

Être Française et Américaine: L'interculturalité vécue

by Nathalie Monsaint-Baudry

Harvard Book Store, 2012. *This book can be purchased directly or downloaded at no cost from <http://www.pbaudry.com/cyberlivre/>*

Reviewed by George Simons at www.diversophy.com

Nathalie Monsaint-Baudry is a major league polymath whose insights into the cultural vicissitudes of both France and America—particularly Los Angeles—are philosophical, linguistic, artistic, sociological, and just plain on target. Having been an “immigrant” in Los Angeles roughly at the same time as the author was working there, I also found it a new and different world, though I emigrated, not from the Hexagon, but from Cleveland, Ohio. Reading this meaty volume brought back memories and instigated insights as well as provoked the kind of aha’s that come when someone finally provides the words for something you felt but didn't quite know how to express.

The painter’s “perspective” is the leitmotif that opens the book and provides us interculturalists with the new way of looking at things, how to come not too close and not too far. Astutely observing that our science-credulous world has programmed itself to prefer for the mental estrangement of Descartes to the hands-on reality of da Vinci, Monsaint-Baudry opts for the concrete expression of Angelino in-your-face-ness. Just as LA County homes have no basements, so too, Los Angeles is not supported by its history, but by its dreams and fantasies, a canvas on which to paint the future.



I remember how once a young man from the East Coast of the United States tried to explain to me that he had spent months trying to get on the “inside of things” in Los Angeles, until he discovered that “there was no inside to get inside of.” Los Angeles County has lots of centers but no Center. There are no signs indicating “Centre Ville”, but every street corner could easily be labeled “Toutes Directions”. Places have names like Santa Monica, Miracle Mile, Downtown, and Old Town, but in fact the only center is the place in which you are standing. You are the center and wherever you

move, the rest of the world moves about you. The place is centrifugal, not centripetal, so watch your footing. It is the perfect place to go it alone on the path of the self-made myth. It's a flat tortilla, it's a grid, a place to get lost so that you have to make a religion of finding yourself, or as I did and many European visitors do, occasionally motor up to San Francisco in order to breathe. LA is the only place where I have ever lived where the freeways merit a definite article, "*the 5,*" "*the 15*".

Circumcision and death are side-by-side, testimony to the US American need to get it right from start to finish. The world of personal trainers and therapists is close by to see you through your addiction to snack crackers or crack snacking. Pay-as-you-go religion, mega churches that squat on the landscape broadcast the intimate connection in the US mentality between faith and capitalism—both coins and currency are labeled, "In God we Trust." While seeing LA as essentially a masculine environment it is also the home of super mom and the HMF (high maintenance female) a place where products can only be marketed well if they bear the blessing of mother nature (organic, no additives).

The book is a Christmas fruitcake of such images and discourse, held together by the dough of Socratic reflection, so I only mention a couple of the nuttier kernels and intensely fruity bits and urge you to munch on the rest yourself—the checklist, the container store, smells and credit cards, over-the-top, cornucopia, and many, many more in this place where the bizarre is never ridiculous.

According to the most recent issue of *Chief Executive Magazine*, California is the worst US state in which to do business, and Texas is the best. It would be interesting to sequel this book with something equally incisive about Texas, which might also tell us a lot about the cultural divisions that both polarize and connect US Americans. Have him

Should you think that the USA does not have an abiding culture that finds expression here, think again. The red thread of US ideas, ideals, and idiosyncrasies is traceable through the author's familiarity with such classic observers of America as Alexis de Tocqueville, Châteaubriand, and Henry James, to say nothing of her vast experience with the abiding themes of US cinema whose output she subtitled for the Francophone market.

France is far from forgotten in these pages of countless perspectives. The author is careful to switch to the French frame of reference repeatedly, both so that Gallic culture can be understood as well as serve as foil to the US scene, which in turn exerts certain magnetism on the direction of French culture itself.

There are many, many mini illustrations that capture the text in a graphic way. My sole complaint is that they are so minuscule—perhaps one of the hazards of print-on-demand. Much like LA, and much like ourselves as expatriates, *Être Française et Américaine* seems to aspire to being a work in progress. I hope my short intro will encourage you to have a look as well as continue shaping your own work in progress.