

## World Literature at the Alsace Borderland: The Frontier Poetics of Claude Vigée and André Weckmann's Poetry

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In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, poets and writers from the border regions of Alsace and Lorraine occupied a precarious position in a contemporary literary canon increasingly shaped by monocultural nationalisms. Situated on the border between France and Germany, Alsace-Lorraine, as the region was named at the time, had become the symbolic trophy of the political disputes between France and Germany, an object of power on which French and German national pride depended.<sup>1</sup> Following the Franco-Prussian wars, songs, stories and films were created as propaganda in France in remembrance of the provinces lost to the Prussians. Yet, poets from these regions often continued to write in three languages (German, French and Alsatian) at a time when successive French and German governments tried to make the region con-

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<sup>1</sup> Alsace and Lorraine are two different regions of France that were known as the “lost provinces” to France during their annexation to the German Reich between 1870 and 1918. The denomination “Alsace-Lorraine” was given to these regions by the German Reich during the time of their annexation, when they were known as “das Reichsland” (see Claß). Alsace and Lorraine, split after World War II into two distinct regions, have different oral dialects (though poets such as Vigée and Weckmann have used the Alsatian dialect in writing): what is known as Alsatian is an Alemannic dialect. Jewish families such as Claude Vigée’s also spoke Alsatian Yiddish, which could be understood by the rest of the population and vice versa. Lorrainian dialects consist of a Frankish language and the “Oil” dialect, or “Welche.” Lorraine thus contains both a Roman dialect and a German dialect. Both are also spoken in Alsace, where the region borders with Lorraine. In addition to these dialects, the population also consisted in the early twentieth century of French and German speakers. Not everyone spoke both languages, depending whether they had attended a French or German school, or both.

form to rigid linguistic and cultural policies. The literature produced in this region is characterized throughout the twentieth century by an ongoing engagement with cosmopolitan thinking beyond the Franco-German context, an openness to multilingual practices, and the mixing of literary forms and genres.<sup>2</sup> This paper will investigate the extent to which the works of two poets from this region born in the 1920s, Claude Vigée and André Weckmann, constitute a critique of nationalisms' cultural politics by analysing the integration of spatial and cultural practices of the border in a selection of their works written in Alsatian, a non-standardised oral dialect. Alongside this case study, the paper will provide a framework of analysis to read "minor literatures" from borderland regions outside of the cultural framework of national identity.<sup>3</sup> Loosely using Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of "minor literature" as texts written by cultural minorities in a dominant national language, I argue here that borderland literatures form a "minor literature" with a distinctive take on cosmopolitan relations within the dominant cosmopolitanism of "world literature" coined by Goethe (Damrosch 1). To what extent has poetry produced in the Alsace-Lorraine borderland managed to shape its own intercultural discourse within a cosmopolitanism based on inter-nation rivalries? The proposed analysis will suggest that the "frontier literature" from Alsace and Lorraine engages with translation, circulation, and general processes of transcultural communication as an integral part of its creative process. As we shall see, these works challenge the system of inclusion and exclusion characteristic of monocultural national identity constructions to favour a form of symbolic and cultural cooperation.

### Nationalist Discourses on the Alsace-Lorraine Borderland

So long as Germany and France fought over Alsace in the late-nineteenth and twentieth century, monocultural national frameworks over-determined Alsatian and Lorrainian literatures and political and public identity. Between the period of 1870 and 1946, when Alsace-Lorraine changed nationality five times in the

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that outside of "French," "German," and dialects most writers from Alsace and Lorraine spoke, many also learned additional languages throughout their lives. Vigée learned Hebrew and English. Eugène Jolas and Yvan Goll also learnt English and published poetry they had written in that language during their stay in America.

<sup>3</sup> By using the term "minor literature," I am referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's terminology in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. "The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialisation of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. ... Even he who has the misfortune of being born in the country of a great literature must write in its language, just as Czech Jews write in German, or an Ouzbekian writes in Russian. Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow" (18).

midst of the Franco-Prussian War and the First and Second World Wars, the question of Alsace-Lorraine's cultural identity was caught up in the historical development of its neighbouring national borders. The narrative strategies deployed in order to represent Alsatian and Lorrainian identities during these Franco-German conflicts is important in order to contextualise the selection of Vigée and Weckmann's texts analysed here, since both poets use "autoethnographic" strategies of narration. By "autoethnographic" strategies I mean to refer to Pratt's terminology to describe works that actively "engage with representations [these two national] others have made of them" (35). The case of Weckmann and Vigée's Alsatian language poetry is all the more interesting for it acknowledges the global culture of dissent in which these authors wrote during the nineteen-seventies and eighties. This allowed them to describe not only the way they were perceived by the nations who competed for their sovereignty, but also to recognise their position as authors in a global context of social inequality beyond their immediate cultural reality. Already, Alsatian poets of the early twentieth century such as Hans/Jean Arp, Eugène Jolas and Yvan Goll had emphasized the ideological context of traditional literary forms by taking trans-cultural contact as the cultural norm shaping their writing (Jolas, Perloff). Weckmann and Vigée go further in politicising issues of identity and power in a cosmopolitan context where identities are ordered around monocultural national identities.

At a time when France and Germany wanted to assimilate Alsace-Lorraine to their territories, the identity of this frontier region was caught between the need to act as a border that separated and thus legitimised two national identities and the cultural demands that were imposed on the population each time it changed nationality. In 1912, the Alsace-Lorraine pendulum between France and Germany led Heinrich Claß, a prominent ideological precursor of National Socialism in Germany, to classify the Alsace-Lorraine population as "Volksfremde" (foreign or non-natives), along with the Jewish population and the people of the Danish and Polish borderlands (79). Claß's text *Wenn ich Kaiser wär* (1912) is indeed full of references to the growing importance of borders and border relations in national and international politics. From the point of view of Alsace and Lorraine's population, however, France and Germany's political programs became more and more interchangeable. Writings by French and German nationalist ideologues such as Claß, Treitschke and Barrès show why twentieth-century Alsatian literary works are often imbued with the irony and detachment provoked by pressures from France or Germany to conform to a monocultural standard.

In 1945, France regained Alsace and Lorraine which have remained French territories until this day. Following, to a less drastic extent, the example of "linguistic purges" in 1919, individuals from the region were once more summoned

to speak and behave in the manner of the French (Boswell 129-62).<sup>4</sup> This was most-vigorously implemented through education measures which forbade and shamed students for speaking the Alsatian dialect at school; a pedagogical tactic which was expanded institutionally throughout the region, with slogans such as “C’est chic de parler français!” (How chic to speak French!) or “Oubliez chaque jour un mot de dialecte et apprenez un nouveau mot de français” (Forget a dialect word every day and acquire a French word instead).<sup>5</sup> This particular socio-linguistic context had, of course, a profound impact on trilingual writers such as Vigée and Weckmann, for whom writing became synonymous with the act of choosing a language and national identity. As pointed out by Penelope Gardner-Chloros, “The example of Alsace shows that an understanding of the sociolinguistic situation, particularly in a multilingual area, contributes significantly to the interpretation of its literature” (1100). Indeed, the trilingual heritage of Alsace has affected writers and the literary field of the region in various ways. The Alemannic, German, and French languages spoken did not simply give poets access to different cultural fields, it gave them a platform to reflect on the ways that these nations authored themselves through culture by foreignising cultural difference within itself. On the one hand, it gave its inhabitants a comparatist insight into different cultures, on the other, it gave them a viewpoint from which to observe how this claim of singularism was based on a very similar imperialist program of cultural expansion and exclusion.

An example of the continuous attempt to identify the region in nation-centric terms in the early-twentieth century can be found in the works of Maurice Barrès, an anti-Dreyfusard French politician and writer of Lorrainian extraction.<sup>6</sup> Recounting the hearsay of French travellers to the then German region of Alsace in his speech on Alsace-Lorraine in 1906, Maurice Barrès insists that any public display of allegiance toward Germany on the part of Alsatians was due to the

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed study of the linguistic purges in Alsace and Lorraine, see Laird Boswell (2000). Eugène Philipps gives a thorough analysis of the linguistic and cultural politic established before the Second World War in *Les Luittes Linguistiques en Alsace jusqu’en 1945* (1975), and Bernard Vogler of the period between 1945 to the 1990s (1994). For a general historical survey of the socio-linguistic policies of Alsace-Lorraine since the Westphalia Treaty in 1648, when Alsace and parts of Lorraine became annexed to France for the first time, see Helga Bister-Broosen (2002).

<sup>5</sup> References to the slogans were found in Helga Bister-Broosen and Roland Willemyns (1998). See also Bernard Vogler: “The elitist discourse of the national education is enlightening: ‘There is no reason to maintain the students in the inferior culture of their origins’” (449, my translation).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note, as an aside, that Dreyfus himself was from Alsace, a detail which certainly added to his portrayal as a foreigner due to his accent and closeness to Germany. Like many other Alsatian Jewish people living in Paris at the time, his first language was either Alsatian or German.

spying system and the network of “agent provocateurs,” which explain the defiance of the annexed regions after so many years of brutal measures, vexations, conflicts and countless denunciations. Many Germans speak the Alsatian dialect and the French language, which explains why the natives are so cautious and refuse to engage conversation with an unknown visitor, regardless of their accent. It is only after having received stern tokens of reliance that they let their guards down and, little by little, reveal their true feelings. (9-10)

The German spying system imagined by Barrès to justify the Alsatians’ suspicious behaviour toward French visitors exemplifies the kind of ethnomorphism used to deny Alsace’s cultural difference. This is because the language spoken by Alsatians is assimilated by Barrès to their national allegiance, in such a way that the very linguistic usage of the population is made to determine the population’s enmity or sympathy towards France. Here denial of difference becomes a strategy of assimilation.

In 1870, the German politician Heinrich von Treitschke, the inspiration behind many of Heinrich Claß’s works, wrote of Alsatians in a more obvious racist vein. Here Treitschke chooses to focus on their choice of language as the determinant factor of their identity, rather than to focus on the meaning of their words:

Well may we Germans be seized with awe, ... when we find these German men raving, in the German tongue, against the “German dogs,” the “stinking Prussians,” and raging like wild beasts against their flesh and blood. And yet we have no right to sit in judgement on this deluded population, which, notwithstanding everything, is among the most vigorous German races. (62)

Based on this essentialist stance, Treitschke’s political program is put forth by him in very confident terms: “We Germans ... know better than these unfortunates themselves what is good for the people of Elsass ... Against their own will we shall restore them to their true selves” (20). As this last statement further demonstrates, Treitschke determines the political identity of Alsace through racial and simplified ethnographic criteria. Yet both he and Barrès of course fail to measure anything of interest about how cultural identities and political will were actually negotiated by the Alsatian population. As national entities in the making, Alsatians are considered as partial, potential subjects who struggle to make sense of their existence, and their multilingualism is seen as a sign of this internal confusion. While Barrès simply assimilates the Alsatians by deeming their cultural difference to be superficial or inauthentic, Treitschke’s strategy is to focus on their choice of language as the *nomos* of their identity. In each case Alsace is nationalised in the denial of multiculturalism as a cultural form.

For Claß, cultural identity equally trumped politics in the choice of national identity. To claim one's cultural identity could be mixed rather than homogeneously determined was depreciated as a form of intellectual debasement. In 1912, Claß proclaimed that the Alsatian, as a result of his or her borderland identity, was the epitome of superficiality:

People are right to ridicule the dual-culture of the French and German region of these national hermaphrodites, since they are neither French nor German, but caricatures of half-formed knowledge. The Alsace-Lorraine particularism is no better, full of life for having just been awarded a new constitution, since this region was devoid of its own historical and cultural foundation. (83-84, my translation)

The "half-formed knowledge" identified here by Claß is, of course, to be distinguished from the depth of national sentiment he attached to the coherence of German identity. Here, the superficiality of the multilingual population is opposed to the depth, feeling, and self-reflexiveness characteristic of German Romantic nationalist theory. As noted by Bernard Vogler, at the turn of the century Alsace-Lorraine was indeed perceived as nothing more than "a land that needed to be germanised" (376, my translation). The attitude of the Prussians was thus to "eliminate progressively all French or Welche elements, and thus the Alsatian double-culture, considered to be a handicap to intellectual development" (376, my translation). The zone of contact which the borderland represented was not only seen as a threat to the sovereignty of the national territory; it was perceived, at a deeper racist echelon, as a threat and debasement to Germany's intellectual prestige. By metaphorically organising coherent nationalities through the matrix of coherent gender norms, Treitschke is shaping politics through the means of a culture whose political logos he could control.

As Claß, Treitschke and Barrès's words illustrate, Alsace and Lorraine occupied an ambiguous political position, since the region was both a border (through which nations constructed their identity) and a new frontier for the French and German empire-nations. As Étienne Balibar notes, in twentieth-century Europe: "These states' borders with each other were both, indissociably, national borders and imperial borders ... For the 'imperial-national' states did not merely have 'citizens'; they also had 'subjects'" (79). Symbolically at least, Alsatians and Lorrainians occupied a controversial position as both citizens and subjects of the French and German empires, a symbolic frontier between citizenship and colonial subjectification which complicated the geographical borderland in which they were positioned. As both citizens and subjects of alternately France and Germany, Alsatians and Lorrainians revealed the ideological complicity between nationalist discourses and imperialist politics.

The political crisis which the region experienced thus illustrates the unofficial role of geographical borders as "apparatuses of control, as instruments of

discrimination and triage” in the European nations’ system of integration (Balibar 82), and how this apparatus of control could in turn be used to negate political self-determination. As Bhabha aptly put it in *The Location of Culture*, this is partly explained by the fact that the nation, more than a system of unity, plays a historical role as “the measure of the liminality of modernity” (201). The function of the border as an apparatus of discrimination between colonized and colonizer, native citizen and outsider is, as we shall see in the third part of this essay, the subject of satire in the poetry of Weckmann and Vigée. Not only is monoculturalism denounced in the poem as the exclusive locations of social integration in the national and international context, monoculturalism is portrayed as an illegitimate threshold between culture and non-culture, between modernity and regionalisms.

### Using Monoculturalism to Measure the World

As Pascale Casanova recently demonstrated in “Combative Literatures,” literary scholarship has not been short of research which has approached the relationship between minor literatures and cultural centres from a sociolinguistic point of view (Casanova 2011). Mikhail Bakhtin for instance is one of the first authors to have theorized the relationship between minor languages and literary aesthetics in his theory of the novel. Bakhtin did so by inscribing the history of language in literature in direct relation with concepts of self and identity formation in the modern nation (Bakhtin 259-422). But as critics such as Dorothy J. Hale have shown, Bakhtin’s tendency to locate the social matrix of society directly *within* language is problematic in its attempt to naturalise authorial choices as already inscribed within social interactions and language use. The questions facing minor literature scholars are thus as follows: Is it possible to express the complex viewpoints and modalities of non-national literatures without falling into the pathology of fixing their particular identities ethnically or territorially? How can one critically engage with the individuality of minor literature authors without categorizing them through a rigid model of social formalism?

Minor literatures often stand in accusation of wanting to appropriate the arguments for recognition that have made them subservient to other cultures. In “Combative Literatures,” Casanova warns us that the temptation to fall into a pattern of asserting minor literatures’ worth on the basis of cultural difference is as dubious as the desire to discredit this claim off-handedly. She writes:

To despise, minimize or discredit nationalist sentiment in literature is merely to reproduce the ethnocentric prejudices of Western—in particular, French—universalism. ... One way of restoring a measure of equality in the critical treatment of different literatures would be through methods and instruments sensitive to the fact that national feeling is central in some literatures, while in others it is simply the object of a collective amnesia. (130-1)

According to Casanova, claims to nationhood in the nineteenth century have to be read as an “assertion of *equality*” between unequal collectivities (123). In her analysis, Casanova calls for a continuing identification of literature with national histories while asserting that this literary evolution should be consistently read against an international background rather than a process of self-individualization. This form of philological contextualization is a great step towards understanding literature as a system working through and at times against the domination of small literatures by the centre. But it can also be criticized for taking national monocultures to be the measure of the international, thereby making nations the historical agents of cosmopolitan relations in literature. In this context, Pratt’s zones of contacts are once again ancillary to the process of internationalization, thus making intercultural relation not the aim, but merely the means of creating a strong international network of distinction and peer recognition among wealthy monocultural nations.

Some literatures, indeed, cannot be easily categorized in this pattern of national becomings. This is the case, besides the present example, of the “literature of relation” model presented by Glissant, of postcolonial and Latino borderland fictions (Aldama; Chamberlain), or of Galician *romance* poetry (Chamberlain). For various historical reasons, these works appeal to a different model of unity by building their own model of cosmopolitan relations on multiculturalism. They are a frontier, to use the Lorrainian-American poet Jolas’ term to describe Alsace-Lorraine, because they have not yet been colonised by national monocultures (Jolas, “European Frontier World”, 4-17). In approaching the question of a “minor world literature,” our first observation will be that nationalist ideologies, supported by a drive for capital and territorial integrity, are first of all not receptive to a cosmopolitan regime which may undermine the notion of cultural unity which legitimizes their existences. As we shall see, one of the criticisms which came out of the Alsatian literary field is that the imperative of nationalism is therefore an injunction of desire *for* the current form of community and essentialist identity model it offers, one which stifles aspirations for other forms of universalities by normalizing affects and cultural behaviours. Correspondingly, the cultural unity prescribed by nationalism is often portrayed, at an individual level, to be a form of political oppression. Indeed, what Glissant designates as “the philosophy of relation” present in creole culture is often described by Vigée as a joy, the “*joui-dire*” of a freedom to exist beyond oneself, that is beyond monocultural self-identification (Mounic). In the frontier poetry of Weckmann and Vigée, cultural singularity is thus fabricated through a deterritorialisation of identity rather than the idea of the selfsame. In this cultural regime, narratives form through a process of cultural dislocation, thereby opening cultural identities to a process of historical and comparative enquiry.



### Weckmann and Vigée's Frontier Poetics

Literature, as many examples of transcultural movements of writers have demonstrated, is not strictly bound by nationalist narratives to think unity. In practice, Deleuze and Guattari observed that literature can deterritorialise language from its national referent and reterritorialise it within the senses (20). By emancipating sounds, forms, and meaning in languages from the cultural constructs of literature as a written empire of forms, their literary forms renegotiate ways of sharing and redistributing the sensible.<sup>7</sup> In Vigée and Weckmann's poetry, the form of identification demanded by nationalisms is a terrain of perpetual contestation and revolt. The polycentric, and to an extent stateless literary geography of both Weckmann and Vigée's works is expressed through a variety of literary strategies. Weckmann's collection of poems *Schang ð sunn sching schun lang* uses what I would call a multicultural hosting of identity discourses. While distancing itself from either French or German literary traditions by writing primarily in Alsatian, Weckmann also adopts various distancing effects towards his own native language. His writing is thus represented in the act of alternately hosting and being hosted by foreign forms. In this poetry collection, Alsace is equally represented through Chinese, African or Black, French and German voices.

The title of Weckmann's poetry collection, *Schang ð sunn schint schun lang* is the first line of a poem written in Alsatian entitled "chinesich," which can be found in the middle of this poetry collection. The poem itself is made to make Alsatian sound Chinese:

Schang dsunn schint schun lang  
 Schun funfzehundert johr  
 Zue lang schun schintse schang  
 Mr dunke se ens chlor

It's been long since the sun shined John  
 One hundred and fifty years it seems  
 Long since the sun shined John  
 We dip it in chlorine. (62, my translation)

The literary playfulness of this doggerel is inscribed within the linguistic form of the poem. Through this unorthodox use of Alsatian, the text is playing with the French saying "it's all Chinese to me," and, as such, the act of using Alsatian, a "foreign" language in France, is raised to the consciousness of the text

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<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Rancière's definition of a democracy of the sense in literature in "The Politics of Literature."

itself. At a poetic and linguistic level of understanding, the image of the sun and of “Schang,” Alsatian for Jean, being dipped in chlorine or bleach entices us to think of French language policies in Alsace from the prism of racial discourse. This rapprochement and gimmicking of Alsatian identity as post-colonial black identity, either foreign or colonised by the French, is done with a heavy dose of irony in “chinesich.” Here the poem acts as a place of contact between different forms of otherwise homeless political demands. Another poem in this collection, “Speak White,” appears at first glance to take a more straightforward militant tone:

Speak white  
 Nigger  
 White is beautiful  
 White is noble  
 White is the way  
 White is French  
 French is white  
 White and chic  
 Alsatian  
 Alsatian get lost  
 Right?  
 Since it’s primitive  
 Vulgar  
 Burk!  
 Thus speak white  
 Nigger  
 ... white like in Paris  
 And dip your nigger tongue  
 In formol  
 And send it to a museum ... (27, my translation)

The political activism of the poem is plainly associated with the struggle of post-colonial black writers, illustrated through the violence of the word “negger” in Alsatian in the poem. The title, in English in the original text, points to a global struggle at the level of all “minority” cultures—reminding one of the Black-American civil rights movements in tone and language.<sup>8</sup> In the frontier poem imagined by Weckmann, what is a source of prejudice in the mainstream community becomes a tool of expression which externalises the issue of Alsatian

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<sup>8</sup> Weckmann’s encounter with Jazz after the Second World War is known to have had a profound aesthetic impact on him. See Bloch 339.

identity at an ocular and symbolic level.<sup>9</sup> Whereas an important aspect of the Alsatian problematic is located at a psychological and identity level, Weckmann's use of blackness externalises the psychological struggles of Alsations on the colonial public sphere of identity discourses by making it visible as well as audible. The cultural connotation of the poem reveals the symbolic violence silenced by the otherwise invisible mechanism of cultural normalisation while the Chinese-sounding poem brings to the fore the marginalising treatment of the Alsatian dialect in a French assimilationist context. The fragmented voices of those marginalised by nationalism's imperialist discourse are here reterritorialised at the contact zone of the borderland, where the symbolic imagination of the poem tries to find its own terms of unity through openness rather than uniformity. The tactics of visibility employed by the poet is formative of a kind of imagined community which departs from the notion of nationalist assimilation, which Bakhtin has so often associated with the "poetic voice."<sup>10</sup>

The political dimension of language and its cultural imposition were often buttressed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a propaganda which placed Alsace at the crossroads between gender and racial discourses. Between the First and Second World War, Alsace, represented as a woman in most propaganda images, was often fantasised as the perfect hostess of French republicanism, while her identity and multilingualism was perceived as a weakness and the potential symptom of her duplicity.<sup>11</sup> The construction of heteronormative desires in Alsace echoes the construction of national desires in the nineteenth century. Either lacking in identity or having too much of one seemed to be a constant theme in caricatures; among them, one which famously dignified Alsations with the term "Wackes," used by Prussian and German soldiers since the Franco-Prussian wars, meaning someone who isn't trustworthy, a rogue and a scoundrel.<sup>12</sup> During the First World War, many images were produced which presented Alsace as a helpless victim caught in the wrong camp, or being seduced by a Prussian Soldier (Vlosak). Caught in a dichotomy between the French and German identity, the Alsa-

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<sup>9</sup> In using the idea of the Frontier-Poem, I am borrowing a concept from Eugène Jolas in "Mots-Frontiere: Polyvocables" ("Frontier-Words, Polyvocables"). For a study of understanding in Jolas's multilingual poetics, see Marjorie Perloff.

<sup>10</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin's critique of poetry in "Discourse in the Novel."

"In genres that are poetic in the narrow sense, the natural dialogization of the word is not put to artistic use, the word is sufficient unto itself and does not presume alien utterances beyond its own boundaries. Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse" (285).

<sup>11</sup> The sexual undertones of Alsace's popular representations are parodied in Weckmann's *La Roue du Paon*. For an analysis, see Spieser-Landes.

<sup>12</sup> In 1913, Prussian soldiers used the term "Wackes" within earshot of the population, which created a major diplomatic incident. It was known in France and Germany as the "Zabern" or "Saverne affair." See Nolan (82-3).

tian dialect became, in Vigée's works, the rogue and untamed language of an occulted point of view. Rejecting the meek image of domesticity and discipline attached to the region, the Alsatian dialect is sublimated by Vigée into a language abiding to neither France nor Germany's written rule.

The eponymous black nettle of Vigée's long poem "Black Nettles Blaze in the Wind" represents at once the language that has been "jeté aux ortilles," or "thrown to the dogs," and the satirical, grotesque and baroque heritage of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Strasbourger writings in Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (1494), Thomas Murner's *Narrenbeschwörung* (1512), and Johann Fischart's *Eulenspiegel* (1572).<sup>13</sup> The themes of folly and excess are used in Vigée's narrative poem as a way of criticising the horrors of the Holocaust of which his family were the victims, but also, by way of re-appropriation through various disguises, as a way of celebrating a form of excess attributed to a frontier region which failed to act as a line of demarcation between national and cultural identities. In this particular passage of "Black Nettles," the voice is connected with bodily organs and the figure of the well. The silencing of the Alsatian dialect in schools portrayed in this passage by Vigée is inspired by his experience as a schoolboy after the re-annexation of Alsace-Lorraine to France in the aftermaths of the Second World War. Rather than exemplifying the fashionable decency attributed to it by French institutions, the language in the poem becomes pregnant with grotesque imagery:

Since it erupted from our windpipes  
As quickly as it had vanished  
Gulped down at the bottom of our wells—  
The forever silenced language of childhood—  
Why do we stand there like helpless beggars,  
All dazed and crooked  
Bare hands extending?

All this life we dismissed it  
On the grounds of sickness:  
Though slowly stifling ourselves  
As we stood away from it.  
Always, this foolish air of panic,  
Of being struck half-dumb.  
Our hoarse voices, broken long ago  
Suddenly stopped:

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<sup>13</sup> For a study of the Alsatian Renaissance and Humanist literary period, see J. Dentinger. It is worth noting that all these books feature the figure of tricksters or pranksters, a legacy still evident in the Alsatian literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Already, on our school bench,  
 In the thrall of the forceps of language  
 We felt like tongue-cripples  
 Tangled up in our songs. (134-7)

In the poem, the characters are denied (and deny themselves) their first language, and are forced at school to awkwardly express themselves in another. The internal struggle of Vigée's characters is represented through the use of grotesque imagery. The act of speaking, in this instance, is put in direct association with the act of giving birth: suggesting both the pregnant existence of a forbidden word and the forced imposition of monolingualism used as a cultural injunction and mode of identification. Additionally, the "mother" tongue and speaker relationship is reversed: bereft of the Alsatian language, the children's voices awkwardly give birth to a voice which is not that of their mother. The trilingualism of Alsatian children, which could be perceived as the dynamic and cosmopolitan feature of their identity, is sacrificed to the rigidity of nationalist decorum.

The spectacle of the republican state, represented throughout by institutions such as the school, the Church, and the army, are continuously undermined by the polyphony of the poem. First written in Alsatian, the poem's first publication was accompanied by a self-translation into French by Vigée (1984). Additionally, the act of writing in the Alsatian dialect, a traditionally oral language, constitutes, *de facto*, a transgression on several levels. Firstly, the roguish characteristics associated with oral dialects are here self-caricatured in a bid to unmask the very excesses of French and German institutions trying to tame them into monocultural nationalised subjects.<sup>14</sup> Unfettered by written norms, the tauntingly unofficial dimension of the Alsatian text also serves in deriding the fiction of an essentialist boundary between France and Germany. In attracting attention to itself as a voice, the poet's instrument is also luring the listener to consider spatial boundaries from the point of view of orality rather than from the official, territorialised standpoint of the written word. Instead of the physicality of frontiers, the text echoes other languages and creates symbolic bridges where, as Glissant put it, "thoughts of and on the world at last circulate in the air" (58, my translation). Indeed, these acoustic bridges, often portrayed in Vigée through the figure of the well and bodily orifices, can also be seen as critical at-

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that the long poem *Black Nettle Blaze in the Wind* has been staged and read in Alsatian by Dinah Faust in 2005, accompanied by Anita Pirmann at the accordion and Edouard Bauer at the violin. See the video shot by the cultural centre of Hoerdt entitled *Orties Noires* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFMKIfngyPU>> [last accessed 21.11.2014]

To hear the passage in Alsatian cited in this article, play from 2.35 until 3:01 minutes of Dinah Faust's performance.

tempts to dig passages between the unspoken experiences of the body and the written mechanisms of territorial division.

Illustrating this form of linguistic construction and his own literary style, Vigée, in his 1982 preface to the poetry collection *Les Orties noires flambent dans le vent*, describes the Alsatian mentality as a form of “humour par-delà les interdits assimilés inconsciemment” or a “humour which pushes beyond prohibitions and taboos that have been unconsciously internalised” (95, my translation). The attitude which seeks to externalise these taboos as matters of consideration for the public and political space becomes, in Vigée’s texts, a stylistic form and a philosophy in its own right. In its existentialist gesture, this stylistic form also creates a bridge, or clandestine passage, between the world of Judaism and the author’s Alsatian identity. In the following statement, Vigée therefore aligns images of Alsatian Christianity with the tragedy of the Holocaust, alternating the warmth of the hearth and the imagery of the crematorium without resolving this dialectic:

Isn’t Alsace, Israel and human life as a whole at once an enchanted native garden and a horrible pit filled with whitish toads ... ? Which is right, the dark and icy pole or the other, sunny side? ... The Christmas burning bush or the hearth filled with calcinated bones of the crematorium? (97, my translation)

In another famous statement, Vigée similarly associates with duality rather than self-identification: “Négation de soi, mutilation de sa propre identité psychique, ce phénomène nocif peut se comparer, à une échelle réduite, bien sûr, au fameux Selbshass juif” (“The negation of one’s self, the mutilation of one’s own psychological identity, this harmful phenomenon can be compared, to a lesser degree of course, to the famous Jewish Selbsthass,” my translation) (95). Later, he adds: “Je suis juif et alsacien, donc doublement juif et doublement alsacien” (“I am Jewish and Alsatian, and therefore twice Jewish and twice Alsatian”) (95). In Vigée’s works, Alsace becomes not only a territorial, but a symbolic contact zone open to the complicity of historical destinies.

In light of the externalisation of an internal conflict into the public space of the writer-reader relation, the borderland poetics of Claude Vigée presents a dialogical defiance which inscribes the principles of the border as “frontier” or contact zone within an aesthetic and an ethos of the poetic text. This literary and stylistic reflection of the region’s multilingual existence performs explicitly, and thereby dialogises in the sense of offering divergent “socio-linguistic points of view” of one’s self, its own characteristics as a culture (Bakhtin 273). In Weckmann and Vigée’s poems, the line separating Germany from France is reimagined as a universal meeting place for disenfranchised voices, where the notion of origin is not as essential to one’s identity as the narrative movement and performativity of relations. Indeed, the hierarchal order of the national and in-

ter-national literary field is reinvested from the point of view of the borderland's multicultural literary production model.

The redistribution of literary capital through the social imaginary of the borderlands is further extended and theorised by Vigée in his use of French through his refusal to separate prose from poetry in most of his poetry collections. In a French collection of essays *L'Extase et l'errance* (1982) ("Roving and Rapture"), Vigée describes the traditional Gallic need to separate the worlds of poetry and prose as a source of an internal struggle on his part, in spite of André Gide and Saint John-Perse's advice to him to simply do away with this form of writing (58-9). In this same essay, Vigée describes Mallarmean poetry as "the exclusive cult of rigidity and law," adding with his characteristic wit: "la différence d'écriture est infime entre le formel et le formol" ("the stylistic differences between formal and formalin are only minimal") (56). On the other hand, Vigée warns of the temptation to simply roam in the midst of the infinite prose of the novel, a form which, when left unchecked, may devour all individuality (55). Faced with the dichotomy of this alternative of forms, Vigée imagines a singular outcome, trope of the contact zone: "to move those enemy polarities closer together" (55). Vigée and Weckmann's works, then, present a form of poetry that is polycentric in style and form. The multicultural and multilingual dimension of their poems is inscribed in the very aesthetics of their works, where creativity emanates from conscious forms of becoming rather than the stasis of "being" in the solipsistic and monocultural sense of the term.

As such, the poems reinvent cosmopolitanism through the idea of a "frontier literature," a space being defined and redefined through culture as an art of contact rather than self-identification. The constant "bordering" community reimagined by the poets, and the world literary community formed by the writers from these regions, construct an imaginary landscape that is distinctly open to the relativity of cultural discourses and narratives which make and unmake established centres of cultural authority.

## Conclusion

It seems appropriate to conclude this essay with an oral tale about nationalism from Alsace. In an interview for the French television programme *Les conteurs* ("The Storytellers") in 1967, Muller, the theatre and cabaret director of "Barabli," allegorised the problematic of Alsatian individuals in relation to national ideologies by telling the following story:

You may have heard of the tale of the Lorelei, this tall, wonderful blond woman, the early days' Hollywood vamp, sitting on a rock with an extraordinary set of hair, provoking shipwrecks (the sailors, in fact, were attracted by her hair rather than her singing). An Alsatian could have never fallen for this trick, he would have looked at her and chuckled: "they are having me on with

this Lorelei, she is wearing a wig!," and would have continued on sailing past her. (my translation)

In Muller's oral tale, the Lorelei episode allegorises the form of ideological castration operated by the Alsatian gaze. Unable to believe in the ideological transformation initiated by the Lorelei's voice, the gaze of the sailor cannot "un-see" past the symbolic dimension of what she stands for: a reification of Germanness, a sublimation of Germany as a monocultural empire nation. Significantly, the essentialising function of the Lorelei as a volkslied is, in Muller's allegory, exteriorised by the gaze of the onlooker as a copy, as something that is unoriginal. In this allegory, the very fetishisation of the voice of the Lorelei, of language as the authentic unification of the voice of Germany, is bypassed and indeed evaded. Here, Muller's public intervention does not simply exteriorise an unconscious collective position. It seeks, as other similar Alsatian literary interventions in the public space of inter-national relations, to tie the political imagination of the collective to new grounds for cosmopolitan relations.<sup>15</sup>

Claude Vigée and André Weckmann's poetic response to nationalist discourses in the examples shown in this essay is, rather than to root their poems into an imagined idyllic Alsatian past, to deterritorialise all languages and identities collectively in a literary contact zone. By deterritorialisation I mean to suggest the process of systematic embedding and disembedding of the authors' and poets' origins in multicultural relations of their own imagination. Indeed, in both Weckmann and Vigée's works, the representation of the Alsatian dilemma is constantly elucidated by engaging in its commonality with other cultures. Whilst Deleuze and Guattari used this particular term to explain the literary style of Kafka in German, the form of disidentification operated by Vigée and Weckmann's writings could be portrayed as digging in literary and global cultures of dissent, fashioning their identity within already established visible tropes of minority cultures. Alsatian letters thus appear to be acting as a host culture in the double sense of the word: as a culture which acts like a host of established national cultures, that is, as a culture which provides hospitality by harbouring others within itself; but also a culture which knows how to be hosted by other discourses. This particular know-how or "savoir" was, as we have seen through

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<sup>15</sup> The subversion of nationalist and regionalist symbols is very common in the literature from the Alsatian borderland. Hans/Jean Arp derides both nationalist and regionalist symbols such as the stork, the gothic cathedral of Strasbourg, and the traditional costume in his short story "La Cigogne enchaînée: Nouvelle patriotique et Alsacienne" (1935) ("The Stork Enchained: An Alsatian and Patriotic Novella"). René Schickele's play *Hans im Schnakenloch* is a drama based on the Alsatian folksong *D'r Hans im Schnokeloch*. This song was often used to popularise the Alsatian dilemma as it tells the story of a man who "wants what he does not have, and has what he does not want."



Barrès, Treitschke, and Claß's political essays, a major source of anxiety in French and German monocultural nationalist prose on the region.

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