

5-2018

# The Desubjectified Subject in the Poetry of Rosmarie Waldrop

Amanda Rebecca Johnson

Clemson University, arjohns@g.clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Johnson, Amanda Rebecca, "The Desubjectified Subject in the Poetry of Rosmarie Waldrop" (2018). *All Theses*. 2853.  
[https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/2853](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2853)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

THE DESUBJECTIFIED SUBJECT IN THE POETRY OF ROSMARIE WALDROP

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

---

by  
Amanda Rebecca Johnson  
May 2018

---

Accepted by:  
Brian McGrath, Committee Chair  
Jillian Weise  
Cameron Bushnell

## ABSTRACT

Criticism of Rosmarie Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction* has centered around her fascination with the notion of zero as both a negation and the locus of infinity, but has so far neglected to discuss the implications that this lacuna has on the role of the subject. True to its title, *Driven* takes the reader on a journey toward nothingness where desubjectification is made into the subject of the work. Through the use of the prose poem which eschews traditional poetic form and conventional syntax, Waldrop employs a collage that not only provides material representation of abstract concepts, but also demonstrates the tenuous relationship between language, the self, and reality. As a forerunner of contemporary women's experimental poetry as well as a German-born immigrant with extensive experience in translation, Waldrop's ability to manipulate language and acknowledgement of the contingent relationship between the sign and referent proves her to be an authority on subjective loss and displacement. Her poem "Time Ravel" from *Driven* is a meditation on the reflexive nature of subjectivity which illustrates the poststructuralist idea of a decentered subject that is comprised of cultural and linguistic relationships. Waldrop's poetics reflect this disjunction between the self and the notion of an objective reality, while also suggesting that through the medium of poetry can one regain the agency that philosophy has long since disavowed. Through a close reading of Waldrop's poem in conjunction with theoretical readings on the postmodern idea of a subject, I will explore how one's identity and location in the political spectrum is formed through the tenuous relationship between language, history, memory, and time.

As a poet, Waldrop's primary concern is with linguistic displacement, but she presents it through the lens of the personal and the collective in terms of memory and history in order to draw attention to the ways in which time shapes our notions of subjectivity. Her unconventional syntax employs a variety of rhetorical devices in order to draw attention to the mechanics of meaning rather than the object itself. The syntactical vacancies provided by Waldrop's elliptical expressions, namely anacoluthon and anapodoton, in which seemingly-necessary grammatical structures are omitted, mirrors the theme of displacement present throughout the poem. The subject has been consumed by the signifiers, leaving an empty container that simultaneously tempts with the promise of meaning while proclaiming there is none. "If the mechanisms of subjectivity are disturbed," Waldrop writes, "it requires a total restructuring of the world." Since what we know of "the world" is based solely on our perceptions, the root of all memory, and may only be comprehended and expressed through language, then a distorted subjectivity raises not only epistemological concerns, but also has profound ontological implications. In this essay, I will focus on how language displaces us or makes us cliché-ridden, as well as demonstrate Waldrop's ability to exploit this gap resulting from the missing signifier in order to demonstrate how language can help us to rethink creativity and subjectivity.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Terrill Johnson, whose unconditional love and support made this possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have been able to complete this without the support and patience of my advisor, Brian McGrath, as well as the rest of my committee, Cameron Bushnell and Jillian Weise. I would also like to acknowledge the extraordinary debt I owe to the faculty of the Clemson English Department who have graced me with their knowledge, challenged me in every possible way, and helped me to grow as a reader, a writer, and a student of this world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<i>DRIVEN TO ABSTRACTION</i> .....	8
ALL RAVELED UP IN TIME RAVEL .....	9
WALDROP AND THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT .....	10
MIRROR STAGE .....	12
NAMES .....	14
FATHER .....	16
MOTHER .....	18

Table of Contents (Continued)

	Page
TIME.....	20
CLICHÉ .....	23
MEMORY AND HISTORY IN TIME RAVEL.....	26
ZERO .....	28
WRITING AS A WAY OUT OF TIME.....	30
REFERENCES .....	32

## INTRODUCTION

*But the subject. Is driven to abstraction. The subject that was present and aware- the one who counts, who sees, the named payee- is moved to tears, turns variable, invisible. Vanishes with the point. Ceaselessly the subject. Absents herself. - Rosmarie Waldrop "A Feeling of Absence"*

Rosmarie Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction* interrogates the notion of the subject and deserves to be read by not only those interested in contemporary experimental poetics, but also by scholars of theories of subjectivity. *Driven to Abstraction* allows readers to rethink what it means to be a subject. As a forerunner of contemporary experimental poetry as well as a German-born immigrant with extensive experience in translation, Waldrop manipulates language and acknowledges the contingent relationship between the sign and the referent. She is an authority on subjective loss and displacement. Born in Kitzingen-am-Main in 1935, Waldrop experienced both Nazi rule as well as Allied occupation. Because of this, she has first-hand experience of being a subject of a totalitarian regime, as well as a subject of a foreign power. She immigrated to the United States in early adulthood with her husband, Keith, an American soldier. She received her PhD from the University of Michigan and began translating works by French and German poets including Edmond Jabès, Paul Celan, Jacques Roubaud, Oskar Pastior, and Friederike Mayröcker. She began writing her own poetry and has since published twenty books of poetry and two works of fiction as well as various essays and criticisms, all exclusively in English. Her work in translating poetry and her experience adopting a language that is not her native tongue allows her to see words as opaque and

material. To be able to pick up and assume another language requires that one perceive the sign separate from its referent. While the object itself remains consistent, its linguistic label is an ephemeral entity that can be manipulated at will.

Waldrop's poetry exploits these complex relations between material objects and the abstract concepts used to represent them by emphasizing both the materiality of language and the abstract nature of seemingly concrete concepts such as "home" and "self." It is not surprising that Waldrop's work employs language to foreground themes of displacement: growing up in an occupied country in which the (temporary) ruling powers spoke an alien tongue, Waldrop has long been accustomed to language as a rift, or a break in connection, a halt in communication. By subverting the typical conventions of writing such as syntax, form, and diction, she emphasizes the ways in which the reader creates meaning by forming connections and filling in textual gaps. She draws attention to language's arbitrary, differential, and relational aspects, rather than presenting a false ideal of truth.

Much of her later work is comprised of prose poems, and *Driven to Abstraction* is no exception. Though I would classify Waldrop's work as "experimental" for reasons which I will explain later, the Western version of the prose poem first appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against standard poetic conventions. Offering a freedom from the restrictive forms of more traditional verse, the prose poem resists definition, or rather, it is defined through negatives. It lacks a consistent pattern, meter, or rhyme, but also eschews the traditional linear structure of a narrative and conventional syntax. It resists closure and by doing so, reflects the displaced and fragmented subject of

Waldrop's work. Through this medium that defies classification as neither prose nor poetry, Waldrop shows that the subject is where the signification breaks down by demonstrating "a preference for its own medium, rather than its subject matter, constantly privileging the discourse itself" (Zawacki 297). The subject is a place of creation, a palimpsest that is constantly effaced and renewed, yet still bears a trace of that which has been written before. Similarly, Waldrop employs the prose poem as a means to experiment with syntax through freedom from formal conventions, yet the idea of poem-as-prose is rooted in a long standing tradition of writers seeking to escape the demands of formality. Through this genre-bending medium, Waldrop produces a collage of writing that not only provides material representation of abstract concepts, but also demonstrates the tenuous relationship between language, the self, and reality.

Typically, experimental literature is considered to be that which prioritizes innovation over accepted literary forms. As an offshoot of modern and postmodern literature, contemporary experimental poetry calls into question previous ideals of originality and makes us rethink our concepts of creativity and authorship. In *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff writes about the notion of citationality, or the reflexive way that a work refers and alludes to other works, frequently borrowing content from other sources to create something original. She argues that "*citationality*, with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpretation of origin and destruction, is central to twenty-first-century poetics," but I would argue that this is especially evident in Waldrop's poetry because it reflects this uncertainty by making it difficult for the reader to arrive at any conclusion regarding the "meaning" of the poem

(17). Rather than appearing as a source of objective reality, her work raises the question of how we can possibly know ourselves when we can't be assured of what we know about the world to be true.

As the modern notion of the unified subject gives way, so does the notion that language comes from a supernatural power. The author's inspiration, or the source of his or her words, was not a message from a god or a muse; rather, it was simply other words. Upon the realization that everything has already been said, that human beings will be forever subjected to the limits of language—that we are perpetually contained in a cliché—the concept of originality quickly gave way to borrowing and collecting, a type of collage or a pastiche. “My main tool is collage,” Waldrop writes in her essay “Why Prose Poems,” “which brings with it displacement and dialogue, makes audible that we always write on a palimpsest. Though what matters most to me while composing is the cut, the fragmentary, ‘torn’ nature of the elements, and the spark given off by the edges” (242). *Driven to Abstraction*'s prose poems are a collage that echoes this idea of displacement, both in terms of content and its visual representation on the page. The first section of the book, “Sway-Backed Powerlines,” is composed of five poems, with each stanza written in paragraph form, centered and justified at the top of the page. The text is not broken up by indentations, line breaks, or quotations, leaving the reader to search for arrangements that might help construct the flow of ideas. By isolating these small sections of text, Waldrop displaces the parts from the poem as a whole, but also removes them from any large unifying body. All the parts look the same and the ends are indistinguishable from beginnings. Like a set of index cards tacked to a corkboard, these

poems recall text ripped from its sources and arranged in haphazard, non-linear, non-chronological manner that prizes the visual form over imagined content.

Preference toward the visual aspects of language is characteristic of concrete poetry, an experimental movement that prizes form over content with a focus on the visual appearance of the words on the page. Waldrop describes concrete poetry as “a revolt against the transparency of the word,” making “the sound and shape of . . . words [the] explicit field of investigation” (“A Basis of Concrete Poetry” 57). Waldrop writes that concrete poetry’s most obvious feature is its emphasis on the visual opacity of the signifier. In her poetry, the sentence is “replaced by spatial arrangement.” Usually, she continues, “we do not . . . *see* words, we *read* them, which is to say we look through them at their significance, their contents” (“A Basis of Concrete Poetry”). Waldrop encourages readers to see the words on the page. Words are no longer simple representations of abstract concepts; instead, they become the material body of the poem. In response to Susanne Langer’s statement that “A symbol which interests us also as an object is distracting,” Waldrop writes that “this distraction is exactly what I want, what poetry worth the name gives us: a word that does not disappear into its meaning, a word-thing, palpable, a sensuous, sounding body. The word made flesh” (“Why Prose Poems” 243). At the bottom of each page in her tribute to John Cage, “Music is an Oversimplification of the Situation We Are In,” a twenty-four page prose poem written in the same single-paragraph-per-page style mentioned previously, is a running footer of words that seem to be ripped straight from the dictionary. Beginning with “a abolish absence acceleration accordingly action admit against all almost ambient ambiguous/ American among

anechoic animal another anxiety any art at atmosphere atonal attention audience” and ending with “unpredictable urgency vertigo vibrate vigor voice wake war watch water wave wear weather welcome wheel whistle wildflowers winter without woodwinds world written year yes zero,” these words have no relation to each other except by how they are arranged in the alphabet, which itself is completely arbitrary. But through this alphabetical grouping, the similar words form an alliteration which provides a sort of continuity among them, “the sensuous sounding body” of the poem.

In “Why Prose Poems,” Waldrop describes her interest in not only the rhythm of the words, but also in potentialities offered by the silences, which “suspend the assurance of a statement to reintroduce uncertainty, possibility, potential” (241). While a blank spot on a page would commonly indicate an emptiness devoid of words, the objects that normally inhabit a poem, Waldrop is able to turn these spots of emptiness into the subjects of her work. In the section of *Driven to Abstraction* titled “What has Become of the Subject,” there are poems about zero, paper money, and Vermeer’s painting, in which she notes “More pressing absence is marked... The very space a function of the brain” (105-6). The spaces here represent that which cannot otherwise be represented. They are the excluded middle, an incomplete body, the marginalized margins, an abstraction made material through typography, but they also are the foundation of her work. The poetic spaces are fixed and rigidly demarcated, but everything else is ambiguous. Through these spaces, Waldrop shows us how language is reframed and displaced (and, by default, how we, as human subjects, are displaced as well by a language not our own). The text is framed and reframed by nothingness; the only frame of reference is a blank space.

In *Driven to Abstraction*, Waldrop's unconventional syntax employs a variety of rhetorical devices in order to draw attention to the mechanics of meaning rather than the object itself; how the meaning is produced is as important, if not more important, than the meaning itself. Unlike the concrete poets who relied on the visual aspects of language, the Language poets such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and others, emphasize the reader's role in constructing meaning through transposed syntax and distorted grammatical structures (which conceal relations of power) "so as to enter the hinterlands of knowledge obscured by the walls of conventional language" ("Rosmarie Waldrop"). I have an interest in the ways Waldrop obscures conventional language, but I am also interested in the ways Waldrop employs rhetorical tropes and schemes (which have a long history) to do so. The syntactical vacancies provided by Waldrop's use of elliptical expressions, namely anacoluthon and anapodoton, in which seemingly-necessary grammatical structures are omitted and expectations are interrupted, mirrors the theme of displacement present throughout the book. The subject has been consumed by signifiers, leaving an empty container that simultaneously tempts with the promise of meaning while proclaiming there is none. "If the mechanisms of subjectivity are disturbed," Waldrop writes, "it requires a total restructuring of the world" (*Driven* 33). Since what we know of "the world" is often dependent on perception, the root of all memory, and given that what we comprehend is often dependent on language, Waldrop's distortions of subjectivity raises not only epistemological concerns, but also an ontological one. In this essay, I will focus on how language displaces us or makes us cliché-ridden; I will also demonstrate Waldrop's ability to exploit this gap between signifier and signified,

language and “reality,” a gap that results from the missing signifier. Through a reading of Waldrop’s poetics, and by paying particular attention to the poem “Time Ravel,” included in Waldrop’s *Driven to Abstraction*, I will argue that language can help us to rethink creativity and subjectivity today.

## *DRIVEN TO ABSTRACTION*

True to its title, *Driven to Abstraction* takes the reader on a journey toward nothingness where desubjectification is made into the subject of the work. The book begins with a poem entitled “All Electrons are (Not) Alike,” electrons being the imperceptible and intangible building blocks of all matter in the universe, and ends with a poem entitled “Zero, or Closing Position.” All the poems emphasize the paradox of materiality that gives birth to nothingness (or vice versa), and explore how infinity can lie in an empty gap. “Like zero,” she writes in “Vanishing Point,” “You agree the point represents, within the physical scene, a definite location. Location, however, vanishing toward the infinite” (93). Through the concept of zero, a mathematical placeholder that not only represents an absence of numerical value but also symbolizes a circle which contains an infinite set of points, Waldrop offers a new perspective on what reviewer John Paetsch calls “an indeterminate multiplicity” of “the obscene center” (“More Vans”). The book’s title comes from the poem “A Feeling of Absence,” in which Waldrop writes about the idea of a nothing that gives birth to a something: “If signs create the very objects they were thought to represent, if shadow be the cause of substance, thought provoking matter, then it’s illusory to think objects come first. Though they contain the infinite...An illusion whose nature we had forgotten and therefore took for truth” (111). She presents reality as a simulacrum that is neither objective or

subjective. Neither privileging form nor content, Waldrop's work is both theory-heavy and visual. Her inspiration comes from math, history, and science: an intellectual collage.

Identification with the intellectual is a hallmark of the language poets, and Waldrop is no exception. *Driven* name-drops philosophers from Plato to Kant, religious figures such as St. Augustine and Meister Eckhart, various artists and composers, and even physicist Stephen Weinberg. Her work relies heavily on the theories of language provided by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. Yet, Waldrop also demonstrates a fascination with geometric principles, as evident in the poem entitled "A Little Useless Geometry Other Matters," in which each stanza/paragraph/page bears the title of a geometric term including "Point," "Line," "From Figure to Proposition," "Volume," and "In All Parts Equal to Itself." In contrast to Waldrop's language which is arbitrary, ambiguous, and an unreliable source of meaning, geometry provides defined terms, figures, and proofs. In the section "Cylinders," she writes: "Vertiginous verticals. We don't count on them though they are the fingers of the earth, but recognize them as doric, ionic, corncob. Or was that corruption?" (22). The solid figure of the cylinder is depicted in a language that contains dual meanings (as in the phrase "count on them") and makes associations based on the way the words sound when spoken (the alliteration of the /v/ and /c/) and the senseless is used to describe the sensory. This juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete, the subjective and the objective is a recurring theme in Waldrop's work, especially in *Driven to Abstraction*.

## WALDROP AND THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT

*Ulysses fights his way back to an Ithaca with four-lane highways. Where serfdom has been replaced by alienation, anomie, anxiety.*

Waldrop describes the “death of the subject” as “where serfdom has been replaced by alienation, anomie, anxiety.” Ties to an outdated notion of “master” have been replaced by an empty gap left by the subject’s death. According to Etienne Balibar in *Who Comes After the Subject*: “the time of subjects coincides with that of absolutism. Absolutism in effect seems to give a complete and coherent form to a power that is founded only upon itself, and that is founded as a being without limits (thus uncontrollable and irresistible by definition). Such a power truly makes men into subjects, and nothing but subjects, for the very being of the subject is obedience” (*Who* 25). If the subject is dependent on obedience to an absolute power, then loss of subjectivity implies that a freedom of sorts has been gained, as one is no longer subject to another (as serf to a Lord, for instance). To Waldrop, this freedom comes in the form of language, “A complex song of if and though I never had a voice. To introduce an exclamation, condition, stipulation, untenable argument, or wish” (36). The first part of this line contains no predicate; its subject is an apodosis which lays out the framework of a language contingent on losing the ability to speak. The conditional makes possible the speech in the subject-less anapodoton of the second part. By subverting the standard conventions of syntax, Waldrop demonstrates a mastery of a language by a de-subjectified subject with no master.

## MIRROR STAGE

*How can I remember my parents if I need to run my hands over my body to make sure it is there.*

According to Jacques Lacan, the mirror stage occurs when a child is able to recognize his reflection, or when he is first able to perceive him or herself as an object. This marks the beginning of the duality between not only the ego and the body, but also between the real and imaginary. The reflection in the mirror provides the child with a visual identity to accompany a self-perception that up until then has only been fragmentary. “It is not that our sensations need to match images in the brain,” Waldrop writes, “but that the brain needs a body for a frame of reference” (35). Since one is only able to see a limited portion of his or her body, the mirror provides the brain with knowledge of the body through an illusion (for the image in the mirror is after all, only glass).

The mirror stage has also a significant symbolic dimension. When the child has assumed the image of his or her own, the figure of the parent (usually the mother) becomes the Other, who confirms the child’s individual identity. Waldrop questions what happens to this parental figure when the subject learns to question his or her subjectivity: “How can I remember my parents if I need to run my hands over my body to make sure it is there” (32). Though the sentence is phrased as a question, Waldrop neglects the question mark and employs a period instead. A question leaves space for possible answers; it is an abstraction in the way that it is devoid of any representational qualities. A statement, on the other hand, is commonly thought of as fact or a purveyor of truth. Additionally, while the grammatical construct of a statement necessarily includes a subject, the subject of a question is often ambiguous. Alain Badiou, the contemporary philosopher, writes that “The subject is the local or finite status of a truth,” which means that when the subject is called into question, so is the notion of truth (25). “Does this fit my image of the real?” Waldrop asks. Not only is reality here an image, and an objective one at that, but the grammatical subject of the sentence is also an enigmatic pronoun (which refers to “glitter in the brain” of the previous sentence, a metaphor which does not refer to a specific object, but rather the idea of disorganization and disjunction) (30). The subject exists in its capacity to question itself, and indeed Waldrop’s many questions do just that, asserting her subjectivity through the process of questioning it.

## NAMES

*Names multiplied in the wake of caravels, clippers, communicating vessels.*

In seeming contrast to the idea of the subject as one who questions his or her existence, other notions of subjectivity focus on the ability to name. Hegel states that the “ego, which is this abstract being, is, because subjectivity, at the same time the power over the different names- the link which, having nothing in itself, fixes in itself series of them and keeps them in stable order” (*Theories* 87). Waldrop asserts this abstract ego through her many asyndetic lists. “Merriment (obs.), caprice, spite, anger, malice, moroseness, melancholy” she writes, assigning names to the myriad of human emotions, delineating a self through a list of abstractions with no subject, maintaining a private order and meaning through these words. According to Hegel, names are “the externality of intelligence to itself” because they give an existence to the content of thought (86). But when written, names also become the material content of thought. Thus, through the act of writing Waldrop not only asserts her being, but also her ability to create material proof of her existence. To quote Roland Barthes, “The Word here is encyclopaedic, it contains simultaneously all the acceptation from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose. It therefore achieves a state which is possible only in the dictionary or in poetry- places where the noun can live without its article- and is reduced to a sort of zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications” (*Writing Degree Zero* 48). Without their specifying articles, Waldrop’s noun-names hang in a balance of incomplete signification. Isolated, these words offer a precise meaning, but collectively form an abstraction when removed from the sentence structure.

Names in Waldrop’s work also function as a representation of patriarchal power. The first poem in *Abstraction*, “All Electrons are (Not) Alike,” draws comparisons between the biblical Adam who created his dominion by naming the objects around him and the European explorers who attempted to do the same through the process of renaming and subsequently forgetting native culture: “Columbus erased heathen names like Guanahani. Christened the islands to become king of the promised land. As Adam, who “called the animals by their true names,” was thereby to command them” (11). While the subject is the one who names, the name also indicates that which is subjected. Through the idea of these explorers, Waldrop seems to suggest that these names are not permanent, they are “multiplied in the wake of caravels, clippers, communicating vessels. The spelling capricious...as the winds” (35). The subject is the ephemeral name; its identity is that of forgetting.

## FATHER

*I can't hear my father's voice, moored as if among antipodes, articulation hindered by head hanging down and a spill of oceans.*

Waldrop's father figures as an abstraction, or a rumor of her creation or existence as she has no direct evidence of her conception besides herself. He first appears in "Time Ravel" "reading at his desk," establishing the correlation between language and paternity (29). According to Lacan, the father is associated with the subject's entry into the symbolic realm of language, which permits the birth of the ego, yet also functions to sever the bodily, pre-linguistic attachment to the mother. Indeed, in "Time Ravel," this linguistic father is presented to us in between a reference to "the dead" and a list of words: "read, road, door" (29). Since the list is asyndetic, as there are no conjunctions linking the terms in the series, the reader is free to determine what connection (if any) can be made. By situating the paternal figure between loss and the realm of abstract symbols, Waldrop suggests that he is responsible for her feelings of dissociation from the material (and maternal) body; but she also suggests that he is to be credited with enabling her the freedom to construct herself anew through language, reclaiming the lost connection to the physical body through attention to the materiality of language. Not only does the eye perceive the visual similarities between "read, road, door," but when the words are read aloud, the tongue and mouth are engaged in producing the repeated /r/ and /d/, providing these words with a physical presence that can coexist with their abstract signification.

In "Time Ravel," the father also figures as a connection between polar opposites, "moored as if among antipodes" (33). He is the bridge between the tangible materiality of the world and the human-created abstractions: "My father's stopped reading to watch a magpie rising black and white against the sky" she writes, as the physical materiality of the bird disappears into the blank expanse of the sky. Yet Waldrop contradicts both the magpie's substantiality, as well as the sky's indeterminateness. The bird's antithetical black-and-white coloring alludes to the paradoxical relationship between color and light: while black is the absence of color and light, and can easily be perceived through normal sight, white, the totality of all colors, is frequently invisible, unless presented against the backdrop of black's void. What appears to be positive is in fact negative, while the negative is, in fact, entirely positive.

Likewise, Waldrop's sky is not an infinite abyss; rather, it is rationalized and comprehended through science and mathematics: "High spirits and cloud theory reflect in the sea and stitch coordinates toward a flight of gulls, of stairs," she writes (32). Refusing to get lost in the sky's blank vacuity, Waldrop is instead able to specifically locate herself in it through the use of "coordinates" while simultaneously mastering its power through the act of theorizing. Here we can read the image of the sky as a metaphor for language: though seemingly infinite and filled with false illusions of clouds and clouded meanings, it is still subject to the human mind. What appears to be immaterial and beyond our grasp

is in fact grounded in the material, for though the objects depicted in the clouds are only a ghostly resemblance, they are nonetheless comprised of water droplets, a materiality that results when hydrogen is combined with oxygen.

## MOTHER

*When I think of my mother I am heavy in the pelvis with the children she wanted, and begin to sing.*

Waldrop's mother is the only material evidence of her existence, yet in "Time Ravel," she is neither wholly material nor maternal. Her "large body evaporates before I can ask her to show me the breast I did not take," Waldrop writes, affirming the corporeality of the maternal body before abstracting it into an indeterminate memory (34). Through the act of rejecting the mother's breast, the source of maternal bonding, Waldrop not only establishes an independence from traditional familial bonds, but also asserts a subjectivity not dependent on prior conventions, which is later called into doubt: "When I think of my mother, I am heavy in the pelvis with the children she wanted, and begin to sing" (36). Paradoxically, she recognizes "her" maternal figure as demonstrated by the use of the word "mother," but almost seems to deny her own existence through the use of the word "wanted," implying that to her mother, children were simply a longing, not a reality. Thus, the poet raises the question "from what am I born?"

Again employing water's materiality as a trope for fluid identity, Waldrop writes of "the memory of a big slab of ice that a man with leather mittens splits across the middle. To reveal the time hidden within where I might not find my body for the cold" (31). Though ice is usually used as a means of preventing organic matter from spoiling, Waldrop's ice preserves time as her "looking self" searches for the physical body<sup>1</sup>. The ice contains the memory of her mother, stocking the icebox, "wrapping the slab in a rag,"

---

<sup>1</sup> Any discussion on the body must be accompanied by a disclaimer that one's relationship to his or her body is intensely personal. Though others may attempt to identify and theorize the issue of the body in regards to context of gender, sexuality, ability, et cetera, I cannot claim to know another's body as my own and cannot make an adequate generalization. According to H el ene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa," women must "write the body" as a way of representing themselves through language: "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man" (877). As a cis-gendered female, Waldrop's writing must bear a trace of her femininity. Alicia Ostriker writes in *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* that "Poets have perennially occupied themselves with discovering analogies between the macrocosm of the world and the microcosm of the self. For many women poets at present, the microcosm means, emphatically, a physical self from which it is neither possible nor desirable to divide mental or emotional existence" (119). As Waldrop's poetry shows, while this self is comprised of unique experiences and memories, it is conveyed through the means of language which is simultaneously common and personal.

I must also recognize the privilege afforded to Waldrop and her body, as well as the privilege extended to me as a writer. Though both of us identify as female, we are also white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, and currently do not experience poverty. Additionally, Waldrop may face other challenges due to her age and her status as an immigrant. I cannot proclaim to speak for everyone, but I can acknowledge the individual challenges that one faces due to his or her body and the privilege each one is afforded and denied.

but does not provide Waldrop with any identity through association for it doesn't "warm [her] enough to have a self" (31). "Bodies that cannot digest time end up being consumed by it," Elissa Marder writes in response to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but her observation also bears relevance in the context of "Time Ravel," as the speaker of the poem is haunted by memories of the past while fraught with distress about the present, which results in anxiety regarding the future (148). Time, figured in Waldrop's poem as water that was once fluid but now frozen, has literally devoured the subject.

## TIME

*What does it mean to recall the past if I have little sense of the present?*

In Waldrop's poem, time does not offer a history that leads to growth. If "travel" suggests arriving at a future destination, then Waldrop's "raveled" transportation exhibits progress toward a future of abstractions. The "four-lane highway" leads to the fictional Ithaca, and "Every island Columbus found was a vow kept toward a map with no elsewhere" (29, 32). Roads are also used as a metaphor for scars: "Skin, though it takes pains to remember caresses, is marked by the roads that pain takes" (31). If we read the cliché "takes pains to remember" literally, this sentence describes the hurt needed to experience pleasure, the necessity of the distance or empty space. Read figuratively, it demonstrates the difficulty of remembering. Though the subject may be displaced and memory must be questioned, the body (as an object) endures. The "memory veers toward the surface" in the form of scars. This is "a body that has presumably survived its ability to function in the world but that bears some unspoken trace of its own remembered past" (Marder, *Dead Time* 114).

Waldrop questions the notion of progress as an advancement through space and time through the figures of Columbus and the explorers. Similarly, she questions whether their voyages and subsequent subjection of the native people brought civilization to the developing world. She describes "complex civilizations where the pace of events and cordless voices exceed all the running one can do just to stay in place" (33). Running is not a method of locomotion, but rather a way to remain static. She describes Columbus's expedition with "greed as secret motor," in which people strive to acquire material objects, setting loose a series of exchanges that amount to nothing more than "dust in everyone's eyes for private purchase and sale" (34).

In "Time Ravel," the difficulty lies in trying to locate one's self in a world where both the past and the future are uncertain. According to Jameson, "personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present...such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience and psychic life" (*Postmodernism* 26-7). The question of "How can I remember my parents if I need to run my hands over my body to make sure it is still there" is followed by the alternative: "Or lean forward to brace against *our* element, deflect its head-on force into a more general time"(32). The displaced time is reflected in the displaced subject.

According to Waldrop, "spontaneous acts" (or those not pre-planned and done in the present) "come back as mistakes." A mistake is only noticed in retrospect, when the future proves the past to be wrong. It implies a regression, a false notion of progress. "Every island Columbus found," Waldrop writes, "was a vow kept toward a map with no

elsewhere” (32). A vow is a promise for the future; therefore, Columbus’s future hinges on a map, an image of the real, but one that contains real power. Conversely, Waldrop’s past is also based on an “image of the real” (31). “Columbus’s crew were afraid they would not come back, unable to close the loop time won’t permit, but sometimes a ghost or shifting winds. Or the memory of a big slab of ice that a man with leather mittens splits down the middle” (31). The grammatical construct makes discerning any “intention” nearly impossible: while the “but” could contradict “closing the loop,” or the “won’t,” as if time won’t permit the loop to close, but the memory will. Memory allows for a return to home, or an earlier time, but also an escape from the “unbearable” present. If memories are formed through language, it follows that all language comes from the past in the form of the pastiche, collage, or cliché.

## CLICHÉ

*Glitter in the brain, ready to be pilfered.*

Originally used in typography, then appearing a half-century later in reference to photography, the word “cliché,” as Elissa Marder informs us, is correlated to the history of mechanical reproduction (79-80). Originally denoting “a negative image...cast in relief,” it has over time come to designate a metaphoric phrase in which its literal referent has been forgotten due to its extensive overuse. However, language is limited and cannot be completely original. There are a circumscribed number of combinations for words to enter in; it becomes almost impossible for language to not become cliché, which Waldrop refuses to lament. Rather, she seems to exploit their value as an instance of negativity transformed into materiality as her media of creation. She employs trite figures of speech and borrowed language, combining and juxtaposing one against the other to create a sort of pastiche. “Skin, though it takes pains to remember caresses,” she writes, “is marked by the roads that pain takes” (31). By coupling the phrase “takes pains to remember,” which usually implies difficulty, with the marks or scars that we assume are results of physical pain, she challenges the reader as to what should be taken literally, or what is the “real.” “The rubrics of the dictionary meaning business,” she writes, implying that the definitions of words have no meaning in themselves except from the negative value they have acquired as clichés.

In a sense, the existence of clichés in our language can be interpreted as not only reflecting the death of the individual subject, but also the lack of historical progress. For there is no language unique to the individual; the stuff of the ego’s formation is common to everyone born under the same tongue, and by using this time-worn language to construct our identity as well as our memories, we are perpetually living in the past, unable to move forward into the future. Marder describes what she calls a “flat death,” one that can never be transcended: “it is this inability to ‘go beyond’ the passing of the past- the being caught up in the relay of an infinite mechanical reproduction which we do not transcend- that is the cliché that is contemporary history” (87). This seems to explain why the speaker in Waldrop’s poem blurs history with contemporary reality: because the past is reproduced in a multitude of ways through language, images, and material objects, it still locates itself in the present of human thought. According to Marder, “when death fails to work, time becomes unhinged, memory evaporates, and speech devolves into cliché or becomes utterly impossible” (153). Nothing in Waldrop’s poem seems to die: the figures and follies of history perpetually appear and reappear to the effect that we are “frozen in time,” much like Waldrop’s “big slab of ice” containing “the time hidden within where I might not find my body for the cold” (31). In Waldrop’s poem, “the dead are neither buried nor put to rest; ghosts of history return in the form of stuttering clichés” (Marder 85). They are apparitions, discovered and discarded, recycled and reused.

However, Waldrop, echoing Barthes, seems to perceive clichés as not “raveled in time,” but rather, as avenues of possibility. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes writes that “clichés function as virtual linking devices; they have lost their density and gained a more interrelated state of speech; they operate in the manner of chemical valences, outlining a verbal area full of symmetrical connections, junctions, and networks from which arise, without the respite afforded by wonder, fresh intentions toward signification” (46). Though Barthes seems to see possibility in clichés rather than loss, he also acknowledges the futility of trying to find an original voice: “writing is precisely this compromise between freedom and remembrance, it is this freedom which remembers and is free only in the gesture of choice, but is no longer so within duration...it is impossible to develop it [one’s mode of writing] within duration without gradually becoming a prisoner of someone else’s words and even of my own...Writing as freedom is therefore a mere moment” (16-17). Out of these time-worn clichés and recycled language emerges something new that cannot be completely severed from the past.

## MEMORY AND HISTORY IN "TIME RAVEL"

*With the mind's eye. We see against the light. The way we see the dead*

Waldrop begins her poem by establishing a metonymic relationship between memory, or hindsight, and vision, a looking forward, through the anthropomorphic figure "the mind's eye" (19). Like Wordsworth's "inward eye," Waldrop's eye does not see what is put in front of it; rather, it is "the way we see the dead" (29). Through this metaphor, Waldrop offers us a sense of time in which memory is a looking forward, while the future is nothing but that which has passed. The poem begins with a vision of the narrator's deceased father, not seen optically, but seen "with the mind's eye" (1). The poem is populated with ghosts seen with this "mind's eye": the ghosts of Waldrop's mother and father, explorers from the history books such as de Gama, Magellan, and Columbus (and by default, the ghosts of the natives in these conquered lands), as well as Waldrop herself, leading us to question notions of home, origin, and the way these contribute to our notions of self and identity. Waldrop's present identity merges with the history of the natives and the future of the explorers, which is presented to the reader in contemporary time in the form of the poem.

Through these images of ghosts, Waldrop's word-pictures become fixed to the page: though her language is turned into something material, it is also increasingly "driven to abstraction" and cannot be placed in time. If "drive" implies a location, then the proper nouns of place names become vague concepts signifying a non-place that exists nowhere except "the mind's eye" (29). "Names multiplied in the wake of caravels, clippers, communicating vessels," she writes, showing how the arbitrariness of language can influence one's knowledge by altering his conceptions of the world (35). What does it mean when a place, or physical entity, that we call home does not exist?

## ZERO

*...the brain needs a body for frame of reference*

In the middle of the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal wrote about the problematic notion of zero in his didactic essay *Réflexions our la géométrie en general; De l'esprit géométrique et de l'Art de persuader*. He writes that while zero usually indicates an absence of a number, it must be able to be represented as a “something” in order to be employed as a placeholder. While not a number, since it can only amount to nothing, the whole number system depends on this non-entity. It is “entirely heterogenous with regard to the system and is nowhere near a part of it. The continuous universe held together by the double wings of two infinities is interrupted, disrupted at all points by a principle of radical heterogeneity without which it cannot come into being” (DeMan 59). While a system must be defined and demarcated by something outside of it, zero must be a number and not a number at this same time. It is simultaneously the foundation of the number system and yet wholly exterior to the system that it defines.

This rupture of the system occurs on the level of language, in, according to DeMan, “the inability of a theory of language as sign or name (nominal definition) to ground this homogeneity without having recourse to the signifying function, the real definition, that makes the zero of signification the necessary condition for grounded knowledge” (59). Because a nominal definition (a definition of name) cannot exist independently of a real definition (an axiom or proposition that needs to be proven), both language and number cannot signify something without resorting to the zero, the nothing and everything without which nothing can exist.

This idea that language is inherently rooted in a deficit has profound implications when we consider the foundations of human life that have their basis in language: our notion of self as formed through development of the ego, history and memory and the way our personal and collective histories are preserved through retelling, and political power structures that rely on language to both totalize and divide.

## WRITING AS A WAY OUT OF TIME

*Set sail on the power of imagination for hearsay geographies and real dangers.*

In “Time Ravel,” the present is associated with splenic boredom, and the future is uncertain. The past in the form of memory and history-as-narrative is unreliable when told through language and therefore cannot be assigned any veracity. Though the material artifacts of history are solid evidence of the past, they take on a life of their own with the passing of time. Yet, these objects contain the possibility of ensuring that something lives on in the future as well as providing a way out of boredom. Writing, as language materialized, is a way for the subject to escape time and reclaim his or her identity despite its displacement. According to Balibar, “It is always in the element of language that individuals are interpellated as subjects...Every ‘personality’ is constructed with words, in which law, genealogy, history, political choices, professional qualifications and psychology are set forth. But the linguistic construction of identity is by definition *open*...it is always possible to appropriate several languages and to turn oneself into a different kind of bearer of discourse and of the transformations of language” (259). Waldrop’s poetry offers us a different kind of language: one that is clichéd and representative of a fragmented subject, but still endowed with the capabilities of creation, a language that is time and history and a part of the self made material. But also, it is a way out of time. Its atemporality is a way to escape chronological linearity of a false narrative.

This paper presents Waldrop’s work in a way that is representative of her poetry-, which is to say that it reflects the lack of unity of the individual subject as well as the outside world. Her experimental poetry relies on self-imposed forms and rejects conventional standards of both syntax and poetics. Though the words in her prose poems are compartmentalized on a visual level, the multiple subjects of her poems never are—history, memory, time, and identity all appear and reappear as the multiple threads that hold the work together. Her words are not limited to a singular context, and that is why a traditional reading proves impossible. Her poetry mirrors the breakdown of the relationship between the word and the object, but, according to Jameson, for postmodern writers this rift “opens up a provisional space in which this breakdown is reexperienced over and over again as a process”(139). Throughout this paper, there are instances where quotations from the poem appear in multiple sections. This is intentional, as it is correlated to the repetition and multiple subject positions offered in the poems. A chronological or linear structure cannot represent Waldrop’s subject, nor can it represent the subject of Waldrop’s work. Rather, this paper, as well as the poetry of Rosmarie Waldrop can only offer fragments of what it means to represent a displaced subject. But unlike T.S. Eliot who hopes to shore fragments against his ruin, Waldrop offers the reader a chance to build something new from the nothing we are.

## REFERENCES

### Works Cited

- Balibar, Etienne. "Citizen Subject." Cadava and Connor 33-56.
- . from "The Nation Form: History and Ideology." Rossington and Whitehead 253-262.
- Barthes, Roland. *Writing Degree Zero*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Cadava, Eduardo and Peter Connor, eds. *Who Comes After the Subject*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Cixous, Hélène, et al. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3173239](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239).
- De Man, Paul. "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion." *Aesthetic Ideology*. St. Paul: University of Minn. P., 1996.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. from *Philosophy of Mind, Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. Rossington and Whitehead 85-91.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- Marder, Elissa. *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.
- Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. *Stealing the Language : The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- Paetsch, John. "More Vans Arrive, All of Them Inert: A Review of Rosmarie Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction*" *Jacket 2*, 2 Jan. 2012, [jacket2.org/reviews/more-vans-arrive-all-them-inert](http://jacket2.org/reviews/more-vans-arrive-all-them-inert). Accessed 3 Dec. 2012.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- "Rosmarie Waldrop." *Contemporary Poets*. *Encyclopedia.com*. 2001 [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com). Accessed 4 June 2012.
- Rossington, Michael and Anne Whitehead, eds. *Theories of Memory : A Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007.
- Waldrop, Rosmarie. "A Basis of Concrete Poetry." *Bucknell Review* vol. 22, no.2, 1976, pp.141-151.
- . *Driven to Abstraction*. New York: New Directions, 2010.

---. "Why Prose Poems." *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries*, edited by Reginald Shepherd, Counterpath Press, 2008, pp. 241-243.

Zawacki, Andrew. "Accommodating Commodity: The Prose Poem." *The Antioch Review*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2000, pp. 286–303. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [jstor.org/stable/4614021](http://jstor.org/stable/4614021).

## Works Considered

- Agacinski, Sylviane. "Another Experience of the Question, or Experiencing the Question Other-Wise." Cadava and Connor 9-24.
- Badiou, Alain. "On a Finally Objectless Subject." Cadava and Connor 25-32.
- Barch-Jacobson, Mikkel. "The Freudian Subject, from Politics to Ethics." Cadava and Connor 41-78.
- Blanchot, Maurice. "Who?" Cadava and Connor 38-40.  
---. *The Writing of the Disaster (L'écriture du Désastre)*. Trans. Ann Smock. New ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. 1936. New York: Schocken, 1986.
- Burt, Stephen. *Close Calls with Nonsense*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2009.
- Cadava, Eduardo and Peter Connor, eds. *Who Comes After the Subject*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Chiasson, Dan. *One Kind of Everything : Poem and Person in Contemporary America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Cohen, Tom, et al. *Material Events: Paul DeMan and the Afterlife of Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minn. P, 2000.
- Frow, John. "Toute la Mémoire du Monde: Repetition and Forgetting." Rossington and Whitehead 150-155.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing : Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Space, Time, and Perversion*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Howard, Richard. *Alone with America*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.
- Hume, Christine. "A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop." *Chicago Review* 53.4 (2008): 252-261. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 3 Jul. 2012.

- Johnson, Barbara. *A World of Difference*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. Print.
- Keller, Lynn. "Fields of Pattern-Bounded Unpredictability": Recent Palimpsests by Rosmarie Waldrop and Joan Retallack." *Contemporary Literature* 42.2 (2001): 376-412. *JSTOR*. Web. 3. Jul. 2012.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language : A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- . *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the 'I' Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Ecrits : The First Complete Edition in English*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Laclau, Ernesto. "The Politics of Rhetoric." Cohen 229-253.
- MacKendrick, Karmen. *Immemorial Silence*. n.p.: State University of New York Press, 2001. *EBSCO Host*. E-book file.
- Marder, Elissa. *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012.
- Mossin, Andrew. "Networks of the Real in Contemporary Poetry & Poetics: Peter Middleton, Susan Schultz, Rosmarie Waldrop." *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.3 (2007): 143-153. *JSTOR*. Web. 3. Jul. 2012.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." Trans. Marc Roudebush. Rossington and Whitehead 144-149.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Differentials : Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Phillips, Carl. *Coin of the Realm : Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2004.
- Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions Pub. Corp, 2010.
- Reed, Brian R. "Rosmarie Waldrop Renews Collage" *Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012. Kindle file.
- Retallack, Joan, and Rosmarie Waldrop. "A Conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop." *Contemporary Literature* 40.3 (1999): 329-377. *JSTOR*. Web. 3. Jul. 2012.

- Retallack, Joan. *The Poethical Wager*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Rossington, Michael and Anne Whitehead, eds. *Theories of Memory : A Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007.
- Selby, Nick. "Desiring Texts: The Erotics of Domestic Space in the Poetry of Lyn Hejinian and Rosmarie Waldrop." *European Journal of American Culture* 23.1 (April, 2004): 21-29. CrossRef. Web. 3. Jul. 2012.
- "Subject, n". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. September 2012. Oxford UP. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.
- Waldrop, Rosmarie. *Another Language : Selected Poems*. Jersey City, N.J.: Talisman House, 1997.
- . *Blindsight*. New York: New Directions, 2003.
- . *Curves to the Apple*. New York: New Directions, 2006.
- . *Driven to Abstraction*. New York: New Directions, 2010.
- . *A Key Into the Language of America. Literature Online*. New York: New Directions, 1994.
- Winters, Yvor. *In Defense of Reason*. Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio UP, 1987.
- Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real: "Strange Shapes of the Unwarped Primal World"." *Adventures in Realism*. Ed. Matthew Beaumont. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 207-223.
- . *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. New York: Verso, 2000.