

# IDENT-O-NAUTS #1

“the compass creates the hand”

On Inter-Relations of Self, Words and Places  
- and Inter-Cultural Poetry by José F. A. Oliver

by Marc James Müller

## compass & twilight

There is the east far behind my brow. There  
is the west a pledge-eye *homelan(d)*  
*guid*. There is the south dice  
box for the hunger. There is the NORTH. *No*  
*pierdas el norte*. There is eastwest  
loaf-ing of the sun. There is the moon  
on his surge for the twi-gender. There is  
the TALK TIME LESS light  
branching of the birds disquiet. There is dew  
bread-warmth in the displaced wor(l)d  
is silence still. There is the day  
so reachable close  
(In: *nachtrandspuren*. 2002, p.12)

Here is a poet, a Lyrical ‘I’, in between cardinal points, between different worlds und cultures. The poet is: José F. A. Oliver, a writer in two languages. He was born in 1961 in the Black Forrest, as son of Andalusian immigrants. This circumstance makes him live and work in even four languages, as he says: German, Spanish, Andalusian, and Alemannic, the dialect of Germany’s southwest. In his poetry, Oliver reclaims ever new forms and sounds from language, always looking to give his polyphonic world and self new meaning, new spaces. Oliver’s creation *w:ort*, which means in German ‘word’ (*wort*) and ‘place’ (*ort*) - and which I have translated in ‘word’ and ‘world’ - stands, in my opinion, exemplarily for this undertaking. A word is expression and place at the same time, or, at least, would like to be it. But, what is the connection between language and place? Why is the wor(l)d displaced for the intercultural poet? In the first instance, I would like to look at the paradigm shift of meaning of place and space since the post-modern era.

The main centre of reference in the humanities was in pre-modern times the national state. Place and places were always described and thought first and foremost in terms of their national location and their national identity – just as societies and societal conditions were. However, at the beginning of modernity, and accelerated in the post-modern era, the

development drives from the monolithic, unified and unifying national state, to a conception of global society, in which spatial references are forfeiting their role as a dominant authority for certain social occurrences. (cf. SCHROER, p. 161) Spatial differentiations take a smaller part because they are losing ground in governing the circulation of goods, information and people. (cf. SCHROER, *ibid.*) Mass media eclipses an immediate experience of space; distances between places and events are increasingly shortened, and are oftentimes just one ‘click’ apart. Equally, modern means of transportation have led to an ever faster and less problematic overcoming of space – which starts already with the invention of the railroad: “By the railroad, space is killed, and only time is left” says already the early Heinrich eine Heine. Also, the economic world of modernity became a world beyond space: Particularly, the international borderless circulation of money provides the opportunity to establish space-spanning social relations ‘fading out’ place continuously (Giddens, Luhmann). The result is: the overcoming of space as an absolute organisational term, and the end of a conception of space as a container holding and structuring situations as well as protagonists. Space is not territorial anymore. So, where do social and societal processes happen?

From a sociological perspective, modernity has even caused a multiple spatialization rather than a loss of space. (cf. SCHROER, p. 164) Different places are now in closer contact, and each media, after all, creates new media-spaces. Thus, the fundamental development is not the loss of space but the partition of space and tangible place. Aren’t the cardinal points in Oliver’s poem so close but nevertheless unreachable for the Lyrical ‘I’? Could displaced worlds also mean displaced places? Only the next day keeps the promise for it to be really reachable.

The progressing disappearance of place accompanied with a new spatialization of world leads, in post-modern discourse, to the notion that space has transformed itself into a permanent ‘side by side’ organized as a capacious net. As Foucault states, we live in an epoch of space with simultaneity as its most outstanding attribute. (cf. SCHROER, p. 171) The new structure also induces a partial loss of time’s leading function: the narrative coherences consisting of past, present and future only can create and carry less and less sense (cf. HAN, p. 54) changing to different conflicting time tendencies. They become point-time or event-time, and thus they are as well shifted abreast. (cf. HAN, *ibid*)

The ‘side by side’ as a main organisational structure of space and time leads in post-modern thought, as Vilém Flusser says, to the concept of world as point-universe. This universe is by no means at all atopic but rather marked by a plurality of spaces. In terms of that, plurality and fragmentation are considered, not without good reason, as symptoms of the present. This also means a reciprocal annihilation of absolute understanding and knowledge – former clearness and certainty forfeit their validity. The loss of the absolute ken, is accompanied by a loss of borders, at least in their pre-modern and modern meaning. The antiquated relevance of borders, as Günther Anders states, is the definite and sharp partition which does not allow any in-between, any undecided. Post-modern borders became a space

on their own; well known is Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space, where contradictions can be negotiated, entering dialogues, in place of strict separations.

Migrants also find themselves as being in-between. After leaving their home-land they see their place of immigration not (yet) as their new home; and they are excluded by an absent acceptance of the majority. Additionally, after a long lasting stay at a new country the binding to the home-land weakens; and the acceptance there for the migrants is usually diminishing over time. By the same token, members of second and third migrant-generations are located in a space of in-between as well, pieced together by differing, often conflicting and supposedly incompatible parts of their 'personal mosaic' - at least from the perspective of dominant society. In Oliver's poem *compass & twilight* is the mentioned lack of an accepting home expressed in his creation *heimatt*, a wordplay which conveys in German two meanings: home-land (*Heimat*) and dull or languid (*matt*). Home is for the Lyrical 'I' associated with debility and weakness, meaning, from my point of view, either a weakening role of the home-land for the intercultural Self, or the Lyrical I itself being weary from the search for a place following just a notion of home without ever being able to reach it, to live it. Home here is not a sustaining factor but generally drawn into question.

On the other hand, fragmentation and plurality of a liquid society, to quote Zygmunt Bauman, entails beside new complexities and lacking means for orientation also an expansion of individual possibilities for play, choice, and change – generally only for members of the dominant parts of society. The borderless Third Space is not a societal accepted sphere for migrants but an inner space, which is constructed and kept up for oneself and for one's own group. For migrants, the Third Space is not predominantly a possibility to negotiate and combine contradictions but rather at first a place of their containment and exclusion by majority. The societal space allotted to migrants is limited. Even though the second and third generation grew up in a post-modern, pluralistic society, the play of free choice, in and with a borderless world, is difficult for them to perform most of the time.

Not only are worlds and places displaced, but so are words. Words, in a very practical meaning, are at first means of communication, of understanding. In another poem with the title *listening again* Oliver writes:

you at one end of language  
I at the other

in-between word and wor(l)dly  
no centre no beginning

I at the end  
is language you in the other

(In: *nachtrandspuren*. 2002, p. 113)

Here, language and 'I' are linked together, not absolutely but relatively in communication with one 'Other'. The 'I' is constructed in and by words and language of a counterpart. In a next step, I would like to look at the connection of identity and language.

The term 'identity' has experienced, especially in the 1960s, a real boom of definitions. Many different schools of thought claimed it for their system of concepts. All the different attempts to define identity have in common a concept always remaining more or less vague, with only a few core-points endorsed by all theories. Such a central element of a modern identity-concept seems to me a process-like character. For instance, Jean Claude Kaufmann says: "Identity is no predetermined condition but constitutes itself every day anew by identification." (cf. KAUFMANN, p. 28)

According to the German sociologist Lothar Krappmann, an individual builds identity in interaction with others, thus in dialogue. Thereby, the dialogue-partners agree on different social roles. The formation and stabilization of the individual identity is carried out by taking a certain *role-distance* to the negotiated role-model during the particular communicational situation. *Role-distance* means here an interpretation of the role, which diverges gradually from the dialogue-partner's expectation and the role-norm respectively. However, can an equal dialogue at all take place between minorities and the majority against the background of partial social exclusion?

Another fact bating the dominance of social interaction for identity-formation and -stabilization is the pullback of collectively experienced and shared social space in post-modern societies. (cf. HEITMEYER, p. 48) The increasing fragmentation and diversification also lead to a successive disbandment of social-spatial coherences, especially among urban living environments and conditions, and in such a way that a gradual loss of certainty and orientation, in particular social groups, are noticeable. Eventually, this results in a damage of general social cohesiveness and anomy causing social tension within society. (cf. HEITMEYER, p. 262) Social norms and values are initially affirmed and bound by social involvement and interaction. (cf. DURKHEIM, cited after HEITMEYER, p. 48). The decreasing social cohesiveness also complicates negotiation processes about (new) shared social norms in changing post-modern societies. From my point of view, the notion of identity mainly constructed by social roles and role-distances is too fixed and constricts interpretations regarding minority groups.

Going back to Oliver's poem *listening again* it strikes that words and dialogue between 'I' and 'other' have *no centre* and *no beginning*. From my perspective, these lines imply a reference to a communication which has not started so far. 'I' and 'other' do not communicate, at least not about the same, shared topic. However, both are constructed in and by each other's language, both construct their counterpart, who is not an equal dialogue-partner yet. For me, the title of the poem is like a request: *listening again*, more careful, closer, and starting to begin an equal communication in a society where certain groups are excluded from a mutual dialogue.

Migrants usually have more languages at their disposal. With multilingualism the attempt was made to distinguish between language of communication and language of identification. (cf. JANICH, p. 29) In my opinion, such a differentiation makes sense primarily for the first migrant generation. In the following generations typically both languages – mother tongue and German – are conjointly involved in communication and even more in identification. For both linguistical and cultural worlds combined by for instance José F. A. Oliver stand exemplarily terms such as *der Mond*, which is of male gender in German, and its feminized form *die Mondin* – a reference to the Spanish *la luna*. We already read in the first poem *compass & twilight*: “there is the moon on his surge for the *twi-gender*”. In another poem titled *moon change, gender act* Oliver writes:

and moon and mooness and moon

lunares

like coinage in the trousers pocket

(affirmation of the easy closeness) jingles

(In: Austernfischer, Marinero, Vogelfrau. 1997, p.52)

Both languages, both cultures are here naturally related to the Lyrical ‘I’. Both are close, and this closeness is very easy to establish, it is even constantly a part of the ‘I’, a companion such as the moon (or the mooness). And, both worlds sound with every step the Lyrical I takes, without the possibility to distinguish the differing derivation of their sound.

Now, I want to turn my attention to formation and variation of individual identity and how and to what extent the practical use of language comes into play. One consensus within the modern research on identity was the presumption that identity is a process. But how is this process being performed? What is tool, and what is medium?

In this context, the theory on *narrative identity construction* seems to me very productive. It assumes that identity processes are based on real possibilities, resources and power relations, but that they are actually performed in a symbolic space – symbolic in terms of semiotic. (cf. KRAUS, p. 160) Accordingly, identity is not to be constructed in the mind but at the body, that is in the action, the objects we act or interact with and which are assembled by us. (cf. KRAUS, p. 161) Language is also part of this symbolically formed world of objects. We narrate about us, and we narrate ourselves. In the centre of the concept of narrative identity stands the notion that there is no reflection, no experience of oneself beyond language. (cf. KRAUS, p. 161) In this case, language does not carry the inside outwards but first constructs the inside. At the beginning of the theoretical formulation by Ricoeur and others was the assumption that the process-goals of self-narration were continuity and coherence. Individuals were organizing, arranging, and forming their experiences in a narrative fashion establishing a “unity of life”. (cf. KRAUS, *ibid*) Also, narrative psychology has had decisive influence on the development of such an identity theory. From a psychological perspective, narrations are always related to social performance making past

experiences “socially visible”, and enable the individual to motivate one’s expectations towards forthcoming events. (cf. KRAUS, p. 162)

However, in post-modern times past and present are not always connectable in a coherent and continuous manner. The individual persists on the potentiality of a great number of self-narrations as well as on the freedom to leave those unconnected. Temporal linearity has also lost its structuring function in post-modern self-discourse offering the possibility to narrate elements of the unaffiliated, disparate and incommensurable. On the other hand, it became more complicated to make sense out of oneself. (cf. KRAUS, p. 173)

Here, the dialogue-partner holds a considerable role as well. They become a quasi-author of the narrated situational identity of the other; as we have read in Oliver’s poem on the other on the opposite end of language. According to Habermas, the parameters of “self-identification” must be acknowledged inter-subjectively. “Identity can only be built on attributes accepted by the environment as such.” (cf. JANICH 2003, p. 29) In respect to the earlier mentioned identity formation of minorities and their exclusion from an equal communication with a majority, the narrative identity construction ought to be critically revised in a similar way like the role-theory.

I hold the opinion that there must be some sort of identity formation beyond immediate dialogue and reciprocal acknowledged roles or self-concepts. Certainly, writing has always been another way of self-narration; each writer will always narrate themselves to a certain extent. However, how far does this self-narration go, and which role does it take in relation - or in contrast - to the actual character of communication between a minority writer and/ or Lyrical ‘I’ as textual minority persona and dominant society? Naturally, the poetic text, the Lyrical ‘I’, has a very close relationship to the author. Oliver puts it as follows:

*I write because I-estuary I always was, language-river I am, and lope-wards  
sound I will be, overflowed by the I, in between all the other Is, for any clear emotion,  
which devises me.*

(From: 13 Saiten, die meine Verse stimmen. In: fernlautmetz. 2000, p. 112)

In these words ‘writing’ is associated with movement and mobility allowing the author to find ever new forms of self-awareness, self-expression and self-positioning. In my opinion, what is of central importance is self-mobility for Oliver as an exemplary member of a minority group in Germany.

→ Conclusion Keywords:

- immobility of identity for minority groups
- negotiation of different/ differing fields of identity in language/ text
- autonomous ‘dialogue’ of minority writers with the majority in and through literature
- text becomes a space of identity/ *Third Space*
- deconstruction of language to word-spaces in Oliver’s poetry

- naturalness of negotiation of contradictions
- productive interrelation of word and place referring reciprocally to each other as in Oliver's poem on a Brazilian friend in Germany:

*note for a brazilian in munich  
about the ear of places  
speaks Ignacio before the hybrid  
self-word of the poet. Always*

*when he lays the south  
his pencil leads the north  
creates the compass the hand*

(In: *nachtrandspuren*. 2002, p. 109)