

Writing from the Margins – and Beyond ...

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Abstract

In 1987 José F. A. Oliver published his first poetry volume *Auf-Bruch* in Germany. His standing as a German-speaking poet from Spanish-Andalusian stock was linked to the *Gastarbeiterliteratur*, or migrant worker literature in Germany, a literature that writes from the margins of both the literary and economic world of the Federal Republic of Germany. Developments within Oliver's oeuvre over the past twenty years, however, indicate a movement away from the literary periphery into mainstream German literature. This article explores these dynamics, using José F. A. Oliver's writings to illustrate this conjecture.

The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in [the] ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space. The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of the national past. (Bhabha 1990: 294)

Definitions Linked to Minority Writing in Germany

The dynamics within minority literatures are defined by the drawing of boundaries as well as continual shifts and realignments within the marginal spaces *vis-à-vis* these demarcations. It is therefore the nature of change within minority literatures in general that this article wishes to explore, and how this is demonstrated within the context of the *Migrantenliteratur* in Germany and, more specifically, how this relates to the poetry of José F. A. Oliver, a Spanish national living and writing in Germany. As a first step, a brief clarification of what is defined as *minority literature* within the context of this article.

In 1975 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari published their now much quoted

work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.¹¹ Essentially Deleuze and Guattari defined “minority” writing or *littérature mineure* (in German it is referred to as *kleine Literatur*) as a minority making use of a “major language” in their creative work. Kafka wrote in Prager-Deutsch in a non-German speaking environment and his cultural and linguistic links lay with Germany, across the border. Conversely, the *Migrantenautoren* or authors from the migrant literatures in Germany, write in German—thus using the dominant language of the area—but draw on their own non-German mother tongue, the language of their country of origin. Their status as members of a minority literature is linked to the issue of nationality: non-Germans (who are in the minority) writing in German and thus producing a literature which has not originated in the *centre*, but on the *boundaries*. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this separation as deterritorialisation of the language, be it the mother tongue (as in the case of Kafka) or the language of artistic choice. In her discussion about migrant literatures in Germany, Donna Kinerny defines this phenomenon as follows:

A “deterritorialized language” results from the conflicts with the native language (which is now in a geographically distant land) and the second language (the language of the majority). ... Cut off from the author’s homeland, literary tradition and native language and written in the second or majority language, it may reflect the literary traditions of the second country, as well as the first, but is never completely with the domain of one or the other. (Kinerny 1994: 227)

Migrantenliteratur, the terminology I have been using, refers to the body of literature produced over the past thirty years in Germany by migrants to the country—in its early days referred to as *Gastarbeiterliteratur*, writings produced by guest-workers. However, as Teraoka succinctly put it, this literature was, and I believe, still is “really contested territory, and all claims made about it or *on* it are profoundly strategic and political” (Teraoka 1990: 299). The issue at stake here is the distribution of power: on the one hand, migrant literature has opened up a space on the margins in opposition to mainstream German literature “while simultaneously ... celebrating the margin as site of empowerment” (Pinkert 2003: 390-391); and on the other hand, the “metropolitan” literatures have been faced with the possibility of disempowerment in areas within their own literary space. The terminology *Gastarbeiterliteratur* is a case in point. Whereas the very first writings in the early sixties were indeed penned by guest-workers (and not all their writings could be defined as literature), only a small percentage of writers in the seventies and eighties still had links to a guest-worker background. The term was used as a provocative and counter-discursive strategy.²² Mainstream German literature, however, used the term—with a hint of arrogance—to

compartmentalise the writing, keeping it locked into its marginality. The issue therefore remains one of empowerment against disempowerment in terms of creative spaces within or on a nation's boundaries.

Gastarbeiterliteratur has, in recent years, been replaced by a plethora of new terms and definitions. This development appears to be linked to a greater engagement with the literature (particularly by academics from the United States working in the field of minority literatures and studies on alterity)³³ resulting in a move away from the perceived negative connotation of *Gastarbeiterliteratur*. The options range from literature of foreigners (*Ausländerliteratur*), alternative minority literature (*Alternative Minderheitenliteratur*), literature by foreign authors (*Literatur ausländischer Autoren*), multicultural literature (*multikulturelle Literatur*), literature of the periphery (*Rand-Literatur in Deutschland*), to, more recently, intercultural or transnational literature. My personal preference, which has developed after working on this research topic for a number of years, has moved towards *intercultural literature*, which, in my opinion, manages to escape the dichotomisation of the other options and stresses a willingness to engage in dialogue while at the same time accepting differences and conflicts. However, in the context of this article, I shall refer to *Migrantenliteratur* in order to reflect a particular historic perspective and because the term *migrant* offers a broader base than the guest-worker in *Gastarbeiterliteratur*. At this point, let me restate my objective, having clarified the definitions: I wish to explore whether those literatures in Germany *writing from the margins*—alternatively defined as *Migrantenliteratur* – have managed to write *beyond the margins*, and if so, what impact this could have on the discourse relating to minority literatures.⁴⁴

José F. A. Oliver: The Poet and his Writings

The focus of this article is on a particular writer who reflects the shifts and changes within the *Migrantenliteratur* over the past 20 years. José Francisco Agüera Oliver is regarded as a second-generation minority author, as opposed to those who were born and raised outside Germany. Oliver was born in 1961, in Hausach, in the Black Forest. His parents came to Germany as guest-workers from Málaga in the Andalusian province of Spain. Oliver grew up speaking his Andalusian mother tongue, the Alemannic dialect of the Black Forest, as well as German and Spanish. He was actively involved in the mid-eighties with a literary forum called the *Polynationaler Kunstverein*, also known as *PoliKunst*, which aimed to support and promote the literature of foreigners writing in German, and to make this literature known to the general reading public. Oliver's first selection of poetry was published in 1987 and, to date, he has published a further nine volumes of poetry. In 1996 he was a recipient of the Adelbert von Chamisso prize, a prize donated by the Robert-Bosch-Stiftung for literature produced by foreigners, and particularly those writing in German. Adelbert von Chamisso was

a French national who fled to Germany with his parents in 1790, becoming an important German poet and novelist despite his French mother-tongue. Chamisso has been used as a figurehead by representatives of mainstream German literature engaged with the *Migrantenliteratur*. In this way he symbolises the potential and scope of multiculturalism within German society which defined itself—or perhaps still defines itself—mostly as a homogenous grouping based on Johann Gottfried Herder's classical concept of internal homogeneity linked to language and external geographic demarcation.⁵⁵

Oliver's first books were published by lesser-known publishing houses that concentrated on *Migrantenliteratur*. His last three volumes, however, were taken up by the prestigious German publisher *Subrkamp*, which does seem to send an interesting signal, as this would indicate that Oliver has been admitted “into the fold” of mainstream German literature. Oliver's poetry was produced over a period of 18 years—spanning momentous political events such as the end of the Cold War and the Reunification of Germany, with the concomitant rise of rightwing extremist movements in the early nineties, reflected in the fire-bombings and killings of foreigners. Oliver was himself affected by these xenophobic attacks and had to ask for police protection when he read from his works in public. Oliver's first three volumes, published in the period 1987–1991, reflect the perspective of a foreigner in Germany and the issues relating to his multicultural background: the ambiguity of belonging (to Germany? to Spain?), and the peripheral *Ausländer's* view of German society. His poetry therefore slots into the groove of the *Migrantenliteratur* and, as a writer, he shares the issues that affect this group who feel themselves overlooked by metropolitan or mainstream literature. A brief explanation on the matter of nationality: German law prior to January 2005 determined nationality on the basis of the law of blood (*ius sanguinis*) and not in terms of the law of the soil (*ius soli*) which derives nationality from the country of birth. Therefore, although he was born in Germany, Oliver was, until recently, not eligible for German citizenship. This added to the complexities of living in your country of birth, but not being part of it.

The poetry of the second phase, which covers the years from 1991–1997, appears to offer a different perspective on similar topics. Interestingly, critics have described this phase as Oliver's most politicised. The issue of the neo-Nazi and rightwing backlashes, for example, are presented as a problem that should concern German society as a whole, and not one that only affects the *Ausländer* or foreigner. The poems are not “writing back” (Ashcroft et al 1989) at metropolitan society but could rather be defined as a “writing into” the consciousness of a society. Some poems continue to address the issue of belonging as opposed to being a permanent guest in the country, although Oliver uses a wider and more complex canvas than in his first volumes. I should like to refer to two aspects of his writing which illustrate the “place” from which he is writing and the “displacement” that he is attempting to address.⁶⁶

First, Oliver's use of neologisms, an example of which is the word *Gastling*. The word consists of two parts: the first referring to a guest or *Gast*; the second part, the suffix *-ling*, can be loosely translated as "one who is". Therefore the meaning of *Gastling* would be: "one who is a guest". However, the neologism, and in particular the suffix *-ling*, refer to the well-known German word *Fremdling*: one who is a stranger or foreigner. The word *Gastling*, therefore, attempts to reflect the complexities of being a guest while at the same time being kept at arm's length (as the stranger), albeit within the defined rules of hospitality. *Gastling*, incidentally, is the title of Oliver's fifth volume, the one that is regarded as his most political. Another example is the neologism *Heimatt*—which, on the face of it, is less complex. However, the accepted spelling of the word is *Heimat*, with one "t", but Oliver adds a second "t", which adds layers of meaning to the second part of the word *-matt*, referring to something being weak, weary, feeble or listless, even dull. The word could also refer to the final movement in a game of chess, namely checkmate, *Schachmatt*, which ends the game, putting the king out of action. All the meanings, therefore, point to a weariness relating to the homeland, the *Heimat* – and in the case of Oliver, his Spanish or German sense of belonging. Perhaps this word may equally resonate with some of us, who have cultural ties to more than one *Heimat* and sometimes get lost between the two.

The second feature of Oliver's poetry is related to his use of the Andalusian and the Alemannic dialect in his poems. The "other" languages are not paraphrased or translated, but form an integral part of the German text. The German reader therefore has to either skip over the parts that he does not understand, or work at translating the "foreign" sections of the poem. This strategy has been interpreted by critics as an attempt to undermine the dominant position of German and Spanish, as well as to alienate the reader within his own language. Petra Fachinger comments as follows:

By making the point that the two regional dialects, Andalusian and Swabian, are independent language systems with idiosyncratic modes of conceptualization and representing reality, Oliver contests the "centrality" of High German and Castilian Spanish. Furthermore, many native speakers of German who are not familiar with the Swabian dialect have difficulty understanding the passages in his poems that are written in this dialect, and might not be able to decipher the meaning of every single word. Oliver thus places native speakers of German in a position in which they will feel like strangers in "their own" language. (Fachinger 2001: 50)

My interpretation of the language switching concurs with that of Fachinger although I would take it a step further and describe the poems as hybrid texts, where

an interplay between the different languages/dialects takes place and *trans-lates* the text into a domain of its own, or—to use Homi Bhabas terminology of a “Third Space”—not one or the other, but *located in-between* (Bhabha 2000: 38). In 1997 Oliver published a ballad with the title *Duende*. Unusually, since Oliver does not normally offer translations, each verse (there are 21) appears in German, Andalusian and Alemannic. The original text is in German and, according to Oliver the other two versions are free translations of the original. The title *Duende*, however, is the first hurdle for the reader—let me be specific for the German reader. In an interview in February 2005, Oliver mentioned the uncertainties he felt when deciding to give the ballad the title of *Duende*, as he was aware that the spelling of “ue” in German stands for “ü” and is therefore pronounced *Düнде*, and not *Duende*. He decided to take the risk and leave it as *Duende*. The German reader therefore has to embark on his/her own voyage of discovery in order to understand the meaning of the word, as well the context in which it is used. It is not self-explanatory and the ballad certainly does not offer easy clues.⁷⁷ In the ballad *Duende*, I would suggest, Oliver does not wish to alienate or undermine the reader. Although some references in the ballad have Andalusian or Swabian links, it takes the engaged reader beyond a marginality into a new domain of understanding—a *Third Space*—which is not confined by one language or dialect. The ballad pays homage to Oliver’s home in the Black Forest, as well as to the many cultural strands that are part of this *Heimat* or home.

The current phase of Oliver’s writing started in 1997 with a collection of poems that are more inward looking—finely crafted texts representing, at times, a stream of consciousness—which differ from the more politicised poems of the previous phase. The year 2000 saw the publication of a collection of poems with the title *fernlautmetz*. Two more volumes followed: *nachtrandspuren* (2002) and *finnischer wintervorrat* (2005). What characterises the poetry of this particular phase? It is definitely not thematically linked to the *Migrantenliteratur* nor does it reflect on issues of belonging or the ambiguity thereof. Instead, he engages with his environment as a critical thinker on his travels be it in, or outside, Germany and crafts his own poetic language by the use of neologism, through highlighting other meanings embedded in words: *w:ort* (word/wort and place/Ort); *p:ostkarten* (postcards/postkarten); cards from the East (*ostkarten*); *f:lüge:l* (wings/flügel); a lie (*lüge*)—or through reversing the order of words in order to drill down into alternative meanings. Since many German words, particularly nouns, are made up of composites or use pre- or suffixes, the restructuring of words is possible, e.g. *zu-künftige* (“of the future”) + *ver-gangene* (“of the past”) = *verkünftige, zugangene*. The restructured word requires careful reading and thought, but is not, in my opinion, an attempt to “write-back” or to undermine the German language in the sense of a counter-discursive strategy. Oliver’s current writing appears, therefore, to follow a more cognitive route (as opposed to the earlier emotional phases), producing finely crafted poems based on what he refers to as

continuous *spracharbeit* (language work). There is no doubt that the *Migrantenliteratur* employs what Fachinger calls “oppositional aesthetics” (Fachinger 2001: 5), such as neologisms and language switching, for example, but these are not the exclusive domain of minority writing. Mainstream German poetry shows many instances of breaks with canonical tradition, be it that of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, or more recently, Lutz Seiler or Durs Grünbein.⁸⁸

Writing from the Margins ... or Possibly Beyond?

I should now like to move away from this brief overview of Oliver’s poetry and spend the last part of my reflections on examining to what extent Oliver is still part of the *Migrantenliteratur* and in which way his poetry can lay claim to have been written or still be written *from the margins*. Oliver appears to have moved away from his earlier positioning within the *Migrantenliteratur* and to be writing *beyond* that. The question, though, remains: where would this *beyond* be? As part of current German literature, as part of intercultural literature, or as a new domain within the *Migrantenliteratur*? Or are we splitting hairs? One of the aspects that makes the current discourse on, or about, the *Migrantenliteratur* in Germany somewhat difficult to define and therefore to track, is that it belongs to a “softer” version of minority literatures. In contrast, the literatures coming from the Third World attempt to establish themselves more aggressively in terms of, or rather against, Euro-American hegemony. The different cultural strains and languages within the European context should not be overstated, however. There remains an underlying, unarticulated sense of belonging within the European continent, although the ongoing battles and issues that confront and divide the European Union seem to contradict my claim.

Although Oliver has, as we have discussed, moved away from the *Gastarbeiterliteratur* of the eighties and into a metropolitan terrain, his acceptance by the literary mainstream appears to have encountered an impenetrable wall. I am consciously veering away from the problematical metaphor of a “glass ceiling” as this presupposes a hierarchical structure, with the *Migrantenliteratur* having to aspire to reach the heights of German mainstream literature. The impenetrable wall in my mind refers to an under-representation of Oliver’s works in particular, and the *Migrantenliteratur* in general, at tertiary education levels (although there are exceptions); and the omission of these writers from German contemporary literary collections, for example, and the literature canon in general. As a result, the availability of secondary literature relating to the *Migrantenliteratur* is limited.⁹⁹ Consequently, the discourse in Germany on those writers from the margins, or who are now moving beyond them, falls short of where I believe it should or could be, compared with the minority discourse in the USA and the Commonwealth. For example, at a conference at Berkeley in

October 2004 entitled *Goodbye Germany? Migration, Culture, and the Nation-State*¹⁰¹⁰, no academic from the field of German literature was represented. Those who contributed towards the discussion on minority literatures came from The Netherlands. Furthermore, the few publications dealing with minority discourse that are written by German academics are usually prefaced by an apology or a regret regarding the lack of engagement with the issue in Germany. Germany did not have a colonial empire of the size and duration of the British Empire and therefore did not have a similar extended experience of post-colonial “writing-back”. Nevertheless, Germany does have “colonies” right within its borders which it appears to continue to keep at a comfortable distance by reducing them to a homogenous grouping within their marginality, as well as maintaining a stereotypical view of them.¹¹¹¹ And, as Henry Gates comments, it is precisely this action that fails to acknowledge the diversity within the margin:

The threat to the margin comes not from assimilation or dissolution—from any attempt to denude it of its defiant alterity—but, on the contrary, from the center’s attempts to preserve the alterity, which result in the homogenisation of the other as, simply, other. (Gates 1992: 298)

Understanding the complexities and configurations of minority discourse in Germany, therefore, cannot be achieved by conceiving of the *Migrantenliteratur* as a uniform grouping united in its opposition to mainstream German literature and tethered to its peripheral present. Instead, I would concur, it should be defined as what Jean-François Lyotard referred to as *petit récits*, each with its own dynamic and positioning *vis-à-vis* the mainstream grouping. Although I mentioned earlier that Oliver seems to have been held back by an impenetrable wall, I would conclude by saying that, as a poet writing in German, Oliver seems to have slipped through the barrier, and *beyond* it and has established himself within mainstream German literature, albeit with his own distinctive intercultural strand. His past marginality does not seem relevant to him anymore. Ironically it appears that it is the critics confronted with his work who are the ones to have been left behind.

Notes

- 1 My references to the Deleuze and Guattari text, is the version translated into English by Dana Polan (1986).
- 2 In the early eighties, when the debate in Germany surrounding the definition of the literature of foreigners in Germany was at its height, Franco Biondi and Rafik Schami pointed to the oxymoron contained in the word *Gastarbeiterliteratur*, a composite

- noun consisting of the words “guest” (*gast*) and “worker” (*arbeiter*). Biondi and Schami commented on the fact that it was normally unusual for a guest to be expected to work (Chiellino 1995: 287).
- 3 For example in the work of Leslie Adelson, Sander Gilman and Jeffrey Peck.
 - 4 Christina Kraenzle, reviewing Petra Fachinger’s book, *Rewriting German from the Margins: “Other” German Literature of the 1980s and 1990* (2001) lists a number of questions pertaining to minority writing in Germany which appear to remain unanswered and point to future research possibilities.
 - 5 Frantz Fanon negates the concept of a national culture in his essay *On National Culture* (1969). Bhabha reflects on Fanon’s conclusions, commenting: “The present of the people’s history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a ‘true’ national past, which is often represented in the reified form of realism and stereotype” (Bhabha 1990: 303).
 - 6 Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:9) refer to the “dialectic of place and displacement” as “a feature of post-colonial societies”.
 - 7 *Duende*, a Spanish word, refers to the power that makes art come alive, sparkle and burn. Federico García Lorca, the great Andalusian poet and poetic inspiration for Oliver, describes *Duende* as follows: “*duende* is a power and not a behaviour, it is a struggle and not a concept. ... All one knows is that it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, that it rejects all the sweet geometry one has learned, that it breaks with all styles” (cited in Gili 1960: 127 and 129).
 - 8 In this context I refer to Elke Sturm-Trigonakis’ comparative research on forms of alterity in the poetry of José Oliver and Durs Grünbein, in which she places both poets within German literature (1998).
 - 9 JanMohamed and Lloyd (1990) in their essay *Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse* refer to the unavailability of minority texts as “ideological encirclement” of the dominant culture (1990: 7).
 - 10 See <http://german.berkeley.edu/mg/goodbyeeger/schedule.htm> (29.11.2004:14.56).
 - 11 In this context I refer to Manuel Günter’s article on the portrayal of Turks within German-Turkish contemporary literature (Günter 2002).

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