Remembering the Beginning: "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" by Rosmarie Waldrop

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Abstract: Through a close reading of "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike," the opening poem of Rosmarie Waldrop's latest collection of prose poetry, *Driven to Abstraction* (2010), this paper shows how the poem deconstructs history and memory through criticism of language. Retelling the narration of the conquest of the Americas, "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" calls into question the beginning of what was to become US American national identity. Putting Waldrop's poem in the broader context of transnational criticism, I argue that its deconstructive poetic and philosophical use of language contributes to the transnational turn, helping to create the room that transnational criticism needs in order to come up with new, more appropriate ways of structuring literary studies.

> "Yet new ages are not brought into being merely through the development of new ideas: the dissolution or overthrowing of old ideas plays an equal part in their emergence."
>
> Moretti 42

In her poetic work, Rosmarie Waldrop frequently uses theories of language and philosophy to deconstruct personal recollections and collective memories that constitute history. Like most poetry, her work is explicitly self-reflexive. Employing poetic language as a tool, Waldrop continuously calls into question the possibility of representing facts and experiences 'truthfully' by means of language, emphasizing the limits inherent in the structure of language itself. Her work, like that of "other Language poets[,] testifies to the existence of [...] a new hybrid kind of creative writing, itself halfway between poetry and theory" (Delville 230). Waldrop's

poem “All Electrons Are (Not) Alike” is an example of such a “hybrid kind of creative writing” (Delville 230).

The preoccupation with theory within the poem, traceable in Waldrop’s poetry in general, aligns her with philosophical approaches to language. Her self-reflective use of language is reminiscent of the approach to language put forward by Jacques Derrida, who, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sums it up in her translator’s preface to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, employs a “strategy of using the only available language while not subscribing to its premises” in his work (xviii). Waldrop, like Derrida, uses language as a tool of expression and representation while continuously calling into question the validity of any linguistic representation and, thus, the validity of her own work. Her approach to language can be described with Derrida’s words, postulating “that there never has been and never will be a unique word, a master name” for any given object or event and that, consequently, “neither Being nor truth” can be found in writing (159, 158). One might be tempted to think that reading poetry that thus destabilizes its very foundation in the form of language might be an uncomfortable experience. But, again, Waldrop’s attitude toward the slippery concept of language she works with brings to mind Derrida’s plea to face that loss of stability “with a certain laughter and with a certain dance” rather than with dire seriousness (159).

The idea that the nation-state as an ordering principle of culture, politics, and economics is no longer adequately able to capture the reality of a globalized world is not a new one. Schools of thought such as postcolonialism and transnationalism have been prominent in the humanities in the past decades and can be linked to the crisis of the nation-state. Spivak, in a dialogue with Judith Butler, states that “[t]oday, it is the decline of the nation-state that we are witnessing in globalization” (Butler and Spivak 76). She notes that this “decline is a result of the economic and political restructuring of the state in the interest of global capital” (76). Not content with ascribing the decline of the nation-state to external forces, however, Spivak points out that “the nation-state as a form was faulty from the start” (76). Those internal flaws pertain to the structure of the nation-state, which—in order to create a cohesive unit—needs to deny membership to those elements (peoples, minorities) that were part of the “old multi-ethnic mix” (76), which predated nation-state homogeneity.

By challenging the concept of the nation-state, globalization reveals the constructed character and internal flaws of those political entities. Nation-states as cultural constructs are brought into being by national narratives, which intend to create a cohesive identity for their members. The construction of national narratives involves documents and other means of language that pretend to represent an already existing reality while actually fashioning the reality they describe. However, these narratives only work for parts of national populations and largely rely on the exclusion of

elements that endanger the believability of the narrative. In order to call attention to those excluded elements, it is necessary to critically engage with the constructed nature of national narratives. Their deconstruction and the subsequent deconstruction of nation-states in general demand frameworks better equipped to analyze a world marked by globalization. Several schools of thought, such as transnationalism and postcolonialism, aim to provide such frameworks.

As this paper argues that Waldrop's poem "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" can be read as a contribution to the transnational turn in literary studies, a working definition of the term 'transnationalism' needs to be established. Transnationalism, according to Steven Vertovec, is the broad term used in the social sciences to refer to "a variety of economic, social and political linkages that cross borders and span the world" (641). However, Vertovec acknowledges that there has been "continuing criticism of the term's analytical fuzziness, overuse, and lack of historical grounding," resulting in transnationalism turning into "an increasingly messy academic arena" (641-42, 643). Since transnationalism is not solely a topic of interest for the social sciences but for various disciplines (641), there are many definitions in use that differ from each other in various degrees. The same is true where the adjective 'transnational' is concerned, which is often used synonymously with terms such as 'international' or 'multinational' (643). In the context of this paper, however, Vertovec's inclusive definition of transnationalism should suffice.[1]

In this paper, I will show how the poem's deconstruction of language and its subsequent questioning of linguistic constructs, such as personal or collective recollections, contribute to the transnational turn in literary theory, which questions the division of literature into national literatures based on the nationality of authors and, in a larger sense, on the political system of nation-states. Waldrop's poem "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" can be analyzed as part of a literature that questions the authority of the nation-state system and is thus involved in furthering transnationalism. By reviewing the origins of the nation-state system in the form of national narratives, the critical potential of language is used to escalate the ambiguities within those narratives. Through poetic and philosophical use of language, the poem thematizes the power potential language has as well as language's inability to convey 'objective truth.' The deconstruction of language undercuts the authority of personal memory as well as of collective memory in the form of history.[2] "All Electrons Are

1 For theoretical elaborations on transnationalism, cf. Appadurai; Faist and Özveren; Massey, Allen, and Sarre; Shohat and Stam.

2 It should be understood that throughout this paper, I do not refer to 'history' as an academic discipline but as narratives that claim universal and objective truth, such as, specifically, national narratives, which are questioned throughout the poem.

(Not) Alike" undermines the linguistic basis on which national identities and nation-states are constructed; the poem thus presents those narratives as subjective and individual accounts that derive their significance from external factors and, hence, do not contain an inherent truth.

Poetry and Crisis

To begin, I want to briefly explain my choice to pursue the trace of a national identity crisis in the realm of experimental prose poetry. The properties of this genre make it uniquely apt to express crisis of any kind. As Franco Moretti puts it, "'poetry' in the modern sense [...] [is] emancipated from a rhetoric conceived as the art of convincing" (70). Instead of forcing opinions on a readership, poetry, ideally, calls into question preexisting ideas and confronts the reader with them. This confrontation—depending on the significance of the issue at stake—can be described as disturbing for the reader. If poetry goes as far as to question the very core of national self-conception, the confrontation has the potential to cause a crisis.

Poetry, more so than other literary genres, allows the author to use language in more than a strictly utilitarian, referential way. With its focus on individual words and their multiple meanings, poetry always carries within itself the promise of language's potential to create meaning beyond representation as well as an awareness of language's possible failure in its referential function. Moretti describes this inherent crisis of language as resulting from the "chasm [...] between signified and referent," which has the potential to "[provide] the imagination with an unexpected semantic freedom" as well as to "[empty] reality and history of that meaning which had seemed consubstantial with them" (71).

Moretti goes so far as to say that poetry "is made possible by, and is identical with, the stupefied perception that cultural paradigms, abruptly defaulting, are no longer capable of ordering and guiding the word" (71). Written in 1983 with reference to Shakespearean poetry, Moretti's definition can also be applied to contemporary poetry. With its minute attention to semantics, poetry amplifies the inherent problem of language's ambiguity. In everyday conversation, this ambiguity is 'checked' by cultural consensus, which tells us what a certain word in a certain context is supposed to mean. But once established systems of organization are called into question or even destroyed, the linguistic order of language, arbitrary to begin with, loses its credibility when trying to order and explain the world. Thus, the world fails to order the word and the word, in turn, fails to order the world.

If we assume poetry to be a genre marked by self-reflexive analysis of linguistic potential and limitation, it follows that within poetry it is experimental poetry that is most suited to depict crisis as a topic of reflection. As a subgenre, experimental poetry stretches poetry's semantic freedom to the breaking point, playing with and dissolving linguistic norms and barriers. This freedom is visible on the level of genre as well as on the level of style and content. With regard to the genre of experimental poetry, Kornelia Freitag points out that "[t]he frequent application of the conceptually broader term 'experimental writing' to designate 'experimental poetry' indicates exactly these extensions and transgressions of generic borders" (6). Hence, experimental poetry is located in an in-between state; even the most basic classification of the genre poses a problem.

This difficulty of classification is particularly evident in the case of the prose poem as a subgenre of experimental poetry and a structure often employed by experimentalist writers. The name 'prose poem' alone locates this structure in between two genres. Its structure, thus, is a transgression of generic norms. According to Michel Delville, some go as far as to characterize the prose poem "as a rather disturbing, if not downright illegitimate mode of literary expression" (4). He also points out that the prose poem, "more than any other genre, constantly gestures to its own constructedness and [...] the arbitrariness and undecidability of boundaries" (12). Therefore, experimental poetry as a subgenre and the prose poem in particular are marked by structural transgressions, which invite imitation on the level of content. The freedom and ambiguity on the structural level is often reflected on the level of content, resulting in the production of poetry that is equally disturbing on both levels. This transgressive quality of prose poetry is particularly strong in Waldrop's poem "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike."

Poetic and Referential Use of Language in "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike"

On the structural level, "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" consists of eight sections, evenly distributed over eight pages, in which it traces the journeys of Christopher Columbus, Cabeza de Vaca, Antonio Pigafetta, and Batholomeu Diaz as they cross the Atlantic. But retelling these stories of men sailing westward is only one strand making up the poem. The retold history of the conquest of the Americas is interspersed with the lyrical I's personal childhood memories, with memories of a father, as well as with observations about neuroscience.

All three strands as well as the poem's main concern with the potential and limitations of language are already introduced in the opening six sentences:

> A view of the sea is the beginning of the journey. An image of Columbus, starting out from the abyss, enters the left hemisphere. Profusion of languages out of the blue. Bluster, blur, blubber. My father was troubled by inklings of Babel and multiplication on his table. Afraid that an overload of simultaneous neural firings would result in an epileptic convulsion. (5)

The three strands are united by the common theme of language, its limitations as well as its potentials. Paying attention to the exact wording shows that the lyrical I does not describe the Atlantic and Columbus as 'real' phenomena. Instead, the lyrical I describes "a view of the sea" and "[a]n image of Columbus" (5). The terms 'view' and 'image' suggest that all that is left from the original journey of 1492 are representations in the form of pictures. The description is thus twice removed from the original: The lyrical I gives a linguistic account of a visual representation of the original event. The original event, predating the image, is not and cannot be present in the poem. The focus then shifts from the visual representation to "the left hemisphere" (5). Not just referring to Columbus's westward journey, this phrase also marks a shift into the left hemisphere of the brain, where neuroscience mainly locates the area responsible for human speech (Kent 290, 456). Speech is first introduced as a "[p]rofusion," as indistinct sound —"Bluster, blur, blubber"—originating out of the "blue," out of an "abyss" of nothingness (5). Assuming that the words "Bluster, blur, blubber" to some degree imitate the spoken sounds (5), the use of alliteration in this passage is of significance: Even before meaning is ascribed to human sound, it already has a stylistic, artistic quality to it, revealing its nonrepresentative, aesthetic potential. The referential function of language is introduced and immediately tainted by mentioning "Babel" (5). Comparing the referential and the aesthetic function, language's poetic quality seems to be the more stable one, but, from its very outset, the text stresses language's potential to cause miscommunication and harm.

This fatalistic view on language's referential function and the more hopeful perspective on its poetic potential is a phenomenon revisited and embellished time and again in the course of the poem. In lines four and five, the process of communication by speaking and hearing is traced to its source in the brain. The father of the lyrical I fears a collapse of the brain due to too many varieties of language and a collapse of communication because of "an overload of simultaneous neural firings" (5). The poem's mastery of language and the dense sentence structures, carrying various meanings and implications, are constantly juxtaposed with critical evaluations of the failures of language. The overly conscious use of language forces the reader to

acknowledge its artificiality as a referential system. By following the text's shift from the 'real' phenomena (not present in the text) to an image of those phenomena to a verbal description of that image, the reader is confronted with a level of subjectivity that implies an unreliability of representation originating in the brain itself. The first five lines of the poem already illustrate the method by which history is deconstructed: by putting it in the context of narrative and discourse and thus, as Freitag states of all of Waldrop's poems, "articulat[ing] the possibilities and limits of preserving cultural knowledge in language" (164).

The Power Potential of Language

The deconstruction of language and history becomes even more obvious as the poem proceeds. "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" focuses on more than the poetic and referential functions of language emphasized in the close reading of the opening lines. Just by taking a step back from the first five lines analyzed above—reading them from afar, in a manner of speaking—the individual phrases and pieces of the first lines show language to be far more than a representative tool with a poetic or referential function. In the opening passage of the poem, the words are shown to conjure up "[a]n image of Columbus [...] from the abyss" (5). Here, language is depicted as transcending a merely referential function and as creating out of nothingness.

The poem's beginning points toward the limits of language as well as language's enormous power potential. The very first sentence has an almost biblical ring to it: "A view of the sea is the beginning of the journey" (5). Combined with the rest of the introductory lines, it echoes the gospel according to John, which opens with the following sentence: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Bible, John 1.1) followed by "All things were made by him" (John 1.3). In this passage from the Bible, words and, thus, language are shown to have creative power. God is language and, simultaneously, the creator of existence by use of language. In fact, the source of being itself appears to be rooted in language.

With the ability to use language comes the opportunity to shape reality, be it past, present, or future. This creative power associated with language is explicitly pointed toward in section seven, in which the lyrical I observes, "The power to name is power. Especially when backed by guns" (11). Again, the reference to the Bible and a god who has "[t]he power to name" and, thus, to create is evident (11). That this creative power, however, has a violent and dominating component as well is illustrated by the second part of the quote: "The power to name" can be abused to destroy or to deprive (11). It also becomes clear that language does depend on context and that its power potential

depends on the position of the speaker. "[B]acked by guns" (11), the already mighty tool of language can be used to exercise power over others and to subdue alternative narratives.

The idea of language as power is further pursued in that same section when the lyrical I remarks upon the power of authors: The author, the creator of stories and words, has the ability to conjure up an alternative reality. Like a god, authors create a fictional universe by naming and defining. They are able to create entire countries and transport the reader there: "When I was ten I read Westerns by Karl May and with him crossed the border between Mexico and Canada" (11). The lyrical I describes her imaginary travels undertaken by reading Karl May's Westerns. Reading the German author Karl May, therefore, is a way to encounter a country without having been there; the first contact is via language and literature. Karl May draws a romanticized image of the Wild West in his Westerns. Even as an author from a different continent, he contributes to the image of America in the world and helps to shape narratives about the United States. In this quote, it thus becomes evident that the poem is underlining the important role literature plays regarding national narratives and the shaping of nation-states. Most tellingly, the lyrical I does not describe traveling the United States but traveling a space that is described as being located "between Mexico and Canada" (11). The United States, thus, is defined by its limits and its surrounding nations rather than by its own territory. The poem points to the arbitrariness of these limits by way of their introduction through a fictional text and the lyrical I's passing them. Consequently, the entire North American continent appears to be an entity whose limits are fluid and shifting. Writing literature about the North American continent is thus an expression of power that actively shapes the perception of that continent in the rest of the world.

Columbus's narration further exemplifies that language does not only function as a tool to spur imagination but creates and shapes reality itself. In the poem, Columbus's power as a conqueror is inseparably linked to his ability to name. He appears as an author as well as a historical figure.[3] This underlines the idea that anyone who possesses the power of speech is able to create alternative worlds in books and on paper and that ideas conveyed via language are able to enter the consciousness of the audience. The ability to name is, again, rooted in power: Columbus speaks the language with which to retell his conquest in Europe. This aligns him with the political powers of Europe that back his language with money, ships, and guns. The power to name enables him to "[erase] heathen names" (11) and "[christen] the islands to become king

3 Columbus is not merely an author in the sense that he shapes history but in a very literal sense as well: Cf. his *Personal Narrative of the First Voyage of Columbus to America*.

of the promised land" (11). And it is this position of power from which he speaks and writes that allows him to impose himself on the 'new' continent and its indigenous population.

In one of few overt biblical allusions, Columbus is likened to Adam and, thus, empowered by God. Columbus/Adam is described as the one "who 'called the animals by their true names,' [and] was thereby to command them" (11). This passage refers to Genesis 2.19, which reads: "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof." In this passage, God endows man with the ability to name and define his surroundings. In Waldrop's text, it even says that Adam/Columbus has the ability to find the "true" name for the animals (11). Hence, the implication that Columbus acts like the first man in a new world becomes clear. This also implies that the indigenous are regarded as unintelligent and unintelligible animals rather than humans. Their language, unintelligible to Columbus, has no value and, in any case, is not backed with cultural or martial power to make it matter. They cannot participate in the communication with Columbus, and, therefore, they do not have an active part in the narration of the future United States of America.

Conquest Through Language

As already shown, section seven describes conquest as rooted in language, but the poem does more than describe this mechanism of conquest: It depicts the capture of the 'new' continent in linguistic terms as a failed communication between the conquerors and the indigenous population. Not only does the communication described in the text transform the indigenous population into a conquered people, the indigenous population is unable to even participate in a discourse they involuntarily are part of. When confronted with writing, they are described as "star[ing] at the document. Unblinking" (8). Because they are unable to understand the process unfurling in front of them, "Columbus issued the required proclamations. And was not contradicted. And named the islands" (9).

The failed communication between the conquerors and the native population is put in a broader philosophical context. While pointing out that the conquerors' communication with the indigenous population does not convey meaning to the latter, the poem shows the conquerors as utterly unperturbed by this fact. Pragmatically, they proceed to name and to proclaim and to set up contracts although they are aware that no 'real' communication with the indigenous population is taking place: "Whereas my

father was disturbed by *Being and Time*, it's in the face of uncovered nakedness Columbus issued the required proclamations" (9). The conquerors' use of language is juxtaposed with the Heideggerian idea that language is always tied to phenomenology (cf. Heidegger 71-77). Language represents an experience or object, but to communicate, one has to share a perception of that experience or object. Thus, words lose their meaning when they cannot be tied back to an experienced phenomenon. Heidegger's position on language is referenced at the end of section four when the lyrical I observes: "Yet when an object has never been seen back home what good is a word? You have to bring the thing itself and empty your bag to make conversation" (8). The word, thus, cannot replace the phenomenon; without the object or experience or another linguistic representation of it, Columbus's naming appears to be void of meaning.

That the conquerors' use of language is still successful in a sense is due to the fact that it does not aim to establish a mutual communication with the 'new' continent and its inhabitants. While the conquerors are not interested in understanding the circumstances of the Americas and their peoples, they are nevertheless shown as successfully communicating within their Western context. Their use of language is not meant to establish meaningful communication with the indigenous population, to learn about the continent, or to provide a 'truthful' representation of the 'new' continent for their patrons back in Europe; it is meant to establish a discourse of power and domination. By superimposing their European experiences and cultural frameworks on the 'new' continent, the conquerors succeed in claiming the Americas as a terra nullius that can easily be incorporated into Western history.

This simultaneous failure of communication and yet successful creation of history through language is depicted at the beginning of section five, which reads: "Absence of meaning cracks the mirror. Yet every shard shows Columbus unfurling the royal standard on October 12, while the wind blows from the East by authority, custom and general consent" (9). The mirror, symbolizing the potential of language to represent reality, cracks due to the perverse occurrence of a communication that is not meeting its most basic requirement: that of two parties participating in it. The wind blowing from the east brings with it the conquerors themselves as well as their authority. The use of this authority to exercise power through language results in the distorted image that stems from the one participating side talking to itself and creating a history and a discourse that suppress the indigenous population.

Deconstruction of National Narrative and Memory

As indicated above, the poem's deconstruction of language and national narrative can be put in a transnational context. Though operating in a historical context that predates nation-states, the poem is concerned with the history and one founding narrative of what is the US American nation-state today. Questioning history and the narratives it proclaims to be factual, the poem investigates what is commonly perceived as the unifying element of national US American identity. As illustrated above, the poem combines philosophical aspects and poetry, using both to undercut a discourse that assumes that events can be adequately and 'truly' preserved through language.

While critically exploring the possibilities of language, the lyrical I, however, also admits that there might not be a way to preserve the memory of events other than through language. It refrains from pitching one truth against another, an alternative 'absolute' reading of events is not offered. In section four, the question is asked: "For if a man has not learned a language can he have memories?" (8). Even assuming the answer to be affirmative, one is left with the question of how such a memory beyond language can possibly be shared with other people or passed down to following generations. Language is depicted as a fallible tool that, at the same time, cannot be dispensed with.

Instead of offering definitive opinions, "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" complicates questions and opens up discourses to make room for alternative readings. By deconstructing the basis of national identity, the poem points toward the crisis of the nation-state system without attempting to solve that crisis. Working from a poetic and philosophical standpoint, the text asserts that there cannot be such a thing as objective truth expressed through language. When shaping language with her tools of choice, Waldrop's philosophical and poetic usage of words is not meant to produce a 'solution' of crisis. Instead, the text confronts the reader with the position that even "the history of philosophy, as of poetry, is a history of a discourse, like all discourses, that can't be precisely named, that is uncertain, changeable, variable, historically situated, subject to revision" (Monroe 608). With her work, Waldrop is situated in an in-between stage: Her poetry can be read as philosophical, as language theory, and as art. Furthermore, as Jonathan Monroe points out, these are discourses that in themselves are always shifting (608). The only way to approach "Waldrop's philosophical prose-poetic texts" is to commit to the "open-ended participatory process between text and reader" set into motion by her poetry (606).

Not presenting another 'truth' about the conquest of the Americas, Waldrop uses the form of the prose poem to establish the impossibility of ever narrating any objective 'truth' through language. This poem, like much of Waldrop's other work, is

an attempt to "render facts and experiences in language *against* the tendency of *language* to normalize, foreclose, and streamline thought and experience" (Freitag 101). This goal is achieved by undercutting her own narration. The way the text constantly switches back and forth between various strands of narration (conquerors' stories, memories of the lyrical I, the father's memories) and usages of language (referential and poetic) makes it impossible for the reader to ever succumb to the illusion of a cohesive plotline and narration. The recurring motif of failing language is the thread that ties together the individual parts.

However, despite the poem's deconstructive approach, with its dense syntax and at times rather gloomy and didactic tone, it still pertains a certain lightness. This joyful element, much like the deconstructive one, lies in the playful use of language, as exemplified by lines like: "True, clue, loop and thimbles, line up to the mast. If they did not, [Columbus] rolled his eyeballs, duplicating the movement of the heavenly bodies" (6). The internal rhyme in the beginning as well as the exasperated Columbus confronted with phenomena that do not meet his expectations and do not fit into his perception of the world are humorous. Here, the conqueror is teased rather than explicitly criticized for his inability to adjust his expectations to the context he is confronted with. He is depicted as a fallible human being inviting laughter. Passages like this one provide the balance of earnest reflection and levity in tone that prevents "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" from having an overly fatalistic view on language and therefore on history, restoring the reader's faith in the creative potential of language and art.

Waldrop and the Transnational Turn

By deconstructing the national narrative, Waldrop's poem participates in the movement toward transnationalism, which has emerged in cultural and literary studies in the past decades. Not merely destroying the US American national narrative that depicts the conquest of the Americas as a glorious success of Western civilization, "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" plays with this notion and exposes it to ridicule. Though Jahan Ramazani points out that "national narratives of poetry in English as 'American' or 'British' or 'Irish' remain dominant and are unlikely to disappear" (xi), the way to work toward a transnational restructuring of cultural and literary studies lies in drawing attention to the artificiality of such national categories in a globalized world. One way to work toward a denationalization of literary studies as Ramazani envisions it is to expose the arbitrariness of strict separation into national literatures in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

That "the paradigm of distinct national literatures [...] proves ill-suited to the powerfully intercultural dynamics" of our time is a point that is easily comprehensible (Ramazani 41). Trying to classify Waldrop as an author in a system based on national literatures illustrates this point. Waldrop being born and raised in Germany, writing in English as her second language, living in the United States, and being concerned with both distinctly German and American subject choices, it is virtually impossible to classify her work as belonging either to American or German literature. Instead, it is more fruitful and honest to situate her in an in-between space.

This in-between space, however, is not a space devoid of nationalities and categories but a space where various and maybe even contradictory influences can be taken into consideration. For Ramazani, a transnational approach to literature and culture consists of tracing "complex intercultural relationships across boundaries of nation and ethnicity, without erasing those boundaries or the earlier hybridizations they contain" (47). Hence, to detach literature and culture from the concept of the nation-state is not to eliminate national identities altogether. Rather, the transnational currents in literary and cultural studies attempt to find ways of classification that allow us to talk about authors and their works without subordinating them to categories of national literatures that no longer do justice to the literature produced in times of increased globalization and transnational ties.

Conclusion

In my analysis I have shown in how far Waldrop's poem "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" can be read as part of a broader transnational turn currently occupying literary and cultural studies. The poem can be situated at the beginning of a development toward a literary studies that strives to restructure the discipline along lines other than national borders as the current structure becomes increasingly hard to justify in times of rapid globalization and strong transnational ties. Waldrop's poem is part of a literature that paves the way for such restructuring by deconstructing national narratives, which build the foundations for nation-states.

In the case of "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike," I have shown that Waldrop incorporates diverse source texts in her poem that illustrate the fictional and subjective character of any narration, be it biblical, fictional (Karl May), historical (Columbus), or philosophical (Heidegger). Navigating these sources, the reader is unable to read the poem without reflecting upon the language theory and epistemological concepts clearly involved in its production. As a piece of writing, "All Electrons Are (Not) Alike" is situated in a peculiar but not at all surprising location between literature on

the one hand and literary and language theory on the other. Thus, with its deconstruction of national narratives and its critical evaluation of history, the text is overtly paving the way to opening up national discourses and creating room for new structures of literature as well as literary theory.

To put this work in a broader perspective, I would like to add that the deconstruction of national narratives can, of course, only be the beginning when envisioning a transnational restructuring of literary studies in Ramazani's sense. That the space for such reconstruction is gradually opened up through literary works is illustrated through my analysis of Waldrop's poem. However, the task for literary students of my generation is to build on the groundwork that has been provided by authors such as Waldrop and to use the newly available room to work out innovative and effective ways to structure the field of literature in an appropriate fashion.

As Spivak points out, transnational, postcolonial, and postmodern criticisms have permeated institutions of higher education in the course of past decades to a degree where transnational criticism can no longer be satisfied to write against nation-based classifications of literature (*Aesthetic Education* 139). This development is due to the fact that formerly marginalized currents of criticism such as transnationalism and postcolonialism are turning into what Spivak dubs "the emerging dominant" (*Aesthetic Education* 143). With that dominant position comes responsibility for transnationalism and transnational literature to fill the space opened up by poets like Waldrop.

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