



Sonya Baker returns to JMU to perform at the *Living in Exile* conference and make a presentation on the African-American contralto Marian Anderson.

Living in Exile

On the 700th anniversary of Dante's exile, JMU scholars say the experience of exile crosses borders to both alienate and inspire

You shall leave behind all that you love
most dearly, and this is the arrow
that the bow of exile shoots first.
You shall find out how bitter
someone else's bread tastes, and how hard is the way
up and down another's stairs.
- Dante, *Paradise* (Canto XVII, 55-60)

In the closing years of the 13th century, Florentine public life is a persistent danger zone for all who dare press their fortunes in it. The vicissitudes of politics become all the more treacherous when the Ghibelline party finally succumbs to the power of the Guelphs. Writ large on European life is the pope's campaign to consolidate his control over temporal as well as spiritual matters, as the sniping Guelphs take up sides as Blacks and Whites inside the walled city-state.

Into this peril steps the novice politician Dante Alighieri, who speaks and votes in various councils of the republic. Well educated in philosophy and theology and with a collection of verse already published, Dante has not yet achieved literary greatness. Instead, says Giuliana Fazzion, he "stumbled against a host of unpredictable snares."

"Florence was such a tangle of public and private passions," the foreign language and literature professor explains. Boniface prevails in 1300, Dante's cohort falls out of favor and Dante is himself accused of misdeeds. Dante cannot win against the pope's backers. In 1302, banished from his beloved Florence, Dante begins a life as "a fugitive poet and beggar," Fazzion says. He spends the rest of his life roaming the courts of Italy, never to return to Florence.

The 700th anniversary of Dante's exile might appear a rather esoteric occasion around which to fashion even an academic conference. Except, as organizer Fazzion and more than 100 JMU and visiting scholars revealed in presentation after presentation last October, the experience of exile is a harsh reality that has repeated itself throughout history and is a theme that continues to resonate universally in the arts.

Emily Bronte, François René de Chateaubriand, Joseph Eichendorff, Joseph Conrad, Paula Marshall and Alice Walker all deal with motifs of exile, whether explicit or implicit, internal or external, point

out JMU English and foreign literature scholars like Annette Federico, Robert Goebel, Bolekaja Kamau and Ron Nelson.

Verdi and Donizetti romanticize exile in their opera masterpieces, says foreign language and literature professor Mario Hamlet-Metz. "Exile is synonymous with death on earth for the Italians," says Hamlet-Metz, who travels frequently to the great opera houses of the world to give lectures about the music, performances, performers and history of opera. "Exile has long been an experience and characteristic of Italy. Whether it took place across the sea or just around the corner, the experience of utter [despair] is the same." In opera, he explains, "exile and banishment are favorite themes" with lines - such as "Homeland, I breathe you at last" and "In my exile, in my pain"- "sung with passionate regret."

Art can illuminate the reality of exile and cross its barriers, says dance professor Cynthia Thompson, whose students' interviews of immigrants to the Shenandoah Valley served as the foundation for a major performance last spring.

Artists as diverse as the classical poet Ovid and the great African-American contralto Marian Anderson, separated by millenia, have endured various forms of exile - either forced, like that of Dante, or self-imposed, like those who fled persecution. Political science professor Kay Knickrehm and English professor Mark Facknitz point out that both Henry Kissinger, who molded U.S. foreign policy, and Hannah Arendt, who elucidated European totalitarianism, first had to escape the Nazis.

Multimedia artist Charlotte Salomon did not. Her epic autobiographical play, *Life? or Theatre?*, mixes painting, prose, playwriting and song, and was strongly influenced by feelings of exile and death as the Nazi noose tightened around Europe, says English professor Susan Facknitz.

Exile in Russia meant life in Siberia or the Caucasus or under house arrest. "Russian intellectuals have been sent into exile throughout history," says history professor Mary Louise Loe. From the 18th-century Aleksandr Radishchev, known as the first Russian intellectual, to Andrei Sakharov, father of the Russian hydrogen bomb and last official Russian dissident, Russian history boasts a veritable who's who of exiles: Dostoevsky, Gorky, Pushkin, Bakunin, Solzhenitsyn, Nureyev, Ballanchine, Chagall, Kandinsky, Prokofiev, Baryshnikov, Rostropovich, Trotsky, even Lenin himself.

Loe says the reasons for exile are universal, "to silence them, to isolate them, to cut them off from society, to put them in a box somewhere and never hear from them again." Often, the outcome was the opposite. "I can't think of many cases where people were sent off and just forgotten about. They used that time to be completely productive in terms of developing their ideas," says Loe.

As Loe and Fazzion point out, exile's positive effects can often overshadow the negative. For Dante, whose despair drove him to contemplate suicide, exile also inspired him to write the *Divine Comedy*. "... no work of the past is more a classic than Dante's *Divine Comedy*," Fazzion explains. "A classic is a text that has permanent significance, that carries a permanent message for all generations. ... a classic is a text that never belongs to the past but always to the present, a contemporary text, a text in which human beings - precisely because they are human beings - keep rediscovering themselves."

"Exile turned out to be for Dante a blessing in disguise," Fazzion says. "You cannot understand Dante without understanding the bleak clarity exile brought to his vision. ... Exiled, never to return, his life became a mythical quest for the divine. ... Exile was a great creative force."

"Exile involves pain and rupture, but it produces what we're talking about," says English professor Suzanne Bost, who finds "exile from one's self at home" in the writings of Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa. These Chicana poets, as well as the Mulattas and Mestizas stretching back to the 1850s, are retracing the steps their ancestors took 3,000 years ago, Bost says. "I am more the exile in the strange land," Anzaldúa says, speaking of the borderlands of the Southwest, the juncture of past and present Mexican and U.S. cultures - "where," in Anzaldúa's words, "languages meet, grate against each other and overlap, where no one is foreign, or everyone is foreign, at the edge of barbed wire."

Implied in exile, says JMU Semester in Florence professor Alessandro Gentili, is a notion of traveling. Etymologically, he explains, the idea begins with the Greek word "oicos" for islands and being "a-oicos," for away on the sea. Similarly, he says, the Greek word "polis" means city, and being "au-polis" means city-less or stateless. The word "exile" itself derives from "ex" (away) and "ilios" (soil) and means "away from the homeland."

To make the idea of exile complete, however, Gentili says "there must be a return at the end." But a return to what? "To one's self," he answers. For, as professor after professor demonstrated in their presentations, just as exile is not necessarily limited to a physical experience, neither is the exile experience limited simply to a geographic location.

Dante's exile was nothing new, even 700 years ago. "We have been at each others' throats for ages," Gentili says. Dante's exile, however, is history and art's ultimate iconic exile experience. "The *Divine Comedy* had nothing to do with religion. It was exclusion, alienation ... Dante was running upstream. He is the salmon source of exile, the primary source of political exile. It was painful. ... Through his journey, Dante found a finer form of self-confidence. Dante finds in his exile the foundation for the acquisition of knowledge. Without the painful and tormenting experience of exile, Dante would miss the return to self."

For more recent exiles, displacement would begin a journey of unprecedented intellectual achievement in their new countries. Among them, says JMU physics professor Bill Ingham, was Nobel Prize-winning physicist Enrico Fermi, then the world's expert on neutrons, who fled Mussolini's fascist

dictatorship. He came to the United States in 1938 and directed the building of uranium and graphite piles in Chicago as part of the U.S. wartime effort to build a nuclear bomb at Los Alamos. "He was invited by Oppenheimer to a study group on the fission bomb. ... Fermi was the nuclear physics equivalent of the help desk," Ingham says.

Another intellectual exile was the future Nobel Prize-winning physicist Hans Bethe. Fired because of the Nazi racial laws of the '30s, the Alsatian landed at MIT to work on radar during the war and went on to head the theoretical division at Los Alamos. His three seminal review articles on nuclear physics are referred to as "Bethe's Bible," Ingham says. Still active with emeritus status as a lecturer and researcher at Cornell, Bethe has spoken out against weapons testing and SDI, or "Star Wars," and continued to publish into the early '90s. In 1992, he wrote an open letter asking all scientists to renounce work on weapons of mass destruction.

Also at Los Alamos for a short time under Bethe was the controversial Edward Teller, who as a Jew had no prospects in Europe and left Budapest for London and then the United States and George Washington University. Known today as father of the hydrogen bomb, he was ostracized by many in the scientific community for supporting the revocation of Oppenheimer's security clearance in the '50s and '60s and later became a Reagan confidante. These three intellectual exiles and others helped the United States attain and maintain scientific, military and political dominance in the 20th century.

Biology professor Ivor Knight says "the biology influx was fewer and younger," but Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953 "owes its existence to those young exiles who made their way from Central Europe in the 1930s and made their reputations in the United States." Among them were Max Delbrück and Salvador Luria, co-recipients along with Alfred Hershey of the 1969 Nobel Prize for medicine for their research on how genes work. They influenced the creation of the scientific community at Cold Spring Harbor, which was modeled on Niels Bohr's celebrated Socratic method of teaching and learning in his scientific community in Copenhagen. At Cold Spring Harbor, molecular biology and biotechnology were born. Before 1953, "nobody cared about DNA," Knight says. Today genetics is one of the hottest research fields with the greatest expectations for science.

The influx of intellectual exiles into the United States has transformed the process of higher education in the world. "In the past, to be really educated, students went to Europe," says social work professor Mary Lou Wylie. "Well, that's switched. Now students come here." These intellectual immigrants and students flourish in the diversity of the United States, she says. Each has left a more homogenous, perhaps more restrictive, community and came to a more heterogeneous environment in the United States.

The same cannot be said for many of today's schoolchildren whose intellectual achievement is in doubt says early childhood education professor Doris Martin. "If their behavior doesn't match the school's idea [of acceptability]," she says, "these are the children who share Dante's hell. ... Children should feel at home at school," but educators' efforts to corral students into the mainstream pushes others "to the edges" and still others "out the door." In the past, Martin explains, schools created for Native American students forbid them "to speak their language and to follow the practices of their families. The idea was to mold American Indians into the white man's image, and it failed miserably," she says. "Are we still doing it under good liberal intent?"

Students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school environment are treated as second-class citizens in "alternative" settings, which "become like prisons," says early childhood education professor Teresa Harris. "Alternative" means the students have severe or chronic behavior problems. In this form of exile, students are cut off from schools because of major events in their personal lives - like moving, divorce or drugs. "Children say later they didn't want to be at school," Harris says, "because they feel they don't fit and can't succeed. They need support to face their challenges, but they don't get help until they're labeled as a troublemaker. ... We need to teach internal self-control and impose external obedience when necessary. But we must realize what's missing. We should focus on the child's interpretation of events. [When children act out] they are responding to what they perceive is an injustice. The attitude and behavior of faculty and staff must reflect that."

The exile continues for schools and individual students who cannot afford to tap into technology. Computers, software and the latest gadgets are the new frontier of the teen social scene, says education technology professor Rich Clemens. "Social connections depend on electronic devices; those who don't possess them are excluded," Clemens says. He cites instant messaging as a replacement for the telephone for teens who communicate in a new language of acronyms, like "99" for "nighty night" and "GTG" for "got to go." With this new language, often they can communicate unsupervised even under their parents' noses. "The digital divide is wide between economics and race," he says. "The chasm won't close naturally unless an effort is made."

Adult education/human resource development professor Oris Griffin gave a personal account of exile, which began when she left her safe segregated Lutheran school after it closed - due to a lack of funding - for a larger black public school farther away. "After fourth grade," she continues, "integration started. There was chaos everywhere. Black teachers and principals were displaced. We found ourselves walking a mile to a white school. ... A white man threw coffee grounds on us. I was so angry. ... I felt completely lost within myself. In high school, tempers were high; there were always fights." It wasn't until college that Griffin says her exile ended and she felt positive about education. She credits her

grandparents for getting her and her siblings through those tough years.

Foreign language and literature professor Carmenza Cline spoke of two kinds of exile in Columbia, which today is known mostly for its drug cartels, guerillas, militias and drug wars than for its rich intellectual heritage. One kind of exile is tied up with the military and government situation, and the other is more social - of the arts and philosophy. Both, she says, entail an exile of silenced voices.

Exile is anything but positive for a depressingly great number of the world's inhabitants, says sociology and anthropology professor Nikitah Okembe-Ra Imani. He describes exile as a social construct endured by "the other" and created by a power structure that divides people into "us and them," "positive and negative," "present and absent." Imani defines "the other" progressively as "other than what I am, that which I do not understand, and that which I do not tolerate" and finds it is at the root of all conflict, interpersonal as well as geopolitical.

"In traditional western philosophy, presences are measured," he says, "absences are not. Blackness is seen as negative and comes to constitute not being. An example is the hat on the coat rack. You see the hat, but the rack's only relevance is that it is holding the hat. It has no value of its own."

"The other" are in a unique position of exile," Imani says. "Your presence is simultaneously absence, there but not there, not valued. Your exile is already part of your definition as a human being."

And it is often hidden in semantics. "African-American life even today is rendered as 'the other.' Black History Month in February implies an absence with the other 11 history months. It's not said, but that says volumes. Critical scholars have to look for the silences," Imani instructs.

Alice Walker and Paula Marshall point out these silences, says English professor Bolekaja Kamau. "Notions of exile are deeply embedded in their work," he says. "Black people who were brought here in involuntary exile struggle to locate themselves in the New (white) World and elucidate the journey toward self. ... [These are] physical and metaphysical passages," Kamau says. "It is not a solo trip. They incorporate the uncorporeal (spirits) as guides." He describes black leaders as signposts who feed the resistant culture with martyrs.

For statistics professor Hassan Hamdan, who grew up in Jenin near the Palestinian refugee camp, exile was palpable. He offers "the physical meaning of exile." In 1948, the founding of Israel created 1 million Palestinian refugees. As they left, Israel took over the land. Their thinking, Hamdan explains, is that rather than live under Israeli rule, "it is better for us to save our honor and leave." They left also, he says, out of fear. During the refugees' 54-year exile, Palestinians have raised children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the camp's now permanent housing and suffer poverty, ill health, discrimination and violence. "Palestinians have their own agency with the United Nations; that's how large the problem is," Hamdan says. Economically, Hamdan explains, they are viewed as immigrants. Socially they are seen as second-class citizens and are blamed for problems. Politically they are seen as a threat to surrounding regimes, Arab and Israeli alike. He also offers a historical point of view: Islamic exile actually began in 622 A.D., when Mohammed was forced to leave Mecca for Medina. Today's great pilgrimages to those cities by devout Muslims all over the world derive their meaning from Mohammed's experience.

"Exile can be a legal condition," says keynote speaker John "Sean" Doyle, a poet and immigration lawyer who has helped countless victims of persecution in their native countries seek asylum in the United States. "Modern states have become good at harrassing people into leaving," he says, through war, for instance, and economics, torture and de facto exile. "They have few options and little hope.

"Some avenues can lead to safe haven," he says. But even seeking asylum can be a form of exile for someone who must recount humiliating details of torture in a bureaucratic procedure. "Usually there are no witnesses or press reports or medical records to prove that torture or persecution truly happened and that the regime in power was responsible," Doyle explains. The asylum seeker must tell an authentic story to distinguish it from generalized press accounts. "They must establish a credible fear of persecution. But it is embarrassing to tell of the humiliation of torture. The alternative is a return to the country of oppression. It amplifies the isolation. ... What happens to their spirit? The refugee needs a human connection to re-establish his significance," he says.

"Most exiles are not great scholars or writers like Dante; they're everyday people," Doyle says. "They are not activists or in a fringe group; they're not out to change the world. But because of their ethnic group, they are harassed. Maybe if we read poets," he concludes, "we increase our sense of humanity and hope for people who are not scholars and poets."

Pam Brock

The full text of a selection of exile papers by the education faculty is available at <http://coe.jmu.edu/clemenrg/childexile/>

