Out of Place: Extraterritorial Existence and Autobiography

Abstract: Edward Said’s Out of Place serves to address the double nature of a person’s extraterritoriality in life and in autobiographical texts whose subjects have migrated from their place of origin in the East to the West and define themselves with reference to American culture and politics. The African-Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff, a naturalized American citizen, uses her first two autobiographical novels, Abeng (1984) and No Telephone to Heaven (1987), to reconnect with her Caribindian past and her native island of Jamaica through stays in the US and England. The Turkish-German writer Feridun Zaimoglu, often labeled the “Malcolm X of German Turkeys,” creates from his extraterritorial existence a new cultural space in Kanak Sprak (1995) or Kopf und Kragen (2001) whose political platform derives from the situation of American minority groups. Edward Said, in turn, provides in Out of Place (1999) the biographical data behind his theoretical discussions of extraterritoriality and cultural imperialism and reconceptualizes the ‘Orient’ from his position as comparative literary critic in New York. All three writers seem to find a place in the genre of autobiography which they remodel commensurate with their extraterritorial existence.

The title of Edward Said’s autobiography Out of Place serves to accentuate the uncertain national status of many autobiographers as well as the extraterritorial space of the genre of autobiography. The political and legal implications of such an extraterritorial existence point to the hybrid nature of the subject and the genre of autobiography concerned with the representation of a self in a country where the allegiance to a nation state exists on paper only and is constantly contested or challenged. The most distinguished canonical models of such extraterritorial autobiographies, Saint Augustine’s Confessions (397-8) and Jacques Derrida’s Circonfessions (1991), span the parameters of extraterritorial autobiography from the fourth century to our time in the Western hemisphere. The cases of the Catholic Church Father of the Middle Ages and that of the deconstructivist critic in the postmodern age define the set of criteria relevant for autobiographers and their narrative medium. Both the medieval and the poststructuralist autobiographer start out in the diaspora of North Africa and move to the centers of learning in the Roman Empire or France where they develop in contact with another culture their own theological or deconstructive thought. Outside of their place of birth they challenge the hierarchies and authorities of empires with new ideas.
In this paper I would like to relate the extraterritorial status of these two major writers to the genre of autobiography in general, but more specifically to autobiographical texts in postcolonial times. In most theories of the three literary genres of drama, poetry and prose, autobiography does not figure and could hence be considered an out-of-place, or lawless genre. In this formal sense, autobiography conforms to the often lawless and out-of-place existence of most postcolonial writers. The recollective formulation of a postcolonial identity seems to require a bicultural context for the construction of a national frame of reference in the same way in which it seems to require a hybrid literary form (see Durczak). Generic and geographical border crossings form the basis of the autobiographical enterprise and represent definitive features of major autobiographical texts. The unfolding of a national identity in autobiographies is hence connected to generic and geographical transgressions and begins outside of one’s country of birth.

For this phenomenon I use the term “extraterritorial” not in the strictly legal sense as being beyond local territorial jurisdiction, but to indicate the status of persons resident in a country where their allegiance to a national frame of reference is formulated, contested or challenged. As such, the term is related to the correlative pair of deterriorizational and reterritorialization used in postcolonial criticism to refer to an uprooted existence, a subject-in-transit (Ghosh-Schellhorn 1998). This transgressive or outlandish existence, not subject to the laws of their environment, also applies to the laws of the autobiographical genre. My initial pair of autobiographers, Saint Augustine and Jacques Derrida, as well as their autobiographies, *Confessions* and its poststructuralist echo *Circonfessions*, stand for such transgressive and outlandish self-writing with a focus on the confessional mode (see Spivak).

I would like to address this double nature of extraterritoriality in autobiographical texts whose subjects have migrated from their place of origin in the East to the West and define themselves with reference to American culture and politics. My three examples of contemporary postcolonial writers are the African-Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff, the Palestinian-American critic Edward Said and the German-Turkish writer Feridun Zaimoglu. The forced immigration of Africans as slaves to the Caribbean, consciously evoked as a precursor to Michelle Cliff’s own migration to the US and to Europe, is seen in analogy to the voluntary immigration of intellectuals from the Arab world to the United States and the invited immigration of Turkish guest workers to Germany for Zaimoglu. All three writers take up the topic of their translocation at different points in their careers in autobiographical works whose common fate is captured in the title of Said’s autobiography *Out of Place*.

For the Jamaican-born African-Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff, out of place has a twofold meaning: from her Jamaican perspective it refers to her African ancestors, who were brought to the New World, as well as to her pre-Columbian
ancestry, the Arowak and Carib Indians resident in the island; from her American perspective it refers to her departure from Jamaica, her residence and eventual citizenship in the United States of America. This extraterritorial position is the topic of most of her works, the early poetry, essays, and especially the first two autobiographical novels linked by the same protagonist Clare Savage. Both Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven follow closely the autobiographical script of Michelle Cliff’s own migration from the Caribbean island to the North American continent and occasional visits to the motherland Great Britain.

The trajectory of Clare Savage’s journey is the structural net of the narrative and situates the autobiographical persona in the New York area from which all events of the life-story must be seen. The extraterritorial state of existence motivates the arrangement of the scenes in the textual rendition. Apparently in compensation for the loss of the land and of her own African-Caribbean self which the colonizers “taught her to despise” (Cliff 1980), she revisits in recollective imagination the Jamaica of her childhood days spent between school in the city and vacations on her grandmother’s farm in the country. In a double move, this story reconnects the autobiographical self with the genealogy of her family and the history of her native island. Both the personal past and Jamaica’s geographical past are contained in the choice of her name: Clare Savage. It clearly refers to the hybridity of her heritage as a descendant of white Jamaicans, African slaves and the native tribes of the Arowaks and Carib Indians. History here is not so much an aspect of time but rather one of geography (see Boelhower). Cliff addresses this aspect in her poem “Obsolete Geography” and her volume of essays The Land of Look Behind (1985). These textual reconnections with her native land empower Cliff in her powerless extraterritorial position in the United States.

Her short story “Monster,” collected in The Store of a Million Items, relates an episode from the narrator-protagonist’s childhood in New York after having moved there with her family from Jamaica: “We live in America, as we will always call it, but are children of the Empire. St. George is our patron, his cross our standard. We are triangular people, our feet on three islands” (Cliff 1998, 22). The weakness of her subject position emerges behind the nautical term of triangulation. While America and the British Empire are mentioned by name in the story, the third component, or the third island, her native Jamaica, is left out as an empty space, only present under the umbrella term of the British Empire. Her Jamaican self is covered over by the former colonial authority and the present American host society which has become the new commercial colonizer in the Caribbean.

The recollection of her native Caribbean past in Abeng, the history of the rebellious Maroons, who fled into the interior of the land to organize their opposition to the colonizers, and their indigenous means of communication by the sound of Abeng (African for conch shell) which “the Maroon armies [used] to pass their messages and reach one another” (Cliff 1984, epitaph) endow the autobiographical self with a rebellious spirit fuelled in the extraterritorial existence. This becomes the topic of the sequel No Telephone to Heaven.
Like Abeng, No Telephone to Heaven draws on the power of memory shared by the indigenous people on and off the island. The geographical locations are the sites of memory which exist in lieu of and besides the historiography of the colonizers (see Hebel 2003). The recent revaluation of memory in postcolonial literature offsets Hegel’s long-held depreciative use of memory, which he attributes to premodern peoples of Asia, Africa and the Americas as a sign of inferiority because they have no history and have not yet attained self-consciousness (Klein 2000, 127). Today Hegel’s devaluation of memory is counteracted by the more modern re-enchantment with memory. Klein relates this mysterious aspect of memory, on the one hand, to a “weak appropriation of Freudian language to valorize sentimental autobiography,” on the other hand, to the postmodern appeal to the ineffable, the excess, the unsayable, in short the avant-garde (136). Hegel’s hegemonic association of memory with premodern peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, the therapeutic function of autobiographical discourses, and postmodern practices conform with Werner Sollors’s idea that the emergence of memory as a category of academic discourse is a healthy result of decolonization: “What is called ‘memory’ (and Nora’s lieux de mémoire) may become a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary ‘History’” (qtd. in Fabre and O’Meally 1994, 7-8). More specifically, Thomas Laqueur specifies in his “Introduction” to the special issue of Representations “Grounds for Remembering” that memory is “not primarily about monuments, memorial practices, pictures, or texts but about space, often empty space that bears little sign of the history it has witnessed” (Laqueur 2000, 1).

Two such grounds of memory constitute significant moments in No Telephone to Heaven (see Agosto 1999). The first one is Clare Savage’s encounter with the Statue of Pocahontas. Her wish to find and explore her “mother country” (Cliff 1989, 109) had led her from the United States of America to England where at the end of her stay the sight of the statue of Pocahontas on the graveyard of Gravesend in Kent turns into an almost classic site of memory which sets off the process of identification with her native Jamaica. The example of the seventeenth-century Native American woman helps Clare to rediscover her ethnicity and her origin (see Birkle). She begins to use the Jamaican creole language and acknowledges – for the first time – the “African, English, Carib” in her (Cliff 1989, 189), the association with the original inhabitants of the island the Carib Indians, with African slaves, and the resistance to the English colonialists. All of these ancestral lines converge in her grandmother’s house on the island, the final destination of her return to the roots. In her essay “Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character,” Michelle Cliff emphasizes the importance of this reconnection as a description of Clare’s “fragmentation as well as her movement toward homeland and wholeness” (Cliff 1990, 265). The process of triangulation will eventually lead her back to her grandmother’s home as the ur-site of memory.

It is the grandmother’s home in Jamaica which forms a kind of gravitational center, the third point in Cliff’s triangular writing. This house, where Clare Savage spent her holidays as a school-child, is connected with happiness and her grand-
mother’s unwritten tradition. It is not surprising that Cliff’s writing consciously and unconsciously circles back to this place of home, away from home. In line with the importance of the geographical location, the memory of the house is, however, not temporal but spatial and emotional. Thus the short story “Monster,” set in New York, begins with a reference to her native Jamaica: “My Grandmother’s house. Small. In the middle of nowhere. The heart of the country, as she is the heart of the country. Mountainous, dark, fertile” (Cliff 1998, 20). Her Grandmother is inseparably linked to the island and to the spatial dimensions of the island which Cliff evokes programmatically at the beginning of the novel Abeng: “The island rose and sank. Twice. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell” (1984, 3). This confirms Cliff’s idea of “Obsolete Geography” as a reference to pre-colonial times in the Caribbean before the advent of Christopher Columbus, to the time of the Carib and Arawak Indians on the island. Rejecting her father’s model of the “white negro” (Cliff 1985, 62), she reconnects with the matrilinear, the African part of her family.

Clare slithered beneath her grandmother’s house drawing her head through widow’s webs, pulling herself through the hard black leavings of rats, hands scraping against fragments of shells embedded in the ground, which signaled the explosive birth of the island. [...] Under this house she found solace from the rest of the company. She found her mother’s things from childhood – schoolbooks, thread-spool dollies, vehicles with wheels of shoe-polish tins. Her mother’s schoolbooks – history, literature, geography – opened their wormed pages to a former world. Things, beings, existed in their rightful place – destiny, order were honored. God’s impatient hand feared. Clare wiped the remains of the scorpion from the book and gathered her mother’s girlhood into a crocus sack. Working a broad piece of shell free of earth, she began to scrape the packed ground. (Cliff 1989, 199-200)

This scene of the emotional reconnection with the ground of her Jamaican island prefigures the eventual reunification with the landscape when Clare as a member of a party of revolutionaries is gunned down by military forces and metaphorically melts into the ground.

For Edward Said, the situation of extraterritoriality presents itself from an entirely different point of view. The writing of his autobiography Out of Place in 1994 is motivated – as in many autobiographies – by his fear of death after having been diagnosed with leukemia. Contrary to Michelle Cliff, who started her career as a young writer with autobiographical texts, Said’s life-story comes at the height of an internationally acclaimed career as a Palestinian intellectual teaching comparative literature at Columbia University in New York and it provides in his own words “a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world [...] a subjective account of the life I lived in the Arab world, where I was born and spent my formative years, and in the United States, where I went to school, college, and university” (1999, ix). The description of the life ranges chronologically from his birth in Jerusalem in 1935 to the departure for America in 1951 and his graduation from Harvard University in 1962. But the life in the Middle East is framed more decisively by the gravity of two political events: the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the Six Days War in 1967. While the first date meant the displace-
ment of Said's family from Jerusalem and their move to Cairo in Egypt and subsequent trips between Egypt and their summer home Dhour in Lebanon, the latter stands for Said's "shock of the total Arab defeat" by the Israeli army (268). In-between these dates Said's political consciousness awakens. Thus his first trip to the United States in 1948 coincides with the fall of Palestine, and he gradually realizes President Truman's "crucial part in handing Palestine over to the Zionists" (141). At the time of the Suez crisis he volunteers "to write a column about the war from the Arab point of view for the [Princeton] university newspaper" which represents his "first piece of political writing" (279).

The relatively late political awareness of the Arab point of view must be attributed to a phenomenon for which Said has become famous, namely "orientalism." In the following I will argue that Out of Place per se is an extraterritorial act and reproduces in its representation the attitude of the West toward the Orient described and analyzed in Orientalism. Thus the Orient appears as a form of imagined geography of European colonizers followed by a cultural hegemony over the Arab world which operates in the world of discourse distant from and exterior to the material reality of the Orient. In the last few decades the European dominance has shifted to the United States: "Orientalism hence means the exercise of Euro-Atlantic power over the Orient" (1979, 5 et passim).

Said's autobiography documents this state of affair throughout and reveals in the recollection of his early years in the Middle East a pattern of orientalism. His early life, upbringing and education as a Christian Arab conform to the model of European colonizers, the English in Palestine and Egypt, the French in the Lebanon. In retrospect he reflects upon the discomfort about his name, a Christian first name in memory of the English prince Edward and the Palestinian surname Said. The photographs inserted in the book show all members of the family dressed in Western style. The occasional Palestinian garments appear as folkloristic costumes. In addition to the Anglophile attitude on his mother's side he inherits his father's American citizenship given to him after his service in the American army during WWI. The orientalizing aspect is also reflected in the confusion about his first language or mother tongue. Only late in life he acquires a more intimate familiarity with the Arab language: "Only now can I overcome my alienation from Arabic caused by education and exile and take pleasure in it" (198). The dislocation of his family and friends in 1948 (see 114), the first time of his experience of being out of place, could also be a motivation for the adoption of a lingua franca like English which is not bound to a specific area of national allegiance.

Along this line of an out-of-place existence and an extraterritorial status, it seems to be logical that the English-language training as a non-native transnational form of communication finds its equivalent in Said's love of classical music. Next to the motif of displacement and alienation, music represents a sort of a leitmotif in Out of Place and in Edward Said's life. Among the most important experiences in his young life count the performances of the Berlin Symphony Orchestra under the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler in Cairo. This form of abstract communication
with its transnational reach spans Said’s personal and professional life (see Barenboim and Said 2002).

From this perspective it is also not surprising that the premed student at Princeton eventually chooses the field of the humanities, the world of the mind over matter. Not belonging to a specific home or being out of place corresponds to the choice of comparative literature, the modulation between different languages and literatures. This comparative and practically transnational interest does however have political consequences. In Orientalism Said distinguishes between the conventional assumption of pure knowledge and the political nature of the humanities (5). His dissertation at Harvard on “Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography” (1966), which is the endpoint of his own autobiography, is an example of postcolonial criticism avant la lettre. Like Joseph Conrad before him, Edward Said moves from the East to the West embracing its culture and language which however can not replace the origin. “Along with language, it is geography – especially in the displaced form of departures, arrival, farewells, exile, nostalgia, homesickness, belonging, and travel itself – that is at the core of my memories of those early years,” he writes in the preface to Out of Place (xii). From the perspective of his autobiography, which now after his death appears to be his legacy, all of his critical work has an autobiographical ring to it. In the Conradian sense, autobiography is the secret sharer of his life work. When he characterizes the work of Western orientalists in Orientalism as lacking representative quality and being defined by exteriority, this also seems to pertain to his own status of extraterritoriality:

To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years. (1999, 217)

Extraterritoriality of a different kind determines the lives of Turkish citizens living in Germany. As a consequence of the German economic miracle (“Wirtschaftswunder”), Turkish people among many other South and East European nations were invited to come to Germany and join the work force in the 1960s. To the surprise of German authorities, these guest workers did not return to their native countries but most of them stayed on. It is the second, and even more so the third generation of former Turkish guest workers who have passed the German educational system requesting their place as Germans of Turkish descent within German society. Their acceptance or integration into German society meets with many difficulties which mostly derive from the allegedly non-European provenance of Turks who as Muslims come from outside of the Christian hemisphere and hence are not considered to be members of European civilization. While many of these Turkish citizens feel out of place in Germany, they experience a similar form of displacement during visits with their relatives in Turkey.

This is the background of the German-Turkish writer Feridun Zaimoglu, who was born in Anatolia in 1964 and came as a child with his parents to Germany.

2 Cf. the present debate about Turkey’s application to become a member state of the European Community.
where he has lived for over thirty years. After passing the German gymnasium, he has become the spokesperson for the generation of Turkish people in Germany who have a Turkish passport but are denied German citizenship. His first publications can be regarded as collective autobiographies of displaced people in search of a cultural home. This cultural home is a defiance of the German discriminatory perception of Turks who – because of their often partial competence of the German language – are called kanak – a composite derogatory term used for people from remote and “backward places.” In a counteractive move, Zaimoglu embraces the special language of the socially, culturally and linguistically displaced young Turkish people in Germany which he calls “Kanak Sprak” in order to make a literary and political statement (Zaimoglu 2000, 2001, 2002). Like the Austrian writer Peter Handke, who in his rebellious mode as a young writer shocked the literary establishment of German writers and readers after the war with his famous *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (insulting the audience in words not considered proper literary language), Zaimoglu wants to elevate the language of German Turkish people to a literary status and reveals its creative potential. In a series of interviews, he reproduces curses and four-letter words as well as pejorative names for the Turks and their different language and culture in order to uncover the discriminating attitude of Germans and to turn their discrimination against themselves. The politically not correct terminology becomes a strategy of offense, which caused the Social Democratic Prime Minister of the State of Schleswig-Holstein, Heide Simonis, to call Zaimoglu a “Schnapsnase” (coll. for drunkard) during a nationally broadcast TV Talkshow (1998; see also Röttger 2003).

This kind of unintentional deconstruction of the politically correct movement, often preached but not practiced by its liberal proponents, resembles the situation of minority groups discriminated against in the USA, especially African Americans and Native Americans. Against the agenda and myth of a seemingly homogeneous culture, called “Leitkultur” in Germany, Turkish Germans set the reality of a multi-ethnic society which questions and undermines the dominance of white culture. It is no coincidence that most of the young Turkish Germans interviewed by Zaimoglu evoke the discrimination and suffering of African Americans or Native Americans with whom they identify as German “niggers” or “kanaks.” The influential liberal weekly *Die Zeit* consequently called Feridun Zaimoglu the “Malcom X of German Turks” (Lottmann 1997, 88). In his creative re-writing of these interviews as a collective autobiography Zaimoglu time and again reconnects his cause with similar emancipatory efforts in the world. Thus he sees in his young unwanted and displaced compatriots the real representatives of the “Generation X” who were denied individualization and ontogenesis (Zaimoglu 2000, 13). The collective group identification has links to artistic efforts in folklore and music as part of the creolization of Western cities and a subsequent

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3. A new law granting dual citizenship to the children of immigrants is in effect, but at age 18 they have to decide and choose one passport over the other.
4. The term “Kanak” is derived from Kanaka, originally a native of the South Sea islands, and used depreciatively for guest workers, especially Turks.
restructuring of their societies. Today, the impact of African-American rap music on the very popular Turkish-German Rap, enriched with elements of Oriental music, represents one of the most creative and politically effective means of creating a different German culture (see Ickstadt 1999). Both he himself as a successful German writer as well as his sister as an actress have overcome their parents’ underdog existence. Their conscious decision to stay in Germany was based on their out-of-place existence which provided them with a special basis for their part in the creation of a multi-ethnic society in Germany in which elements of the East and the West meet (see Zaimoglu 2001, 21). One of the latest examples of this new kind of autobiographical achievement for re-making culture from an extraterritorial position is the film Gegen die Wand (Against the Wall) by the Turkish-German director Fatih Akim which won the first prize at the international film festival Berlinale in 2004. Both the director and his actress enact their own out-of-place existence and stress the creative potential derived from it.

Returning to my initial pair of extraterritorial autobiographers, Saint Augustine and Derrida, I would like to conclude that they stand for a form of life and a form of writing which is perennial but particularly prominent in our own time. The formulations and presentations of original ideas in the autobiographical works discussed here were contingent upon their authors’ out-of-place existence and the use of an out-of-place genre, inhabiting multiple worlds (see Huddart and Hornung 1997, 1998a and 1998b). Rather than deploring this extraterritorial state of affairs in life and autobiography, we should recognize the cultural achievements derived from it. This recognition allows Michelle Cliff to avoid her protagonist’s self-destructive definition of a reunification with her native Jamaica, it helps Feridun Zaimoglu to contribute to the emergence of a new culture in Germany and it confirms Edward Said’s wisdom formulated at the very end of his autobiography: “With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place” (295).

Works Cited


1 Introduction.

Realisation of economic, social and cultural rights ('esc rights') essentially has a territorial scope: it normally takes place on the territory of states. On 1 October 2010, 160 states had ratified or acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which is the main universal treaty on extraterritorial conduct "in a way which may undermine and conflict with the laws and policies of a foreign government." Generally speaking, courts in the United States have exercised extraterritorial restraints of trade, but is an indirect and remote repercussion of a restraint carried out, completed and, in the legally relevant sense, exhausted in the foreign country." Such perceived "Yankee jurisdictional jingoism" has created widespread resentment and prompted several states to retaliate by adopting "blocking statutes" limiting the extraterritorial reach of American antitrust legislation within. Extraterritoriality, also known as extraterritorial rights, is an exemption from local laws. That means that an individual with extraterritoriality who commits a crime in a particular country cannot be tried by the authorities of that country, although often she or he will still be subject to trial in his or her own country. Historically, the imperial powers often forced weaker states to grant extraterritorial rights to their citizens who were not diplomats including soldiers, traders, Christian missionaries, and the like. This was most famously the case in East Asia during the nineteenth century. An out-of-place artefact is an object that exists in a place in which it is impossible for it to exist. OOPArts are often of interest to creationists and others who seek evidence that may refute the theory of evolution; they are also used to support religious descriptions of pre-history, ancient astronaut theories, or the notion of vanished civilizations that possessed knowledge or technology more advanced than our own. This is a list of the top 10 out-of-place artefacts. 10. Baigong Pipes. The Baigong Pipes are a series of pipe-like features found on and near Mount Baigong about 40 km south.