

Presseartikel zu Rosmarie Waldrop

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Jürgen Brôcan, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1. März 2005

Konfrontation zweier Kulturen

Rosmarie Waldrop lotet die Sprache Amerikas aus

Im Jahre 1643 schrieb ein gewisser Roger Williams eine Abhandlung, hinter deren unspektakulärem Titel sich keineswegs nur eine schlichte Einführung in die Sprache der Narragansett-Indianer verbarg. «A Key Into The Language of America» war vor allem eine anthropologische Studie indianischer Bräuche, die dazu diente, den weissen Siedlern einen moralischen Spiegel vorzuhalten. Die neuenglischen Kolonisten missverstanden allerdings Williams' Absicht und betrachteten sein Buch als praktischen Leitfaden für Händler, Siedler und Missionare. Roger Williams, der Prediger, hatte bereits zuvor unwillkommenes Gedankengut verbreitet: 1632 verfasste er einen Traktat, in dem er das durch königlichen Freibrief gewährte Recht der Kolonisten an indianischem Land anfocht. Drei Jahre später stellte man ihn deshalb vor Gericht und verurteilte ihn zu dreihundertjähriger Verbannung aus Massachusetts. Williams floh, gründete eine Siedlung namens Providence und lebte vom Ackerbau und Handel mit den Indianern.

Rosmarie Waldrop ist, wie sie selbst in ihrem Vorwort betont, in dem Fakten und Poesie sich zu einer unnachahmlich schönen Melange verbinden, in jenem Jahr geboren, in dem Williams' Verbannung endete. Zu dieser Koinzidenz tritt die viel bedeutsamere Gemeinsamkeit der Immigration: In Kitzingen am Main geboren, siedelte Waldrop 1958 in die Vereinigten Staaten über. Der von ihr erwartete Kulturschock blieb indes aus. Fremdartig waren die seltsam klingenden Ortsnamen, Relikte der untergegangenen Sprache der Narragansett. Sie waren der «indianische Untergrund ... unter dem Boden des amerikanischen Englisch». Die eigene ambivalente Haltung zwischen zwei Sprachen und Kulturen erlaubt es Waldrop, historische Texte wie Roger Williams' «Schlüssel» aufzubrechen und einer Re-Vision zu unterziehen.

Schon in den Gedichten von «Shorter American Memory» (1988) hatte sich Waldrop explizit mit der Geschichte ihrer Wahlheimat auseinandergesetzt. Williams' Werk dient nun ihrem ebenfalls «Schlüssel zur Sprache Amerikas» betitelten elften Gedichtband als Koordinatensystem der Erkundung heutiger amerikanischer Zivilisation und von deren geschichtlicher Dimension. Williams' «Schlüssel» ist auch der formale Aufbau der einzelnen Kapitel verpflichtet. Sie beginnen jeweils mit einer Collage, in der Wendungen aus Williams' Werk mit modernem Vokabular konfrontiert und ironisch imitiert werden. Es folgt eine Wortliste, die das semantische Feld der Überschriften assoziativ auslotet. Dem schliesst sich eine narrative Passage an, die in Gestalt der Stimme einer jungen Frau die Thematik von Eroberung und Geschlechtlichkeit weiter ausführt und die Frage nach nationaler, kultureller und sprachlicher Identität stellt. Der weibliche Körper steht dabei als Zeichen für die Landschaft. Jedes Kapitel endet mit einem kurzen Gedicht, das - anders als bei Williams - keinen offenkundigen moralischen Anspruch vertritt.

So entsteht ein reizvolles, sicherlich nicht immer unmittelbar zu erschliessendes Sprachgeflecht, in dem sich die verschiedenen Parallelen gegenseitig erhellen und durchdringen: die Sprache der eroberten Indianer und der gesellschaftlich «eroberten» Frau; die altertümliche Sprache und die zeitgenössische; die Begriffe des Verstandes und des Körpers; die verlorenen und die gegenwärtigen Sitten, beide oft hinterfragenswert. In einem Interview sagte Rosmarie Waldrop, «die einzige Transzendenz, die uns zur Verfügung steht, in die wir eindringen können, ist die Sprache» (1991). Die Haltung des *poeta vates*, des seherischen Dichters, ist ihr vollkommen fremd, für sie sind die Dichter «ein Sprach-Wartungsteam». Vor diesem Hintergrund kann Waldrops «Schlüssel» auch als Wortsonogramm der modernen amerikanischen Sprache und Kultur gelesen werden, die selbst lange auf der Suche nach neuen Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten und Emanzipationen vom einstigen europäischen Erbe war.

Kann der Transfer einer amerikanischen Spracherkundung ins Deutsche gelingen? Er kann, wenn das Verhältnis von kreativer Aneignung und Textgenauigkeit so feinhörig aufeinander abgestimmt ist wie in der Übertragung von Elke Erb und Marianne Frisch. (Es fällt kaum ins Gewicht, dass diese Intention an wenigen Stellen übers Ziel hinausschießt, etwa wenn «pathetic», quasi mit einem Umweg übers Deutsche, als «pathetisch» wiedergegeben wird.) Wieder einmal hat sich der Verlag Urs Engeler Editor als kompetenter Sachwalter massgeblicher amerikanischer Dichtung in beachtlichen Übersetzungen erwiesen. Rosmarie Waldrops vielschichtiges, rätselhaftes, faszinierendes, kulturkritisches Buch verdient eine Bauchbinde mit der Aufschrift: Höchst empfehlenswert.

Kimberly Lamm, published on the web, in «Truth While Climbing the Stairs» – A Rosmarie Waldrop Section, edited and Introduced by Kornelia Freitag, *how2* (Fall 2002)
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«Gender in a Minor Key: Rosmarie Waldrop's A Key into the Language of America»

«Later I played under highway bridges to make room for strangers. A smell of concrete and mud, acrid of sexual transactions» declares the imaginary voice of a young Native American woman in Rosmarie Waldrop's *A Key into the Language of America* (1994). This voice speaks from within a transaction that exchanges her body and image for an abstract and sexualized sign, which in turn propels and justifies the strangers' encroachment. This voice, central to Waldrop's text, traverses the territories of thought held in place by time and the language of historical documents; her voice makes the metaphors that sustained the feminization and colonization of Native American culture and land literal. Her voice employs dense language replete with ironies and metaphors to describe, enact, and resist the experience of being forced to signify the receding edge of language, culture, and landscape while being simultaneously bereft of personhood's visible signs. «On the periphery of more private weather, I tried to adjust to Dutch trumpets and fire instead of bedclothes. This was inevitable if I wanted to imitate consciousness» (8). This passage suggests that consciousness, crucial to a definition of personhood and the experience of subjectivity, must be imitated by spaces flanked by signs of triumph and destruction.

A poetic text a cléf, Waldrop's *A Key into the Language of America* improvises from within and extends the critique begun in Roger Williams' treatise *A Key into the Language of America* (1643). Williams was a Puritan ousted from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his «non-conformist opinions» and founded a «haven of religious freedom» in what is now known as Rhode Island (xiii). He wrote *A Key into the Language of America* as a study of the Narragansett's language to enable communication between the Puritans and the Narragansett Indians, but *A Key* became more than a dictionary or a guide. It became a challenge to his fellow Puritans to question their colonial perspective. As Waldrop explains, «Williams recognized a culture where his compatriots saw only savage otherness» (xiv). Williams' fellow Puritans read *A Key* against the author's intentions; for them, it was evidence of his colonial success. Waldrop continues, «The Key is written for them, for his compatriots – who immediately misunderstood its intention. They regarded it as a factual handbook, of great practical use to traders, missionaries, and settlers» (xv). Opposing these justifying conclusions, Waldrop clarifies Williams's intent: «the original book was not written as a handbook for successful colonization. It was written not only to teach a language, but also to teach a lesson» (xvi). Williams' lesson was, according to Waldrop, «moral and spiritual. It was also political» (xvii). *A Key into the Language of America* is a plea to Puritans to question their assumptions of superiority and civility. In one of the poems Waldrop cites, Williams asks,

If Nature's Sons both wild and tame,
Humane and Courteous be:
How ill becomes it Sonnes of God
To want Humanity? (xvi)

Waldrop writes another *Key into the Language of America* with «a politics of desire that questions all situations» (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 42), and brings to the foreground what was buried within, and essential to, the Puritan conceptualization of the world they encountered in America. That is, Waldrop foregrounds how the sign of the feminine contributes to the conflation of Native American culture and the natural landscape. As a result of this conflation, the daughters' right to the humanity of personhood wasn't considered, though women were forced to signify both the «wild» and «tame,» the binaries that emerge from the Puritan assumption that Native-Americans are

synonymous with nature. From within the structure and language of Williams' document, Waldrop calls attention to the formulation of the feminine as the definition, limit, and excess of a repressive and civilizing order. Waldrop reveals the fetishization of the feminine within American colonialism. She exposes the simultaneous disavowal and recognition of the feminine, and the paradox that women are only granted limited forms of recognition within the cultural syntax of their disavowal.

I want to analyze the feminist critique central to Waldrop's *A Key into the Language of America*, and underscore its place in what Sianne Ngai describes as «a general shifting in feminist criticism from the terrain of speculative theory to more locally grounded and historically based arenas of inquiry,» a shifting that has had «a much more lingering impact on feminists from the literary avant-garde» (17). *A Key into the Language of America* implicitly argues that the strategies and dismantlings associated with contemporary literary theory and avant-garde poetics are pertinent to contemporary writers' inquiries into history, particularly the gendered dimensions of history. And despite the fact that their «lines of escape tend to be open to privileged male figures» (Polan xxiii), this essay also begins to open the possibility of utilizing Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of minor literature to analyze contemporary American avant-garde writing such as Waldrop's. *A Key into the Language of America* is, simultaneously, an enactment and critique of minor literature, though it seems Waldrop would agree with Deleuze's portrayal of Anglo-American English as a dynamic field, compelling for its play of power and subversion. In a dialogue written with Claire Parnet, entitled «On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature» (1977) Deleuze claims that English is «a hegemonic, imperialistic language. But for this reason it is all the more vulnerable to the subterranean workings of languages and dialects which undermine it from all sides and impose up it a play of vast corruptions and variations» (58). *A Key into the Language of America* works within the shifting ground of power of American English, but also attests to the vast and violent limits placed on its subversion.

Lynn Keller has recently argued that «a paradoxical attraction at once to system and to deviancy» is fundamental to Waldrop's work (103). Following this formulation, it becomes easier to see how Waldrop's work exposes the paradoxes of a language that Deleuze and Parnet hail as both hegemonic and riven with vulnerabilities by working within the system of Williams' formulations. In her prefatory remarks to her *A Key into the Language of America*, entitled «A Key into a Key,» Waldrop describes what her book borrows from Williams's: «*A Key into the Language of America* takes its title, chapter sequence, and many quotations from Roger Williams's book of the same title» (xii). The phrases Waldrop borrows from Williams appear in bold; they figure as shards of a historical perspective embedded in the landscape of American thought, which Waldrop imitates in order to subvert. And yet, Waldrop does more than imitate Williams's language and structure; she tropes within them, breaking open the form of his ideas. She expands the lesson Williams wanted to teach his fellow Puritans into a more explicit argument, though interestingly, Waldrop's argument is textually more ambivalent. She also expands Williams' lessons into a feminist critique. Through the disembodied voice of «a young woman ambivalent about her sex and position among the conquerors» (xxiii), Waldrop calls attention to the imaginary and symbolic function of woman within an equation that feminizes the conquered (xx).

The feminine was the repressed but crucially sustaining sign in the colonization of America. As Waldrop writes, «In the shell game of archetypes, the conquered (people or land) is always female...The colonization of America put the very 'male' Indian position of the conquered female, part of the land that was considered there to be taken» (xx). The voice of the young woman attempts to represent the difficult experience of living within this «shell game of archetypes» in which the signifier through which she is supposed to identify herself is repeatedly used as an ideological pass that justifies continued domination. Evocative and dense, «her» passages resist complete understanding, and therefore are poised to undo the understanding that Williams sought to inspire and, more importantly, the understandings his Puritan readers thought

they brought to and gained from his text. To that end, this voice of the young woman does not index a person exactly, but rather, a gendered subject position that exists between the seams of national, cultural, and linguistic identity. Waldrop restages the cultural clash between the Narragansetts and the Puritans, but then allows the openings that emerge from the clash to expose what and whom operated as the sign — «the voice» — of passivity. This young woman's voice represents but resists a gendered passivity; she is a subject denied a subject «position,» a subject denied its own relation to the imaginary, and continually displaced.

Analyzing the unpredictability of *A Key into the Language of America*, its play between order and disorder, Keller argues, «because the volume is so regular in its structure, [Waldrop's] variations are notable and heighten readers' awareness of the multiple strands forming any web of linguistic linkages or of cultural conflict» (108). Irony contributes to readers' heightened awareness of how the feminine helped sustain the multiple strands forming the linguistic linkages and cultural conflicts that mark early American history and literature. Waldrop deploys irony to disentangle the orders of thought and perspective that Williams' text provides. In her essay «Irony and Postmodern Poetry,» Rae Armantrout delineates how irony functions in a contemporary poet's work. She states that irony «marks the consciousness of dissonance» and is «the stubborn mark of the divided psyche» (674). Irony's capacity to represent the dual aspects of a dissonant and divided perspective also becomes a way to «stage a 'return of the repressed,' representing both the mechanism of repression and the nature of repressed desire» (679). This is precisely what Waldrop does when the young woman's voice states: «Too long I took clockwork as a model instead of following the angle my inclinations make with the ground» (18). This statement is representative of the Native American woman's continually bewildered consciousness. It represents women finding themselves emerging within forms of consciousness and selfhood that they can only retrospectively resist, and attests to the thoroughness and pervasiveness of Puritan colonization.

Furthermore, Waldrop inscribes what Williams's audience might have read from within his sentences and gives the lines the dissonance of irony. In Chapter II, entitled «Of Eating and Entertainment,» Waldrop links a description of the Narragansett's meals and the language — as well as the ideas — they were forced to figuratively take into their mouths. Making the literal and the figurative equivalent on the surface of the text allows Waldrop's insight — that the Puritan eye ravenously roved the landscape — to emerge. Waldrop represents the «mechanism of repression,» as well as the ravenous nature propelling that desire:

Indiane corne, boiled with free will and predestination is a dish exceeding wholesome if taken through the mouth. Their words, too, fit to eat. And crow. A mark «cadency.»

Similarly, an eye devouring its native region must devote special attention to its dialect. (5)

The line that begins with a devouring eye articulates how Williams's compatriots misread his text. Williams transcribed and translated the Narragansett language in order to facilitate equity and understanding between cultures, not a devouring colonization. Waldrop's work reveals the misreading that sustained the repression and decimation of Native American culture and language.

The first chapter, entitled «Salutations,» is an imitation of Williams' delineation of the Narragansett's sign system for greeting, which turns, quite quickly, into the introduction of the language, and then turns, quite quickly, into an assessment of the natural resources available to the Puritans — «the pumice found in great quantities.» Waldrop unravels the concatenation of assumptions that informed Puritan misreadings. The Narragansett «Salutations,» Waldrop writes, «Are of two sorts and come immediately before the body. The pronunciation varies according to the point where the tongue makes contact with pumice found in great quantity» (3). The voice of the young woman emerges from this description, announcing her continual displacement within the receding space of Native American marginalization:

I was born in a town on the other side which didn't want me in so many. All the streets were long and led. In the center, a single person had no house or friends to allay excessive sorrow. I, like other girls, forgot my name in the noise of traffic, opening my arms more to measure their extension than to offer embrace. (4)

Rendered anonymous and therefore rendered part of a paradoxically atomized collective – «I, like other girls, forgot my name» – this voice offers up an ironic imitation of a «salutation» as a means to measure and encompass women's dissipation within the fast traffic of American colonialization. Moreover, the passage suggests that the feminine becomes the means through which incursion is supposedly «welcomed» and measured. The woman embodies and displaces this measurement simultaneously, as she «open[s] [her] arms more to measure their extension than to offer embrace.» That is, she makes the metaphorical equation that links her body, the land, and the act of measurement, literal.

Waldrop follows this declaration with a poem that elucidates the ideas informing and the consequences that emerge from the Puritan assumption that learning the Narragansett language will help facilitate economic expansion and the eradication of Native Americans. Notice how «woman» is imagined as a facilitating passageway, a metaphorical equation without the structure of metaphor, a noun used as an adjective:

the Courteous Pagan
barefoot and yes
his name laid down
as dead
one openness
one woman door
so slow in otherwise
so close

Since she speaks from within a metaphorical equation that does not explicitly call attention to itself as such – «one woman door» – she calls attention to the ideas that sustain her marginalization. The last two lines of the poem, «so slow in otherwise / so close,» suggest how the feminization of Native American culture perpetuates and expedites the rapidity of Puritan expansion.

Chapter VII, entitled «Of Their Persons and Parts of Body,» begins by calling attention to language's role in shaping the perceptions of the Native American body: «Great bunch of hayre raked from darkness, yet as organized a physical substance as sober English» (15). The paragraph ends with an image of childbirth as the passageway to religious submission: «Though childbirth will force Christianity down the ladder into fighting units: women never forgive unparted flesh» (15). If women resist the mandate to fulfill their biologically and socially determined role, the Puritans are led to suppose that women will condemn not only themselves, but «unparted flesh,» as though it is apart from them. The young woman's passage that follows these statements renders a body and a psyche riven by violence: «I was shorn of illusion and impulse, though with a sorry knife, before touching amorous form» (16). Colonial violence precludes the possibility of love and sexuality. The passage ends with two statements: one suggests but does not explicitly represent the theft of rape, an enforced sexualization. The second attests to the fact that stories have been left untold: «All manner of man and what bigness chased me to the bottom of my ignorance desolately sublimating the fewness of wishes. Inexact report» (16). That «[a]ll manner of man» participated in this desolate sublimation, together with the abstraction of «bigness,» suggests that it was not only white Puritans who forced themselves on Native American women, but masculinity as a concept and a force. The «bigness,» pervasiveness, and ubiquity of masculinity makes an articulation of a

story difficult, practically impossible, hence the «Inexact report» (16). It is precisely the moments when Waldrop makes the broken inexactness and vagueness of the history Williams' text transcribes into poetic ambiguity that the text most explicitly resists the Puritan misreading of Williams' text.

Waldrop is a German American woman writing in English at the close of the twentieth-century. Her «report» of the sexed and gendered story that Williams's text does not tell is inevitably «inexact,» and yet the voice she writes inscribes an awareness of gender and sexuality's symbolic role as the sustaining ground of the violent and uneven exchanges that mark early American history. In one of the poetry sequences that follow the young woman's narrative sections, Waldrop writes, «the sexual act takes on / a sheen of purchase / the difference of invasion» (52). Transformed into an idea of physicality, nature, and sex – indeed, one might say that she is forced to allegorize them – the woman of *A Key* is invisible to the eye, and is preoccupied by becoming and sustaining a visibility that is outside the symbolism of cultural and monetary exchanges. In Chapter XXIV, entitled «Concerning Their Coyne» Waldrop completes one of Williams' sentences to highlight the cultural imposition implicit within the monetary sign system. «Songs of Myself» not only alludes to Walt Whitman's nineteenth-century poem, but a conception of American selfhood that the Narragansetts unwittingly adopted through monetary exchange: «Indians are ignorant of Europe's Coyne yet call it Monéash and notice changes in the price of beaver, somnambulism, and songs of myself» (49). The following sentence points to the inequality built into these «exchanges.» The Narragansetts brought their natural resources in exchange for their lives, and the Puritans heard a cries of submission: «They bring down all their sorts of furs and trade them for the wish to live, the wish to die, the wish to kill, the wish to be had» (49) The young woman's section that follows highlights how the inequity of these exchanges dominate the imaginary of self-perception: «I learned that my face belonged to a covert system of exchange since the mirror showed me a landscape requiring diffidence, and only in nightmares could I find identity or denouement» (50).

In each chapter, the young woman confronts the realization that what she sees of herself cannot be «mirrored» in culture. To transcribe the difficulty of finding an identity outside of nightmares, in other words, outside of a cultural unconscious, this voice is written under the sign of search. Recall in the first chapter entitled «Salutations,» the young woman states: «I, like other girls, forgot my name in the noise of traffic, opening my arms more to measure their extension than to offer embrace» (4). The attempt to see her arms, her physicality, herself, «measured,» which might prove her actuality, seems to be inspired by her name slipping from memory – a name readers never read or hear. Another chapter of *A Key* articulates the stark binaries of space she is forced to choose between in order to be seen. Cleverly, Waldrop links the binaries of this choice to language by alluding to the phrase «Sticks and stones will break my bones» at the opening of the passage: «Sticks and stones and swamps and howling wilderness, or inside a patient garden and ability to behave: intrepid waiting. Sad career. Crisp choice» (24). The sentences that follow these lines are interesting not only because the speaker adopts the myth of biological essentialism to explain her own rebellion but because her description of the movement her desire propels is infected by the language, ideals, and condemnations internal to manifest destiny: «Because of my uterine heritage an inner heat pushed my knees toward desire and superhuman effort at the risk of getting lost and needing the succor of savages» (24).

The possibility of possessing an actuality consistently propels this young woman's search. Although her body figures for the landscape, the stability of place is denied to her. Her voice hovers both before and after conquest; she never finds or inscribes the «center» of the story, but its traumatic outlines and peripheries. This is not to say that the voice is mythical. Waldrop manages to render simultaneously a particular and collective consciousness and intelligence, but when she takes action to place her intelligence within the visible and recognizable of the social symbolic, she becomes all

the more amorphous, abstract, absent. In Chapter IV, she describes the rituals and collective ecstasies of baptism: «A procession, a river of people, the whole town crossed into exaltation to subject the body to their rites of candle and flame, cries and bewailing, morning and evening.» The young woman doesn't resist, and more importantly, doesn't want to resist, the pull that will «subject the body to their rites.» In other words, these «rites» – which play off «rights» – make the body into a subject, granting it subjectivity. She poses the impossibility of resisting as a rhetorical question: «Could I withdraw from such offering. I rushed my headlong into it and found I made no splash. It would take a different kind of water to quench my long terror»(14). The visual and physical outlines of this self will not materialize in cultural waters that refuse to mirror a woman's actuality and presence. The fact that readers never see her and never know her name attests to not only the resistance a young Native American woman must have encountered if she attempted to forge a place in the symbolic order; it also attests to the limits to representation language, culture, and time imposes upon Waldrop as a writer. *A Key into the Language of America* is an imaginary testimony to what might have been said by a woman speaking within and against the dominance of a major language and culture.

A Key into the Language of America is the work of a sensibility attuned to the power within language as it aligns the borders of cultural and literary documents and reinforces the seams of identity and personhood. This sensibility emerges out of, but is not halted by, Waldrop's sustained attention to a unique constellation of positions that together compose her history. Born in 1935, Waldrop is a woman poet of German descent. Her childhood coincided with the rise of Nazism, and she now lives in the United States, speaking and writing in English. In the preface to *A Key into the Language of America*, Waldrop weighs parts of her history and identity on the power scale now required of contemporary consciousness: «I was born 'on the other side,' in Germany. Which was then Nazi Germany. I am not Jewish. I was born on the side of the (then) winners» (xix). She goes on to weigh her gender identity and vocation: «I am white and educated. I am also a poet and a woman. A poet, in our days, is regarded as rather a marginal member of society, whose social usefulness is in doubt. As a woman, I do not figure in the shell game of archetypes, but as conquered» (xx). Furthermore, as a result of her linguistic and geographical displacement, naturalized equations between language and identity are permanently unsettled. In her essay «Thinking as Follows» Waldrop writes, «In crossing the Atlantic my phonemes settled somewhere between German and English. I speak either language with an accent. This has saved me the illusion of being the master of language. I entered it at a skewed angle, through the fissures, the slight difference» (611). In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, Waldrop is a «foreigner in [her] own language» (1977, 59). Entering language from a «skewed angle,» mindful of her split relation to power – and the possibility that gender marks the difference in that split – makes Waldrop's work attentive to texts that open into another story within American literature and history, without making that story a mirror of her own.

Since it passes through history, since it passes through and across cultures, languages, landscapes, and races, and since it writes within and out of Williams' words and forms, Waldrop's *A Key into the Language of America* cannot be described or understood as an autobiographical reflection, or an exploration of her identity. Rather, it reveals what being a «foreigner in [her] own language» allows her to see, break up, imagine, and revise in historical texts and in constructions of the self and personhood traced and retraced by history and habit. Between the texture of a life lived and a text on the page, there are spaces of translation – lines of flight and escape – that reconfigure the already imagined shape of the self, that even demolish the precedence of a self. Waldrop's *A Key into the Language of America* reveals that a writer attentive to this space can also reconfigure the already imagined shapes of history and literature: this is the impetus moving through minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the minor works against firmly entrenched notions of resemblance that make the text a mirrored territory of the self and history. Dana Polan explains that their concept of writing «stands against psychology, against territory, by giving an author a

possibility of becoming more than his or her nominal self, or trading the insistent solidity of the family tree for the whole field of desire and history» (xxiii).

Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the minor illuminates the relations among language, power, territory, and innovation at work in *A Key into the Language of America*. In their study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature as «that which a minority constructs within a major language» (16). It has three basic characteristics: «the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation» (18). Their articulation of the minor emerges from an assessment of people's split and partial relation to the language and culture in which they live: «How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language they are forced to serve?» (19). Franz Kafka, a Jewish writer living in Prague, wrote not in Czech, but in German, and forged a literature that is «affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization» (16). Kafka, in other words, wrote texts in German that simultaneously articulate the «impossibility of writing other than in German,» and therefore manifest Prague Jews' «feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territory» (16). Writing this distance, Kafka became, through intense lines of flight that become the process rather than the signifier of desire (8), «a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to [his] own language» (19). Kafka's work deterritorialized the imperative within the German language to make one's consciousness an imitation of the self already imagined within its linguistic spaces.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the «lines of flight» that characterize minor literature are resistant and desiring formations of movement engaged in the process of deterritorialization, movements of «becoming» engaged in the process of interrupting orders of thought, breaking cemented maps that lead to the mirrored ends of familiar ideas and historical memories. A line of flight is the appearance of a «heterogeneous line» (7). A line of flight doesn't move toward «freedom» – a state enforced by dominant circumscription – but becomes new paths that don't already exist. In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari explain, «The problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency» (8). At the opening of *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), they call attention to the orders within literature and the book: «In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification» (3). «Lines of flight» are intimately caught up with both literature and geography. In «The Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,» Deleuze and Claire Parnet write: «American literature operates according to geographical lines: the flight toward the West, the discovery that the true East is in the West, the sense of the frontiers as something to cross, to push back, to go beyond. The becoming is geographical» (37).

This is a compelling portrayal of American literature, but the literature of Early American history is replete with subjects who fought and struggled to possess the status of personhood and sustain the nominal self threatened by the lines of escape crossed and pushed by American colonialists. A literary text that opens and rewrites a historical document that transcribed a Native American language now lost, Waldrop's book intensifies the political circumstances and consequences of the minor. *A Key into the Language of America* shares the characteristics of the minor in that the young woman's voice becomes a «collective assemblage of [Native-American women's] enunciation» (18), unsettles Williams's language as well as the assumptions his compatriots projected on to it, and brings a political immediacy to the American conquest as well as the way historical texts are currently read. And yet the young woman's voice, a literary and imaginative transcription of a voice that is denied subjectivity, complicates the minor's dissolution of the speaking subject. Can one become a nomad in relation to one's own language when one is bereft of one's history, culture, land, and identity? Deleuze and Guattari state that in Kafka's work «there is no longer a subject of enunciation, nor a subject of the statement» (22). In a chapter entitled «Of Discourse and Newes,»

the young woman laments: «Why speake I not, I should have asked, counting on articulations of sound forms in waiting» (18). This sentence does not attest to the movement of language unleashed from the stranglehold of the author-subject position or the map of self; it attests to a historical and political story that couldn't be articulated, a story attested to in retrospect by a fictionalized voice who didn't have the means to ask why she couldn't speak.

Waldrop's text complicates the theorization of the minor because it assumes and calls attention to the disappearance and eradication a major language can enforce. In the chapter entitled «Of Eating and Entertainment,» the voice of the young woman tells of an experience that qualifies as a line of flight from sense and subjectivity. Notice how the disappearance of the «I» is coincident with encroachment of confusion and nonsense: «I began my education by walking along the road in search of the heroic. I did not think to ask the way to the next well. Wilderness like fear a form of drunkenness or acting like a boy. The ground begins to slip. Rhythm of swallows seen from below. It is a strange truth that remains of contentment are yet another obstacle» (6). Writing, for Deleuze and Guattari, is meant for becoming imperceptible, and these lines move toward a language that is «head over and heels away» (1986, 26). And yet this movement away from sense and subjectivity is rare in *A Key into the Language of America*, since the history the young woman finds herself within enforces impediment to every line of flight by denying her a glimpse of recognition or coherence. Deleuze and Parnet write, «One has to lose one's identity...One has to disappear, to become unknown» (1977, 45). This formulation, while imaginatively galvanizing, seems idealistic when examining the work such as *A Key into the Language of America*, which attempts to engage a history that is most profoundly marked by enforced loss.

As I have shown, Waldrop texts employ multiple forms of reading, writing, and interpretation, many of which are ironic imitations of the language, assumptions, and metaphorical equations Puritans brought to their reading of Williams' text. Deleuze and Guattari argue against the typical hermeneutic «keys» for interpreting texts. They emphasize Kafka's hatred of metaphor, and write, triumphantly: «Kafka deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation» (22). In answering their opening question «How can we enter Kafka's work?» they state: «We aren't even trying to interpret, to say that this means that» (7). And yet, it seems to me that since a major language makes those subjected to it see and speak themselves within its dominant code (a dominant code that is often subsumed into the invisibility of ideology), literary exegesis, and an attention to metaphor, symbolism, and signification, is required for understanding the ubiquity and tenacity of this major code, the «this means that» of ideology. In an early poem entitled «Remembering to Sleep,» Waldrop writes, «A dream, like trying / to remember, breaks open words / for other, / hidden meanings» (28). These lines describe what Waldrop's *A Key* does, not within the space of individual psychology but in language and the textual forms of history. Without insisting on an allegorized code of hidden meanings, a reading that «breaks open words» can reveal that «A crying fit /is cancelled» (28) and in turn can give «a syntax to the cry,» as Kafka's work does (1986, 26). In other words, part of a poet's or a literary critic's line of flight involves breaking open the words of the major language to see the minor moving within its «cramped spaces.» This means employing – with a resistant irony – the literary and linguistic tools through which the major is sealed into dominance. Deleuze and Guattari discern: «When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things» (1986, 28). Resisting literary «archetypes» that work by «assimilation, homogenization, and thematics» (7), Waldrop's work demonstrates that a literary reading of historical documents can inspire the breaking of their form, the reconstructing of their content, and perhaps a interruption into history and memory's ordering of things.

Deleuze and Guattari do not propose or even indicate that the minor can be utilized to highlight feminist interventions and directions in literature and historical texts. I think this possibility opens

when the minor is read within the frame of Waldrop's text, though *A Key into the Language of America* reveals that the lines of escape might not be as direct or immediately freeing as they would have us believe. Attempting to render the gendered voice haunting representations of the Native American voice in American literature and culture, *A Key into the Language of America* reveals that there is a feminized minor within the minor literatures of American literary culture struggling to find lines of escape. Native American culture is the primary and most extreme example of Susan Howe's pithy and accurate description of American literature's most salient themes and tendencies: «Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminized and then restricted or banished» (1). Gayatri Spivak concurs when she writes, «the Native American voice has been most rigorously marginalized even within marginalization» (189). *A Key into the Language of America* demonstrates that the gendered and sexualized embodiment of that voice has been marginalized with even more rigor. Waldrop's literary and critical enactment of its forms, words, and ideas becomes a key to unlocking – deterritorializing – the logic enforcing that rigor.

Rosi Braidotti claims that feminist readings can become or perhaps even exceed deliberate lines of flight if they, «develop a consciousness that is not specifically feminine, dissolving 'woman' into the forces that structure her» (395). *A Key into the Language of America*, which attests to a Native American woman's struggle to become visible to herself in the midst of cultural clashes and historical traumas prefaced both on women's absence and femininity's thick and ubiquitous presence, moves back into history to see how both the actual and symbolic dissolution of Native American women became the force structuring and enforcing their absence. The young woman's voice witnesses that dissolution at the culmination of her search: «I had finally reached the center of the city. It was deserted, in ruins, as useless as my birth and as permanent as a site of murder» (66). *A Key into the Language of America* calls attention to an enforced dissolution that should be seen before the category of woman can be euphorically dissolved in American literature's lines of escape.

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«A Tale of Two Keys: Rosmarie Waldrop's Poetics of the Book»

Yes, there is an instant when my poem or book seems «right,» when it is done. But is that instant «absolute»?

–Rosmarie Waldrop, Talisman interview

...[I]t is not easy for us to imagine such a realm, in which printed records were not necessarily authorized or faithful.

–Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book*

At what point can a book be described as a finished or an authoritative presentation? In an interview with Edward Foster for *Talisman*, Rosmarie Waldrop argued that a book's form is never «'absolute'» since there is no «definitive interpretation» of a text by either the writer or the readers (36, 34). Her sense of the book as an open form might characterize a range of postmodernist interventions in source texts, from the «writing through» projects of John Cage to the palimpsests of Susan Howe. [1] But what happens when a poem transplants not only the language of a source book but also its organization – the outlines, headings, and chapter structures that determine the way the audience processes the book's information? In a twist on her intertextual writing style, Waldrop explores the implications of this subtly subversive theft in the 1994 text *A Key into the Language of America*.

Waldrop's book has the same title as its source, Roger Williams's 1643 study of the language and culture of the Narragansett tribe. In addition to mixing selections of his English and Narragansett words in her passages, she includes a copy of his title page, duplicates his chapter titles, and imitates his division of information within each chapter: cultural observations, vocabulary terms, and a concluding poem. By adopting his organization in her own text, she scrutinizes the different ways in which meaning can be categorized and visually arranged within the book form, asking readers to reexamine the process by which they assess any textual data as trustworthy. The result is a «book-poem» that challenges the very concept of the book as a tool to communicate reliable knowledge. [2]

The orderly arrangement of information in Williams's *Key* is the perfect background for the disruptive investigations of a book-poem. Williams introduces his phrases and observations as a much-needed cross-cultural guide, the symbolic key to an informational treasure box of «Rarities» that can lead to still further discoveries: «A little Key may open a Box, where lies a bunch of Keyes» (83). [3] To give readers easy access to that information, each chapter lists vocabulary entries by theme (e.g., marriage, religion, government) and carefully classifies commentary from the «generall» to the «More particular» (104). A prefatory set of «Directions» (90) ensures that the book will be «pleasant and profitable for All» to use (83). Within the chapters, Williams combines concise morals about «Pagans» who act more virtuously than the purportedly Christian colonists (116) with repeated reminders to his readers in the didactic poems about the need to restore New Testament values.

Bending the Book

As in Waldrop's previous palimpsests, her reproduction of the source creatively distorts what it borrows. [4] At the thematic level, Waldrop's *Key* pays tribute to Williams's nuanced treatment of Narragansett society and land use while it also critiques his prejudices and omissions from a

modern «immigrant's take on the heritage and complex early history of [her] adopted country» (xxiii). [5] But mirroring Williams's guidebook in this case turns the entire structure of his Key into the foreign text – distanced in both time and cultural context – to be analyzed. Waldrop copies and subverts the function of each book convention that seems to guarantee reliable information, explicitly rejecting a model of accessibility or usefulness for her text. Waldrop's remark that her «word lists,» in contrast with those of Williams, «are not of practical use» (xxiii) is only the first step in a project that substitutes false leads for his directions, digressions for his arguments, and broken patterns for his categories. Where Williams worries about colonists who fail to keep their promises, Waldrop creates a book that self-consciously presents itself as a deceitful resource, contradicting and dismantling its information outlines.

Her introduction, for example, initially resembles Williams's prefatory material in providing explanations and usage notes, but her guidelines conceal the actual relation between the two Keys and the fact that her divisions of information are misleading. The statement that Williams's language is set off from her own writing by «its archaic syntax and vocabulary printed in boldface» gives the impression of a clear original to be retrieved so that «Roger Williams's voice will be recognized» (xxii). Yet the rest of the book undermines that expectation of typographic distinctions in meaning. Some of the excerpts taken from Williams's chapters are reproduced in boldface type while others are not, and this can include adjacent segments from the same sentence or passage. Nor does the boldface signify more accurate copying. The seventeenth-century phrases in either typeface may be altered from Williams's language, at times with minor changes in capitalization but often with deletions, rearrangements, or substitutions such as «white men» (17) for Williams's «Englishman» (136) that expand the meaning considerably. Because of the discrepancies, readers unwilling to consult the 1643 text can never be certain of the exactness of any insert.

What Is Fixed in Print

Waldrop's play with these faulty reproductions raises broader questions about the stability and accuracy of printed texts. The assumption that a book is a «reliable» copy of the information it advertises is not an unquestionable part of print culture, book historian Adrian Johns contends, but rather a belief that was deliberately constructed over time – a construction exposed by acts such as piracy that made it difficult to gauge the trustworthiness of a text's contents (1-5). «What could one know in such a realm,» he queries, «and how could one know it?» (5). While Johns's history in *The Nature of the Book* focuses on unauthorized printing in early modern England, Waldrop is interested in multiple practices by which the structure of a seemingly fixed printed book can be altered or recontextualized and in the resulting effect on an epistemology of reading. Beyond the underlying humor of a new Key published by an author whose initials are also R. W., Waldrop's mix of borrowed structural devices with acknowledged and unacknowledged revisions presents the book form as a contested space, the significance of whose organization can always be reinterpreted.

Waldrop begins to reframe Williams's book format with her facsimile of the title page from an 1827 edition of his text. His name and New England residence, as well as the printer's name and the date and place of the book's publication, would have situated and authorized the book for its contemporary audience. Waldrop's caption for the facsimile, however, underscores the status of his book as an archival document, its information reassembled in the «Collections of the Rhode-Island Historical Society,» and notes that permission for reproducing the text must be obtained from a source other than the original author or publisher (xii). The new publication of a historical source and the minor formatting changes from the 1643 title page might go unnoticed at first. But as a preface to Waldrop's more dramatic transformation of Williams's book, they prompt questions about who controls the dissemination of any «print / worthy» text (17). She develops the point in her introductory remarks about the politics behind the late-eighteenth-century publication of extracts from Williams's Key. The texts deleted much of his commentary, especially his criticism of

the English settlers, turning his work into a purely «utilitarian guide to customs and vocabulary» (xix). Her description brings out the irony of altering a book's information in the ostensible interest of making the presentation of the data more reader-friendly. Waldrop's assessment of these prior texts is already mediated as she echoes the editorial remarks in yet another version of *A Key*, the 1973 volume edited by John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz. The implicit challenge to the audience is to decide whose authority, if any, can be trusted to (re)produce the definitive reading edition of Williams's book.

Even without the problems of overt revisions or competing editions, Waldrop suggests, a reprint might lose the time-dependent information formats in a book. Her simple decision not to modernize the spelling of the borrowed chapter titles produces, in Pierre Menard style, a wholly different effect than that of the original source. The titles refocus attention from expectations about the chapters' contents to the archaic nature of their own wording; headings that originally evoked motifs of new information or change (e.g., «Of Discourse and Newes» and «Of Travell» [17, 23]) now remind Waldrop's readers that they are looking at diction from three and a half centuries ago, «living in translation...at arm's length» from Williams's subject of study as the «message, slowed down by change of climate, becomes obsolete» (17). The rhetoric of obsolescence also hints at the difficulty of finding current sources to check the accuracy of the translations Williams outlines. When Waldrop remarks that contemporary tribe members have consulted Williams's *Key* to choose Narragansett names because their language is no longer spoken (xxii), she emphasizes his book's conflicting roles as an authoritative source and as a copy, a print approximation that cannot be readily verified, however widely it may be reproduced.

«Tidings on Condition»: Waldrop's Chapter Transformations

If readers cannot necessarily gauge the reliability of a book's information, what are the internal formats that create the impression of having easy access to trustworthy data? Waldrop moves from scrutinizing the informational contract of a book's introductory material to the details of its chapter outlines and page layouts. Contrast the two authors' versions of chapter 2, entitled «Of Eating and Entertainment,» as Waldrop turns Williams's orderly layout into her own food «for thought» about what presentations can or cannot be consumed easily in a book format (5). Williams's chapter opens with a vocabulary list, each line divided into a Narragansett term or sentence at the left and the translation at the right. Waldrop distorts his translation structure, undercutting the reader's ability to distinguish between the foreign and the familiar by scattering informational «elements» from different contexts across her page (see fig. 1). How does the reader begin to make meaningful order of that page space? Her observation paragraph precedes the word list here as if promising an interpretive frame, but there is no gloss even for the words from Williams included within the passage itself. The boldface type, instead of drawing attention to important points, accentuates the impression of information that has not been fully assimilated into the frame text. The one Narragansett term remains doubly opaque; without Williams's lineation, it is not clear that «Red Copper Kettle» is the translation of «Mishquockuk,» nor where the two boldface entries with their closing punctuation fit into the list of unpunctuated modern compound terms following the implied «food» (5). With page structures that refuse to clarify their information categories, the book's promise of «words...fit to eat» never leads to a master key to decipher all the codes (5).

Chap. II: Of Eating and Entertainment

In addition to the disjointed page formats, the argumentation itself turns information into «noise» (4) from the very excess of its claims. Like Williams's text, Waldrop's book provides didactic points, but hers are spliced together from so many theses in the two *Keys* that it resembles what Christian Bök has described in his own book art as «a route composed of nothing / but detours» (n. pag.). [6] The background for Waldrop's digressive route in chapter 2 begins with Williams's

comment that «Indian corne...is a dish exceeding wholesome for the English bodies» (101). The food imagery is part of his moral that the Narragansetts could serve as a model of temperance and generosity for the colonists, and yet at the same time he describes himself as an Elijah-like figure in the «wilderness» being «fed» by «These Ravens,» he also indirectly suggests the tribe's need for a man of God to convert them (105).

Waldrop's chapter argument fractures itself into simultaneous responses to different parts of this message. The opening paragraph seems to satirize Puritan theology in the unexpected, paradoxical description of the corn «boiled with free will and predestination,» and she reduces Williams from being fed by ravens to eating «crow» for the religious bias in his accounts of the Narragansetts (see fig. 1). Waldrop's rhetoric of «devouring» language and lands, moreover, evokes other images of invading «white bodies» and «Unsuccessful» uprisings (5) that ironize in retrospect Williams's goal of promoting communication between the tribe and the settlers. The passing reference to «wives» (5), in turn, opens a new line of questioning, anticipating Waldrop's critical scrutiny of past and present gender roles. She inserts an extra section in the second page of this and every chapter: a centuries-spanning «narrative...in the voice of a young woman, ambivalent about her sex and position among the conquerors» and fully aware that «conquered» cultures are troped as feminized (xxiii, xx). In chapter 2, the narrator's description of her early «education...in search of the heroic» leads only to the concluding poem's image of female bodies as commodities to be appraised and consumed: «all flesh considered / as a value» (6). If the reader is hard pressed to extract a single lesson from these overlapping critiques, the confusion is deliberate. By adding new divisions and by refusing to provide the stages of a discrete counterargument, Waldrop emphasizes the interpretive constraints of any one outline and the conclusions derived from its organization; the chapters of her revisionist history keep their own premises open for redirection.

Broken Frames and Scattered Lists

Waldrop's language play continues the process of strategic digression. While the parodic logic, syntactic games, and rapid shifts in subject of her previous palimpsests have been well studied, [7] she uses these techniques in *A Key* to reorganize all the linguistic cues within its section divisions and to break down the information barriers among chapters. Chapter 18, «Of the Sea,» vividly exemplifies the disruption of ordering devices as she takes her own «hatchet» to Williams's connections (see fig. 2). The first line of the prose poem offers no description of the titular sea beyond the fragments «A site of passage, of dreadful to move on, of depth between,» in which the prepositional phrases fail to specify the origin or destination of a journey (37). Instead of Williams's expository sentences, her syntax outlines information that is never delivered. She presents a comparison in «Close resemblance» without clarifying the details being compared or offers choices whose contrasts are equally ambiguous: «long neighborhood or early development» (37). As the pun on «all at sea» implies, the paragraph is organized to induce the «bewildered» sense of being «drowned» in an unfamiliar, «overwhelming» set of syntactic cues (37).

CH. XVIII OF THE SEA

With this degree of interpretive difficulty, Waldrop's reader might turn from sentences to words as the smallest semantic units of the book. Instead of Williams's thematically connected word lists, however, her lists defy semantic classification. To draw out the «depth between» linguistic «surface[s]» in chapter 18, she assembles terms linked chiefly by the fact that they form words or compounds when combined with the initial three letters «sea» (see fig. 2). Either one gives up on a subject category for a list that includes «[séa]nce» and «[sea] cucumber» or else considers multiple possible relations among the different terms while acknowledging the arbitrariness of any temporary ordering (37). One could read a word in dialogue with the chapter term, transforming the

domestic space of a «bed» into a geological formation in «[sea]bed» (37), or could treat the lists as independent poems. The reader's desire to figure out the relation between words, for instance, is mockingly reflected here in the letter groups of «mstress» and «son» that suggest a family unit of mistress and son (37).[----seamstress and season]

Even beyond the specific lists, the attempt to single out theme words for a section ultimately undermines the divisions among chapters as Waldrop turns her Key into a dictionary of deferrals. She sometimes inserts entries from one of Williams's chapters into a different theme chapter in her Key, and her own central images of coinage, tongue, water, and skin—terms that seem most directly connected to specific chapter motifs—are also the ones whose contextual definitions are scattered broadly across chapters, creatingx alternating impressions of superfluity and contradiction. There are so many early allusions to the «coining of new words» (5) and to bodies as sexual currency that the overview of these motifs in the chapter on «Coyne» seems belated (49-50). For other words, the chapter contexts purposely clash with each other. She juxtaposes chapter 14's references to «skin» color and «racial discrimination» (30) with the images of characters «shedding skin» in chapter 10 (21) as if contesting stereotyped identifications; the book's later portrayal of «unidentical skins» may refer to either the differences between lovers or the subjective perception of a single body (see fig. 3). The result of these shifts in information exchange in A Key is that the book's semantic subdivisions are visible chiefly when they are being violated.

The Non-Sense of an Ending

The transgression of information boundaries is nowhere more evident than in Waldrop's satiric revisions of Williams's thematic and formal closure. In the book as a whole, she keeps the progression of his chapter themes from greetings to burial customs but ends her text with a deliberately nonlinear image that resists summation: «then life could not / be understood forward / or backward» (66). The contrast with Williams is just as pointed in the concluding poems in other chapters of their Keys. His rhyming quatrains are miniature sermons as in this excerpt from the verse in chapter 18:

I have in Europes ships, oft been

In King of terrours hand;

When all have cri'd, Now, now we sinck,

Yet God brought safe to land. (Williams 179)

His conclusion tightly structures the sea chapter's information, reminding readers that the details should be interpreted more in light of the «Power of God» (179) than of human ingenuity in seafaring lest they miss the point of the providence behind Williams's own New World mission. Waldrop's poem, however, offers «dark thoughts» rather than enlightenment, cautioning readers that they are likely to find a premise that «holds / no water» in its indeterminate, unpunctuated fragments (see fig. 3). Her section celebrates abstract images of flux in «exchange» and «displacement» (38) that question the stability of the language in which one might make any definitive assertion. «[T]ense» may be a noun or an adjective here, and the chapter term «sea» doubles homonymically as a verb in the allusion to what «swimmers see» after immersion, while the descriptions point to something outside their imagery with the recurring preposition «beyond» (38).

«Against the threat of frigidity....

For all the puns on vision, what Waldrop's chapter conclusions tend to foreground is white space. The copious white space around the earlier lists and the short poetic lines leads into the blank space at the end of each chapter. Her passages anticipate this transition with their images of whiteness, pallor, and absence. These references qualify her often-cited description of the «palimpsest» as an information-rich composition, a model of plenitude and presence in which the «blank page is not blank» because «No text has one single author» («Form and Discontent» 61). [8] Despite all the authors who crowd these pages – Williams, Michel Fardoulis-Lagrange, Claire Needell, and Howe [9] – the blank spaces in *A Key* interrupt the information transmission with textual lacunae that do not signify even as palimpsestic traces. Alongside the attempts to recover the «traces of the push across this continent» (60) – the conquests and the enduring hate language in slurs such as «red skin» (26) – Waldrop's lacunae remind readers of what cannot be «read» at all, of the blind spots and failed translations in projects of textual and historical recovery. Critics have discussed the motif of gaps and missing centers in her books as a strategy of disrupting authoritarian narratives (Evans 287), as an acknowledgment of the fallacies in historical records (Freitag 452 and Clippinger 199), or as a symbol of liminal spaces that can lead to new ways of perceiving the self and the world (Keller 393).

A Book-Poetics of Limits

But there is little discussion of those gaps as part of Waldrop's retheorization of the book itself. The thematic and stylistic play with white space, for example, recalls the blanks in Stéphane Mallarmé's book-poetics; she analyzes his approaches to silence as spiritualized acts of «negation» revealing the limits of thought and language (*Against Language?* 17-18). In particular, Waldrop's *Key* adapts the gendered imagery of book thresholds and limits in his critique of conventional reading techniques. When Mallarmé describes the white spaces of the book form revealing the «mystery» of the pages' lettering, he warns readers not to view the «virginal foldings of the book» only as borders to be penetrated to gain «possession» of the text (82, 83). Waldrop's *Key* resists such forcible appropriation with its consciously «difficult unfolding» (16). Her narrator gives the reader hints of «parts called private and more or less so,» with the «flesh close up» – like the space of the chapter's conclusion – unreadably «pale,» but here the pallor «terrifie[s]» rather than entices the reader/«lover» (see fig. 3). In a later chapter, she imagines the body as text darkening completely to «a dead end» that the lover will abandon for more familiar structures (60). As the blurring of dark and white imagery suggests, both the printed and unprinted book spaces in *A Key* can contribute to a sense of depleted meanings as Waldrop replaces Mallarmé's vision of richly significant typography with her own misleading shifts in type.

Following a line of influence from Mallarmé, the blanks, interruptions, and wounded bodies throughout *A Key* are even closer to the book metaphors of Edmond Jabès. To quote from Waldrop's translation of *The Book of Questions*: «'So the empty space between two pages or two works is the place and non-place where our limits of ink and screams are set up and broken down'» (Jabès 381). In Jabès's post-Holocaust text, the book is a form that both marks the failure of language to articulate catastrophic loss and yet continually revises the rules of expression in its interpretive word play and cross-generic experiments. [10] That description might well characterize Waldrop's goals in *A Key*. I have argued that Waldrop juxtaposes a history of betrayed treaties with a reverse strategy in her own text: she exposes the thematic and formal «platitudes» (54), «exaggerations» (23), and «Discrepanc[ies]» (41) in her outlines, declaring the book «print / worthy» precisely because it advertises its artifice: «Some Body Hath Made This Lie» (17). But her provisional structures do more than simply reveal the limits of a specific type of book presentation. They invite readers to speculate about a book whose most basic information remains in flux, and if that text cannot be fully realized within a single material format, it nevertheless suggests new directions for a book-poetics to develop.

That is the reason why Waldrop's text offers such diverse answers to the question posed by the stolen title: to what data is this new text a key? Taken to its extreme form, her project outlines a book-poetics of absence without a fixed author-function, the book reduced to an empty frame whose title and layout can be adapted to the content, or lack of content, desired by each new occupant. Yet her play with textual editions also suggests that the frame itself is unstable, prompting readers to imagine a book composed as an ongoing collage of different formats and print incarnations of its information. This might include not only manuscript drafts [11] but also fragments of competing publication copies, reprints, excerpts, and translations all vying for authority. And in that contested authority, where would one place a book form based on acts of piracy that deliberately misrepresents its promised contents, a text that simultaneously copies too much information and too little? Poised between the prospect of purely deceitful or absent forms (a «night too long ago for architecture» [7]) and an excess of possible structures («High surface motion, endless, endless» [37]), Waldrop makes sure that the «complex variables» (55) in her own Key never permit an absolute or conclusive book. Of all the text's information, the brief warning label «Liable to sudden deviation» remains the most reliable signpost for the reader caught in the playful «ambush» of the book's evolving forms (59).

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Notes

[1] Waldrop has created numerous palimpsests of her own, including *The Reproduction of Profiles* (1987) and *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (1993). *Shorter American Memory* (1988), as Kornelia Freitag notes, borrows the language of the source book and also models most of its chapter titles on the text's headings (452), but it does not reproduce the book conventions and chapter structures as systematically as in *A Key into the Language of America*.

[2] «Book-poems» offer an alternative to the premise of the book as an informational instrument; they distort the conventions of prefaces, indices, chapter divisions, pagination, illustrations, and syntax that enable the reader to process textual data. For recent examples of this genre, see the book art of Steve McCaffery, bpNichol, Johanna Drucker, Darren Wershler-Henry, and Christian Bök.

[3] His opening letter emphasizes the distinctiveness of the book's information and the urgency of its publication: «I Present you with a Key; I have not heard of the like, yet framed, since it pleased God to bring that mighty Continent of America to light,» a guide composed after having «been importun'd by worthy friends, of all sorts, to afford them some helps this way» (83). All quotations from Williams are taken from the 1973 text of *A Key into the Language of America*, edited by John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz, and are used with the permission of Wayne State University Press.

[4] Adapting Michael Davidson's concept of the «palimtext» that shows the traces of its compositional intertextuality (*Ghostlier Demarcations* 9), Lynn Keller addresses Waldrop's use of source texts to provide «limits that...prove generative in themselves and at the same time invite transgression and transformation» («Fields» 381, 386). Keller's analysis of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* focuses more on the poet's reworking of borrowed propositions, terms, and syntax, however, than of the book formats of the sources specifically.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Rosmarie Waldrop are from *A Key into the Language of America*, used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

[6] By linking this description to the metaphor of a fractal in *Crystallography*, Bök suggests a poetics of «digressions» and «redundancy» that remains equally complex at each new level of scrutiny (n. pag.).

[7] Marjorie Perloff uses Waldrop's own term, «'grammatical terror,'» to describe the «mock causality,» syntactic confusion, and intertextuality of *The Reproduction of Profiles* (Wittgenstein's Ladder 210, 209); she also discusses the visual page art and sound play in the «'nonsentences'» of *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (*Poetry On and Off the Page* 159-163). Jonathan Monroe analyzes Waldrop's «'syntextural'» poetics, noting among other devices in her prose poetry the «paratactic effects within a predominantly hypotactic frame,» the abrupt changes in tone and diction, the digressive exposition, and the deconstruction of binaries (133-35). See too Waldrop's analysis of the «semantic slidings» and interplay between subject and object positions in her compositions («Alarms and Excursions» 59, 61, 64-5).

[8] In a conversation with Joan Retallack published in *Contemporary Literature*, Waldrop herself revises the palimpsest imagery: «But if there's the palimpsest then why am I anxious about the white space?» (368). She rephrases the discussion in images of linguistic «plenitude almost as large, almost as unlimited and full of possibilities as emptiness» (368).

[9] Waldrop includes language from Needell's *Not a Balancing Act* and Fardoulis-Lagrange's *Le texte inconnu* and pays tribute to Howe's palimpsests of early American texts in altered phrases such as «articulation of sound forms in waiting» (18).

[10] Waldrop analyzes the structural experimentation of Jabès's books, in which narratives can develop solely in the form of commentary, and she notes his excessive use of devices such as metaphor in a way that «paradoxically undermines and empties itself» to disrupt signification («Signs and Wonderings» 352-54).

[11] See too Davidson's discussion of reading the poetic text as archive in his study of the manuscript pages of George Oppen (64-78).

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