# Violence and its Alternatives

The Joanne Brown Symposium on Violence and its Alternatives

—Jerry Zaslove

The 2003 annual Joanne Brown Symposium on Violence and its Alternatives invited three guest speakers and eleven participants to address the issue of "Exile as an Alternative to Violence". There is a long history in the humanities on the use of exile as a way to eliminate and control violence and to banish dissidents from the state. But exile as an alternative to violence is not so clearcut an issue. From biblical times and throughout the culture of the Greek city-state, complex societies have practiced ostracism and exile as a means of isolating slaves, intellectuals, artists, unusual personalities, misfits, tyrants and dictators. Exile is not just a subject common to our epoch of nationalism when mass migrations and emigrations arising from conditions of violence and persecution, economic or environmental catastrophes are common. Exile in international law does not just encompass conditions when states expel, banish, ostracize, scapegoat and isolate individuals and groups from home or native land. The term "exile" covers much ground in identifying how a society understands itself while also creating a geographical ghetto-space for those who don't or can't belong. At the same time, the host country enables the second identity of the exile to become associated with culture-building and the laws of citizenship. Flight, exile, refuge, asylum and forced emigration was the framework for discussion of those premodern, modern and contemporary conditions that make this subject crucial in understanding the displacement, settlement and isolation of peoples in the contemporary world.

 David Kettler, Scholar in Residence at Bard College, presented on "Et les émigrés sont les vaincus". Kettler, renowned for his writing on the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, is currently writing on the German-speaking exiles in the United States 1933 – 1945, and the continuing effect of the exile story on a generation of scholars, artists and theorists. Kettler cautions "against a romantic abstraction of exile from the contexts of power, notably political power." In his words, there must be
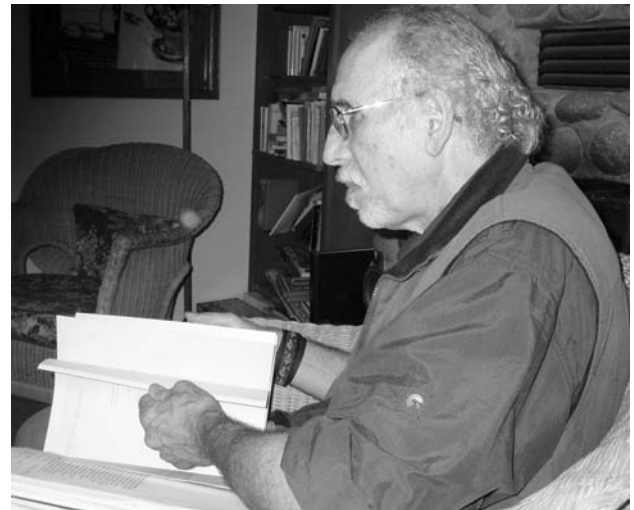
Jerry Zaslove

a structural analysis of the concept. The exiled in this basic sense correspond to political émigrés. In the paradigm case, exile refers to an act of expulsion, a condition of banishment, and an active orientation to return. Each element of this structure can take a variety of forms and be subject to change over time, but all types play out in the realm of power and resistance, with violence always present, if only as possibility. Second [he says], I lay out a simple typology of political exile and reflect on several examples of the outstanding types, notably the violent confrontation in the Middle East between two populations both constituted by narratives of exile. Third, I reflect on some different modes of displacement, notably the contrast between exiles who have names and refugees who have only numbers. Finally, I offer some thoughts on the appeal of exile as a trope for the situation of the artist/intellectual in a world of dislocation.

Kettler's presentation included reference to several of his essays on this subject. Ian Angus of the Department of Humanities, who has written extensively on philosophical issues related to nation-formation, responded to Kettler with a discussion of the place of exile in the formation of sociology as a discipline itself, especially in the way ideological critique displaces settled notions of interest and knowledge.

Martha Langford, now an independent curator, was invited to present on how photography and the reception of photographs of violence and war in contemporary culture could be placed within the exile paradigm. Martha Langford is the founding Director and Chief Curator of

Left to right: Glen Lowry, Peyman Vahabzedeh, Martha Langford, Ian Angus, David Kettler, Samir Gandesha

the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (1985-1994) and was the Executive Producer of the Still Photography Division of the National Film Board (1981-1984). She has written and lectured extensively on Canadian photography, European and North American art and architecture, cultural theory, and museology. Her presentation combined a number of her current interests that have been explored in her exhibitions: the photographic grotesque, the expression of memory, and most recently, pathways of spectatorial involvement. Many of these themes are present in her book *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums,* recently published by McGill-Queens (2001). Her presentation of "Images of Violence in Exile" addressed many "works of art that are supposed to be contributing to the discourse of violence and exile." Langford began her presentation with a critique of Susan Sontag, "who has suggested that only the prosecutors, victims, and witnesses of war (or, we may say, flight and exile) can understand what [war] . . . is about *(Regarding the Pain of Others, 2003)*." Langford's presentation pointed out that

> artists and curators try to document, or somehow to convey these events: their immensity and hopelessness; their internalized pain and their subjects' movements toward recovery. We should start … by looking at the pictorial repertoire of violence,

always divided into two categories, graphic and symbolic representations—the works of the journalists and the works of the artists . . . This division seems to break down when the vernacular (snapshots and snapshot effects) is taken into account, but possibly not—the goal remains the same—it is dissemination through the universalizing force of abstraction. Violence, summoned by collective memory, is thus exiled to the imagination. Pictorial typology does the same trick by camouflaging the specifics of place and time—we are the world. If exile is to be considered as a form of violence, then we might well wonder how its representation will fare. Is it (somehow) doubly exiled? Is there anything to be retrieved from the contemplation of absence besides fellow-feeling, or the guilty pleasures of melancholy before the human ruins?

Adrienne Burk, who recently defended her doctoral dissertation on women, memorials and monuments in Vancouver, responded with a commentary on the difficulty of applying any degree of empathic understanding to victims of violence and loss of identity through displacement. Jerry Zaslove, who co-edited a recent issue of *West Coast Line* on Cultural Memory, Photography and Community with Martha Langford, then presented a paper on the background

Martha Langford and Don Grayston
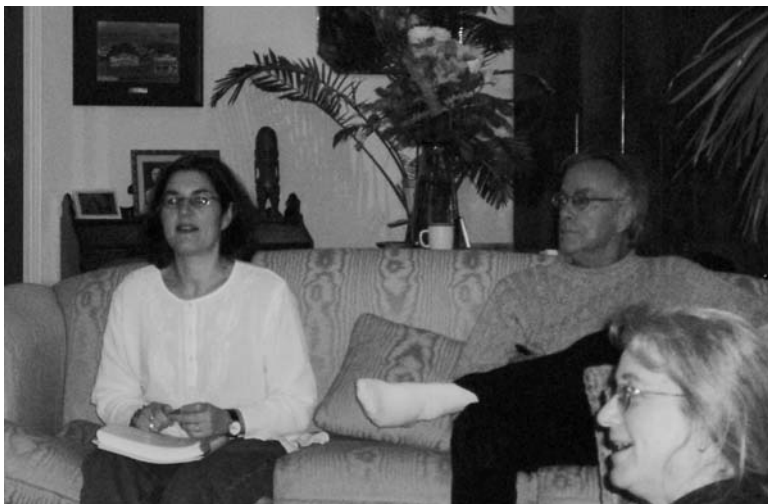
Coleen Gold, Larry Green and Adrienne Burk
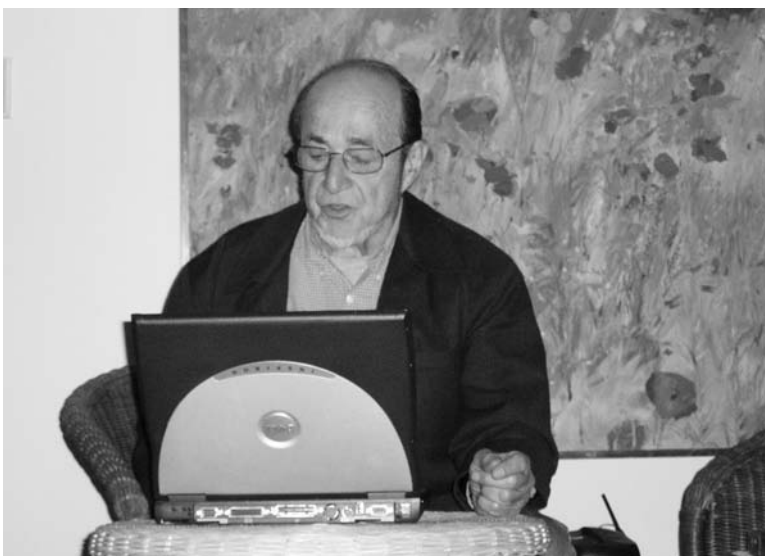
David Kettler

contexts to a 2002 UN Installation in Prague on "Flight and Exile In Art." The UN installation was sponsored by the United Nations High Commission on Refuges and attempted to show the historical if not epic sense that exile as part of our political and moral landscape cannot be avoided.

In collaboration with Martha Langford's depictions of violence, I showed a series of images, culminating in Jeff Wall's epic portrayal of war, death and dialogical experience in Wall's "Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter, 1986), 1992." My presentation, entitled "'The Antigone Principle' and Exile," was based on Sophocles' understanding of the post-exilic violence that accompanies intellectuals and artists whose own experiences — for example, Edward Said — are touched deeply by the consequences of the 19th century's migrations and emigrations, emancipations from slavery and hankering for revolution, even as exile has a pre-history embedded in ancient cultures and inquisitions, wars and persecution. I asked:

> How can exile studies and refugee studies be politicized today? Statelessness is mirrored and imagined in the public sphere in the photographic history of victims of war. I call this the doubling of violence at the borders, where the state and exclusion meet at a crossroads of violence and state formation— the "Antigone Principle". Our very definition of culture is a repository of fragile symbolic associations connected with exile. The self-organization of parallel realities to exile can be understood in the ways we negotiate the boundaries in the arrival and departure of groups and individuals who are dislocated and subjected to violence as the origin of their identities. For example, the origins of the classic avant-garde in Europe, England and North and South America can best be understood through the exiles' cross-cultural influences. Exiles carry—and disrupt—their home cultures, and drive themselves into trans-national and anti-national styles of expression as culture-builders and memory bearers. The historiography of the exile movements must be related to the epical story of European modernism and its legacies, even as the conditions of "exile" change shape under the forces of mobility today, as we witness how the UN and other refugee and enclave protectorships struggle with the problems of exile and displacements.

Peyman Vahabzadeh, whose doctoral and post-doctoral work explores the phenomenology of violence in society, responded. He has written deeply and personally on the subject of exile—most recently in his compilation of exilic meditations and poems by Iranians who have fled tyrannical statemaking in Iran. His issue of *West Coast Line* has been expanded into a book-length exposition of his own exile that was reflected in his commentary on his own personal and theoretical displacement from home and language.

As David Kettler remarked, "Once one raises the wider question about the cultures in which exiles figure, however, the view expands to include negotiations about the exiles in which they play no part as 'exiles' since they have become 'refugees' and then 'citizens'. They variously figure as counters but not necessarily as players."

As it turned out, all participants realized that in their own lives they or their pasts figured as both counters and players and "strangers" and agents of change.

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