

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

361

Volume 361

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Lawrence J. Trudeau

EDITOR



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Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 3,000 authors from 91 countries now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Before the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially necessary to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors of the twenty-first century. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 covered authors who died after December 31, 1959. Since January 2000, the series has covered authors who are living or who died after December 31, 1999; those who died between 1959 and 2000 are now included in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. There is minimal duplication of content between series.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science-fiction writers, literary and social critics, world authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews selected from hundreds of review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning an author’s career from its inception to current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other works that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

CLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale’s *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author’s name.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. As a further aid to the reader, a list of **Principal English Translations** is provided for authors who did not publish in English; the list selects those translations most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, plays are dated by first performance, not first publication, and the location of the first performance is given, if known. Lists of **Representative Works** discussed in the entry appear with topic entries.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *CLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Chris Abani

1966-

(Full name Christopher Uchechukwu Andrew Abani) Nigerian novelist, novella writer, playwright, and poet.

Freedom-to-Write Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Lannan Literary Fellowship.

INTRODUCTION

Chris Abani is known for his political activism as well as his unvarnished fictional portrayals of contemporary life in West Africa, particularly his native Nigeria. He has lived in political exile since the age of twenty-five, having earlier endured multiple arrests and imprisonment for his depiction of corruption in his country's government. Abani is a member of the "third generation" of Nigerian writers, whose works acknowledge but do not centrally focus on the troubles associated with British colonization, which lasted until 1960. Abani's works describe a Nigerian culture that comprises a complex array of ethnicities and identities, as well as hierarchies of social power that emerged out of colonial models. Abani's novels also confront the painful realities of contemporary life in Nigeria, including human trafficking, the conscription of child soldiers, the destructive trade in drugs and human organs, and the continuous struggle to establish a postcolonial identity.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Abani was born in Afikpo, in southern Nigeria, to an Igbo father and a white English mother on 27 December 1966. He began writing in childhood, and his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, was published in 1985. Because the novel described a political coup similar to events that occurred in Nigeria a few months after its publication, Abani was imprisoned for six months under suspicion of treason. He continued to write, and was imprisoned again after the publication of his second novel, *Sirocco* (1987). After his release, Abani wrote plays protesting the Nigerian government's policies. He was jailed for a third time and sentenced to death. Eighteen months later, however, bribes paid by friends helped win his release. After leaving Nigeria in 1991, Abani first went to live in England, where he earned a degree in gender and culture studies from the University of London before immigrating to the United States in 1999. He received an MA in English literature and a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Southern California. He currently teaches creative writing and literature at Northwestern University where he is Board of Trustees Professor of English. Abani has won numerous awards for his writing, including a PEN

MAJOR WORKS

Published in 2004, Abani's second novel, *GraceLand*, follows the life of Elvis Oke, a young man growing up in the village of Afikpo in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although the village initially seems idyllic and appears to have maintained ties to its traditional Igbo past, many rituals and traditions have been lost to the practices of modern life. However, some violent traditions, such as honor killings (the killing of a family member by other members to protect the family's reputation), persist. Elvis and his cousin Efua are abused by their uncle, but the family refuses to acknowledge it. When Elvis is eight years old, his mother dies, and he moves with his father, Sunday, to Maroko, a slum of Lagos that stands in close proximity to the beaches crowded with the city's wealthier residents. Excited by the possibilities of life in the city, Elvis decides to become a dancer. He wears a wig and white powder to impersonate Elvis Presley on the beach, and he works as a private dancer and gigolo for Indian and Lebanese customers. Elvis befriends Caesar Augustus Anyanwu, also called The King of Beggars, a political dissident working to undermine the country's military government. He also meets Redemption, an orphan and hustler who traffics in drugs and conducts other illicit activities to make money. Although The King of Beggars wants to transform Elvis into an intellectual like himself, Elvis is tempted by Redemption into a life of selling drugs and, eventually, human organs. When Elvis expresses his increasing revulsion at the buying and selling of human body parts, Redemption tells him that it is wealthy whites who have created the demand for them. Eventually, Elvis acquires a passport and plots his escape. The novel ends as he is preparing to leave for the United States, acknowledging the appeal of the myth of the American dream, as well as the possibility of an encounter with a different system of exploitation and corruption in America.

Abani's novel *The Virgin of Flames* (2007) is set in Los Angeles during the period following the attacks of 11 September 2001. The book describes the internal life of a thirty-six-year-old muralist named Black, focusing on his struggle to establish a coherent identity. Black is introduced as he makes up his face to look like that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose portrait he plans to paint on the side of an abattoir operated by a Rwandan refugee named Bomboy. As the novel progresses, Black's interest

in cross-dressing deepens, and he begins to covet a wedding gown belonging to his friend and employer, Iggy. His desire to wear the dress reminds Black that his Salvadoran Catholic mother, Maria, became a religious fanatic after his Igbo father was declared missing during the Vietnam War. Maria tortured her son and gave him the name Black to mark him as cursed by his race. Later, Black nurses his mother after she becomes ill with cancer. After she dies, he puts on her wedding dress and imagines himself dead. Black's desire to cross-dress is eventually linked to his early childhood when he discovers a photograph of himself at the age of three or four wearing a white dress: he learns that his parents, following Igbo tradition, dressed him as a girl to protect him from evil spirits. On this photograph is written the word "Echefulam," which means "never forget me" in Igbo; it is Black's father's last communication prior to his disappearance. As Black works on his mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe, he renames her Fatima and paints her as a robed Muslim with his own face. With her hands, she is strangling a dove, and she carries an AK-47 rifle. The city police order the destruction of the mural, and Black's personal struggles intensify. A transgendered stripper named Sweet Girl teaches him how to hide his genitals, and Black responds by beating her until she throws turpentine on him. He then lights a cigarette, igniting the turpentine and experiencing a symbolic rebirth in the flames.

Abani's novella *Song for Night* (2007) tells the story of fifteen-year-old My Luck, a mine defuser in an army engaged in the Biafran War in West Africa. Like others chosen to map the location of land mines, My Luck is lightly built and has had his vocal cords severed by an army doctor, rendering him unable to scream if injured by an exploding mine. At the beginning of the novel, he has just regained consciousness following an explosion and is hunting for his platoon. His fourteen-year-old girlfriend, Ijeoma, who was also a mine defuser, died the previous year in an explosion. As he searches for his lost comrades, he remembers scenes of violence: his Igbo Catholic mother being murdered by Hausa soldiers; his own accidental shooting of a seven-year-old child; his killing of a group of old women who were about to eat a dead baby. He remembers being forced to rape a woman and learning the sign language developed by the mine defusers. The novella presents two worlds: My Luck's internal world, in which he and his friends have voices and can describe their experiences; and the real world of disenfranchisement and silence in which he is only able to communicate in sign language. My Luck explains that he keeps a record of deaths in the form of scars shaped like crosses on his body. The scars commemorate both the loved ones he has lost and the people he has murdered. At the end of the novella, My Luck is reunited with his mother, who tells him, "You are home." My Luck is suddenly able to speak again, and it is revealed that he has been dead from the beginning of the story.

Abani's 2010 poetry collection, *Sanctificum*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. The poems, written in fourteen

linked free-verse sections, graphically depict Abani's own personal history as well as the history of Nigeria and the brutality of life there. "Boys are taught to kill early," he writes in a section in which the speaker describes his complex relationship with his homeland: "I was five / when I shot a chick in my first ritual." Despite the raw subject matter, however, Abani ends the poem on a cautiously optimistic note: "I am not a pessimist. / I believe in love. / It has, however, often been a foreign country to me." Other poems examine such issues as race, gender, religion, and politics, combining standard English, Igbo, and Latin phrases from the Catholic liturgy to illustrate the hybrid quality of contemporary Nigerian language and culture.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Abani's work has often been evaluated in the context of his relationship with his war-torn homeland. In a 2004 essay, Abani described two perspectives on exile, noting that although many believe the experience can be a source of redemptive creativity, such a reward cannot compensate for extreme, irreparable losses. In a dialog with the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín, Abani (2006; see Further Reading) maintained that in societies where tradition has been disrupted or destroyed, writers, who can achieve a continuity through the use of words, are particularly valued, even as they chronicle dislocation and loss in their works. Patricia Pak Poy (2008) praised *Song for Night*, arguing that "Abani forces us to look at our own experience and at the current situations of civil strife, of barbarous practices in war situations, of the use of child-soldiers, of desperate situations of poverty and starvation, of conflict arising out of racial and religious differences and the desperation of communities subjected to conflict." Debra Zott (2008) noted that despite the "ghastly descriptions of death and depravity" in *Song for Night*, "the language of the novel is actually quite beautiful, with a lyrical quality."

Several critics have observed that Abani represents a generation of writers who have progressed beyond postcolonial critique. Chielozona Eze (2005; see Further Reading) explained that Abani's depiction of Nigeria does not continuously reference a colonial past but instead addresses a complex present marked by problems that have sources in both Africa and the West. Stefan Sereda (2008; see Further Reading) argued that Abani uses Western pop and Afrobeat music to develop a critique of the violence and socioeconomic trauma generated by colonialism and globalization, while at the same time acknowledging Nigeria's current status as a multicultural environment. Ian Munro (2006) evaluated the role played by the city of Lagos in *GraceLand*, focusing on the experiences of Elvis Oke in the complex and dangerous underworld of that city. Iain Lambert (2011) argued that Abani's use of nonstandard English in *GraceLand* was influenced by the writings of earlier Nigerian authors such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka.

Critics have also analyzed how Abani's work reflects upon theories of consciousness and selfhood. In an examination of contemporary theories of trauma, Amy Novak (2008; see Further Reading) argued that though novels such as *GraceLand* confront the racial biases that marginalize Africans, they offer a stereotypical view of African women's experiences. Daria Tunca (2013) discussed Abani's novella *Song for Night* in terms of "translocation," which describes the physical or psychological movement from one place to another, as well as the possibility of change in particular locations. According to Tunca, the motif of translocation functions in the novella to encourage both empathy and critical distance in the reader.

Irene Hsiao

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Room at the Top. Imo State Broadcasting Corp., Nigeria. 1983. (Play)

Masters of the Board. Enugu: Delta of Nigeria, 1985. (Novel)

Sirocco. N.p.: Swan, 1987. (Novel)

Song of a Broken Flute. Imo State U, Oweri, Nigeria. 1990. (Play)

Kalakuta Republic. London: Saqi, 2000. (Poetry)

Daphne's Lot. Los Angeles: Red Hen, 2003. (Poetry)

The Poet, the Soldier, the Lover and the Paper-Kite Maker. Actors' Gang, Los Angeles. 2003. (Play)

Dog Woman. Los Angeles: Red Hen, 2004. (Poetry)

GraceLand. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004. (Novel)

Becoming Abigail. New York: Akashic, 2006. (Novella)

Hands Washing Water. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2006. (Poetry)

Song for Night. New York: Akashic, 2007. (Novella)

The Virgin of Flames. New York: Penguin, 2007. (Novel)

There Are No Names for Red. Los Angeles: Red Hen, 2009. (Poetry)

Feed Me the Sun: Collected Long Poems. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2010. (Poetry)

Sanctificum. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2010. (Poetry)

The Secret History of Las Vegas. New York: Penguin, 2014. (Novel)

CRITICISM

Chris Abani (essay date 2004)

SOURCE: Abani, Chris. "Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self." *Creativity in Exile*. Ed. Michael Hanne. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. 21-30. Print.

[In the following essay, Abani reflects on opposing perceptions of exile as a redemptive opportunity for creativity and as an irreparable loss. Abani argues that the former view is romanticized, and he recalls moments in his own life when the realities of exile stood in contrast to a more positive appraisal of it.]

"What does exile mean to you?"

The question hung in the air for a few very long moments. We all stared uncomfortably into the opaque blackness of our coffee. Some of us stirred the half empty cups earnestly. Someone coughed. I glanced at my watch. It was eleven a.m. and through the window, the Pacific was a lazy stretch of blue. There were twelve of us sitting in the corner of a coffee shop in Santa Monica, occupying three tables pushed together. We were here for the second session of the PEN Writers' Café, which was created to serve as a meeting place for intellectuals and writers in exile or interested in the theme of exile. Our enthusiastic host, a Los Angeles based poet, had asked the uneasy question that hung between us.

Nearly seventy people had attended the first meeting of the PEN Writers' Café. It was held in the Culver Hotel in Culver City, and we were fêted by the new owners who explained that the hotel was famous because the Munchkins from the *Wizard of Oz* had stayed here all those years ago. The bulk of the crowd were screenwriters and television producers who had come to find the latest best plot or story line to develop into a made-for-television movie. Business cards changed hands quickly and there were promises to call or do lunch.

"As a poet I feel exiled from my community, my family, even from the themes of my work," our enthusiastic host said. "Come on people, don't be shy, let's talk about what exile means to each of us."

Next to me, my friend E., an Ethiopian journalist in exile, put down his coffee cup and cleared his throat.

"I listened to my mother die over the telephone," he said. "That's what exile means to me."

* * *

The condition of exile and its discourse speak to an uneasy dialectic between at least two dominant binaries, and a multiplicity of other concerns. On the one hand are those who celebrate exile as redemptive. Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai speak to the possibilities that displacement and exile

offer. Salman Rushdie, C. L. R. James, and George Lamming believe exile to be a vital condition for writing, a form of alienation that produces a useful double-mindedness. Yet this double-consciousness, common among all ex-colonials and people of any marginalized group, requires no physical displacement to develop. If anything, it requires a more mental, and in many ways, more egregious breach with the self. This of course brings us to questions about the actual nature of what constitutes exile, and even, when exile?

Proponents on this positive, even optimistic, side of the debate typically celebrate and even romanticize the position of the exile, elevating the exilian to noble standing. (*Exilian* being a word Wole Soyinka jokingly coined to refer to one living in a state of exile, as though it were it a real country with real citizenship.) The exilian's position is often difficult to reconcile with the difficult, continuous, and ever-shifting business of remaining human, as exiled writers like Salman Rushdie have discovered.

In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said contends, "exile is strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience" (Said 1994: 137). He describes exile as a "crippling and unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place." And yet Said goes on to point out a romantic benefit of this condition. "If true exile is a condition of terminal loss," he argues, "why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture? . . . Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles."

The negative position often has tragic examples, as in the case of Arthur Nortje, a South African poet exiled by the then-apartheid regime who committed suicide.

Global culture—dominated by America and the myth of white supremacy—permeates even the remote mountain ranges of the Himalayas and is not only present but is in fact an overpowering obstacle to self-rule in post-colonial contexts. Exceptions to this seem to occur where the post-colonials are themselves white settlers, as in America, Australia and possibly even New Zealand. Frantz Fanon has made the case for the fractured and often schizophrenic self produced as a legacy of this global whiteness in his books *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks*. So one need not leave one's home, in forced or voluntary exile, in order to experience this double-mindedness; one need only be an ex-colonial or a descendant of people bound over to slavery.

* * *

I was twenty when my father disowned me publicly for my actions as an anti-government activist. That term itself still bothers me. I wasn't necessarily anti-government as much as anti-human rights violation or anti-poverty and such policies of the Nigerian government that were intended to achieve a fascist and oppressive result.

It is often difficult to define the psychological and emotional damage something like that can have on the psyche of an Igbo, and by extension, a Nigerian and African: in a culture where people, on meeting you, don't ask you your name but your father's name, and by implication, the clan you belong to. This is still part of modern practice and is a way of deciding whether to continue interacting with you, or how to interact with you.

To be disowned publicly is to be cut off from this, to be placed in a limbo of homelessness, clanlessness, to become nothing. A ghost. This is another form of exile, one even more damaging because you are in the home of your birth and yet treated like a pariah. The question becomes—what atrocity had you committed that your own father, your lineage would disown you? Or as my grandfather said to me, "You have become a bat: a creature that is neither bird nor animal. Creatures like that are feared and despised."

* * *

Sociologists point out that one's experience of exile depends very much on one's cultural and material capital. The exile of certain individuals or even whole cultural groups places them higher or lower on an imaginary yet paradoxically "real" hierarchy of value.

There is exile caused by war or ideological difference. There is even self-exile as a form of protest. But there is also the exile of the former political prisoner. The cultural, humanitarian and even intellectual cachet of this position probably ranks highest. How do the exiles in this situation navigate the romantic ideals placed on them and still maintain a degree of integrity? How does one keep being human while labouring under this imposed nobility? Is there a way to live that faces up to the horrors and displacement felt daily, yet resists the anomie of romance?

This romantic value is placed on exile by all cultural institutions and everyday people. One can argue that this fascination goes back to pre-biblical days and probably for very good reason. In a world that wants to control and classify its relationships with all individuals and groups, the exile is possibly the most frightening, because he or she occupies that liminal space that defies any category. This ideal "where" of exile, a physical, mental and imaginative place, as liminal as it is, has a concreteness to it, and I think all exiles would agree that one knows when one arrives there. This *terra firma* is however given its dimensions and shape by those not in exile. This liminal space can be a wasteland often difficult to conceive—not only for the outsider, but for natives too—and so the process of rationalization begins: the construction of a consolation.

* * *

Sitting in the poets' lounge of Rotterdam's Poetry International Festival in June 2003, I was approached by an Iranian

poet now living in London. Over tea we talked about our memories of London, where I used to live, and about being ex-political prisoners and being tortured.

"Do you remember how you could get extra money for healthcare if you had been tortured?" he asked me.

I remembered only too well. I also remembered the humiliation of having to prove your torture, and also my shame at getting more money from the state than regular exiles, who needed it just as much, simply because I had been tortured. My new Iranian friend laughed at this, calling it VAT.

"Value added tax?" I asked, confused.

"No, value added torture," he replied.

* * *

The value placed on exile is immense and grows in proportion to the cause of said exile. No national allegory or national mythology is complete without reference to colonies of exiles, outposts of the real state, the romantic state and the self. These colonies are usually made up of writers, painters and other artists. From the self-exile of writers like James Baldwin from the cultural state of America that limited his imagination and the right to express it, to the immigration to America of Germans and Jews between the two world wars. These intellectuals are revered because they refused to compromise and rejected all states of oppression. The value of the exilian grows when the process or factors of exile are not self-chosen but imposed punitively by the community the exile originates from, including those displaced by war and unable to return. One question this begs is that of creative/intellectual output, the second is the question of identity (as in: "Am I a writer because I am in exile, or, a writer in exile?").

In the first instance, there is the assumption that exile can, might, or even should interrupt or enhance the creative flow. There is also the assumption that one's product must necessarily reflect the themes and locale prior to exile, or else, dwell on endlessly unravelling the nature and being of exile. This is not an imaginary predicament, but a real constrictive aspect of the liminal limbo of exile. Publishers and other art producers or facilitators demand this material, which can be fed to a waiting audience desperately in need of heroes of any kind, indulging in ambulance chasing. This of course raises the question of whether we really value the suffering of others as some morality tale or whether we just enjoy the suffering of others. Are we slowly developing safe blood sports? Even an inability to produce work can be work in itself and can sometimes gain more popularity and cachet than actual work as one laments endlessly being unable to produce, because we all love the myth of the tortured artist, and here we have one who has actually been physically tortured to spice up the serving. Am I unduly cynical? I think not.

I am always asked—"Can you still write? What will you write about now that you are cut off from your subject?" Always by people who have never read my work, nor care to really. Why bother when you can get your fix this way? Or I get the reverse—you are so noble, after listening to what you've gone through, I feel ashamed to worry about the mortgage. One day I'm going to pluck up enough courage to say: "You'd better worry about your mortgage or else you'll be homeless." I certainly do. But in this role as confessor, I realize that the statement comes from a deeper place than even they are aware of. It is not just a flippant, easy way to mitigate something, which Victor Burgin refers to as "the melancholy tension of separation from all our origins" (Burgin 1991: 29).

This melancholy tension is the wound the true self carries. It is the thing that alerts us to our real predicament as humans: to make sense of the state of being, whatever it is. Consider even that it is comparable to the condition of our relationship to the grotesque, as an aesthetic, a device even, to mediate death, as argued by Bakhtin. The loss of that aesthetic in our literature and culture forces us to seek it out: in the pain and suffering of others and in the subsequent ennoblement of the sufferer. This condition of exile, perhaps more easily identified in recent exiles, is the thing we all wrestle with—outsiders and natives alike. An interesting binary that exacerbates the condition rather than solving it.

And what of identity? What is it? How does one construct it and resolve its many contradictions and then what to do with it subsequently? While trying to steer clear of Foucault and Freud, among others, the argument can be made that we do for the most part construct our identity, and at an even deeper more ineffable level, the self, from our interaction with our environment. It can even be argued that identity is not a 'thing' or 'place' we construct or arrive at, but simply a constant flux created by the tensions between the promptings of our internal voice and the external forces of experience. For most of us this is not too difficult because we are surrounded by the familiar with regard to the external and its tensions, and so we know our place. Any movements within this field are small and still mostly manageable. We first begin to understand the confusion facing the exile with regards to identity when we lose someone in our lives to death. This is further complicated by the addition of an unresolved tension or by the fact that we have often based our ideas of who we are in conflict or in opposition to the one lost.

So, for instance, a mother who loses a child faces a real crisis of identity. Who is she now? Is she still a mother? Does she have enough of the self prior to motherhood left over to reconstitute a new one? And what of the relationship to her husband and the broader society? Has she failed because she couldn't sustain the life we believe was entrusted to her? Sad and tragic as all this is (and touching on the sexist as this analogy is), it is still occurring within