

“Mad and Navigating Blood:” Exile and Radical Creativity

Elizabeth Bachner

Many of the most radical and influential works of art, poetry and fiction have been created in exile. Artists and writers, displaced by force or choice, have produced the type of work that shatters boundaries, perhaps mirroring the ruptures evident in their changed geographies, allowing them what Julia Kristeva has called “exquisite distance”.¹ To mention just a few familiar examples out of many, these artists and writers include the most prominent Roman poets (Ovid, Cicero, Boethius and Virgil); Dante; the “lost generation” of modernist poets and authors (including T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Djuna Barnes and many others); post-Revolutionary Russian émigré painters; the Surrealist painters in exile in the 1940s United States and Mexico, and the poets who fled China after the Tianenmen uprising in 1989 (including Bei Dao and Duo Duo).² A large number of Nobel Laureates in Literature have exiled or self-exiled for a crucial portion of their writing lives.³ Several important writers-in-exile (including Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe and Henry Miller) have taken up the issue in their non-fiction or autobiographical works, and there are many volumes of history, biography, and aesthetic studies that take up the issue of artists and writers in exile to varying degrees.

Yet, despite this, there has been no systematic study of creativity in exile as an *enduring social form*. In my dissertation, I will take up this issue through in-depth interviews with contemporary artists and writers working in exile, which I think will be a fruitful way to ground this broad inquiry. In this short essay, however, I will explore the question of how *internal experiences* of exile and creativity converge for artists and writers, with particular attention to the spectrum of experiences of exile, from the forced to the self-

¹ Julia Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves*. (Tr. Leon S. Roudiez.) Columbia University Press. 1991, p. 13.

² Examples of radical creativity in exile could fill a large volume or multiple volumes. In my dissertation, I will use in depth interviews with contemporary artists and writers in exile to address this theory, but for the purposes of this paper I draw on existing artwork, writings and biography rather than original interviews. The few examples I’ve mentioned here are all figures or groups who have had great political and social impact as well as aesthetic importance. Intellectuals who have had radical political impact in exile form the subject for a fascinating study in and of itself (in fact, two important works about the history of the New School for Social Research take up this issue in interesting detail. See Claus-Dieter Krohn. *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*. University of Massachusetts Press. 1993 and Peter Rutkoff and William Scott. *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research*. Free Press. 1986.), but I will be focusing on aesthetic and poetic creativity in my dissertation.

³ These include Joseph Brodsky, Gao Xingjian, Elias Canetti, among others.

determined, taking up brief examples rather than detailed case studies. In conceiving the experiences of “exile” and “self-exile” as ends of a spectrum rather than two types entirely distinct from one another, I will begin to map “exilic creativity” as an experience shared by artists and writers throughout that spectrum. If my project were to map this spectrum of experiences of exile, the “poles” would be “Forced Exiles” (*extremely* threatened artists and writers: the novelist Salman Rushdie and the painter Felix Nussbaum—artists who were threatened with death if they did not go into exile and hiding—are good examples) and “Self-Exiles” (extremely privileged artists or writers—Henry James and John Singer Sergeant leap to mind—who were not threatened in any sense whatsoever in their home countries, and were not even marginalized in any familiar sense.) Across the spectrum would be those not forced to flee their home countries, yet marginalized, constrained or imperiled in them to some extent nonetheless. As is clear from the examples I use in this paper, complex and intricate interrelations of nation, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and many other factors—including self-perception—shapes where different writers and artists might fall in the spectrum. The programme of this essay is not to pinpoint individual writers and artists on the spectrum, defining the level of force that has informed their experiences, but rather to demonstrate how the *entire spectrum* of “exilic experience” converges with radical creativity.

Force and Freedom: The Spectrum of Experiences of Creativity in Exile

I left those walls
 smeared with my blood—
 it was an atrocious massacre.
 Now I’m flying over the city
 not like a Chagall bride
 beside her bridegroom, the violinist,
 but like a winged nightmare
 with an entire biography of dirty feathers.⁴—Nina Cassian

⁴ Cassian’s poem concludes with the stanza:
 “But, see, I left that house of massacre,
 I am a nightmare-bird now;

It has always been true of all who make what they make come out of what is in them and have nothing to do with what is necessarily outside of them it is inevitable that they have always wanted two civilizations. ... There is no possibility of mixing up the other civilization with yourself you are you and if you are you in your own civilization you are apt to mix yourself up too much with your civilization but when it is another civilization a complete other a romantic other another that stays there where it is you in it have freedom inside yourself which you are to do what is inside yourself and nothing else is a very useful thing to have happen to you and so America is my country and Paris is my home town.⁵—Gertrude Stein

Creativity has flourished in forced exile, from Ovid's *Tristia* (written after he was exiled from Rome by Caesar, who strenuously objected to the book he had written about sex) to Felix Nussbaum's "Self Portrait with Jewish Passport" (which shows the artist—who was in hiding with his wife and carried false papers—defiantly but tragically displaying his Jewish passport and wearing a star of David) to the novels and short stories of the South African writer Bessie Head. Bearing this in mind, one could argue—as does Edward Said—that the exilic experience turns people into novelists or activists or intellectuals, because "much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule... the exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction."⁶ However, Said's view overlooks an essential property of the history and nature of creativity in exile: many of the most influential and innovative artists and writers of the past centuries have been privileged *self-exiles* (like the modernist novelists described in Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*, whose pilgrimage to Paris in the 1920s in search of the artist's lifestyle invariably ended with a return to Greenwich Village and, finally, a sojourn to Connecticut), or have existed in some space

everyone hears the beating of my wings,
nobody recognizes me." (Nina Cassian. "I Left Those Walls," (trans. Nina Cassian and Naomi Lazard), in Daniel Weissbort, Ed. *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*. Penguin. 1991, pp. 100-101.)

⁵ Gertrude Stein. "What Are Masterpieces?" in John Simpson, Ed. *The Oxford Book of Exile*. Oxford University Press. 1995.

⁶ Edward Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press. 2000, p. 181.

between exile and self-exile, at once marginalized in their countries of birth but not in fear that they will be murdered or imprisoned.

To meaningfully understand the convergence of exilic experience with creativity, and how this convergence has radically shaped both artist's experiences and the arts themselves, it is essential to acknowledge a full *spectrum of literary and artistic exile*. As I will discuss through the works of Georg Simmel and Julia Kristeva, the experience of the creative process as an epiphany or crisis (in the sense of a defining moment of change) is akin to the radical rupture from everyday life compelled by geographic displacement—the convergence of the two crises represents a nexus of art and life. Artists and writers forced to relocate (like Nina Cassian) and those for whom geographic displacement represents the practical enactment of an imaginative concept of space (like Gertrude Stein) *share* the experience of creativity merged with geographic displacement. Yet discussions of literary and artistic exile are often so broad or narrow that they fail to account for this spectrum, thus obscuring the importance of exilic creativity as a generative force for artists and writers.

In their dictionary definitions, the terms “exile” and “expatriate” both connote banishment or expulsion, and imply a person who has been *driven* out. “Expatriate” explicitly refers to expulsion from the *patria* or fatherland, while “exile” is more ambiguous at its root—*salire*—which means “to leap or spring”. Within sociological discourse, the problem of exile or expatriation has most often been viewed as an issue of international politics, a reference to immigration policies, refugees, forcible expulsion and asylum. In literary circles, both terms are applied to an extremely broad range of experience, and the terms émigré (which initially applied strictly to Royalists fleeing revolutionary France) and immigrant are no more narrow. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Exile*, John Simpson describes how he has “tried to stretch the definition of exile as far as possible without actually breaking it”, including in the volume:

“...not merely the more obvious political and religious exiles, but adventurers who threw everything up and headed out; misfits and ne'er-do-wells and those

who were simply too intelligent or too restless or too awkward to stay at home like everyone else; debtors, pursued by the courts; writers who needed a quieter or more stimulating atmosphere in which to work; refugees from bad weather, bad cooking or a bad past...”⁷

Though Simpson’s list of exiles might seem remarkably broad (and the portion I cite here is only an excerpt), his conception is sharp and narrow in comparison to the uses of the term in *Women’s Writing in Exile*, edited by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram. While Simpson confines “exile” to describe those who, for whatever reasons, have left their home countries, the Broe and Ingram volume includes interpretations of incest victims as “exiled” within the discourse on incest, women (*matria*) as de facto *expatriates*, or exiles from the fatherland, a Jewish woman professor’s exile within her department in the academy, and exile from the literary canon alongside essays on more conventionally conceived geographic exile. As Jane Marcus asks:

“Is the political refugee in Siberia more of an exile than a lesbian poet in Iowa or a woman of color in a white culture? Can the loss of language be compared to the loss of a nation?”⁸

In this paper as in my dissertation, I will discuss as “exiled” only those writers and artists who are in some sense *geographically* displaced, whether by force or design. However, within this definition, it is essential—in probing the convergence of exile and creativity—to allow for an understanding of exilic experience which acknowledges the experiences of geographic rupture and creativity shared by artists and writers whose lives may be otherwise radically different in social, economic and political terms. In mapping how creativity and exile converge, how exile is experienced and described by artists and writers is essential. How do they view exile, refuge or escape? How do they experience the artistic self, and how do they place that self into the world? In a literary sense, the

⁷ See John Simpson’s introduction, in John Simpson, Ed. *The Oxford Book of Exile*. Oxford University Press. 1995.

⁸ Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, Eds. *Women’s Writing in Exile*. University of North Carolina Press. 1989, p. 273.

epiphanic self is exiled from the mundane world. Artists and writers create—in their work—both spaces which aim to be alternative to the world, to transport both artist and viewer from the actual, and spaces which newly or differently *see* the world. The nation gets reinvented in creative works, and often by the artists or writers themselves in pursuing artistic space. The notion of a “geography of the mind”, so central in literary and artistic accounts, is sociologically problematic, yet of great importance in elaborating the convergence of exile and creativity.

“Exquisite Distance”: Strangers, Adventurers and Creativity

Georg Simmel’s definition of adventure and Julia Kristeva’s account of the foreigner’s “perverse pleasure” in self-alienation profoundly contribute to an understanding of exilic creativity, although there are conflicts and absences in both accounts. According to Simmel:

“...(It) is the radicalness through which it becomes perceptible as a life tension, as the rubato of the life process, independent of its materials and their differences—the quality of these tensions becoming great enough to tear life, beyond those materials, completely out of itself: this is what transforms mere experience into adventure.”⁹

To Simmel, the adventurer and the artist have a “profound affinity”, and the artist is marked by an attraction to adventure. Art and adventure converge because the very idea of an adventure is that it is something “alien, untouchable, out of the ordinary”, and that it lacks “reciprocal interpenetration” with “life-as-a-whole”, its temporal form is a “radical being-ended.” The affinity between the adventurer and the artist, as well as the artist’s lust for adventure, are explained by this particular temporality. Because both the artwork and the adventure are removed from daily reality, because they “stand over against life”, they are “analogous to the totality of life itself.” Artists and adventurers, or artists *as*

⁹ See Georg Simmel, “The Adventurer,” in Kurt Wolff, Ed. *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918*. Ohio State University Press. 1959, p. 258.

adventurers, seek a way to retain or totalize the epiphanic experience. This adventure transgresses national space, challenging the boundaries of the nation with the imagination. And yet, artistic wandering is often closer to the Simmelian stranger than to the adventurer, the stranger who is seen as “other” and is at once marginal and intrinsic to the society.¹⁰ Also, adventure is so often associated with privilege and the absence of necessity, as evident when Salman Rushdie wittily evokes the power dynamics explicit in the distinction between artist-adventurer and artist-stranger when he notes the difficulty of imagining “an Indian Paul Thoreaux be obsessed with U.S. railways or a black African Karen Blixen heading for Scandinavia.”¹¹ Yet, in the case of artists and writers in exile, central aspects of the (necessarily marginal) stranger and the adventurer coincide. Julia Kristeva’s concept of the “foreigner” and the experience of being a “stranger” shows how these experiences might overlap and intersect. She writes:

“Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*...this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. Rimbaud’s *Je est un autre* [“I is an other”] was not only the acknowledgement of the psychotic ghost that haunts poetry. The word foreshadowed the exile, the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living of a modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed. Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture.”¹²

Exiled artists and writers, like Simmel’s adventurer, imaginatively structure the world, in the sense that they consciously aim to create a life outside of the mundane. Both identity

¹⁰ See Georg Simmel, “The Adventurer,” in Kurt Wolff, Ed. *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918*. Ohio State University Press. 1959 and Georg Simmel, “The Stranger”, in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. University of Chicago Press. 1979.

¹¹ See Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. Penguin. 1991, p. 224.

¹² Julia Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves*. (Tr. Leon S. Roudiez.) Columbia University Press. 1991, pp. 13-14.

and geography are understood through this process. Simmel and Kristeva's concepts elegantly *contribute* to a more elaborate theory of exilic creativity, but neither manages (or attempts) to define such a theory. To form a meaningful sociological theory of exilic creativity, the convergence of creative imagination with social and political forms must be elaborated. For that reason, Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community" is of great consequence in understanding the cross-national experiences of adventurers, exiled artists, émigrés and travelers, because the *imagined* nation has been a prominent theme in exile writing and artwork.¹³ In particular, the *ways* that the nation is imagined by the exiled and self-exiled are crucial to a nuanced account of the degrees of force, need, desire, escape and refuge that shape the experiences of transnational artists and writers, from the eminently privileged expatriate (in Mary McCarthy's words, a "rather hedonistic escaper") to the exile seeking refuge from an undeniable threat to life and freedom (to McCarthy, "a bird forced by chill weather at home to migrate but always poised to fly back.")¹⁴

In the full range of experience, from hedonistic self-exile to forced migration, the imagination of a nation figures centrally, from Gertrude Stein's imagined Paris as some space that could be "made" to reflect what was inside of her to Salman Rushdie's "Indias of the mind." There is no doubt that relationships of power contribute to the content of how geography is imaginatively constructed—for instance, in Gertrude Stein's lines ("America is my country and Paris is my home town...if you are you in your own civilization you are apt to mix yourself up too much with your civilization"), the literary self is clearly Stein's center of the world—elsewhere in this same essay, Stein writes:

The Renaissance needed the greeks, as the modern painter needed the negroes as the English writers have needed Italy and as many Americans have needed Spain or France."¹⁵

¹³ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso. 1991.

¹⁴ Mary McCarthy. "A Guide to Exiles, Expatriates and Internal Émigrés" in *Occasional Prose*. Harcourt Brace. 1985.

¹⁵ Gertrude Stein. "What are Masterpieces?" In John Simpson, Ed. *The Oxford Book of Exile*. Oxford University Press. 1995.

Aside from her explicitly colonialist worldview, Stein's construction of the artist driven to expatriation by something "inside of them" is similar to Hemingway's. An unpublished passage from his manuscript of *Death in the Afternoon* reads:

"Any one who knows a damned thing about it is aware that the artist, like the cabbage and head lettuce, which he often resembles in intelligence, needs transplanting. It is not where they work, but what they have inside of them."¹⁶

In contrast, Rushdie writes that:

"...writers in my position, exiles or émigrés or expatriates, are haunted by some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."¹⁷

As these examples indicate, in cases across the spectrum of exilic experience, writers and artists share an imaginative dimension. This is apparent in Kristeva's quotation from William De Kooning, and would also apply to artists and writers seeking out certain "weightlessness":

"For since he belongs to nothing the foreigner can feel as appertaining to everything, to the entire tradition, and that weightlessness in the infinity of cultures and legacies gives him the extravagant ease to innovate. De Kooning does not say anything else: 'After all, I am a foreigner, I am different because I am interested in art in its totality. I have a greater feeling of belonging to a tradition.'¹⁸

¹⁶ Cited in Edward F. Stanton. *Hemingway and Spain. A Pursuit*. University of Washington Press. 1989. p. 9.

¹⁷ Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. Penguin. 1991.

¹⁸ See Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 32.

Beyond this geography of the mind (which I will argue is central to the identity and works of artists and writers in general, rather than exclusively those in exile), there is the issue of the *imagination of exile*. By this I do not mean a fabrication of exile, but rather *how exile itself is conceived and understood by artists and writers*, how both homeland and *terra incognita* are imagined, and how the transnational self is imagined. The experience of exile can live in different ways within artworks or writings, envisioning both the exiled self and the exiled other and transgressing conventional notions of time as well as space. One moving example is in Anthony Hecht's poem dedicated to his friend Joseph Brodsky.¹⁹ Another is Max Ernst's *Arpitides (The Stateless)*.²⁰ As the scope of these examples shows, the experience of "exile" (whether broadly or narrowly conceived) offers profound insight into not only marginality in its many forms, but creativity itself. There is an important link between the lived art, the experience of *being* creative, and the desire to refigure geography, temporality and the boundaries of the self. Irit Rogoff offers a helpful account of this relationship:

"While the art world cannot claim for itself a fixed and concrete location, a mapped terrain with distinct boundaries, it is nevertheless a world unto itself, with a distinct cultural and linguistic tradition and a vehement sense of territoriality...Any critical examination of the relationship between geographical materialities and the representation of coherent identities reveals that, contrary to expectations, these neither complement nor construct one another in a direct or causal manner. The mere appearance of ...recognized national entities within identifiable boundary lines...or the representation of specific linguistic practices, do not necessarily signify a set of shared homogeneous values operating from within one shared collective identity...the disruption of such traditions through

¹⁹ Hecht's poem, "Exile", connects his friend's exile in America to an ancient history of Jewish exile, concluding with the lines:

This is Egypt, Joseph, the old school of the soul.
 You will recognize the rank smell of a stable,
 And the soft patience of a donkey's eyes,
 Telling you you are welcome and at home.

(In Anthony Hecht. *Collected Earlier Poems*. Knopf. 1997, p. 149.)

²⁰ From exile in France in 1939, Ernst was interned in a camp near Aix-en-Provence as a hostile foreigner and tried to escape several times. "The Stateless" portrays iron files (tools of escape) as dancing writing implements. (© 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP Paris.)

geographical and cultural exile and dislocation, opens up possibilities for the incorporation of alternative and plural perspectival vantage points and pictorial references which forge new cultural conjunctions.”²¹

The exilic genre is as old as literature itself, spanning poets banished from Rome (like Ovid and Cicero) sixty years before Christ, the self-exiled modernists James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, and writers who fled Beijing after 1989 like Bei Dao and Duo Duo. Visual artists (and, arguably, musicians and other performing artists) have similarly embraced exilic themes, forms and metaphors. Although this is not a genre study, the poetic “myth of exile” central to the genre has shaped the relationship between exile and creativity as an enduring social form in disparate contexts. According to classicist Jo-Marie Claassen:

“Ovid is largely responsible for the creation of a *myth of exile*. Ovid’s exilic poems, while ostensibly giving a view of ‘real exile’ in the ‘real world’, manage to universalize the exilic psyche. Exile is given a mythical, universal dimension by its recurrence as Leitmotiv in ever-shifting facets of psychological isolation, but also of psychological redemption by means of poetry... (Tristia) turns the poet’s history into myth...As always, Ovid the poet can have it both ways...He is a displaced person, but at the same time a larger-than-life, eternal survivor, sustained by the most powerful goddess of all.”²²

Mythology and imagination are at the core of poetic and artistic creativity. While this might be a tautology to literary theorists, it becomes vibrant and essential in the context of a sociological study of creative experience, specifically the life experiences of people whose identities are inextricably linked to the idea of a creative self. To understand the ways that artists and writers experience exile—and the revisioning of the body, geography and memory within that process—requires an elaboration of the role of myth.

²¹ Irit Rogoff. “In the Empire of the Object: The Geographies of Ana Mendieta,” in Zolberg and Cherbo, Eds. *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge University Press. 1997. pp. 159-160.

This “myth of exile” is where the experiences of privileged expatriates and forced exiles share a common form, as well as where artists can form identities in mnemonic relationship to others of radically different times and contexts, as in Joyce’s feeling of kinship with Dante.²³ The “myth of exile” shapes images both of the nation and the body, often together, as when Adonis claims in his poem “The Funeral of New York”: “I seduce Beirut./ I exchange identities with her.”²⁴ Both Adonis and Joyce draw on the myth of Daedalus and Icarus to explore exilic experience.²⁵ At its core, the Simmelian adventure is not about any one concrete activity, like travel or risk-taking, but rather about the *imaginative experience* of a rupture between the everyday and the exceptional, which is why it is apropos in a discussion of creative identity. The relationship between life and art—as described by artists themselves—is represented by a complex intersection between imaginative imagery and concrete experience.²⁶

²² Jo-Marie Claassen. *Displaced Persons: The Literature of Exile from Cicero to Boethius*. University of Wisconsin Press. 1999, pp. 10, 72. Claassen refers here to books four and five of *Tristia* in particular.

²³ See Willard Potts, Ed. *Portraits of the Artist in Exile: Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans*. University of Washington Press. 1979 and Helene Cixous. *The Exile of James Joyce*. (Tr. Sally Purcell.) David Lewis. 1972.

²⁴ Adonis. “The Funeral of New York,” in *The Pages of Day and Night*. (Tr. Samuel Hazo.) Northwestern University Press. 1994, p. 62. In his introduction to this body of poetry, Adonis writes: “In his struggle against the hell of daily life, the Arab poet’s only shelter is the hell of exile...Absence and exile constitute the only presence.” (pp. xiii-xiv.)

²⁵ See Helene Cixous, *The Exile of James Joyce*, for an interesting account of Joyce and the Daedalus myth. Adonis’s poem “A Memory of Wings” frames the poetic self as Icarus, but changes Icarus’ experience to a metaphor for his particular exile. It begins:

“Icarus passed here.
He pitched his tent
beneath these leaves,”
and concludes,
“He never burned,
He never returned,
this Icarus.”

(See *The Pages of Day and Night*, p. 27.)

²⁶ This relationship applies to both forced exiles and the self-exiled—just as Nina Cassian and Adonis’s depictions of exile are imaginative, so too are those of Gertrude Stein and Emer Martin (a young Irish novelist, who has stated, “I escaped from Ireland when I was seventeen. The nuns in my convent school had spent so many years ranting about the dangers of drugs and sex that I couldn’t wait to dive right in and try it myself.” In the same interview, she again invokes “escape”: “I escaped to Israel [from Egypt] by walking over a minefield unawares while listening to the Bee Gees ‘What are you doing in your bed you should be dancing, yeah.’ All these soldiers were waving at me frantically, I was thinking, ‘What a friendly bunch!’” (Interview with Mia Dinelly, *Female FYI* magazine, October 1997.) Martin’s novels *Breakfast in Babylon* and *More Bread or I’ll Appear* represent contemporary accounts of self-exile and the search for adventure—they are some of the most significant works in a growing body of contemporary expatriate fiction.

“Exilic Creativity” as a Social Form

“...This world is done for. Haven’t you heard? The fucking polar ice caps are melting. Ha, Ha! The waters are rising and pretty soon Russia and Europe are going to be flooded...Where are you from? China? China won’t escape either, now will our Turkey; we’re all going to feed the fishes. God? God won’t do anything. But don’t worry, New York will go first. Ha, Ha!...All these big buildings will soon be at the bottom of the sea.”²⁷—Bei Dao.

Exile has been framed by novelists and others as intrinsically a part of the *modern* condition, with human beings stranded and atomized in the new metropolis. Yet the actual convergence of the experience of exile with radical creativity defies simplistic periodization—it is evident from the classical period to what is (problematically enough) referred to as the “postmodern.” The challenge of my dissertation will be to confront the problems of periodization that haunt sociological approaches to creativity, and to confront the opaque conception of cultural temporality that often mars accounts of artistic cycles and processes. Simplistic accounts of the transition to postmodernism, for example, obscure the experiences of contemporary self-exiled artists and writers who make the self-conscious choice to emigrate for artistic purposes. Similarly, ideas that there is now no norm to rebel against or transgress overlook the lives of both privileged self-exiles, who may perceive constraining norms, and forced exiles who suffer the same censure and persecution as generations of dissidents before them.

Exilic creativity is an enduring social form that can be revisited across rapid and dramatic transitions: the acceleration of time and space, the erosion of tradition and constancy, and the schism between past and future. Even polar thinkers on issues such as the meaning of modernity agree that life today is increasingly dynamic and unsettled—

²⁷ Bei Dao. *Blue House*. (Tr. Ted Hutters and Feng-Ying Ming.) Zephyr Press. 2000, pp. 208-209. This is Dao’s rendition of his conversation with a New York cab driver. Bei Dao was one of several eminent writers who fled China after the Tiananmen uprising and lived in seven different countries between 1989 and 1995; his essays are an important account of contemporary exile.

Giddens describes this as a period of “radicalised modernity”, while Bauman argues that it is a postmodern “liquid modernity”.²⁸ Many of the finest social theorists and philosophers have endeavored to understand and contextualize the dramatic events of the late 20th century, including the demise of communism and emerging global capitalism, the dominance of world politics by market bodies, and the proliferation of media. Within the past fifty years, there have been proclamations of the death of history, the death of art, the death of modernity, the death of parody, the death of outrage, the end of the nation state and the move to post-industrial society.²⁹ Yet even before the vigorously debated transition from modernity to postmodernity, accounts of transitions in art worlds and their relationship to social and political change have been highly contentious.

What massive socio-cultural ruptures or revolutionary moments have moved Western society from the *ancien regime* to the early modern, from the “high modern” to the postmodern, and how salient are these terms and claims? J. Bernstein views postmodernism as a “false modernism”, while Pierre Bourdieu describes it as a “masked appropriation” of “the findings of social sciences but also the historicist philosophy which is, implicitly or explicitly, inscribed in the practice of these sciences.”³⁰ Luc Ferry has delineated three approaches: postmodernism as the summit of modernism, as the “return to tradition” (against modernism), and as the supersession of modernism.³¹ The conceptions of modernism in art and philosophy, as Bernstein aptly notes, are continually making claims upon one another, but are not necessarily actually continuous. These debates are crucial in the history of ideas, whether from the vantage point of Marx’s utopian teleology (via Hegel) or Poggioli’s theory of the avant-garde.³² Yet accounts of

²⁸ See Anthony Giddens. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford University Press. 1991 and Zygmunt Bauman. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press. 2000.

²⁹ I am referring here particularly to the work of Francis Fukuyama, Fredric Jameson, William Bennett, Jean-Marie Guehenno and Alain Touraine. Obviously, such theorists differ strikingly in orientation and, I would argue, depth. Yet their very difference underscores the prevalence of such “deaths” in grand theory.

³⁰ See J.M. Bernstein. *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*. Pennsylvania State University Press. 1992, and Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press. 1993.

³¹ Luc Ferry. *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*. University of Chicago Press. 1993.

³² Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Belknap Press. 1968.

how innovation should be periodized are often so highly conflicting that they obscure the *fact of creativity* altogether or seem to confine innovation to an overscripted series of brief moments.³³

Such nuances and contradictions make the process of periodization—choosing how to mark what is important or “real” in history—decidedly complex, and in fact it is within the attempt to periodize that initially meaningful theories become vulgarized or drift farther from social practice. Further, philosophically rich and layered theories of social transition can become popularized in a reductive way that erodes the contexts evident in the original account. The interplay between ill-understood theories of transition in multiple academic debates often yield conclusions that would be beyond bizarre if faced by laypeople in the light of day, such as the idea that there are no social norms to rebel against, or the claim that the United States society is totally secular and even hedonistic.³⁴ It is the task of sociologists to delve deeply into existing theory, and to simultaneously freshly question social experience. It is also our task to understand the hegemonic relationships and practices of power that determine who can create history, and this question must be continuously reframed and scrutinized. To confine innovation to a period now “over” or “dead” silences accounts of creative processes as experienced by artists and writers. In creative practice, innovation and appropriation are far from mutually exclusive (consider Joyce or Brodsky’s appropriation of Dante or A.M. Homes’ nod to Nabakov.)

Mapping “exilic creativity” as an enduring social form across national, cultural and temporal boundaries requires an acknowledgement of biases in the history of arts and literature, and to proclaim today’s artistic and literary worlds to be (newly) “postcolonial” risks vulgarity. Through the history of creativity in exile, radical art worlds have often

³³ For example, Renato Poggioli views the avant-garde as sometimes congruent with modernism, whereas Peter Burger frames the two concepts as entirely mutually exclusive. See Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Belknap Press. 1968, and Peter Burger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. University of Minnesota Press. 1984.

³⁴ I refer here primarily to Daniel Bell. *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Basic Books. 1996.

fused insiders with outsiders.³⁵ The enigma of “which comes first”, exile or creativity, can never be resolved in a simplistic way, yet acknowledgement of the profound role of power, hegemony and world politics on the entire spectrum of exilic experience for artists and writers is essential in a sociological approach to exilic creativity. According to Edward Said:

“So many...exiled poets and writers lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity—to deny an identity to people...you must first set aside Joyce and Nabakov and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom U.N. agencies have been created.”³⁶

Though this claim is extremely well-taken, it is worth noting here that Said’s account of exile and creativity becomes deeply, even unworkably, problematic. He mentions expatriates as those who voluntarily live in another country and describes how Joyce “*chose* to be in exile, to give force to his artistic vocation” —he describes artists in exile as “decidedly unpleasant” and exiles in general as using “willfulness, exaggeration, overstatement” to “compel the world to accept (their) vision—which (they) make more unacceptable because (they) are in fact unwilling to have it accepted”, yet elsewhere states emphatically that exile is not a choice. He makes a strong connection between exile and creativity, stating that “exiles, émigrés, refugees and expatriates uprooted...must make do in new surroundings, and the creativity as well as the sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that still has to find its chroniclers” and that “exiles break barriers of thought and experience.”³⁷ The tension between force and freedom in his account of exilic experience is wholly unresolvable, because, as I suggested earlier, artists and writers across the spectrum of exile *refigure*

³⁵ For an interesting discussion of those who have made alliances with exiles in the process of creating movements, see Vera L. Zolberg. “New Art, New Patrons: Coincidence or Causality in the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde,” in *Contributions to the Sociology of the Arts: Reports from the 10th World Conference of Sociology*, Mexico, 1982.

³⁶ Edward Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press. 2000, p. 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xiv, 174-186. I take particular exception to Said’s claim that the experience of exile has yet to find its chroniclers—this essay, as well as my dissertation, centers around those chroniclers.

geography, and this refiguring is *imaginative* but not *fictitious*.³⁸ Artwork and writings from across the spectrum of force have shared this radical vision and breaking of barriers, from Gertrude Stein’s defiant prose form to the changed reality of surrealist works in exile. Yet, the graphic and overt physical rupture of exile shapes these works as well. Said’s sometimes brilliant claims fail to form a cohesive theory of exilic creativity because he does not acknowledge that while artistic passion applied to the bitter exilic experience for “uncountable masses” in need of agencies (Kristeva writes: “Foreigner: a choked-up rage deep in my throat”³⁹) can transform those experiences into profound works of art with profound social and political significance (as in Felix Nussbaum’s “Self-Portrait with Jewish Passport”, which confronts each viewer with the terrible truth of Nussbaum’s endangerment), *so too* can the radical experience of creativity move artists and writers to test geography.

The convergence of displacement in the physical world with the imaginative rupture of creative experience carries the possibility of a unique type of radical innovation. I use the term radical in its most formal sense, meaning “pulling up at the roots”—“radical creativity” is an experience of innovation so powerful that it uproots stagnant ideas and experiences. The theory of exilic creativity is essential for understanding the relationship between art and literature and social, political and geographic transition. It allows for an understanding of the properties of creative experience that cut across traditionally conceived barriers. By isolating exilic creativity as a *constant generative force*, we can better understand the particularities of art worlds in transition and the artistic experiences of crucial change.

³⁸ In fact, the lives of artists and writers in exile have been of great political consequence. One interesting account is Alexander Stephan. “*Communazis*”: *FBI Surveillance of German Émigré Writers*. (Tr. Jan van Heurk.) Yale University Press. 2000.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Columbia University Press. 1991, p. 1.

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