

## Using Imagination to Create New Roles: Diane Wakoski's Poetry

By Nancy Bunge

In 2001, as my "Women In America" class drew to a close, my freshman students had a complaint so compelling that they risked offending me just before I calculated final grades. They announced that the women's movement seemed a failure to them because they saw no successful women whom they would choose to emulate. The stars of the entertainment industry, like Madonna or Whitney Houston, tended to have troubled personal lives, while the "safer" role models like Janet Reno and Madeleine Albright seemed desexed. They looked around and saw no woman whose life suggested that they could enjoy distinguished careers without sacrificing all hope of developing a rich personal lives.

I suspect that if the poet Diane Wakoski had heard their comments, she would urge the students to see this deficit as an opportunity to use their hearts and minds to develop and live out new roles that would allow women to enjoy both success and personal happiness. Wakoski's poetry asserts again and again that imagination can help solve the difficulties that repeatedly haunt women.

Wakoski has earned the right to speak with authority on this subject, for during her 65 years on the planet she has lived through times that afforded women considerably fewer options than women attending college today. Moreover, she began her life far from the privileged circumstances often associated with an endeavor like poetry. Born on August 3, 1937, she grew up in Whittier, California where her divorced mother worked as a bookkeeper to support her two daughters. Wakoski's sense of abandonment by her father recurs in her poetry, as in the following poem:

If George Washington  
had not  
been the Father  
of my Country  
it is doubtful that I would ever have  
found  
a father....  
other children said, "My father is a doctor,"  
or  
"My father gave me this camera,"  
or  
"My father took me to the movies,"  
or  
"My father and I went swimming,"  
but  
my father is coming in a letter  
once a month

for a while,  
and my father  
sometimes came in a telegram  
but  
mostly  
my father came to me  
in sleep.

After she became pregnant in high school, she stayed in a home for unwed mothers until she gave birth. She then put the child up for adoption because she did not have the money necessary to provide him with a good life. Educated at the University of California at Berkeley, she considers herself extremely lucky, in part because of the terrific education California offered its residents when she grew up there. And, indeed, her journey through California public school system laid the groundwork for a life rich in both achievement. Wakoski has published over 40 collections of poetry, most with the prestigious Black Sparrow Press, and won numerous awards such as a Guggenheim, a Fulbright and the Poetry Society of America's Walt Whitman Award. After teaching at one university after another for over a decade, she has settled at Michigan State University where she now holds a distinguished professorship.

Wakoski has also enjoyed a good marriage for almost twenty years. This seems a large accomplishment after the long series of difficult relationships with men she has candidly and compellingly described in poetry collections with titles like Dancing on the Grave of a Son of a Bitch and the Motorcycle Betrayal Poems. Wakoski dedicated the latter book to the men who'd betrayed her adding her hope that "they will fall off their motorcycles and break their necks." This authentic rendering of her life in her poetry complements Wakoski's writing philosophy: "The only writers that interest me are the ones who are original and I think their originality almost always comes out of an organically honest expression of their involvement with the world."

In much of the poetry she has published during the last 10 years, and especially in the collection Medea the Sorceress, Wakoski shares the secret of her success: instead of bemoaning the limited possibilities reality presented to her, she has used her imagination to create new options for herself.

Wakoski has consistently rejected the label "feminist poet." She puts it this way Medea: "One of the reasons I have not been wanting to be called a feminist poet is that the label seems to lump all women writers together, as if we have a common message. I am not even sure that I have a message, but if I do, it is full of contradictions and paradoxes and perhaps even baffling. I know that I am glad I was born a woman, and I have never once longed to be a man though I have an almost classic case of what I call 'penis envy' because I really do believe that if my culture (or biology) allowed me to be the sexual aggressor that I would have had a much more fulfilled life" (111). So, she does wish she lived in a world that encouraged her to actively pursue her passions the way it does men: "I really don't want to be a man...., but I want to have the right to initiate action. I want to be the quester, the lover, to play the role of Orpheus" (Medea 46). But she believes the feminist point of view recommends emulating men rather than pursuing them. Wakoski writes:

I never wanted to be  
the garage mechanic, only  
to marry him,  
never wanted to ride motorcycles  
only to love the man  
who raced them (Medea 159).

Wakoski's poetry suggests that women who desire change should expend their energy dreaming up ways to move beyond the problems they face. Wakoski began using fantasy to escape her life's limits at a young age. In the poem, "Saturday Night," she describes her desolation after returning home from a day of escape into library books, a drugstore dinner, and a musical comedy at the Whittier Movie Theatre:

I still think each morning  
when I wake up and don't want to face the day  
of how I felt then, not wanting to emerge  
from the dusty old car,  
wanting to snuggle down into the warm  
backseat while it carried me through the night  
of fragrant oranges.  
a treasure of books at my feet  
in a world where I could always be the princess,  
never the servant,  
never the poor peasant, living alone  
in the country  
with only an old mother. (Magician's Feastletters 89)

Her poems suggest that falling in love brought her the same joy as books and movies. Although she rejected many adolescent rituals like learning to drive, she gave herself over to teenage love. But she acknowledges that to resist this dance would have meant transcending patterns of behavior persistent enough to have become mythic:

Corn maiden, Persephone,  
Eurydice, Chac Mool, Hades,  
Bad Boys, good girls.  
that's what the earth stories are  
all about (Medea 156).

Not that Wakoski felt forced into this role. On the contrary, even recalling her adolescent passions gives her enormous pleasure; like

one of those California sunsets  
that coil around you,  
wrapping you in light. (Medea 156)

When Wakoski got pregnant and retreated to a home for Unwed Mothers, she refused to disown her enthusiasm for passion to please the social worker:

She is told by the Social Worker that she has FAILED because  
she still loves J.  
she doesn't regret doing anything for love,  
she doesn't believe she is bad  
she doesn't regret giving up her child  
she believes her life will go on, the same as it had always gone on  
she won't talk about her mistakes. (Medea 98)

Like the other girls in the home, she hasn't lived long enough to collect much worldly information, but they all understand their own innocence:

Most of us, didn't know....  
about the tiny burrowing owls, or the lingering scent of sagebrush  
when the night was pure, pure as we knew we still were. (Medea 98)

In "Reading Bonjour Tristesse at the Florence Crittenden Home for Unwed Mothers," Wakoski reports that she used literature to comfort herself during her pregnancy and exile:

I walked in the dusty yard of The Home  
memorizing Shakespeare's  
"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone bewept my outcast state." (Argonaut Rose 16)

When the boy who got her pregnant wrote letters about dates with other girls, she vowed to rebuild her life. His betrayal allowed Wakoski to see herself as Medea; she believes that a large often silent group of women will see themselves in her determination to shape a good life for herself in spite of trusting a man who betrayed her.

She went to Berkeley, and she told him  
to go away. No regrets. Only the weak have  
regrets. She flew in her chariot  
with all her dragonlady power to Berkeley,  
then New York, then the Midwest, and finally to this Café  
where she sits telling the tale, not of the tribe,  
but of herself, and in spite of what others say, she knows  
that the song this Silvery Moon Questing Lady of Dragonlight sings,  
is the tale for at least half  
of the tribe. (Medea 99)

She writes this poem validating choices made out of love and passion:

for all women, the other half of the tribe,  
for Eve who dared to eat the apple,  
I write this letter, and sign myself

Diane,  
The Lady of Light . (Medea 99)

And so, in this poem, Wakoski suggests that when she trusted a man who abandoned her, she not only experienced personal sadness, she underwent an experience so common that it has become embodied in myth. But she has moved beyond the grief, so she writes the poem not to record her personal difficulties, but for “at least half/ of the tribe,” for those women who, like Wakoski and Medea, have trusted men too easily and too much. For them, she declares herself “the Lady of Light” because she can tell them with authority that she if they imagine and fight for good lives, they will find them. I have taught this poem twice to my mostly female students and, always, when we discuss it, an attentive silence settles over the classroom suggesting that many, if not all, the women in my class know precisely what Wakoski means here. The first time I taught it, I asked my class: “Should I teach this poem next semester?” They answered in a chorus: “Yes!”

The honest articulation and pursuit of what she feels shapes not only Diane Wakoski’s romantic life, but her poetry. Even though much of the poetry she has written about her relationships with men is negative, the faith that truth telling pays consistently motivates her. Wakoski believes that one finally cannot escape one’s destiny, but that one can realize it in fuller and narrower ways. So, to disown the power of her attraction to men would destroy rather than save her no matter how many difficulties loyalty to her feelings bring her. Wakoski fully understands that love often robs people of both freedom and common sense:

We turn  
ourselves into coyotes,  
grey and hungry  
and we follow,  
running. We  
follow without even thinking  
it might be  
a risk (Medea 174).

Still, living one’s life means owning and following one’s own dreams. Wakoski finds that the imaginative ability to entertain several realities simultaneously allows her to both dream of and move towards a life that more satisfactorily realizes her deepest needs and desires. When she felt trapped as a girl, she lived in a metaphorical and literal desert:

except in a dream  
That dream was Michigan,  
A land of Native Americans, Hiawatha’s shores  
of Gichgee Goomee  
but first it was the water. All the  
water  
the desert never had. Still,  
it was only a dream, in the shape of a mitten.

Near the end of the poem where these lines appear, Wakoski argues that her life as an artist played a crucial role in her movement from a desert to a green landscape again both literally and metaphorically:

The artist  
isn't a physicist  
until he has to make  
a monument;  
change his life from desert  
to water. (Medea 23-25)

She learns how to do this by giving herself over to books and movies, for she writes: In movies and books

we shape our own destinies,  
call ourselves  
whatever we want to. (Medea 31)

Even as an adult, when she watches movies about teen love, they help her recover from the damage done by her troubled adolescence: “No wonder I love these teenage movies where the sex is sexy and doesn't result in pregnancy, and kids have fun without having to worry about turning into Neanderthals or reverting to some lower class slob” (Medea 123). These films multiply her imaginative options even in adulthood: “Movies give me one of those parallel universes where I can live a different life than I was destined for. The life where my handsome father loved me and did not go away; where I brilliantly replaced my mother and then was courted by the nicest, richest men. Oh fairy tales, escape, oh Purple Rose of Cairo” (Medea 168).

Wakoski argues that cultivating her imagination by reading books when young has made it possible for her to redeem her adult life. Women who haven't learned how to cultivate their fantasies easily fall into traps shaped for them by their adolescent experiences because they make the mistake of believing that their present reality defines all their options: “If girls didn't read books, they would be stuck with many children before their teens were over, and drunken husbands or no husbands at all, or even worse, dreary ones who spoke badly if at all and had dirt under their fingernails and were not sexy” (Medea 123).

So, Wakoski believes her imagination has blessed her with a good life. She reports that as her husband sleeps, she often reviews her life with gratitude. And she thanks poetry for bringing it to her: “One of the reasons I don't regret my life or any of its failures is that I feel that I have recreated myself in a way that is quite worthy of merit, and it gives me a sense of what is possible in this world....I do count my blessings and I do thank poetry” (Medea 123-4).

Her imagination not only gives her the capacity to dream up and move towards a richer future, it helps her heal the past. Riding in a car with her husband or with a male friend, she feels as though the father who abandoned her has returned to take care of her:

Riding with you, whether you are Steel Man

Of young Rosenkavalier, the car is woolly  
with the love I know my father  
secretly had for me. (Medea 170)

Imagination even rounds off the sharp edges of the present. If her husband has no interest in dancing with her, Wakoski takes a turn around the floor with an imaginary partner:

You can make him say all the things  
your husband or lover never said, and he'll dance  
when you want to dance. (Medea 180)

But still, for Wakoski, nothing matches falling asleep next to a living, breathing

kind husband, who whispers,  
"Poor Diane," and pulls you closer like a child  
to assuage you, to hold you, to love you securely, as no father  
as no lover, even the invisible one,  
ever has. (Medea 180)

Wakoski sees in retrospect that she could never have achieved this happiness without embracing her past. The bad relationships prepared her for the good one because "They were the experiences which finally have allowed me to define love as something beyond sex" (Medea 191). But to put this history to good use, she had to imagine a different future.

Imagination has even brought her children. Students drawn to her by their shared fascination with poetry help her form a family, so she writes to a former student: "I have found a son without actual motherhood" (Medea 189).

Wakoski confesses that she has little compassion for the abused wife on her block because she has none to spare. Having had to work so hard for so many years to save herself from the darkness,

I would not go down underground for her,  
having already stumbled blindly, and  
raggedly, through my own winter, to only  
just now see the April light  
flooding through my house.

But perhaps the neighbor can save herself. Wakoski sees her as lost in darkness because she cannot trust her passions or dream of a better life for herself:

She had hidden her sex in fat.  
She lives puzzled by light.  
She has children to serve her.  
She chooses a bad husband, one who could  
not find a woman. (Medea 163-4)

So, Wakoski's poetry implies a rather conservative message: that despite so much theorizing about equality, women primarily yearn for and need good relationships with men and that by embracing their desires and their imaginations, they may be able to find them—as she has.

Even though I would love to dismiss Wakoski's position as reactionary and simplistic, I can't, primarily because the freshmen students in my "Women in America" classes fall in love with Alix Kates Shulman's book Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, year after year and decade after decade. The unresolved dilemma in that book, and apparently in my students' lives, is how women can form such healthy bonds with men that they need not fear humiliation or abandonment. Wakoski's solution seems extreme: give yourself over to love trusting that eventually you can find your way to a healthy version of it, but it is more of an answer than Shulman's novel offers.

Moreover, when my students complain about the personal lives of successful women, they suggest that the question that most tantalizes them is the same one that has absorbed Wakoski: not how to succeed in professions traditionally dominated by men, but how to form good relationships with men. And so, Wakoski, rather than articulating an retrograde philosophy, may well pose the question that still most needs an answer: how can women help men find a way to genuinely respect and love them? That this question haunts the 18 year old women in my classes who easily aspire to the professions all but totally beyond the reach of the women in my generation, suggests that the public problems between men and women like equal pay for equal work are the easy ones and that the private issues still need addressing.

If establishing a constructive relationship with a man remains the central problem for women attending college, how much more intensely it must bedevil those whose relatively limited resources and educations make them far more dependent on men, especially once they have children. If any group of women in the world enjoys circumstances that should liberate them from the vulnerabilities that have made male betrayal a problem for women since before Medea's time, it should include the young women who sit in my classes. But, as Wakoski wisely notes, her poetry offers a modern rendition of a conflict between men and women too large and deep to give way simply because women have more career options and money than in the past.

## Works Cited

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