. Once a week Shon Bila sold fresh eggs.

Questions

1. What do you see when you remember your home culture?
2. What do you see in the United States?
3. What feelings do these sights evoke?

Touch and Writing

It was cold and I put on two extra layers of clothes. I remembered the nights in Curaçao, when a cotton sheet was all I needed to cover me. I remembered the warm island breeze tickling my face and dancing in my hair. How I wished I could be there with Oma right now. I closed my eyes. I could see her sitting in her rocking chair on the porch. She used to say, "Life is a paradox. Except for true love there is no good that doesn't have its bad, and no bad that doesn't have its good." I was beginning to understand what she meant. Here we were in America, a place Mama said was so good, yet things were going badly. I wanted to be with Oma. I'd rather be there, in a place Mama said was not so good, but where I didn't feel bad (p. 54–55).

Questions

1. What tactile experiences do you think of when you think of your country of origin?
2. Patricia remembers the Curaçao island breeze on her skin as she sits in a cold car in Hollywood. Other areas that can be explored are uses of body language. Is there a lot of physical contact or little physical contact in your country of origin?
3. What kind of clothing is worn? How does it feel?

Tastes and Writing

Mama had calmed down over the past few days. She was frying chicken for the Escabeche and cutting the vegetables. Cooking often cheered her up. Hendrika was preparing Papas a la Huancaína. These dishes were Peruvian and were two of Ramón's favorites.

I was making my own special dish. I sliced plantain bananas, fried them lightly, mashed them with garlic in a mortar, and then fried them again until they were crisp. For every three I made, I ate one. Hendrika and I were singing along to an Armando Manzanero record; the Peruvian singer-songwriter's music was famous throughout South America. The romantic ballads made me think of Sandu. The smells and sounds made me feel as if I were still in Curaçao, where we ate with friends from many South American countries. I closed my eyes. Our apartment finally smelled and sounded like home. Hendrika set the table. We all wanted to make the meal perfect for Ramón. We were very grateful that he had helped us when we first got to Los Angeles (p. 104).

Questions

1. Food is a major sensory component of culture. What flavors are prominent in your culture of origin?
2. What flavors and spices remind you of your country of origin?
3. Do these flavors and spices evoke any feelings?

Emotions and Writing

Willia stopped the car and I got out. A large sign posted on the fence declared “Coming Soon—the Country House Hotel.” There was no one around. I walked around the entire fence, trying to find a way in. I stood there sobbing, mourning the loss of the house. As the trade winds caressed my face, the scent of kadushi cactus flowers enveloped me. I thanked Oma for sending it, and I thanked the house for the many happy memories it had given me. I bid the big blue house farewell and turned back toward the car. Willia was leaning against the car door waiting for me, tears running down her cheeks.

Four days later, Willia stood again on the airport rooftop, waving good-bye. As I climbed up the stairs to the plane I waved back. I was sad to leave my sisters, but relieved that the Curaçao I loved was in my heart and could never be left behind. I was eager to return to California to pursue my rekindled dream of becoming a reporter. I took my seat and waved at Willia through the window, although I knew she couldn't see me anymore. I stuffed my carry-on under the seat in front of me and pulled out my wallet. Inside, I carried with me a few colors of the island: the folded pink card with its expired riding lessons, and next to it, my green card (p. 195).

Questions

1. Upon returning to Curaçao, Patricia finds that the island has changed, and that she has changed as well. What do you fear about going back to your home culture?
2. When she returns to California, she finds herself eager to pursue her dreams. What do you hope for now, living in the United States?

