

Dragan Todorovic, Serbian writer and multimedia artist

‘We are who we are not: Language, exile and nostalgia for the self’

“Home ceases to exist after one goes into exile. Collective memory is adjusted so the space emptied by the exile's departure can be closed as soon as possible. The two nostalgias annihilate each other. If *la maladie du pays* is the right diagnosis, then we are longing for a historic place; if *mal du siecle* exists, if we could somehow return to the specific time, we would find the geography impossible. Both ideas are utopian. But neither of these notions mentions the concept of cultural nostalgia: longing to return to the cultural milieu the individual once inhabited.

“*The Book of Revenge* in translation made me a foreigner in my own language. What I felt when reading it was nostalgia for my old self.

“My first job after arriving to Canada was as a programme director at a radio station in North York. My English was progressing, but when forced to speak it for long stretches of time, I found the experience tiring. Soon, I developed terrible migraines. The attacks started around noon and by the afternoon reached punishing levels, only to abate in the evening and completely disappear during the night.

“One day, with the pain being impossible to withstand, I left the office and hid in a remote corner of a poorly visited cafe with a coffee and a book. By pure chance, it was a book written in my mother tongue.

“In a little while, my headache was gone. I repeated the process the next day, with the same result. Thinking it was impossible that the book had helped-surely my organism had found a bypass!-I did not bring the volume with me on the third day, only to experience new levels of pain. After that, I always carried something written in my mother tongue. Until perhaps seven or eight months later, the migraines stopped altogether - long exposure to my second language did not hurt me anymore.

Nostalgia for culture is perhaps the strongest form of nostalgia.”

Isabel Allende, Chilean author

“I live with one foot in California and the other in Chile.”

“I feel that I’m a foreigner everywhere. A stranger in life, because my life has been about moving from one place to another.

“And where are my roots? I would say that they are in my books, they are in the people I love. I will never completely belong in a place and understand all the rules, the subtleties of the rules. It’s good for a writer. You keep listening and observing and asking questions.”