Lives Being Language: Reading Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop

by

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To Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop,
for welcoming this thesis, and me, into their home
I learned about communication by twisting my legs around yours as, in spinning a thought, we twist fiber on fiber

—Rosmarie Waldrop, *Curves to the Apple*
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Introduction: “The Splice of Life”

COLLAGE, THE SPLICE OF LIFE / is one of my main methods. No text has one single author in any case. The blank page is not blank. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we always write on top of a palimpsest...I have foregrounded this awareness of the palimpsest as a method: using, transforming, “translating” parts of other works. It is not a question of linear “influence” and not just of tradition. It is a way of getting out of myself. Into what? An interaction, a dialog with language, with a whole net of earlier and concurrent texts. Relation. Between.

—R. Waldrop, Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie 90-1

In the passage I quote above, Rosmarie Waldrop reflects on the central concerns of this thesis: the relationships and conversations between one text and others, one voice and others. Aptly, this passage opens with a phrase that exhibits a technique we see often in Rosmarie’s work and that she describes here as “using, transforming, ‘translating’ parts of other works.” She uses the phrase, “slice of life,” translates it from the French tranche de la vie, which was “a term originally applied to French Naturalist literature” to mean “a realistic and detailed portrayal...of incidents typical of everyday life,” and then transforms it (OED). Instead of “slice” she writes “SPLICE,” which is a noun that refers to different kinds of unions or combinations. Therefore the first line of this passage can be rephrased: collage is the union or combination of various parts of life. Unlike a slice of life, the splice of life doesn’t purport to be realistic or naturalist. Instead, it emphasizes its composition, its status as a palimpsest, and the page as a meeting place for multiple texts and voices.

What’s so compelling about Rosmarie’s description of this palimpsest method is that she has worked as a typesetter for Burning Deck, the press she founded with her husband Keith Waldrop. She describes typesetting in Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie: “Setting type by hand is so slow it seemed the invention of close reading” (R. Waldrop, Ceci 77). Here, Rosmarie represents the author not as the origin of a text...
but rather as another reader of language. Rosmarie borrows and develops another striking image of the writer’s position from Cervantes: “I like the image in Don Quixote that compares translation to working on a tapestry: you sit behind the canvas…You follow out patterns, but you have no idea what image will appear on the other side” (89). Here, the translator creates something other than the text it attempts to faithfully represent. Instead of establishing a one-to-one correspondence, the translation defers to and differs from the original. Rosmarie extends this idea of translation further when she writes, “This holds for living as well. Step by single step. And for writing. I don’t even have thoughts, I have methods that make language think, take over and me by the hand” (ibid.). Here, as in the above passage about the splice of life, Rosmarie defamiliarizes a familiar phrase, “take me by the hand,” using, transforming, and translating it into, “take over and me by the hand.” Language is Rosmarie’s partner here, guiding her, and taking her by the hand.

Rosmarie often writes about language in this way—combining the way she thinks about language and about love. Often, she writes of the equivalent relations of a union of a word and its meaning and of a person and their partner. For example, in Curves to the Apple, one speaker says, “Your arms were embracing…They held me responsive, but I still wondered about the other lives I might have lived…As if a word should be counted a lie for all it misses. I could imagine my body arching up toward other men…a lost wedding” (R. Waldrop, Curves 71). This passage is imbued with nostalgia, wondering what could have been, what other unions might have been possible. It seems correct to read the “splice of life,” then, as a reflection on missed connections. The word “splice,” conveniently, can also mean “Union by marriage”
Thus, for Rosmarie language constitutes a union on the level of language and sometimes, too, on the level of partnership or even authorship.

This is the case with the Waldrops, whose relationship began when they met to translate poems from German into English. Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop are two contemporary writers, translators, and publishers. Rosmarie was born in Kitzingen am Main, Germany in August 1935 and has written much about her experience growing up in the Nazi era and the effects it’s had on her writing.¹ In Germany, she studied literature and musicology at the University of Würzburg and the University of Freiburg. Keith was born in Emporia, Kansas in 1932. In 1953, he was drafted into the US Army and was stationed in Rosmarie’s hometown. While Rosmarie was studying at the University of Würzburg, the orchestra she played in performed for soldiers stationed at Kitzingen. Keith was in attendance. After the event, Keith invited Rosmarie and friends to his apartment to listen to some records. After that night, the two met often to translate Nietzsche’s poems into English.

Their relationship began with and also continued because of language. After Keith (on the GI Bill) and Rosmarie studied in France, Keith returned to the States where he won a writing prize in 1958. He sent the prize money to Rosmarie and asked her to marry and come live with him in America. She accepted. Rosmarie went to live in Michigan with Keith, and attended the University of Michigan, where Keith obtained a PhD in 1964 and she obtained a PhD in 1966. Rosmarie has worked as a professor of comparative literature and German studies at Wesleyan University, Tufts

¹ See Rosmarie’s autobiography Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie and her novel The Hanky of Pippin’s Daughter. For reflections on her fraught relationship with language because it can be used as a violent tool, see Rosmarie’s novel A Form / Of Taking / It All and her poetry collection A Key Into The Language Of America.
University, and Brown University, and Keith has worked as a professor of poetry and film history at Wesleyan University and, until recently, Brown University. The two moved to Providence, Rhode Island in 1968, and have lived there ever since.

Their lives became more invested in language when the Waldrops bought a printing press second-hand and started *Burning Deck Magazine* in 1961—a publication that later transformed into Burning Deck Press, which closed in November 2017. The mission of the Press was to publish writing from all literary camps and affiliations (Language Poets, New York School, and so on). The Waldrops saw Burning Deck as a meeting place for writers of all kinds, from all different places and often of many different languages (through English translation).

The Waldrops’ lives are so deeply invested in language, its production and its publication, that their literature seems to reflect most predominantly this sense that language, to use Wittgenstein’s words, is “a part of the human organism” (*Tractatus* 22). For Rosmarie, the self is constantly being written, written over, and rewritten. She even writes, in her essay “The Ground Is the Only Figure,” “I am everything I’ve ever read or written or thought” (250). We see this expression of the self or the couple as discursively produced in the texts I analyze in this thesis: *Ceci n’est pas Keith / Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie* (Chapter 1), *Curves to the Apple* (Chapter 2), and *Flat With No Key* and *Light Travels* (Chapter 3).

This thesis argues that the Waldrops’ collaborative work splices together questions of language and gender. In their collaborative writing, the couple is both performed (coming together on the page) and also linguistic (invoking conventions of

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2 Fortunately I had the opportunity to visit the Waldrops in Providence and to see their home at 71 Elmgrove Avenue. The two spoke generously about their collaborative writing and publishing, and provided comments that proved invaluable for this thesis.
language). In the singly authored works, the speakers wrestle either with external attempts to identify or categorize them or with an opposing figure, thought, or idea. But in the collaboratively authored works, the poems dismiss reflections on sameness and difference or encounters with opposition, moments of disconnect or misunderstanding, in favor of a discussion of what it means to compose and combine language on the page—what it means to couple.

In Chapter 1, “‘Paper-Authors,’” I examine the autobiographical work *Ceci n’est pas Keith / Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie* to show how the Waldrops posit a notion of the self that isn’t singularly or definitively articulated, but more aptly represented as an accumulation or collage—or, even, a pile of papers. Here, one voice is fragmented, fractured, and multiple. In Chapter 2, I examine Rosmarie’s *Curves to the Apple*, a text that wrestles with the gender binary in its intertextual dialogues with masculine-oriented source texts and dramatizes that wrestling on the page, in conversations and encounters between two voices that express oppositional modes of thinking: masculine and feminine. Here, two voices are opposing and cannot be synthesized. Lastly, in Chapter 3, I look at the collaborative works *Flat With No Key* and *Light Travels* and synthesize critical work on collaboration to show how, in the Waldrops’ collaborative works, two voices pleasurably and desirously synthesize to produce each word, line, and stanza. In this way, the thesis moves from two co-published but singly authored works (one voice on the page) to a singly authored but dialogic work (two voices on the page) and finally to two co-authored works (two voices speaking as one). Furthermore, the thesis moves from trying to understand the writerly self as performed (the multiple personas one can inhabit or playing into or against gender
and social norms) and also linguistic (iterative, repeatable, and discursively constructed) to understanding the couple in these two frameworks.

My thesis relies on the classic works *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* by Jonathan Culler and *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler. Both texts helpfully frame this thesis’s concern with how texts and the body are simultaneously written and rewritten. While these texts are referred to only briefly, they proved formative for this thesis’s attempt to articulate the alternation (Culler), waffling (Butler), or shifting between speech acts (Culler) or gender (Butler) as performed or linguistic.³ For both Butler and Culler, this alternation, waffling, or shifting doesn’t result in synthesis. The two also articulate a problem that the Waldrops are concerned with in their writing: that language, even though it exists outside of us, has the ability to shape or entrap us. Culler reflects on how philosophy rejects writing in an attempt to be precise and accurate. He notes how deconstruction doesn’t accept this philosophical rejection and is instead based on the Derridean call to play with language and the materiality of the signifier.⁴ Butler reflects on how to articulate the self in autobiographical writing in the wake of poststructuralism: “I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this ‘I’ possible...you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you” (xxv-i). This quote is helpful for

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³ Culler writes, “A scrupulous theory [of language] must shift back and forth between these perspectives, of event and structure or parole and langue, which never lead to a synthesis” (96). Similarly, Butler reflects on her theory of performativity, saying how it “waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical” because “the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical...), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions” (xxvii).
⁴ Culler writes, “What deconstruction proposes is not an end to distinctions, not an indeterminacy that makes meaning the invention of the reader. The play of meaning is the result of what Derrida calls ‘the play of the world,’ in which the general texts always provides further connections, correlations, and contexts” (134).
understanding how the self is written and also for how this limitation or partial
determination distances us from others.

In Ceci, Rosmarie writes, “I once wrote: ‘I need a book to say I love you.’ The
distance of another’s words to say what touches me most” (Ceci 91). Here, Rosmarie
renders her own words strange with the use of quotation marks. Her use of multiple
“I”s is confusing too: there is the “I” who narrates the autobiography, the “I” who
wrote, “I need a book”, the “I” who needs a book, and the “I” who says “I love you.”
This multiplication distances us from the speaker, who is herself distanced from
previous selves. Rosmarie’s statement maps neatly onto Butler’s statement that, “you
never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you.” In a
similar way, Rosmarie’s text is about how this “I” makes itself available to “you”.
The speaker uses a book to articulate love, to establish its availability to another. As
Rosmarie sees the self as an accumulation of everything one’s thought, read, or
written, a book seems like the perfect appendage for articulating one’s love for
another. In other words, you never receive me apart from the texts that make me.
Chapter 1: “Paper-Authors”
Textualizing the Self in *Ceci n’est pas Keith / Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie*

Can we say / white paper / with black lines on it / is like a human body?
—R. Waldrop, *Love, Like Pronouns*

It is language which speaks, not the author.
—Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

*La trahison des images* by René Magritte

From the French, “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe,*” translates to, “This is not a pipe.”
The above Surrealist painting “*La trahison des images,*” by René Magritte, confronts the problem of representation by emphasizing the treachery of images, which purport to be what they represent when they’re actually something else. The inclusion of text in this painting marks it as a representation, not an actual pipe. In his book *This Is Not a Pipe,* Michel Foucault argues that Magritte goes against convention when he combines representation by resemblance (figure) and by sign (discourse) in the same medium (33-4). The painting doesn’t point to anything outside itself; instead, it operates solely within its layout (52). This obliteration of reference to something outside the work of art is thematized in both sections of *Ceci n’est pas Keith / Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie* (2002)—a pair of autobiographies that undermine the task of autobiographical writing by positing a notion of the self as an iterative, performed subject that can’t be singly articulated.
Keith and Rosmarie allude to Magritte’s painting with the titles of their works, “This is not Keith” and “This is not Rosmarie,” thus invoking the problem of artistic representation evident in Magritte’s work and applying it to the textual representation of the self. While the cover of Ceci depicts an unnamed man who is indeed neither Rosmarie nor Keith, making the titles true, on the title pages for each of their sections they include photos of themselves along with the titles. This combination of “figure” and “discourse,” like we see in Magritte’s painting, obliterates the reference to anything outside the autobiographies. In Keith’s section, we see a photo of Keith pointing, performing the gesture of reference. It appears on the page such that he points to the photo’s caption—he points to the text, and nothing outside it.

Roland Barthes’s essay “From Work to Text” provides a helpful category for such a textualization of the author: “[In texts, the Author] becomes…a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work” (161). Within this framework, life writing is simply another fictional category. Barthes writes, “The word ‘bio-graphy’ re-acquires a strong, etymological sense, at
the same time as the sincerity of the enunciation…becomes a false problem: the I which writes the text, it too, is never more than the paper-I” (ibid.). Rosmarie and Keith implicitly and explicitly dismiss this “false problem” in many ways (ibid.).

The Waldrops mention the fictional accounts of their lives not to say that they (the fictional accounts) are different from what they’re writing now (the autobiographical accounts), but to say that they’re the same. In Rosmarie’s Ceci she writes, “Back in a medium of German…I started a novel, The Hanky of Pippin’s Daughter. It began with portraits of my parents, but quickly became a way of trying to understand, to explore, at least obliquely, the Nazi period, the shadow of the past—and the blurred borders of fact, fabrication, tradition, experience, memory” (Ceci 87). Rosmarie mentions her novel in order to show how she has moved away from direct representation. Her novel isn’t a simple portrait of people or places because telling a story that occurred in Nazi era Germany necessitates a fragmented, fractured style that self-consciously negotiates the borders of fact and fiction. Keith similarly marks his work’s move away from direct representation: “In Light While There Is Light I tried to give a sense, not of my early life, but of the world I passed through in that life, that previous life. I can say of this work, as of that one: nothing here is absolutely true and none of it entirely false” (Ceci 56). Keith equates the veracity of his fiction and non-fiction because he, like Rosmarie, Magritte, and Barthes, believes that a textual representation of a person doesn’t and cannot directly refer to that person. For this reason, categories of true and false, or sincere and insincere, are not useful.

Kimberly Lamm notes how Ceci “undermines, quite subtly and playfully, the assumed certainty of autobiographical genres” (266). What is this “assumed
certainty”? It is the expectation that autobiographies refer to the authors directly, that there is a confident and certain relationship between the word and the world. With the Waldrops, even language, a medium that supposedly mirrors reality, is “a site of uncertainty” (269). Lamm equates, and rightfully so, the instability of a fixed, certain language and the instability of a fixed, certain self and argues that Rosmarie and Keith play with both uncertainties in Ceci (ibid.). Other scholars have noted how the Waldrops imbue their work with these concerns about how language affects, and often constricts, our notions of self. Kornelia Freitag argues that Rosmarie believes in the epistemological functions of language, meaning that changing language can change how we see and know the world (101-2). She also discusses how Rosmarie’s Peculiar Motions revises the notion of the self to be something that is materialized through speech and “made… intelligible through literary systems of representation” (145-6). Tae Yun Lim argues that language “defines the speaker’s identity and the world around her as substantial reality” and so, channeling Judith Butler, our beings are always a linguistic product, “a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language, [because] I am not outside the language that structures me” (Butler xxv, qtd. Lim 62).

In this way, the author is more determined by language than the other way around. Lamm notes how Rosmarie herself believes “writing is the continual making and undoing of the self in writing” and “that this pattern of doing and undoing cannot be wholly determined by the poet’s will” (267). The Waldrops, in Ceci, link the instability of language and of the self in order to undermine the autobiographical genre and also the position of the author. Both privilege language’s agency over the
author’s. Language constructs another world, and texts exceed authorial intention. Both express the sense that language gets away from them, that they lose a sense of what’s true or false, in the process of writing. The two resist, in their fictional and autobiographical accounts, the impulse to point to the author as a solution to the text. They, like Barthes, believe, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (Barthes 147).

On the page, Rosmarie and Keith are simply paper authors that refer, obliquely and indirectly, to their biological selves. Instead of positing a notion of the self as singular, articulable, and inherently meaningful, the Waldrops posit a notion of the subject that’s plural, material rather than transcendent, and not articulable. The two undermine the “sincerity” of enunciation through an emphasis on theater and performance. By bringing their stories together, they create a dialogue. Keith includes a footnote in Ceci that playfully acknowledges this: “I trust this will not conflict with the account in Rosmarie’s autobiography” (Ceci 44). Here, Keith sarcastically acknowledges the doubling that occurs in Ceci when both Waldrops recount an event, as happens here. Instead of providing the true account of this moment or their lives entirely, Keith and Rosmarie playfully textualize themselves, creating subjects that always defer to but are different from them.

_The Excremental Shadow in_ Ceci n’est pas Keith

An old history professor…paid me [a compliment] I have found useful in after years. “You have,” he said, “not too little, not too much—just the right amount—of contempt for your audience.” (K. Waldrop, Ceci 37)

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5 Reading their autobiographies with an eye to gender, we notice how Keith’s relationship to theater and performance is more fulfilling—he chooses to put on personas—while Rosmarie’s is less satisfying—her forays into theater are forced by the war, and her gender is determined by others.
The first house Rosmarie and Keith lived in was “lined with books, all but kitchen and bathroom—for fear of grease and steam” (18). Once they ran out of room elsewhere, however, “Steam seemed the less dangerous and, when the volumes reached too great an overflow, we decided to put shelves in the bathroom. So what books should go there? Books, we decided, with something in title or author to suggest that locus” (19). The first book they included in the bathroom collection was “Ubu Roi, of course” (ibid.). Ubu Roi is “a play so contentious that its premier, in December 1896, was also its closing night. It lives in the annals of drama because it offended almost everyone who saw it. In this, it prefigured modernism, surrealism, Dadaism, and the theater of the absurd” (Paris Review). The play “is a parody of Macbeth in which a revolutionary…does a number of…obscene things…Ubu’s first line is ‘Merdre!’, the French word for shit” but with an extra consonant (ibid.). The first book selection for the bathroom, then, is quite apt. The text’s name or author doesn’t merely suggest “that locus”; instead, Ubu Roi has a meaningful resonance in the space. The list continues, “The Golden Pot. Anything by Adelaide Crapsey…The Sitwells. The Brownings. The Golden Ass. Privy Seal. Free Fall. Let It Come Down. Finally it was hopeless, any word at all doubling its meaning with an excremental shadow. Howards End. Gone with the Wind” (19). Keith playfully inhabits the “excremental shadow” behind these texts, playing with how a title or an author’s name can have this other meaning in the bathroom context.

Keith conceives of language in such a way that everything has an excremental shadow; meaninglessness and waste pervade his text. Considering Keith wrote his dissertation on “the aesthetics of obscenity” in the comparative literature program at
the University of Michigan, it isn’t surprising that he mentions *Ubu Roi* multiple times in *Ceci* and has performed the play himself (26). Keith’s stories are filled with misunderstanding and confusion. The text is riddled with literature talks that crowds don’t understand, performances Keith and his friends put on to trick audiences, and memories of words or phrases Keith could never make sense of. Keith privileges the absurd, nonsensical, and obscene and posits a notion of the self as constructed through such insincere enunciation. Even further, he argues for a relationship to language and literature that doesn’t take itself too seriously and that operates with a playful performativity that basks in its meaninglessness, its excess—its *shit*.

Before analyzing scenes that recount performances, self-consciously insincere enunciations, I will look at moments in which Keith reflects on language’s aural qualities, the signifier, as opposed to language’s meaning, the signified. The autobiography begins, “I know, in songs, how important the words are, how the melody is—in some sense—dependent on the words. And yet I almost always listen…without taking the text into account, without in some cases any idea of what the song is about” (*Ceci* 9). Rather than focus on a song’s lyrics or meaning, Keith listens only to the melody. Instead of being bothered by this, Keith writes, “It seems…this partial experience of the total song—adequate” (ibid.). The word “adequate” can be defined, “Equal in size or extent,” and also, “Philos…Of an idea, concept, etc.: fully and exactly representing its object” (OED). Keith invokes both of these senses here. He sees the partial experience as somehow on par with the total experience. Further, instead of engaging with the philosophical use of “adequate” as something that “fully and exactly represent[s] its object,” Keith flips the term’s
meaning. Instead, he uses the word to describe his partial experience of the thing—he hasn’t “any idea of what the song is about” (9). It is not the idea (the lyrics) that Keith finds adequate—it is the object (the melody).

We see another example of Keith privileging sound over meaning when he writes, “The sound of talk in another language can be quite distinctive without one’s knowing the language, without even knowing…what language is being spoken. I sometimes hear…what seems a new tongue, enunciating what are probably commonplaces in an incomprehensible—and, thereby, magical—message” (Ceci 9­-10). Here, the text invokes linguistic concepts and subverts them. The linguistic meaning of “distinctive,” is, “Applied…to a phonetic feature that is capable of distinguishing one meaning from another” (OED). But here Keith writes that this “sound of talk…can be quite distinctive” precisely because one doesn’t know the language. Keith uses “distinctive” not to signify how meaning is distinguished but to describe how aural qualities of language block our ability to distinguish meaning.

Keith also recalls moments in which not knowing the meaning of words or phrases led his younger self to intuit obscene or inappropriate meaning. For example, he remembers phrases his father “produced whenever remotely appropriate” (15). He elaborates on one particular phrase; “‘Crazy was always ‘crazy as a peach orchard boar.’…But what did it mean, that ‘peach orchard boar’? Or was it ‘bore’? My father always chuckled as he said it and my mother seemed scandalized, so I assumed—as a child—it must be some sort of obscenity. I have, to this day, no clue” (15-16). The homonyms “bore” and “boar” confused the younger Keith. Added onto this sonic
confusion, younger Keith’s attempt to deduce meaning through context clues falsely leads him to intuit obscenity (“my mother seemed scandalized”).

Keith also develops his interest in the excess of language and the insincerity of the enunciation through the stories he tells about pranks and performances he and his friends have put on over the years. For example, after the Beat Generation became prominent, Keith and his college friends devised a plan in which they would pretend to be renowned members of the Beat Generation and put on a talk. (They went so far as to hire an actress to play one of the poets.) Keith writes, “We thought of it as a joke, but also an experiment. We would arrange the evening to become more and more ridiculous as it went along, to see just how far we could go before the hoax became apparent and our bluff was called” (Ceci 22). The group of young men constructed backstories, “biographical notes,” for their characters and prepared extensively for the performance (23). They scattered fliers that included made-up quotes from Henry Miller endorsing one of the writers who would be in attendance. Keith had been “doubtful, thinking that few people would show up, that those who did would already be in the know, or immediately recognize either [friend and co-performer] Bob Dunn or me” (34). Instead, Keith was met by a crowd genuinely excited to hear the Beat poets perform: “The audience ate it up” (25).

Like the Beat Generation hoax, when Keith was invited to host a fiftieth-anniversary Dada event at Wesleyan while he was teaching there, he thought, “Perhaps no one would come anyway” (Ceci 38). His main concern with the event was that he didn’t want to “[reduce] Dada to the dreariness of subject matter” so he planned two jokes to lighten the occasion (38-9). One of the jokes involved a great
build up in which Keith couldn’t control his laughter as he tried reading from a sheet of paper grabbed from under the podium. Finally, he calmed down and turned the sheet around so all could see: his Ph.D. diploma (42). The absurd thing about this joke is that it apparently led to Keith’s not being asked back at Wesleyan the following year (“I was informed that I would not be teaching at Wesleyan next year…One member of the department was in fact at my celebration of Dada…and ‘never forgave you for that academic-degree bit’” [ibid.].) After this, Keith took on a post at Brown, where he taught until retirement. Pages before this incident, Keith writes, “With a dissertation on obscenity, my friends kept asking me, “‘where do you think you’ll ever find a job?’ It was a perfectly serious question, but I decided to treat it as a joke. ‘Obviously,’ I said, ‘Brown University’” (31). Keith foregrounds his interest in the excremental shadow of language, the humor and obscenity that comes with the manipulation of and playing with the signifier.

What become difficult to integrate into this reflection on the excess of language are moments in which the text seriously reflects on life and death. For example, Keith writes, “I think continually of the perdurance of particles” (Ceci 12). “Perdurance” is defined, “The state or quality of being everlasting; permanence” (OED). The “perdurance of particles” refers to a philosophical theory of persistence and identity. Keith implicitly references this theory later: “What is in my mind—or I should simply say, what my mind is (which is to say, my environment)—well, in a sense, that is precisely what I’m not. In another sense, it is all in the world I am” (51). Keith posits a notion of the self as dispersed in one’s environment. The self is
simultaneously negated and affirmed, nothing and everything, what it is not and all in
the world it is.

Keith counterbalances his reflections on selfhood and mortality with critiques
of pompous, all-too-serious quotes. He writes, “I have always despised the pompous
sound of ‘And death shall have no dominion’ along with its silly message. (I can
remember other pompous, and even siller, lines: e.g., ‘I think continually of those
who were truly great’)” (Ceci 11, my emphasis). Here, he quotes Dylan Thomas
(first) and Stephen Spender (second). Both quotes argue against mortality’s absolute
dissolution of the self. In the first, death is not in charge, and in the second, because
the author thinks “continually” of the truly great, they are not forgotten and so never
die. Keith mocks both quotes, even as he alludes to the language of the second in his
line, “I think continually of the perdurance of particles,” a line that both negates the
self in its dispersal but also affirms it in its perdurance (12, my emphasis).

On the last page of his autobiography, Keith reflects on how writing is an
attempt to grasp at a perdurance of the self. He writes, referencing the opening line of
Herodotus’ Persian Wars, “With neither great and wonderful actions nor any sense of
glory to report, I write this—or maybe it’s these—against the decay of remembrance”
(Ceci 56). It isn’t death that Keith tries to stand up against but the decay of memory, a
particularly human loss. Further, Keith pluralizes “this” into “these,” dissolving the
individual into the multiple. By writing, too, “With neither great and wonderful
actions nor any sense of glory,” Keith points to the absurd anecdotes he shares in Ceci
but instead of saying they are meaningless, he asserts their excess as an attempt to
combat memory’s decay.

23
Musil’s concept of identity rang true to me: consisting of multiple selves, with “character” and “qualities” being our most impersonal traits because they are what is reinforced from the outside (R. Waldrop, Ceci 72).

I have always thought of poetry as a way of building a world. The world is certainly not a given, even if it occupies more and more of the sky. Building a counter-world, not better, but other (64).

Rosmarie’s Ceci, like Keith’s, makes language a site of uncertainty by pointing to the insincerity of enunciation and representation. From the start, Rosmarie disrupts the one-to-one correspondence between the world and its representation when she refers to a photo, “I wash (drown?) dolls in the tub…I hold up my…Raggedy-Ann doll, but male…The photo does not show the doll was named Ulli (my name had I been a boy)” (Ceci 59-60). Here, Rosmarie reflects on how the photo fails to capture the moment entirely because it can’t capture a subject’s intention or motivation (is she washing or drowning the dolls?) or the backstory behind the photo and its subjects. The autobiography continues to disrupt the correspondence between the world and its representation.

The text even mocks an interest in word-world correspondence in the section “FOR REFERENCE,” which reads, “I was born on August 24, 1935, in Kitzingen am Main, Germany, the daughter of Josef Sebald, a highschool teacher, and Frederike, nee Wohlgemuth. My twin sisters Annelie and Dorle were born 9 years earlier, in

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6 Robert Musil, author of The Man Without Qualities, had an antagonistic relationship to war and its effects on the self that Rosmarie identified with when she discovered his writing while studying at University: “Musil’s concept of identity rang true to me: consisting of multiple selves, with ‘character’ and ‘qualities’ being our most impersonal traits because they are what is reinforced from the outside” (72). In the same passage in which Rosmarie discusses how Musil’s concept of identity rang true to her own, she writes, “I was fascinated by the way the narrative calls itself into question, both thematically and by always pitting a two-dimensional grid of details against the famous ‘narrative thread’” (72). Rosmarie is thus interested in a kind of collage structure that calls the narrative into question.
1926” (*Ceci* 60). For a text that destabilizes the connection between the word and the world, what do we make of the inclusion of facts, dates, references to reality? First, such facts establish Rosmarie’s context in what was then Nazi Germany—a historical time and place that determined much about her relationship to language and the world. We see Rosmarie connect these ideas about fact and fiction and her attempts to obliterate the reference when she writes, “*I WAS AN ONLY CHILD,*” which isn’t true; she had twin sisters. The text continues, “even though I wore hand-me-downs from my sisters” (60). This insincere enunciation leads not to a dismantling of the text but to its construction. Such a rejection of what it means to be an only child allows the text to ask, “Could a child be born from something not a mother?” (60). In the real world, no, but in the world of this text, yes, it does indeed seem that Rosmarie was born not from a mother but from the war.

Rosmarie writes about living during the war as existing on a kind of stage. After recounting the first time her town was bombed, Rosmarie writes, “*WAR A SURFACE TO LIVE ON*…At the sound of the siren everybody ran to the cellar” (*Ceci* 62). Unlike Keith who playfully and absurdly basks in the meaningless excess of language, Rosmarie points to the danger of this excess and the possibility of its violent manipulation. Like Keith, who reflects on childhood memories of sounds, Rosmarie too reflects on sounds, though they all relate to the war: “*HITLER ON THE RADIO*…I remember the voice,” “*WAR CAME OUT OF THE RADIO BEFORE / I HAD TIME TO SCRATCH ON A SLATE,*” and “*MY FIRST SCHOOLDAY, SEPTEMBER 1941 / A COOL DAY / I was taught.* The Nazi salute, the flute” (61, 62). Here, Rosmarie connects her childhood education, her assimilation into the world
of music and literature, to the sounds and voices of the war. Her language here includes echos, “salute” and “flute,” to show how the war affected the way she uses language as less about meaning and more about material sounds and resonances.

Indeed, Rosmarie reflects on this explicitly when she writes, “the raw experience of war is no doubt the more crucial ‘cause’ of [my] turn against images [in writing]” (RCeci 82-3). Here, Rosmarie flips the word “war” to make the word “raw” to show this resistance to language as a mirror image of the world; instead, language is a mirror for itself. With this flip, Rosmarie shows that while her writing isn’t interested in images, it is concerned with the way language is itself reflected. This “raw” experience points to the real fear and danger Rosmarie faced in her childhood. For example, Rosmarie reflects how play was tinged with real danger: “School stopped. We kids ran wild. The ruins became our castles. With an undercurrent of terror that we might find real bodies in our imagined dungeons” (64). Material reality always found a way to enter. Rosmarie’s writing similarly navigates the material and the immaterial qualities of words, working against metaphor or meaning and working towards the sign’s materiality.

Having grown up in Nazi Germany, which created a blurred understanding of fact and fiction, Rosmarie had a different relationship to theater than Keith. She writes, “MY CAREER IN THE THEATER was brief” (65). Her theater career came about and ended because of the war—the theater troupe that picked her up rode around in an “American army truck”—and its effects on public schools—“School did not reopen in Kitzingen [her hometown] until January 1946” (65). Instead of
attending school, Rosmarie acted. Without school and without being old enough to work towards the war effort, Rosmarie was at a loss: what role could she play?

The roles she played were limiting and help to reveal a larger constriction of her identity during the war. After Rosmarie’s town was bombed for the second time, and her sisters were drafted, “ALL HANDS IN THE FIELDS / WOMEN OR PRISONERS… One to a munitions factory, the other to an anti-aircraft unit,” Rosmarie’s parents sent her to live on her uncle’s farm (64). Ironic in its pointed disregard for people without a role in the war effort, Rosmarie’s aunt took to calling her “‘thing'” (64). To give herself some purpose, Rosmarie joined the theater: “[In the] afternoons,” she writes, “I was a dwarf in Snow White” (65). The dwarfs are characters defined by and named for singular qualities. The limitations of these roles proved stifling: “I was proud to be paid like the rest of the cast, but soon got bored playing the same parts every day. I couldn’t wait for school to start again” (65).

Rosmarie describes a series of external attempts to characterize her and her dissatisfaction with those identities not only in terms of the war but also in terms of gender. She provides anecdotes of attempts to cast her as a woman, instances in which she was encouraged or forced to assimilate femininity into her identity. Rosmarie writes, “During my last year in the girls’ school we had been given a lecture on charm—a concession to femininity, along with dancing lessons. The lecture stressed we should practice smiling at people till it became ‘natural’” (67-8). Of course, convention can’t become natural—it can only appear to be so. Rosmarie, unsurprisingly, failed to assimilate the convention into her identity. Once when she attempted to smile (“I had been practicing”), a classmate reacted, “‘What a crush you
have on Kurti Höhn. I couldn’t help laughing when I saw you pass him”” (68).

Rosmarie was humiliated—the feminine quality she adopted failed to fulfill her. Even further, her attempt was misconstrued—while she may have had a crush on Kurti that wasn’t the reason why she smiled. She had done so because the charm lesson encouraged her to. Rosmarie shares a similar anecdote about a priest who attempted to plant the qualities of humility and modesty, feminine “virtues”, on her. The text reads, “‘You are very bright,’ he said, ‘but if you were really bright you would not show it’” (68). The quote displays the absurdity of these gender norms, especially as they pertain to femininity, which expects women to be visible and silent, thing-like.

Like how Rosmarie sees her formal rejection of images in her writing as a response to her experience of the war, Rosmarie also sees her experiences of sexism and imposed gender norms as factors that determined her formal disruption of subject-object relations. She writes, “Later I realized that my feminist concerns were surfacing in the very grammar. Who could have more interest in subverting a rigid subject-object relation than women, who have been treated as the object par excellence?” (84). In this way, Rosmarie looks to grammar and signifying systems in order to disrupt those patriarchal norms. Rosmarie reflects on others ways she attempted to remove external qualities imposed on her in a section titled, “WE SWAPPED KNIVES TO PEEL OFF / CHILDHOOD LIKE SO MANY SKINS” (67).

Childhood, here, doesn’t merely impress certain qualities on a child. Rather, these

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7 Freitag notes how Rosmarie is against the Romantic notions of expressiveness and organic form and instead stresses composition with a shift away from metaphor and symbolism (Freitag 104-6). In this way, Rosmarie doesn’t deny physical reality but “undermines some of the symbolic meanings traditionally ascribed to it” (110). Freitag continues, “She does not question the existence and significance of sequences and causal chains but the way in which they stabilize and are stabilized in thought, communication, and poetry” (110).
qualities cover the child entirely, constituting an outer skin. These impositions of personality and character, then, must be physically removed. The text proposes that destabilizing language’s relationship to the world is one way to perform this peeling.\(^8\)

Rosmarie notices how the body and language are linked. She writes, “DOES THE BODY ALWAYS CONTAIN ITS OWN ABSENCE? Montaigne thought of writing, studying as an apprenticeship of death. Because it can draw our soul out of us and keep it busy outside the body” (93). While textualizing the self can provide some reprieve from the real world because it constitutes a subject outside of the body, the body itself reminds of the real world and its dangerous materiality. Rosmarie continues, “Nevertheless, I was totally unprepared for breast cancer. Or for Keith’s gangrenous gall bladder four years later…[I hope] that one part each is all we have to give up” (93). Here, the word “part” reminds of this chapter’s discussion of theater and performance. Indeed, this passage, a reflection on aging, is about the loss of possibility, of missing out on a part or role one could have played. The simple answer to the question to Rosmarie’s question, “DOES THE BODY ALWAYS CONTAIN ITS OWN ABSENCE,” is yes. A body, precisely because it is a living thing, always contains its impending absence, its future death. In the same way a text defers to reality, the body defers to death. So while a text presents the possibility of

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\(^8\) The last external imposition explored in Ceci is that of nationality and language. Rosmarie reflects on how she’d thought that by moving from Germany to America she’d obtain a “wholly new identity,” but quickly found this was not the case (72). In fact, Rosmarie writes, “I WAS SHOCKED AT MY LACK OF CULTURE SHOCK,” partially because, “Michigan had a large German population” (74). She found herself living among those who affirmed her “past” identity and so couldn’t move beyond it. The moment she does achieve a “new identity,” Keith brings it about. Rosmarie writes, “YOU’VE BECOME AMERICAN,” Keith told me one morning. ‘You talked in your sleep, and it was English,’” (76). Here, Keith speaks Rosmarie’s new identity into existence. In a similar way, Rosmarie’s “little nieces laughed” at her when she visited them in Germany because she “talked funny” (79). In her words, “I had an American accent in my native language! I spoke nothing ‘right’ any more. Even my speech was marked by my non-place between languages, between countries” (79).
constituting a subject and a world that is other outside the real world, the real world can’t be avoided; it painfully finds its way back in.

_Bodies of Work_

Both Rosmarie and Keith conclude their autobiographies with similar images of papers, gathered together or piled up. Keith writes, “With neither great and wonderful actions nor any sense of glory to report, I write this or maybe it’s these—against the decay of remembrance” (Ceci 56). For Keith, these papers allow something of him to persist after his death. Similarly, Rosmarie writes, “The years Keith and I have lived together are piled on the path to the shore. In splendid profusion. We walk on them” (93). For Rosmarie, “the years” she and Keith “have lived together,” recounted in these autobiographies, are like a pile of papers. With this image, the Waldrops provide an alternative performance of the self as an accumulation of its iterations. In Rosmarie’s _Curves to the Apple_, she writes, alluding to Wittgenstein, and also to the above line about a body containing its own absence, “That language can suggest a body where there is none. Or does a body always contain its own absence?” (Curves 57). Rosmarie connects these concerns about language and the body and the body and death with allusions to another’s text and to another of her own texts. (This process of self-quoting runs throughout the Waldrops’ work.) But she doesn’t simply combine these concerns; she presents them as two ways to conceptualize a body’s absence.

That Rosmarie invokes this quote again and follows it with a reflection on the years she and Keith have lived together, which are piled like papers on the path to the
shore, guides us into the second and third chapters of this thesis. What about being a part of a couple allows for this accumulation? What is the same about accumulating years and accumulating papers? In *Love, Like Pronouns*, Rosmarie writes, “Our lives being now language, the emphasis has moved,” and in the collaborative *Flat with No Key*, the authors quote half of this same line (*Love, Like Pronouns* 79). Indeed, with these closing passages in *Ceci*, we get the sense that Rosmarie and Keith have incorporated their ideas about language into their concerns about life. Their bodies and the years they have lived together are, in this way, an accumulation of words, phrases, and books.
Chapter 2: Wrestling with Gender in *Curves to the Apple*

Heterogeneous elements produce a fruitful kind of tension, one that stretches my ideas in the process of wrestling them together
—R. Waldrop, “A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop”

Is it because we cannot capture our own selves or because logically nothing is on its own that we turn to each other for reflection and echo as philosophers always go back to the same props and propositions?
—R. Waldrop, *Curves to the Apple*

If Rosmarie and Keith playfully multiply, defer to, and finally differ themselves from their autobiographical I’s, what are we to make of their poetic speakers? When their poems say “I,” who speaks? When they are addressed to “you,” to whom are they directed? In Chapter 1 I argue that Rosmarie and Keith subvert the autobiographical genre, the ability to singularly articulate the self as a unified individual, by mocking the idea that a representation of a thing is the thing itself. Language is always other than what it represents, always missing, exceeding, or slipping away from its supposed referent. This, an autobiography of Keith, is not Keith, nor is one of Rosmarie, Rosmarie. In Rosmarie’s words, “This ‘I’ has lately been confused with the expression of unquestioned subjectivity and identity. But it simply indicates that language is taking place” (*Curves to the Apple* xii).

This idea that language is something not owned but rather activated by the author is explored further in Rosmarie’s *Curves to the Apple* (2006). For this reason, Chapter 2 considers *Curves* with accent on its multiple forms of dialogue. *Curves* is a plural text in the most basic sense: a collection of three individual collections of poetry (*The Reproduction of Profiles* [1987], *Lawn of Excluded Middle* [1993], and *Reluctant Gravities* [1999]), separately and reissued by New Directions under a new
title. Nodding to the dialogue and friction among the collections in the introduction to Curves, Rosmarie writes, “The poems of this trilogy try to navigate conflicting, but inextricable, claims of body and mind, feeling and logic” (Curves xi). In other words, Curves navigates incompatible ideas that nevertheless can’t be wrested free from one another. Curves dramatizes these oppositional claims with two voices on the page, one expressing a masculine mode of thinking that maps onto claims of mind and logic and the other a feminine mode that maps onto claims of body and feeling. Curves maps the gender binary in a normative fashion that, Rosmarie admits, impels readers to gender the speakers “I” and “you” (xii). But, Rosmarie argues, the voices “can also be the two voices of everybody’s inner dialogue” (ibid.). In this way, the voices are not of a specific gender but rather express a gendered mode of thinking that’s in line with normative conceptions of gender.

Rosmarie activates and animates the gender binary in this way not to argue that it is fixed or correct, but to show how it is constantly being activated, revised, and wrestled with—within a text, oneself, or a relationship between two people. Rosmarie says, in an interview with Christine Hume in 2006, “Heterogeneous elements produce a fruitful kind of tension, one that stretches my ideas in the process of wrestling them together” (“A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop” 257-8). Here, Rosmarie connects this wrestling together of heterogeneous elements to expansion. If one connects this imagery to Rosmarie’s animation of the gender binary in Curves, this passage reads like a normative description of heterosexual sex—two bodies with heterogeneous “elements” have sex and the woman becomes pregnant, her belly stretching and expanding as a result. In this way, Rosmarie sees the wrestling together
of heterogeneous elements as that which produces horizontal expansion as opposed to linear progression or logical derivation.

In *Curves*, Rosmarie provides moments or scenes of heterogeneous elements “wrestling” on the page. The word “wrestle” is alluded to in *Profiles* and appears explicitly in *Lawn* and *Gravities*. In *Profiles*, a bride with a mind/body division wrestles a groom to the ground. In *Lawn*, a speaker describes the process of writing as one in which it\(^9\) wrestles with its body to produce words on a page. And in the prologue to *Gravities*, we have a self-conscious reflection on what it means for two voices to wrestle on a page. The word “wrestle” is thus used to describe physical struggles to overpower another (invoking images of performed or staged fighting) in addition to intellectual debates in which speakers try to out-think their opponents. Wrestling is also used to describe one’s struggle with a concept, situation, or emotion.

The image of “wrestling” runs parallel to the text’s larger play with dialogue. *Curves* declares the page as a meeting place in the prologue to *Gravities*: “the point of encounter is here [on the page], always” (R. Waldrop, *Curves* 104, my emphasis). This dialogue comes in two modes: one is that which occurs between texts, and the other is everyday conversation between two voices. In this way, the page becomes a place where oppositional elements encounter and wrestle with each other. Scholar Fiona McMahon notes how Rosmarie’s work forces the reader to “encounter poetry from the perspective of its composition,” “a confrontation in which the page is portrayed as a literal meeting place and a locus of epistemological inquiry” (65). In this essay, McMahon categorizes Rosmarie’s *A Key into the Language of America* as

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\(^9\) I will be using the pronouns it/its for the speakers in *Curves* as Rosmarie (and I too) see these speakers as grammatical loci through which normative conceptions of gender and the language that maps onto those conceptions move.
what Michael Davidson calls a “palimptext.” Another scholar, Lynn Keller, categorizes Rosmarie’s Profiles and Lawn as palimptexts. Davidson defines a “palimptext” as “writing that displays its formations in other writings…an arrested moment in an ongoing process of signifying, scripting, and typing” (Davidson 9, qtd. Keller 381). In this way, Curves takes up the content and form of those texts, acknowledging and revising them even as it mocks them, to propose a feminist poetics that doesn’t separate itself from men or masculinity but takes up both masculine and feminine modes of thinking to produce an androgynous hybrid of voices, genders, and genres. Rosmarie foregrounds this in the structure and content of her text—she adopts the formal rigidity of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus while refusing the closure and logic of her content.

Multiple scholars have identified an ideological genealogy from Wittgenstein to Gertrude Stein to Rosmarie. Scholars Marjorie Perloff, Joan Retallack, and Jonathan Monroe note how Rosmarie shares an ideological concern with Wittgenstein and Stein: the interest in how language has “the power to make us captive, to captivate and so entrap us” (Monroe 126). Perloff similarly suggests that what connects Rosmarie to Wittgenstein is that, quoting Rosmarie, “we cannot get out of...

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10 Keller also categorizes this text as a palimptext in her essay “Nothing, for a woman, is worth trying’: A Key Into Rosmarie Waldrop’s Experimentalism.”
11 Jonathan Monroe argues that Rosmarie’s texts refuse categorization as either “philosophy” or “poetry” by switching between the two (134). Steven R. Evans notes how Curves “[traces] two cognate structures, the logical…and the erotic…to their common fulcrum in the subject’s desire to know” (294). Freitag writes that Profiles and Lawn bridge the “gap between literary and philosophical discourse” (122).
12 Freitag argues that the prose poem is the appropriate form for Rosmarie’s intertextual project: “Waldrop’s rigid structuring and subsequent sabotage of this very structure is…a parody of Wittgenstein’s numerical principle in the Tractatus which aims at an especially complete logical derivation but inevitably leads to highlighting the gaps in the reasoning process” (126).
13 Marjorie Perloff includes Rosmarie’s Profiles in her book Wittgenstein’s Ladder as an example of a contemporary work “written under the sign of Wittgenstein” (6). Joan Retallack writes how Rosmarie “is…progeny of both Steins—Gertrude and Wittgen” (505).
language” (Perloff 205). Monroe importantly notes how the philosophical notion that language “bewitches” us is a misogynistic one (Monroe 126). One speaker in *Gravities* provides a more nuanced and non-sexist way of understanding our relationship to language: “Language…spells those who love it” (R. Waldrop, *Curves* 108). The word “spells” here can mean the spelling of the names of those who love language and also the bewitchment of those who use language.

*Curves*’s intertextual dialogue is double in its own, intrinsic dialogues—dramatizing the gender binary with speakers wrestling on the page while the text itself wrestles with male-oriented source texts. From Wittgenstein *Curves* borrows, and works with, the form of the philosophical dialogue. These dialogues are dramatized in the form of an everyday conversation between “I” and “you” (in *Profiles* and *Lawn*) and “she” and “he” (in *Gravities*). This chapter will analyze *Curves* chronologically, moving from *Profiles* and *Lawn* to *Gravities*. This decision is based in the similarities between *Profiles* and *Lawn*. They both more obviously engage in intertextual dialogue, their prose poem format is standard throughout, and their speakers, “I” and “you”, are not explicitly gendered. By contrast, *Gravities* wrestles with its intertextual source texts in less obvious ways, is written in a multi-genre format that includes prose poems, lyric poems, and journal or collage-like pages, and presents speakers that are gendered “she” and “he.”

The contentious entanglement of the gender binary as animated in I/you and she/he reveals *Curves*’s larger interest in textual form and content as something inherited, not created anew. One speaker in *Lawn* asks, “Is it because we cannot

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14 Jonathan Culler discusses philosophy’s resistance to and rejection of language in *On Deconstruction* in a section titled “Writing and Logocentrism.”
capture our own selves or because logically nothing is on its own that we turn to each other for reflection and echo as philosophers always go back to the same props and propositions?” (75). Here, the speaker articulates a question that aptly describes the concerns of this chapter. Does Curves locate concerns about articulating the self through inherited grammars and genres in the form of the couple in conversation, wrestling on the page, because we cannot singly articulate the self or because things are necessarily relational? These “props and propositions” are the claims of mind and body and feeling and logic that Rosmarie discusses in her introduction. Indeed, the text emphasizes its return to these props and propositions through the mimicry and quotation of philosophical texts. It reflects them, however, with a focus on how the gender binary is the prop and proposition that must be wrestled with first.

*Lawn of Excluded Middle* as a whole enacts an echoing, a return to, the “law of excluded middle,” which is a law of propositional reasoning that “affirms that, for any statement \( S \), the claim ‘\( S \) or not \( S \)’ is logically true...One version of the law of excluded middle in Aristotle denies that there is anything intermediate between the two halves of a contradiction” (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Rosmarie writes, in the introduction to *Curves*, “The theme [of empty transcendence, a non-existent God] connected with the law of excluded middle. I had used—and misused—Wittgenstein phrases all through *The Reproduction of Profiles*. I could now happily continue trying to subvert the authority, the closure, of logical propositions and explore the fertile ‘lawn’ between true and false, black and white” (*Curves* xi). Here, Rosmarie articulates this subversion of the law of excluded middle in a feminized
way—the text refuses closure, refuses to pick one side of a binary and so expands the “fertile ‘lawn’ between” the two sides of the binary.

The prologue to *Gravities*, “Two Voices,” reflects on this space between: “Even if voices wrestle on the page, their impact on the air is part of their definition. In a play, for instance, the sentences would be explained by their placement on stage. We would not ask an actress what anguish her lines add up to. She would not worry what her voice touches” (103). In contrast to the actress, embodied and speaking onstage, voices are disembodied: “Voices, planted on the page, do not ripen or bear fruit. Here placement does not explain, but *cultivates the vacancy between* them” (103, my emphasis). Here, we have a contrast to Rosmarie’s above quote: “heterogeneous elements produce a fruitful kind of tension, one that *stretches my ideas* in the process of wrestling them together” (“A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop” 257-8, my emphasis). “Two Voices” rejects the fruitful production of two voices on the page while Rosmarie, in this quote, states how heterogeneous elements produce fruitful tension. The placement of voices on the page, as suggested by “Two Voices,” cultivates, expands, or stretches the vacancy or space between them. Similarly, in Rosmarie’s quote, by wrestling together heterogeneous elements, her ideas stretch—the middle space between the binary grows and expands.

*Curves* thus toes the line between a performativity of gender that is theatrical, performed in conversations on the page, and linguistic, invoking gender norms, stereotypes, or conventions and also alluding to the way previous texts have articulated or informed how we think about gender. In a similar way, Judith Butler reflects on how her own theory of performativity “waffles between understanding
performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical” because “the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical...), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions” (xxvii). The word “waffle” implies indecision on the part of the speaker who talks on and on but comes to no synthesized articulation. While the words share no etymological strain, “wrestling” and “waffling” both evoke a back-and-forth motion. The word “wrestle” can mean, “To twist or writhe about...to work backwards and forwards” (OED). Therefore, in an extension of this “waffling,” Curves offers a more aggressive contention with the speech act as performed or linguistic. Instead of waffling between being a theatrical text, with dialogue set off by speakers, and a linguistic one, which foregrounds only its relationship to other texts, Curves wrestles with its source texts and dramatizes this intertextual struggle in conversations on the page. Curves doesn’t entirely rid itself of its source texts or have the feminine mode of thinking entirely overpower the masculine mode. Instead, Curves proposes an ongoing erotic entanglement that foregrounds its contentious self-difference.

In this way, Curves struggles with language as previously, if not still, owned or controlled by men. These masculine-oriented philosophers were wary of language’s power to “bewitch” us, but Rosmarie isn’t. More than revising the genre of these philosophical texts, Curves also revises the gender of its speakers to include a feminine attitude, posture, and voice.15 Rosmarie adopts the structure and form of

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15 Keller notes another instance in which Rosmarie writes a woman into Wittgenstein’s text: “When I say I believe that women have a soul and that its substance contains two carbon rings the picture in the foreground makes it difficult to find its application back where the corridors get lost in ritual sacrifice and hidden bleeding” (R. Waldrop, Curves 49). The relevant passage from Investigations reads, “What am I believing when I believe that men have souls? What am I believing in, when I believe that this substance contains two carbon rings? In both cases there is a picture in the foreground, but the sense lies far in the background; that is, the application of the picture is not easy to survey”
Wittgenstein’s texts,\(^\text{16}\) constructing a textual lineage that allows her to parody the misogynistic biases inherent in those texts—writing into and on top of Wittgenstein’s philosophical dialogues. Instead of flipping the gender hierarchy so that women own or control language, \textit{Curves} shows how to use and misuse inherited grammars and discourses in order to propose a feminist poetics that basks in the dissolved ownership of language and chooses the page as the surface on which to negotiate these problems of gender and language.

\textit{In “Your Language”: Wrestling with Men in Profiles and Lawn}

Rosmarie’s work has attracted the attention of feminist critics for her engagement with male-authored source texts, her play with gender norms, and for her idea that language is something that, while it exists outside us, has the power to shape us; some even say her work is a continuation of what the French feminists called \textit{l’écriture féminine}.\(^\text{17}\) Ann Rosalind Jones’s essay “Writing the Body” helpfully glosses the \textit{l’écriture féminine} movement, in which theorists including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig turned to language, to signifying practices, as a site in which to deconstruct and challenge male-dominated and male-centered thinking. Jones rightfully points out the essentialist and white-centric ways

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\(^{16}\) Perloff notes how \textit{Profiles} adopts the short prose paragraph structure of Wittgenstein’s \textit{Philosophical Investigations} and the overall structure (five sections, moving from “facts” to “applications”) of Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} (206).

\(^{17}\) Lamm connects Rosmarie’s concerns about “the difficulties individual women face as they grapple with the function of femininity in patriarchal discourse and thought” to Irigaray’s (264). She also notes how “both look to performances within and against language top open the possibility of subversion. Irigaray names this performative aspect of feminism ‘mimicry’” (ibid.).
Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous approach the feminine and discusses how sexuality and
gender are social and symbolic, like language, rather than innate or essential (Jones
375). The question then remains: how can we revise language, a signification system
rooted in patriarchy and oppression, to suit those who are marginalized or oppressed
under that system? Jones argues that, pushing the French feminists away from gender
essentialism and white-centrism and toward a more contextually and historically
grounded notion of language, gender, and race, we need to examine that language and
its modes of representation (381).

Our very first scene of wrestling in Curves comes in Profiles. Here, the
speaker exhibits a stark mind/body division and importantly maintains this division,
not becoming its feminine, female body, over the course of the passage:

The body is useful. I can send it on errands while I stay in bed and pull
the blue blanket up to my neck. Once I coaxed it to get married. It
trembled and cried on the way to the altar, but then gently pushed the
groom down to the floor and sat on him while the family crowded
closer to get in on the excitement. The black and white flagstones
seemed to be rocking, though more slowly than people could see,
which made their gestures uncertain. Many of them slipped and lay
down. Because they closed their eyes in the hope of opening their
bodies I rekindled the attentions of love. (Curves 29)

Here, the speaker articulates the hierarchical relationship it has with its body: the
speaker is the subject of the action and the body is the object. The speaker sends it on
“errands,” for example. As the passage progresses the speaker gains control, too, over
the groom. We have the speaker “I” that “coaxed [the body] to get married,” gently
persuaded the body, and then we have the body that “gently pushed the groom down
to the floor and sat on him.” The speaker also seems to have control over the other
bodies in the room through the rocking “black and white flagstones” that cause the
wedding guests to slip and fall to the ground. Here, the feminine “I” physically overpowers the masculine groom and maintains the lack of unity between its mind/voice (“I”) and its body (feminine).

The mind/body binary is not collapsed in this passage because the speaker proves dominant over its body and its now-husband. By contrast, in Lawn, a speaker, upon speaking to a masculine speaker, becomes its feminine, female body. The binary is collapsed, and the speaker becomes solid, still, like a boulder. Lynn Keller cites the following passage from Lawn:

> Whenever you’re surprised that I should speak your language I am suddenly wearing too many necklaces and breasts, even though feeling does not produce what is felt, and the object of observation is something else again. Not modulating keys, not the splash that makes us take to another element, just my body alarmingly tangible, like furniture that exceeds its function, a shape I cannot get around. The way one suddenly knows a boulder in the road for a boulder, immovable, as if not always there, unmodified by inner hollows or the stray weeds and their dusty green, a solid obstacle. (R. Waldrop, Curves 54, qtd. Keller 390)

The relevant passage Keller cites from Philosophical Investigations reads:

> Not everything which is unfamiliar to us makes an impression of unfamiliarity upon us. Here one has to consider what we call ‘unfamiliar.’ If a boulder lies on the road, we know it for a boulder, but perhaps not for the one which has always lain there. (Wittgenstein 156, qtd. Keller 391)

While Wittgenstein is making a general statement about familiarity and unfamiliarity (another binary), Rosmarie’s text maps this general statement onto the gender binary. Keller notes, “A man may think he recognizes what a woman is, may think he is encountering a being comfortably familiar in its limitations and its (dichotomized) difference from him” (391). In this way, the masculine speaker “you” assumes it is familiar with the feminine “I” because the masculine speaker sees women as both
different from and lesser than him. While Keller focuses on the way the man stereotypes the woman, the truly bizarre and fruitful addition to Wittgenstein’s passage is the following: “Whenever you’re surprised that I should speak your language I am suddenly wearing too many necklaces and breasts” (R. Waldrop, *Curves* 54). Here, in the moment the feminine speaker uses the masculine speaker’s language (“your language”) the feminine speaker becomes its feminine, female, body. It becomes the normative gender the masculine speaker recognizes as familiar—physically accommodating the masculine gaze.

*Curves* as a whole attempts to expose language as a tool men use to exercise power over women. The above notices a moment in which a feminine speaker is embodied as feminine, female, in the moment it speaks the masculine language. In another place, Perloff notices a similar gendering as it pertains to what she calls “sexual politics” (208). Perloff also notices how this navigation of masculine-oriented language occurs on the level of the text (intertextual dialogues with Wittgenstein) and on the level of everyday conversations between feminine and masculine speakers. Perloff writes that *Profiles* channels *Investigations*’s focus on “the inability of words to have precise meanings outside their particular language games” into “the interactive deployment of these language games, in the way language games are related to gender and power” (ibid.). Perloff cites a passage from *Profiles*, “You told me if something is not used it is meaningless, and took my temperature which I had thought to save for a more difficult day…I expected reproaches because I had mentioned the word love, but you only accused me of stealing your pencil, and sadness disappeared with sense” (R. Waldrop, *Curves* 13). The relevant passage from
*Investigations* reads, “‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’” (Wittgenstein 43, qtd. Perloff 207). Perloff writes that Rosmarie’s passage plants a scene of gender inequality into Wittgenstein’s passage; the idiom “take my temperature” is altered by “you,” who “takes” the speaker’s temperature against her wishes (207). Perloff also argues that “the language game” in the second sentence “refers to sexual politics” in which the woman is “always ready to offer ‘love’” (208). Here, the man takes something that the woman had hoped to keep, making her vulnerable to the point where she is repositioned into the submissive feminine stereotype, always ready to love and expecting reproaches.

In this way, *Profiles* and *Lawn* dramatize how because language and everyday speech are inherently masculine-oriented, feminine speakers are gendered and excluded from the conversation. Perloff notices how in the second half of *Profiles* “the male voice largely disappears” and the speaker reflects on her long-gone desire to “be a man”; for Perloff, this change in the text indicates a “quest…to escape the imposition of someone else’s logic, even someone as close to Rosmarie’s own sensibility as Wittgenstein” (208-9). Where Keller argues that *Lawn*’s palimpsest method proves generative for the text, Perloff notices how perhaps this intertextual style is only limiting and that the texts itself wishes it was free from those constraints. This chapter corroborates Keller’s assessment because *Curves* as a whole moves towards the gradual but definitive gendering of the voices, insisting on the productive use of the binary, of contentious and ongoing self-difference.

*In Any Language: Wrestling with Language in Lawn*
The second example of wrestling in *Curves* also contains a mind/body division. While the first moment of wrestling depicts a feminine speaker overpowering its body and its groom, maintaining the binary between mind/body and masculine/feminine, the second moment of wrestling depicts one feminine speaker’s attempt to write words on a page. The passage reads:

> It takes wrestling with my whole body for words on the tip of my tongue to be found later, disembodied, on paper. A paradox easily dissolved as any use of language is a passport to the fourth dimension, which allows us to predict the future, matter of body, even rock, thinning to a reflection that I hope outlasts both the supporting mirror and the slide from sign to scissors. Meanwhile, the crossing is difficult, maybe illegal, the documents doubtful, the road through darkness, wet leaves, rotting garbage, people huddled in doorways. The vehicle breaks down, the tenor into song. Again and again, the hand on paper as if tearing the tongue from its root, translating what takes place to what takes time...We may also get stranded, caught on the barbed wire, muscles torn and useless. (R. Waldrop, *Curves* 94)

The “paradox” here is that heightened embodiment is necessary to produce the disembodiment of language on paper. This paradox “dissolves” because printed language isn’t embodied. The speaker figures this move from embodiment to disembodiment in the metaphor of possibly illegal immigration. The boundary between embodiment and disembodiment is like, the speaker says, the dangerous barbed-wire fence immigrants cross. The speaker says that this act of writing down, the translation of “what takes place” into “what takes time,” is similar to the way immigrants lose “place” and enter “time.” Like words on paper, torn from their “root,” “we,” immigrants, become “stranded,” dislocated, and disembodied. Here, physical immigration is parallel to the movement, and dislocation, of languages across borders. Like the writer with “hand on paper as if tearing the tongue from its root, translating what takes place to what takes time,” the immigrant tears their native
tongue from its root or place of origin. The tongue itself is also torn from its root in
writing because speech is translated into print. The word “root” can mean “The
embedded or basal portion of the tongue” (OED). The writer rips the tongue from its
root, its connection to the body, just as the immigrant rips their native tongue from its
root, their connection to their place of origin.

The relevant passage from *Philosophical Investigations* reads:

“The word is on the tip of my tongue” tells you: the word which
belongs here has escaped me, but I hope to find it soon. For the rest the
verbal expression does no more than certain wordless behaviour…We use [the words] in certain situations, and they are surrounded by
behaviour of a special kind…In particular they are frequently followed
by finding the word. (Ask yourself: “What would it be like if human
beings never found the word that was on the tip of their tongue?”)
(Wittgenstein 219)

The “wordless behavior” that Wittgenstein notes is equivalent to what Rosmarie calls
“wrestling with my whole body.” How are these words found? Rosmarie attempts to
depict this moment of finding as less a discovery and more a dangerous process of
immigration. This move from wordless embodiment to worded disembodiment is
violent and cuts the speaker’s voice or tongue from its body. In this moment, words
occupy the alliterative, idiomatic place that is the “tip of my tongue.” The “slide from
sign to scissors” indicates this violent ripping, this snipping from its origin. On this
line of translation, a kind of barbed-wire fence, a word ripped from its root can mean
multiple things: “documents” are “doubtful,” and “the vehicle breaks down, the tenor
[breaks] into song.”

Here, the mind and the body are not merged; instead, the passage lingers on
this moment of transition, the space between embodiment and disembodiment. By
examining how Rosmarie uses and misuses her source texts, we see a simultaneous
attempt to revise, rewrite, and write over the biases of those texts alongside an attempt to obviate how these misogynistic ways of thinking persist in the way we use language every day. Rosmarie wrestles with the male-oriented source texts, using “your [the masculine] language,” in such a way that maintains the binaries of masculine and feminine, mind and body, and disembodiment and embodiment, again, not to say that these binaries are fixed or correct. Instead, Rosmarie writes into, over, and under her source texts in such a way that simultaneously entangles them and increases the strangeness or distance between them. Instead of attempting to merge her texts with her source texts through the use of quotation marks or other formal markers, and instead of attempting to collapse the binaries of masculine/feminine and mind/body, *Curves* further separates the two halves of the binary, increasing the fertile space between them.

*In Another Language: Wrestling in Reluctant Gravities*

Unlike *Profiles* and *Lawn*, *Gravities* genders the two voices “she” and “he”. This happens gradually over the course of the prologue, “Two Voices.” Critics have disagreed over the status of gender in *Curves*. Perloff and Keller have been quicker to gender the speakers “I” and “you” according to gender norms, while Freitag resists normative gendering.\(^\text{18}\) Because the three wrote their scholarship prior to the publication of *Gravities*, they didn’t take it into their accounts; they couldn’t argue anything about the trajectory of the text from “I” and “you” (in *Profiles* and *Lawn*) to

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\(^\text{18}\) Freitag writes, “Retallack, Perloff, and the commentator on the cover of *Profiles* all ascribe a higher degree of activity and aggression to a male—passivity, lamentation, and/or sensuousness to a female speaker. This is an inference Waldrop *plays* with, yet it is not the only possible gender constellation her poems suggest…It indicates that the poetic position of enunciation is linguistically produced yet never neutral and independent from the ‘old gender archetypes’” (133).
“she” and “he” (in *Gravities*). Important to note, too, is that while Perloff notes how the masculine voice disappears as *Profiles* progresses, it is firmly reinstated in *Gravities*. Rosmarie writes, in the introduction to *Curves*, “The rhetorical ‘you’ had hardly a chance against the dominant ‘I’ in [*Profiles* and *Lawn*]. For the third volume, *Reluctant Gravities*, I decided that the two voices should be given equal space” (*Curves* xii). This collection focuses on attempts at understanding between the masculine and feminine speakers. The text provides equal space for the voices to articulate responses to a variety of topics in order to show and understand how the way we use language is influenced by the way we have been gendered.

*Gravities* is broken up into sections of three types: conversations between “she” and “he” in the form of prose poems, songs that appear as lyrical poem, and meditations that appear like poetic journal entries or collages. The text is itself a hybrid of voices. In the conversation sections, two voices intellectually and erotically “wrestle” on the page. In the song sections, one lyrical voice waxes poetic on love. In the meditations, one speaker reflects on the relationship between itself and language, itself and knowledge, and itself and its lover. While the conversation sections dramatize moments of dialogue, the hybrid form of the text, its various formal elements and corresponding speakers, makes it so the multiple forms within it are also in conversation. The collection emphasizes its interest in and insistence on difference through this use of formal distinctions. Each of the sections looks typographically different on the page. The conversations appear as two-page long prose poems that are broken up by a switch in speaker. In this way, the text appears almost like a drama, with one character’s lines, enter, and another’s. The songs appear as
traditional lyric poems, centered and left justified. The meditations push the margins of the page wider so that the two-page long reflections, not quite prose poem or poetry but more like a collaged journal entry, push at the book’s boundaries both thematically and graphically.

The collection begins with a poignant reflection on the difference between two people, between words and what they signify, and within oneself, and directs readers to investigate “the vacancy between them” (103). The poem begins with an inability to distinguish one voice from the other and ends with a clear, gendered, distinction between the two. The prologue, “Two Voices,” begins:

Two voices on a page. Or is it one? Now turning in on themselves, back into fiber and leaf, now branching into sequence, consequence, public works projects or discord. Now touching, now trapped in frames without dialog box. Both tentative, as if poring over old inscriptions, when perhaps the wall is crumbling, circuits broken, pages blown off by a fall draft. (103).

Initially, the poem cannot discern the number of voices on the page because the two, or one, are so entangled it is difficult to distinguish where one starts and the other begins. The poem employs words with both natural and artificial meanings. For example, “leaf” can mean a leaf on a tree and also a page of a book. Further, these words alternate between their natural and artificial meanings in this back and forth motion of “turning in on themselves.” As the poem progresses, it rejects the possibility of voices on a page being natural. The text reads, “Voices, planted on the page, do not ripen or bear fruit” (103). In Lawn, one speaker says, “Only language can grow such grass-green grass” (50).
The artificiality of printed language is linked to its placement on the page. Here, and now we return to the passage quoted earlier in this chapter, the poem articulates its difference from dramatic writing:

> Even if voices wrestle on the page, their impact on the air is part of their definition. In a play, for instance, the sentences would be explained by their placement on stage. We would not ask an actress what anguish her lines add up to. She would not worry what her voice touches, would let it spill over the audience, aiming beyond the folds of the curtain, at the point in the distance called the meaning of the play. (103)

When voices wrestle on the page, they turn in on themselves, branching out, touching, and trapped on the page. Because the actress speaks and performs her lines on stage, their meaning is not questioned. Lines on a page don’t have the privilege or peril of embodiment.

Yet the text discusses the “sex” of these voices in a way that hints at their embodiment. The text continues:

> The difference of our sex, says one voice, saves us from humiliation. It makes me shiver, says the other. Your voice drops stones into feelings to sound their depth. Then warmth is truncated to war. But I’d like to fall back into simplicity as into a featherbed. (103)

Here, we have “one voice,” masculine, if we are following the gender stereotypes evoked in the previous two collections (masculine is assertive, rational, logical and feminine is complacent, irrational, emotional), says that these two voices are differently “sexed.” The “other” voice, presumably feminine, doesn’t feel comforted by their sexual difference; it makes it cold. It resents the masculine impulse to know feelings “deeply” and to exhibit passion through fighting (“warmth” to “war”).

The poem continues with the language of the natural and the artificial:
Voices, planted on the page, do not ripen or bear fruit. Here placement does not explain, but cultivates the vacancy between them. The voice pauses, starts over. Gap gardening which, moved inward from the right margin, suspends time. The suspension sets, is set, in type, in columns that precipitate false memories of garden, vineyard, trellis. Trembling leaf, rules of black thumb and white, invisible angle of breath and solid state. (103)

Here, we have an extension of the idea that printed language isn’t natural when it points to the process by which language is made artificial. The poem provides the metaphor of “gap gardening” for typesetting, a suspended process conducted from right to left. As in the pencil passage in Profiles and the immigration passage in Lawn, Rosmarie manipulates an idiom to point to the artificiality of language. Here, instead of “rules of thumb,” Rosmarie writes, “rules of black thumb and white, invisible angle of breath,” which refers to the ink-stained fingers of the typesetter as well as black and white on a page—black being the words, and white being moments of silence, breath, or space between words.

The typesetter encounters text in a physical, graphical, artificial manner that this poem attempts to reenact and represent for its readers. Whereas a sentence’s placement on stage, embodied in the actress, produces higher meaning, a sentence’s placement on the page doesn’t. This is because the actor constitutes a compact of voice and body while the page doesn’t. The prologue continues:

The pact between page and voice is different from the compact of voice and body. The voice opens the body. Air, the cold of the air, passes through and, with a single inflection, builds large castles. The page wants proof, but bonds. The body cannot keep the voice. It spills. Foliage over the palisade. (104, my emphasis)

Here, the poem says more about what makes printed language different than language that is performed. It is precisely because “voice and body” constitute a “compact” or
“combination, composition,” as opposed to forming a “pact,” or “a formal agreement,” that the voice has the ability to open the body (OED). “Pact” implies an understanding between two parties that are separable. “Compact” implies a complete union. Earlier in the prologue, the speaker says, “Even if voices wrestle on the page, their impact on the air is part of their definition” (103). The word “impact” means, “the striking of one body against another; collision” (OED).

The page is a place where oppositional elements come together, wrestling, making and breaking pacts, forming compacts, and making an impact on the air. The prologue concludes:

The page lures the voice with a promise of wood blossoming. But there is no air. No breath lives in the mouth or clouds the mirror. On stage, the body would carry the surface we call mind. Here, surface marries surface, refusing deep waters. Still, the point of encounter is here, always. Screams rise. Tears fall. Impure white, legible. (104)

An “encounter” is “a meeting face to face; a meeting…in conflict” (OED). The word “still” here can mean the state of stillness or the phrase “even so.” The page, the “vehicle” from the immigration passage, fails the voice. The word “legible” can mean that the print is readable, that the language is comprehensible, or interpretable. For a poetry collection as opaque as *Curves* this legibility is disputable.

What does this refusal of depth have to do with gender? It seems like a pointed rejection of the masculine desire to know something deeply. The prologue’s two prose poem paragraphs about the two speakers read:

She tries to draw a strength she dimly feels out of the weaknesses she knows, as if predicting an element in the periodic table. He wants to make a flat pebble skim across the water inside her body. He wonders if, for lack of sky, it takes on the color of skin or other cells it touches. If it rusts the bones. (104)
He has put a pebble under his tongue. While her lips explode in conjectures his lisp is a new scale to practice. He wants his words to lift, against the added odds, to a truth outside him. In exchange, his father walking down the road should diminish into a symbol of age. (104)

The masculine speaker desires what the actress can achieve when she looks out above her audience towards the “meaning of the play.”

Curves is a text that thematizes intellectual and intertextual, wrestling, using the gender binary to facilitate tension. The text operates on two levels: Curves (a feminine-oriented text) wrestles with masculine-oriented texts while its feminine speakers wrestle with masculine voices on the page. In Profiles and Lawn, these masculine voices are ignorant and biased. As a result, Rosmarie and her feminine speakers attempt to topple over those masculine voices to reveal the misogyny inherent in their language. In Gravities, we move away from outright misogyny and towards a navigation of mutual understanding in a couple that, while tinged with gender inequality, is a bit more equal. The couple ruminates on love, its past and its future, and larger philosophical ideas like depth and oblivion. This more sensuous and understanding wrestling is mimicked in the form of Gravities, which seamlessly encapsulates multiple voices and genres.

By culminating the collection with attempts at understanding and communication, following trials of misunderstanding and misogyny, Curves zooms out from issues of gender and power and opens up other issues with language like its incapacity to capture embodiment, specifically the embodied emotions “love” and “pain”. This move towards more equal attempts at understanding is hinted at earlier in the text. In Profiles, a speaker says, “I learned about communication by twisting my
legs around yours as, in spinning a thought, we twist fiber on fiber” (31). In Lawn, a speaker says, “Many questions were left in the clearing we built our shared life in...I knew I didn’t want to part from this whole...I wanted to continue lying alongside you, two parallel, comparable lengths of feeling...What is love? And where? Does it enter with a squeeze, or without, bringing, like interpretation, its own space from some other dimension?” (73). In Gravities, in a poem entitled “Meditation on Understanding,” the speaker says, “Even if you were to express everything that is ‘within you,’ if the flesh opened. // rain curtains / the eye...Is it that I can’t foresee the way your thought grows into anger? a body? How nudity is yet another garment?” (150). Another speaker asks, “Why is it...that we cannot share experience, not even under the same sheet?” (159). Like language, the body masks our ability to fully articulate knowledge or emotion. The page, then, becomes a meeting place, a sheet upon which voices encounter and wrestle with one another, an alternative to the physical sheet under which lovers, wrestling, lie.
Chapter 3: Literary Coupling

Are we making an object when we make love? Do we hope it’ll stay in front of us and allow us to observe it?
—R. Waldrop, Love Like Pronouns

narrow coupling / a sentence is made / or child
—R. Waldrop, Love Like Pronouns

When Rosmarie Waldrop writes poetry, when she writes poems, she writes her poems: the poetry of Rosmarie Waldrop. When Keith Waldrop writes poetry, when he writes poems, he writes his poems: the poetry of Keith Waldrop. But when Rosmarie and Keith, when Keith and Rosmarie write poems together, whose are those poems? They are the poems of a third poet, whose name and gender and origin and language we do not know. But what we do see, and hear, are the poems.
—Jacques Roubaud

In Curves, the page acts as a meeting place for language’s entanglement with gender. Curves wrestles with its masculine-oriented source texts in the same way the text’s voices, masculine and feminine, physically and dialogically wrestle under and on top of the sheet. One speaker says, “I learned about communication by twisting my legs around yours as, in spinning a thought, we twist fiber on fiber” (R. Waldrop, Curves 31). Like many places in Curves, here the text alludes to a passage from Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: “We extend our concept of [x] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread doesn’t reside in the fact that some of the fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres” (Philosophical Investigations 32e). Here, the entanglement of a concept’s numerous threads is what strengthens it. Similarly, Curves doesn’t attempt to wrest apart the masculine and the feminine but instead dramatizes moments of entanglement, of inextricable bodies and voices on the page.

What happens, though, when masculine and feminine modes of thinking are entangled within a single authorial unit? What happens when that unit is composed of
a couple, and when who writes what isn’t distinguished for the reader? In Chapter 2, I notice how Rosmarie’s work foregrounds composition through the palimpsest method and dramatizes that method with the entangled voices and bodies on the page. As noted in Chapter 2, Fiona McMahon notes how Rosmarie’s work forces the reader to “encounter poetry from the perspective of its composition,” “a confrontation in which the page is portrayed as a literal meeting place and a locus of epistemological inquiry” (65, my emphasis). In collaboration, then, the page is more than “portrayed” as a literal meeting place—it is an actual meeting place.

Rosmarie herself emphasizes composition in multiple works and interviews. For example, she articulates that only by changing the composition can one create something different, something that is not the same, from what came before it. We see this implicitly in her use and misuse of Wittgenstein’s texts in Curves, and explicitly in her frequent citation of the following Gertrude Stein quote: “Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same.” Here, Stein writes that only by changing the composition, the combination of linguistic units into new words, new sentences, paragraphs, forms, and so on, can one create something “different.”

In an interview with the Waldrops, when asked about the use of wrestling in Curves and if a similar wrestling occurs in the collaborative texts, Rosmarie said, “In a way, the collaboration compounds it [the wrestling] because there is another other” (Cettina, interview, my emphasis). In other words, Rosmarie says that collaboration makes the physical and philosophical wrestling we see in Curves more complicated or

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19 See “A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop” by Joan Retallack and Rosmarie Waldrop in Contemporary Literature, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), page 367. See also Rosmarie’s essay “Form and Discontent,” page 54.
intense. We get a sense of this compounding in Rosmarie’s *Love, Like Pronouns*, a text which I read here for the ways it connects issues of composition and combination in language to the composition and combination of a couple by using the words “another” (that we also see above) and “married/marriage” in passages about the two.

In the poem “Object Relations” the speaker says, “How differently our words drift across danger or rush toward a lover. Meaning married to always different coordinates. I married a foreigner, in one sense. In another, no word fits with another” (R. Waldrop, *Love, Like Pronouns* 33, my emphasis). Here, we have a reflection on how words have different meanings in different contexts (e.g., when one is in danger or in love). In other words, “Meaning [is] married to always different coordinates” (ibid.). The example the speaker provides to describe how meaning is necessarily contextual is that of its own marriage to “a foreigner” (ibid.). The word “foreigner” means different things in different geographical contexts (e.g., in America, a German is a foreigner, and in Germany, an American is a foreigner). And importantly the word also denotes “otherness,” a difference between the word’s addresser and its addressee. Like the marriage of a word and its meaning, the speaker’s marriage to a foreigner constitutes the marriage of one thing with an other.

In a poem called “Initial Conditions,” the speaker also uses this language of marriage and otherness: “The question: Why? Is most nostalgic. In twenty years of marriage one might be in love with one another. Or with another?” (R. Waldrop, *Love, Like Pronouns* 31, my emphasis). Here, we have a reflection on meaning (“Why?”) placed next to a reflection on marriage. The speaker points to the way people talk about a couple—they are “in love with one another,” meaning “each
other”—and defamiliarizes it. One might be in love “with another,” someone else, or a foreigner, “an other”. That the phrase “Or with another?” is placed alongside a reflection on nostalgia imbues the question with a sense of what could have been, who else the speaker could have been in love with (ibid.). Like words that are married to meaning depending on where they’re situated on the page, a married couple similarly depends on location or placement (at home or abroad, together or apart).

In the Waldrops’ collaborative writing, we see a greater emphasis on how spatial and contextual composition make different meanings available and close other meanings off. But where Rosmarie’s Curves focuses on encounters between two voices on the page, the erotics of sameness and difference, the Waldrops’ collaborative writing focuses on how different units of language (from the letter to the word to the sentence or stanza) change meaning when they are coupled with other units of language. Looking at the collaborative poems Flat With No Key and Light Travels, we see an emphasis on sound (the actual sounds of letters or words in addition to musical references and allusions) and spatial placement of letters, words, and stanzas on the page.

*Narrow Coupling: Literature on Collaborative Writing*

Scholars of collaborative writing often focus solely on the circumstances of a text’s production to expose how it has been plurally authored. Others who lament the lack of scholarship on collaboration acknowledge how scholars might not want to

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20 See Jack Stillinger’s book *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (1991), which attempts to reinstate the position of the author, declaring that s/he is not dead, and attempts to expose, through biography, how texts are plurally authored. He looks primarily at canonized texts authored by men. While he provides a list of other collaborations in the back matter of his book, his list is far from complete.
expose how certain groups of authors (women, writers of color, and so on), at the moment in which they are finally receiving attention as serious literary writers, are not solitary geniuses but participants in a collaboration. Most often, scholarship on collaborative writing looks at works authored by same-gender couples, leaving cross-gender couples out of the conversation. Because scholarship on collaboration often moves away from textual analysis in favor of biographical exposition, I will focus on four sources that provide most in the way of close reading. While not all of these sources take self-proclaimed collaborative works as their objects of analysis (by this I mean that not all of the works discussed feature all of the collaborators’ names in the by-line), I find their discussions of collaborative writing as something erotic, desiring, and social compelling for my discussion of the Waldrops’ work. My study of the Waldrops diverges in one main way from the texts I discuss, however. Where theirs read for the formal or thematic use of voice in collaborative texts (either to produce a synthesized voice or a panoply of voices on the page), I read the Waldrops for their emphasis on composition.

Before I get there, though, one of the first questions this section addresses is: why the couple as the unit of collaborative study? Especially following my discussion of the binary in Curves, I am interested in the couple as a way to expose how the

21 See Bette Lynn London’s Writing Double: Women’s Literary Partnerships (1999). London’s book responds to Nancy K. Miller’s argument about “why many feminist critics wanted to keep the idea of the individual author intact at the very moment they were demanding recognition for women’s authorial achievements” (2). London’s book thus attempts to show the literary seriousness of female literary collaborations. The book looks at the following examples of collaboration: the Brontë sisters, “Michael Field” (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Jane and Mary Findlater, “Martin Ross” (Edith Somerville and Violet Martin), and more. Scholars Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson, in Literary Coupling: Writing Couples, Collaborators, and the Construction of Authorship (2006), look at cross-gender collaborations. The two have noticed a trend in literary criticism in which scholars of cross-gender collaborations, as opposed to scholars of same-gender collaborations, more commonly try to uncover who wrote what. Their book provides a wide-reaching examination of multiple forms of literary couplings from a large time period in order to show how our concept of authorship has been constructed over time.
gender binary is so entrenched in language that all other binaries are knotted up in it. Nearly all of the texts I encountered in my research on collaboration study the couple. Scholars Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson are two of few authors who interrogate this question of the couple as it pertains to unequal relationships, stating how couples “are more likely to reproduce patterns of dominance,” versus exemplifying “reciprocal exchange” (6). Other studies of collaboration also focus on who is dominant over whom in the literary couple.

One of the first book-length studies of collaborative writing, Wayne Koestenbaum’s *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (1989), is a text which provides a theory in which “collaborators express homoeroticism and they strive to conceal it,” a duplicity marked by the title of this book (3). Koestenbaum’s book follows gender and psychoanalytic theory as opposed to “a gleefully poststructuralist path” because, Koestenbaum argues, such a path would be reductive and simplistic, simply pointing to the way that collaborative writing “[makes] the reader vulnerable to heterogeneity and indeterminancy, and, by obscuring who wrote what, they prevent the reader from limiting the text’s sense” (ibid.). What Koestenbaum does take from poststructuralism is “the chord in Barthes that celebrates impossible moments when speech approaches bodily pleasure, when one man’s voice does not lag behind his friend’s, but blurts out at the same moment” (ibid.). While Koestenbaum dismisses the benefits of a study of cross-gender collaboration—he writes that a study of “fruitful sisterly collaboration” would be

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22 Koestenbaum’s book looks at the following examples of collaboration: Sigmund Freud’s and Josef Breuer’s *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), John Addington Symond’s and Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion* (1897), William Wordsworth’s and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), T.S. Eliot’s and Ezra Pound’s *The Waste Land* (1922), and romance novels by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osborne, Andrew Lang and H. Rider Haggard, and Joseph Conrad and Ford Maddox Ford (4).
“more fruitful than the union of a male writer and his female amanuensis: Sylvia Plath, typing her husband Ted Hughes’s poems, resumes an old tradition of wifely subordination”—his reading for desire in collaborative texts is helpful for its articulation of pleasurable synthesis in collaboration (14). My example of the Waldrops’ collaborative writing pushes against Koestenbaum’s idea that a heterosexual couple’s collaboration would perpetuate patriarchal domination of the man over the woman. Instead, what we see in the Waldrops’ writing is a playful (if not always erotic) negotiation of coupling, composition, and combination.

Holly Laird, in her book Women Coauthors (2000), also uses the language of desire and pleasure to write about collaborative writing. Laird intervenes in collaborative literary scholarship to combat the exclusion of women as equal or dominant partners in collaborative works—something we see in Koestenbaum’s quote about Plath above (3).23 Like Koestenbaum, Laird attempts to recover the erotics that lie within collaborated works. She writes how these erotics result from how, on the page, authors “must negotiate their differences…contest each other’s powers, and…while retaining their bodily borders, they may momentarily, ecstatically merge” (13). Here, Laird’s language of “negotiation” and “contest” and how these issues of voice are erotically embodied reminds of my discussion of Curves in Chapter 2 in which two voices, masculine and feminine, vie for the upper hand in physical and intellectual wrestling matches on the page. But while Laird looks at how collaborative texts themselves present ideas of sameness and difference

23 Laird’s book looks at the following examples of collaboration: the Delany sisters, Amy Hill Hearth on “Having Our Say,” lesbian couples whose lives and writings were intertwined, including Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper (“Michael Field”) and Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and the Native American authors Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris.
and of social binaries (something I perform on Rosmarie’s singly authored *Curves*), I argue that the Waldrops’ collaborative texts put aside issues of sameness and difference and focus instead on the page as a place where linguistic units playfully couple and break up, multiplying and dividing in meaning.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in her article “Agency, social authorship, and the political aura of contemporary poetry” (2009), extends Barthes’s and Foucault’s theories of authorship that she thinks fail to encapsulate contemporary avant-garde works that dramatize social authorship. She desires to rearticulate the position of the author not as dead or passive but as a productive agent that she names “the announced” (DuPlessis 990). She writes, “My goal…is to acknowledge the sociality of modes of praxis (like citation/appropriation, poly-linguality, heteronyms, torqueing or deturning texts, hetero-discursivity/anacoluthon, and neo-reportage) as construction choices” (989).24 Here, DuPlessis emphasizes authorial decisions a writer makes in order to “pluralize authorship, not dissolve it, in order to acknowledge the multiplicity, the self-difference, the heterogeneity of the literary text, deliberately produced as multiple” (993). DuPlessis believes that this acknowledgement of self-difference is inherently political when she writes, “[it is] an act of critical analysis, didactic intervention, and political critique” (ibid.). We see this emphasis on social modes of praxis in another study of collaborative writing, which is primarily a study of the Language poetry community.

*Among Friends: Engendering the Social Site of Poetry* (2013), co-edited by Anne Dewey and Libbie Rifkin, analyzes collaborations of various sizes. In the introduction to the text, Dewey and Rifkin write, “*Among Friends* mounts the

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24 DuPlessis cites Rosmarie’s *A Key Into the Language of America* as one of these texts.
argument that friendship is a promising site from which to trace the changing gender politics of post-1945 avant-garde and antiestablishment poetry” (9). Like Koestenbaum, Dewey and Rifkin argue that literature provides a lens through which to view gender and sexuality politics of the time and place a text was written. One essay in the collection, “The Volley Maintained Nears Orgasm: Rae Armantrout, Ron Silliman, and the Cross-Gender Collaboration,” by Andrew Epstein, analyzes a cross-gender collaboration. Epstein articulates his project as diverging from other analyses of collaboration that often leave cross-gender collaborations out of the discussion, citing Koestenbaum’s book as an example of this.

Epstein’s essay analyzes the gender politics of the Language poetry community, which has always been interested in collaboration, as exemplified in a cross-gender collaborative poem by two of its members, Armantrout and Silliman (171). He thus uses “Engines” as an example of the Language community’s interest in collaborative writing and as a site in which to analyze the fraught gender dynamics inherent in that community at the time it was written. For this reason, he engages with a poem co-authored by Armantrout, who has spoken about her feelings of exclusion from the masculinist Language community, and Silliman, who has articulated his complicity in this masculinist community (175-6). Epstein reads “Engines,” then, for how it thematizes dialogue and disagreement in addition to how it thematizes gender, sex, and sexuality (180).

What all of these texts, except Koestenbaum’s, have in common is their emphasis on self-difference and heterogeneity. They read collaborative works for how they thematize or formally acknowledge multi-voicedness or sameness and
difference. Oddly, what my study has in common with Koestenbaum’s is something that he sees as rooted in the homoerotics he studies. In the place where he discusses how his book might have followed a poststructuralist path, he writes, “I might have loosely employed Bakhtin’s notion of ‘heteroglossia’: collaborative texts….make the reader vulnerable to heterogeneity and indeterminacy, and, by obscuring who wrote what, they prevent the reader from limiting the text’s sense. I would have found praise of heteroglossia tedious because the prefix ‘hetero-’ suggests this theory’s sexual preference” (Koestenbaum 3). While Rosmarie and Keith are engaged in a heterosexual relationship, I think that because their collaborative works’ deemphasize voice and speaker and emphasize instead composition, combination, and coupling, it insists on a similar erotics of simultaneity through synthesis with another.

**Combination and Permutation in Flat With No Key**

*Flat With No Key* (2008) is a text that thematizes and performs its compositional process. The collection is composed of twenty-six poems for the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, beginning with “A” and ending with “Z.” Each poem is broken up into stanzas that are consecutively numbered. Each stanza is equal in length to the number stanza it is (e.g., the first stanza is one line in length, the second is two, and so on). Every line in the poem contains at least one word that begins with the title letter. Additionally, each stanza must carry over a certain number of words from the previous stanza (the exact number of which is difficult to distinguish and may not be heavily regulated in the text). For an example of what a page in the text looks like, see page 67. In this way, the collection shows how letters,
words, and phrases change meaning in different contexts, exemplifying how by changing the composition something different arises. The poems which most obviously thematize combination and composition are “F” and “K,” which are notable, too, for their appearance in the title of this work (“flat” and “key”).

The poem for “F” even begins with a self-conscious reflection on form versus content:

1
It is the form, not the content

2
It is the form, not the content
that you feel all the way down to your foot

3
It is the form, not the content
that your foot feels all the way down
to the factory

Here, the word “form” appears three times, “feel” twice (once in the singular and once in the plural), “foot” twice, and “factory” once. “Form” appears as the direct object, “feel” and “feels” as main verbs, “foot” as the indirect object and then as something the subject possesses, and “factory” as a noun in the poem’s final prepositional phrase. Indeed, “It is the form, not the content” that dictates this poem.

Because the form of the collection necessitates at least one “f” word per line—with each additional line, another “f” word is included—the “form” dictates the construction of each line. We see a reflection on form and content in Rosmarie’s essay “Form and Discontent.” Rosmarie writes, “Form/composition is not an extension of content….but is, on the contrary, primary. It is the form that generates the content” (“Form and Discontent” 60). Here, the word “primary” is indicative of
the form of *Flat*, a text which takes lessons from primary education (the alphabet and counting) as its formal structure.

The primary elements are in turn repeated, copied, and reproduced. This production and construction is compounded by the use of the word “factory” at the end of the poem. The word “factory” comes with connotations of endless reproduction of an identical product. This self-sameness is felt by the addressee’s foot, just as the letter “f” is reproduced and repeated over the course of the poem such that a reader feels the sounds of letters and words as the poem moves down the conveyor belt to its completion.

This idea that poetry moves towards some musical or mathematical limit is explored further in Rosmarie’s essay “Form and Discontent.” She writes, quoting Louis Zukofsky, “‘Poetry may be defined as an order of words that as movement and tone…approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit’” (55). Rosmarie herself is drawn to forms that “[stress] the horizontal, the axis of composition” and notices three tendencies that strike her: (1) “spatial composition,” (2) “an emphasis on discontinuity, leaps on the level of syntax, of logic, of grammar,” and (3) “mathematical,” involving “a lot of counting,” for example, “words per line, sentences per paragraph” (54-5). The example Rosmarie provides is that of Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*, which, written when Hejinian was thirty-seven years old, is composed of thirty-seven prose poems that are thirty-seven lines each. This kind of mathematical precision is evident in *Flat*, most obviously through its mathematically determined stanza lengths.
But the collection also connects this emphasis on mathematical construction along a horizontal axis to musical performance. The collection plays with its logical form and senseless content throughout. It performs its form and basks in the absurdity of its content. The poem for “K” reads:
1 Let’s perform something in a flat with no key

2 let the missing key be sharp
no kangaroo be seen

3 Let the missing key go west
avoiding kangaroos
and kulchur

4 Let the key
miss kangaroos
and kulchur
the kettle-drum is set up in the flat

5 Let the key
muss up kangaroos
kick kulchur
drum up the kettle
ka-boom

Here, the speaker plays with the multiple meanings of “flat” and “key,” all of which are contextually activated in the poem. While the first clause reads, “Let’s perform something,” which would then make the musical meanings of “flat” and “key” seem correct, the use of the preposition “in” followed by a physical place, “a flat,” confuses the reader into imagining the flat as an apartment. “A flat,” and this stretches the musical intonation a bit, could also be read as “A-Flat.” Similarly, the word “key” multiplies in meaning here. “Key” could refer to something musical, musical scales or piano keys, something related to setting type or typing on a computer, or to a key that opens a lock. When expressed, pressed, or used, the key causes something. It

25 “Kulchur” refers to Ezra Pound’s Guide to Kulchur, a book that New Directions describes as “cover[ing] the whole territory of “kulchur”—from the Chinese philosophers to modern poetry, from music to economics—as he discovered it for himself in a lifetime of reading, looking, and listening” (New Directions).
produces a letter on a page, creates a musical note, or opens a door. A key can also be, “A means of understanding something unknown, mysterious, or obscure; a solution or explanation” (OED). Without a key, the flat cannot be opened and the music is without a scale.

This simultaneous multiplication and division of words and their varying contextual meanings explodes by the end of the poem—the last line reads, “ka-boom”. In this way, the mathematical precision that Flat moves towards is what Zukofsky describes as its musical and mathematical limit. The collection ends with a reflection on nothingness, on a sense of there being nothing left:

Z

And it all comes to zero

The final poem evokes a sense of everything being finished, of having gone through all possible combinations. This is emphasized by the fact that this is the only poem in the collection without numbered stanzas. Finally, the alphabetical form dictates that the poem must end here, that Z is where it all must come to a stop.

Compounded Sounds and Spatial Couplings in “Light Travels”

Like Flat With No Key, the Waldrops’ Light Travels (1998) ends with an image of nothingness. The final line reads, “reminiscence and extinction.” The poem as a whole alternates between these notions of presence and absence in its formal structure. The poem is structured in such a way that, except for the first page of the poem, each page contains two stanzas, carrying over the bottommost stanza from the previous page and placing it at the top, and including a new stanza underneath
that one. This spatial movement under and over is explored, too, in the poem’s
discussion of sound as something that is affected by “undersounds” and also by things
that are “overheard.” The poem thus compounds its interest in spatial and aural
composition as dictating meaning, fittingly, in its use of compound words.
Scholar Kimberly Lamm notes how, “‘Light Travels’ is a modified renga, in which one poet writes three lines of five, then seven, then five syllables, like a haiku. The next poet repeats the first poet’s haiku, and then writes two lines, both of seven syllables, like a tanka” (272). As Lamm notes, the Waldrops modify this renga in two ways: usually, the renga is composed by more than two poets, and the renga form strictly follows its syllabic structure (ibid.). Building on Lamm’s argument that the poem thematizes ideas about voice, collaboration, and language through this manipulation of sounds, images, and oppositions, I would argue more specifically that the poem thematizes these ideas through spatial configurations on the page that draw attention to variations or disruptions in a repetition or sequence.

We see this, first, in the misuse of the renga form as Lamm points out. But we also see it more specifically in the physical movement of stanzas across pages. What is kept, and what is left behind? What is maintained in the poem, and what is subject to change? While Lamm focuses on images of envelopment and how the two voices on the page alternately “echo and temporarily envelope” the others’ words, I will focus on how the poem thematizes composition as something spatial, how the content of a poem is subject to its spatial configuration on the page (272).

The poem begins:

I

Lamm argues that this kind of cross-gender collaboration is exemplary of the Waldrops’ feminist poetics. She writes, channeling Judith Butler, Diane Elam, and Luce Irigaray, “Continuing to insist, even inadvertently, that only women write feminism risks an essentialism that will reduce the possibilities of feminist poetics to a narrow consistency” (265). For this reason, Lamm reads the Waldrops’ work “as examples of how feminist poetics can be a way of thinking about gender and language and not necessarily what people with particular bodies can produce” (ibid.). That Lamm sees the Waldrops, both of whom are white, cisgender, and heterosexual, and their collaborative work as undermining gender essentialism in feminist poetics is a bit essentialist itself. However, Lamm’s essay is useful for the careful attention she grants the Waldrops’ collaborative texts.
As Lamm rightly notes, the way the poem opens suggests that the speaker is already responding to text that for whatever reason is unavailable to the reader (272). The first stanza exemplifies the formal structure of the whole poem: unpunctuated and uncapitalized, the poem is full of enjambment. Each line bleeds into the next, meaning sliding under and over lines. By contrast, the word “unkept” is forcibly split into “un- / kept.” What is left “unkept,” or neglected, in this poem? The speaker says, “un- / kept secret on / a basic undersound.” Here, the word “on” can mean “about” such that the line reads, “I follow you un- / kept secret [about] / a basic undersound.” In this sense, the speaker “I” follows this unkept secret. What is an “undersound”? The word has no definition in the OED, but its use is cited in the following two instances: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and John Ruskin’s *Unto this Last* (1862). The line from *Jane Eyre* reads, “‘The gale still rising, seemed to my ear to muffle a mournful undersound’” (Brontë 268, qtd. OED). The line from *Unto this Last* reads, “‘No air is sweet that is silent; it is only sweet when full of low currents of under sound’” (Ruskin 168, qtd. OED). These two examples cue readers into what seems to be a mournful sound underlying air that is more musical than, say, an undertone. It is a sound so basic it lies under air. Perhaps this reference to a “basic undersound” makes more sense in conversation with the stanza’s assertion of sequence and continuity (“I follow you”) and of similarity and commonality (“common time,” which refers to three-four time in a musical scale). What is shared,
it seems, is this “basic undersound,” a sound that is indistinct but linked to mournful, melancholic sweetness.

The poem continues:

2

common time I follow you un-
kept secret on
a basic undersound

this is the first part of the rhyme
allow for sequences of overheard

Here we have our movement across pages. The new stanza uses the demonstrative “this” to point either back to the previous stanza (to the “basic undersound”) or ahead (to “the first part of the rhyme”). In this way, readers are told to listen, to “allow for sequences of overheard” sounds. Here, we also have our first pairing of opposites: under and over. Both occur in compound words, “undersound” and “overheard,” words with aural meanings. The words also reflect the poem’s constant shifting of stanzas, moving one on top of the other in a series, and how this affects the sounds of the poem. Here, stanzas and sounds travel across pages, alternately revealing and concealing themselves to and from the reader.

What’s the effect of this under/over movement? What’s its purpose? The poem reflects on its constantly shifting meaning and movement across pages:

3

this is the first part of the rhyme
allow for sequences of overheard

close the curtains but
playful elaborations of other-
wise arrogant variations keeping
the window open
Here, we have two identifiable strains of dialogue on the page. One reads: “this is the first part of the rhyme / allow for sequences of overheard / playful elaborations of other- / wise arrogant variations.” And the other reads: “close the curtains but / keeping / the window open.” Inscribed into this moment of dialogic wrestling we have our second paired opposition: close and open. Here, the air from the window is still being let in, even though the curtains are closed. In this way, the “undersound” from the first page remains and continues to underscore the poem.

On the following page, we have our first example of a stanza slightly altered in its second instantiation:

4

   close the curtains but
   playful elaborations of otherwise
   arrogant variations keeping
   the window open

   (my emphasis)

Like “un- / kept,” “other- / wise” is forcibly split in its first appearance, but is made whole in its second. The word “otherwise” is a compound word, a combination of the adjectives “other” and “wise,” and both meanings are activated in the first stanza it appears. The lines read, “playful elaborations of other- / wise arrogant variations.” Here, the poem playfully enjambs the word “otherwise” so that the fragment can be read as “other” (meaning additional) wise but arrogant variations. With this meaning, the variations are playful, wise, and arrogant, perhaps pointing to their lack of purpose for the reader. But this meaning changes in the stanza’s second appearance, in which the arrogant variations are just that: arrogant. Further, what we have,
“playful elaborations,” are presented as antagonistic to the “otherwise / arrogant variations.” Thus, the first stanza questions the usefulness of these variations, but the second affirms their importance.

The poem reflects on the effort involved for a listener:

6

ears busied with hearing more than
one voice the stream our tears unmirror

This sense that the reader is being asked to pay close attention, that they are being thrown in the water to “sink or swim” in the structure of the poem, is expressed in the poem’s penultimate stanza. The final page reads:

15

how different the grammars of
to think or swim

reminiscence and extinction

Here we have a defamiliarization of the phrase “sink or swim,” which becomes “think or swim.” The poem points to how the grammar is what differentiates the words. And indeed if one looks at how the two words are conjugated, this is clear. “To think” is conjugated: think, thought, and had thought, while “to swim” is conjugated: swim, swam, and swum. In this way, including “to think” instead of “to sink” disrupts the similar grammar construction of the words in the idiom. “To sink” is conjugated: sink, sank, and sunk, following the same conjugation structure as “to swim.”

Changing the word “sink” to “think” says more than articulating grammatical differences among linguistic units, though. By changing one word in a pairing, the poem alters the idiomatic phrase about one’s willpower and effort being all that
ensures success or achievement to a phrase about the difference between physical versus mental effort. In this way, the altered phrase combines ideas about a reader’s effort to think through the poem’s composition, which changes sounds and spatial configurations in order to generate new meaning.

In these collaborative works, we see and hear reflections on how changes in sound and spatial configurations on the page alternately narrow (in one context) and broaden (in the movement to another) a linguistic unit’s capacity for meaning. In *Flat With No Key*, we see and hear how a letter, a word, or a phrase multiplies and divides in meaning based on context and ultimately reach a point of exhausted nothingness. In *Light Travels*, we see and hear how, in constantly shifting pairs, a stanza, phrase, or word changes meaning based on its contextual relationship with other stanzas, phrases, or words. The compound word especially brings together the Waldrops’ concerns about sound and space. The “undersound” of the poem is its constant shifting, how stanzas travel across pages only to be left behind, and the sequences “overheard” constitute those moments of travel, of just having been left behind. Further, the words combine within themselves ideas about space (“under” and “over”) and sound (“sound” and “heard”). In this way, *Light Travels* performs multiple moments of coupling, ideas coming together, and moving apart, with a self-conscious understanding that changing the sounds and spatial arrangement of linguistic units on the page allows for such momentary narrowing and overall expansion.
In *Ceci n’est pas Rosmarie*, Rosmarie quotes Foucault, “‘One writes to
become other than one is’” (93). In an interview with the Waldrops, Rosmarie
expressed a similar sentiment about collaborative writing. When asked generally
about their collaborations, she said, “[Collaboration] was a process we enjoyed
tremendously partly because it allowed us to play with each other’s way of writing,
which normally is a no-no for each of us, but in collaboration I felt freedom to play
with the way he [Keith] does things” (Cettina, interview). Here, Rosmarie uses the
language of pleasure and play that critics of collaboration have noticed in the texts
they study. But Rosmarie also articulates something about putting on the other’s
language, a performance of becoming other than one is—the other member of the
couple. In this way, the entanglement of two voices on the page is indeed
compounded by collaboration, which is less a process of pleasurably simultaneous
speech (as Koestenbaum argues) and more about the pleasure of writing in the
language of your other, your partner, and having your own language being written
back to you. In the same interview with the Waldrops, Keith noticed, “She
[Rosmarie] would write something, give it to me, or the other way around,” and
Rosmarie agreed, “Keith would write a line, hand it to me, and when I got to it, I
would write the next line” (Cettina, interview). In the Waldrops’ collaboration, the
page really is a meeting place. Keith notes, “When we put [all the lines] together and
arranged them as we saw best, we found that we couldn’t always remember who
wrote which half” (ibid.). And the reader, instead of being confronted with
heterogeneity and plurality, is confronted with complete synthesis—letters, words,
phrases, and stanzas, composed by and for the couple on the page.

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