
In exile

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Exile. Is it a verb, a noun, an adjective? Does anyone truly know what it is to be *an exile*, *to be exiled*, *to be in exile*, *to be an exile leader/poet/whatever*? A quick “Google search” of the word exile comes up with 2,800,000 hits. There are videos, software, music groups, computer games and magazines all professing some connection to the term exile. And then there is a multitude of every conceivable group speaking from exile. No country is without exiles. The Dalai Lama is living in exile in India. African Americans have sought exile in Cuba. Some American soldiers have found exile in Canada to avoid participating, *in their words*, in “*an illegal war in Iraq*”. Many countries have some form of government in exile, waiting for the time to rightfully return to the homeland. Indeed, history is often written from in exile, as is witnessed by a plethora of groups that have sought to justify the “true” nature of events.

Everything has been figured out, except how to live
(Jean-Paul Sartre. 1905-1980).

Perhaps the word “exile” is too political of a term for the average citizen. It connotes civil war, disruption, potentially a cruel immorality. Do we know where to draw the line between immigration, migration, refugee status and exile? Surely there are cases of some who claim exile but who are ultimately fleeing their own criminal prosecution. Similarly, there must be cases of some who never escape persecution, the intricate web of surveillance and betrayal, or the depth of torment and torture. Sometimes those in exile are labeled “terrorists”, or conversely “freedom fighters”, and occasionally “despots”. Often, they are those on the margins, seeking peace. Assuredly, the vast majority prefers to not be in exile

*There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world,
and that is an idea whose time has come.*
(Victor Hugo, 1802-1885).

The history of humanity is a litany of such stories, of forced estrangement of diabolical action, and conspicuous movement. Is there one exile group that does not have an office some representation or a *bone fide* foothold in Canada? The reality is that without peace, there will forever be a massive circulation of the peoples of the world. Since there has never been peace, we are destined to see these waves of mass migration to continue. The impact of the world socioeconomic and political order is far-reaching. There will be instability, insecurity, poverty, and desperation. People do re-settle, and many do achieve success, but there is always a part of them left behind. Sometimes, one is caught between the socio-psychological abyss and the constant chime of meeting deadlines, not free or at ease neither here nor there.

For Jorge Etcheverry, a well-known poet from Chile residing in Ottawa since the early days of the Pinochet’s dictatorship, exile cannot be disconnected from the political trappings surrounding the human condition:

Un trasplante por razones de persecución/discriminación política, ideológica, étnica, de orientación sexual o sexo o religiosa. Si bien excluyo a la inmigración económica “tradicional” (venir a “hacerse la América”), en los tiempos actuales, el fantasma del hambre y la necesidad fuerza a vastos conglomerados humanos fuera de sus países. El exilio se convierte en parte de la “globalización”, que convierte en superfluos más y más sectores en los países y regiones en que la economía de mercado se establece o renueva.

For Ramón de Ella, a poet from Argentina who has recreated his life in Ottawa, exile is characterized as life:

El exilio es optar por la vida, por un sueño, por una convicción, aunque todo ocurra calladamente. El exilio es el precio que se paga por querer ser, por aborrecer la inexistencia. El exilio es estar ausente de un hogar que ya no existe.

For Spin, a young dub poet in Toronto who bemoans the misery in his native Guatemala, exile comes with a daily reminder of where one is from:

La privación del hogar natal de uno por causas forzadas. El exilio también es un estado mental por el cual uno busca huir de circunstancias que le causan a uno dolor en cualquier forma que ese dolor sea manifestado. Este tipo de exilio para mí incluye a los que tienen recursos financieros y viajan desde sus condiciones privilegiadas a países de necesidad en busca de ese “relajamiento” que no viene siendo nada más que un exilio voluntario mental.

For Constanza Durán, a Chilean artist and poet living in Toronto, who was also geographically displaced, exile speaks to the incessant turbulence of being uprooted:

... dejar al país de uno, su cultura, sus raíces y la ideología en que uno estaba inmersa, en forma brusca e inesperada. El exilio duele ya que por las razones mencionadas antes, uno está siempre con un pie aquí y otro pie allá. Duele el dejar tu país en forma abrupta sin haber uno realmente podido decidirlo, lo decidieron por uno. A pesar de los años que han pasado, por más cariño que le tenga Canadá, siempre me siento que no pertenezco aquí.

For Hugo Hazelton, an American academic, translator and poet living in Montreal, and who came to know Canada through military invasion in Vietnam, exile represents the re-birth of conviction and ideals:

El exilio es la necesidad de pasar la frontera a otro país para preservar y seguir luchando por unos ideales trascendentes.

The exile, or exiled conditions not normally a choice; it is a necessity or a form of survival. North American society, with its cure-all talk-shows and reality-shows and get-rich-quick schemes, is not always prepared to grapple with the reality of the essence of

peoples¹ core being. A very quick look at the notion of democracy and the way elections are held here can provide a justifiable context for not being able to delve too far into the existence of the exiled.

*If I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics
encircles us today like the coil of a snake from which one
cannot get out, no matter how much one tries.
I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake.*
(Mahatma Gandhi, 1869-1948).

Exile is also a condition of the mind. One does not have to leave one's geographic milieu and cultural environment to sense a feeling of exile. Exile infers, unfailingly, ideology; it relates to the search for your home, the parameters of your family, your identity, and, ultimately, your existence.

Poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history
(Plato, 427-347 BC).

The great African-American writer Maya Angelou (born in 1928) captures the essence of poetry by stating that "*there is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you*".

Imagination is more important than knowledge
(Albert Einstein, 1879-1955).

In our world of instant connectivity, satellite images, high-speed, finger-printed, freshly-minted political hucksterism and the never-ending reality of poverty, racism and war, there is still the possibility of a humanistic, philosophical *ballade* through nature and time and space.

*Originality and the feeling of one's own dignity are achieved only through work
and struggle*
(Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1821-1881).

This is why we write and read and deliver and consume poetry. There are no rules, there is no bloodshed, and there can be love. Poetry can give us some meaning to a world that has, in part, lost its soul. We write poetry as a way of seeking some piece of the truth, seeking to legitimate what we might not be able to otherwise vocalize. We are free, but never really free. With poetry, we drink wine with our friends while we dine on life's most precious morsels, the connection between us.

He, who merely knows right principles, is not equal to him who loves them.
(Confucius. 551-479 BC).

A thousand hours of bureaucratic toil cannot amount to one line of incandescent poetry, which you hold in the mind and soul for an entirety.

In a world full of subtleties, innuendo and nuances, I can openly admit that it was, without hesitation, a pleasure to ponder the exile in which we live and dream about around us with the poets in the “*Colectivo de Mojito de Iguana*”². Poetry offers hope, it can speak to the unspeakable, and it can rectify the inner self. Our words, our thoughts, our poetry, are our manifestation of solidarity, cajoling through an intimate journey in search of liberty, seeking to denounce the permanency of exile.

Endnotes

¹ This text has been adapted from one written for a book of poetry on the theme of exile, which will be published in late 2006 by White Dwarf Press in Montreal.

² A group of ten poets, eight of whom are from Latin America and two others with links to the Hispanic world, formed the *Colectivo de Mojito de Iguana* as a way of uniting their force and their voice to create art, and to seek to, as Angelou suggests, “speak the truth”.
