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**Never-at-Home: notes on gender in the work of Rosmarie Waldrop and
Caroline Bergvall**

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The paper I gave at the “Pressure to experiment” conference in Southampton explored the poetry of Rosmarie Waldrop and Caroline Bergvall. Starting with Marc Crépon’s thought on the subject of languages without a home (*sans demeure*),¹ I argued that under the pressures of what I called “never-at-home,” these two female poets escaped a permanent, central and familiar position in language; they thereby explored what Waldrop calls her “Non place” (Waldrop 2002, 79) and what Bergvall names the “Else-here” (Bergvall 2002, 221) of their linguistic identity.

As Cole Swensen and Abigail Lang remarked when they read the ensuing article, the question of gender pervaded what I was saying, albeit not explicitly. A pun on “cuneiform,” “coyne,” and “coney” in Waldrop’s *A Key into the Language of America*, my comments on *conis/conile*, and Waldrop’s invention of a new language in “language of America” prompted a comment from Abigail Lang that according to a flawed yet very widespread etymology, *conile* had to do with female sexual organs. She added that what I was saying of the “I” recalled Waldrop’s “idea of the empty centre as a place of resonance and fertility” (Retallack, 1999). Cole Swensen suggested that the pink background in the web version of Bergvall’s *Flèsh* (published [in this very journal](#)) recalled the aggressive pink of a current women’s anti-war group called Code Pink and the pink that gay activists used as a sign of protest in the 70s.

I wanted to investigate further what these remarks pointed out. I am therefore glad to be given the opportunity to add some notes on gender to that article.

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Not reductive

While Waldrop's and Bergvall's poetry both question their paradoxical linguistic identity, they, at the same time, resist this point of origin. More than advocates or preachers of multilinguistic poetry, the two poets explore the alienation inherent to language. The two poets invent languages that are shifting sites or drifting zones. As much as language is relocated through processes of constant translation and transformation, it also turns these two poets into what Emily Dickinson called "the Term between" (Dickinson, 353). Indeed, the shifting linguistic sites Waldrop and Bergvall invent deconstruct the alienating processes whereby one creates a territory, i.e. a delimited land, especially considered with regard to the government that owns and controls it. Intersecting questions of belonging, ownership, and control seem to be subsumed by both poets under their view of unmastery and under the corollary thought of a language of process. Their texts are instances of "open text," which, as Lyn Hejinian remarks, "invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and this, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive" (Hejinian, 43). Such writing, she comments, "resists reduction and commodification" and, with Luce Irigaray, places this "within a feminine sphere of discourse" (ibid.).

Waldrop and Bergvall try to escape linguistically what Barthes calls the "intimidation" of language (Barthes 1967, 43). Most of Bergvall's texts, for instance, traffic across linguistic barriers through translation, which, in the end, consists less in adjusting the meanings of one language to those of another than it does in rubbing or folding one

¹ A short summary of the theory he exposes in *Langues sans demeure* can be read in the introduction to my article, published in Jacket Magazine with the proceedings of the conference.

language upon the other. From *Goan Atom I*, where she anatomises the body of her new language, to her latest adaptation of Chaucer, language travels (a bit like a pilgrim) and never stops doing so: as with Gertrude Stein's work, the reading of Bergvall's texts can never be complete. After her performances, words still overlap, and continue to morph into other linguistic objects. In a sense they are a vademecum. On the materialist road, which unlike a pilgrim's progress is without a final destin(y)ation,² the movements of language involve the body in what Bergvall calls "micro frictions."

The language of inquiry that Bergvall and Waldrop shape participates in the deconstruction of the stereotypical female and male linguistic territories: "The woman in our culture has been treated as the object par excellence (...). Instead, I propose a pattern in which subject and object function are not fixed, but temporary, reversible roles, where there is no hierarchy of main and subordinate clauses, but a fluid and constant alternation" (Waldrop 2005, 180).

According to a traditional conception of sexuality, male and female are governed by mutual attraction. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud proves this conception wrong and instead proposes a study of the complexity of sexuality and its origins. His views have largely contributed to rid sexuality of moralist reductionism. Through the so-called "language of America" of *A Key*, Waldrop explores these two conceptions of sexuality. For instance, in "Of Marriage," she reflects on the intimations of man on a reified female: "He may remove her clothes at any angle between horizontal planes" (47). Though the act can be tinged with the eroticism of divesting, it is also assimilated in the course of the paragraph to a form of punishment³. While "may" suggests the self-given permission of a grammatical masculine subject "he," the woman is reduced to a metonymy: "her clothes." The figure of rhetoric disfigures the identity of

² According to the French philosopher Louis Althusser, the difference between an idealist and a materialist experience is that the first is like boarding a train which takes you to a given and known somewhere whereas the second consists in boarding a train somewhere without ever knowing the destination:

"l'idéaliste est un homme qui sait, et de quelle gare part le train, et quelle est sa destination: il le sait d'avance et quand il monte dans un train, il sait où il va, puisque le train l'emporte. Le matérialiste, au contraire, est un homme qui prend le train en marche sans savoir d'où il vient ni où il va" (Althusser 250).

³ "If the woman be false to bedlock, the offended husband will be solemnly avenged, arid and eroded. He may [remove] her clothes at any angle between horizontal planes" (Waldrop 1994, 47).

the woman's body into a thing, i.e. via the reduction inherent to metonymy, rhetoric records and operates the disappearance of the feminine subject. As in the poetic blazons of the Renaissance, the feminine body and subject have been taken hold of and reduced into a mere commodity: "the sexual act takes on/ a sheen of purchase" (52). Against the intimidation and intimations of a language that captures instead of opening, Waldrop breaks up the syntax of normative prose with collages, creating gaps that allow the language to hesitate and reshape the grammatical territory of gender:

I must explain my body
does not differ (50).

As the line *verses* into the next, the body fluctuates between object and subject and blurs the dichotomy of the paradigm same/other.

In Waldrop's *A Key* and in Bergvall's poetry, the notion of gender is coextensive to questions of territory and linguistic alienation. Escaping a permanent territory and its process of ownership and alienation through a language that is never at home also has to do with attempting to escape the pre-determination of a class, of a category, and, in a word, of reduction itself. Indeed, in resisting a home, the poets go against the reduction of the alienating role given to women. For Waldrop, resisting this role goes as far as distancing herself from the role of the 'feminine' poet. Indeed, though *A Key* states "I must explain my sex" (56), the persona of the narrative prose also battles "to eliminate the platitudes of gender identity" (54). In other words, Waldrop's text resists the pitfalls of reductive gender:

[Being a woman] clearly shapes my writing (...) but does not determine it exclusively (...). I don't see much point in labelling certain forms as 'feminine' (...). I don't really see "female language" (...) because the writer, male or female, is only once partner in the process of writing (Waldrop 2005, 207-8).

The luminous complexities of Waldrop's thought strive to avoid exclusive polarities. And, paradoxically enough, this fundamentally anti-dogmatic resistance to exclusive determinations of gender parallels Julia Kristeva's very definition of woman's genius:

the particular accomplishments of each woman and her personality, which cannot be reduced to the common denominator of a group or a sexual entity, have become not only possible but also proclaimed with great pride. It is because I am myself, and specifically myself, that I am able to introduce the contributions of women to a large segment of the world (Kristeva 2001, xiv).

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Empty centres

In *The Empire of Signs*, Barthes speaks of Tokyo as having an empty centre. Indeed, as the Imperial city remains unmapped for obvious reasons of secrecy and sacredness, the map of Tokyo has a huge white empty central space.

In the last chapter of *A Key*, the biographical passages of prose that trace the steps of a young girl towards the definition of her sexual identity end upon the young girl's arrival in the centre she was looking for: "I had finally reached the centre of the city" (66). The main verb suggests the long-awaited end of a quest whose eschatological meaning is reinforced by the pluperfect and the anaphoric "the"⁴ connoting the centre and the city as known. All along the book, the urban topography is constructed as potentially metaphorical (of love and of language) and brings to mind Augustine's City of God. In the last chapter of *A Key*, the image of the promised city, the security of a New Jerusalem of truth as love, the Dantean phantasm of a *paradiso*, soon vanish: "It was deserted, in ruins" (66). Its symbolical value and the ability of the symbol to refer to something other and beyond the word crumble. With this annihilation of the "promised end" the sense of a

⁴ In linguistics, "anaphoric" markers such as "the" and "that" point backward to a something that has already been mentioned.

stable identity and the desire for meaning cannot be *reached*, but must always be redefined: “my self the self of others” (60).

For Barthes, “[Occidental cities] are concentric; but also, in according with the very movement of Western metaphysics, for which every centre is the site of truth, the centre of our cities is always full.” As he argues, Tokyo is a counter model to occidental cities and occidental metaphysics:

[its] centre is no more than evaporated notion, subsisting here, not in order to irradiate power, but to give to the entire urban movement the support of its central emptiness, forcing the traffic to make a perpetual detour. In this manner, we are told, the system of the imaginary is spread circularly, by detours and returns the length of an empty subject (Barthes 1982, 30-32).

It is true that the empty centre at the end of *A Key* and Tokyo’s are different in that the emptiness in *A Key* results from a love war between a male subject and a female subject. This empty centre is therefore tinged with death and tragedy. It is revealed, after all, in the last chapter of the book called “Of Death and Burial,” highly reminiscent of Eliot’s “the Burial of the Dead”.⁵ Yet, what Barthes’ reading of Tokyo’s empty centre allows us to understand is that the emptiness of the centre in *A Key* also negates the idea that a supreme truth of love, desire, and gender can be reached.

In “The Space of Emptiness” (itself a sub-section of “The Ground is the Only Figure”), Waldrop details the relation between empty centres and femininity:

My obsession with empty centres: womb, resonance body, “I,” God. God as a void, infinite, nothingness, silence, death, desert. As ultimate otherness. As metaphor for all that calls us into question. Our primal opponent. The centre we long for, which, we think, would give meaning to our life (...). There is nothing there (Waldrop 2005, 250).

⁵ Though the likeness of the two titles is only a matter of coincidence since Waldrop’s title comes from Roger Williams’ 17th century treatise, the “rubble of love” together with the reference to the “desert” and the “ruins” seem to recall Eliot’s *Waste Land*.

The nothingness she refers to is the impossible locus of poetry. It is around this central emptiness that Waldrop's poetry conceives its revolutions. The marginal situation of this ex-centric poetry makes the circulation of words and desire possible. As in Dickinson's poetry, but with other poetical tools, it is from the gaps created by caesuras and endings, from the cuts of collages, and from the empty centres that the margins of poetry can put a haunting rhythmical circulation of language into motion. It is around the very idea of this central nothingness that a network of restless signification emerges: "Waldrop, like nature, abhors (yet is fascinated by) a vacuum. Most of all the emptiness inside me. I am everything I have ever read or written or thought. Language has no limits" (ibid.).

Nothing shall lead to something. The empty centre, the "nothing there," Waldrop's "non place" are also reminiscent of Shakespeare's puns on nothing and noting in *Much Ado*, i.e. they recall that nothing is a bodily and linguistic locus that generates and gives birth to notes, words, and creation. The oxymoronic and ghostly presence of this centre hesitantly underscores Waldrop's interlinked thoughts on gender, territory, and poetry in *A Key*. Like Tokyo's centre, the empty centre is a force that organises movement and circulation (be it linguistic or other). It therefore destabilises our notions of territory. With Hejinian's distinction between generative and directive poetry in hindsight, one could argue that the multifarious sites of meaning opened by such a poetry are not directed by a delineated sense of truth but generated by forever opening spaces, by gaps, slits, and blank zones of exchange. Waldrop puts it beautifully:

This emptiness which is not empty, as the excluded middle between true and false is not as empty as the law of logic would have it. On the contrary, it is the locus of fertility (Waldrop 2002, 91).

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Getting out of oneself

In her book on Picasso, Stein states that the creative impulse of geniuses such as the Spanish painter supposes that they empty themselves of who they were and of what they had: “all his existence is the repetition of a complete emptying” (Stein, 32). Perhaps, to be “never-at-home” means to be able to empty oneself repeatedly. Waldrop’s palimpsestic method is a way of emptying herself before regaining what would have been impossible to express without the detour through the voice of others. She states that this method is “a way of getting out of [her]self” (2002, 91).

What does “to get out of myself,” mean? Is this movement of depersonalisation akin to ecstasy (etymologically, a way out of oneself)? Does it boil down to saying that to empty oneself and to be “never-at-home” means to abstract from this world and abandon it as a mystic would?

In some of Waldrop’s observations and references one could almost feel that there is a link between the move away from processes of capture and the definition of another space akin to that of mystics.⁶ Similarly, in *Flesh*, Bergvall refers to four figures regarded as mystics. Saint Teresa’s religious ecstasy is a union with the infinite and an experience of the death of the body, the psychopathological hallucinations of Unica Zürn seem a way out of the self, Hannah Weiner’s linguistic ecstasies and word hallucinations are a form of communication with that which has perhaps superseded God in the 20th century, i.e. the unconscious. The text concludes with the literary ecstasy of Kathy Acker. Do these references in Waldrop and Bergvall amount to saying that “going out of oneself” or being “never-at-home” are new forms of feminine ecstasy for these two poets?

One could object that these remarks and questions seem irrelevant and ideologically dubious. Yet, the question of shaping an othering poetic space, as Bergvall and Waldrop do, is both related to the conception of a free subject out of itself and to gender. When studying three mystic women in *La vie parfaite*, Catherine Millot states: “for a long time, I believed that their jouissance was drawing me to study their lives. I was blind to the fact

⁶ See for instance the quotation above: “God as a void, infinite, nothingness, silence, death, desert” recalls Saint John of the Cross. Waldrop also quotes Eckhart in “The Ground Is the Only Figure” (Waldrop 2005, 253).

that their freedom actually did” (Millot 11). The French psychoanalyst further explains that going out of themselves and hence being transported to another space was also a way for these women to free themselves from their position as woman and, for Jeanne Guyon, to abstain from being the slave of her husband and mother-in-law.

Along the same line, Kathy Acker’s biographical essay “Seeing Gender” (Acker 158-168) captures the ecstatic movement. She says that she understood early in her life that to be “a girl” meant death because it amounted to being forced into a fixed category: “gender has something to do with death (...). To see was to be an *eye* not an *I*” (Acker 160). She felt the urgent need to escape her family and this alienating albeit empty “I.” She got out of herself and, according to her own metaphor, travelled to create a space where “I” wouldn’t be defined as reductive territory: “I ran into the world of books (...) I never left that world” (159). This peculiar form of ecstasy, which she calls piracy, freed her from “girl” or “woman” and contributed to the reinvention of who she was.

The sentence that Bergvall singles out from Kathy Acker’s body of work is complex: “I write in the dizziness that seizes that which is fed up with language and attempts to escape through it: the abyss named fiction.” (Bergvall 2005, 29). It could stand as the perfect definition of a mystic’s ecstasy: mystics, so Millot argues, go back inwardly, diving into themselves until they reach the bottom, which proves pierced, and opens onto an illuminated passage. Millot points out that according to Master Eckhart a mystic envisages the soul as “an abyss” (Millot 13).

Yet, whereas ecstasy is all about abandon to the infinite notion of God, the dizziness devised by Acker “seizes” something. It first lets go, and then retains something out of the emptiness. This paradoxical and truly dialectic movement is that of the modern poet: he/she criticises language from within and creates a zone where another language is possible. The ‘abyss of fiction’ is the infinity of dreams, the infinity of the unconscious, the infinity, perhaps, of a phantasm of a language that travels within language and languages: the language of life as an abyss.

The texts that Bergvall writes as a tribute to these four female mystics and writers can first be apprehended as made of a language brought out of itself: the apocopes, the tmeses, the estranging capitalisation, the interjections, and the constant references to the body point to the literally violent, uncompromising, and ecstatic movement of language out of itself. Yet, just as Acker wants to find the body and its writing in her essay “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body” (Acker 143-151), Bergvall’s ecstatic language does not tend toward a bodiless world. It does not abandon this world. On the contrary, it lets materiality ooze its stuttering and destabilizing life. The body of words gets out of place as letters emerge out of words. In this respect, it is telling that Bergvall should have preferred the term “friction” to Acker’s “fiction.”⁷ The friction of letters and different languages inscribe the page and the disfigured body in public space. Recalling Louise Bourgeois’ hybridized bodies (Bergvall 2001, 50), conflicting references to the female body are rubbed in and out of Bergvall’s texts. For instance, the feminine pronoun ‘her’ is reconfigured through various “m odes d’efacement” (Bergvall 2005, 29) into linguistic avatars such as “heir, hair, errs, airs” (Bergvall 2001, 22). The pronoun also appears partially out of the decomposition of the word “wooper”: “woo pops/er” (26). Likewise, the text hesitates between here and her: “her e” (22). Letters drifting out of signifiers unleash a motion of signification: language is indeed “fricted” out of its normative syntactic and semantic territory into an unstable here. This movement out and through language is also sociolinguistic. Indeed, the appropriation of the female body in society is deconstructed in the reference to the title of a French popular song written by Serge Gainsbourg in 1965: “Poupée de cire, poupée de son.” A young singer, France Gall sang this seemingly naïve song for the Eurovision contest: the first words of the song are “I am a wax doll,/ I am a sound doll/ My heart lies in my songs/ A wax doll, a sound doll.” Because “poupée” in French also means “young chick,” because Gainsbourg always played with slangy parlance, and also because the song reflexively refers to a singing doll and its/her songs, one could not but hear the voice of the female singer (and under it the voice of the male composer) turning the female body into an object. Bergvall playfully mars the title into quasi-nonsensical language: “poupée de çuir, poupée de çon” (Bergvall 2001, 22). The graphic and phonetic distortion of the title lets the feminine

⁷ “Entire circuits tRipping on friction,” (Bergvall 2005, 29).

body reappear. For instance, son (“sound”) is turned into a homophonic neologism “çon,” which, though it looks more like a Turkish word than anything else, recalls graphically the word “con” (“cunt” in French) alluded to earlier on in the text. The disarticulation of the title creates what one could term “frictive” language, that is a language born out of itself and related to fiction. If in “Seeing Gender” Acker related fiction to dreaming and to escaping confrontation, friction then is the confrontation with the very object Bergvall tries to escape. Whereas fiction and ecstasy move away, friction acts upon the inside, and not just from the outside. And as with the passage from “son” to “çon” and “con,” the action on, through, and against language wrenches out from language the clichés surrounding the feminine body.

Waldrop and Bergvall’s movement out of themselves, i.e. their language of never-at-home, is perhaps an anti-ecstasy in that it acts on rather than abandons this world; it acts from within language, with and against language so as not to be reduced to a territory, a role, or a fixed grammatical function. If ecstasy and trance are means to dispossess oneself of one’s self and to be introduced to the passivity of contemplation, Waldrop and Bergvall’s ways out of themselves are not ecstatic at all in that they do not reach a “second state” of oblivion and void, but rather their texts suspect⁸ alienation from the familiar territory of gender, language and poetry. They create and demand, that is, a renewed attention to the world here and now.

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⁸ The word is used here as a reference to the thought of suspicion characteristic of thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva, to whom Bergvall refers many times in her essays.

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