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Sites of resistance: language, intertextuality, and subjectivity in the poetry of Diane Wakoski

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SITES OF RESISTANCE:
LANGUAGE, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND SUBJECTIVITY
IN THE POETRY OF DIANE WAKOSKI

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in
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by
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Cordelia Maxwell Hanemann
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Abstract

This dissertation explores the interconnectedness of language and related cultural texts and women’s subjectivity. The poststructuralist feminist enterprise of examining and critiquing language and signifying practices for the ways in which they impose social values and of interrogating and undermining the fixity of meanings in cultural texts will serve as my primary frame. Concerned with the individual (gendered) consciousness, poststructuralist feminist theory of subject formation posits that while language, along with ideologically biased texts of the culture, construct subjects, language and the cultural texts also serve as sites of resistance for the deconstruction and reconception of individual and collective subjectivities. Because for many poststructuralist feminists, the language of poetry serves as the vehicle *par excellence* for the revisioning of language, texts, and subjectivity, a study of the way language relates to subject formation can find fertile ground in a focus on the language of poetry.

I center my discussion on the role of language and cultural texts in subject formation around the poetry of Diane Wakoski, who experiments with postmodern parody, linguistic intertextualization, and remythologization. Wakoski’s intertextualization and remythologization of cultural texts enables the revisioning process of reconceiving the possibilities of women’s subjectivities. Wakoski, through recursive postmodern parody, installs, explores, undermines, and remythologizes a pastiche of texts: traditional, biblical, personal, and cultural myths; cultural icons from history and popular culture; scientific treatises and commentary on art; the architecture of the casino and the landscape of the desert; elements of personal biography, memories, and letters.

I interrogate and remythologize Wakoski’s texts by recursively visiting key stories, myths, allusions, and themes to demonstrate how Wakoski’s poetic language and intertextual technique reflect the process by which women can be both victimized by cultural texts bent on determining their identities and liberated by a renovation of the defining parameters of language. I analyze Wakoski’s poetry to discern ways women have been interpellated through language to set roles, relationships, performances, self-perceptions, and even bodies. Language and the cultural texts themselves serve as sites where women can contest the ways in which their subjectivities have been conceived and where these subjectivities can be revisioned.
Introduction

Diane Wakoski, poet in residence at Michigan State University since 1976, has authored a large body of published poetry spanning over four decades. A former Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellow, she has been recognized for her work by the American Academy of Poets, which bestowed upon her the coveted William Carlos Williams Award for Poetry, and by the National Endowment of the Arts fellowship. Not only is she a full-time teacher of poetry at MSU, but she has also served as visiting poet in at several prestigious universities, including the University of California at Irvine and the University of Virginia. In addition, her poetry appears in syllabi for courses in Contemporary Poetry, American Literature, Women’s Studies, Women’s Poetry, and Popular Culture across the continent. Through her many publications in theory, criticism, poetic methodology, and most importantly, her forty plus volumes of poetry, she has crafted a complex personal mythology.

Avowedly a “user of stories” (Wakoski, Toward a New Poetry 291),¹ Wakoski advocates writing and re-writing old stories, transpositioning them into new ones:

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each time
we reshape a thing, it gathers power, and

to make is richer than
to be. (The Emerald City of Las Vegas 52)²
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Through her writing/re-writing, she grapples with the on-going process of self-discovery. This process has entailed engaging those cultural, literary, and personal-life “texts” that have informed her vision of herself and of her place in the culture. Though personal, her poetry is not necessarily “confessional,” but what she likes to call “the art of personal narrative” (TNP 257). Using the metonymy of the persona-as-woman, the poetry explores some of the significant issues relating to subjectivity and positionality relevant to American women. Wakoski’s most recent series, The Archaeology of Movies and Books, especially volume three, The Emerald City of Las Vegas, presents experiments in form and content that reflect her personal mythology. The three volumes of the trilogy, Medea the Sorceress,³ Jason the Sailor,⁴ and, especially, The Emerald City of Las Vegas, broach serious feminist issues that warrant critical scrutiny.⁵

Those feminist issues in Wakoski’s poetry which I find particularly compelling cover a wide range of themes. The poet strives to discover a means of challenging the traditional ways in which women have been conceived in and through language and to refashion femininity by manipulating the language that has kept her circumscribed. She grapples with how language and
the cultural texts have determined what is real, true, and normal and have, thus, dictated meaning—both collective and personal. Examining how the culture has prescribed roles, she explores how women see ourselves and how we fit into the cultural matrix. The poetry indicates her concern for contemporary women who have experienced both a recognition and a misrecognition of ourselves in the roles prescribed by society. Having been interpellated, or called, to a set of gendered corporeal strictures, women in the culture have felt the call to “rewrite” the cultural texts in order to re-conceive the female body, so that new bodies can matter/materialize (Butler 4) and new modes of subjectivity can be engendered.

Wakoski deals with the theme of women’s weariness at being erased or ostracized, vilified or punished when we fail to conform to the strictures and demands of those interpellations which are sanctioned within and by the cultural ideology. She analyzes the relationships that have constructed women and have defined how we perceive ourselves. These include relationships with men—the patriarchal god figure and his testaments, fathers and their “wills,” lovers and their expectations and attentions and inattentions. Further, relationships with women inform our woman’s identity: relationships with our mothers, whom we both love and love to hate and fear (that we will resemble), and with “othermothers” (Collins 119), that is, those women who can nurture us and serve as models from which we can draw both sustenance and a sense of ourselves. Using her personal experience, Wakoski explores a woman’s “self-relationships”—self as a young girl; as a young woman with angers and desires and wants and hurts and fears; as an older woman aging, wrinkled, fat, no longer young, beautiful, or conventionally sexually desirable. Finally, like many feminists today, Wakoski advocates women’s seizing the language to become speaking subjects with some measure of agency: women are the poets of the day (re)inventing new “languages” that enable us to articulate what and how it means to be a woman. While Wakoski recognizes that language determines our reality and thereby constructs us, she also claims that, through the language of poetry, we can be liberated, expanded, freed from circumscription. Because she advocates a new articulation of the multiplicity and diversity of women and because she works to change some of the ways in which women can be in the world without having to give up our gendered identity, I see her poetry as highly political. Her objective is resistance, disruption, change, and difference.

One significant feminist issue Wakoski herself has raised explicitly in interviews and obliquely in her poetry is the struggle women writers face in finding an attentive and serious
audience for their work. Wakoski’s own work has not been given the scrutiny and attention it deserves by readers and critics. Much of her work has been critiqued primarily through a New Critical perspective by critics like Marjorie Perloff, who greatly admires the density, ambiguity, and obscurity of such poets as Ezra Pound and John Ashbery. Perloff has classified Wakoski as a “corn-pone” poet—a long with such note-worthies as Richard Wilbur and Denise Levertov, among others. Perhaps what marks Wakoski as a “corn-pone” poet to Perloff is that she writes of women’s experience from a new postmodernist rather than a modernist perspective, in a feminist poststructuralist rather than a traditionalist “masculinist” manner. Wakoski herself avers that “each poem becomes a field, a landscape of ideas, and completely baffles the critic or reader whose reading techniques were formed by the New Criticism” (TNP 106). Although Wakoski eschews the name of “feminist” poet, her poetry falls under the rubric of women’s poetry, much of which, as Alicia Ostriker has observed, has been “misinterpreted, misnamed, misdescribed, misunderstood, and undervalued” (34). Consequently, a feminist approach affords the best explication of her poetry. She belongs in the canon of contemporary women and feminist poets whose work has recently been hailed by such feminist critic-theorists as Alicia Ostriker, in Stealing the Language, and Adrienne Rich, in Lies, Secrets, and Silence and others.

The enterprise of examining and critiquing language and signifying practices for the ways in which they impose social values and of interrogating and undermining the fixity of meanings in cultural texts will serve as my primary frame. Poststructuralist feminists are concerned with the individual (gendered) consciousness and with the “relation between language, subjectivity, social organization, and power” (Weedon 12), all themes which Wakoski broaches in her poetry. While stressing the “importance of the subjective in constituting the meaning of women’s lived reality,” poststructuralist feminists “challeng[e] subject positions available to women” (8) and the social structures and codes that limit the complexity of subject development. Because poststructuralism identifies the subject as a site of disunity and conflict (21) and “proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory, and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (32), the perspective of poststructuralism provides a valuable tool for examining Wakoski’s texts. Wakoski’s concern for the language of poetry and her proclivity to use that language to explore the nature and nuances of her own woman’s subjectivity also invite a poststructuralist analysis. Her work possesses the power to draw a reader into the experience of
the poetry so that that reader, through participation in the complex of thought, feeling, and intention, is moved to think differently about what it means to be a woman in the 21st century.

As a woman/feminist reader, I have connected with Wakoski’s experiences and experiments and have felt the frustration, anxiety, anger, anticipation, and hope which her poetry evokes. She has challenged me to revision old stories and old ideas, to assume new positions from which to view women in/and the world, and to employ exciting and challenging critical perspectives. As a critical reader, I have been frustrated with critiques of contemporary women poets that address ideas about the poetry without looking closely at the poetic language or without close-readings of the texts; that quote extensively from texts and either leave the quotation to stand in for analysis or accompany it with a superficial or self-evident summary; and/or that articulate the critique in an old critical language that does not reflect innovations in theory and language-use initiated by such French feminists as Helene Cixous and such American critics as Susan Howe. This dissertation aims to use these approaches to explore Wakoski’s poetry.

My analysis of Wakoski’s work will center on The Emerald City of Las Vegas, as the culmination of experimental forms and thought processes Diane Wakoski has developed throughout The Archaeology of Movies and Books, although I will also include references to both Medea the Sorceress and Jason the Sailor and, frequently, to poetry and prose within Wakoski’s apology for poetry, Toward a New Poetry. Through my interrogation and interpretation of The Emerald City of Las Vegas, I will give this volume of Wakoski’s poetry well-deserved scrutiny; reveal the layers of gender representation with which the poet grapples in her text; analyze, through my interpretation of the semiotic theories of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, the language/form of the poetry, especially remythologization and intertextualization/transposition; bring to bear a feminist-poststructuralist perspective on a reading of the poems; and engage in my own creative critique of Wakoski’s texts—with the language of her poetry and with the complex and evolving women’s subjectivity that lies at its core.

What I hope to generate is a creative, poetic, and critical tapestry of my own. Just as I feel strongly that women are cultivating new ground and reinventing the language of their own subjectivity through the poetry, I would like to think that, as a poet-critic myself, I can, in this work, revision6 critical language even while I manipulate critical tools. Trained as a New Critic, but continually reinventing myself as a postmodern, poststructuralist feminist reader, I will use both inductive and deductive approaches to my reading and experiencing of Wakoski’s poetry.
As a new kind of feminist reader, I like being drawn into her poems whereby I experience them, then slip out of them to examine where I’ve been. I will thus read closely and personally, then stand back and see a much larger picture in which the poems seem to be but catalysts inciting more universal perspectives and insights. The poems/theories provide “many position possibilities” (EC 103) from which to see my own new “realities”/revisions/rewritings. Because Wakoski’s text is itself a postmodern pastiche of texts that revisits themes over and over in different contexts, I find that my approach must be recursive, as I too, examine and reexamine recurrent tropes, allusions, and themes from different angles. Thus, this dissertation has become itself a kind of intertextual matrix of the play of a postmodernist feminist poet-reader-critic who does not quite know where yet to stand to determine what is “real”/“true” and possible about women’s experience, but who revels in the journey of discovery.

Location, location, location: Diane Wakoski situates her 1995 volume of poetry, *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*, somewhere in the linguistic space between the allegedly real city of Las Vegas and the avowedly mythical realm of the Emerald City of Oz. In so doing, Wakoski positions herself firmly in the postmodernist world that frequently transposes, often without perceiving distinctions, the real and the fake, the true and the false, the genuine and the artificial, the factual and the fictional. Perhaps what she wants her readers to see is that what we assume to be real, what we take to be the truth, is in fact a “text”: a myth, a story, a version generated out of some ideological bias or for some political, social, economic, or philosophical agenda, hence, a devised code or rule, even a script. On the other hand, what we have always taken to be fictional, mythical, or artificial often wields a power that surpasses the factual, the historic, or the authentic. All the texts of our culture are constructs of some sort; all exert varying levels of influence over how we perceive the universe, how we position ourselves within that universe, and, consequently, how we conceive ourselves in relation to that universe.

Diane Wakoski, the poet, weaves a cacophony of texts—from myths to cultural icons, from scientific treatises to fairy tales, from the elements of personal biography to the text of *The Wizard of Oz*, from the architecture of the casino to the landscape of the desert—into a parodic, intertextual pastiche in order to interrogate, to critique, to subvert, and to rearrange the givens these texts assert. Further, in experimenting with alternative positionalities from which to view “reality,” she tests and explores feminine/feminist constructions, perceptions, and subjectivit(ies). In so doing, she inevitably reveals the problems and the possibilities engendered
by the “language” and by the “myths” of these texts to define women’s place, women’s experience, women’s roles, potentialities, and futures—indeed our very subjectivity.

What Wakoski wrestles with in her poetry is the conflict between being called to certain performances or modes of being and patterns of behavior and perception and resisting these interpellations as imperatives. Her poetry and her *ars poetica* indicate that she seeks to challenge the singularity and coherence of a unified conception of (gendered) identity. In the end, what she pursues is an ongoing balancing of construction that intertextualizes—in the sense of remythologizing and recontextualizing a play of texts—cultural discourses with her personal perception and her own female experience. The cultural discourses, personal perception, and actual experience continually inform one another and her own emerging female subjectivity. This subjectivity is not simple. It is not unitary; it is not finished. On the one hand, Wakoski, in the company of feminist poststructuralists, acknowledges the socially constructed nature of subjectivity: “no matter how much we reject the culture that we live in, we are extensions of it” (Healey 16), that is, we are not merely reflections of our culture, but we derive our identities from the intertextual matrix that comprises that culture. As we grow up in the culture, our conscious and unconscious thoughts and perceptions, our interpretations of meaning, our behavioral norms, our values, conceptions, and thought processes, all of what constitutes the totality of our sense of ourselves is molded through “language in the form of conflicting discourses” (Weedon 31), which we can call the texts of the culture.

In her defense of poetry, *Toward a New Poetry*, Wakoski claims that “life so much becomes a series of literary actions that we think ourselves as characters” (15), yet she also asserts that life as well as art is about “transformations” (103) and that as a poet she can invent her life. Between adherence to the language-generated “internalized norms of femininity” (Weedon 2), which define and drive women, and the chaos of a life without language—epitomized in the life of the blind, deaf, and dumb Helen Keller before she acquired language—, there lies a huge uncharted space of possible subject positions. Subjectivity is not a coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of “reality” (8); rather, it is a significant site where the individual can resist the imposition of a single unequivocal sense of identity and identification and can contest the veracity of a given “reality.” Because of the conjunction of language and subjectivity, “language, itself, [becomes] the first site of a struggle over meaning which is the prerequisite for political change” (9). If, as feminist poststructuralists contend, language “enables us to think,
speak, and give meaning to the world around us, [and] this meaning and consciousness do not exist outside language” (31), then language is the primary site at which new concepts, new voices, new awarenesses, and new meanings can be created. Through engineering the language of cultural texts into new forms, Wakoski gains some measure of control in a world that seems chaotic and in which, as a woman, she has felt powerless and manipulated. This act of writing herself fulfills her role as woman/poet, which she equates with the feminine, much as the French feminists7 do: “That our forms cannot exist until we discover our own content” (TNP 102). Thus, writing, for Wakoski, provides a means of challenging and, thus, of undermining any supposed and prescribed unitary identity and of participating in the construction of her own subjectivity.

It is the site of language—the poetry of Diane Wakoski—that will serve as my own site of contestation as I explore, through reading/rereading and writing/rewriting, both how Wakoski acknowledges the power of language to construct “texts” and then how she manipulates that power in order to undermine those constructs. Because the perceiving subject-self derives a sense of identity from the interplay of the texts of language, sorting out their messages, their intents, and their influences initiates not just the poet’s engagement in the process of discerning meaning and identifying the self, but the reader-critic’s as well.

In examining the poet’s work, I find myself as a reader critic caught in the old conundrum: I want to say that Wakoski begins with language, as tools of the trade, that she attempts to capture experience and to generate new subjectivities, but I find myself entangled in the problem of the relationship of these three spaces. Indeed, the poet herself has questioned:

Do we choose the symbols for our lives and then write the poems? Or do the poems write our lives? (TNP 92)

I am using poststructuralist notions of language as both a system and a space. Language is a complex system comprised of words, signs, and whole signifying systems producing effects of behavior, attitude, expectation, emotion, assumption, relationship, and power within the cultural ethos. Although structuralist concepts of language presuppose a system of signs to which the community of “speakers” has assigned arbitrary meanings, poststructuralists see the meanings within the system as more complicated. Signs within the culture have, over time, accrued what Leps calls an “historical materiality” that includes, not just “the multiplicity of meanings past, present and future” (356) but also complex ideological intentions lurking under the surface. Thus, language is a system of signs designed to construct relationships and identities and to
maintain the structure of power within socio-ideological matrices. Yet, poststructuralists see language also as “the site of a struggle over meaning” (Weedon 8). It is “language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and enables us to give meaning to the world and to act to transform it” (31, my italics). Informed by and informing the cultural myths, discourses, and other texts (including texts of “being”), language is a “place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested” (21). Because language produces both regulatory norms of constitution and “marginal originality” (Leps 536)—the sayable and the unsayable, the narrativizable and the unnarrativizable—, it functions as the site where the power structures can be challenged and undermined and the socio-cultural dynamic changed, allowing for multiple and equivocal rather than singular and univocal perspectives.

Language provides an important battleground for the feminist—especially the feminist poet, reader, critic, theorist. To begin with, it has, historically, served the agenda of the patriarchy, the masculine, which is both phallocentric—garnering the power of the phallus, which women, lacking, don’t have—and logocentric—owning the word: when the Word was made flesh, it became, not a woman, but a man, a son of God who became a fulcrum for a theology and a living man-infestation of the Word of God. Much of patriarchal language has asserted its authority over women, author-izing us by writing us and thereby fixing us into roles and stereotypes, determining our social and developmental possibilities. However, for poststructuralist feminists, this linguistic fixedness is as untenable as a “[b]iologically based theory and the common sense position[s] which it informs,” because, ultimately, any fixed form of subjectivity “render[s] the status quo natural and marginalize[s] attempts to change it as unnatural” (Weedon 26). Since language for the feminist poststructuralist “does not merely reflect an already given social reality, but constitutes that social reality” (21), the feminist poet and, presumably, the feminist critic can challenge social constructs—especially those of women—through language itself. Cixous, for whom “writing is the very possibility of change,” conceptualizes women’s task well when she urges us to “break out of the snare of silence,” to “seize the occasion to speak” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 349), to write ourselves into history, into the culture, into the present moment in new ways, thereby effecting the necessary “transformation of social and cultural structures” (349).
Language, though it possesses the power to construct, also provides the space for change. A site of conflicting discourses that invites (wo)-manipulation and investigation and that opens the individual to the possibility of conflicting forms of subjectivity (Weedon 32), language exposes the individual to “possible versions of meaning rather than ‘truth’ itself” (94). Julia Kristeva conceptualizes the vacillating quality of stability and instability of language as at once system and transgression. In her theory of intertextuality, transposition shatters the denotative and enunciative authority of language through a “passage from one signifying system to another [that] demands a new articulation of the thetic” (Kristeva Reader 111).9 Poetic language, like that used by Wacoski, enacts a “semiotic polyvalence” (111) which empowers words/signs to interact with each other in multiple and diverse ways. Wacoski’s intertextualization enacts Kristeva’s theory: “producing a new signifying system with the same signifying material: in language, for example, from narrative to text. Or it may be borrowed from different signifying materials: the transposition from…[cinema] to the written text” (111). Wacoski’s poetic intertextualization of various texts into new forms undermines their “old position” and enables “the formation of a new one” (111). Through her poetry, she challenges the “old” texts of the culture that posit specific subject positions for women and replaces these texts with new readings which reveal multiple possibilities of new subject positions. For example, Wacoski, who defines herself as a quester/journeyer (Medea 104, 146), usurps the traditional myth quest and transpositions her place within it from object to subject. As she becomes the protagonist/hero(ine), central and proactive, she assumes a whole new subject position for women.

New subject positions, themselves, enable new dimensions of subjectivity and new conceptions and potentialities of experience. Judith Butler asserts that the subject is never entirely determined by cultural constructs but is “always a nexus, the nonspace of cultural collision” in which the subject repeats the constitutive imperatives, but can also rebel against them, thereby creating a “space of…ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed” (124). This never-quite-determined subject-in-action, then, serves as another significant site for the contestation of identity(ies) and meaning(s).

What excites me about Wacoski’s poetry is that she engages this very ambivalence, this nexus of entangling histories and versions of stories and ideologies that converge and explode, submerge and re-emerge. I see her poetry as Cixous’ “new insurgent writing” (“Medusa” 350)
that facilitates “the indispensable ruptures and transformations of her/[our] history” (350) by effecting change through disassembling “the codes that negate” (349)—where codes are “forms imposed by language on reality to prefigure our perceptions of it and our selves” (Radloff 640). The poetry serves as a site of contestation and renovation that extends the expanding possibilities for exercising subversive thought. It essays new articulations, pushes against the limitations of “being-in-the-world,” and re-visions women’s subjectivity. For Wakoski, language/poetry becomes the primary site of resistance in the structuring of identity; the writing of poetry—manipulating the language, selecting the images and connecting the metaphors, parodying the ironic allusions, discovering the forms and generating the structures, unfolding the narrative—becomes the means by which she can reinvent herself: “Every time you tell your story, you’re creating not history, but your sense of yourself” (Martin 477).

One of the primary strategies of the “new insurgent writing” employed by Wakoski is the manipulation of texts intertextually into a “mythic” structure. Telling one’s story implies that text is speech or writing. However, telling one’s story entails confronting and assimilating the plethora of texts that contribute to that “sense of yourself” of which Wakoski speaks. Text, as I am using the term, has many different definitions. In one sense, it designates a piece of writing. This includes the story Wakoski tells through her poetry as well as those pieces of writing that she quotes or alludes to in her poems, themselves texts. One could perhaps construe text not just to mean linguistic constructs and discursive aspects and applications of language itself, but also to include other authoritative texts from science to art and the media, to significant social structures within the culture. Texts are seldom clear, transparent, singular, and innocent narratives, practices, discourses, or institutions, but are ideologically marked “network[s] of sign systems” situated within a matrix of ideologically marked signifying practices in the culture (Godard 568, my italics). Each text—whether discursive or cultural—is always laden with the residue, resonance, and repercussions of preceding, coterminal, and contiguous texts. In fact, to paraphrase Kristeva, each “text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations…the absorption and transformation of [other texts]”; ergo, each “(text) is an intersection of… (texts) where at least one other… (text) can be read” (Reader 37). This definition implies every text is an intertextuality and that intertextuality is both a kind of palimpsest of informing texts exerting assorted layers of influence and a site where the interplay of influences can engage.
Intertextuality itself is an ambiguous term whose denotations have multiple applications. On the one hand, it represents the intermingling or interweaving of texts, a juncture of several texts simultaneously that “constantly reopens texts to new positionalities within [an] overall framework” and disseminates ideas across numerous texts (Godard 568). As a mode of textual production that constructs new texts out of the pieces of other texts by using quotation and plagiarism, allusion and paraphrase, citation and misquotation, intertextuality describes Wakoski’s practice in *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*. By creating a frame for relating one set of texts to others, both similar and dissimilar, it creates a field of similarities, coherences, and dissonances where none appeared to exist. Transposition, Kristeva’s word for intertextuality,11 “implies the abandonment of a former sign-system, the passage to a second via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems and the articulation of the new system with its new representability” (112). Wakoski interweaves a plethora of texts into a pastiche. By so doing, she forces the reader to examine the conjunction of these texts and to come away with new insights into their collective and individual meanings.12

This practice describes the signification process Roland Barthes defines as mythic structure: the system of meaningful signs reconstituted from the language into new correlations of signification (119). Myth, like language itself, consists of the tri-partite structure: signifier, signified, and sign, but it is a second-order system constructed by “robbing” language of its expected meanings, often dictated by socio-ideological imperatives, and infusing it with other, calculated and contrived meanings: “it is filled with situation” (119); it has intention. It is a kind and use of language that asserts a powerful concept of truth, but as Barthes claims, “what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain *knowledge* of reality” (119, my italics). This “certain knowledge of reality,” which consists of an interpretation of language, of history, of sociology, of ideology, etc., is often foisted upon an “innocent”13 and unsuspecting audience of the text as a “truth.” However, because myth for Barthes is essentially a poststructuralist semiological system “whose fundamental character is to be appropriated” (119), there is no fixity in mythological concepts. Wakoski’s poetry lends itself to a twofold application of the signifying processes Barthes ascribes to myth. On the one hand, the poet herself enacts the signifying process in her own reading of myths (stories, texts, discursive practices and technologies) as she tests the “truth” they purport to bear; on the other hand, she mythologizes or rather re-mythologizes the texts she encounters, “robbing” them of their intentions and assigning them
with other potential meanings. I, as an interpreter of Wakoski’s texts, will re-appropriate them to remythologize them in an effort to discern and to articulate still new meanings in the light of my personal vision, experience, and theoretical and literary background and bias. Because any critical analysis necessarily (re)creates the “original” text in a new context, my critical analysis will engage in the very intertextual practice Wakoski herself employs to arrive at meaning. As Wakoski does in her text, I will create a pastiche of quotations, paraphrases, extrapolations, and interpretations intertextualized in a variety of theoretical contexts.

If we return to our notions of the connection between language and subjectivity and apply an expanded conception of language at work as text, intertextuality, and myth structure, we begin to see how complex the relationship between language and subjectivity actually is. Wakoski herself clearly asserts an “I,” a Diane, who functions as a reader-interpreter of the culture and as a character-construct in the narrative—both of her own poetry and in the drama of the culture. This “I” further features as the protagonist and the agent-poet-author of that multiplicitous narrative—operating dramatically and constructively both within her own text and in the matrix of her culture. In this context, we can consider “text” as “an intersection of the subject, signifier, and cultural practice” (Godard 569). The subject includes the individual-self (as reader/re-reader), the protagonist (as construct), and the author-poet (as writer/re-writer), and the signifier is itself a text, a network of words with its defining denotations and associative connotations. Configured into the forms and structures of the poetry, this network of words both conforms to the dimensions and limitations of language and challenges those dimensions and limitations.

Cultural practice entails not just associations, perceptions, social mores, assumptions, and expectations, but also the tension between personal experience and the cultural ideal/paradigm. Wakoski claims that “life [art] is about transformations” (TNP 103) and that the text of her poetry becomes the ground and means for her to effect transformations in her positionalities as a woman. She accomplishes these transformations through intertextualizing the meanings of a variety of texts, networks of words, and mythic structures.

Both the manipulation of assorted texts and the constant potential for variation and reinvention constitute Wakoski’s intertextual weaving. As a postmodern artist in the age of the proliferation of texts, Wakoski intermingles fragments of such texts as Frank Baum’s The Wizard of Oz and other fairy tales and traditional, personal, and cultural myths, excerpts from Nick Herbert’s Quantum Physics, allusions to icons of history and of popular culture, commentary on
art and architecture, and personages, memories, and letters from her personal past into an intertextual fabric. However, she does not just cut-and-paste the excerpts, quotations, allusions, and fragments she selects; she frequently parodies them to reveal how “present representations come from past ones” (Hutcheon, Politics 93) and how all representations have, if not “ideological consequences” (93), at least often hidden agendas. The parodic reprisal of these texts, as well as the intertextual transpositioning, becomes a radical rereading and rewriting which facilitates an ironizing of the allusions and a de-doxifying of the assumptions (98) from which they derive their force. While recognizing the power of the selected texts to legitimize representations of subjectivity, Wakoski subverts and destabilizes these representations providing a complex site of resistance in which to re-vision them and to resituate and redefine herself as a woman.

One way of conceiving of the text/context of Wakoski’s multiple positionalities is by thinking of her writing/rewriting of her female, feminine, feminist self through the text of this poetry as what Audre Lorde has called a biomythography, the textual ground for a testing of her own subjectivity. Biomythography is etymologically rooted in bio, that is “life,” implying one’s life story and invoking biology, the femaleness of this poet-persona. She is a woman writing out of concerns for her woman’s body in all its complexity. It further incorporates “myth”—the fictions, the constructedness, the “lies” and the “truths” which constitute the feminine. And, finally, it includes graphein or writing, the poetic enterprise of grafting onto the language of the culture a place for the female-feminine-feminist. Wakoski acknowledges both the biological nature of her femaleness and the constructedness of her femininity, but is not satisfied with accepting any singular perspective of either. While grounded in the personal, the evolving biomythography generates/regenerates new versions of the self. Like the myths within Wakoski’s text, this biomythography is unstable and incomplete, only part of an ongoing story. The self, like the volume of poetry, then, becomes a palimpsest of intertextuality, a site where subjectivity is constructed by a cacophony of “quotations,” but both the volume of poetry and the self conceived through the language of that poetry also serve as sites where that construction can be contested. Thus, Wakoski, as a woman reader/writer, borrows from her own experience as a woman, from her experience of literary and cultural texts, and from her personal autobiography to create “a personal mythology rather than simply participating in the mythology of [her]
culture” (TNP 310). As a feminist, she re-visions and re-writes the texts both of the culture and of her personal mythology, engaging in the most important work of her life: re-inventing herself.

Audre Lorde’s claim for women that “Poetry is not a luxury” (36) reinforces the fact that poetry/writing the self is a political necessity in the ongoing feminist enterprise of finding a way to articulate subject positions alternative to the one(s) determined by patriarchal language. Thus, poet-critics like me must experience, explore, and, on some level, explicate the language and subject matter of women’s poetic texts. In this dissertation, I examine the disparate ways in which Diane Wakoski, in her volume The Emerald City of Las Vegas, layers meanings through the manipulation of “myth.” As I analyze the specific strategies of remaking mythologies with which she experiments, I inform my readings with interpretations of the linguistic/reading theories of Julia Kristeva on intertextuality, Roland Barthes on mythic structure, and Linda Hutcheon on postmodern parody. In the process, I discuss the recursion, deconstruction, and revision of tropes, the parodying and collaging of texts into assorted arrangements of intertextuality, and finally, the resultant transposition and realignment of relationships that effect new opportunities for altered versions of subjectivity. I frequently read through the French feminists—Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva—and significant other feminist theorists like Teresa de Lauretis and her technologies of gender; Chris Weedon and her summations of feminist poststructuralism; Donna Haraway and her ideas about the conjunction of man/woman and machine; and Judith Butler and her theories of the regulatory norms of gender production and performance. All of these voices as well as other theoretical voices will converge in what I anticipate to be a poetic intertextual remythologization of Wakoski’s text.16

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I have organized the dissertation around key feminist issues that affect Wakoski’s enterprise of self-fashioning. Because one of the most pervasive feminist issues is the way in which women have been convinced of what constitutes the real, the natural, and the common sense, in the first chapter, “Real to Reel: Spec(tac)ular Mythmaking,” I explore Wakoski’s interrogation of what constitutes reality. Through an intertextual matrix of assorted texts from the volume of poetry, I examine the layers of “reality” experienced by the individual woman and the impact these layers have on women’s consciousness and the construction of women’s subjectivity. Working from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, I use several lenses to direct my interrogation of Wakoski’s texts and methods. Teresa de Lauretis’ notions of technologies of gender serve as the
organizing structure of the chapter. Her discussion of the roles of institutional technologies such as science, social technologies such as cinema, and critical practices that include literary criticism along with socio-cultural critical practices plays well into a reading of the selected poems and segments that raise questions of the real and of representation. In addition, her theories provide a valuable link between the French feminists’ theories of what Cixous, in a positive vein, calls “morewoman” (Coming to Writing 55)\textsuperscript{17} and Irigaray, in a more negative one, calls “feminine masochism” (36), on the one hand, and the semiotics of Charles Peirce, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes, on the other. All in some degree deal with the positions from which the makers/users/objects/subjects of language operate.

“Geographies: Wresting Woman-I-fest Destiny from the Jaws of the Father,” the title of the second chapter, alludes to an intertextualization of the texts of geography/landscape and history with the notion of the quest. Through the journey motif, which Wakoski introduces as

\begin{quote}
My car pointed West,  
the trunk full of diamonds and Mother rattler coiled there  
We are traveling to Southern California,  
to the Pacific (EC 15),
\end{quote}

she initiates a journey quest as both a parody of the call to the American male to “Go West, young man!” and the very real, though often subtle, call which the French feminists urge on women: “[to] listen with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself”; “set off again from elsewhere” (Irigaray 29). In this chapter, I examine the landscape of the casino and that of the tunnel/cave and the desert in conjunction with Wakoski’s allusions to Dorothy’s journey to, through, and from Oz and to the historical imperative of Manifest Destiny. In analyzing these texts, I show how Wakoski transposes them into insights about her own and potentially all women’s fraught quest for identity. The parallel universes of these texts serve as assorted technologies of gender that must be traversed for the journey to be effective. The conflict between being “inside the frame” and “outside the frame” which Wakoski establishes through her cinematic imagery and which I analyze in chapter one continues here in a new context as the woman, through her quest, negotiates both an external and an internal landscape. Both are conflicted because the persona-protagonist of the poems finds herself both inside and outside both geographies—cultural and personal—and invites the reader to analyze the relation of such positions to her evolving self-interrogation and self-realization.
Chapter three, entitled “Which Witch is (Wh)I(ch): Righting and Rewriting the Body” discusses the role of the body in determining women’s subjectivity. I examine Wakoski’s pastiche of texts that include the fairy tales of Hansel and Gretel and of Cinderella, the story of Eve, the myths of Persephone and Medusa, the contemporary fairy tale of *The Wizard of Oz*, movie icons like Deborah Kerr and Glenn Close, and Wakoski’s autobiography. Through interacting with, parodying, revisioning, remythologizing, and inviting reader-remythologization of these texts, Wakoski addresses issues that still haunt women today. The issues include: the imperative of feminine youth and beauty, the failure of women’s self-esteem and self-worth seen through the body, women’s lack of freedom to enact a unique body, the commodification of women as sexual rather than as gendered, the usurpation of women’s eroticism for men’s pleasure rather than for women’s self-accomplishment, the vilification of any powers of the woman that assert themselves against the grain. Because it is a long chapter dealing with such myriad and complex issues, I have broken my analysis up into three parts. The first section, which deals with the body itself as external construct and internalized interpellation to performativity, looks at Wakoski’s text through Judith Butler’s performativity lens and Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze,” then posits the necessity of resignifying the interpellative signs—such as witch/Medusa—that have defined women. The second section on eating and the body segues into an application of Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg to a prosthetic hand in Wakoski’s poetry. Finally, I read the poems as redefining women’s sexuality via Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic, which takes into account the reconceptualizing of women’s sexuality by French feminists, Irigaray and Cixous, as well.

The next two chapters move away from the exclusivity of the body in determining women’s subjectivity to examine the contributions of the sociality of women’s relationships. Chapter four deals with women’s defining relationships with men, while chapter five centers on women’s relationships with women and women’s place in the community of women. In chapter four, entitled “Patriatism/Matriatism: Partners or Pariahs,” I explore Wakoski’s representation and parodying of some key concepts of men and the freighted subject positions to which women have succumbed in their relationships with men. All of these patriarchal influences contribute to women’s subjectivity. In deconstructing the myths and representations of the old patriarchal avatars of men as God, as Father, and as lover, Wakoski invites new conceptualizations of the identities, power, agency, and self-expression of women, and of a new representation of man: the
feminized man. This chapter contains four sections: section one deals with images of God through the texts of *The Wizard of Oz* and American history; section two interrogates the Father-lover through the myth of Jason and Medea; section three analyzes Wacoski’s autobiographical relation with the lover-terrorist, the Motorcycle Betrayer; and section four redistributes the masculine/feminine paradigm to present another view of what can happen when women attempt to co-opt “the master’s tools” and what can happen to men when they become “feminized.”

In chapter five, which I call “Women for Women Makes Morewoman,” the poet embraces relationships with women and the animosities and intimacies that have the potential to change the way we act, think and know. I again rely heavily on the theories of the French feminists, along with Adrienne Rich’s ideas, to discuss the importance of women’s identification with other women in the formation of our self-images. Both Rich and Cixous repeatedly remind us how much we have been estranged from other women: how much we have been taught to fear, to dislike, even to hate other women, and, thus, to fear, dislike, even hate the woman who is the self. In addition, Rich has announced that “we are all lesbians.” Although Wacoski regretted Rich’s use of the term “lesbianism” to characterize intense, intimate, immediate, intercursive relationships of women with women, she espoused the metaphor (*TNP* 333) for these relationships. She would probably extend the notion to an androgyny that invites a different set of gender stylistics, performatives, and constructions. We are all lesbians because we must be about women; as Kristeva claims: “we must use ‘we are women’” even if we are in danger of seeming to espouse an improbable essentialism (in Marks 137). We are all lesbians because we are learning to love other women, even the other woman who is the self: “Women, myself, we. […] We need to love ourselves AND to love otherness” (*Jason* 41, 135).

The concluding chapter entitled “Making and Being: Rose Selavy/ C’est la vie—and That’s Life,” presents an overview of Wacoski’s achievement as a contemporary feminist poet and demonstrates how the poet configures her woman’s subjectivity through language, specifically by the very act of writing itself. She does so through the trope of drawing a rose that is both an intertextualization of her personal perception and experience and her incorporation into her writing of all that she has inculcated through her exposure to the culture. She begins at a single point of articulation—herself—and draws into the lines of the rose the complex of texts that comprise her vision and history. It is the confluence of language, vision, experience, personal history, and cultural texts that enables the poet’s volume of poems to emerge.
All the chapters leading up to this one critique the culture for its depiction of women, its interpellation of women to roles and expectations and behaviors which we have often felt powerless to avoid or to change. What has emerged, though, from the critique, is a solution: art. Since, as Ross King contends, “only art stands outside this external call to prescribed and deterministic subjectivity” (567), art/poetry becomes the means of reading/ rereading the texts of the culture, of writing/rewriting the self. For Wakoski, art is a way of animating the world, of infusing life into empty forms, of reshaping things, of remaking the self: “when we are writing poetry, we really are writing out of a very personal self” (TNP 258). The poetry itself becomes the observer position par excellence from which the woman poet can craft an identity. It is about inventing and reinventing the self: “And anything you put into your poetry is what you have ultimately opted for as your reality” (255).

While it does seem as though Wakoski has, in fact, eschewed a large body of feminist theory to seek a femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, the body, or the unconscious, an essence which inheres in women, but to which males too now lay a claim;…in a female tradition simply understood as private, marginal, and yet intact, outside of history, but fully there to be discovered and recovered, …in the chinks and cracks of masculinity, the fissures of male identity, or the repressed of phallic discourse (de Lauretis, Alice Doesn’t 186), she is, in fact engaging in a writing—this ironizing, parodying intertextuality, this poetry, this pastiche and palimpsest of images, this transposition of texts—that grapples with all of these issues and still comes away being both political and personal. She has engaged the individual woman’s experience; she has retrieved, deconstructed, and revisioned a plethora of texts from the culture; she has refashioned herself as a woman and a poet and invited her reader(s) to participate in the transpositioning of the myths of the culture into new myths that better conceptualize the experience of women.

Introduction End Notes

1 Subsequent citations will be TNP.

2 Subsequent citations will be EC.

3 Subsequent citations will be Medea.

4 Subsequent citations will be Jason.
Initially, the three works, *Medea the Sorceress*, *Jason the Sailor*, and *The Emerald City of Las Vegas* where the designated three volumes of the trilogy. Only later did Wakoski add the volume *Argonaut Rose*, which I am not including in my analysis.

Revision refers to Adrienne Rich’s classic definition: “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 35).

The French feminists who most significantly inform my reading of Wakoski’s poetry are Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. While each contributes unique perspectives to feminist theory, they often intersect with each other on key issues. When I cite the French feminists as a group, I am referring to these three women as sharing a similar position. Otherwise, I will specify which of the three I am citing.

Subsequent citations will be “Medusa.”

Subsequent citations will be *Reader*.

See Chapter 2.

“The term *intertextuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of study of sources, we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality” (*Reader* 111, Kristeva’s italics).

I am not claiming that Wakoski creates her own linguistic sign-system thus creating totally new language through which a new self can be imagined, but I am positing that she so challenges the texts of language that their old reifying tendencies must be rethought.

For Wakoski, art is all about “going beyond innocence” (*TNP* 323).

Wakoski refers to Judy Garland in the poem “Medea’s Children”; otherwise, her references in *The Emerald City of Las Vegas* are to Baum’s written text. However, it is difficult for a 20th century reader not to conjure images from the film.

Biomythography is a term attributed to Audre Lorde who coined it to describe her autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Lorde called *Zami* a biomythography because “it is made up of myth, history, and biography, all the ways in which we perceive the world around us” (Beam, par. 5). I am using the term to designate a strategy which extends Wakoski’s personal mythology to include references to a variety of literary and extra-literary structures—autobiography, biography, film, myth, cultural icon, poetry, history, etc. A biomythography includes the multiplicity of texts that inform the subject as she evolves and invents herself in a kind of myth of identity.
Because Wakoski’s poetry incorporates myriad images, myths, discourses, and texts and broaches a wide sweep of feminist themes, a scrutiny of her poems evokes associations with a wide variety of feminist theorists. That she herself ranges “wide, wild…and wilder” (Ostriker 80) in the scope and selection of these images, myths, stories, allusions, and cultural texts and that she positions and repositions these in a variety of shifting contexts invites the reader, likewise, to shift the perspectives from which the poetry can be read. As a result, I, as a reader, have found a variety of disparate theoretical and critical lenses useful in exploring the meanings incited by Wakoski’s text. Also, because her text is about challenging “truths” and perspectives, she invites the use of a plethora of lenses, theoretical and imaginative.

Subsequent citations will be Coming.
Chapter One: Reel to Real: Spec(tacular) Mythmaking

Perspective determines reality. In other words, the unmediated real does not exist, but is rather “observer-created” (EC 23, 149). Early in *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*, Diane Wakoski introduces the dilemma of perspective through the overlapping frames of Frank Baum’s world of Oz and Nick Herbert’s excerpted summaries of quantum theory. She begins her poetic text by focusing on the circumscribed vision prescribed by the compulsory green spectacles all must wear on entering the gates of Oz. When the gatekeeper from *The Wizard of Oz* cautions Dorothy and her fellow travelers that “if you did not wear spectacles, the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you” (13), he is both lying and revealing a truth. Although the gatekeeper may believe what he says, the reader of Baum’s fairy tale learns that it is a lie perpetrated to ensure enslavement to a calculated and manipulated way of viewing the world. These “spectacles” are imposed upon everyone wishing to partake of the social world of Oz; the spectacles must be worn day and night; they are “locked on”: “so ordered” by the Grand Wizard (13). While the wearers are led to believe that the glasses “protect” their eyes from the overpowering wonder and beauty of Oz, in reality it is the spectacles that *create* the artificial “dazzle” and “brilliancy of the wonderful city” (13). Everything is colored by the vision of these spectacles. What the wearers see is not the unmediated real but filtered through these emerald lenses. More subtly, these glasses ensure the place from which the viewer conceives of the real—always behind the lenses in the subservient position of manipulated viewer locked into patterns of perceiving that effect and circumscribe ways of being, relating, and acting within the cultural matrix, determined by the imposed lenses. So long as the world is viewed from the location behind the “green spectacles,” the “real” world will remain tinted/tainted.

Through the analogy of these tinted spectacles creating their tainted view, the poet initiates her readers to the myriad possibilities promised by a journey into her *Emerald City of Las Vegas*. The poet warns us that what we see in the world into which we have been introduced—whether the world of these poems or the “real” world of our lives—is colored, determined by the machinations of an elusive, fake Wizard (read patriarchal authority), who can wield multiple visages and avatars to suit his own purposes, which is generally to disguise his lack of power, knowledge, insight, and wisdom, but to sustain the illusion of these qualities. The Grand Wizard has somehow so convinced the populace at large of his possession of these qualities that all actually do see the world as a glowing green gemstone. This vision parallels the way in which
language and the texts of language—including myths, stories, popular culture icons, historical personages, and the plethora of narratives that emanate from our culture—determine how the world is actually perceived.

In opening her volume with the remonstrance about spectacles, Wakoski establishes three important premises which the discerning reader must attend: first, all persons bring to our vision of the world an ideological bias that determines the location from which we view not just ourselves, but also our world and our place within that world; second, this bias is generated by sets of “technologies” or strategies implemented by a conservative agenda and designed to maintain the status quo, to circumvent challenge, and to prevent change; finally, we often unsuspectingly collude in the strategies of that agenda. She admonishes her readers not to take the world at face value but, instead, to demystify the assumptions that generate the magic of appearances and that are perpetrated by the cultural texts ultimately attempting to determine our subjectivity, identity, experience, and being in the world. Urging us to eschew what feminist poststructuralists have called the “common sense” position, she incites us to regard the so-called “naturalness” of the status quo, the fixedness and singularity of forms of subjectivity, and the intuition that change is “unnatural” as untenable positions (Weedon 26). In contesting what is real and in examining what is construct, Wakoski interrogates the power and veracity of three technologies of gender that insist on structuring women’s subjectivity, including institutional technologies such as science, social technologies such as cinema, and critical practices that include literary criticism (de Lauretis, *Technologies*) and issues of the value of women’s writing.

By interrogating Wakoski’s weave of science and fantasy, cinema, and women’s writing, I will analyze the ways Wakoski engages in her investigation of gender, the layers of women’s perceived and experienced reality she weaves in her text, and the potential impact these layers have on women’s consciousness and on the construction of women’s subjectivity. Wakoski’s exploration of the no-man’s land of realities and illusions informs her process of self-discovery and of self-revision. She negotiates what the French feminists have called the gaps and ruptures and leakages in images and perceptions of “truth” that have constituted the only space which women have been allowed to occupy. She herself calls her inquisition a stripping away of veils, a discovering of what has been obscured or hidden: “what art is, is to pull away the masks one by one and reveal what is behind the veil” (*TNP* 322).
To balance the fantasy world of Oz, Wakoski inserts another text: statements from physicist Nick Herbert, to lend an “authoritative” support to her intuition that there is in fact no objective reality. The insertion of quotations from Herbert’s text, Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics, constitutes Wakoski’s exploration of the institutional technology of science as an informing positionality for determining the nature of reality. According to the theories of quantum physicists, Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, reality is “observer-created” (23). Wakoski’s peppering of her work with quotations from Herbert verifies that not only in the world of fantasy is reality tested, but also in the “real” world as well—even in that bastion of truth, science. Through the references to Herbert, the poet instantiates the poststructuralist perspective that our ways of seeing the world and our place in that world as “common sense truths” and “givens” are questionable, hence allowing for the possibility of other perspectives, the very possibility Wakoski then explores and interrogates.

Wakoski struggles between the two poles of belief; she stands torn between the “truth” as we’ve always known it—“real,” “objective,” “external,” and immovable—and another, perhaps scarier, riskier, and certainly more exciting possibility: the “observer-created reality” theories of Bohr and Heisenberg. These theories intersect with the French feminists’ theories of the ruptures, gaps, and leakages and the liminal space of elsewhere that enable alternative versions of “truth”/subjectivity to emerge, not just as alternatives, but as multiple, simultaneous possibilities.

Thus, although Wakoski does not claim any theoretical labels, her text pursues a poststructuralist feminist agenda. As the work of a woman poet interrogating the texts that have influenced her woman’s identity, the poetry persists in investigating those technologies of gender by which women’s subjectivity has been constructed, the extent to which women have cooperated in this construction, and the possibilities of ways to fashion ourselves anew, now and in the future. Wakoski’s compulsion to write begins with the urge to discover the vagaries of vision—what Irigaray has called the difference between seeing and being seen: how she has been seen and how she has seen herself and seen herself being seen, what she has been seeing, who has manipulated her seeing, and how she has been complicit in seeing—and ends with her claiming new location(s) from which to see and to define her perspective. Her goal is to subvert and to readjust the lenses of that seeing: “I think that having simultaneous awareness of many, many things and keeping those awarenesses moving and alive is what any real life is about” (TNP 254, emphasis added).
Wakoski’s use of the sporadic quotations from Nick Herbert sets up the paradoxical tensions of what constitutes these awarenesses. She inserts references to quantum theory to explore the complicated nature of positionality and of consciousness in relation to conceptions of reality. These citations reinforce the play of variability, possibility, and multiplicity Wakoski examines and the singularity, particularity, and unchangeableness she contests. Wakoski’s view coincides with Herbert’s when she says, “there’s no such thing as an objective point of view…. There’s no real world out there and the only thing that’s interesting is how successfully we can convey or communicate our personal perceptions of it” (“Colloquy” 63). It is claims to a singular reality which feminists contest in examining the technologies of gender that insist on structuring us into reified, immovable, static, so-called objective and natural positions. Thus, Herbert, as a representative of the institution of science, lends weight to Wakoski’s challenge to those technologies of gender that insist on defining women’s subjectivity. Herbert’s words remind the reader that even the old defining technologies like science are changing with the times, undermining formerly determined “rational” and “common sense” truths and realities. Yet, although Herbert himself asserts a variability and a randomness to the events of the universe, he wants to hedge a little on the side of old, pre-quantum Science; he seems to renege by protesting the univocal nature of choice: “all our choices are real choices…taking one path means forsaking all others” (EC 83, italics mine). Only one reality choice can function at a time; only one path can be occupied at a time; when one chooses one consciousness, one must forsake other possible “awarenesses.” However, what Wakoski contends is that there is at least “a parallel universe” (TNP 40), if not “a steadily increasing number of parallel universes” (41), or “a next life” (40). What Wakoski professes here is not unlike Charles Peirce’s concept of the variability of interpretants in linguistic theory. According to Peirce, semiosis is comprised of a “nexus [of] object-sign-meaning [as] a series of ongoing mediations between ‘outer world’ and ‘inner’ or mental representations” (in de Lauretis, Technologies 39). All signs within the system are ambiguous because they carry with them a certain amount of connotative baggage so that when texts/signs/attributes are called into being, each consciousness conceives, not the object or substantial reality, but a complex internalization or “mental representation” fraught with the baggage that inheres both with the associations derived through the history of the text and with those of one’s “point of view” or “consciousness.” In a process of a seemingly “unlimited semiosis,” the individual consciousness engages in a “series of ongoing mediations” between
outer and inner worlds (39). In a different context, Wakoski presents this phenomenon as vacillating from being “inside this frame” and “outside this frame” (EC 199-200), on one side of the door/camera (182, 103) and on the other, seeing with green glasses on/green glasses off. The multiplicity of positionalities and the interpretability and consequent variability among subjects, then, provides for mediations of meaning. In the gap between sign determinations and representations—what has been characterized by the French feminists as the “ruptures” and “leakages,” new observer positions can be assumed, new attributes can be valued, and new meanings can be conceived and interjected. While this system certainly does not posit an infinity of possibility, it does undermine the certitude of “one path, one choice” espoused by Herbert in the name of Science.

Wakoski’s argument is that we often think in multiple ways about the same things or in the same ways about different things. In her text, the poet plays with the paradoxical tensions of what constitutes “consciousnesses” or “awarenesses.” She pits the univocal against the equivocal. Even as possibility wants to devolve to singularity, division to unity, and fragmentation to wholeness, and the common sense of a single, proper, right, “objective” point of view struggles to asset itself, Wakoski insists on the opposite: singularity must dissolve into possibility, unity to division, wholeness to fragmentation, common sense to madness. In this contest between the possible and the impossibility of the singular, unified wholeness, Wakoski, despite protestations to the contrary,5 deflates any notion of the common sense, neorealistic “external world independent of the perceiving subject” (23).

In the process, Wakoski finds herself situated in the complicated space between the absolute randomness posited by Bohr and Heisenberg and the neorealism of Einstein. This middle space is a no-man’s land where feminine subjectivity can be re-perceived, re-conceived, and re-written. Constantly questioning what’s real and what’s fiction, she rejects the coherence of sources that incite meaning and generate a given “reality”:

What an effort civilization is
to remember so vividly those run-down perhaps-chains, perhaps-sequences,
those maybe-patterns that we feel must shape our lives. (44, my italics)

“Sequences” implies a given causal relationship between events. For example, because a woman is young and beautiful, she will be seen, desired, and loved by men; if, however, she is old and ugly, she will be either invisible or shunned, and certainly unloved. If a woman attempts to violate the limits of her scripted, genderized purview, she will be punished, ostracized, criticized,
imprisoned. “Patterns” indicates that there is a rationale and an order, when in reality the world is fraught with power plays that only barely keep in check an ensuing disarray or chaos potentially disruptive of the so-called natural order. These patterns refer to the complex network of patriarchal power that governs even the minutiæ of women’s lives. Finally, “chains” reveals that the rules, codes, and prescriptions insisted upon by the texts of the culture imprison rather than free those in the pursuit of attaining a sense of self: “We don’t have destinies” (181) of our own.

Despite their obvious power over the individual, these sequences, patterns, and chains demand an “effort” on the part of the struggling subject to conform to their dictates. A close look at Wakoski’s language reveals a conflict of centripetal and centrifugal forces, signaled by the word *effort*, that provide both incentive to adhere to and impulse to deviate from civilization’s strictures. The *effort* she associates with civilization functions in several ways. In the most obvious, civilization imposes with *effort* its sequences, patterns, and chains upon the populace. Civilization’s *effort* insists that women subscribe to certain roles: the imperative to be sweet, good, acquiescent; the compulsion to be mother, to be maid, to be care-giver, to be house-frau; the expectation to fulfill desire. Women, thus subjected to the sequences, patterns, and chains associated with civilization as we know it, have struggled in an *effort* to inhabit them as “natural” even as we have felt disoriented, repressed, oppressed, and inhibited, aware on some level that there is “no natural order / …[some]one must impose it” (179, my italics and bracketed insert).

Finally, we can construe *effort* to signal the call to all of us who feel circumscribed by the imposition of civilization’s order to write our own stories (sequences), fashion our own designs (patterns), forge our own destinies (chains):

> We don’t have destinies
> unless we wrest them from somebody else,
> unless we insist over and over on
> what we want…. (181)

Tension, paradox, ambiguity, struggle: torn between the imperative to remember to adhere to the constrictions and compulsions of civilization, even against one’s personal grain, and the intuition that these constrictions and compulsions, ensconced in a history and a tradition, permitting only one “observer” position, are only “perhaps-chains,” “perhaps-sequences,” “maybe- patterns,” the poet insists we acknowledge the potential of the poetic language to evoke a revisioning. Since there is
It is not that civilization must shape our lives, but that we have been led to feel it must shape our lives. Against the apparent imperative of these sequences, patterns, and chains “we [have felt] must shape our lives,” Wakoski insists that the imperative is indeed apparent and not inescapable. That the sequences, patterns, and chains are “run down” (44) indicates their antiquity and antiquatedness: they have long outstayed their welcome; they do not provide the stay against chaos that the late 20th century woman needs in her own imperative to find a place for herself. In the poem “From Shells to Radishes,” Wakoski questions

what does it mean to control the images in your life?” (185);

indeed, what would it mean if women could control those images, “wrest them from somebody else,” (181) realign the causal sequences, rearrange the patterns, remove the chains? Just recognizing the very presence of civilization’s demands and imperatives and of the individual’s compulsion to conform to their dictates constitutes a quantum leap in the subjectivity process. The next important step is the actual “wresting” of power, perspective, prestige, and place from the purveyors of those sequences, patterns, and chains that comprise “civilization.” Such an endeavor entails a willingness to engage difference, to embrace change, and to impose creative revisioning and thinking/rethinking.

In broaching gender under the rubric of literary practices, the poet contends that we shape our lives largely out of literature, one of many symbols she uses to represent cultural influence. We can wrest these lives from the texts of the culture by critically interrogating the technology of literary criticism for its role and its usefulness in the identity-creation process. Because (feminist) academicians and publishers of the twentieth century have rediscovered the texts of women writers in a revision of the canon, women readers have only recently begun to see our stories in a new light. As women’s novels, poems, plays, and other texts are rediscovered and republished, contemporary readers can see that the “he” of mankind does not own the only story. We can now choose a woman’s “book” (82) from which to “draw our lives” (102), from which to derive our identities; further, we can choose how to read that book and how to apply what we construe. As
characters in the fictions we create, we “can be / anything [we] choose” (82). The danger is that there are too many stories from which to choose. What if we choose the “wrong book” (82), read the script inaccurately, fail to see what is hidden in and by the text, what has been elided or obscured? Herbert may be somewhat correct in saying that when we choose one path, we automatically abandon others; we certainly cannot be in all texts at once, although, perhaps, all texts play in us. Wakoski intimates that we’re not one story, but a compilation of segments “wrested” from many stories and from many possible stories.

Wakoski examines this multi-storied position in her poem-story of “For Catherine Who Says She Is Wuthering Heights,” in which we see Catherine molding her life from and into the text of the “wrong book,” while ignoring the many other stories that could, do, and should inform the “new identity” she is imagining. The Catherine of the poem is a friend of the poet’s thrust into the feminist dilemma of trying to craft an identity in a world imposing its own reifying “realities” and valorizing its own agenda-driven “fantasies.” In the poem, Catherine is positioned in the awkward space between her own experience and her dream of becoming the romantic heroine of a Victorian novel. Perhaps she identifies with the heroic Catherine Earnshaw/Linton whose wild energy railed against social strictures, yet who was wooed by the wonderful, wild, mysterious gypsy Heathcliff as well as by the cultivated, kindly, but stultifying, gentleman Edgar. In many ways the poem’s Catherine resembles the failed heroine of the text of another fore-mother. Catherine, like Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, is running away from her old life by removing herself to a new personal space: a “doll-house apartment” (EC 82), reminiscent of Edna’s pigeon house where Edna, in seeking escape and sanctuary, fails to perceive that she is still encaged because she has brought with her her romantic visions of who she is and of what her life should be. Catherine, like Edna and the “paper doll waitresses” in Mary’s café, imprisoned by the imposed imperative of their servitude (154), enacts a version of prescribed womanhood. In the process of renovating her doll house, musing, “New. Fresh. [I]’ll start over” (82), Catherine thinks she can create a new life for herself. With the windows and doors closed, she assumes she can isolate herself from her culture and her past and can recreate in the vacuum of this small space an entirely new Catherine. However, we see what she does not—that she has brought her past and those texts of the culture that have constructed her with her into this space: in the guise of independence and individuality and insularity, she is really basking in the “sheen of the man-made” (82). She has unwittingly brought with her not just her
romantic visions of “skirts of soft muslin, over petticoats that drape / softly around plump bodies” and the “fantasies of love” and of “Yorkshire moors / which… / [hold] the spirit’s desire for freedom” (84), but also her past experience and her acculturated proclivity to see with the “green lenses” imposed by the culture. She thinks she can completely recreate her world according to her own choices, but those choices are circumscribed by the particular lenses with which she sees herself. Agency and choice for the individual, while possible, are not unequivocal. Rather, they operate, not in the closed-off inner sanctum of the individual—because every individual brings with her the baggage of her experience as well as romantic notions of how the script of her life should be read—, but within that civilization of sequences, patterns, and chains. If she had read *Wuthering Heights* or *The Awakening* carefully, differently, Catherine would have seen that the protagonists of these stories were enacting, less the “wings” of feminist freedom and reinvention, and more the “cage” of imprisonment in the cultural texts.

While Wakoski does not revise/rewrite either *Wuthering Heights* or *The Awakening*, she does urge Catherine—and through Catherine, the reader—to critically reread old stories from a “feminist” point of view. What the feminist movement and its stimulus to redefine literary critical practices have taught us is that if we do not so reread, we all risk replicating the errors made by the heroines of those and the plethora of stories from which women have drawn their lives. Wakoski’s hope, reflecting that of many contemporary women writers, is that women can begin to read old texts in new ways and, as a result, to write new stories driven less by unperceived chains and more by individual willful actions, less by imposed sequences and more by individual choices, and less by perceived patterns and more by individual newly conceived possibilities, thereby breaking the hold of the old chains, sequences, and patterns that have heretofore dictated women’s lives. Relocating to a doll house, repainting its walls, and dreaming of a new life modeled after some old dream are partial and superficial acts that divert Catherine from the real work of “re-reading the book,” of seeing what has been hidden, obscured, and elided from the text. So long as Catherine stays within the confines of her small space, she will see herself as limited to small stories; she will relate to the “man” in the story, the one whose very designation, *man*, bears the weight of what it means to be *hu-man*, and, thus, she will be “drugged…beyond possibility” (82) as a woman. Catherine must leave her doll house and reread the text if she is to discover that she *is* a woman and what it means to be a woman. Like Catherine, this is the task of all women: to leave the romance of the doll house. By re-reading
and revisioning the texts of the culture, as Wakoski does in the text of these poems, women can then see what “truths” these texts can reveal that are not necessarily apparent in the sequences and patterns of the surface plot.

What Wakoski wishes for Catherine is actually not modeled in/on these stories’ texts. Modeled is the way things have always been, not what they can be. What Wakoski wants Catherine to see is not romance, but struggle; not fantasy, but tension; not the idyllic, but the tragic, not superficial beauty-peace-harmony, but loss and madness and despair women have experienced within and because of the dictatorial texts of the culture. When Wakoski urges Catherine to reread the story, it is not to discover herself within its pages, but to recognize through the text that there is a space in her world for her to deconstruct the old story, to pull the “facts” of her positionality, of her story, into a new construction of herself, a new story that is not one of denial and negation, but one of claiming her own power. Her life has clearly been fraught with tensions, contradictions, and horrors from the “lusting stepfather” to her “Russian eyed mother” (82). She cannot make her history go away by painting over it, by shutting windows and doors. There is no escape from experience, but there is self-rescue. Wakoski wants Catherine to identify, not with a character within the book, but rather with the authors, the Bronte sisters, “women who rescue themselves” (83), women who have “wrested” their “destinies” from the “somebody else” that comprises the “hu-man” of the culture, women, who, having seized “author-ity,” can now write their stories. Catherine’s and all women’s enterprise is not about starting a new life so much as rescuing ourselves, claiming our woman’s identity and the power of our own lives—which includes personal experience with all its beauty, contradiction, and horror—, and writing our own story from that experience.

Thus, Catherine finds herself at a kind of junction point where, rather than denying her experience, she can utilize it as a means of self-construction. Denying that experience and her heritage as woman and daughter, substituting for it “the sugar cube held between the teeth” (82), the illusion of the perfect romantic life, would necessarily entail facing an abyss of meaning, “the black-hole in the mouths of old…women” (82). Instead of denial, then, Catherine must embrace the terrorism of that “lusting stepfather” and the horrors of her mother’s history, symbolized first by the scarf she has inherited from her mother, then by the mother’s ethnic association with Russia. First, the scarf obscures and contains Catherine’s beautiful hair. Second, because the scarf is one Catherine inherited from her mother, it bears the impact of her mother’s experience.
This inheritance includes, not just the subservience of the woman to the man in the culture, but also the life-experiences of the generations of women subjected to the “lusting” of stepfathers and of social suppression, symbolized by the mother’s Russian heritage: Russia being one of the most powerful symbol of the 20th century for oppression, the deprivation of freedom, and the threat to individual autonomy. The “red roses grounded in black” (82) that constitutes the design of the scarf could easily, within the canon of Wakoski images, represent the red roses of life and of art, of identity, and of self-realization, and of a femininity both old and new pulsing against the backdrop of that black hole, that abyss of meaning which is imposed often by the cultural texts.

Extending to other poems her critique of cultural literary practices as a technology of gender, Wakoski personalizes the role of the “book” in her own life. Using the I persona in “Emerald City,” she claims the book for herself: “under my pillow I hide the book / which records the ivory name” (78). These lines raise numerous questions: why does she hide the book? why under her pillow? what is the nature of this book? to what does the ivory name refer? The very nature of the book is ambiguous. Is it the text of the “secret story” she almost told “in front of the fire” (105)? Even she herself inquires “but what is / the story?” (105) In this question she is posing those questions we should all ask: what is the nature, the meaning of the story; what is real; who is the author-constitutor of this story? Is the ivory name the inscription of the author or of the protagonist, the hero, the chosen? Can she/we identify with either the story or the inscription, that is, with the author? Where do we stand in relation to the story? How does our “observer position” affect how we read the story and how we put ourselves into the story, and what of that story we extract to apply to our own lives? Can we even be authors of our own stories? These are the difficult questions that arise in a critique of the technologies of gender that have determined women’s subjectivity. To these questions the poet provides no complete answers—except to invite the reader to consider multiple possibilities. Hence, as an inquisitive conscious feminist reader-of-texts, I can speculate that the ivory inscription in this book represents several possible realities: Wakoski’s name inscribed in the canon of American poets; the absence of her name in a book inscribed with other stories; the terra incognita of the mysterious, unexplored, unknown, unwritten woman self; and/or the possibility of generating a new history or better, as Helene Cixous contends, a “process in which several histories intersect with one another” (“Medusa” 352).
The ivory name recorded in the book could refer to the text of a *Who’s Who* (*EC* 132) of contemporary American poets in which Wakoski’s name—her “ivory name”—is written. She is included in the canon of worthy poets, though she rues rather bitterly and frequently that she is not among the “elect” who are considered eligible for the Pulitzer Prize. Perhaps, though, the ivory name is not hers, but the name only of some other, more worthy of note. Indeed, a key feminist issue has been that women have been excluded from the canon of what constitutes American literature, British literature, world literature. Wakoski does not merely nod, but lays claim to her feminist forebears from Emily Dickinson’s “loaded gun” to Sylvia Plath’s “blood red tulips” (198). “The book on fire under [her] / pillow” (79) recalls Dickinson’s finest and most controversial poem, “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—,” in which latent power—poetic, erotic, female, imaginative, emotional, physical, and personal—stands at one moment hidden in a corner awaiting the master hand to unleash its potential, at another moment, vital and awake, awakened, rejecting the comfort of the eider pillow. For Wakoski this gun in the bed parallels “the book on fire under [her] / pillow.” It is Dickinson’s “book,” suffusing the poet, Wakoski, with visions of female possibility: guns going off, earthquakes pulsing, volcanoes erupting, orgasms convulsing, all transforming the geography with the burgeoning power of the feminist voice emerging from its repression to speak for itself, for and about women’s lives. And it is Wakoski’s own book of poems, her own “insurgent writing” (Cixous, “Medusa” 350) ready to surge forth, to burst out, to explode and transform the geography of her world and to claim her place in that world.

Having often suffered rejection, neglect, indifference, and erasure as a writer, Wakoski critiques the silencing of women’s voices, the devaluing of their (written) experience. In some ways Wakoski’s enigmatic book, the “book on fire under her pillow,” alludes to the book of myths about which Adrienne Rich wrote in her poem, “Diving into the Wreck”:10

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way  
[...]  
carrying...a book of myths  
in which  
our names do not appear. (*Norton* 2951)

This text is that in which women have not been included, the book in which women’s stories have not been written, or if they have, they’ve been relegated to a sort of “space off” (de
Lauretis, *Technology* 26), that part of the text that is not seen. This “space off” represents a kind of null set, “the un-lived stories” (*EC* 40), “un-lived,” in one sense, not because they have actually been unlived, but because their value has not been recognized. Wakoski mourns, in “Looking for Beethoven…,” the possibility that she will appear in “books / no one / will ever read” (18). She is not revealing only the latent fears of the poet who puts her self and her work into the public arena for readers to read and love, to read and hate, to read and remain indifferent, or, worst of all, not to read at all; she is lamenting the invisibility and the unworthiness women have felt, the empty space/page that has constituted woman’s place in the culture. In another sense, the “space off” represents those stories yet to be written, because they exist only in the realm of the possible. We shall see, however, that this space is not unequivocal. Rather, it is a site outside the frame, which, as Cixous might put it, “can serve as a springboard for subversive thought” (“Medusa” 350), as a new “observer-position” from which a new “reality” can be generated and a new vision conceived; this space provides an opportunity for women to seize the moment to speak, “to wrest our destinies.” Yet, still, it is the unseen space, in effect, that which, because it is in the dark, may not be there at all. This has been women’s fear: that the dark space of the shadow, our personal “dark continent”—what Wakoski calls her “rocky cave”/“rocky tunnel” (*EC* 106), which we must explore to find ourselves, is empty, itself a fiction, ourselves “a shadow” (106), without substance.¹¹

Wakoski broaches the conundrum when she asks, in “The New Moon, a Scar,” “How can you see something which isn’t there?” (121). Again, her one question evokes a flood of other questions: what is this mysterious *something* which isn’t there? why isn’t it there? is it not there merely because it is not seen? why isn’t it seen? if it is there and unseen, what can be done to bring it into the light? Wakoski likens women’s situation to the new moon, a scar of light in the night sky that belies the rest of the moon, relegated to shadow and darkness, and always dependent upon its position relative to the sun whose light it casts. Thus, this unseen “something” is the woman herself. In “Swan’s Neck,” the same poem in which she claims her inclusion in the *Who’s Who* text, she speaks of the male poet beside whom her name is inscribed as having “blanked [her] out of his mind” and as having

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  treated [her] as if [she] were not a swan or even a snake,
  but a piece of lint
  something brushed off his coat. (133)
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The patriarchal authoritarian vision of the culture determines that she is neither beautiful and elegant like the swan, nor dangerous and clever like the snake; rather, she is an object of so little value as to be dismissed with a petulant disgust as one might treat an offending, but somewhat innocuous inconvenience—a piece of lint. In this case it is not that she is not seen at all, but that when she is seen, it is as something to be summarily discarded as of little use and value. Wakoski’s tone implies that this man, “seen [only] in the company / of men” (133), disdains to see her, whose “name is next to his in every // reference work” (133), not because she is not there, but because her being there offends him. He treats her with such contempt because she has dared to encroach upon his world.

In the real world, as in the literary world, there are specific places relegated to Woman: she, who has been called “a scribbler” in the literary world, churning out her silly little texts for an undiscerning audience, is assigned equally circumscribed roles in her daily life. As a Woman, she can get away with being the Helen in the story, beautiful daughter of the raping, but otherwise indifferent Zeus-swan or coveted “trophy-wife” of the powerful world-leader, Menelaus, or she can be the Leda figure, equally beautiful, rape-victim, single-mother. She can only be the gendered one—daughter, mother, wife, concubine, mistress—to whom things happen—like kidnap and rape; she cannot be the swan itself—“no swan in me” mourns the goose-like Wakoski-poet (132)—, not the god avatar, “that swan among men” (133) who can make things happen. The very commodities of physical beauty and a kind of “feminine” helplessness, passivity, and receptiveness, which render the woman attractive to men and which the culture celebrates and by which the culture, and men and women alike within that culture, define her as valuable, are the very commodities that undermine any possibility of the woman’s having an individualized identity. Leda has no place in the story except in “connection” (132) to the swan/god/man who rapes her; Helen, who has the dubious honor of “engendering there / The Broken wall, the burning roof and tower / and Agamemnon dead” (Yeats 1952), also trades only on her beauty and her acquiescence to the masculinist agenda. In the end it is the men who dominate the epic stories—from the Iliad to the Odyssey. Clearly those stories are not even about “saving” Helen, but of salvaging Menelaus’s honor, showcasing Achilles’s valor, and challenging Odysseus’ intrepidity. Yeats’s masculinist question,

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she [Leda] put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (1952)

is insulting. Women, if we have any knowledge or power at all, have it only insofar as it inheres from connection to that “indifferent [masculine] beak” ready at any moment to let us drop.

Wakoski critiques the precarious position as it applies to herself and to women in general both through the allusion to Helen of Troy and to Leda and through her condemnation of the contempt wielded by the indifferent male poet in her own text, “who has clearly blanked [her] out of his mind” (EC 133). Denied “swan” status, women—whether the so-called “heroines” of the tales or the “scribblers” of them become the “lint” of society to be summarily dismissed.

On behalf of all women, the poet, even as she yearns for any kind of recognition, refuses the summary dismissal and the relegation to prescribed roles. While she does query, “why a woman / should not have her share of white-swans love” (133), indicating how women have been acculturated to desire the mythic roles perpetrated in the old stories, even when these entail rape, kidnapping, and male indifference, she asserts the power of her name to be written “next to [the male poet’s] in every / reference work” (133), an identity which, if the male poet denies it, will surely go away. Fortunately, such wishing does not make it so. Feminist writers are making their mark: they are taking up the “ivory stylus” and writing their “ivory name[s]” in the “fiery book.” However, although women’s books are being published, read, and written about, and whole courses and curricula are now being devoted to their writings, Wakoski’s alluding to Helen of Troy and to her mother Leda, and choosing the image of women’s marking their ivory names with an ivory stylus indicates the complexity of women’s writing and of women’s conceiving meaningful selves. While ivory, not unlike allusions to Helen, conjures images of the exotic, we must acknowledge that ivory, like Helen, is an illegal substance, poached by men, commodified, and sold as contraband. In addition, an ivory name on a white page is still invisible. Thus, the image of the ivory stylus and the ivory name indicates that women’s finding a place in the world of letters, women’s having an opportunity to write our stories, is fraught with an underlying, often unseen or unrecognized, tension and difficulty. Wakoski’s personal and professional chagrin at the man’s contempt for her and her work still represents a common contemporary masculinist perspective. Women continue to struggle for genuine recognition in the big book of myths, the canon, and in the culture.
However, the woman’s name in the book is not the only “thing which is there but which no one sees” (122). Further into “The New Moon, a Scar,” Wakoski intimates that any sensitive woman, and especially the woman poet,

must understand
the invisible…the thing which is there but which
no one sees, or which is only a form
not yet illuminated. (122, my italics)

This invisible form yet to be illuminated is that strange and elusive “unmeasured state” (193). There is a reality which defies the codified, the measured, the prescribed and which constitutes an important part of reality not illuminated, not in the light. Wakoski’s “thing which no one sees” resembles what de Lauretis calls a kind of “phantom percept elided by the purposefulness of dominant codes” (Alice Doesn’t 68) that women in the culture have felt to be missing, yet which has seemed to hover in our peripheral vision, to persist liminally in some nether layer of consciousness and which now invites inspection, or better, introspection, and investigation. Wakoski has denoted the unilluminated invisible as “some spirit from [her] past” which beckons to be called, something “much bigger, more / powerful” than anything from either the natural world or the culture (EC 52). While Wakoski does not make any overt reference to the French feminists, this “spirit from her past” resonates as Julia Kristeva’s theorized chora, the pre-language, pre-symbolic, pre-mirror-stage component of the human psyche, that part unformed, uninterpreted, undetermined by language and ideology, that part of the self which stands as Cixous’ “without,” that comes from “afar,” and that has existed “always” (‘Medusa” 348) in relation to culture. Wakoski is referring to the unexplored “dark continent” which she characterizes as both the desert, the great expanse of wonderful land to be traveled and discovered and reinvented in a kind of feminist manifest destiny and her own green and opulent back yard. That part of the woman that constitutes not just the “without,” but also the within, not just an “afar,” but a proximity as well, and not merely an “always,” but an inception and an immediate, this invisible thing, this spirit of woman becomes in Wakoski’s poetry the site of “the secret story [she almost told] by the fire” (EC 105), “the unheard songs” (Cixous, “Medusa” 348), “the ebullient infinite woman…kept in the dark about herself [and] led into disdain” (348), yet resisting death, closure, enclosure, containment, and the “neorealism” of a measured, codified, prescribed “real” world. This is the no man’s land of the “space off,” the “feminist” or revaluation/re-situation/re-vision that feminists are theorizing, that contemporary women poets
are disclosing and inserting into texts, and that women today are attempting to acknowledge and to incorporate into their language, their thinking about themselves, and their experience.

There must be another history, not his-story but her-story. In “What Was It Like,” a poem about “untold stories” and “parallel universes,” Wacoski claims, “I have always known we had a history / that we [could] have acted out” (EC 40). This other history is the forbidden one, the one that could put women into new scripts to be “acted out.” Women must put ourselves into the text: we must reconceive the stories, rewrite the scripts, replot the narratives, and reassign the roles. To do so means, as the poet proclaims in “White Las Vegas,” to take huge risks, to abandon the “search for certainty, the peaceful progression of the expected” for that elusive 2% chance of winning (152). Risk means chance, flux, innuendo, nuance, chaos, grief, complexity, and change. Yes, women’s playing the game—“what’s a hand if not to be played” (152)—, women’s writing our own lives threatens to elicit change: change in the way subjectivity is conceived; change in the range of subject positions that determine what is seen and how; change in what attributes materialize as valued; change in the power dynamic of who decides what the rules, prescriptions, “sequences,” “patterns,” and “chains” are to be and what constitutes the real, the natural, and the common sense.

To elicit this change, however, women must first assume the subject positions now in the hands of men. Wacoski conceives of the challenge to the subject position through the tropes of camera and cinema in the poems, “Night” and “Hot Flickers/Movie Light.” She critiques photography/cinematography as technologies of gender that inscribe women into specific frames, but that, under a feminist scrutiny, reveal other truths and other possibilities. Again, Herbert’s ideas on physics informs her presentation of her critique. Just as Herbert vacillates between belief in the inherent singularity/uniformity of things in the universe and the notion of quantum randomness that signals multiplicity, so Wacoski demonstrates through her critique of the camera and of the cinema how the technologies tend to concretize, to limit, to frame, yet how they can be employed as a means also of seeing things differently. We’ve been taught to see things through the eye of a microscope or through a set of narrowly focused hypothetical questions or, as in the image Wacoski uses, through the eye of the camera, a small aperture that determines a very narrow range of vision. The camera also tends to capture the image, to concretize it, to make it permanent, to render the image unchangeable. However, after the camera’s work is finished, the image does in fact change, and what gets presented by the
camera’s “truth” is only momentary and fragmentary and certainly observer-created. Besides, the camera does not see “everything”; what it looks at/for—what attributes materialize—is determined by the watcher, the observer behind the camera. Although, in the past, we have ascribed the credibility of truth to all camera images, Wakoski posits that this kind of concretizing, this kind of still-life, this kind of momentary truth, this kind of selective “reality” cannot stand as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.\footnote{15} When she exclaims: “[t]he camera’s eye / nonsense / all eyes are cameras” (185-6), she is claiming the potential of all of us/each of us to define a different reality.

In the poem “Night,” the poet’s critique centers on who owns the camera,\footnote{16} who is captured by the camera’s eye, and what implications and repercussions result from those positions:

The man I love lives behind
the camera. He sees me in the only light
the only light. (103)

The repetition of “the only light” elicits a plethora of responses. To begin with, it intimates a sense of nostalgia for the heroinism and romanticism invoked by the gaze of the camera. The camera and its owner, the man the persona loves, give her meaning by designating her as worthy to be looked at, hence, possibly younger than her 60ish self—at once beautiful, glamorous, and erotic. She longs to be seen, not as the aging, wrinkle-skinned Diane, but as the glamorous movie-star-princess, Kelly McGillis of Top Gun, in “Hot Flickers/Movie Light” (199-200), “wrapped in raw silk” rather than “swathed in tent-like clothes” (19). That she is not Kelly but Diane, not young but old, not svelte but plump evokes feelings of remorse and loss, feelings of being left out. This grief must accompany the knowledge that her lover “lives behind the camera,” that is, he lives to look at her (or not), to assume the consciousness position that defines (her) reality. The eye of the camera is not objective, nor is it innocent. Who owns the camera owns the gaze, determines who/what is seen, what particular attributes “matter/materialize” (see Butler). The camera becomes first a sign of masculine power to create reality, since the man is the only conscious observer; it further becomes a techno-phallic extension of his life—that, in fact, gives meaning to his life as well, only in an entirely different sense than it imposes meaning on the scoped woman—who may or may not be his beloved. He owns the device that dominates perception; he wields scopophilic desire; he controls the orifice through which “reality” emerges. She, Diane, lacks: machine, phallus, consciousness, control, desire. Her lack is quite complicated. If he chooses not to look at her, she becomes invisible—unilluminated, out of the
light altogether. If she does not exist in the “reel” world, she does not exist in the “real” world; hence, all her feeling of “love” for him dissipates into the vacuum of this erasure. Even if he does look at her, she is at his mercy; she cannot define herself because he owns the camera and wields its scopophilic potential.

This helplessness must evoke another layer of emotion: anger and bitterness. Why is it he who owns the camera; why is she the object and he the subject? She is emotionally invested in him, but what of his love for her? If he did love her, would his love change the he-camera-she dynamic, or does his living behind the camera preclude his being emotionally invested in her? The camera comes between them, protecting him from emotional involvement and deflecting the threat of her possessing a consciousness and a subjectivity of her own. We can almost hear her scream, “Why is it there is ‘the only light, the only light,’?” Even in the precise science of physics, light is variable, manifesting both particulate and wave-like qualities. As the woman-persona chafes at the confinement to the narrow scope of the man’s camera eye, her anger moves her to remove the imposition of this “only light” by interposing other lights: “Emerald light. Apple light. Rose light” (103). She writes into the script of this poem other possibilities, possibilities that he is probably incapable of seeing, but that she must seize for herself. Even as the question surfaces—if she were suddenly to become his equal, what would the world look like through the lens of her camera?—the poem itself becomes a kind of camera behind which Diane lives and can thus wield the power of its vision-making capability to define anew what is seen and how it is interpreted, to write that “other” history.

Wakoski further reveals her cynicism about the romantic visions presented by cameras through her critique of the cinema as a technology of gender. As a narrator of her own text, she contests the narrativity of film to work its effects on the spectator/narratee and engages in the ambitious project of producing possibilities for change by examining the role of spectator/narratee. In one sense, the narrativity of a text is the manipulation of the devices and strategies of narrative through which certain ideas are conveyed and certain responses are evoked. A spectator’s/narratee’s awareness of the narrativity at work in a text opens the way for evading set and stable ideas and target responses. In an ironized allusion to the movie Top Gun in her poem “Hot Flickers/Movie Lights,” the poet-persona stands outside the frame as spectator, looking on/in. Teresa de Lauretis verifies the significant position of the spectator/narratee in the critical process: “the notion of spectatorship is the most important at the present stage of film theory in
its questioning of cinema as a social technology, a system of representation massively involved in (re)production of subjects” (Technologies 118). The narratee of a text, like the spectator of a film, is the person addressed by and constructed by both the narrativity and the narrative/film/text itself. In this case, the woman addressed by Top Gun is potentially a woman like the “heroine” played by Kelly McGillis or the poet Diane Wakoski or any struggling feminist attempting to fit/find something other than the constructed role designed for women. However, the film, as a technology of gender, refuses that difference by insisting on the stereotype. From her heteronomous position as both narrator and spectator/narratee, Wakoski attempts to undermine the “hot flickers” of the film’s images and to redefine a ground from which to interpret and be interpreted/interpellated. Even as she uses irony to examine some aspects of feminine subjectivity, to critique and to indict the camera for its flawed univision, and to uninstall it as “the only light” in which women can be seen, the lure of the persistent images of the movie haunt her and attempt to suck her into their version of reality. As the implied woman spectator, she is herself, through the narrativity of the film, “constructed as a set of beliefs presupposed by the text” (Ryan 598-9) of that film, while at the same time she attempts to stand outside, not as manipulated spectator/narratee only, but as critic/skeptic struggling for revision.

Thus, Wakoski finds herself caught between the spaces both “inside this frame” and “outside this frame” (EC 199-200). In one sense this interstitial space represents both what the French feminists have called ruptures, gaps, leakages, and what Wakoski herself has called inhabiting parallel universes, so that it is not so much an elsewhere as a confusing and conflicted un-definable—perhaps impossible—space. In one moment, she identifies with the female character played by Kelly McGillis “inside this frame”; in another, she reverts to an envious Diane, not included in the world of the beautiful and the chosen, hence, “outside this frame”; in the meantime, she seems to be “on another continent” (199), neither inside nor outside, but also not either inside or outside—seeking another story not included in either the “reel” version of the film or the “real” version of her experience. Finding herself in this impossible space incites the woman spectator to the revision recommended by Adrienne Rich and to the insurgent writing/rewriting advocated by Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

The film attempts to structure a relation with the woman spectator in order to draw her so completely into a contrived set of narrative events that her place within the culture is reinforced. One point of intersection between Diane Wakoski and Kelly McGillis’ character in the film,
ironically, is their intelligence. McGillis attracts Wakoski because the character is the brainy, but beautiful, physicist, not unlike the bespectacled Diane who, as the “class brain” (199), although not beautiful, was attracted to principles of physics. As a world-class physicist, McGillis could potentially assume a presence as the intelligent one, the one who knows the answers, who commands, not sexual scopophilia, but attentive respect for her intellect and knowledge. For once, it might be popular to be both a woman and the class brain; for once, a woman might stand outside the ideology of gender that insists that men are intelligent and women are beautiful. However, early images of McGillis in the movie are contraindicative. Granted, she is shown as making her own life for herself. She has a high-powered job; she’s well-placed in government and in academe—and not as an English teacher or as a poet in residence, but as a physicist with “her head full of mathematical equations” (199). Countering this image of the powerful and independent woman, one of the first views of McGillis is not of her bespectacled head poring over complex equations; no, it is through the slow, calculated, sexual panning of her ankles, legs, and body as the camera’s scopophilic eye conflates with the eyes of the men watching her. With this camera eye, she is put in her place as the female/feminine character; she is seen in “the only light.”23 As Teresa de Lauretis might put it, the film “broaches the paradox of woman as object and as sign at once captive and absent on the scene of Western representation” (Technologies 113).

I would like to examine one segment of the poem as it sheds light on Wakoski’s characterization of the dilemma of women caught between the scopophilic interpellations of the culturally attractive female/feminine and an intuition that, despite the appeal of the fantasy, it does not represent the “only reality,” if it represents any reality:

Inside this frame,
she’s riding a motorcycle along the highway, behind the leather-jacketed pilot,
her head full of mathematical equations,
aviator glasses with amber lenses disguising her;
she could not be farther from him if she were on another
continent. But their bodies nested together
on wheels,
as they ride the coast…. (EC 199)

In this passage Wakoski explores that “caught” space between connection and critique as she effects her revision of the image of Woman. Her representational pastiche of the filmic McGillis exposes the complexity and the veracity of the poet’s claim to existing in multiple universes and
to the theoretical claim that women in film are both captive as sign and object and yet somehow absent. Through identification, the poet’s own brainy self transposes, as I have said, into the brainy McGillis, even as the former’s “class brain” spectacles transpose into the exotic amber-lensed aviator glasses. That these glasses “disguise” McGillis at once enables Wakoski to enter the frame, placing herself behind these lenses, so that it is she who is nested against that black-leather-jacketed pilot’s body, and indicates that the narratee/narrator outside the frame is seeing a discrepancy between what is presented on the screen and some other “truth” she intuits under the surface. The narrator interposes: “she could not be farther from him if she were on another / continent”: the woman cannot share in the man’s power, although she is nested with him. In fact, the use of the word nested conjures images of huswifery and maternity, women’s roles that preclude rather than enable a share in power. Further, the woman spectator cannot, because of the sheer fiction of the myth, become the heroine of the piece even as the film interpellates her to that Cinderella (nested with her Prince Charming) role, calling all princess-wannabe’s to the modern day ideal of the beautiful girl riding off into the sunset with her dark prince/pilot. No, women—the one within the film and all the “Diane’s”\(^{24}\) being called into and held out of the film’s reach—exist on another continent altogether. Ironically, it is this “another continent” that undermines the traditional interpellation of the film and reveals to the reader that the Wakoski-narratee, despite the allure, is not buying the objectification of the woman into the feminine or the loss of self this objectification entails.

However, before arriving at a recognition of her “another continent” location, Wakoski and her reader have to work through some of the intricacies of the film’s text. Images of wheels, the highway, and the black leather jacket seem in momentary “hot flickers” to allude to Wakoski’s fantasy “Motorcycle Betrayer.”\(^{25}\) In the poem “The Motorcyclist in the Woods,” the poet valorizes personal power through the (sexual) power of the motorcyclist and his machine:

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what the rider
ha[s] between his legs
(horsepower)
whether galloping or revving the engine. (184, Wakoski’s parenthesis)
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In both poems, “Hot Flickers/Movie Light” and “The Motorcyclist in the Woods” and in the movie Top Gun, go power revs between his legs, not hers. Wakoski, herself considered brainy, once sported her own “leathers” (Medea 141) and basked in a reputation of being a kind of motorcycle babe. Although she, the Wakoskian “class brain” (EC 200)—the movie’s brainy
physicist—possesses a machine of her own, which, once upon a time, revved at her command, she has been relegated to the back seat not just on his motorcycle, but also in the film/text and in the culture. Both the position as driver/pilot and the power over the machine have been usurped by the male, and it is not she in the frame who is revving between his legs. He is the horsepower that gallops/revs between her legs, demonstrating that whatever (sexual) power she has derives from his (sexual) power and prowess.

Further, the woman’s intelligence is subsumed in the male’s adventures, tragedies, and triumphs. It is the male figure in the movie that “demands a three-dimensional space” (Mulvey 443) and “woman as icon” (443) who, from her back-seat position, “could not be farther from him if she were on another / continent” (EC 199). She is indeed in another world, the world of the fetish, the icon, the created image, the “reel” as opposed to the active, engaged “real” world where things matter. In this man’s story about men and their contests and conquests, she is merely the prize, “the princess / of orange groves” (200), planted firmly into two worlds where her presence is reassuring: the world of fairy tales and fantasy (the princess) and the world of nature (orange groves). And her vision of herself, not unlike the view through the green glasses of Oz, is tinted, here by the “aviator glasses with amber lenses,” and tainted.

In the end, “[t]he man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power” (Mulvey 443); he controls events now by controlling not just the camera, but the script as well, and he dominates center stage. He lives in front of the camera as well as behind it, directing its narrative potential, establishing the social dynamics of what constitutes right relations, the “right” story to which all ancillary characters must submit and which establishes the paradigm of all future stories. The male/masculine figure in the narrative is the more perfect, the more complete, the more powerful ideal ego. Thus, women’s potential to partake meaningfully in the story is short-circuited. Through the film’s narrative and narrativity, the hero’s maleness/masculinity is fore grounded and contested in true narrative fashion and found not-wanting; the heroine’s femaleness/femininity is likewise fore grounded and contested and, as she succumbs to the interpretations/interpellations of the construct, likewise found not-wanting. Left wanting—outside the frame, on “another continent”—is the female-feminist spectator-reader who wants to be like Kelly McGillis, but struggles with the contradictions inherent in the artificial coherence of the female/feminine film/phantasm. As a romancer of the phallus, the poet is attracted to the beautiful and desirable ultra female with legs, hips, and breasts as well as to the ultra feminine,
compliant, supportive, sympathetic, romanced Kelly, even as she aspires to the feminist image of the potent, intelligent—“class brain”—independent, abrasive, authoritarian Kelly. Wakoski as spectator is thus seduced by the narrative and by the process of narrativity even as she rebels against them.

Despite the allure, these images do not, need not, and should not constitute life outside the film. Wakoski actually begins the poem by describing the “real world” of “little beach towns, where the sinks / were discolored with necklaces of alkaline water from rusty pipes,” replete with wet and moldy smells, moldy walls, all transformed into a “filmy sunset” (199). The camera, along with the man who lives behind it, has the ability to transform the “real” into the “reel,” to fictionalize and so to tantalize the spectator that s/he engages in the fantasy. The real class brain, “outside the frame,” wearing the coke-bottle glasses—Diane—, thus, becomes “the princess / of orange groves” (199) whizzing off into the filmy sunset. The poet so wants to believe the hyperreal “fiction” presented through the screen interface, she falls under the spell of the media’s transformation of both sociological and geographical space into that specular surface in which she can see herself reflected. The female spectator colludes in the realization/creation of the fantasy world of the film. By romantically inserting herself into this “hot flicker” of a moment, she becomes a female character/princess in the drama and can thus partake of the male’s prerogative power of the machine, the victory of his achievement, his right to choose a future, the wholeness and shape of an orderly world. As her observer-position alters, she no longer sees any of the unpleasantness of the “real” and often ugly and chaotic world represented by the external geography, but rather is positioned to identify with the fabricated fiction. The entire experience of watching the film parallels the layers of reality to which women have felt subjected in the culture. Constantly drawn into the story, often, for women, the “wrong” story, women have devalued ourselves in our real experiential lives and longed to partake of the romance of a hyperreal-fictional life.

Wakoski herself refuses to be carried along as a passive spectator, to be bound to “a silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 438). Working back and forth from surface to interior, from one side of the camera to the other, from inside the frame to outside the frame, she denies “the process of reproduction as articulation of coherence” (de Lauretis, Alice Doesn’t 135). While the princess within the script acquiesces to an implied and apparent coherence as feminine and subservient female, Wakoski’s poet-persona rails
against both that acquiescence and against her own desire to partake of it. There is no denying that part of her would love to ride off with the Motorcycle Man—her personal mythic hero paradigm—but her personal experience with that Motorcycle Man has been that he is a betrayer and an abandoner. Real-life men do not have the staying power to sustain the romance any more than real-life women can fit the princess model. The poet ends her poem, then, not, as in the movie, with the hero and his prize princess riding off into the sunset, but steeped back in the geography of the real and the ugly, the de-romanticized colonizing machine interposed in the landscape of romance: “the natural gas / wells pumping” (199). These “black stained steely heads of dippers” (199) pump out a brutal, relentless dance of rape and exploitation, sucking out the natural resources of the land and transforming the natural landscape, not into a fantasy of romance and heroism, but into a landscape of exploitation and devastation and horror in a “rhythm no one would ever / dance to” (199) if they could choose. The relentless, but silent pumping imposes its repulsive and pervasive rhythm over all.26 These steely heads of dippers remind us that the real set of the scene—the moldy, wet, and smelly beach towns, the rust and alkaline rings—were obscured at the outset by the romantic lenses of disguise, of the imperative of fiction that always wants to transform the world to a purpose, like those green lenses of Oz.

While the film clearly attempts to fool the spectator into believing in its own version of the “Emerald City,” that is, a “regulated coherence of a master plot with a closure of a framed narrative image of woman as spectacle and object of a controlling [master] gaze” (de Lauretis, Technologies 124, my bracketed insert), Wakoski’s text enacts own interference or disrecognition. Wakoski’s identification with Kelly McGillis and envy of her constitutes a recognition of the role to which she “should” aspire, but as a feminist, the poet experiences the anxiety and excitement of what de Lauretis calls “the recognition of misrecognition” (124), an awakening to the layers of mis-association and mis-identification the film’s narrativity has effected in her.27 Why is she envying this disempowered McGillis who is a phantasm, a myth, a fabricated ideological construct on the screen? Through a disrecognition of recognition, Wakoski’s rejection of the film’s interpretation of “right femaleness” (Jacobsen 68), the poet shifts the focus from the images on the screen to the act of seeing itself; she can thus counter the narrativity of the film by questioning the so-called coherence of the female/feminine image purveyed through the film. The complex act of disrecognizing recognition undermines any
notion of a coherence of the female/feminine self or of the coherence of the master plot itself to effect that female/feminine coherence.

Into the complacency of such coherences, another kind of coherence interferes. To borrow again from the realm of science, the term *coherence* in the physics of radiation does not indicate cohesion in the sense a wholeness or conformity characterized by “a mutual attraction by which the elements of a body are held together” (*AHD* 141),\(^\text{28}\) the pursuit of a logic of order or conformity to a prescribed trajectory, or the fulfillment of the stipulations of a “law”; rather, creating a coherence (of interference) means “having a constant phase difference…and so able to interfere” (*COD* 81).\(^\text{29}\) This interference initiates a new seeing, and this new seeing—call it revision after Rich or a new re-cognition\(^\text{30}\)—re-thinking, re-knowing, re-perceiving, re-conceiving—inaugurates precisely that space of contradiction, that “another country,” that impossible space of “elsewhere” where women can craft another sense of self. By fragmenting and critiquing the film’s narrative with clips from its text, by ironizing her position as narratee, and by claiming her role as narrator (persona-poet), Wakoski creates that space, that gap, that moment of incoherence, or radical coherence, that critical space in which she can opt for a different story, a different version-view-perspective-path-reality.

A woman, although not owning the camera, certainly possesses a critical gaze of her own and can “see” the images on the screen, not just from the powerful and heretofore singular interpretation of the “gaze” manipulated through the video camera but also from the critical perspective\(^\text{29}\) of a feminist viewer rereading the meaning and intentions of the reel into her real. Thus, she—as woman-feminist-spectator—can construct herself viewing the construct of the feminine, whether on the screen, in a literary text, or in other cultural texts. In seeing herself as woman both inside the frame and outside the frame, both bound and attracted by the ideological representation and detesting and contesting that representation, she enters the no man’s land where she can choose which “real/reel” to embrace. However, as Wakoski herself contends against Herbert’s assertion of the one-path-at-a-time theory, women are so conflicted by the contradictions of confrontation that we find ourselves, not in one place, but in many places at once. This is what Wakoski means when she asserts the primacy of parallel or multiple universes. While the logic of physics dictates that only one reality-choice/-consciousness exist at a time, feminists contend that the multiple views of reality converge into an intertextualized
reality—a calling in from elsewhere and a denial of complete identification with the singular view.

Through the pastiche of cultural texts and allusions, Wakoski interrogates the ways in which women have been led to see ourselves and our place in the culture in one set of ways, when in fact we have felt both attracted to and uneasy about this pigeon-holing. Critical readers can see that our ways of perceiving have been manipulated and that there is not merely one place from which we can perceive and, therefore define, reality. Women don’t have to stay in front of the camera being defined by the scopophilia of the male observer; we don’t have to stay bound into texts and interpretations of texts in which our struggles have been obscured, erased, or romanticized. There are other realities. Women can stand outside the text(s) and compose our own stories, and these stories have merit, momentum, and purpose. Wakoski’s poetry represents a resistance to the truths posited by the technology of science—the ratiocination process and reification of “fact/truth/real” that claim one path, one view; the technology of literary critical practices—the circumscription, erasure, and limitation of both the female author and the female protagonist; and the technology of cinema—the delimiting, romanticizing, stereotyping of the female other in film. Wakoski shows that women have been persuaded to believe too innocently in fabricated realities, whereas, there are multiple possible realities yet to be explored and created out of a sense of women’s revisioning of our place in the culture.

Chapter One Endnotes

1 See full citation in works cited: Technologies of Gender. Subsequent references to this text will be Technologies. I am using the idea of “technology,” much as de Lauretis does, as a system through which gender is constructed and perceived and, thus, as a site of resistance for the reconceptualization of feminist identity. While de Lauretis indicates that science is one of the key technologies of gender, she does not analyze it in her text, focusing more on the role of cinema as a technology of gender. I broach science here only as Wakoski uses it to contrast traditional scientific attitudes that claim objective truth with her contention that we live in multiple/parallel universes and that there is not just one possibility of perceiving reality open to us.

2 Because Wakoski is clearly exploring multiple possibilities and positionalities for women’s subjectivities, it is not surprising she should not want to confine herself to the label of feminist. She contends: “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” (Medea the Sorceress 111). By eschewing the name, she can still partake of the impulses and imperatives of feminism without assuming some of the baggage that has accrued to the name. In addition, like
many ethnic writers who wish not to be identified solely with their ethnic group, she hopes to broach biases in canon formation by being thought of as a poet and not as a feminist poet or even as a woman poet. In disdaining a “feminist” identification, Wakoski is not denying that she enacts a feminist agenda—especially if we define feminism as a critical revisioning of the texts of the culture, which she clearly does—, so much as insuring that she not be held to any single feminist theoretical agenda or ground.

3 See full citation in works cited: “A Colloquy with Diane Wakoski.” Subsequent references to this text will be “Colloquy.”

4 What I am presenting here is an interpretation of those theories insofar as they apply to my process of interrogating and my reading of Wakoski’s poetry. Here, I am extrapolating my ideas from de Lauretis’ explanation of Peirce. Peirce calls a sign a representamen which represents some object and addresses somebody; in the process of standing for something in the mind of a person, this first sign (representamen) generates a more complex sign which Peirce calls the interpretant of that representamen. The sign, for Peirce, is never pure, but appears as a textual matrix, and no single sign actually is a thing, but a complex set or “operational description of a set of possible experiences” (Technologies 40). Thus, in the unlimited semiosis of representamens transforming into interpretants, “the nexus object-sign-meaning is a series of ongoing mediations between the ‘outer world’ and ‘inner’ or mental representations” (39). What is useful for me is the dynamic that Peirce describes between the object in the external world, the sign which enables the mind to grasp some sense of that object, the activity within the mind that transforms the object into some meaningful “idea” or mental representation, i.e. a new sign. This theory indicates that there is not necessarily a “real” but only and always ideas of that real, and, while some of these ideas are grounded in cultural assumptions, there is always room for the individual mind to bring to bear on those ideas new ideas generated out of personal experience and thought processes. Thus, the theory supports Herbert’s contention that reality is “observer created,” the French feminists’ ruptures, gaps, and leakages, and Wakoski’s intuition that we really do live in multiple/parallel universes.

5 In her poetic apology, Toward a New Poetry, and in various interviews, Wakoski has posited a belief in the Jungian notion of “wholeness,” whereby each woman possesses a complementary anima that contributes to her identity as a woman (“My Silk Dreams” 192): “I think in that Jungian sense of every whole being half masculine and half feminine…in that they fit together and make the complete whole (TNP 270). In addition, she heralds assorted other kinds of wholeness: a Whitmanesque wholeness of body and mind whereby “the imaginary life is incumbent on the physical life” and vice versa (Jacobsen 67) and the connection of women “with their own sexuality and with each other…[that] represents a needed beginning in the process of women learning to imagine themselves whole” (Carruthers 301-2). Despite these protestations to wholeness, Wakoski lays claim to multiple existences and existing in multiple universes, hence exhibiting, less wholeness than fragmentation, division, or at least multiplicity. In addition, I will show, she is less about becoming whole as an endgame, than becoming as an ongoing intertextualized process.

6 In the poem, “Mary’s Diner” (EC 155-6).
This recalls the character of Janie in the novel of yet another fore-mother, Zora Neale Hurston. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s identifying mane is kept confined beneath a red scarf so long as she feels dominated by the patriarchal influences of husband and culture. Only when she divests herself of the romantic illusions of “love” and “romance” and claims her woman’s identity does she remove the scarf and allow her hair to flow with the “sheen,” not of the “man-made,” but of the Janie-made.

Wakoski, aspiring to a Pulitzer, has herself felt left out of the selection process because somehow her poetry has not been appreciated by the “institution.”

Even today in American literature curricula across our country, syllabi nod to Anne Bradstreet—whose poetry vastly exceeds in beauty, emotion, timeliness, charm, depth, and complexity the highly imitative and contrived poetry of her contemporary, Edward Taylor, as well as later luminaries such as Freneau, Longfellow, Bryant, and even Emerson (as poet); Emily Dickinson—whose proximity, vitality, and innovation simply cannot be disregarded (though whose “odd” poetic structures have been “corrected” by such authoritarian editors as John Crowe Ransom); and Marianne Moore—whose poetry is very contained and more “masculine” than that of many of the other women poets of her generation.

In an analysis of the way in which American women poets use myth, Wakoski refers to this particular poem of Rich’s: “Rich’s ‘Diving into the Wreck’—opens the door to a different vision of her life: which begins a whole new body of work, encompassing her feminist and lesbian journey to rewrite the ‘book of myths’. [She] portrays herself as a mythic figure, exploring and reinventing the possibilities of the culture” (*Contemporary Woman Poets* xi).

Wakoski uses the image of the rocky cave/tunnel and her emergence as a shadow in relation to her identification with Persephone which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

“Most everywhere most of the time, the world dwells in an unmeasured state. Anyone curious about reality will want to know what the world is like when it is not being measured” (*EC* 193).

In the poem “Deer Gods” (*EC* 51-53)

And if, in knowing this,

he was calling for something which could never come to him
in the mail, something which was so much bigger, more
powerful than the actual deer who wandered that land,
crossing the road to the cherry orchards and then back
wandering down to the Lake as big as an ocean, their delicate toed
tracks leaving evidence they’d come down to drink at night
when no one was looking for them. Did I want to call
forth some spirit of my past, refresh it, make it grow
larger than my life, knowing that to make
something might be a means of remaking
myself? (52)
“Now women return from afar, from always: from ‘without,’ from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture….’”

For further discussion see Chapter 2.

Wakoski develops the theme of gambling in her poems, centering on the casinos of Las Vegas, which I cover more thoroughly in Chapter 2. However, here we just need to be reminded that as in the cultural patriarchy, the games at the gambling tables of Las Vegas are rigged in favor of the house. However, unlike casino gambling, in real life, Wakoski posits that we may not be bound by the house limits and agendas, by the binary of black or red, by the limitations of sums to 21. In Wakoski’s game of life, women who take the risks, even if they don’t win, benefit from the challenge, even when the odds are against us. See “White Las Vegas” (EC 152-153).

It is interesting to note, which Wakoski does not mention, that contemporary computerized and digitalized technologies have made easy the transforming of camera images by digital manipulation so that even so-called “captured” images can be air-brushed and otherwise manipulated to render an assortment of “realities.”

The flip side of the relationship is what he becomes ensconced behind the camera. I will discuss this more fully in Chapter 4.

Throughout the volume, Wakoski references a plethora of lights, an extensive analysis of which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I will discuss Wakoski’s use of these tropes more fully in Chapter 5.

Teresa de Lauretis defines narrativity in several ways. First, it differs from narrative in that the latter constitutes the story, whereas the former constitutes “the works and effects, the logic, grammar, syntax of narrative…what the story enacts and effects as a strategy…a product.” She further defines narrativity “as the structuring and destructuring even destructive processes at work in the textual and semiotic relation of spectatorship” (118).

The narratee of a text, like the spectator of a film, is the person addressed by the narrative/film/text. Marie-Laure Ryan defines it as “the communicative partner of the narrator, filler of the receiver position in narrative…. [they] are actual individuals in nonfictional narratives but textual constructs in fiction” (598); further, the narratee is “constructed as a set of beliefs presupposed by the text” (599, my italics).

Through the image of “hot flickers” Wakoski is effecting a clever word play. On the one hand, flicks refers to movies; on another, flickers intimates momentary flashes of light that provide insights; and on still another hot flickers indicates sexual arousal. All of these come into play in Wakoski’s critique of cinema as a technology of gender. While the film punches all the right buttons to evoke romantic and “sexual” attraction, it also provides a window through which Wakoski can gain insights into the ways woman have been subjected to cinema-image-driven narratives that interpellate women to roles they find attractive, even as these roles undermine any sense of self-realization.
23 Wakoski cleverly interweaves notions of science and fantasy through the allusive image of the heroine of *Top Gun* in much the same way that she is interweaving allusions to the science of Herbert and the fantasy of Baum to reinforce her notions of the intertextuality of the texts that interpellate women to their roles, assumptions, and identifying (self)-representations. Wakoski’s juxtaposition of the hard science of quantum physics and the fantasy of contemporary fairy tale uniquely positions the poet to interrogate the “truths” of both texts insofar as they serve as discourses that structure what we have come to think of as real.

24 As a narratee of Wakoski’s text, the woman reader identifies with the poet’s female/feminine dilemma, just as Wakoski, as narratee/spectator of the film, does.

25 The “motorcycle betrayer” figure features in numerous other volumes of Wakoski’s poetry as well as in the texts of the trilogy. I discuss this figure more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

26 This rhythmic pumping as a parallel to the exploitation of the land, to which the poet alludes in her reference to *Sea of Grass*, could also represent sexual intercourse in which the male protagonist’s rhythmic phallic drive dominates the gendered landscape.

27 This seems to me a parodic ironizing of Lacan’s recognition/misrecognition that inheres in the mirror stage through which the individual comes into self-individuation/-identification.

28 See citation for *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*; all citations to the text will be *AHD*.

29 See citation for *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*; all citations to the text will be *COD*.

30 Perhaps in another context this re-cognition could refer to a re-conceiving of Freud’s/ Lacan’s masculine-biased/-based psychoanalytical theories with which feminist theorists have been wrestling.

31 *Critical* falls into two major points of focus in addition to a scientific application. First, *critical* indicates an action or practice “characterized by careful evaluation” (*AHD* 170); I contend that a critical perspective entails providing textual scrutiny that precedes and influences that evaluation. That evaluation may be censorious or captious, or it may be discriminating, perspicacious, and astute. Second, *critical* derives from crisis and “involv[es] risk or suspense”; it represents that which is “decisive [or] crucial” (*COD* 225), vital and essential. Applied to the world of physics, it marks the “transition from one state to another,” and in nuclear physics, it entails “maintaining a self-sustaining chain reaction” (*COD* 225). All of these nuances of the term, *critical*, apply. Wakoski has brought to bear her close scrutiny of cultural texts in an effort to evaluate them according to a criterion of her own. In the process, she has imposed a discriminating attitude that intends to reevaluate in order, alternately, to condemn what needs condemning and to assert what needs asserting. Finally, this scrutiny and shifting of viewpoint entails a very risky, but crucial “transition from one state to another” for her first as narratee, then as persona/narrator to initiate the feminist political agenda by inciting a “self-sustaining chain reaction” of awareness and change applicable to readers/narratees of her texts.
Chapter Two:
Geographies: Wresting Woman-I-fest Destiny from the Jaws of the Father

In her book of theory, Toward a New Poetry, Diane Wakoski claims that to discover who we are, we must confront both space—“where we are”—and time—“whatever is considered the closest culture source that we learn in our history classes”; then, we “move out” from there through the texts of assorted “geographies” (315, my italics). Each woman must seek her own subjectivity by exploring the disparate geographies of her self. This exploration initiates a new geography as what Susan Friedman calls “a discourse of spatialized identities constantly on the move” (19). The woman on the move must confront her origins and biography, interrogate the influence of her history and culture, and encounter her deepest unknown self, then from that confrontation, interrogation, and encounter, craft herstory. All of the “geographies” through which women move provide new locations from which to create an observer-generated reality. As such, they serve as sites of resistance and as significant topographies in which women can confront, explore, claim, and map a subjectivity different from the one advocated by the culture. To navigate the significant geographies of her poetic text, Wakoski, traveling West in a car “with the trunk full of diamonds / and Mother rattler coiled there” (EC 15), instigates a feminist postmodern excursion that parallels and parodies modernist notions of the quest journey. Wakoski, a self-avowed “maverick” (“Whitman? No, Wordsworth” 17), has characterized herself as a “lonely woman quester” (24). Likewise, to navigate the pertinent geographies of Wakoski’s poetic text, I, too, borrow from the traditional quest myth defined by Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism.¹ As I meander through Wakoski’s quixotic text examining her feminist quest for a woman’s identity, I will model, parody, deconstruct, and remythologize the principles and interpretations of the mythic quest journey: the call, the journey itself replete with associated tasks and trials, the confrontation with the demon, and the return.

Although her volume of poems, written as a postmodern pastiche, adheres to none of the coherent linear narrativity we might expect in a quest journey, nonetheless, the poet clearly grapples with key phases in a progression toward a sense of what constitutes her feminine subjectivity. Assuming sometimes the avatar of Dorothy, a female protagonist of a quest text, and sometimes her vacillating Diane persona,² the journeyer of Wakoski’s poetry engages in this quest for identity. As a “recovering” modernist, the poet herself appropriates from her own cultural and literary experience, the mythic quest journey laden as it is with masculinist,
patriarchal agendas even as she undermines these agendas through parody, irony, and remythologization. Wakoski’s persona-quester’s response to assorted “musics” within the culture parallels the call to action of the model male quester. Just as Frye’s male quest-hero must encounter, negotiate, and traverse an alien landscape, so Wakoski’s questing heroine confronts first the architectural, man-made “geography” of the culture, represented by the casino, where she must interrogate the power and allure of the cultural texts, then she must engage the more “natural” geography of the desert. In these two settings, the female quester endures trials that both inhibit and facilitate her quest. The journey climaxes for the male hero in his combat and defeat of an offending, often supernatural, monster, generally characterized as female, who wreaks havoc in the world order and who guards a treasure trove. In Wakoski’s poetry, the female quester’s engagement with the mystery of the desert culminates in her confrontation with a female monster hoarding jewels. Instead of conquering this demon, however, the questing woman must acknowledge that the she-demon is that aspect of herself, which, having been demonized by the culture, should be embraced and her self-jewels claimed. Finally, the male quester completes his mythic task to secure/steal the treasure for the realm, that is, for the patriarchy represented by the old king, and to restore order, often in addition to marrying the bride-prize princess. Wakoski’s questing heroine recognizes her self (worth) as this bride-prize/treasure. In claiming her own value, her jewels, she embodies not the ethos of patriarchy which the traditional male quester sets out to restore, but a recentered, redesigned, redefined, remapped social world.

Women reading the traditional quest myth do not find ourselves as protagonists anywhere in the text. In that story, our place is prescribed: either we are the demons to be defeated or the bride-prizes to be claimed, to be wedded, bedded, and thereby contained—lest we, too, turn into Wicked Witches or Medusas or dragons—or heroines and independent selves. Thus, because the old master narrative of the male hero’s journey does not adequately account for the woman’s experience of the culture and of the self, Wakoski must generate a new myth(ology) to provide a context of meaning to a heretofore unarticulated, even perhaps unarticulatable, set of perceptions and experiences, and a new conception of the hero—the woman as her-own, protagonist, quester, center of the dramatic narrative, questing for an identity other than that represented by the male hero’s experience.
Despite the inherited reliance on old patterns that threaten to impose themselves on her thinking and on her experience, the poet recognizes that paradigms of the quest myth are not innocent, neutral ways of organizing experience, but ideologically marked “networks of sign systems” authorizing and supporting agenda-biased signifying practices (Godard 568). By appropriating the protagonist position in a neo-mythopoeic text, Wakoski shifts the terms of the quest. Because her text becomes a woman’s quest, the story told by a woman, about a woman, for women (and for men), woman—as quester and bard—assumes a feminist point of view, claims a woman’s cultural experience, and charts a new course of action. She reshuffles the assumptions upon which the story is based and, in so doing, enables the readers to revision the whole mythic quest in a new context. Thus, she first installs the quest myth, along with other myths, by weaving it/them as substructure(s) to her text; then, she deconstructs the myth by mining their meanings and undermining their author-ity, and, finally, she reconstructs them by transpositioning, what Julia Kristeva would call a “mosaic of quotations” (Reader 37). I will show how the poet “robs” the traditional quest myth of its intended meaning as she appropriates some of its intentions and patterns, reconstitutes old sequences, designs, stories, and paradigms into new correlations of signification. In the process, she parodies the cultural texts, confronts her own internal conflicts and negativities, seizes and affirms her personal “woman-being,” and, through her emerging self, remythologizes the quest journey for herself.

The poet’s remythologizing text redefines the impetus, the task, and the outcome of the quest. Her feminist quest journey is initiated, not by some patriarchal social imperative to “prove oneself,” but by three key informing impulses: the compulsive drive of interpellation, as the journeyer is “called” to the culture; a negative power not unlike that described by Julia Kristeva as “abjection”; and the more positive one of what Audre Lorde has called the erotic (53). These three forces—the drive of the culture, the angst derived from women’s feeling displaced in that culture, and the desire of women to get in touch with our own inner resources—serve as the redefined impetus that moves the woman to engage in her feminist quest journey. Because the motivation for undertaking her mythopoeic mission is singularly feminist, the task to be accomplished is not centered in performing heroic deeds, in conquering some foe, in outwitting and displacing an enemy. Rather it entails the process of recognizing, then, of rejecting the draw of the myths of the culture, and, finally, of hearing, of valuing, indeed, of discovering a unique, yet multiplex woman-self “within.” This “within” constitutes both the woman’s finding herself...
caught up within the cultural texts—symbolized here by the casinos of Las Vegas and by oblique references to American history—that alternately entangle and alienate, as well as the woman’s journeying into an interior landscape that is the mysterious, frightening, exciting, and demanding “dark continent”/desert of the internal female self. In the process of reorienting herself, the woman quester abandons the mythic call to Manifest Destiny, signaled by Wakoski’s reference to Southern California and the Pacific Ocean, in favor of an internal journey in which she wrestles with her own mother dragon characterized as “Mother rattler” to claim the treasure of “diamonds” within herself. Finally, the outcome: instead of reintegrating back into society as would the mythic hero, the newly born woman reorients/revisions/remythifies herself by writing herself, here through the vehicle of mapping.

I will begin the discussion by analyzing music as the call to culture. Thus called by the culture, the poet-persona feels impelled to a Manifest Destiny prescribed by the siren song of the music of Beethoven and of country music. The former, the haunting music of Beethoven, actually initiates her journey and leads her to the casino. The city/casino, the residence of “Sam’s Town,” presents a parody of the country and of the cultural texts that define the ideology of the “fathers” of the country. Country/“cuntry” music, the music of his-story, the music of the fathers of the country personified through the image of George Washington, pervades, permeates, even imposes, but goes largely “unnoticed” and certainly unanalyzed by those living within the culture. Through Wakoski’s casino imagery, I will show how the cultural texts create realities dedicated to an ideological agenda and thereby obfuscate possibilities of subjectivity alternative to that agenda. It is the persona-poet’s sojourn in the geography of the casino, symbol par excellence of the cultural text, with its hyperreal setting, its simulacra of “history” and “reality,” that enables the poet-quester to interrogate the cultural texts and to find them wanting. Insights of postmodernist thinkers like theorists Michael Branch, who has engaged in detailed analyses of the role/ruse of the casino, Frederick Jameson, who has theorized empty parody and analyzed the function of hyperreal space, and Jean Baudrillard, who has given contemporary currency to the terms simulacra and hyperreal, illuminate the ways in which such contemporary cultural texts as the casino serve to expose the fiction of fictions.

Through her casino imagery, Wakoski interrogates the cultural texts that construct her world and her world view and call her to “being” in this world—a major, but necessary, trial for the questing woman. In the process, the poet quester begins to feel a distress that discomfits and
agitates her. The French feminists, especially Julia Kristeva with her discussion of abjection, Helene Cixous with her application of the “Diaspora effect” (Coming 15) and Luce Irigaray, with her geographies of disorientation, have all critiqued the defining cultural texts and crafted significant and informing theoretical perspectives that elucidate the abjection, scattering, and disorientation that women often experience in the culture, and that Wakoski explores in her poems. This feeling of not belonging, of having no place, no identity, no self in the cultural construct instigates the next stage in the poet-quester’s journey: confrontation with the wilderness—here characterized as the desert. The French feminists and feminist geographers like Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift as well as Wakoski herself, see in the multiple geographies of our landscape(s) ways in which we can conceive of ourselves. Wakoski and the French feminists in particular have metaphorized geography into the geography of desire, the geography of emotion, the geography of self, as both an internal and an external territory to be explored and claimed by women. As in the traditional quest journey, Wakoski’s quester must confront the demon and claim the treasure. However, I construe from Wakoski’s allusions to Medusa, the Sphinx, and “Mother rattler” that the demon is the demonized feminine, a part of the woman self that must be confronted, redefined, reintegrated into the self—it is not so much “other” as having been “othered,” alienated, ostracized, consigned to the liminal space of the outcast. Audre Lorde, like French feminists Cixous and Irigaray, would characterize the outcast female power as the female erotic, a kind of unclaimed women’s desire—her treasure, her self. Although images of the Sphinx appear in the casino, it is not until the quester fronts the beauty and desolation of the desert part of her journey that the female power of the Sphinx, parodied in the casino, and of her surrogate in the poems, “Mother rattler,” become identifiable and “real” to her instead of merely mythic, fictive, parodic. The final stage of the journey I will analyze is what the woman does with her new sense of self, her new knowledge, her new treasure. Writing—poetry! These are what Wakoski always comes back to as her means of articulating her identity. Through the imagery of mapping, she claims the power to chart her own course, to describe her own territory, to indicate the diversity of her own topography. I will be using mapping as a postmodern “epistemological strategy,” through which “we come to know or explicate our understanding of our own world and ourselves” (Rodaway 245). Thus, map/mapping, as Wakoski deploys them throughout her text, provide significant tropes through which the woman journeyer can discern
where she has been, scrutinize where she is, determine where she is going, and, then, determine what gets identified and marked as territory to be explored and claimed.

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In her desperate search for her own music, Wakoski opens her text of *The Emerald City of Las Vegas* with the call of the siren-song of the cultural music, a theme that plays throughout her text in assorted forms. In “Looking for Beethoven in Las Vegas,” the poet, under the guise of seeking the music of Beethoven, initiates her expedition in search of her own music, her own voice, her own poetry—all of which will serve as signs of her identity and means of scoring, mapping, writing her subjectivity. However, her own music is initially drowned out by the overpowering cultural music: first, by the haunting and alluring and grand music of Beethoven, representative of the culture’s “grand narratives” with their promise of beauty and grandeur and, then, by country music, with its close associations with her mother and attendant painful childhood memories and with the cliché’s and slogans of American history. As in the quest myth, the quester tunes in to the demands of the culture. Almost without conscious awareness, she suppresses the inner voices of her music to defer to these more dominant and seductive tunes of the culture. Her energies are consumed by a subliminal urge to respond to the call of culture, to conform to the demands of its “grand narratives.” Wakoski, the poet, having been nourished on mostly masculinist modernist texts and on the fairy stories, movies, music, and other agenda-biased cultural texts, thus, ironically, initiates her journey by pursuing, not a woman’s music, but a man’s. This music, as we shall see, leads her, not to self-discovery, but into the very heart of the culture, to the casino, purveyor of distraction and dislocation and paradigm of contrived reality *par excellence*. This pied-piper pursuit of man’s music represents the dilemma of contemporary women struggling to discover our own paths to identity and to fulfillment. The powerful allure of the cultural texts, with its ability to discourage individuality and to enforce conformity to a patriarchal agenda, subsumes our feminine-erotic desire into a desire to belong to the world in which we find ourselves. We get tricked into culture thinking we are on a journey to self-realization. Irigaray puts this phase of the process into a more positive perspective when she contends that the woman seeking her self-identity must journey “back through the masculine…cultural imaginary…because that move imposes itself both in order to demarcate the possible ‘outside’ of the imaginary and to allow [the quester] to situate herself with respect to it as a woman, implicated in it and at the same time exceeding its limits” (162, my bracketed
When Wakoski, woman-poet-quester-persona begins her journey by responding to the call of Beethoven’s music and expending her energies pursuing the bold, pervasive, familiar music of the “grand narratives” of the culture, she accedes to having to go through those narratives/stories/myths/texts in order to arrive at her own story/self. This is what Wakoski’s whole volume of poetry is about: going through the old masculinist imaginaries to demarcate for herself her own territory.

Although the poet-persona’s search begins by her seeking the music of Beethoven, it is as though the two musics—Beethoven’s and the country’s—get interfused in the persona’s mind. Her search for the music of Beethoven leads her on a wild chase all over the world, from “Beethoven’s park / in the Grinzingerstrasse” (EC 16) through “the cobblestone streets of Hydra” (16) to “the squid-clear Mediterranean” (16) until finally she walked into the MGM Grand Hotel and heard the thunk thunk thunk of silver dollars rattling into the slot machine tubs;

There it was,
thunk, thunk, thunk,
Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony;
…in George’s coin,
…the history of America
…played in a new symphonic thrust. (17)

This powerful patriarchal music that represents the “grand narratives” of the culture draws her to the American West, to Las Vegas, to the casino, to the “Emerald City” of Las Vegas12 where she can engage that seductive music and the equally seductive narratives for which it stands.

The music of this place is both attractive and debilitating. While it hearkens to the romance of a Grinzingerstrasse, it is really only an ordinary, banal thunk, thunk, thunk that brings her back to earth—to the “rude country music” (187) that evokes her “empty California life” and the “ice-clotted winters / of Michigan” (16), that is, a confrontation with her own past. In the poem “Sound Track,” Wakoski laments that she has been out of touch with her erotic source, that “her music was only played by ear / …with no models to imitate but [that] rude country music” (187). This country music symbolizes the rudeness, vacuousness, and pervasiveness of the “cunt”-ry’s music—music of the fathers of the country, the man’s music designed to keep a woman in her place, in “domestic buildings,” rather than “something different [to] transcend the scores which played through every failure of [her] female life” (187). That the poet associates country music
with her mother and her mother’s failure as a woman exacerbates the oppression of this music as a cultural text. Desperately disappointed at her mother’s failure to materialize into an idealized woman, she hears in that music her mother’s physical unattractiveness, her poverty, and her failed immigrant life:

- her poverty—teeth bad breath,
- her bandaged-flat breasts,
- squashed in a lower class world…,
- her misshapen feet which had been squeezed into cheap ill-fitting dance shoes. (187)

The mother’s shortcomings represent the poet-persona’s heritage. Thus, the patriarchal music signals a desperation that tells of abandonment by her Naval dad and of Wakoski’s own perceived inherited unattractiveness and consequent potential for further abandonment and failure to live up to the romanticized visions of princess-girls who under their cinder-Ella kitchen-maiden appearance are really beauties waiting to be discovered, awakened, and whisked away from all this. In an effort to expunge those early childhood memories and messages of unlovableness, images of lives haunted by poverty, domestication, and repression and inhibited by a stifling domestication that Wakoski symbolizes by untidy rooms (179), full of “the daily smells, of grease, and smoke, of dried blood, urine, or feces, clothes unwashed” (143), she substitutes the idealized music of movie sound tracks, another form of the country’s music. She would listen to

- endless movie sound tracks
- … “full moon and empty arms” which flooded [her] childhood imagination
- offering images of women
- in ruffled black gowns…(187),

that is, images of women as glamorized—beautiful, young, princess-like, being whisked away by motorcycle-knights. This is what women have done. When we haven’t been able to face the destitution of the lives we’re expected to lead, we’ve idealized them with the empty, fictive music of movie sound tracks.

In addition to this personal call to biography and the fictive call to fantasy, the country’s music signals the call West, to Man-I-fest Destiny and to the fulfillment of American history and the American Dream. America: founded by the noble fathers. America: initially governed, legislated, and policed by rich, land-owning white men, often on the backs of women, African slaves, and the working poor. Women, of course, didn’t even get the vote until nearly 145 years
after the signing of the Declaration of Independence (for men) and then still suffered restrictions of ownership, (reproductive) freedom, and identity. The call West alludes to the slogan “Go West, young man!” verifying that adventure, prosperity, and future played to men’s agendas. Women were often the workhorses who enabled the men to pursue their dreams. With her glimpse, from *The Wizard of Oz*, at Dorothy’s life in that mid-western “one-room / farmhouse in Kansas / in the 19th century” (143), that “dry, grey place” (30) she calls home, no home the questing woman would ever want to return to (33), Wakoski examines the failure of the romance—for men as well as for women—of “liberty and justice for all.”

What initiates Dorothy’s journey in the first place is her disaffection with life on the plains: the bitterness of her uncle’s having to grub a living out of a tired soil and the nagging listlessness of Aunt Em, overburdened by the drudgery of endless housework. We might characterize Dorothy’s disaffection for this life as abjection—or the desire that moves—, the impetus which drives Dorothy’s initial hunger for adventure and for a future of her own, and which, as I will show later, will motivate the poet-quester on her journey. Ironically, however, the country music and the slogans and clichés associated with it are so powerful that even in the midst of her journey, the young Dorothy longs for her mythic home; yet, when she quips “there’s no place like home” (31) to the tin man, we know we are hearing another version of the country music cliché that keeps women in their place—in the home and not blazing along the yellow brick road in paradise. That this quick-phrase rolls so easily and glibly off Dorothy’s tongue indicates how much women’s motivations are driven by messages inculcated in our youth. While Dorothy hungers for her now mythically conceived home, the questing woman can allow herself no such luxurious nostalgia. And even Dorothy cannot “return” until she has confronted the city of Oz.

As a woman searching in the terrain of *man-*myth, *Man-*ifest Destiny, and American *his*-story where she has no destiny, if destiny is seen as the attainment of noble goals and of self-fulfillment, the poet quester experiences the first stage of what Helene Cixous calls the “Diaspora effect” (*Coming 15*)—a sense of separation, fragmentation, disenfranchisement, and scattering. Because the journey occurs, not in a vacuum of time and space, but within the context of American culture and its powerful interpellations, the woman quest journeyer must first disentangle herself from the effects of her own fraught relations with her origins and her personal past and with the “endless movie sound tracks” that have proffered informing images of women to the “childhood imagination” to confront the cultural messages with which she has
grown up. In other words, she cannot find her self-music until she has confronted the imperatives of the cultural texts—the “transitional architectures” (Pile and Thrift 22) of its paradigmatic city, the casino, and the histories that have suckled and sucked her.16 Just as Dorothy had to journey through Oz and to detect its fictions, so the woman quester must confront this city of cultural texts, the casino. Recall that she has been called here by a compulsive search for the music of Beethoven, and that it is here that the broader music of the “grand narratives” of the culture merge with the country’s history (out West) and with the contrived world of the casino. This woman quester thus engages in the diaspora effect that entails leaving her homeland—Wakoski’s “moving out”17—and “scattering” herself in the territory of an “alien” country where her very identity gets obscured by the noise of the cultural texts.18 This diasporic leaving/scattering is seen in Wakoski’s encounter with the casino—the world of Irigaray’s “masculine cultural imaginary” (Irigaray 162). The casino, the emblem par excellence, of the patriarchal texts, attempts through the cacophony of its architecture and images to generate a world in which individual subjectivity plays no part, where to score means, not to craft one’s own song, but to “win” at 98% you-lose gambling venues of a patriarchal system designed to keep all profits “in house.”

The “illusioneered” world of the casinos of Las Vegas (Branch 277), like that other fabricated city—Oz, is a constructed and manipulated space designed first to disorient, then, to reorient one’s sense of oneself. Both “worlds”—the casino and Oz—represent texts fabricated by an authority bent on pursuing its single-minded agenda—creating an allure so powerful, it will obscure all other possibilities. Audre Lorde asserts that “[i]n order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt [or mask] or distort those various sources within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (53, my bracketed insert). In Las Vegas, the Luxor Casino, created, not so ironically, by “Circus, Circus enterprises” (EC 147), effects through its exquisite, but parodic, facsimile of “the regal and awe-inspiring Sphinx” (148), just such a distortion.

According to de Lauretis, “the Sphinx, like other ancient monsters, has survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else’s story, not [her] own” (Alice Doesn’t 109). The quester’s encounter with the Sphinx in this context anticipates her future encounter with other female monsters which have been devised to characterize women’s identity within the culture. The Sphinx in the context of this fabricated city becomes integrated into the patriarchal logos system.
of signs so that its “threatening otherness” can be named and totalized. She resembles the woman quester, who has felt that her mission, her experience, her very identity have been held hostage to the hero’s quest myth; the Sphinx, like the woman quester and her experience, must be either contained and rendered ineffective, or parodied and made to look ridiculous. As the guardian of the city’s/casino’s portal, the replicated Sphinx enacts “the symbolic boundary between nature and culture” (109), where nature is the female-feminist elsewhere, both fearful and fearsome, and culture is the order imposed on that nature, the green spectacles that provide the world definition and shape. Because the Sphinx represents both erotic female power and the desert, parodying her signals a distortion of perception and of space with which women questers must grapple if we are to successfully navigate both the inside that is the casino and the outside that is the desert.

One way of conceiving of the dimensions of this dilemma is to reapply notions of inside and outside, with which Wakoski experiments throughout The Emerald City of Las Vegas. When de Lauretis, using the very language that Wakoski develops in her poetry, claims that monsters like the Sphinx are “associated with boundary… the symbolic transposition of the place where [heroes] stand…, the limen, frontier between the desert and the city” (109), she, like Wakoski, implies a desert “without” and a city “within.” The without of the desert, for Wakoski, represents not just the Freudian fearful country, but especially the woman’s very exciting “within” that must be explored, while the within of the city represents the woman’s “without” because she is really outside the city, outside the story that the city represents. Even as she is drawn in by its exotic signifiers, she stands without an identity within either city or story; even as she appears within that space, she is standing in a truly liminal place—without.

By hijacking the Sphinx, ancient mythic female monster who really belongs in the desert, and by exploiting the allure of her liminal mystique and power, the architects of the casino accomplish two goals. One, by exoticizing her and making of her a magnificent “trompe l’oeil oculus” (Branch 297), the owners of the casino capitalize on her ability to “capture vision, to lure the gaze” (de Lauretis, Alice Doesn’t 109) and transform her female eroticism, mystery, and knowledge—which the female quester must encounter when she journeys to the desert—into attraction and advertisement, so that the Sphinx herself becomes a hawker for the casino’s wares. Two, colonizing her eroticism for the purposes of profit ensures her redefinition away from disturber of the status quo and, consequently, her containment as a divisive, disruptive and
subversive female force that possesses the ability to hold a city hostage to her powers. Through architectural parody, the Sphinx is controlled in ways in which she is not in the original story, where she is “destroyed,” but not actually contained—because Oedipus, her vanquisher, is finally brought down, blinded, “castrated,” and removed from his position of authority and dominance. The suppression of the erotic for which the Sphinx stands insures a scattering of the feminist energy of desire that could motivate the woman quester to seek out her own inner sources. Hyperrealizing this emblem of female power and making her subject to the intoxicating gaze of passersby reduces her to a kind of museum piece or an advertising ploy merely capable of luring would-be clients out of the desert and into the city. City, as de Lauretis reminds us, “is a text which tells the story of male desire by performing the absence of woman and by producing woman as text, as pure representation” (*Alice Doesn’t* 13). The woman quester is thus drawn into a phallocentric mythification of her eroticism, and her desire gets subsumed by the agenda of the casino. She, like the Sphinx, is de-natured, abstracted, contained, controlled, mocked, parodied, and denied identity. On entering the casino’s portals, the woman journeyer gets sucked into the casino’s vortex and, in its cacophony of images and noises, loses the thrust of her purpose and any sense of a self as distinct from those images and noises. So long as she stays in the casino, she cannot see the Sphinx as an emblem of her own woman power. Only when she leaves the noisy, tacky, gaudy surrounds of the casino/cultural texts and broaches the silent, desolate, mystical, and unencumbered space of the desert can she hope to confront the Sphinx as a kind of cyborgian positive and powerful part of herself. She will encounter this Sphinx again in her journey as her own demon, “Mother rattler,” with whom she must grapple to arrive at a fuller sense of her own complexity and dimension. But for now, the Sphinx is seen only as a bit of a joke, an architectural doo-dad, an ornament, a center-piece at best.

The casino/city is conceptualized as the place where the riches we all covet are ensconced. However, like the “plastic” Sphinx of the Luxor, the allure of the casino itself displaces woman’s erotic (self) desire for a desire defined by the culture. While Wakoski eventually will have to seek her desire in order to attain a sense of herself, here, the culture-call of both the Luxor Casino and the MGM Grand Hotel, the latter, newly remodeled to simulate the Emerald City of Oz, attempt, as do all mirages, to present the illusion of the promise of fulfillment. Here, the casinos serve as “a refuge, an attractive alternative to the chaotic and threatening world outside”
(Branch 292), thus, a temptation away from the harsh world of experience and the potential world of danger in exchange for a world of apparent order, beauty, and delight.

Having been taught to be dissatisfied with who we are, with how we look, women frequently seek a world where we can be beautiful. If we cannot actually undergo the extreme make-over that would transform us from the ugly duckling into the swan, the casino can provide a faux venue through which we can imagine we are beautiful. Inside this world, we can escape the harsh realities of our origins and past experiences, ugly self-images that have precluded our being able to visualize our selves as desirable, the “real” history of America where life consists, not of glamorized Hollywooded images of beauty and romance, but of the poverty, grime, and grind of ordinary existence. The persona-poet confesses that inside the casino, “we believe / we can have everything, or at least will have it soon (EC 25). Indeed, she, who is “small [and] plump,… swathed in tent-like clothes” (18) imagines herself as transformed into a beauty:

   bare-armed,
   long-haired,
   scented with lilies of the valley. (18)

She, who is really 60-ish, old, wrinkled, and fat substitutes in her mind’s eye a hyperreal gaudy self

   wrapped in raw silk,
   shod in glass or gold
   looking nothing like
   [she] ever looked in youth or life” (18),

that is, like nothing.

That she is “shod in glass or gold” indicates the precariousness of women’s journeys through the culture. In other places throughout The Emerald City of Las Vegas, Wakoski celebrates the variety of shoes that can facilitate her journey. These shoes of glass or gold, however, are not the silver shoes “which have the power / to take [her] any place [she] want[s] to go” (33) or even the roller skates attached to her ordinary Diane-shoes which could strike lightning along sidewalks and catapult a precocious Diane child across slick city streets on her woman’s adventure (34). Instead, these shoes of glass or gold, although they sparkle with glitz and appeal, are fragile and easily broken or disfigured; they are reminiscent of Cinderella and the terror of her potential abduction,23 or at least of her seduction by promises of the eternal passivity of “happily ever after,” her adventure-quest done before it has begun, the prince the beginning, middle, and end of her story, she the bride-prize.
As in the mythic heroic quest, which is fraught with attractions that distract the “hero” from his course, this place—the casino/cultural text—lures the unwary woman quester from the more difficult task of engaging her deepest person-ality. Like many other texts in the culture, this one presents what Michael Branch describes as a “fantasyscape and technological utopia” that signals American’s proclivity “to ‘buy’ (in both senses of the word) artificial representations of the natural world and to do so in ignorance of the very real effects that these places (however artificial) have on them” (292, Branch’s parentheses). Although the neon city of Las Vegas alleges to replicate an historical, geographical, or cultural entity, it does not reflect any reality; it does not even imitate an historical “fact,” a geographical “place,” or a cultural artifact. Rather, it is the simulacra of those topographies. As the paradigm of cultural texts, the casino represents the faux real we become convinced is the real real, that is, the real way things are. This is the power of many cultural texts, perhaps including Wakoski’s own poetry—the assertion of their own veracity, when they are no more real than any other construct. Wakoski posits as a counter to this other-crafted reality, the power of the individual to control the images of one’s own life (EC 185), to create one’s own reality by one’s perception, to narrativize one’s own story by one’s choice and signification of language, one’s determination of one’s own mythologies, often based in personal experience that constitutes on some level a “brute event” (Hutcheon, “Telling Stories: Fiction and History” 238).

However, Wakoski intimates that the casino, and by association, other powerful cultural texts, are perhaps less real because founded on a never-has-been, the completely fabricated lie. The casino, then, presents the quintessential hyperreal simulacra: the real that never was. When one goes there, one buys into omissions, into the faux fake, an imitation of what never existed in the first place. Its pastiche of texts (Tiki bars juxtaposed to pyramids (EC 149)), its glitzy lights and noise, its constant activity (the casino never “sleeps” (21)), its promise of ultimate, if not immediate gratification, convinces partakers that they are “happy,” that life is good, or, if not good, at least as it is inevitably meant to be. Thus, it deflects individuals from engaging in the real—that is, experiential, personally aware—quest, the interior search for the gold mine within ourselves. The casino enforces a nascent passivity that prevents participants from thinking, from questioning, from questing and venturing out. It celebrates acquiescence and stasis, even as it incites to continued fantasies of rich and beautiful lives without work and effort, without anxiety or struggle.
Wakoski uses her sortie into the casino as an elaborate conceit for what women do when we step into culture. The hyperreal simulacra of the casino, then, attains a kind of credibility, as it becomes, not only a space but also a way of conceiving reality. It is a metaphor for how women get lured into the cultural texts by the façade of glamour, elegance, and exotica. We enter by making a huge leap of faith that is calculatedly contrived. Only when the persona questions, “What was that bamboo and South Sea stuff doing in a pyramid?” (149) does incredulity replace credibility. As she becomes aware of the disorientedness of the “coherence” of the stories purveyed by the casino, she can effect a first step in disentangling herself from what Baudrillard calls “the integrated circuit of signs” that comprises the “convolutional system” (in Rodaway 252) of the cultural texts. Suddenly, she can see herself as a “consumer of meanings” (262), prepackaged and spoon-fed to the gullible who have “bought” the false coherence, the false sense of belonging, the false feeling of power and well-being generated by the hyperreal casino architecture. Instead of providing meaning and sustenance, the cultural texts create hyper-subjects which are as flat and empty of meaning as the very hyper-spaces they inhabit. If we examine the tenuous connection between the fabricated spectacle and its allegedly “historical” model, we must see the MGM’s Emerald City as a factitious fiction of a fictitious fiction, a symbolic valorization of illusion and the Luxor as an eroticized Egyptian grave, a symbolic invitation to and celebration of death. Each presents a parody of its correlate, a brilliant façade that invites the imagination to partake of the hyperreal magic of deadly illusion; neither offers any substance to the narrative of the self that any quester seeks. Our attraction to simulation—both in the text of the casino and in any of the cultural texts that invite us to partake—represents our proclivity to escape from experience, hence to avoid confronting meaning. If we “buy” the texts of the casino/culture, we attach our sense of identity, meaning, and purpose to that which is manipulated and determined by those texts.

A foray into the maw of the casino seems to present a dangerous detour away from purpose, originality, momentum, and vitality and into the deadly stasis and stagnation of “carpets permeated with smoke, the upholstery stale with gin and perfume” (16), like the cliché of an old movie. But it actually provides an opportunity to examine the old representations that have kept women in our place and to acknowledge the power of these representations, as well as their artificial constructedness and their inefficacious flaws. To return to Wakoski’s initial metaphor of the pursuit of music, the woman quester, has come here, not to play Keno or Snow or Chemin
de Fer; rather, she has come searching for something authentic, something big and grand like the music of Beethoven. Her misguided search has drawn her here, where she hears that music in the only sound she can find: the “thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk [of] symphonies / in George’s coin,” the history of America “played in a new symphonic thrust” of silver dollars clattering out of the slot machines (17). What a disillusionment—to search for something one believes to be great and to find it translated into the banal. What an enlightenment—both Beethoven’s music and the noise of coins in the slot machine are variations on a patriarchal theme she had never fully discerned.

Caught up in the demented thrust of Beethoven’s paternal symphony (TNP 249), the persona-quester is tempted to play the casino’s/culture’s games, convinced that, in so playing, she may have some chance of winning. So persuaded, the woman quester comes “to love the sound of the banks of dollar machines nearby, rattling their thunderous clank of silver dollars” and surrounding her with “a belt of sound / drawing [her] tightly into cherries, liberty bells, plums…” (EC 154). Through these sounds, which stand for the cultural value calculated in terms of the “clank of silver dollars” and through the “belt of sound” that tightly constricts the woman-player/participant into a neat geometrical configuration, Wakoski critiques the contemporary capitalist draw of money as a representation of winning and succeeding and the personal cost of “buying” into that money-value dynamic. The subject is held suspended in an anticipation of hope and belief in the present moment, in the possibility of winning and of garnering the treasure-trove of silver dollars.

What all this means for the woman player, compelled by the Siren song of clanks, thunks, rattles, and liberty bells and sucked into the Charybdis of the apparent coherence of this hyperreal space is twofold. One, the hyperreal environment is totally oppressive, defying and displacing imagination because “it gives you so much you have nothing more to add” (Baudrillard 147), thus supplanting any sense of a complex, inner, imaginative, feeling self; circumventing growth, change, motivation, mobility, energy, rebellion, newness, and difference; and ensuring an enervating paralysis, stagnation, passivity, and accession and acquiescence to conformity. Second, the woman participant’s sexuality and eroticism, which is figured as the sum total of the multiplicity of her subjective resources, symbolized by the cherries and plums, are lined up into geometric patterns of wins and losses. Attendant liberty bells, which signal, not liberty, but his-story and the specters of Uncle Sam and George Washington, this latter with his
“tight smile” (*EC* 24) hovering over her, like “the shadow of a blackbird” (21), when she plays Black-jack, signify the ever-presence of the country’s agenda. These specters of patriarchy serve as manifestations of a kind of patriarchal superego designed to keep the woman player in line but still engaged. The woman who plays these games cannot claim her identity, her uniqueness, her self, but instead sacrifices these to the meager “2% [possibility of a] win” (152), when the truth is she “know[s] how much it costs to win, since small wins have always been paid with larger losses” (156). The “gaudy city” is not about a grand music that women can transpose into a music of our own; it is a faux myth about money, about partaking of great riches, even as it fleeces and hustles us out of our true wealth: our diamonds (15), our jewels (*Medea* 114), our self-worth, our self-awareness, and our freedom to pursue our own subjectivity. As the paradigm of the culture, the city of the casino tells the father’s story in the coin of the realm, “George’s coin”—George being George Washington, father of the “cunt-ry,” that place where women are degraded.

Although the casino serves as a very 20th century kind of “Gold Rush” (195) where, with the right kind of luck and the pull of the handle, anyone can become a winner and stake a claim in the high-stakes Black-jack game of life, the savvy player soon realizes that all the games are rigged for the 98% risk and 2% win and that the “house”—the house of the father—is the only winner. Wakoski as player wants to partake of this high-stakes “poker” game, but, she intuits that it is strictly a man’s game and that the woman’s place in that game is carefully circumscribed. The woman attempting to play this game assumes an “I [that] deposits [its winnings] to the father’s account” (*Kristeva, Powers*, par. 2). Yet, as we can see, the draw is great: the poem’s persona gets fooled into coveting that 2% win. What she could potentially win here—money, coin of the realm, a place for herself crafted by those who have, in the past, written the text—is miniscule compared to what she could lose—her chance to claim her own “homestead,” to map her own territory, to write her own story.

The gaudy city, then, as paradigm of the cultural texts, presents an attraction no less powerfully convincing than those other fictions cited in Wakoski’s book: the flat-screen interface of “Hot Flickers at the Odeon” or the magnificent world of the Oz. Wakoski plays on the parody of the disparate texts to articulate the difficulties American women face in conceiving of our identity within the constructs of the history, geography, architecture, and culture of America, precisely because these constructs are so often fictions of fictions camouflaged as truths. They
attain a reality not unlike that perceived by those visitors to Oz who see the Emerald city as glittering and gem-like or one elicited by movie scripts, whose verisimilitudes mimic enough of the real world to lend them credibility.

As the poet-persona vacillates between seeing herself as fat and swathed in tents or svelte and wrapped in raw silk, as a free agent placing winnable bets at the Blackjack table or imprisoned within the carefully monitored frames of the slot machines, she engages in a struggle to place herself meaningfully “within the regime of power and meaning [that constitutes the patriarchal culture],….a struggle [that] is naturalized in and through the spatial and temporal practices of the I/eye” (Pile and Thrift 48, my bracketed inserts). Pile’s and Thrift’s idea has application here as the eye constitutes what and how one sees one’s space, and the I becomes the subject that is constructed in, of, and by that perceived space. According to Frederic Jameson, postmodern hyperspaces, not unlike the casino described in Wakoski’s text, obliterate “critical distance” because they insist on “immersion” (87). Those who become immersed in the postmodern hyperspace of the cultural texts introject the ideology proffered by those texts.²⁵ The hyperspace of the casino, infuses the subject with the facets and details of its fabricated history and its imitation architecture. The poet-persona becomes so immersed in the cultural myths that she herself becomes a kind of scripted narrative, a “tablet on which all the quotations…are inscribed without any of them being lost” (Hutcheon, Politics 98), a cacophonous palimpsest of garbled white-noise, a surreal clutter, a nightmare pastiche of surfaces, all of which effect a dislocation, fragmentation, instability, and isolation. The hyperreal space fosters a world of hallucination—a total falsification of the eye—that ensures a kind of nonexistence that annihilates the I.

Discernment of one’s predicament and subsequent self-extraction from the immersion are no easy accomplishments. Wakoski has artfully positioned her persona within the text of the poetry and within the contexts of the cultural myths and stories to create a sense of both immersion and exclusion at the same time. She creates the feeling, one moment, of standing in the center of the casino and, in another, of standing outside a glass and looking in on herself: while she usually speaks of herself as a first person, she sometimes speaks of herself in the third person, calling herself by name. She thus generates a kind of surreal position of being in more than one space at a time, an orientation shared by women in the culture as we attempt to navigate the interpellations and temptations of the cultural myths and expectations while we completely
repress what Wakoski has called our “‘vision’…what is most private, intimate, eccentric, unusual, unique, visionary” (*TNP* 334).

The estranging multiple-positioning disorientation is presented in the poem, “Blue Dress/ Airmail Letter,” when the Diane-persona, an aging but would-be glamour-girl, is watching on television the specter of an aging and has-been glamour-girl, Deborah Kerr, tottering onto the stage of the 66th Academy Awards ceremony to accept a Lifetime Achievement Award (*EC* 118): when the latter “stumbles,” she, observer-Diane, “falls” (119).26 In this instance Diane is both within the frame, compelled to enact its agenda, and outside the frame, experiencing, in this moment of recognition, not only an identification with the stumbling, plastic Deborah Kerr, but a horror at her own wanting to be like the aging movie star. Standing outside the image and looking on, she acknowledges that she has been attracted to the youth, beauty, fame, and adulation that accrues to movie stars, forever in the gaze of the camera’s eye. Yet, ironically, even as she is seduced by the luster, not so much of the image itself, but of the anticipations and associations that are attached to that image, she feels divorced from it, somehow outside its very possibility; she is alienated by and from it. Meanwhile, any feelings of self-worth, of self-value, of self at all are so suppressed as to seem not to exist.

This feeling of existing in parallel positions and of both recognizing and not recognizing one’s self anywhere in them is effected by the spatial and temporal practices of the cultural texts, from movie scripts to television images, from traditional cultural myths like the quest-myth to contemporary postmodern architectures like the casino. We readers can almost see the woman-quester shaking her head in a mixture of disbelief and disorientation; we can almost hear her query, “Where is the *I* of me?” As she does with many of her experiences as a woman, the poet-persona finds herself haunted by the fear, horror, scorn, and disenchantment that accompanies a recognition that what was construed as real, consumed as essential(ist), has been a dream and that the dream is really a nightmare. She is thus initiated into a kind of feminist abjection: a wretchedness, misery, dislocation, self-abasement, and self-loathing generated by the culture and by the disorientation of her place within that culture. Eventually, it is the disorientation and consequent abjection, called by Kristeva “the primer of the culture” (*Power*, par. 2), which will motivate her rebellion, the transgression that will enable her to leave the environment of the casino and to resume her woman’s quest-journey.
Notions of orientation and disorientation play well into a discussion of the feminist dilemma as Wakoski is negotiating it. *To orient* signals both recognition and mobility. On the one hand, it means to “bring into clearly understood relations” (*COD* 720); that is, one comprehends where one stands in relation to one’s surroundings and to points in time (history) and space (geography), ergo to the cultural texts. In Wakoski’s casino poetry, the woman quester must perceive, recognize, and acknowledge the ideological coordinates that generate the space of the casino, despite the casino’s intention to obscure those ideological coordinates and the agendas that accompany them. She must struggle to see the constructedness of the cultural texts for what they are despite the fact that their agendas are opaque. The identification of this biased constructedness facilitates her ability to see how she is oriented within the ideological matrix the ideological coordinates generate. That is, she perceives the forces that contribute to her constructedness and recognizes how little of her-own self is allowed, elicited, or acknowledged by these texts and how little freedom she has to claim anything other than what actually is allowed, elicited, and acknowledged.

*To orient*, taken from another perspective, anticipates mobility: it determines the specific direction the voyager wishes to take. The woman journeyer, having discerned the constructedness of the environment in which she has functioned all her life, now must orient herself to negotiate an odyssey away from/outside of that constructedness. She must abandon this set of now familiar, perhaps even comfortable, constructs in order to adopt another set, one of her own making: Wakoski does contend that “to make is richer than / to be” (*EC* 52). Although to move away from the familiar and the comfortable may feel strange and fearful, if the woman quester remains within the confines of the casino, she is stuck, prevented from rebelling or resisting, from moving, growing, or changing. To avoid the confusion and stasis of disorientation, she must re-orient27 herself. This entails “re-making” her position both within the cultural matrix and within her own mind’s eye/I, and then, re-aligning her energies and re-positioning herself to take a new direction.

In yet another sense, *orient* signifies “lustrous, sparkling, precious,” like jewels or diamonds, and “rising, nascent” (*COD* 720). Both of these latter denotations of the word align with the new possibilities that can emerge with new orientations. They also dovetail into notions of feminist desire and eroticism: the jewels/diamonds, “lustrous, sparkling, precious,” constitute the inner treasure of women’s subjectivity. In addition, the possibilities of being reborn (re-nascent) and of
rising to new heights signal women’s potential for transcending the dislocation, disorientation, and dysfunction of her place in the culture and for actually re-making herself.

In the casino, as in the culture, she has certainly felt dis-orient-ed: “confused as to [her] bearings,” as to her sense of what is “correct” or real (276). Disconnected from her awareness of her own preciousness and distracted from any sense of personal purpose or goal, she is immobilized from pursuing a journey through which she could resist stasis and status quo and attain a sense of her own empowerment. In the poem, “David’s Letter,” the poet muses:

> We [women] don’t have destinies
> unless we wrest them away from somebody else
> unless we insist over and over on
> what we want and never give up…. (181)

Caught in the “magical” land of mirage, that is, of the hyperreality of the casino and of the fabricated reality of the cultural texts, women must avoid the trap of the “man-I-fest” destiny, in which the man’s I imposes the destiny.

Although the poet does not refer to Manifest Destiny explicitly herself, she often, albeit obliquely alludes to it and to other founding “clichés” of the American ethos. Manifest Destiny, one of the most powerful of the father’s slogans motivating and justifying man’s action, that is, conceived by and for the rugged male individual—that “Marlboro Man,” vital confrontational, adventurous, and brave—has valorized the claiming, staking, taming, and, ultimately, exploiting of the wild west territory. “Rugged individualism,” a term used to characterize the specifically American (quest) hero, has masked masculine violence, exploitation, and rapine under the guise of patriotic dynamism and daring; it has initiated and directed the mapping of claimed territories, the establishing of accepted and prescribed rules of behavior, and the legislating of laws of the land. Further, it has sanctioned a propagandist self-aggrandizement that in turn has justified a plethora of terrorist activities. Under the aegis of improving the land, the rugged individual has raped it, referenced in Wakoski’s text by her allusion to the movie *Sea of Grass*, in which “the tragedy of the land parallels the tragedy of the human relationship” (*EC* 148). What Wakoski asserts with this allusion is that the tragedy of human relationship always accompanies the tragedy of the land, because both function within the purview of the same *modus operandi*. Thus, what motivates, justifies, and sanctions the one will ultimately effect the other: the m.o. that permits the man to rape the land gives him equal permission to rape the woman; the orientations are identical. Under the banner of Manifest Destiny, the historical rugged individual
embarked on a radical imperialism that justified the violent annexation of swaths of Texas and California from an unwilling but conquered Mexico, the theft of forests and prairies from Native Americans, and the herding of whole groups of defeated people into ghettos euphemistically called reservations. This radical imperialism is the same impulse that has traditionally and historically given men power over women’s lives and bodies. Women must wrest the name-calling, law-giving, myth-making, map-drawing prerogatives from those who are determined to see the world only from a biased patriarchal perspective and to characterize land, country, culture, ethos, and ethnos from a singular phallogocentric point of view. Women in America, whose personal territories have been claimed, tamed, and exploited, who have been herded onto our own reservations, euphemistically called “the homestead,” must wrest/wrestle our woman-identity or what we might term our Women-I-fest Destiny from the text of his-story/history. Thus, twentieth and twenty-first century women must refuse the claiming, taming, exploiting, and mapping of our woman territory even as we insist on discovering, exploring, expanding, and charting that territory for ourselves.

Manifest Destiny represents an 18th century American version of the quest myth where the land as female is both dragon to be subdued, defeated, conquered, and vanquished, and bride to be claimed, staked out, and domesticated. If we see myth as a kind of intersection of subjectivity and culture in which the subject insists on writing the myth-text, then the woman-poet quester must usurp the paradigm of the quest myth/Manifest Destiny and transposition it into a feminist encounter in which the female/feminist can be born. As Wakoski bemoans, we women do not have a destiny unless we determinedly wrest it from the grasp of the father. To wrest, which means “to force or wrench from someone (else’s) grasp,” entails twisting, deflecting, distorting, perverting (COD 1245); it resembles “to wrestle,” which means to “do one’s utmost to deal with evil, temptation, duty, task” (1245). The enterprise of wrestling/wrestling one’s own destiny from the jaws of the father requires courage, fortitude, imagination, and gumption. It requires twisting free of a Manifest Destiny designed to accommodate a male questing hero, deflecting the call “home” that has kept women subservient to the hearth and to the ash heap, distorting and perverting fictions of the knight in shining armor—portrayed in Wakoski’s iconography as the Silver Surfer, the Motorcycle-Man-Betrayer, and the black-leather-jacketed-Paul-Newman-hustler. It entails dealing with the evil of female objectivization, commodification, exploitation, and erasure, with the temptation to succumb to the siren’s song of “once upon a time” and
“happily ever after,” with the duty to leave the artificial world of fantasy and to embark on the much more difficult journey to self realization, and with the task of charting a new geography that will provide maps for our future lives as well as for the lives of future generations.

Thus, the woman quester, so long as she remains stuck in the casino, inundated by cultural messages and imperatives, will be disenfranchised from her potential for rising, for birth, change, or difference, for growth, luster, or mobility. She has no potential destiny of her own. She is, in effect, lost. To be lost, though, “not only describes the subject in space; it describes the subject as space” (Pile and Thrift 49, my italics). Wakoski’s woman persona does not have the feeling of being lost because she is wandering in the wilderness; rather, she experiences “lostness” because she is engulfed. She is experiencing a disorientation of absorption; this is what the immersion of which Jameson has spoken feels like (86). Such immersion can lead to a perpetual lostness whereby the individual never attains a sense of self outside the cultural texts.

Diane Wakoski’s quester, as I have noted, has become disturbed by a strange disorientation in the illusioneered space of the casino. This agitation stems from two sources: the powerful allure of the casino as it attempts to subsume her in the noise of its text and the draw of the desert outside this frame calling her to another itinerary. Wakoski’s persona, like women in the culture, desires to stay in the “casino,” the space defined by the cultural texts, where she will take her slim-to-none chances, pursuing illusory images of herself and of her place in society. Yet, she experiences a plethora of emotions that attend her feeling of not belonging. Even as she stands within the casino/culture, she feels outside it: manipulated by its hidden imperatives; controlled by its contrived environments and its false allusiveness; disoriented by the faux architectures and appearances that have been cannibalized from traditional contexts.

Only the most violent of emotions can wrench her from the stranglehold of the subsumation and abjection perpetrated by this space. Fractiled by her dysorientation, the persona finds herself caught in “a center of passions” (Cixous, Coming 18), “a vortex of summons and repulsion” (Kristeva, Powers, par. 2), a chaos of conflicting emotions, “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness,” which now harries [her] as radically separate [and] loathsome” (par. 2)—the abjection that moves. Disturbed by this plethora of feelings that “wake her up…moaning” (EC 22), the persona senses the danger of annihilation in this space; she intuits the powerful and significant “weight of meaninglessness” that is about to crush her (Kristeva, Powers, par. 2). Her fears drive her even as she wallows in a scorn and a blame generated by the
fruitless attempts to identify with the imposed interpellations of the cultural texts: “I am full of blame. I burn and burn myself. I freeze myself with scorn…. I am always on fire or like an ice-queen, freezing or searing myself with blame and judgment” (EC 156). She sees herself as vile, as full of blame, as faulty. This surge of abjection initiates the discomfort that can lead the quester on a narrow path through dejection and rejection: “[a]pprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened it rejects” (Kristeva, Powers, par. 1). She can become dejected, stuck in her recognition of failed desire, or she can reject the source of the failure, the whole phallogocentric system that has captured, contained, and controlled her imagination and commence her move to resume her quest, to find another defining song, to write her own text.34

Wakoski’s poetry insists on asserting the presence of a different kind of music (17) that represents a mysterious inner voice characterized by Cixous as “that lament that never stops resonating… [that] retains the power of moving us—that element is the song, first music…which is alive in every woman” (“Medusa” 352). As it urges the woman quester to search for the origin of her own resonating music, it shifts the focus of her desire. No longer shanghaied by and lassoed to the country’s music, the woman quester can respond to the desire that is the creative and generative impetus of her own woman’s search.

Thus, it is the confluence of abjection and desire that jolts the woman quester out of the illusionered space of the cultural texts and motivates her to resume her curtailed journey, a journey which will entail fronting the unknown (of the desert).35 She must commence the next stage of the “diaspora effect”—this born out of the persona’s having introjected the culture’s unaccommodating ethos, having suffered the resultant abject dys-orientation, and now experiencing a desire to re-orient herself and to move out. Through this mobilization, she acknowledges and broaches the terra incognita of her denied self. Finally, she can syncretize her experience—her “coming to culture,” then her feelings of dysorientation and abjection, and her equivocal insider/outsider position—with her quest for identity. Now, awakened and inspired to move, she can re-orient herself to continue her journey in another key: she can cultivate that inner ear—what Irigaray calls “another ear as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself” (29). She can find another kind of riches, a “realer” sense of what constitutes her desire, her inner self-source.

What she has not heard within the confines of the casino, either in the music of Beethoven or in the sounds of the slot machines, is that “other voice,” pervasive in other places
in the poetry of *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*. This voice intrudes and interrupts the traditional call. Wakoski usurps the Guardian’s voice from *The Wizard of Oz* to articulate the two key components of this new woman-journey. The woman quester, in the avatar of a young Dorothy, is cautioned: “[t]here is no road.…No one ever wishes to go that way…. (EC 127). Then, out of the other side of his mouth, the guardian voice urges: “Keep to the West where the sun sets and you cannot fail to find her” (127). This voice serves the equivocal role of both cautioning the woman quester of dangers inherent in the journey and urging her to undertake it, mysteriously alluding to some unknown, potentially dangerous *her* who must be encountered and confronted.

First, it informs Dorothy that the way is obscure, that there is no road, no single and clear route for her to pursue. As she—Dorothy/woman-quester—embraces the journey, she must invent the means, chart her own course, listen to and follow her own instincts, and find her own way. This is the injunction many women face as we inaugurate our separation from the safety of the familiar—the city—and embark upon the unknown—the expansive, uncharted wilderness of our own deserts. This unknown territory of our deserts, the terra incognita, is perhaps less actually unknown than unrecognized, unencountered, unexplored, and uncharted—the self that needs to be discovered, examined, loved, and mapped. Whoever embarks on this project is venturing, like Dorothy, “through a country that is sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible” (33). This “sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible” country represents the terra incognita of the undiscovered woman’s self, caught between the homogeneity of conformity to scripted roles and images and a rugged individualism, once available only to men in America. Women like Dorothy are called to a new heterogeneity/heterogyny that continually creates and seeks new frontiers, which we will form to our agenda of multiple reality possibilities, or as Irigaray has indicated “a sort of expanding universe” (31). Part of our quest entails our discovering our own power to get ourselves wherever we wish to go; part necessitates our pulling ourselves away from those attractive but stultifying old messages and maps; part demands our beginning a journey where there is no road except for our own intuition and imagination; part requires facing our demons and claiming our treasures; and, finally, part entails our acknowledging, confronting, and mapping the geography of self.

As the Wakoski persona faces the first phase of her “desert” journey, she has to tear herself away from the city and stand ready to confront the “unknown.” As the symbolic woman quester, she will embark on the “appalling but intoxicating excursion toward the never-yet-said” (Cixous,
Coming 14), that place where the language that will articulate her woman’s experience can be reconfigured. She will journey “toward the place where meaning [as she has always known it] collapses” (Kristeva, Powers, par. 2, my bracketed insert). The collapse of meaning is not the same thing as meaninglessness.

Meaninglessness is what Wakoski’s persona has experienced within the cultural texts. It evokes feelings of a crushing emptiness, a kind of nothingness and a being “treated with such contempt” that the woman-self is conceived of as “a piece of lint” (EC 133). When old meanings collapse, however, a space opens up for the possibility of new meanings, for a refusal of the heretofore “nothing” of imposed meanings, for an inception of new “somethings”—frightening, refreshing, even exciting—to replace those old, contrived, artificial meaningless meanings. These new somethings are frightening because they undermine certainty, that is, the familiar, the comfortable, the “normal”; they are refreshing because they invite the new, the different, and the unique; and they are exciting because they initiate resistance, transgression, and revolt, that in turn motivate change and risk in a new key. Into the space created by this collapse of meanings, the woman quester on her journey commences her excursion into the forbidden, the forgotten, the “inconceivable region deep down inside [her] but unknown…, another space, limitless” (Cixous, Coming 10).

Although Wakoski intimates that the journey will take her to the desert, what she clearly is exploring is not only an exterior landscape but also an interior and quite personal one, the unconscious, “that other limitless country where the repressed manage to survive” (Cixous, “Medusa” 350). In Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski asserts, “we are the desert” (315, my italics); we are that liminal space, that condemned territory, that dangerous border between—a kind of no-man’s land, on one side of which stands the walled city which alleges to prevent chaos, but which continually threatens, and on the other the unexplored expanse of the woman-self.

Leaving the carefully controlled environment of the casino, women questers must first broach the borderlands, the frontier, that liminal space that serves as “the limit of the symbolic order” (Moi 167). This is the condemned territory which has been relegated as outcast. It is this landscape of chaos, “sometimes dark and terrible,” which the female quester must broach, the desert of herself. Her goal is that encounter with the mysterious her, but to get there the journeyer must cross the boundary into the terra incognita. Cixous reminds us that the “Dark Continent [of the woman self] is neither dark nor unexploorable—It is still unexplored only because we’ve been
made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (“Medusa” 352). Women have been so terrorized into fearing this part of ourselves which is outside the law and order and culture that we scarcely acknowledge its very presence. We have scarcely known of its existence, this repressed, this suppressed: it has not been evident on any map we have ever seen. We have been so conditioned to the phallogocentric stories that we can hardly conceive of any other scenario than the ones presented in those texts. Yet, a key component of our journey is the very revisioning of the quest-myth.

Thus, with fear and trepidation, the woman quester escalates her involvement in her personalized, remythologized quest process: she broaches the dark and dangerous territory—that space of herself either demonized by the culture or so totally repressed that she did not know it was there. She journeys into the unconscious to confront the distorted images of herself that have been implanted by conceptions generated by former myths. This confrontation fulfills the second part of the task detailed by the guardian’s voice: the encounter with her. This her whom Dorothy/woman-quester must brave is not the fairy-tale “princess of orange groves” (EC 200), the fictional feminine female we all want to be, but the Witch of the West,37 Cixous’ “self that horrifies” (Coming 7). Just as Dorothy must face the Witch of the West and eradicate the negativity ascribed to her, so must the woman quester confront and transform her own demons. Unlike the male quester, who perceives the demon/dragon as the disrupter of peace, harmony, and social order, the woman quester attempts, not to slay the beast, but to find a way to see her as beautiful, and then to identify with her. The woman’s task is to transposition that demon signifier away from its association with termagant, virago, nag, hag, witch, bitch, madwoman, chimera and into a vital part of her own self-affirmation, her own personal biomythography. In this phase of the journey, Wakoski’s persona-woman-quester associates herself with assorted images of contained and/or vilified female figures and monsters: Persephone in her dark tunnel; the plasticized Sphinx, held captive, as we have already seen, by the casino culture; Medusa, vilified and beheaded; and her own equivocal Mother-rattler, queen of the Pythoness Oracles.

In “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote,” the persona conceives of herself as a frustrated and dysfunctional “Persephone in winter” (EC 104), that enemy which Frye associates with “winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life” (188).38 The woman is taught to see herself as “the dark shadow of the / Kore / who must disappear, who is finally lost in the crumbled underground” (EC 159). Abducted by a ruthless and egocentric Hades, who would own her,
Persephone disappears into the “rocky tunnel / the only return possible / [being] a shadow” (106). Like the kidnapped Persephone, women have disappeared into the meaninglessness of the culture, our riches subsumed: we become like the Persephone “with a rock instead of a pomegranate” (104); we have “been raised to fear the Yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings” (Lorde 57). This Persephone figure represents the kidnapped and circumscribed self, hardened, dried up, wintry. The sterility she experiences is the darkness of her own powerlessness, the winter of her harnessed fecundity and her stolen reproductive powers, the confusion of the stereotypes to which she has been consigned: all of which effect an internal “moribund life.” Thus, the sterility she must overcome lies within herself, she who ironically possesses the pomegranate potential, the gestation drive, the procreative power. To restore her fertility, she must deal with the real monster, the monster of a culture which has demonized her and which has “so much take[n] us [women] away from the real notion of invention of the self to a kind of stereotyped notion of a socially forbidden self” (TNP 334). This does not mean, of course, that the monstrosity of the demon is not in some ways herself, if for no other reason than she has been taught to think of herself so.

She has come to see the enemy as herself, and it has been deeply demonized in the avatars of the Sphinx, of the Medusa and the latter’s wiry, much-feared snakes,\(^3\) and in her personal demon-icon, the fearsome Mother rattler. Her perception of herself incorporates the culture’s influences, represented, as we have seen, by the casino. When she sees herself as the Sphinx, it is not unlike that replicated, contained Sphinx keeping vigil over the Luxor:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Like the Sphinx I am} \\
\text{standing rigid in} \\
\text{attention} \\
\text{in front of the winged boy} \\
\text{and his dark shadow. (EC 192)}
\end{align*}
\]

This Sphinx, as we have seen, is grounded, stuck, stiff, and immovable; she does not hold any city hostage, but is held hostage to it. Standing intimidated in and by the shadow of the winged boy, which a reader could presume to be the ill-fated Icarus, she does not command the attention of others. At least Icarus could choose to fly, to flaunt the sun, to flail, and to fall into the sea. Women, however, are dominated by the sun, sitting in the phallogocentric shadow of the man’s adventures and deeds. It is this image of the woman-demon, frozen into lifeless paralysis, all of her power and vitality extracted from her, that the woman quester must not just resist, but claim
and transform. Wakoski insists that women must not remain stuck in the shadow of the adventurous male-quester, but must claim our own muscle—that great lion’s body, seat of desire—and our own wings: “I am the one / with giant spreading wings” (57), she asserts. These “giant spreading wings” would initiate her own adventures: “I want to have the right to initiate action,” she protests (Medea 46). Were the winged Sphinx to move, she would surely shake up the earth: volcanoes would erupt and the earth would quake. I’m reminded of a diminutive Emily Dickinson, mother-dragon of all women poets, who claimed her own inner volcanoes and earthquake-potential as an example of latent, but potential woman-identity assertion. The awakening persona here also claims her Vesuvian power, those “tunnels of fire under [her] pillow” (EC 175) ready to erupt: “I realized just what a burning piece of volcanic matter I must have been” (TNP 318). These fires that seethe on in the inner woman burn in a different way from the fires of abjection: they represent “that power that is a form of passion” (319), which can transform the fires of anger into a more creative energy filled with affirmation and assertion. These are the fires of a yes that can propel the newly-empowered woman into a future in which she can shape the images that define her; she can dictate the substance that language generates. She can acknowledge her inner desire, her erotic power, her intelligence.

When Wakoski equates herself with the frothy, frosty Medusa, she is claiming that intelligence: “the image of the Medusa with the snakes in her head, which, of course, is the image…of an intellectual woman…. And it is the threat of the female mind….” (315). Medusa signifies more than just women’s intelligence. Because Medusa is not merely the image of the snarling female monster, but incorporates the significantly phallic imagery of the “snakes hissing out of [her] aging head” (EC 133), she represents not so much man’s contestation with the monster as woman’s confrontation with a seemingly alien power strangely attached to her, or better, emanating from her—her-own. Ironically, the she-monster, as a representation of out-of-control female energy—what I equate with feminist erotic desire—, intimidates the woman quester as much as it does the male hero: there is “the equal sense that women are threatening, witch-like in their power” (Jason 72). This is because women have been out of touch with our deepest selves so that “[t]he fear of our desires [has kept] us suspect and indiscriminately powerful” (Lorde 57). The She-power is dangerous; She is frightening; She is huge and present and imposing, even repugnant—perhaps because of Her proclivity to disrupt the order of the
universe. Wakoski characterizes the repugnance and uncertainty women feel about our own eroticism through her persona’s fear of and attraction to the phallic snakes.

The snake, as a symbol of her own equivocally perceived subversive and powerful self, possesses a deviousness that associates it with some traditional uses of the snake which can be cleverly deconstructed. In its association with Eve and the loss of “paradise” (EC 29), it represents not just Eve’s power to lure Adam into sin. In a more feminist reading, the encounter between snake and Eve represents the challenge of Eve’s dedication to the univocal monogamous relationship in which Adam is the namer, the dominator, the first denominator out of which woman has derived ribs, skin, flesh, nomenclature, language, perception, knowledge, and all. If we buy Wakoski’s claim that Medusa represents the intellectual woman, then Eve’s encounter with the snake perhaps does represent her coming into knowledge, into intelligence, certainly her coming to a self knowledge through which she recognizes her difference from and separation from Adam,—a separation which, Biblical texts to the contrary, couldn’t be all bad—and her revision of the relationships inherent in her “given” world constructed completely out of men’s prerogatives—from God’s to man-Adam’s to, even snake-Satan’s. But what if the snake weren’t a representation of Satan after all, but of “something else”?

I’m reminded of D. H. Lawrence’s famous poem, “The Snake,” in which a male persona confronts aspects of his own complex self through a surrealistic encounter with the snake. He awakens in a kind of symbolic wet dream to encounter a snoozing snake interposed between the persona and his well. The phallic snake clearly represents the flaccid penis, deflated of its erotic power, its very flaccidity threatening the persona’s masculinity. The nature of the persona’s fear of the snake is, of course, what the poem is exploring, but it derives ambiguously from the snake’s current flaccidity, hence both its current powerlessness and its latent potential to disrupt the persona’s sleep, to revive, to rise up, and possibly to attack the persona, to prevent his getting to the well, conceivably symbolic of the well of his inner self, his own poetic/generative/creative powers. Thus, the snake of sexuality/phallicity dominates the man and prevents his unification with the salvific waters that could slake his thirst for himself. He does not know quite how to relate to this snake—is it friend or foe, part of the self or arraigned against the self? As a man, the persona perceives the snake as a threat, anticipates its innate, but dormant violence, and attacks it with a preemptive violence of his own.
Not unlike the man who must face the terror of his own phallic drives and his perceptions of the demonic quality of that phallicism, the woman must also face her own repressed phallicism, which has variously been vilified as penis envy or, when seen as threatening (like in the Medusa), as castrating. For women, phallic power has traditionally been arrayed against us; it has never been seen as part of our own treasure trove. In Wakoski’s case, because she is a woman facing what she perceives to be this same snake, made “more phallic in imagery, in myth” (EC 132)—its power vastly overblown by the layers of meaning in myth and imagery over time—, her impulse is to flee, to deny its relation to herself, or to see only its proclivity to attack, only its inherent violence and threat. Phallic power has always been ascribed to the male. Its domination over the female has manifested itself through overpowering: that is, through clever manipulation, as with Satan, or through sexual violation, as with say Hades and Persephone, Zeus and Leda, etc. When the same phallic power attaches to the woman, it has, in the culture been “turn[ed] into a feminine image in a classical way” (TNP 314). In Wakoski’s text, the beautiful, desirable Persephone becomes the threatening, ugly, angry, snarling, hissing Medusa head, body, vagina or the riddling, devious, man-killing Sphinx or the hateful, gnarled, evil-magic-wielding Witch of the West.

However, Wakoski wants to find a way to revision the phallic imagery in order to claim its associative powers for her woman-self. Instead of seeing the snake as a threat or as an impediment, she wants to see it as an asset. Mother rattler and the milky python, images of the snake in Wakoski’s text, reject and defy the classical demonizations of women’s power by offering alternative ways of conceiving the imagery that has characterized, classified, and constructed that power. She even attempts to create a positive personal association with Medusa for herself. As the woman quester embarks on her desert journey, she acknowledges her fear of snakes: she half hopes that by going to the desert “where [she] thought there could be none” (EC 191), she could avoid any untoward encounter; what she discovers, though, is “there it was, almost racing” (191), “ready to get you” (87). The snakes are present and out there, only the “out-there” isn’t a real “out-there,” but more of an “in-here”: “a snake hisses in my veins,” the persona admits (133). And it is ready to get her because it is her; it wants to claim her. She cannot broach the journey without confronting the snake that is herself, that guards her jewels/diamonds, that sequesters her sweet well. Jewels and snake are “so much female information ” (166), which the woman quester must not just acknowledge and accept, but also
embrace and love. The Medusa snakes are extensions of the woman-persona’s body as well as representations of significant aspects of her woman-identity. They come to be seen as part of her body that is beautiful: her aging 60ish head bobs atop “a long white neck / still beautiful but more like a milky python” (132). That it is “milky” attests to its connection to the internal Mother rattler, the one who nurses her along, nurtures her, and urges her inner adverive and subversive energies onward. On the one hand, the persona establishes as essential to the woman-quest an acceptance of her own body from its beautiful long-neck and aging Medusa head to the mother’s milk needed to feed her and future generations and to nourish its own inner ferocity. On the other hand, she embraces the very idea of motherhood. She comes to love the dragon/mother rattler, who will be the mother of herself, enabling her own rebirth. She becomes her own bride-prize whom she claims after her arduous search and whom she “marries” in order to revitalize her own “moribund life.” These snakes, then, represent the “quantum stuff as the sum of possibilities” (167) of the woman’s inner resources, creativity, and gestation drive providing the means for her to write her new quest myth in which she is her-own. Wakoski thus revisions the negative imagery of women’s power into the positive. Medusa transforms into the milky python and the Mother rattler, images which wrest the phallus from male-claims by providing images redefining women’s share in the phallic imagery of the snake.

When, in “Craig’s Hummingbirds,” the poet-persona asserts, “I am the woman / holding a rose and the crystal mirroring my Pythoness oracles” (63), she is transforming the Medusa-demon into the positive multiplicity of herself. Frye explains that, often in traditional myths where wealth assumes the forms of power and wisdom, the entrasured lower world is often a place “inhabited by a prophetic sibyl” who presides over “oracles and secrets of her own” (193). This sibyl—an ancient, pagan female prophetess—presides over the “Pythoness oracles.” That she possesses “secrets of her own,” that she answers to no particular god, that she operates under the aegis of no particular religion, nor any particular social or cultural imperative makes her a kind of witch, outside the borders. We might recall that when Dorothy set out on her quest, she was seeking the witch, because it was the witch who guarded the secrets Dorothy needed to complete her journey. These “secrets” are Cixous’ “unheard of songs” (“Medusa” 348), Lorde’s “resource[s] within each of us [women] that lie in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling” (53). This, for Wakoski, is the image of the artist, the woman “looking at [her]self in the mirror” and instead of being destroyed
by that act, “burst[s] through the mirror in this act that looks like it will shatter the self and only result in bloody carnage; instead, [she] bursts through the mirror with all this blood-shattering imagery and emerges totally whole on the other side where [she] can look at the world [anew]” (TNP 250). This new looking gives rise to a woman-self capable of constructing her own conception of the world, of setting her own directions, and of charting her own courses.

One of the ways in which Wakoski articulates women’s coming into the place of power in the crafting of our own subjectivities is through the image of charting or mapping. Cartography, another text which has heretofore been a vehicle for men’s describing of experience, can be usurped by the woman quester, who, has encountered the West of Woman—that is, the Wicked Witch of the West and the uncharted territory, the space where there are “no roads,” at least, no roads anyone has seen. This space has heretofore been conceptualized only in terms of the patriarchal cartographers into accepted maps of the culture—but not more. Employed by Wakoski here, the epistemological strategy of mapping conceptualizes, for the contemporary woman poet, a postmodern feminist experience. As the process of sign making whereby meaningful attributions are assigned to signifiers, mapping serves as a powerful tool enabling women to look behind, beneath, and into signifying practices, to reevaluate representations and interpretations of those representations, and to take command of the signifying process that wants to fix us into rigid forms. The map, like any other cultural text, bears a history of presenting truth as a fixed given.

Supposedly derived from an empirical encounter with the landscape, the map represents “what is.” If some geographical feature appears on the map, it is true and real; if none appears, then it does not exist. Hence, the map becomes a verification not just of the way the world looks, but of the way the world is: if the map indicates that the world is flat, then the world is, in fact, flat. Like other cultural texts, the map itself has a way of bringing the world into being; at the same time, it disguises “the power that operates in and through cartography” (Pile and Thrift 48). The agenda and scopophilic prerogative of the cartographer are nearly always obscured. Pile and Thrift further remind us that “[m]aps are not empty mirrors; they at once hide and reveal the hand of the cartographer” (48). Not unlike the man in the poem, “Night,” who “lives behind the camera” (EC 103), whose eye and agenda determine what is seen, the cartographer wields the power of the forms. What women must do first is to acknowledge that cartographer, the one who
owns the gaze that shapes what is seen. Then, we must become the mapmakers of our own experience.

Conscientious women-map-readers and neo-feminist cartographers have a difficult job. We must first reevaluate our orientations to old maps and not accept Wakoski’s lament that she/we “cannot fold up those / maps of lost goldmines” (19). While we cannot avoid the inevitable ambiguity of the situation in which we find ourselves, as “not radically cut off from that which threatens [us],” but becoming progressively more aware of its “perpetual danger” (Kristeva, Powers, par. 19), we can no longer accept victimization by the cultural texts. Maps, like other sign systems of representation, cannot prevent questions that leak through the silences and interstices in the cartography. While the map wants to fix the world with a single vision of it, we’ve seen from quantum physics, that the world cannot be so fixed. Still, it remains the obligation of map-readers continually to hone our analytical skills and to re-read those maps to interrogate what they present as true and real and what they omit as either “not there” or not worthy. Further, it falls to women to wrest the pen from the cartographic hands of patriarchal culture and to transform mapmaking into a viable device for our own signifying. Like postmodernist physicists, neo-feminist cartographers become adept at recognizing, charting, even creating our own “consciousness-created reality [in which our own]…consciousness selects (or at least acts as the site of such a selection) which one of the many position possibilities actually becomes realized” (EC 103) and then crafting those consciousness-created realities into our own maps.

One way Wakoski uses mapping is to bring into relief elements, features, and attributes of the “landscape” that formerly were obscured or were seen only in a negative light. Recognizing that subjectivity is frequently determined by scopophilic attitudes, we can conceive of the map as another manifestation of “visual practices [that] fix the subject into the authorized map of power and meaning” (Pile and Thrift 45), creating a terrific tension between the subject as in-process and the map as another representation of a fixed and immutable reality. The process of mapping for the persona poet “move[s her] out” (TNP 315) from an observer position in which she sees herself only in singularly negative ways to a position of multiple possibilities: “to realize [she] might be / momentarily / in more than one universe” (EC 151).

In one case, the poet-persona pulls out a self-map that images herself as a “moonscape,” only she sees nothing there; in another, she looks at her personal moon-map and sees herself only
in negative terms. Conflated with the new moon, she perceives herself as empty, as enshrouded in shadow, as nearly invisible, a mere sliver of moon; dejected, she feels “in exile” from herself (115), her body/self an “aging desolate terrain” (115), characterized as the large, dark, flat areas of the moon once thought to be seas, but now dry and barren:

- The Mare of Isolation.
- The Mare of Remote Shadows.
- The Mare of Longing.
- No geography which would ever yield what I have searched for. (19)

The isolation represents her growing up “plain” and feeling removed from the prizes awarded to those women who are physically attractive, her growing up “smart” in a world that expects men to be smart, but women to be pretty and sweet, and her growing up competing with other girls and women instead of bonding with them. The remote shadows represent herself as abandoned, rejected, and betrayed, her talent, her insights, her voice, and her abilities relegated to the margins, her inability to see herself except in terms of an opaque and featureless rendition of herself generated by “the only light” (103), “his” light, the sun’s light. The longing here is that specter of abjection that generates and is generated by anger, dysorientation, and want. This longing creates in the persona both a sense of things being amiss, accompanied by her not knowing what or how or why, and a desire to revision and to resolve these feelings of alienation by embracing what Wakoski calls her own “vision”: “what is most private, intimate, eccentric, unusual, unique, visionary…that part of you which is somewhat repressed or put down because it doesn’t fit in with the forms” (TNP 334).

Only by repositioning herself relative to her moon map can the persona-poet hope to see in the new moon, in the isolation, the remote shadows, and the longing, not a negativity, not a loss of value and riches, but signs of affirmation, signs of what that value and those riches are and where they can be found. These signs are the diamonds of herself, the rough and primitive coal that, under the pressure and weight of time, have transformed into gems within the realm of her experience as a woman from childhood to adulthood. The moon, which she has seen as all shadow, needs to be reconceived as “new moon,” which it is, the new beginning representing new possibilities for self-definition and self-value, the enshadowed portion, gradually emerging aspects of her evolving self. Eventually, she will shine forth as the “full moon,” full and beautiful and round, replete with its own kind of “shining head” of light (122). On this journey she is
making through the night, the moon provides a new and different kind of light to guide her on her way. No longer dark, the way is now illuminated, not by the artificial neon light of Las Vegas casinos and all they represent, but by the Diana-moonlight of herself.42 Her perspective, her vision, her ability to make out the landscape and the paths are now enlightened by that Diana-moon, a complex mare of conflicting positions characterized by isolation, by shadows, and by longings, but these are the positives that motivate her—that want “on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva, Powers, par. 8).

Illuminated by this new light, the landscape becomes rich and varied and enticing. Isolation, which signifies solitude and singularity, signals the quester’s “ascent [which] is descent” (Medea 104). Wakoski claims, “you have to understand the journey underground, you have to understand being in hell before there is any possibility of climbing out of the abyss” (104) and of claiming your inherent uniqueness. The quester’s journey across the plains alone with her “maps,” with her “diamonds,” and with her “Mother rattler” comes to fruition in her lonely ascent. The remote shadow, as extensions of herself—“the one who descended into the rocky cave and came out / a shadow” (EC 106), derives from that descent into her own interior “rocky cave” where she encounters hell and understands the abyss, the unknown or secret, but wonderful and incomprehensible, aspects of herself she is in the process of discovering, the beauty that underpins that “aging desolated terrain” (115) she has so disparaged. Finally, the longing is an inherent hunger for the mother/daughter/woman of herself: Persephone returning to Demeter, the waiting mother. The quester drives with her own treasure-within across the lonely desert, scattered, fragmented, and disparaged—yet longing to love—herself: “We need to love ourselves AND to love otherness” (Jason 135, Wakoski’s capitals).

We women need to mother ourselves, to nurture ourselves and each other. We need to love our own erotogeneic selves and to see in our eroticism both power and person-ality. At one point Wakoski comments with derision that she has become her mother: “I have turned into / my mother” (EC 122). Women carry with us this dread of becoming our mothers, those dragons, those ugly, old wiry-haired Medusas scaring off men, young and old, like Wakoski’s own mother or, like the woods witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” threatening castration and cannibalism. This Mother rattler, Mother-Medusa figure stands poised, ready to turn the quester—either male or female—into stone. As we have seen, women have grown to suspect our own Mother-Medusa potential. First, we have been taught to fear, to hate, and to reject the mother, who is both “other”
and us; then, we have come to regard other women, not as allies, but as aliens and as potential competitors. When Wakoski sees herself as a “Medusa, / snakes hissing out of [her own] aging head” (133), she is afraid she will frighten away potential admirers with her unwieldy power or even turn herself to stone. She does not literally say, but implies what Cixous confesses in *Coming to Writing* that “[t]here is a self that horrifies [her]” (7). Having always been afraid of snakes, Wakoski, as we have seen in the poems, alternately flees them, defies them, and embraces them. But these snakes lie embedded in the very terrain she is attempting to claim.

Want it or not, women are being called to affirm the self in its myriad and often frightening aspects. Staking this claim is scary and dangerous because it always means facing what we’ve been taught is monstrous about ourselves and redefining it as our primary source of wealth and vitality. In the end we must confront Mother rattler and acknowledge our Medusa potential to guard our treasures and to reorient the self in the power dynamic—even when that opens us up to attack and self-derision. This is part of what it means to assume a new scopophilic position, to reevaluate what is seen and how it is seen.

In “Our Lady of Chanterelles” and “Sketching Flowers,” Wakoski returns to her own body to envision the map of herself. Yet again, in examining herself, this time in terms of her body, metonymically seen in terms of her hand, she ruefully admits, “My hand’s map seems empty and smooth, / dry as Death Valley” (115). What she is acknowledging is that those identifying pathways which track across one’s hand providing one’s unique identity are, for her, invisible. Here is another image of her failure to recognize herself as having an identity; her uniqueness is again seen as obscured and erased. Despite the obvious negativity of her view, the empty invisibility can elicit two possible positive interpretations. One, the hand’s “empty” map presents a kind of *tabula rasa* on which the woman-owner of that hand might chart/draw her own version of her identifying marks. To do so, however, requires that she envision and acknowledge a “content” to be mapped: “our forms cannot exist until we discover our own real content, and that in some way is our lives” (*TNP* 102, Wakoski’s italics). Women must first acknowledge that we have a subjectivity of value to claim and to chart.

From another point of view, just because we cannot see the contours of the hand’s map does not mean there really is nothing there; it’s just that—if we’ve learned anything from Nick Herbert’s concept of the observer position—what is there cannot be seen from where we are
standing. Were we to move, to shift our observer position, those unique identifying marks already present might surface:

I love knowing that when a person opens her hand, there is a map there, if only you know what to look for. How to read it. (EC 113)

One of the real difficulties women in the twentieth/twenty-first century have had is coming to know ourselves, to know that “there is a map there,” that we have “to know what to look for.” By citing/siting/sighting the map on her hand, the poet-persona extends the potential contiguity of the map as metonymy to broach any barrier between self as internal space—Wakoski’s “real content” that we as women are coming to ac-know-ledge—and self as acting/moving/questing journeyer engaged in the very act of (re)negotiating cultural and geographical, psychological, and emotional geographies/ terrains/territories. Thus, shifting positions facilitates perceiving new possibilities for subjectivities:

it was like coming to a road indicated on a map that you had never dreamed was there until you studied it closely. (102)

Like so many of Wakoski’s ideas, “to move” itself means more than is apparent. On the one hand, the persona-poet has made great strides in moving through assorted landscapes from the hyperreal casino to the surreal desert. On the flip side, the poet posits that because “the world is moving[. y]ou may be standing in one spot, but you don’t stand in the same place” (TNP 254). Consequently, any mapping of the self, any reorienting of signification, represents an ongoing enterprise, never finished, because, first of all, the “territory” to be mapped—that allegory of the self and the body—is vast, mysterious, dark, and terrible; second, the mapmaker herself is constantly on the move; and, finally, the landscape itself is always shifting. Constant movement indicates vacillating center(s) and shifting liminal boundaries that continually require new colligations between the interior world and the world outside, between the subject and her sociality; further, this movement accommodates the concepts of fixity and flux, of simplicity and nuance, of conformity and hybridity, of security and terror, of opacity and transparency.

Mapping such a subject requires a “disalienati[on]” process that “involves the…[continual] reconquest of a sense of place and the construction and reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along moments of mobile, alternative trajectories” (Jameson 89, my bracketed insert). This entails, less
a staking out of territory—which implies boundaries, limits, ownership, location, stasis, and stability, and more a discovery—which asserts exploration, risk, wandering, imagination, vision, movement, anticipation, and relocation. This new mapping entails, not a unidirectional relationship between knower and known, not occupation, superiority, and disaffection, but traversal, multiplicity, and affection. Discovery of the woman’s ethoscape dovetails into the biomythography of the individual, as the unconscious opens and expands into consciousness, courage, and confrontation, out of complacency, cooptation, even collusion. This project is constantly deferred, never finished: mapping, like mythmaking, is an ongoing process so that we should talk about remapping and, indeed, about re-moving and re-journeying, even as we have already adopted revision and reorientation. This moving/removing/journeying/rejourneying/mapping/remapping/collimates with what Cixous refers to as being born again every day:

I wasn’t born for once and for all. Writing, dreaming, delivering; being my own daughter of each day. The affirmation of an internal force that is capable of looking at life without dying of fear, and above all looking at itself, as if you were simultaneously the other…and nothing more nor less than me (Coming 6).

Writing, dreaming, delivering—these are the tools of the poet. It is the poetry itself which mediates the social—the world of experience and the out-there, “where anything can happen” (EC 149), into the subjective—the complex inward self of the individual woman, and the subjective into the social. Through the tropes of the myth-journey and the exploration of the landscape, Wakoski indicates an important phase of the development of the woman’s subjectivity. Yet, this whole process represents, in figure, what Wakoski is enacting in the form of her own text: this text of her poetry is in fact a pastiche of cultural texts through which the poet excursions, ironizing and parodying all the while, and via which, through clever transpositioning of meanings, she explores and crafts her own autobiomythography.

Through my excursion into Wakoski’s poetry, I have examined the roles which the grand narratives of myth(s) and history, of the casino and of assorted cultural geographies play in generating women’s subjectivity. If, as de Lauretis contends, “the subject is where meanings are formed, [and]…meanings constitute the subject, [and]…the notion of semiotic productivity must include that of the modes of production” (Alice Doesn’t 33), then Wakoski is right in claiming that we must go through the cultural texts to arrive at our own sense of our autobiomythography. These cultural texts themselves, as well as the language in which they are couched, the associations which they engender, and the performances which they elicit, become the sites of
resistance for the woman seeking subjectivity in the modern world. The journey through these
texts demands a recognition of their constructive capacity, an examination of their power to
determine perception and self-definition, a reinterpretation of the time-worn symbols, a rejection
of the imperative of their authority, and a reconfiguration of the very modes of representation.

Women, even as we struggle to resist the calls to culture, are, as Wakoski demonstrates,
continually re-called. That powerful music of Beethoven seduces us: the messages of the old
grand narratives, the old images and texts and perceptions, embedded as they are in our very
thinking about ourselves, continually guide our thinking, direct our choices, determine our
perspectives, inhibit our actions, and reinforce old meanings. Nevertheless, while we cannot
avoid the culture and its powerful “musics,” its call to participation, women can at least
transgress them: “make travels, provoke, pervert” (35). Further, although de Lauretis contends
that women cannot transform the codes, the sign-systems through which all stories are
conceived, I have argued with Cixous that women must defy and deny these codes that define
and frequently negate us (“Medusa” 350) and, through our acts of resistance, effect a
transformation of the codes.

Wakoski as a woman poet does effect such a transformation through the very act of
writing this poetry—her remapping of the conflicting geographies of the woman-self. First,
Wakoski as a woman poet writing a woman text, infuses her woman writer self into the realm
where the woman has not been the writer, the bard, the scop, the poet, nor what de Lauretis calls
“homo faber, the city builder, the producer of signs” (Alice Doesn’t 35). Next, the woman poet
inserts into the “story,”—where, heretofore, the woman has not been considered the protagonist,
not subject but the subjected, or object, antagonist, commodity—, the woman heroine, whose
energy and agenda create the momentum of the narrative and whose actions, emotions, and
thoughts form the center of the conflict. Finally, she has created through her postmodern pastiche
and re-intertextualization of historical allusion, cliché, and slogan, of traditional myths, mythic
figures, and mythic modes, and of the assorted geographies of the casino and the desert a whole
new configuration of language, a whole new mosaic of texts, thereby inventing the very
representationality through which her woman-self is conceived. She has indeed reconfigured the
old scores into a music of her-own.

I have argued that the feminist experience, examination, manipulation, and
remythologization of the texts of the culture and of the language through which those texts have
been mastered enables the revision of the woman-self. I have demonstrated that Wakoski’s text has intertextualized a “plurality of discourses” (Alice Doesn’t 32) in order to command and recraft the production of meanings that inform the meaning and making of the subject. We are all subjects in context; we are mosaics of quotations of all those texts through which we journey; we are palimpsestic pastiches of them and of new interpretations and new conceptions and even new tropes like Pythoness oracles or Mother rattler. But more than that, we are fictions in process. Wakoski’s text presents a method, a mode, a reconfiguration of codes that can influence that process. The woman poet’s transposition of the cultural texts displaces the author-ity of the formulaic, the systematic, the authoritarian reading of meaning. In so doing, the status quo is disturbed, and new meanings erupt, and new possibilities for women’s self-conception are thus wrested from a destiny fated and fore-ordained by the authority of patriarchal texts.

Chapter Two Endnotes

1 I am borrowing from Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism which outlines what he calls the archetypal quest myth as follows: 1. the model male “quester” responds to a call to action; 2. he traverses an alien landscape, which he may conquer along the way; 3. he confronts and defeats a mythic, if not supernatural, foe, often characterized as female, which is somehow wreaking chaos on the world and which is guarding some kind of treasure trove; and 4. he completes a mythic “task” that will secure the treasure for the realm, restore order—often in addition to the hero’s marrying a bride-prize princess—, define the “hero” as the embodiment of the cultural ethos, and ensure his acceptance and integration back into society.

2 Wakoski has seen herself as a questing woman: “I want to be the quester” (Medea 114); “I have memories from childhood…[that] shaped me into the kind of lonely, questing woman I am” (“Whitman? No, Wordsworth” 24), making “Diane” like “Dorothy.” In a letter to Jonathan and in the poem “Dianes,” the poet celebrates the multiplicity of identities associated with her name: “I have loved being called ‘Diane.’ I have loved all the associations with the Moon, and I have loved the image of Athena, the goddess of the hunt and chase” (Medea 112); “Diane, Dianne, Dian, Dyan, Dyanne, Diane” (114).

3 I discuss witches more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

4 “Her-own” is my neologistic substitution of the feminist heroine for the masculinist hero.

5 For Kristeva “quotations” means texts from the culture that can be cut and pasted into new texts, intertexts: “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Reader 37).

6 From Kristeva’s Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, subsequently abbreviated as Powers. I recognize that I am not using abjection in the totality of Kristeva’s conception,
adoption, and interpretation of the complex of abjection, but many of her descriptions of
abjection apply to Wakoski’s persona’s self-journey. For me, abjection becomes another form of
desire—if desire is source-resource, passion, deep feeling, creative energy, motivating force. Not
all women’s desire is positive. Oftentimes, we act in positive, generative ways out of negative
impulses. In fact, it is the suffering, shame, fear, and angst which I am calling abjection that
often most powerfully initiates resistance. I will discuss this more thoroughly as I work through
the woman’s quest-journey motif in the poems.

7 “Looking for Beethoven in Las Vegas” is the first poem in The Emerald City of Las Vegas.
In Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski asserts that Beethoven “represents this angry demented,
powerful, unusual father figure with his beautiful, unusual chords and powerful attitudes toward
the world” (249).

8 “Like my father, then, the figure of George Washington becomes a symbolized father
figure. Because he was the father of our country, I began to think of myself, partly with a pun on
the word cunt, as country. Again, country is a feminine entity, and therefore what the country
relates to is the father, the masculine” (TNP 249).

9 I am using “scoring” here as the writing of a musical text. Reflecting on the intrusion of the
cultural texts, the poet-persona is haunted by “scores which played through every failure of [her]
female life” (187).

10 She has called herself a “daughter of Jeffers” and claimed the influence of Stevens,
Whitman, and Williams among other male modernist poets.

11 For Audre Lorde desire is equated with the erotic which is “our most profoundly creative
source” (59): what which “is deepest and strongest within each of us” (56), that which
“empowers us, becomes the lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence” (57),
and that through which “we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the
erotic within ourselves” (58), that is, “to recognize our deepest feelings” (58).

12 Wakoski documents the renovation of the MGM Grand into an Emerald City replica: “I
heard that an Oz theme was going to be used. The casino was going to be The Emerald City”
(EC 147).

13 It is noteworthy that while Wakoski’s text is clearly critical of social “realities” as they
affect women, especially unattractive or poor or aging women, it neglects to broach the ethnic
dimension of oppression within the culture.

14 She claims: “home is a myth itself” (EC 42).

15 In sequels to Baum’s original tale, Dorothy leaves Kansas again, this time, according to
Jack Zipes, because she recognizes that she’s been duped by the cliché. See “Oz as American
16 I am borrowing from Cixous: “The texts I ate, sucked, suckled, kissed. I am the
innumerable child of their masses” (*Coming* 12).

17 I am referring to Wakoski’s statement cited earlier in this chapter: “We start where we are
and we make a journey back to whatever is considered the closest culture source that we learn in
our history classes, and then we move out and we move from the east to the west and we move
all around” (*TNP* 315).

18 I am borrowing from Cixous: “At the age of eighteen, I discovered ‘culture.’ The
monument, its splendor, its menace, its discourse” (*Coming* 11). “Everything in me joined forces
to forbid me to write: History, my story, my origin, my sex. Everything that constituted my
social and cultural self…. Property, rights, had always policed me” (11).

19 This is a paraphrase of Kristeva: “Abjection…becomes integrated in the Christian Word
as a threatening otherness—but always nameable, always totalizable” (*Powers*, par. 37).

20 In Chapter 1 I discuss the role of the green spectacles.

21 “We are the desert” (*TNP* 315).

22 There is an irony here. Michael Branch, in his discussion of the Silver Legacy Resort
Casino in Nevada, completed in 1995, as the then “newest and largest spectacle in Reno’s
downtown casino district,” focuses on the Baron’s Rig, “a 130-foot-tall, 198-ton ‘replica’ of a
mining rig” ensconced beneath the casino, as “not a replica, a representation, or even a
simulation of a 19th century mining rig, …[but] a simulacrum” (288), verifying that even the
alleged “buried treasure” for which the casino stands is totally fake.

23 I discuss Cinderella’s abduction in chapter 1; Wakoski’s reference:
One shoe to me
means rape or abduction,
means war and guns, fire, someone
running for her life, or being carried senseless
over a rough shoulder. (*EC* 41-2)

24 In a footnote to “Saluting the Sun,” Wakoski informs her readers that “People who went
West during the Gold Rush to seek their fortunes were called ‘argonauts’” (*EC* 195). They
“gamb[ed] on finding the Golden Fleece / with the golden hills of California” (195). This
represents a kind of pun on the word fleece, as these so-called heroic Argonauts fleeced the land
of its riches. She furthers the pun in the poem “In St. Louis,” in which she tells the story of adults
assaulting children during the annual Easter Egg Hunt in a park in St. Louis, greedily scrambling
to procure for themselves the “real” golden egg. She plays on the idea of golden fleece as an
ironic “golden theft” and misuse of dynamic energy and a thwarting of innocence, thus playing
on the association of fleece with both lambs and with theft. I’m borrowing from Wakoski’s pun
on the word fleece which means to swindle (especially the innocent), but also to strip—as to
fleece a sheep. The act of fleecing here represents the invasion and undermining of innocence as
well as the act of thievery and chicanery. She also plays with the word hustle in “The Rosy
Trickster, Old Coyote” when she alludes to “Paul Newman’s black and white ‘hustler’ eyes” (104) which carries with it a sexual connotation. Hustle as I am using it means, like fleece, to swindle, but it also bears the sense of prostitution—to be prostituted, hustled (COD 488).

25 I’m borrowing from the concept in psychology, introjection: “the unconscious incorporation of external ideas [and influences] into one’s mind [and behavior]” (COD 527, my bracketed inserts).

26 I discuss “Blue Dress/Airmail Letter” in a different context in Chapter 3.

27 Not unlike Adrienne Rich’s “revision.”

28 Some of these clichés include: harkening to the call of the Pacific; establishing the necessary journey across the desert to claim the riches of the West in the imagery of the California Gold Rush, even though this event came much later than the formulation of the concept of Manifest Destiny; and referring to Dorothy’s mid-western homestead as “no place like home.”

29 The entire citation reads: “I remember weeping my way through Hepburn and Tracy’s Sea of Grass, a movie made in the forties which is still very relevant on the subject of plant ecology and what happens when you artificially transform a landscape from grassland to farm land. The tragedy of the land parallels the tragedy of the human relationship” (EC 148).

30 I’m using rape here as a kind of “term of art,” following the precedent set by David Mamet in his play, Oleanna, in which rape becomes a “term of art”: “a term, which has come, through its use to mean something more specific than the words would, to someone not acquainted with them…indicate” (1796, Mamet’s italics and ellipses). In the play, the term rape does take on broader “specific” applications, setting a precedent for its usage—the use of “rape”—in other contexts.

31 Fractile is a neologism that derives from fractious, fracture, and fragment, combining notions of the unruly and peevish with those of the broken, disconnected, isolated, incomplete, and unfinished (COD 389).

32 The prefix, dys, meaning “diseased, difficult, faulty, or bad” (AHD 223), extends the meaning of dis as an absence or a negation.

33 I take “uncanniness” to indicate the inexplicable, the strange, the preternatural: that which is beyond the natural, that which is abnormal, that which is out of sync with the “common sense” and with what is expected.

34 The French feminists contend that the moment of recognition initiated by abjection/passion, awakening/awareness always at some point instigates writing. Wakoski, too, sees a new writing as the solution to women’s disoriented place in language and in the cultural texts.
One way of thinking about the intertextualized remythification process in a feminist way is through the lens of Helene Cixous’ association of desire, diaspora, and desert, and her urge for women to find a new design for articulating their subjectivities: a “new calligraphy.” Cixous’ woman seeking answers to the questions—“who am I, who will I have been, why-me, why-not-me?” (Coming 6)—is the questing woman who has been assigned “to the diaspora of [her] desires, to the intimate deserts” (7), even as she must find and invest in a “new insurgent writing” (“Medusa” 350) to address these questions.

I discuss this image in Chapter 1.

I will discuss Wakoski’s use of the witch as part of her search for subjectivity more fully in Chapter 3.

Northrop Frye contends that in one version of the quest myth the monster which the hero must defeat “is the sterility of the land itself and that sterility is present in the age and impotence of the king” (189). In order to restore that waning potency, the hero must engage and defeat the threatening dragon-foe, retrieve/steal her treasure-trove, return to the kingdom to claim his bride-prize and restore order in the realm. Implied in this account is that it is the dragon-foe who has wreaked the chaos that disrupts the law-abiding order of the realm and that has consequently effected its resultant sterility, necessitating the male hero’s confrontation with the dangerous, wild, chaotic, bestial female foe.

Snakes in traditional myths represent “the fallen order of nature” (Frye 188), but for Wakoski they represent “the female culture in all ancient religions” (TNP 314), akin to the conceptions of the erotic and that desire which many feminist theorists have attributed as women’s inner resources.

One such poem is 1677:

On my volcano grows the Grass  
A meditative spot—  
An acre for a Bird to choose  
Would be the General thought—

How red the Fire rocks below—  
How insecure the sod  
Did I disclose  
Would populate with awe my solitude.

In addition, the reference to “Vesuvian” derives from her poem 754, “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun”—:

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Upon the Valley glow—  
It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let its pleasure through—"

See Chapter 3 on the body.
The poet persona, as “this woman [who] flaunts her moon” (Medea 92) and calls herself “Diane of the Moon” (104), rejoices: “I have loved all the associations with the Moon” (112).

See Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between mothers and daughters.

Wakoski also references her own rebirthing: “It is always new, a beginning” (EC 44); “the spirits’ desire for freedom” (84); “the energy of it would wave through you” (85); “then the freedom of the walk” (85); “so much female information” (166); “quantum stuff as the sum of possibilities” (167); “each day brings its / fresh discoveries” (186); “I have discovered [the world’s] multiplicity” (151); “Each day a new day / we begin” (155).

I am playing with the meaning and connotation of mastered: that is, of the master, of the system, of an authority like master/god/patriarchal supremacy.
Chapter Three: Which Witch is (Wh)I(ch): Righting and Rewriting the Body

Diane Wakoski, who avows a fascination with a myriad “geographies” and conceives “our [female] bodies [as] this terribly complicated geography of America” (TNP 315), keeps good company, as we saw in Chapter 2, with a plethora of contemporary feminist theorists in aligning the geography of the landscape with the geography of the body. Teresa de Lauretis’ claim that the female body “is charted, zoned, and made to bear…a meaning which proceeds entirely from external relationships, but which is always subsequently apprehended as an internal condition or essence” (Alice Doesn’t 183, my italics) asserts a connection between the external constructedness of the female body along with its signification within the socio-cultural dynamic and women’s self-awareness. It is this very complex intertextual matrix of culture/text, body, “self-awareness,” and subjectivity that Wakoski explores in her poetry.

At the core of women’s subjectivity is our perception of our gendered bodies. In Bodies That Matter, Judith Butler asserts, not only that “gender is a part of what decides the subject” (x), but also that “sex” and the body are irremediably interconnected in the culture: “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’… constitute the materiality of bodies and …materialize the body’s sex” (2, my italics). While notions of gender, as key determinants of subjectivity, originate in the biological morphology of the individual, gender itself is actually constructed through what Butler calls “normative constraints that not only produce, but also regulate bodily beings” (x). In one sense, women acknowledge that we feel compelled to enact certain “performances” which signal us as female and as feminine; Wakoski claims: “We are the roles we play” (Jason 98). But what of the body? It is something tangible, something “real,” “factual,” “substantial,” “empirical.” Surely, we cannot change the “truth” of the body? Yet, Butler reminds us that “gender [a]s an ‘act’” is “performat[ive],” that is, “real only to the extent that it is performed” (278). But surely this enactment does not extend to the body itself? As a corporeal “reality,” the body must surely manifest an inviolable integrity as an empirical entity beyond textual construction? If this is true, what does it mean when Simone de Beauvoir claims that “woman is made and not born” (8), that, in fact, we become women? Through what Butler calls “[t]he tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions” (273, my italics), we must acknowledge that our bodies enact both a biology and an ontology devised by the “authors of gender” (273): those phallogocentric, patriarchally authoritative texts, the subtle but ubiquitous messengers from myth to media, from art to advertisement, from fairy tales to “facts,” from
mother’s milk to mother’s mouth, from father’s favors to father’s fibs. In the process, as de Lauretis reminds us, “whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her own representation,” it ultimately “becomes for that individual real, even though it is, in fact, imaginary” (Technologies 12, my italics).³

This “imaginary” gendered body is neither fixed nor stable, but fluid, even multiple. When Butler began her interrogation of the body, she was startled to find that “the thought of materiality invariably moved [her] into other domains,” that it was impossible to “fix bodies as simple objects of thought” because these bodies indicated “a world beyond themselves” (ix). Even as the regulatory norms of the culture attempt to impose “the domain of intelligible bodies, [they] produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies” (xi). It is these other bodies, as well as the body rendered “intelligible” by the constraints of the cultural texts, that horrify and mystify Wakoski and entice the poet into her layers of representation. She evinces in her poetry that it is not just the one body to which women feel called, but to these other—multiple—bodies as well. In fact, her accord with Nick Herbert’s theory of “parallel universes” (EC 41) applies in a unique way to the materialization of women’s bodies. Wakoski’s claim that women “ha[ve] simultaneous awareness of many, many things and keep those awarenesses moving and alive” (TNP 254) attests to the fact that women in the culture do face the possibility of multiplicity.

Just as Butler conceived her project (Bodies That Matter) as one that examined: “gender practices as sites of critical agency” (x), so Wakoski’s poetic project, The Emerald City of Las Vegas, explores gendered practices that center in the female body and those texts that call the female body to its gendered identity as sites of resistance. For the poet, the power to revision her own body-identity derives from the language of poetry: “we become the words we speak” (Jason 98). When Wakoski vacillates between the possibility that there is and is not “something more substantial than language [that] anchors us” (EC 106), she, like Butler, who asks if “words alone ha[ve] the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance” (x), is intuiting that the materialization of the body is a process. This process originates in something other than language, but certainly is carried on in the cultural arena in which language determines perception and, thus, “reality”: “anything you put into your poetry is what you have ultimately opted for as your reality” (TNP 255). The gendered body represents an ongoing materialization dictated largely by language in an interplay of textual influences. These influences imposed by
cultural imperatives are potentially mitigated by the vision of the poet, which for Wakoski entails “perceiving all the possibilities and showing how they work together” (103) and perhaps against each other as well. In addition, each time the poet imposes her vision upon a text, whether a written text or her own body, she potentially enacts change and effects a shift in “power”: “each time / we reshape a thing, it gathers power” (EC 52).

In order to grapple with the complexity of multiple bodies, visions, and possibilities for women’s gendered identity, Wakoski uses her poetry to transform assorted key cultural texts after Barthes’ mode of demythologizing, through what Linda Hutcheon has called a postmodern parody, “a double process of installing and ironizing, which signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Politics 93). Wakoski alludes to and dissects such selected texts as traditional fairy tales, contemporary advertising images, ancient legends and myths, current movie-star icons, and even her own autobiographical materials, first, to reveal their often undetected agendas in the construction and performance of the female body and their power to generate specialized kinds of culturally expected/accepted self-awarenesses. Then, she manipulates the resultant dissections in order to craft another vision in her poetry: “what is most private, intimate, eccentric, unusual, unique, visionary about the person” (TNP 334), a sense of an energizing subjectivity. This enterprise reveals how her text—the poetry along with the self she generates through the poetry—, while “new” and “original,” is itself, like all texts, derived from previous ones:

she call[s]
forth some spirit from [her] past, refresh[es] it, make[s] it grow
larger than life, knowing that to make
something might be a means of remaking [her]self. (EC 52)

In the process of generating the parodic pastiche that constitutes the text of her own poems, Wakoski transpositions the dissected fragments into a kind of cyborgian intertextual tapestry that undermines even as it inscribes and mines as it restores the very biases that she attempts to critique. While one part of the poet wants to see the female body in that old masculinist camera light (EC 103), another part rebels against that circumscribing scopophilia described so well by Laura Mulvey. However, once Wakoski exposes the “installed” conceptions of the woman’s body, she cannot return to the innocence of an “uneducated” vision. As it is, Wakoski’s exploration of women’s bodies through the interplay of texts, caught in the equivocal tug of war
between ironizing and installing (Hutcheon, *Politics* 93), does provide a site of resistance for examining and revisioning the alternative possibilities of women’s subjectivities.

Because of the complexity of women’s bodies, it is particularly difficult for the woman/the poet to explore the on-going construction process of women’s subjectivity through any kind of linear vision. Though she has poems that seem to focus on single topics, like “Aging” or “Masks” or “Lily Hands” or “Hansel and Gretel,” Wakoski’s method relies on pastiche to critique the body as a site of resistance for women’s subject formation. Because the body itself is not one, or once-and-for-all, or even diachronistically contained within a single existential domain, but a palimpsest of interpellations generated over time and still ongoing, Wakoski, in her own textual exploration of her woman’s subjectivity, mimics the body’s fluidity. The poet’s non-linear, sometimes apparently chaotic panoply of images and texts captures the dynamic complexity faced by her as a contemporary woman, no longer content with cultural determinations of her own body potential and eager instead to broach new possibilities—even when those possibilities entail embracing “other” body-conceptions that have been relegated to the “constitutive outside” (Butler 3).

The poet violates unity in narrativity and continuity in symbolism to replicate the conflicted and complicated process women have experienced in sorting through the plethora of cultural messages. Her aim is to draw attention to the power of the cultural texts to effect gender construction, to arrive at some sense of the multiple ways in which women’s bodies have been constructed by these texts, to resist the impulse to adhere to cultural imperatives, and to encourage our participation in our own subject formation. In discerning Wakoski’s method of remythologizing texts and of transpositioning tropes, themes, and issues central to women’s body conception, perception, and construction, I have detailed some of the “contradictions and paradoxes” (*Medea* 111) with which contemporary women have had to contend in sorting out the relationships of those texts to our bodies and of our bodies to our identities. The poet engages in a kind of dialectical inquiry in which “truths” are examined, tested, and critiqued, and contradictions, paradoxes, and dissemblings are unveiled. It is through a constant installing and stripping away that the poet generates her other vision of women’s bodies in the culture.

That women’s bodies, when they fail to conform to the cultural parameters of femininity, have largely been dissected, denigrated, dismissed, or dispersed altogether serves as the focus of poem after poem in Wakoski’s *oeuvre*. In “Hot Flickers/Movie Light,” the female body merges
with the male-body-machine dynamic: reflected in the one-dimensional image of the movie screen, “the woman can only come into being as the invented other of the masculine subject” (Irigaray 129). In “New Moon, a Scar,” the female body is seen as “empty” or as “weakly invisible” or “almost invisible” (EC 121, 122); in “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote,” it is obscured in shadow (106), that portion which shows, revealed only by the power of “the only light,” “his” (“Night” 103). If seen as separate at all, the non-conforming female body is fragmented: a gnarly parchment hand or a prosthetic one, an asp-like neck, a hag face, a body that is fat, old, and ugly. The woman becomes a plethora of “attributes” that don’t measure up to the cultural paradigm: the woman persona then sees herself as unacceptable—that is, unattractive and undesirable. In “Swan’s Neck,” the woman poet is dismissed altogether, like a piece of lint (133); she vanishes with the flick of the masculine writer’s hand. Thus, in poem after poem, the poet explores the female body: body as one-dimensional reflection, body as selected attribute, revealed in “the only light,” body as hidden and out of sight, or dismissed and erased.

By revisiting some of the body images that have been imposed on and absorbed by women, Wakoski exposes and critiques the process by which women have inculcated the imaginary into the essential. As she broaches this theme, Wakoski resuscitates cultural texts, from ancient myths and legends, like that of Helen of Troy and Medusa, to biblical texts like that of Eve in the garden, from old-fashioned fairy tales like “Cinderella” and “Hansel and Gretel,” to newly crafted fairy tales like that of the Wizard of Oz; from popular culture texts broadcasting icons like Deborah Kerr to contemporary embodiments of popular culture body images like a lovely young girl in a shoe store. Using these texts, the poet first displays the constructedness of the female body and explores the feeling of being trapped by the limitations of script and scope and by the circumscribed set of roles permitted women, even when, clearly, “real” bodies do not fit the parameters of those roles. Then, she re-writes the body to re-vision new ways of being “made” and to reclaim women’s self-esteem and sexuality and to control what constrains her.

Wakoski explores the dilemma of the woman caught between the attraction of the dictates of the regulatory norm to perform an acceptable, desirable female identity and what Butler calls “the experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which [she] does not belong” (219). She longs to conform to the princess, the movie star, the Cinderella figure, even as she recognizes that those are the “unlivable,” and ultimately undesirable ideals for a woman who envisions a multiplicitous, complex, even contradictory self. At the same time, to
her horror, the poet recognizes herself in the witch, in Medusa, in hags and viragos, those bodies that matter/materialize in the culture only as the so-called “defining negativity” (190) of the culturally expected female body. These unthinkable, unnarrativizable, unlivable are the bodies which she is supposed to disdain. Just as Butler asks in her text what bodies matter and to whom, so Wakoski wants to know what bodies matter/materialize. Must those bodies that conform to the regulatory norms be the only ones that matter/materialize? Or do “other” bodies, those defined by the constitutive outside, those abjected, unlivable, unnarrativizable, those illegible bodies matter/materialize as well? I am arguing in this chapter that Wakoski is striving to rethink, to rewrite, to renarrativize those bodies, those unthinkable ones. Through the “possibilit[ies], through fantasy, of retelling the story, reshaping it” (Medea 150), the poet can reshape those bodies; those unthinkable ones can become thinkable in a new light, legible through a new ecriture, and livable in a myriad of new ways: “Words, words / where are you leading me now?” Wakoski speculates with anticipation (Jason 99).

I will examine the way in which Wakoski both identifies and disidentifies with the “perfect” female body. In “She Bends to Offer Me Running Shoes,” the poet revisits this female body materialized through the regulatory norms of youth and beauty and attempts to place herself within its constraints, only to find herself, with her aging, non-aerobic, non-nubile body, uncomfortable with the prescriptions of the cultural imperative that values the young, athletic female body. Then through a remythologization of the Cinderella story in “Jewel Leaves,” Wakoski deconstructs the romance of the culturally accepted image of woman as not only young and beautiful, but also good and passive, waiting, like a princess, for romance and fulfillment in the person of Prince Charming: “Romance…has always been my emblematic of my search for something else” (Medea 153).

Wakoski uses masks as a significant trope for articulating the complicated and multi-layered position of women in misrecognition: “the mask in the mirror [is a way] of seeing me” (TNP 321). Acknowledging that youth and beauty are façades, Wakoski interrogates these as masks which women don. Wakoski states that “we are the roles we play” (Jason 98); we are the masks that we are called to wear; yet, Wakoski also advocates that we strip that mask away: “what art is, is to pull away the masks one by one and reveal what is behind the veil” (TNP 322). Beneath the mask—another body, an “inside”—a repressed body resides. In the poem “Blue Dress/Airmail Letter,” Wakoski further interrogates the cultural imperative of the young and
beautiful body through the image of the aging Deborah Kerr, whose mask of youthful beauty presents the ridiculous parody of the aging movie star distorting her body in order to hold onto a vanishing body image. No longer fulfilling the prescriptions of what constitutes the acceptable body, Kerr, a kind of Cinderella grown old—her plasticized façade and demeanor masking the abject body underneath/inside—, is really a deformed body in acceptable body attire. She is, in fact, a hag, a witch, with whom the poet identifies in the most derogatory sense. Wakoski’s identification with the old lady beneath the façade elicits both her fear and frustration and her anger and indignation. She hates what that woman and, indeed, what many aging women feel compelled to do to our bodies to make them socially, even personally, acceptable.

One of the personae with whom women have identified is the specter of the old woman, characterized as a witch. Wakoski deconstructs the multi-layered text of the witch to redefine her power as a positive force for women. The witch in her multiple avatars resembles what Butler calls a “threatening spectre” (3). This “spectre” in Wakoski’s poetry similarly threatens to disturb the status quo. Also represented as the “teeth-mother” (Medea 45), she is the devourer—read castrator—of men. Eating, then, provides another trope for interrogating how women’s bodies matter/materialize in the culture.

Closely connected to eating, another significant trope Wakoski uses to explore how women’s materiality affects and effects subjectivity, is the image of the hand. In the poem “Lily Hands,” Wakoski metonymizes both the lily hand and the prosthetic hand to represent the “monstrous doubling” and the “narcissistic horror” experienced by women as we wrestle with split aspects of ourselves. The insertion of the bionic hand as a kind of cyborgian “lesbian phallus,” like the witch, institutes a radical shift in the way meaning, power, and materiality can be perceived and determined. Thus, the woman-persona, confronting significant body issues, can come to claim her female erotic as an assertion of her woman’s witch-potential. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the poet’s return to writing/poetry as the site for a recontestation of the woman’s subjectivity: to the power of the poet’s own “ivory stylus” to claim her “sexuality” as “that power that is a form of passion that is certainly an ingredient of great art” (TNP 320). She “retell[s] the story, reshaping it” (Medea 150) so that she can be the “sexual aggressor” (111), “a chooser” (112), the one with the right “to initiate action” (46).

Before she can rewrite the story of her sexuality, she must confront the way sexuality has been culturally inscribed into youth and beauty. Frequently self-referential, Wakoski grapples
with feminist issues that affect her personally, specifically, the implications, for women, of aging
and of being considered unattractive in a world that valorizes youth and beauty and that
essentializes female desirability, lovability, and value in terms of these qualities. Flowers and
candy, long associated with the romance of love and of feminine desirability, serve as a fulcrum
in the poem “Violets” around which Wakoski initiates her examination of the place of the body
for women. Frozen in time, the little violets have been sugared—little girls, after all, are made of
sugar and spice and everything nice, aren’t they?—, not only to ensure sweetness but also to
prevent aging, thereby preserving beauty and the illusion of youth and conflating these with
sweetness or niceness. Through the image of the candied pansies, Wakoski interrogates the
complex relationship of women to the mythic expectations that have frozen us into prescribed
roles privileging and privileged by youth and beauty, passivity and goodness. Like the “candied
violets,” women are compelled to retain our youth, beauty, and sweetness even if we must do so
hyperreally, generating, often, only the simulacrum of that youth, beauty, and sweetness: its
shadowy likeness or a deceptive substitute. Like the pansies, we were never meant to remain
young and beautiful forever, nor were we meant to put on such saccharine sweetness—if we ever
were “beautiful” or “sweet” at all.

It is the body image of that youth and beauty, for Wakoski, that represents the dream-value
of all women. When, in the poem, “She Bends To Offer Me Running Shoes,” the poet-persona
goes to the shoe store to purchase a pair of running shoes and, there, encounters the young and
beautiful sales-girl, she sees her in terms of body images promoted by cultural myths and
advertisements. Admiring the girl bending to fit the poet’s feet with running shoes, in the poem,
Wakoski imagines her into being. Not a real person in the mind of the poet-persona, she is rather
a model which is at once “specific yet anonymous” (Hutcheon, Politics 102), here an example of
postmodern pastiche: a simulacrum which never existed except as a parodic pastiche in
Wakoski’s imagination; she is a representation of the sequestered images generated by cultural
texts, images that now hover within Wakoski’s subconscious mind. This girl is seen as young
and beautiful, with perfect hair—“like water,” “brown as coffee;” it is the real thing, “like Coca
cola…like sweet syrup” (38). Wakoski projects her into a set of images out of the fantasies
generated by advertisements. The girl belongs on a beach playing volleyball, “standing before
the net next to the Pacific Ocean” (39); she is a kind of prom queen attracting everyone’s
attention with her beautiful tan body and her flowing hair. Momentarily conflating herself with
this fabricated image of the girl’s idealized life, the poet-persona is transported into the fantasy of that life by the power of her own culturally-manipulated imagination.

However, when Wakoski comes to her senses, she deconstructs the image and teases out an alternative truth about this girl’s life, informed less by imaginative fictions. In reality, like that other icon of dream-imaginings, Cinderella bound to her hearth, this girl is “only / the servant” (32) consigned to “bending over the inferior feet of the world” (38). In the image of the perfect beach bunny with the Coca-cola hair, the silvery smile, the supple, tanned body, Wakoski could revert to celebrating the fiction of the beautiful woman whose very identity centers on her physical attractiveness. This attractiveness should, as with Cinderella, eventuate her rescue from the world of women’s real experience—servitude, passivity, circumscription to available roles. Unattractive women like the speaker in the poem have been limited by being forced—not unlike those Chinese women compelled to bind their feet—to wear shoes “too narrow, or short, too pointed / or high” (38). The correlative to those not so ancient Chinese women, whose very marriageability and hence survival hinged upon their binding their feet and thereby precluding any sort of active life, is the 21st century brand of foot mutilation. As those glitzy narrow, pointed shoes which Wakoski rues in her poem have come back into fashion, women are today literally undergoing surgical procedures to sever toe parts, to scrape off bunions, to shave heels, all to reshape their feet to fit “attractively” into these new frames. They enact the nightmare misery of Cinderella’s step sisters so intent on fitting undainty and unfeminine “inferior feet” into the glass slipper that would signal their own marriageability to the prince that they resorted to amputating toes and whole chunks of their feet, even at great personal pain and suffering. That they were mutilating their bodies mattered little so long as the goal, conformity to the prescribed physical demands of the moment—here the prescribed frame of the minuscule glass slipper, itself symbolic of the circumscribed, fragile world of the eminently desirable and marriageable would-be-debutante—, be attained.

Shoes here clearly symbolize limitation and not possibility. Whereas shoes in other contexts in Wakoski’s poems enable journey, dance, or flight, like so many of Wakoski’s images, this one, too, is equivocal. On the one hand, the Ruby Tapdance Slippers, in the poem “Medea’s Children,” infuse Judy Garland’s feet with energy and dynamism to engage in the dance (201); however, they are reminiscent of those terrible “red shoes” of the fairy tale in which the young girl, donning the shoes as a sign of freedom and self-assertion, is then punished by being
compelled to dance until she drops. She perishes from the dissipation of her own vital energies which the shoes prevent her from directing in positive ways. The Silver Shoes Dorothy pilfers from the Witch of the West will enable her to get home—but that “no place like home” is back in dry and dusty Kansas, that “myth of home” away from which the tornado of her own wild emotions and imaginings had whisked her into the magical world of witches and new adventures in the first place. Besides, it is these shoes which provide the impetus for the destruction of the Wicked Witch of the West, who as I will show, may not be so much a villain of the piece as just villainized. Dorothy herself ends up, at the very end of the volume of poetry, standing back where she began in her desolate home town, “in her stocking feet” bereft of her precious Silver Shoes, which “had fallen off in their flight through the air, and were lost forever in the desert” (202). Whereas Cinderella’s shoes are supposed to enable her escape, they, in fact, only serve to inscribe her into the text of the passive, good, acquiescent princess who will eventually merge her life with that of prince charming. They, also, are “too narrow, or short” (38), too fragile to be useful for real navigation. The new shoes the poet-persona is buying, embossed with the wings of Mercury, should enable her own mythical, magical flight, but she has no vision for “anything like volleyball / or even running” (38) for herself; her closets full of “aerobic shoes and Birkenstocks” only serve to “disguise old treadmill feet” (201). Merely donning the “right” shoes does not open a portal in the “flat mirror” in which women have seen themselves as what Alexandra Robbins, calls “the tales men tell about women—madonnas and whores, saints and witches, good little girls and wicked queens” (211)—Persephones and Medusas, Helens and Medeas, Cinderellas and Eves. Viewing herself reflected in the mirror of the girl with the beautiful hair, Wakoski sees both the fiction of this particular “tale” and the futility of her ever attaining the mythical promise held out by that fiction. Instead of “learning how to live / above the earth,” this girl, despite her youth and beauty, “bends” and “tends”; she does not in fact, frolic, run, or fly.

The fiction of the fairy-tale life aura of the sales clerk with coffee colored hair parallels the illusion of the happily-ever-after in the tale of Cinderella in the poem, “Jewel Leaves.” Not unlike the sugared pansies, the heroine, Cinderella—“a waiter…who must be chosen” (Medea 112), has been frozen in time as the ever-beautiful, ever-young, ever-desirable one to whom all good things will come: that is, the prince, who loves her for her beauty, will whisk her away to the castle and eternal bliss. However, as with the sales girl, the story behind the story just might
reveal some other truth. Wakoski fits into the community of feminists who “rearrange the familiar motifs and characters [of fairy tales]…to provoke the reader to rethink conservative views of gender and power” (Zipes 13). By parodying bits and pieces of the Cinderella story, inserting alternative interpretations and juxtaposing Cinderella with assorted other cultural icons, Wakoski installs traditional representations of women while at the same time subverting these representations.

Because we women define our status in society by the ability to be loved, we all think of ourselves as potential Cinderellas—beautiful and desirable. Yet, in the poem, Wakoski questions the Cinderella story. Although Cinderella may have beautiful hair, a lovely figure, great skin, and a perfectly proportioned body, she is just a servant who lives in the kitchen by the hearth; she is Ella of the cinders, Ella of the ash-heap, Ella-at-everyone’s-beck-and-call. While Cinderella’s rags to riches story may appear romantic and inviting, Wakoski challenges and mocks the trajectory of this story:

Why would she leave
her shoe on the steps, even
Cinderella, running so fast to be inside
before any prince could see her rags would probably not
have lost just that one item.
One shoe to me
means rape or abduction
means war and guns, fire, someone
running for her life, or being carried senseless
over a rough shoulder. (41-2)

Once Wakoski opens the door to one possible revision of the fairy tale, other possibilities emerge. What is it about this small shoe anyway—does it perhaps symbolize all those other shoes—“shoes too narrow or short, too pointed / or high” (38)—that have circumscribed and limited women’s lives and made them subject to men’s approval and authority? What of the mention of war and guns? Is she again harkening back to “[t]he beautiful Helen, whose foot was like / a Calla Lily” (29) and whose beauty is blamed for world war, but which war probably had its roots in economics, power, domination, and one-up-man-ship? Or perhaps she is referring to Eve, who, wanting for one small moment to share in will, knowledge, and power, “ate [the golden apple] / in her own garden” (29) and then has stood accused of having caused the desecration of the whole human race? What we are left with at the end of the Cinderella story is the image of a disillusioned maid, covered with ashes, mooning over memories of the illusory
one night stand of a grand ball and holding onto her glass-slipper souvenir, obsolete before the night is even over, as such souvenirs always are, and way too fragile ever to effect a bonafide escape from the drudgery of housework, the “reality” of self-worthlessness, or, worse, the specter of physical and emotional abuse.

Although Wakoski posits an alternative interpretation of the events in the fairy story, young girls have read it seeing ourselves as potential romantic Cinderellas, transported to happily-ever-after and not consigned to a life of hearth-scrubbing. The poet, like many women, longs for the prized beauty and the romantic experiences that accrue to that beauty, but that never seem to happen in real life:

When I dream…,
… I am
bare-armed
long haired
scented with lilies of the valley
wrapped in raw silk
shod in glass or gold
looking nothing like
I ever looked in youth or life. (18)

The dream of beauty haunts the so-called unattractive woman, as the dream of youth haunts the old woman, even if she is not very unattractive or very old. Being unattractive, then, is not the only error to which women may fall victim. Women who are considered unattractive and/or old feel compelled to wear the masks of the ever-attractive and of the ever-young. They dream of becoming the fairy tale princess, of being transformed from being ordinary or merely different—as perhaps Cinderella’s “ugly” sisters felt, who would cut their feet in an effort to fit the prescription of the coveted glass slipper. We are not permitted to be our selves; we must conform to some image, fit some conception, wear some mask of youthfulness and attractiveness.

Masks— their creation, their installation, and their removal— contribute significantly to the process of subject formation in Wakoski’s poetry. For Wakoski, the mask functions significantly in her own role as woman-artist as well as woman in the culture. As an artist, she “believes in all the possibilities of masks” (TNP 321); as woman and artist, she creates and installs masks that function within the culture in order to see herself more clearly—“the mask…[becomes a way] of seeing me” (321). She then strips the mask away to discover what it has obfuscated. Art is all about “going beyond innocence, creating all the masks, all the forms, and then being able to strip them away” (323); further,
what art is, is to pull away the masks one by one and reveal what is behind the veil. That’s what we mean about the mystery of art. Somehow you can’t do it without the process of creating the masks first. It’s like enlightenment that you have to go through this journey of taking away your innocence and seeing things perhaps even falsely in order for that innocence or pure perception to mean anything. (322)

Wakoski’s association of the mask with her feminine identity and with her identity as an artist/poet link her to the French feminists’ position in relation to “writing the body,” “speaking the body,” “discovering the body.”

Wakoski’s preoccupation with masks indicates that it is important to examine not just what the mask hides and what it reveals, but the whole nexus of indications associated with the masks and with the wearing and the wearers of them. For Wakoski the mask, then, is multiply revelatory. What she shows us through the interplay of masks is that we need to see that the façade is not real; rather, it is put on or assumed—willingly or unwillingly—by all of us in some measure. Each mask so assumed serves as an interpellation, a call to being—Butler’s “ontological necessity” (273). As there is no such thing as “authenticity,” since “life” is always about putting on some mask, assuming some pose, and then stripping away the façades to see what lurks beneath and to interrogate the complex matrix of intentionalities associated with the assumptions of those masks and poses, the creating, installing, wearing, and removing of the masks constitute essential stages in the process of (self)-discovery.

In one series of poems, the poet investigates the equivocal nature of masks to obscure and to reveal how we see ourselves. The woman-persona of the poem, “Masks,” characterizes herself as an “aging body” (116), masked in the past by youth. This is a twist on self-perception. Since aging women like to think of ourselves as young and beautiful and envision ourselves so, as does the persona, we have often thought of our old-lady faces as the masks. Wakoski turns this perception on its head: youth is seen as the illusion—“that skin, those breasts or / legs, or muscles—They’re not real” (116), and the reality—“your aged body, the real / one you will expose when you are over fifty” (116) emerges from beneath the mask of that youth. Instead of the lovely and unmarred figure of youthful promise, we must inevitably devolve into Cixous’ “uncanny stranger on display” (“Medusa” 350), the “nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (350). Our selves as young and attractive are constructs, masks that obscure the real us—old, wrinkly, saggy, baggy, and unattractive. The trauma of aging becomes fraught, not just with the devastating loss of youth and beauty, but with equally debilitating feelings of
inadequacy, powerlessness, hopelessness, and isolation. Horrors! is this who we really are: “hag-face, only a melt-down to fat and bones / into the chaos of eternity” (EC 126)? Because we’re taught from the beginning that only if we are young enough, beautiful enough, gentle enough, and sweet enough will we be loved by men and that being so loved by men is the ultimate measure of our worth, we cling to those qualities as essential. When Wakoski says in the poem, “So Cold in Winter,”

I love the
morning light
when I feel as if I could be
anything
that my body is fresh and men could
really love me” (22),

on one level she equates morning with youth and beginnings when we can be “anything,” but the “anything” always seems to have attached, for (young) women, the necessity of “being loved by men.” But if we take Wakoski at her word, that youth is merely a mask which essentially obscures our “real,” that is, “old-lady” selves, then when we remove these masks of youth, when we age, we are really coming into our new morning, perhaps a new life of possibility—“when [we] feel we could be / anything”—not fresh, not loved by men, because our new life of possibility is not dictated by our need either to be fresh or to be loved by men. Instead of awakening to those impermanent young bodies, we awaken to bodies “gloved with what they do” (111). This unveiling of the “old-lady” self lurking beneath the young body self represents a revision—a seeing ourselves in a new light, hence a new beginning:

alive, radiant,
lighted, filled until everything is light sometimes
light filled with light. (43)

However, Wakoski’s imagery of the mask does not allow us the simple satisfaction of transcending the negative devaluations associated with aging. Women’s experience is dogged by other ravages of aging. In our culture, aging women are haunted by the menace of menopause—the unspoken passage into uselessness. Wakoski, in her citations of The Wizard of Oz, associates the menopausal woman with another avatar—the Witch of the West: “so wicked that the blood in her [has] dried up” (121). Later, in “The Blue Dress/Airmail Letter,” the menopausal woman becomes Deborah Kerr, who refuses to face her menopause, so retains her young lady mask which she continues to tweak with plastic surgery, designer coifs, and baby-girl dresses. Then
the poet herself in several poems acknowledges her own menopausal state replete with “hag face” (126) and “fawn-spotted skin” (112). This menopausal woman becomes the pariah, the witch, the wicked queen who, once “the fairest of them all,” transforms into the wicked stepmother—and her fate looms as a spectral shape overshadowing all young women’s futures. Fearing the onset of age, the peri-menopausal woman, in the poem, “George Washington at Sam’s Town,” continues to fantasize about “wearing magic slippers” (25)—that is, “that [her] body is fresh and men / could really love [her]” (22), that she could still become Cinderella and live happily ever after as the princess riding off into the sunset—even as she writhes in fear of “age and death…disease and rejection…ridicule and ugliness” (22).

The poem, “The Blue Dress/Airmail Letter,” further develops the complexities of the mask through the image of the antique Deborah Kerr, parodying the imperative to deny her post-menopausal identity. Tottering onto the stage at the 66th Academy Awards ceremony, the aging movie star, masquerading femininity, embodies, not the dream of perpetual youth and beauty, but its nightmare. A caricature of the beauty queen she once was,

    dressed in voluminous old-lady clothes, a kind of morning glory blue, with her hair dyed blond and sprayed into the coif of expensively cared-for aging women...(sic 118),

she is trying to retain “paper crisp control” (118). As what Teresa de Lauretis calls the “visual figuration of [the] feminine position” (Technologies 44), Kerr performs a deadly “inscription of gender, … [t]he woman fixed in the position of icon, spectacle, or image to be looked at” (44). The old lady clothes, the dyed blond hair, the expensive, cared-for façade represent this aging woman’s pandering to the cultural norm of Woman. Women in our society have been coerced into retaining and presenting youthful attractiveness even when such attractiveness has waned. Beneath swaths of blue chiffon, the wizened, wrinkled, aging body that once held the captivated gaze of “millions” of adoring fans lurks a witch. This public Deborah Kerr on display is well-preserved, like the candied violets, but hardly glamorous as her ridiculous baby-doll dress and plasticized demeanor de-sexualize her. Icon no longer, she stumbles onto the stage as an empty, powerless automaton. A fabricated facsimile of the movie queen, she fits the definition of fabricated. She is fab/fabulous, false like a lie, like a fable, too good to be true; she is bricated: made into something hard, solid, immovable, fraught with irony and paradox because it is truly another layer of the mask, one assumed to conform to the criteria of the paradigm of Beauty.16
What this image of the tottering Deborah Kerr, “having to reach for Glenn Close to prevent / herself from falling” (118), the latter herself, “now over forty ha[ving] begun to lose / parts to new beauties” (118), accomplishes, both in itself and as Wakoski uses it in her text, is a kind of three-fold narrativization of gendered womanhood that incorporates the spectator/reader. First, through the externally “imposed, predetermined, and determining coherence” (de Lauretis, *Technologies* 121) of the gendered image, the spectator is compelled to participate in its narrative through identification. Second, the image, even as it represents the gendered “ideal” and calls spectators to participate in the narrative of that ideal, “contains” a kind of space off, or a space “not visible in the frame but inferable from what the space makes visible” (26), probably not unlike an artist’s “negative space.” The image not only presents woman as icon to be viewed, it also presents her as a kind of null-set: empty, vacant, unrepresented, hence, woman as erased, unrepresentable, dissolved. And third, it narrativizes the inevitable and perpetual/perpetuating imperative of displacement of the old by the young. Each of these facets of the image plays out in Wakoski’s text.

Because this mask/image of the gendered representation of woman on the TV screen narrativizes (tells the story of) what it means to be a woman, Wakoski, as woman spectator, is drawn into an identification with that image. Identification with that fabricated facsimile appears complete when a weeping Wakoski-persona moans, “She stumbled, but I fell” (118). The distance between Wakoski as spectator and Deborah Kerr as object on the screen collapses through a kind of narcissistic scopophilia as the former identifies with the latter (Mulvey 441). This is the objective of the narrativized image of Kerr: to “locate the [gendered] spectator… in the clutches of narrativity, a prey to the oedipal logic of desire, to the pull of identification, to the attempt, even though thwarted, to find a coherence and a truth” (de Lauretis, *Technologies* 122). When Wakoski “falls” in Kerr’s place, she is finding within that image, engendered by the medium of the television screen and by the cultural imperative that insists that women present a “young” face to the world, a sense of herself as subject. However, she becomes a subject in two ways: one, the identification with the image and two, her subjection to the narrative that is portrayed through the scenario of the image. Instead of feeling pleasure in associating herself with the image of Deborah Kerr, the old-woman observer is overwhelmed by disgust and horror. In a postmodernist twist, Wakoski experiences a kind of terrible reality check in which her narcissistic identification with the values represented by Deborah Kerr’s image turns on her. She
acknowledges her victimization by the impossible values of the hyperreal Hollywood mentality of the perfect and immutable beauty grounded in youth. The poet recognizes that this simulacrum of the icon has allowed the role of femininity so completely to subsume Kerr’s identity, and by extension, her own, that the woman has nothing else: the “real” old lady Deborah Kerr is relegated to the space off, to the margins, to the liminal elsewhere. Her sacrifice has been everything in exchange for nothing, except perhaps the pleasure of “being chosen as an object of consumption” (Irigaray 84), but even then, the Glenn Closes are hovering in the wings for that spot. When the Wakoski-persona weeps, she is decrying the enormity of what Deborah Kerr’s stumbling appearance on that stage means. She laments the tremendous cost extracted from the woman to maintain such plastic perfection:

I burst into tears. I
realized how much I hate aging, how awful
it is that we get trapped into these old
bodies, and that publicly it might be worse
for a beauty queen or movie star than for
me or any non-celebrity woman, but
privately it is the same. Most of us have
cared about Beauty, about sex, love and
romance with the body, and even about
wholeness that the young body represents
and the old we no longer can claim. (EC 118)

As she identifies with Kerr—“It is the same”—, the aging-woman-persona grieves at the incredible absurdity of Deborah Kerr’s holding onto the relic of her past self; she deplores the concomitant absurdity of a world in which she, herself, will be expected, as she continues to age, to emulate Kerr by fabricating her own façade. Finally, she despairs at the insight that no strategies can mask her own old-lady-ness, and that, in all likelihood, any strategies she might effect would make a mockery not just of her body but also of her person.

What emerges in Wakoski’s poem is a self out of joint, a self caught between the “parallel universes” (41) of the fakeness, but pervasiveness, of Kerr’s visage on the screen, of Wakoski’s own self-imagined conceptions of her own beauty, “long-haired… / wrapped in raw silk” (18), and the real weeping, wincing, aging woman self, sitting in her living room, watching TV. As we can see, then, while the identification appears complete, the spectator-persona experiences a strange feeling of existing in “parallel universes.” While she does identify with the image of Kerr on the screen and with self-images that, in her mind’s eye, depict herself as young and beautiful,
there is still the woman sitting there realizing how much she has been taught to hate her own aging process and the body that accompanies that process, how much she has been taught that the Beauty, sex, love, and romance associated with the young body represents wholeness and identity which we “old one[s] no longer can claim” (118). She ends by “cr[y]ing] for a whole minute, out loud, and / desperately. Crying for [her]self of course.” (118) This self is a conflicted self caught between the imperatives of that old-lady Kerr image and something else, missing.

The something missing is both the self that is not represented in the image of Kerr and an intuition creeping up on the persona that there is something amiss in the image/mask/representation itself. As the spectator-persona is inundated with all these “old / young images flooding the screen” (119), she is caught in what de Lauretis calls the “space off”: a space “not visible in the frame but inferable from what the space makes visible” (Technologies 26). This space off, “erased, or better, recontained and sealed into the image,… exist[s] concurrently [with] the represented space” and includes “the spectator (the point where the image is received, reconstructed, and re-produced in/as subjectivity)” (26, de Lauretis’ parentheses, my italics). What is omitted from the representation of Deborah Kerr is the real woman beneath the plasticized mask of the face lift and makeup and the voluminous old lady clothes that present her as perpetual debutante. What is omitted, then, is Wakoski herself as she sits in her living room watching TV, gazes down at her “fawn-spotted hands,” and glances at her “hag face” in the mirror. The persona’s own marginality—her place in the space-off—is brought into relief as the poet creates, not just the plasticized iconic image of Kerr center stage, but the weeping, aging woman watching and identifying with the icon.

As a reader-spectator, I participate in the spectacle. Just as persona of the poem is the spectator of an image created by cultural assumptions, so the reader serves as the narratee to whom the images of a horrifying Kerr and of a horrified persona are addressed by the poet writer (the narrator behind the narrative). I, as reader, retriangulate and reinterpret the image the persona is watching in the light of my vision of the persona weeping and myself identifying with both and revisioning the whole matrix of the politics of representation. As Wakoski weeps and falls, I too respond with my own shock of recognition—to both images: the stumbling Kerr and the weeping persona. This shock of recognition takes in the imperative of Kerr’s artificial “young-looking” mask, the horror the persona feels at that imperative, and the erasure of a viable woman self from the whole narrative. Outside the text but drawn into it, the reader, through
critical spectatorship/readership, can, like the aging woman within the poem, react—weep, rage, despair—or resist.

The images Wakoski generates in her poetry move me, too, in and out of associated ideological representations of gender and what these leave out, which I sense is myself, the aging me I glimpse when I, too, glance in the mirror. The truth is, I, like Wakoski and like most women, never was the beauty queen, celebrity type, so I’ve always been unrepresented in/by the cultural texts. In those media images of movie stars and beauty queens, in fairy tale representations of Cinderella and Snow White, even in old-lady images like Deborah Kerr’s, I am omitted; I disappear into the space-off. This is the dilemma of women who are living in Wakoski’s parallel universes or de Lauretis’ “two kinds of spaces [representational and space off]... [that] coexist concurrently and in contradiction” (Technologies 26). De Lauretis describes it well in her discussion of the confluence of image, spectator, and space-off:

The movement in and out of gender as ideological representation...is a movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centered frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out, or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable. It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space off, the elsewhere of the discourses. (26)

Thus, the aging woman (persona/viewer/reader) is caught between the world as determined by the hegemonic discourses and the liminal space that the French feminists urge us to claim as our own special territory, not unlike that desert terrain Wakoski herself explores in numerous poems. This is clearly a conflicted space which old women recognize and to which all young women are destined to go. Aging is inevitable. Young adolescent girls move from gangly bodies to those beautiful young bodies of “breasts or / legs, ... / clear skin and firm muscles” (EC 116) to their old lady bodies, wrinkled and dried up. When Wakoski weeps, she is not merely weeping for her own lost youth or the desecration of “beauty” by the fatuous “beauty” of the iconic Kerr. She is crying for a system which insists on the continual displacement of old beauties by young ones.

In the image of Kerr and Close, the persona intuits the implicit competition for “roles” in movies inherent in the film-world dynamic; however, in the culture, other conflicts centered around sexuality and gender identity play in the competition between the young and the old. The narrative of sexual competition initiated by the juxtaposed images of Kerr and Close is further developed by the poet through the imagery Wakoski borrows from The Wizard of Oz.
Through the relationship between Dorothy and the Witch of the West, the poet explores both the dynamic of sexual “competition” as well as the fears that all women face in our own aging process—both the displacement by the young and beautiful and the dissolution into nothingness. In Baum’s text, the Wicked Witch of the West dies by dissolving, and she is subsequently summarily supplanted by the youthful and heroic Dorothy. Wakoski cites the incident in which the young Dorothy gets “so very angry [at the witch] that she picked up the bucket of water that stood near and dashed it over the Witch, wetting her from head to foot. Instantly, the wicked woman gave a loud cry of fear, and then, as Dorothy looked at her in wonder, the Witch began to shrink and fall away” (EC 134). The wicked woman melts away wailing in a “desperate voice” that she “never thought a little girl like [Dorothy] would ever be able to melt [her]” (134). By the witch’s death, the world is supposedly made safe, and Dorothy, young and lovely and innocent, is acknowledged as the hero of the day for having destroyed her. Dorothy, then, becomes like the “isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized” icon of Mulvey’s masculine gaze (444). Her isolation and glamour derive from the singularity of her feat, while her sexualization, first of all, attends, as per the cultural norm, her status as young and beautiful and, secondly, derives from her having defeated the powerful asexual woman, the Witch. The post-menopausal Witch, who with her “dried up” blood (EC 121) defies the sexual imperatives of reproduction and “compulsory heterosexuality” (that is, defining herself in terms of a relationship with a man),20 dwells in that dark place where the sun sets in the west, that very place over which the sun no longer holds sway, that place beyond representation—the liminal elsewhere. Outside culture—outside the venue of the masculinized sun—this witch had power in her own right: she’s reputed to have had “but one eye, yet that was as powerful as a telescope and could see everything” (EC 89). Instead of being limited by a pin-hole camera eye, her vision has scope. That she was nicknamed “Wicked” attests not so much to her true nature, as to her perceived nature. Perhaps, she is wicked precisely because in commanding such expansive vision herself, she defies the limits of cultural scopophilia. However, that Dorothy, who becomes a “sorceress” in her own right (152) can triumph over the Wicked Witch of the West, sends a powerful message to aging women that they have no way of stopping the Dorothies from displacing them—even Glenn Close has “begun to lose / parts to new beauties” (118). In this story, the young and energetic and adventurous Dorothy on her own personal quest-journey must, as part of her rite of passage, destroy to displace the older woman, but the text is written by
a man, and the cultural norm dictates that the sexualized woman will win out, even if only momentarily and even if winning isn’t exactly winning. Characterized as a witch or a sorceress herself (152), Dorothy is being set up for future destruction because, as Clarisse Clement attests: “every sorceress ends up being destroyed….they [sic] have to disappear” (5). The valiant, brilliant, defiant, deviant Dorothy, at the end of Baum’s original story, is restored to Kansas and the drudgery of the scullery, Cinderella returned to the ash-heap. Thus, women are kept contained: by the power of a gaze that defines our place in the culture, by the names to which we are called—young and beautiful—and by which we are called—witch, old hag, dried up, dissolved—, by our restoration to domesticity, by the anxiety of losing our only valuable currency in society, and by a trepidation of impending loss that initiates our own self-loathing: the aging-woman-spectator-persona “cr[ying] for a whole minute, out loud, and / desperately. Crying for [her]self of course” (EC 118).

However, what Wakoski’s weeping persona in “Blue Dress/Airmail Letter” reveals is not just horror and despair, loss and fear, self-loathing and self-belittlement, but an anger: “how filled with anger I was about…the injustice of my life and the world; and how that must [be] communicated, …as pure, raw energy” (TNP 317). Rage seethes under the surface revealing the poet’s unwillingness to succumb to Kerr’s absurdity or to any implied sexual competition. The very tone of Wakoski’s critique of the injustices imposed by the world (read cultural texts) challenges the impenetrability, the falseness, and the necessity of the image-mask that women have felt compelled to assume. However, because the loss of beauty and youth is inevitable and unpreventable, what are we to do? How can we direct our anger so that it becomes, as Wakoski protests, “a very powerful and positive emotion…it prevents you from becoming bitter and dried up” (317-318). Anger, which “is one of the few things that can change the world” (319), then serves as a powerful vehicle of resistance that can prevent the post-menopausal woman from becoming erased, from drying up and blowing away, from dissolving in her own “wicked-ness,” her own “bitter-ness.” For Cixous, the crone who has been consigned to the liminal space of elsewhere is the witch; she is the one who will “return…from beyond ‘culture’” (“Medusa” 348). As we will see in the poem “Hansel and Gretel,” the name of witch gets ambiguously assigned to the crones—the woods-witch and the stepmother—as well as to the young girls, Gretel and Heather, as potential future witches. If their young bodies are actually, as Wakoski contends, masks for their true aging selves, then their essence is in fact—witch. So when Wakoski plays
with the term *witch*, she is effectively creating a coven of witches—good and bad, young and old—as the community of women which it would seem need to claim not their youth and beauty as their essential and defining attributes, but their constitutive “inside” or what I call their witch potential.

Before we can entertain the implications inherent in Wakoski’s ambivalent assignment of that name, *witch*, in “Hansel and Gretel,” we need to examine the equivocal ways in which Wakoski has used it in her texts. The term *witch*, as the characterization of the female body in Wakoski’s *oeuvre*, serves as a fulcrum of equivocation and ironic tension: what Judith Butler has hailed as a site of “collective contestation,” the point of departure for a set of both “historical reflections” and “futural imaginings” (228).21 “What’s in a name?” Wakoski obliquely queries in “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote.” We know that “names” serve as means of interpellating us, of calling us, and of our being called to an identification with a construct within a given ideology. This means the name, the sign, as it “furnishes individuals with an image of their place as subjects in the social world” (King 567), evokes its own historical baggage garnered from cultural usage, reinstalls that baggage in the present, and anticipates future fulfillment of its contingent associations. To be called a witch is to be called out of society, to be ostracized, feared, and hated. Traditionally, witches are old and ugly; evil, selfish, and deceptive, they lurk on the margins of acceptable social behavior. They terrify us because of their liminal status. We do not understand them; we certainly don’t want to be like them—to be the crone, the rebel, the hag—no longer beautiful, no longer “sexual,” no longer desirable.

We are taught to admire the lovely, the passive, the acquiescent good girl, and we want to be like her—*Cinderella, Snow White, Beauty*. If we take the poet’s assertion that the masks we wear are the ones of youth and beauty decrying our true selves—old, ugly, and witchy, we have to buy the suspicion that underneath the façade of all youthfulness, women are really witches, from Gretel, the “Good Witch” because “young and beautiful,” to the “woods-woman,” the bad witch, because “opposite” (120). Note that the term *witch* applies to all women, including Dorothy, whose white attire signals her as a sorceress, a kind of *good witch*. The name’s negativity is somewhat ameliorated by the *good*. Explicitly associated with the good here is the youth and beauty that attach to Gretel as well as to both Dorothy and Glenda, the “good” witch of Oz; what is implied is that if we are sweet enough, passive enough, servile enough, we will be good enough to be loved by men. Men will overlook our inherent witchness if it is well enough
disguised by the proper attributes that materialize in “the only light.” Since it is acceptable, albeit a little suspect, to be the good witch, women are supposed to emulate Deborah Kerr, a kind of latter-day Gretel preserved to paper crispness by hair spray.

However, the truth is that we all grow old like Deborah Kerr, and no amount of hairspray or makeup or fancy attire can prevent or disguise that inevitability. No mask can obscure the name—witch—to which we are ultimately called. Once the body’s beauty fades and “the blood dries up,” women’s claims to fame wither. When the body can no longer attract or reproduce, women no longer possess any productive value within the culture. Thus, we can be consigned to the liminal elsewhere of society where we are contained by vilification and marginalization. This consignment is the “truth” Wakoski, through her texts, attempts to resist, not necessarily by denying our witch potential, but perhaps by actually finding ways to claim it. Initially playing to our fear and loathing of witches, the poet-persona deconstructs the authority of the performative signifier and opens it to new meanings and new possibilities.

In her poem, “Hansel and Gretel,” Wakoski challenges these means by which women’s witch potential undergoes containment. She does so through deconstructing our assumptions not just about witch-ness, but also about the fairy tale-text itself, which, as Christina Bacchilega claims, “continue[s] to play a privileged role in the production of gender” (10). The fairy tale, as another kind of signification, customarily operates within the culture much as Roland Barthes’ conception of myth, whose “double function” is to indicate a certain pattern of orthodox values (doxa) and to impose an understanding or a certain knowledge on us (117, 119). This includes prescribed patterns of expected gender behavior and modes of being. When Barthes advocates a paradoxical mode of reading or mythifying of the original myth, teasing out and testing meanings at odds with the surface logic of the text, thereby de-doxifying their authority (Lee 596), he is promoting a critical, not a nostalgic re-reading and subsequent re-mythifying. Wakoski’s parodying of the fragments of the myth in her poem enacts Barthes’ paradoxical mode of reading. The original fairy tale, “Hansel and Gretel,” in language that purports to be innocent and charming, has as its agenda the reification of cultural patterns, designs, fears, prescriptions, and expectations centering on the male and female bodies and attendant cultural assignations. In Wakoski’s “Hansel and Gretel,” the poet raises the question of whether we should be reading this story at all: “I am not sure this is a story / we ought to listen to” (EC 120). The we of the text is ambiguous. It could, of course, refer to the children for whom the tale is
allegedly designed, or it could indicate the we-women who read this text and find ourselves de-
humanized, commodified, or villainized. Children have been taught to read the story as one of
strangely adversive and subversive female powers, even of feminine evil and predation with
Hansel as “the victim” (120) who hasn’t bargained for or somehow hasn’t been adequately
prepared for such disruptive woman power threatening his manhood. In fact, the first
uncomfortable moment in the tale derives from the fact that it is the *stepmother* who
subversively initiates the children’s leaving. This moment of discomfort discomfits Wakoski
who comments:

> Like so many stories, this one
> has never made sense to me
> [...];
> so we read it for
> the wicked stepmother, insisting it was she who
> sent the children away. (119)

Thus, the whole adventure, allegedly instigated by the wicked stepmother, actually centers,
not so much on Hansel, the purported hero, or even on the pair for which the tale is named—
Hansel and Gretel, but on the wicked stepmother, paradigm of woman-power run amok. The
good birth mother of the tale is displaced mysteriously by the wicked stepmother as if to indicate
that even the most wonderful mother can transform into a witch and threaten the young man’s
burgeoning sexuality. This transformed mother figure deprives him of familial, conjugal rights,
then forces him to confront the wilderness, itself characterized as mysteriously evil and
predatorily female. Even Gretel, the apparently innocuous, though potentially incestuous, sister,
is “smarter than Hansel” (119) and ends up supplanting him as the hero of Wakoski’s tale: it is
*she* who saves *him* from the predatory witch. Finally, of course, there is the cannibalizing wicked
woods-woman/witch who would literally consume him. Surely, all of these female forces
converging on the body of poor Hansel should serve as a grim warning to any unwary young
man-child that woman-power bears elusive and deceptive potential threats which he, in his
youth, innocence, and “lack” of experience, might not anticipate nor know how to control. The
power of the cunt, the genitals, characterized alternately by the stepmother, the witch, the sugar
house, and even Gretel and her contemporary correlative Heather (120), threaten vulnerable
masculinity. Because women are not permitted smarts, because we are seen as bodies proffering
sugar-treats, because we are perceived as sexually threatening/castrating, we have been called by
vile names to shunt us off to the margins. The persona poet comments almost incredulously:
“There seems to be some sense / that we have to be witches” (120), not because we are actually witches, but because we are threatening.

Through her version of this tale, Wakoski challenges singular interpretations of the truths that purport to represent women and our bodies, both confirming and deconstructing our assumptions about those bodies and the lives that attend them. Here, she is challenging the ways we can/should/must read myths; she is contesting our notions of what constitutes a witch—a name we have been or will be called if we do not keep our erotic, sexual, maternal, bodily, intellectual powers carefully circumscribed: “all women are witches” (120), Wakoski reminds us. In the process, she finds herself, as many women in the culture do, caught between the confirmation of old assumptions of witchness and the deconstruction process.

The “real”/other beneath the façade is elusive. The Wicked Witch of the West figure gleaned from *The Wizard of Oz* assumes, in Wakoski’s “Hansel and Gretel,” first, the form of the step-mother, then, that of the woods-witch, while Dorothy appears in the forms of Gretel and, later, of Heather. Linked together, the story of Oz and the narrative of Wakoski’s “Hansel and Gretel” are haunted by all these female powers—the dark and shadowy ones of wicked witches and the sorcery of the good witches with their repressed female intelligence and burgeoning female sexuality. What Wakoski reveals in unmasking young girls as potential witches is that when they claim their own power to act, the whole culture shudders in fear. Yet, it is this suppressed and emerging female power that appeals to the poet. While one part of her does crave to be the beautiful woman whom men desire, another part of her aspires to be “a woman who will not step aside / for history” (*Medea* 44). She protests: “I am glad I was born a woman, [but …] what I want is to have been the one who made the choices” (111-112), “to have the right to initiate action” (46) even if that means “willingly accepting the masculine role—lesbian, teeth mother” (44). This image of woman has “outlived the old myths” and initiates “the new myth for women” (44).

Wakoski’s language indicates why the witch figure—lesbian, teeth mother—is considered wicked. She threatens men in their space, in their masculine role, in their manhood—“the daddy is the victim” (*EC* 120). The witch intimidates Hansel, the boy, with the most threatening aspects of women’s bodies: the womb—in the image of the sugar house which would feed him—and the female genitals—which would devour him. “Often interpreted and feared as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow [him] whole” (Irigaray 29), female desire, here through the
image of the sugar house of the woods-witch, voracious herself, and, later, of the wiles of the more tentatively hungry Heather, who would “like / to eat him up, she thinks he’s so sweet / and tasty (EC 120), has the potential first to lure Hansel into its domain, then to subsume him into its morass. Her attempts to lure Hansel, “the one being fattened for the oven” (120), back to the oven-womb bear the threat of castration. Once in the power of the witch, Hansel is held ransom for his desired phallus, the source of his power. Recall in the traditional tale, at one point Hansel holds out his puny, little chicken bone (read “little hard-on”) for the blind witch to feel. The woods-witch clearly wants that bone to become larger and more pleasing to complete her plans to devour him, to subsume his identity and his body entirely into hers, and Heather, too, has her designs.

Wakoski has deconstructed the position of roles in society: “Men are weak and helpless, / victims” (120), and the women, both old and young, are “smarter” and more powerful, capable of abandoning sons, of castrating/devouring them, or of rescuing them. When the protagonist of the narrative is a woman instead of a male figure, she will demand the three-dimensional space normally assigned to male protagonists. She will be, not the object of the erotic gaze—here it is Hansel who is in the cage, in the frame, in the box, being looked at—, but a “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego... [who] emerges as the representative of power...[and who] controls events” (Mulvey 443).

The witch, as protagonist of the poems, intimidates not just Hansel, but Gretel as well. While the witch threatens Hansel—that is, virile man—with the power to control and contain him, to destroy and devour him, her relationship to Gretel is less straightforward. The complex dynamic of the nature and influence of the witch on women’s lives represents Wakoski’s struggle with subjectivity and her identification with the performative extensions of witch. Wakoski called the witch—the “real” witch of the tale and any witch in the making—the “teeth mother” and presented both bad witches, the wicked woodswoman, and good witches, Heather and Gretel, as potential devourers. However, within the culture women have been the ones compelled to be “sugar and spice and everything nice.” Thus, in the poem “Violets,” Wakoski has also characterized women’s physical position within the culture through the symbol of the “candied pansy.” We have already seen the association of candy with the allure of the sugar house where the witch waits to disrupt and to destroy and with the adornment of chocolate.
glazed tortes with edible candied violets, themselves representative of women—also edible?—
captured in the compulsion to be looked at.

To these Wakoski adds other associations with eating as a means of control and of
capitulation. The very dynamic of eating, the alleged means by which women can get back in
touch with essential nature, is itself ambiguous. On the one hand, women’s taking over the power
of eating enables them to redefine relationships. When Eve, in the poem “In St. Louis,” eats the
apple “in her own garden” (29), she “sets men against women” (29). But what is really
happening in that story? Eve—in her own garden—sees in the apple a chance to share in
patriarchal knowledge and power, a chance to secure a place for her will in the power dynamic,
defined completely by the will, first, of God the Father, then, of Adam, the Husband. Instead of
being seen as entrepreneurial and proactive, she is seen as sinful and betraying of the patriarchal
trust. She is the first witch who threatens the patriarchal paradigm.25

Another time, Wakoski recalls, as a young girl,

not eating [her] candy
...holding [hers] back till
[she] still had a piece of chocolate
when no one else had
anything…. (122, my italics)

For that one moment of power or control, she was called “mean” (122) that is, witch-like. She is
made to feel bad for wanting something for herself. So, what does a woman do in a culture that
honors power and control and desire, but not in women? She can always eat junk. Women’s
eating candy, often indulged to assuage our failure to live up to the paradigm of niceness and of
lovableness, contributes to our failure to attract by making us fat and ugly, no longer physically
desirable:

we American women who are all overweight and
craving love
while eating sugar. (120)

Symbolically, eating for men is an act of domination. Recall that nothing is said of the
cannibal Hansel, who would, without permission or “foreplay,” eat the witch’s goods. He
invades her space, destroys what she has built, follows the dictates of his needs/ego, then has the
temerity to call her the demon. In other of the poems, men’s eating flowers signifies their power
over the garden—which we have seen belongs to Eve—, over the gardener, often designated as
the woman—, over nature, reproduction, and production, over women’s bodies. When the lion-
man, who likes flowers because “they seem so helpless and frail” (97), conceives of deigning to eat the flowers, he visualizes

a cattleya
massively presented, like a steak on his plate. Or a giant
*lily* being offered in someone’s hand, to hold and crunch on.” (97, my italics)

The language of this image links it to the poem “Lily Hands” in which one of the protagonist’s “lily hands” (107-8) has been removed and replaced by a prosthetic device. The language further interweaves the intentionality of the eating with the removal of that hand: by a leap of association, we can imagine the man eating the lily hand with the voracity that he would devour a steak. This act of masculine eating represents a subverting of women’s work, symbolized by hands, “gloved with what they do” (111), to man’s will and a sacrifice and violation of women’s bodies again to satisfy men’s appetites. In the culture, the imagery of hands permeates the domination of women by men: women have given their “hands” in marriage; men have had to take women “in hand” to keep them in line. Men’s hands can caress women’s bodies, but women’s hands aren’t supposed to caress those same bodies. Men’s appetites are to be respected and assuaged, but women’s appetites are suspected and suppressed.

When, in Wakenski’s poem, the man eats the lily hand as an act of domination, the woman can go around handless, representing the same kind of immobility and vulnerability as the Chinese women with their bound feet, or she can get a new hand. Obviously, the woman cannot, like the salamander, grow a new appendage, but she can certainly affix one. In “Lily Hands” it is a better one, making her “so [much more] interesting,” this woman “that commands notice” (96). Ironically, the opportunity to implement the use of the prosthetic hand derives from the man’s consumption of the lily hand. From the cultural imperative to succumb to the patriarchal powers, women can craft a new being, a new way of being seen. She becomes the cyborg in which the poet combines not just mechanical and organic, but a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality... [generating] the possibility of historical transformation” (Haraway 697). What the image of the girl with the prosthetic hand does is to shatter a binary: she does not possess one “good” hand—the feminine lily hand, beautiful, smooth, white, delicate, fine—and one “bad” hand—a prosthetic monstrosity, deformed, hideous, aberrant, abnormal. Rather, she has taken an evil, the mutilation of her lily hand—read *feminine*—and turned it to advantage—read *possibility*. She is a new design promising a range of possibilities; she is a new kind of anomaly, a new construct that bears scrutiny.
Initially, Wakoski perceives the cyborg as a perversion of the beautiful garden, a distortion that disturbs equanimity: “it” represents an incursion of the machine into paradise that forces us to re-vision that garden. But, revision is difficult: it entails deviating from those old reified performances that bear the force of history and iteration. Before Wakoski can arrive at this revision, she has to overcome her revulsion. As she indulges in a macabre curiosity about the girl with the prosthesis, she meditates on the loss of the beautiful real hand with its long fingers, soft “as the taper of lily buds” (108), the real hand, the lily hand, the beautiful hand, like morning glories plucked and set in a crystal vase, no longer “connected” to the root system (108).

Wakoski, nostalgic for the ideal, is repulsed by “the non-lily part of her body” (108), that unendurable disfigurement. The persona of the poem cannot bear it, as she “wriggle[s her] own fingers resting in [her] lap” (108). The self-loathing that underpins the text tells much about ways in which women have perceived ourselves. Disease, disfigurement, debasement—anything that deviates from the norm, from the ideal—, strikes a dissonant chord. For Wakoski, the encounter with deformity initially depresses her; it overpowers her ability to conceive of woman differently than as “lily.”

However, her fascination with the prosthetic hand as somehow more interesting, more mysterious, more vital—certainly different and capable of new and unforeseen possibilities, shifts value orientation from the lily hand to the bionic hand. Suddenly, the bland, passive lily hand pales beside its exciting, vibrant, complex counterpart. This shift in value and vision creates a whole new context requiring, in turn, a renovation in admiration. Perceiving the lily hand as offensive instead of “normal” undermines the patriarchal mindset because it indicates that youth and beauty are, instead of normative conditions, temptations that threaten the states of mind and body, the true “spirit of women.” When the lily hand is seen as camouflaging the hidden and insidious sickness of patriarchally defined feminine beauty, the conscientious feminist must be willing to cut it off: save the whole woman by removing the offending hand. Only by removing the offending lily hand can women save ourselves from the man-date of physical attractiveness that has dominated our thinking about ourselves. What Wakoski comes to realize in the poem is that the disease does not only originate from outside the body. The offending hand is also self-generated: “she herself is the sickness” (Coming 7), as Cixous describes in a similar rumination on an amputated hand.
This new hand has agency and power, unlike the passive, but beautiful, lily hand resting in the girl’s lap, waiting to be washed. This newly-crafted hand is the chimera of which Donna Haraway speaks: it represents a new hybrid, a new mythological creature that will serve as a new protagonist in new stories, a new fabrication devised out of the assertion of a freed-up imaginative capability. In this new hand lies salvation for women who willingly excise that which impedes self-expression and exorcise the internal demons that refuse to permit our getting rid of those cultural messages and myths binding us to youth and beauty.

Hand, then, for Wakoski, represents a new conception of both body in itself and body as an expression of the woman’s evolving subjectivity. We must claim, not those once-upon-a-time “lily hands,” but our parchment-skinned hands with their wonderful blue veins, “gloved with what they do” (EC 111), and we must substitute for those impossibly “beautiful” hands, a new kind of hand altogether, one designed and crafted not to function according to any cultural imperative, but to respond to the will and intention of the owner, the (wo)-man-I-pulator, who operates her mechanical hand…

| opens and closes |
| the gripping pads she now has |
| …makes connections, closes circuits, helps her wash the other hand. (108) |

The bionic extension of a young girl’s body and the aging hands of an older woman represent the beginning of a transformation in self-perception. The young girl is not diminished by the prosthetic hand; the older woman is not limited by her blue veins and parchment skin. Rather, both women are diminished by the man’s hand that “takes and encloses,” by the gullet, by the gut (Cixous, Coming 4); all women are limited by that attitude towards us that would make of us the object of men’s desire and men’s agenda, and perhaps, more, by our own failure to love ourselves or to see our own worth: “We need to love ourselves AND to love otherness” (Jason 135). Women are enlarged by the cyborgian possibilities represented by hands that “point out, fingers that see, that design, from the tips of the fingers that transcribe the sweet dictates of vision” (Cixous, Coming 4). Wakoski is at a juncture. She can allow the age on her hands to be “the final, natural fence/ between what [she] thinks/ and what [she] can do” (112-113). Her aging hands can limit her capacity to grow and to love, or she can see in hands, new possibilities for being.
In challenging the parameters symbolized by the boundaries between the hand of flesh and the mechanized hand, the young hand and the old, Wakoski broaches the equally fraught dilemma of women’s bodies as sexual and as erotic. The lily hand is clearly gendered—lovely, passive, sweet, smooth—while the bionic one is—other. We have already seen in numerous poems the position of the woman as determined by the male gaze, her corporeal reality created by masculine desire. It is the lily hand that represents what is seen as “desirable,” the bionic hand as—something else, something strange,27 unnnarrativizable. In Laura Mulvey’s view, women have been constructed as icons, sexual objects whose visual presence invites erotic contemplation (442), as surely Deborah Kerr once did. However, the erotic as an attribute of women has itself become a site of contestation for the definition of women’s subjectivity. When Mulvey uses the term “eroticized,” she is using it in a derogatory way to signify women’s being seen—like the pale lily hand or like the girl in running shoes—, not for ourselves, but for a negative genderized potential. Wakoski, throughout her poetry, characterizes this negativity in several ways. In a couple of poems, “Looking for Beethoven in Las Vegas” and “Ice Walking,” she bemoans, like Heather of “Hansel and Gretel,” loving without being loved: she laments being stuck in “a house / your lover / doesn’t want to live in” and “the prospect of sleeping alone every night” (18). Her feelings of physical plainness, unattractiveness, and inferiority weave through the poems “In Saint Louis,” “She Bends To Offer Me Running Shoes,” “Wearing the Silver Slippers,” “Saluting the Sun,” and “Sound Track.” Body issues centered on aging as detracting from her sexual eroticism play in “The Blue Dress/Airmail Letter,” “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote,” “Alexander,” and “Luxor.” Her body issues are exacerbated in “The New Moon, a Scar,” “Swan’s Neck,” and “The Motorcyclist in the Woods” where her very image is being erased, ignored, and dismissed. In the poem, “So Cold in Winter,” she laments that women value themselves as female-feminine only via their sexual attractiveness to men.

Fantasizing love, pretending she is attracting men’s attention, she becomes a woman. Through all these negative body images, she is generating, not a multi-faceted, complex, exciting, energized subjectivity, but an empty, hollow, determined “other” instead. Catherine McKinnon defines such gender socialization as “the process through which women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men. It is that process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their identity as women” (531, McKinnon’s parenthesis, my italics).
While Wakoski admits in her poems that she has succumbed and probably will continue to succumb to the need to be desirable, which she translates as being loved and admired by men, her poems, as we have seen, especially in the trope of the prosthetic hand, also attempt to search for other ways of defining her gendered being. In a pastiche of images and assertions, the poet examines an erotic self: as derived from past feelings of confusion at her emerging adolescent eroticism; as a hidden, even formless, but gradually emerging, internal, perhaps secret, erotic self; as an abject self who acknowledges shame, blame, and scorn at feelings of an inner sexual identity that has not conformed to the way in which women’s external sexual selves are expected to be conceived and expressed. Poet-theorist-feminist, Audre Lorde, claiming women have confused the erotic and the sexual, criticizes a gender identification contingent on patriarchal interpellation. For her, notions of sexuality and the erotic have been conflated and “used against women to make them feel confused, trivial, and psychotic” (54); “women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of [the] existence of the superficially erotic, [which] has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority” (53). When the young-girl persona of Wakoski’s poem, “The New Moon, a Scar,” attempts to hold onto her one piece of chocolate when everyone else has already eaten theirs, she is castigated as “mean,” tantamount to Lorde’s psychotic, contemptible, and suspect, or to Butler’s “unruly child” (ix). What she is, however, is not “mean,” but “un-rule-y,” that is, “dangerous.” This sequence of “The New Moon, a Scar” represents the young girl’s being called to adolescent conformity by denying the viability of her own sexuality, just as the persona of “Lily Hands” feels called upon to reject the non-lily hand as a kind of violation of the feminine. Feeling so overwhelmed with emotions and needs that she could not articulate within the safe confines of the cultural language—“I felt so out of control, my emotions were so wild” (EC 122)—, this little girl

learned early to find
what few moments of control [she] could exercise
in contrast to the actions of other children. (122)

In attempting to push against the limits of being, she is labeled a rebel. For not performing her proper role, she has to be punished; she has to be contained, even erased. Later in the same poem, the persona says, “Now I say nothing…and no one sees [me]” or they “see me as empty…nearly invisible” (122):

Thus, women have been taught to deny our inner selves, that invisible…
thing which is there but which
no one sees, or which is only a form
not yet illuminated. (122)

Wakoski asserts the value of this invisible “thing,” which lacks shape only because it has not yet come to light. In other images the poet has sought a form for this invisible: “I would look at my body, my face, from every angle, searching / for something which might be invented with a different length of light.” (63). Although she is struggling, here, with the want of attractiveness that continues to haunt her as she attempts to metamorphose her un-lovable body into what men desire, what she is implying by this search, too, is that she intuits that there really is something else for which she should be looking, something of great value that has been kept hidden, denied, even omitted—“Some vital piece / of evidence is missing” (106).

The shame the young girl-Diane feels at being termed “mean” foreshadows the evolution of her adult burden of guilt, scorn, and other forms of self-recrimination. In a letter to Craig, included in the text of the poetry, Wakoski confesses to feeling “full of blame” and needing “absolution” (156): “I burn and burn myself. I freeze myself with scorn. I am fire and ice with no sense of a temperate zone….I am always on fire or like an ice queen, freezing or searing myself with blame and judgment” (156).

Why should she be so self-derisive? Where does this anti-narcissism that drives her to hate herself, fear herself, denigrate herself, see herself as torn between blame, judgment, and scorn come from? We have seen where these feelings originate; they are inculcated from youth—through experience and the imposition of the informing cultural texts. Wakoski’s personal childhood was fraught with tensions of a father who virtually abandoned the family to poverty and desolation predicated on, at least in young Diane’s mind, her mother’s lack of physical attractiveness and personal charm, and a mother whose resentment at rejection and consequent insular self-absorption precluded her cultivating any meaningful relationship with her daughter. It is a short step from autobiography to the general awareness that the lack of power for women originates with our mother’s milk so to speak. The Wakoskian little girl who had so little control—her “life so empty” and her “needs so great” (122) learned to exercise a measure of control, ironically, in problematic ways. It is no wonder, then, that women have not valued either our disparate bodies or our individual desires; we have not been in touch with our inner selves, with our erotic selves, with any sense of ourselves as individuals, because the female self has
been labeled young, beautiful, and sexually attractive or passive, meek, and acquiescent or mean, rebellious, witchlike, seductive, and hungry.

What Wakoski struggles to find, as Audre Lorde advocates, is permission to efface the negative self images that have accrued to women’s erotic identities and to recognize and to acknowledge female desire as the *embodiment* of something positive inherent in the person of each woman, something personal, exciting, mysterious, yet to be discovered and brought to the surface. The persona of “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote” admits:

[w]hen I disappeared into the rocky tunnel
the only return possible
was a shadow, and it was that
which depended on the name. (106)

With this admission, she acknowledges the contingency of her bodily being. The shadow depends upon a source outside itself—the sun—for its shape and substance, but still that substance is amorphous, ephemeral, and liminal. Further, that her “return” depends on the name(s) to which she is called to be and by which she is called into being reinforces the externality of her sense of her own constructedness. Her very corporeal being depends on language and on the cultural texts that name her. Proper femininity, besides conflating physical attractiveness with degrading servitude, immobilizing passivity, and cultivated self-loathing, calls women to a sexuality that is directed only outward to please men. Yet, somehow, the emergent woman here intuits “that something more substantial / than language anchors us” and acknowledges that “[w]e have not been given all / the facts” (106). For Wakoski, as for Audre Lorde, there is something else which defines women, and that something else is the female erotic: “our most profoundly creative source” (Lorde 54), that “power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge” (53), “an assertion of the life-force of women” (55).

Although Wakoski does not explicitly aver, her poems indicate that in being subjugated to masculine conceptions of the sexual, women’s eroticism has been robbed of its internal fecundity and generative potential. It has been colonized to serve the agenda of the dominant ideology. Women have thus not seen our own eroticism, but have felt that “sex [is] like snow on a grave” (*EC* 106). Through the image of snow, Wakoski taps into the futility and vulnerability of a sexuality that supplants the erotic. “Sexuality,” as opposed to the “erotic,” valorizes “physical attractiveness and the attributes of female biology, ‘sensation without feeling’” (Lorde 54) or the romantic fabrication of feeling, the relegating of feeling into the real of the hyperreal, that which
never existed nor can exist, the complete fiction that attenuates female desire in order to gratify
male desire. The “grave” indicates the end-game of that sex which is “sensation without feeling”: it is death. When Wakoski whines, “to kill / yourself for love. Isn’t that / what all of us do?” (EC 105-6), she is not questioning that we do this; she is questioning why we sacrifice substance for shadow, the well of our being for a shell of non-being; she is castigating herself. Passion is seen as a crucifixion, a self-death—“to kill yourself for love”—rather than as a resurrection, a claiming of our sensuality and our desire.28

The rocky cave and tunnel in “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote” could represent, as I discussed in Chapter 2, an aspect of the geography of woman’s desire, Freud’s “dark continent,” Cixous’ heath, our deepest well of being. When Lorde advocates that “we begin to live from within outward” (58), she is urging us to redefine Wakoski’s dark side of the moon (“New Moon, a Scar”), her rocky cave and tunnel, to see them not as places of denial and destitution, but as places of self-renewal and creativity, and, consequently, as our most potent source of “information about ourselves” (54) that will inform the materialization of new bodies that matter. When the woman emerges from the cave, she is perceived as a shadow because she is expected to conform to the name(s) that called her hence—names of wife, mother, daughter, female, feminine, woman, whore, bitch, cunt, lady, ma’am, maid…, but, having gone into the darkness29 of her own inner resources, she can no longer subscribe to the name(s) she is called by the father of her “cunt-ry.”30 Instead of allowing names to interpellate us, women should call ourselves to an identification we wish for ourselves. Wakoski herself claims the benefices of her own name, “Diane” and the identifications that accrue to it: “I have loved being called ‘Diane.’ I have loved all the associations with the Moon, and I have loved the image of Athena, the goddess of the hunt and chase (and chastity), with her silver arrows and what has always seemed to me, the image of a chooser” (Medea 112). Wakoski, in the poems, recognizes the power of her woman’s body, as she claims “the blue veins under [her] old skin” (173), asserting with a kind of pride that “blue is hotter than red” (173). She is the “hot” woman she perceives as she looks at those blue veins, “hotter than red” under her own parchment skin. The blue under our old skins still burns hotter than ever. It is a frightening and erotic business that we undertake to claim the dangerous and creative potential of our own bodies: we “can’t pass through this door without burning [ourselves]” (173).
Wakoski articulates the phenomenon of a new self-vision in “Craig’s Hummingbirds”:

I am the woman
holding a rose and the crystal
mirroring my pythoness oracles. (63, my italics)

Here, she conflates the woman, the name (of the rose), and what I have been calling her Medusa-potential. However, claiming one’s Medusa-/witch-potential is not unequivocal. Women have so feared our pythoness oracles that we have neglected to acknowledge the power that accrues to it. None of us likes to be labeled or thought of as witch, gorgon, pariah. We, too, rage for order against the chaos of our feelings, against scattering, fragmenting, against internal diversity, against divergence, against bodies that either don’t matter or matter only in negative ways. In her poetry, Wakoski reflects what women in our lives have felt: as we face our own strangeness, we often feel the urge for oneness, for wholeness, for a we-ness against the monstrous, the anomalous that is us; against the “unspeakable, unlivable, unnarravitizable” (Butler 188) that is us. We have been taught to value the neat, the rational/thinkable, the legible, the common sense; we have been expected to perpetuate the continuity of the bodies and the behavior that enable classrooms and marriages and households and other vital social relationships to support the status quo, the reasonable. We have been held enthralled to a certain logic of being that dictates what we expect of ourselves as we struggle both to conform to the messages of the culture and to listen to that still wee voice calling us both from and to our own wilderness: that “sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible” (33) place that is our deepest erotic selves.

Even as Wakoski embraces her own ability to grow and to change, she does not want to be seen as too strange, though she has seen herself as estranged from herself; as too risky, though she hungers for the unknown of “98% risk”; as too alien from the “real” world and from the ideal of the feminine. Yet, she continually challenges that ideal as impossible and even undesirable because it denies her the possibility of her uniqueness, her voice, and her identity. While she hesitates to step outside the frame, she despises what she sees within the frame and rails against its strictures and limitations. She fears being on the other side of the mirror, but she can’t bear to see her visage reflected from this side of the mirror because it is informed by too many voices she doesn’t want to hear. And she eschews being beyond history, yet she doesn’t want to be limited by its old reifications and dictates and truths.

Diane Wakoski does not actually resolve the dilemmas of the body nor the dilemmas of the names women are called. She leaves intact the feeling that the witch must be contained at all
costs, lest she run wild and ravage youthful manhood or blessed femininity, lest she disrupt the status quo, lest she teach Gretel that the young girl, too, can exert power over men, power that derives from sources other than the sexual or the physical. Through images of aging movie stars preserved against time and through fairy stories like “Cinderella” and “Hansel and Gretel,” accompanied by the poet’s own apology—“I am not sure this is a story / we ought to listen to” (120)—, we see how women have been carefully acculturated to hate ourselves, to hate being “trapped into our old bodies” (120). Driven by the desire “to be loved” (120), we have cared so much about beauty and sex and love, these latter claimable, as women get older, only by “performativity,” that is, like Deborah Kerr, by creating the illusion of beauty and youth. But the illusion presents merely artifice, an adornment for the “chocolate glazed tortes” (96). In the end, women will have to claim our bodies, to recognize with Cixous that the Medusa is “not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (“Medusa” 350). While Wakoski herself attests that the image of Medusa represents the intellectual woman and the threat of the female mind, her poetry indicates that it is not just the female mind that threatens, but the body as well, and it is through claiming this body that women can actively pursue the refashioning of our subjectivity.

Chapter Three End Notes

1 In this chapter, I am using the definitions of geography as “the study of the earth and its features and of the distribution on the earth of life, including life and the effects of human activity” (AHD 299), and as “the surface, form, physical features, natural and political divisions…” (COD 412). The definition of the Greek graph, meaning “forming, thing written, drawn in a specified way” (433), contributes interestingly to my enterprise. This aspect of the definition of geography plays well into the construction of the body in Wakoski’s poetry. She examines surfaces—both as artificialities and as masks/roles that define: “we are the roles we play” (Jason 98). She examines the distribution of “life” forces and the “effects” of human activity—those ideological imperatives that call women’s bodies into being; she explores the various forms the body takes and interrogates those physical features that matter in bodies; she contests the natural and political “divisions” of the gendered body.

2 “There are things that come out of your biology, but I think there are other things that have to be given to you somewhere” (TNP 316)

3 I discuss Wakoski’s “reality” in Chapter 1.

4 She discusses the way the body is conceived through language—the body as a thing written/drawn in specified ways. I outline my use of Roland Barthes’ concepts of mythologizing, remythologizing, and demythologizing in the introduction. Essentially, he argues that the task of the demythologist/remythologist is to “read against the grain of the culture and to expose the
production of meaning, to critique cultural myths, to ‘unlearn’ orthodox social values or doxa, and to establish more pluralistic perspectives” (Slethaug, 529).

5 I will be referring to Judith Butler’s discussion of performance in *Bodies That Matter*.

6 I will be referring to Donna Haraway’s definition of the cyborg in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” which I will apply differently in specific assorted contexts.

7 In her book of theory, *Toward a New Poetry*, Wakoski defines vision: “‘Vision’ is what is most private, intimate, eccentric, unusual, unique, visionary about the person. By definition it would have to be that part of you which is somewhat repressed or put down because it doesn’t fit in with the forms” (334). If we apply this definition, then as women see the ways in which the body has been constructed, our self-vision will be forever changed and redirected, ideally, toward a future re-visioning.

8 A palimpsest indicates a layering of texts “that have been written upon several times, often with remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased writing still visible” (*AHD* 512). Pastiche has the character of presenting an odd array of texts intertextually.

9 Alicia Ostriker describes both Wakoski as poet and the Wakoski poet-persona of her poems as “fiercely strong, hard as a rock, poetically abundant—a poet’s abundance consists of her range of images, and Wakoski’s is wide and wild as any surrealist’s, and possibly wider and wilder than any other American poet’s” (80).

10 I am defining dialectical as: 1. the “art of investigating the truth…, testing of truth by …disputation. 2. criticism dealing with meta[–]physical contradictions” (*COD* 264, my bracketed insert)

11 Taken from *Le Sexe*: “As for the priority of symmetry, it co-relates with that of the flat mirror—which may be used for the self-reflection of the masculine subject in language, for its constitution as subject of discourse. Now woman, starting with this flat mirror alone, can only come into being as the invented other of the masculine subject (his alter ego) or as the place of emergence and veiling of the cause of his (phallic) desire; or again as lack, since her sex for the most part—and the only historically valorized part—is not subject to specularization.”

12 I am borrowing from both Judith Butler and Donna Haraway to craft the cyborgian lesbian phallus. Butler refers to the lesbian phallus as a split signifier: “When the phallus is lesbian, then it is and is not a masculinist figure of power; the signifier is significantly split, for it both recalls and displaces the masculinism by which it is impelled” (89). What I am borrowing here is the notion of the paradox of applying a masculinist power to a woman, who both can and cannot own that power, perhaps even wills and wills not to partake of it. Wakoski herself protests that, while she has not wanted to be a man, she has, nonetheless, experienced “penis envy” in that she has wanted to initiate a masculine-like sexual aggression and to partake of masculine prerogatives to act and to choose (*Medea* 111-112). The cyborg for Haraway is not just a postmodernist commingling of machine and human; on a more abstract level, it represents a whole new creature with new and often untested and barely imagined potential powers: a
creature of “both imagination and material reality” and “a matter of fiction and lived experience” (696). Further, it represents, through “crucial boundary breakdowns” (698), a “revolution of social relations” (697), “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (700), “deepened dualisms, permanently partial identities, and contradictory standpoints” (700), “a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self...[that] feminists must code” (706). The notion of the cyborg ties in neatly with Butler’s “lesbian phallus” when Haraway insists that cyborgs “seize[...the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (715) and connects with Wakoski in that cyborgs are “feminist variants” (717) that “subvert central myths of origin...to subvert command and control” (715).

13  Irigaray and Cixous use frozen: How can I be distinguished from her? Only if I keep on pushing through to the other side, if I’m always beyond, because on this side of the screen of their projections, in this plane of their representations, I can’t live. I’m stuck paralyzed by all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen. Transfixed, including by their admiration, their praises, what they call their loves. So either I don’t have any ‘self’ or else I have a multitude of ‘selves’ appropriated by them, for them, according to their needs and desires. ...I’m completely lost. In fact, I’ve always been lost, but I didn’t feel it before. I was busy conforming to their wishes. But I was more than half absent. I was on the other side” (Irigaray 17, Irigaray’s italics); “we have been frozen into our place” (Cixous, “Sorties” 68), “on ice” (69); and “[t]he little girls and their ‘ill-mannered’ bodies immured, well-reserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified,” (“Medusa” 348).

14 Jameson’s idea of parody and pastiche derives from Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal and of simulacra: hollow and empty, postmodern parody and pastiche indicate that which never existed. When Hutcheon uses the terms, she twists the traditional meaning of the words—pastiche as a kind of intertextual collage of assorted texts and parody as a kind of critical travesty, imitation, and/or mockery—into a postmodern usage. Seen as a kind of “contesting revision or rereading of the past” (Politics 95) through the appropriation of a plethora of images salvaged from “the image reserves of the past” (93), postmodern parody is “both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation” (98).

15 When Wakoski uses the trope of the mask, she insists on installing the mask as a means of “seeing” (TNP 321), then on stripping it away to see “the real face” (321). This poetic process resembles Hutcheon’s description of postmodern parody: “As a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (101). Wakoski’s entire text of poetry vacillates between this parodic inscribing, installing, and legitimizing and a more destabilizing subverting, critiquing, challenging.

16 The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines fab, a kind of abbreviation for fabulous, as marvelous; fabulous itself means “celebrated in fable...incredible, absurd, exaggerated.” To fabricate means to construct, manufacture, invent (as a story), to forge (as money), and if we extrapolate from fabulist as “a liar,” then it also means to lie (343).

17 In a hand drawing, the eye is drawn to the usually recognizable image—say a vase of flowers. However, every image also presents the space outside the image, the surround space that
actually gives the image its form by exclusion. It is this surround space, the space not actually included in the image itself that is called “negative space.”

18 See Chapter 2.

19 Wakoski also develops this phenomenon of competition/displacement in a different context in “Hansel and Gretel,” which I will discuss shortly in this chapter.

20 Adrienne Rich thoroughly discusses her interpretation of “compulsory heterosexuality” in her essay by the same title in Blood, Bread, and Poetry. I expand on her definition in Chapter 5.

21 I am extrapolating my discussion from Butler’s definition of the term queer: “a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage” (228).

22 In describing Barthes’ demystification of myth, Gordon Slethaug summarizes the process as: “Assuming that language maintains the structure of power over an indefinite period of time and, consequently, that it enforces a certain ideology, he (Barthes) argues that the task of the analyst is to read against the grain of history and culture and expose the production of meaning, to critique cultural myths, to ‘unlearn’ orthodox social values or doxa and to establish more pluralistic perspectives” (529).

23 Barthes himself claims: “the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn” (Barthes 135).

24 I discuss Wakoski’s use of the lesbian more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

25 Clement calls the sorceress “the heiress of all generic Eves” (6).

26 Quoting piecemeal from Haraway’s text, I have condensed an applicable conception of the cyborg to Wakoski’s context: Haraway calls the cyborg a hybrid, “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” which has “no truck with…seduction to organic wholeness”; it is a fiction “mapping our social and bodily reality,” an “imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” for the future; she sees it as our “politics” and as “our ontology” (697).

27 Strange means “foreign, alien, not familiar or well-known, accountable, unaccustomed” (COD 1052).

28 Wakoski would prefer to see desire/passion as a positive resource: “And it’s that power that is a form of passion, that is certainly an ingredient in great art” (TNP 320).

29 Butler’s claim that “bodily pain is the precondition of bodily self-discovery” (58), coincides with Wakoski’s insistence on the darkness (“ascent is descent”) as a prelude to return and self-realization.
“Like my father, then, the figure of George Washington becomes a symbolized father figure. Because he was the father of our country, I began to think of myself, partly with a pun on the word cunt, as country. Again, country is a feminine entity, and therefore what the country relates to is the father, the masculine” (TNP 249).
Chapter Four: Patriotism/Matriatism: Partners or Pariahs

Throughout Diane Wakoski’s writings, an obsessive connection to men defines the poet’s experience as a woman and determines her self-perception. In one interview, Wakoski attests that her “mythology starts with [her] personality and [her] life” (Jacobsen 68), but she immediately qualifies that assertion with a focus on “growing up as a little girl who loved and adored [her] macho father who essentially abandoned [her]” (68). In Toward a New Poetry, she conflates the father figure with the lover. This father-lover emerges, on the one hand, as an ominous patriarchal figure in the poetry, one even equated with “god.” On the other hand, the poet interrogates the idea of her biographical father alternately as the paradigm of excellent manhood—a kind of hero-lover-god, then as a version of terrorist-demon-lover visiting his egotistical expectations and prerogatives on innocent femaleness. Ironically, even when she presents the father/god/lover as negative, hurtful, even abusive in his relationships with women, Wakoski does not overtly hold him accountable for his bad behavior and attitudes. Rather, his negativity is interpreted, not as his failure as husband and father, but as a failure of the women’s femaleness. In Wakoski’s poetic biomythography,¹ the father-lover transposes into the lover-terrorist through the avatar, first of Jason of the Argonauts, then of the Motorcycle Betrayer/Motorcycle Mechanic. They represent two interchangeable stereotypes for what Robin Morgan calls the demon-lover who enacts a kind of terrorist regime in the heterosexual love relationship.²

The interconnectedness of these avatars of the male figures impose limitations on the female/feminine identity paradigm and inhibit its development. Thus, Wakoski’s personal biomythography, as a poetic account of her developing subjectivity, presents a complicated matrix in which she can scarcely separate her experience as a woman from a “super obsess[ion]” (Morgan 68) with the “father-lover-god” (EC 30). It is not until she explores gender cross-dressing, first through Medea, then in the poem, “Your Sister in Jail,” that she challenges gendered identities and limitations by having her female characters enact masculine prerogatives and by feminizing the male character of Robert.

If we believe that representation is a “kind of mapping of social vision into subjectivity” (de Lauretis, Alice Doesn’t 8), we must examine Wakoski’s representations of men, as well as those of women. Just as Wakoski had to go to the casino to discover the extent of its factitiousness, so she must visit the representations of the significant patriarchal texts of God, Father,
Lover/Terrorist, Brother to shed light on where she stands as a woman in relation to them all. Analyzing men’s representation illuminates women’s as well.

Wakoski acknowledges that in Western gender roles, the men have the power while the women wait, pine, adore, and follow; the men are proactive and active while the women are passive and reactive. A masculine god determines how the world is seen and operated. In her poetry, through magnetic attraction, men—whether Zeus, Hades, Wakoski’s Navy-Dad, Jason of the Argonauts, the poet’s Motorcycle Betrayer, or prince charming—seduce women, almost “against one’s will” (*Medea* 105), to throw in our lots with men, to dance to their music and rhythms, to follow their lead. The male in the culture is “the aggressor,” the do-er, the one with a “more fulfilled life” (109), “the one who ma[kes] the choices” (112), has the “right to initiate action” (46). The woman has been consigned to the role of the one to whom things happen: she does not choose, but, “like Cinderella… must be chosen by the prince in order to have any beauty in her life at all” (112), or like Medea must get subsumed by Jason’s story in order for anything meaningful to happen to her. However, Wakoski asserts that even while women are subjected to the roles of passivity, acquiescence, even subservience, the world is “full of contradictions and paradoxes” (109), “flux, nuance, innuendo” (125), so that women can break out of old roles and transform from “a waiter” to “a chooser” (*Medea* 112). And men can be like the Robert character in “Your Sister in Jail”—gentler, truer, more sensitive than the Oz Gods, Navy Dads, and Motorcycle Betrayers that populate women’s lives.

In *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*, Wakoski establishes the ground of her woman’s self-perception in our relationship to men, presented in a panoply of historical, mythic, and personal stereotypes. She presents men as heroic, then undermines their heroic stance by de-romanticizing them. For example, the paternal figure of George Washington smiles, not with a benevolent, fatherly smile, but with a “tight,” wooden one (*EC* 25); the heroic father is not present but absent (30); prince charming is characterized as a potential rapist (41). Critic Christa Buschendorf sees the poet, in retelling the story of the God-Father-Lover figures, as emphasizing “the continuity rather than the revision of traditional gender roles” (613). However, I will show how, while appearing to romanticize the masculine figures, instead, Wakoski undercuts their power to mask their inadequacies, their ignorance, and their self-centeredness behind iconographic façades of the omnipotent god; the paternal father; the attentive lover; and even the darkly mysterious and romanticized hero-terrorist.
In shifting the way men can be seen, Wakoski enables a whole new conception of women’s roles. Through the female protagonist of the poems, the poet agonizes over dislodging men from their romanticized iconic position of domination over her, even as she recognizes that their power over her is not positive. Wakoski’s detour first to the fantasy world of Oz, then to the “real” world of quantum physics, initiates her revision of God, primarily, through the image the Wizard of Oz, and, obliquely, through an iconographic representation of Einstein as the old-school scientist. When the poet quotes Frank Baum’s Grand Wizard, “invisible” to mortals’ eyes, telling Dorothy he is omnipresent, she is establishing him as a parody of the pervasive god figure that dominates Western thinking.

“I am Oz, the Great and Terrible. Why do you seek me?”
...seeing no one, Dorothy asked, “Where are you?”
“I am everywhere,” answered the Voice, “but to the eyes of common mortals, I am invisible. I will now seat myself upon my throne, that you may converse with me.”
(EC 186, my italics)

That he is “everywhere” denotes the pervasiveness of his presence and his power. It is Oz-God who has ordered the wearing of those compulsory green spectacles, which I discussed in Chapter 1, in order to insure that what all citizens of and visitors to the Emerald City of Oz, regardless of gender, see is considered right, beautiful, and true. This is patriarchy at work, creating the world—not really the one that is there, but the world as it is filtered through patriarchally-devised lenses. This space is crafted by a mythic “invisible” god-wizard figure, who conjures the world we relate to and consequently the structures of our subjectivity in terms of the limitations of his imagination. The World-according-to-Oz, “Under Oz,” with the Wizard of Oz as the god-like front-man, covers for inadequacy, ignorance, self-righteousness, greed, elitism, an insatiable hunger for fame, power, wealth, and domination, and a self-professed “humbug” (171). Wakoski uses the reference to the Oz-God’s “invisibility” to verify how persuasively the ideology of patriarchy has manipulated our minds to buy the world we see as the world that is. Further, she asserts through her citations of Herbert’s Quantum Reality that Einstein—who, along with the rest of the modern scientific community, had long ago abandoned belief in a controlling, albeit invisible, “ether,” but who clearly “didn’t like [the] intrinsic randomness” of quantum physics (23)—questions a God that “would play dice with the universe” (26, 81). As the father-god of modern physics, Einstein asserts as true the fiction of the old, patriarchal high ground that maintains the solidity of scientific truth and rational sense.
Scientific ownership of truth and of so-called rational thought processes in turn verifies both a god which determines all the moves in the universe and a way of knowing that keeps man, woman, and god firmly in their respective places. The invisible mind of god determines and sustains the rules of science, faith, hope, love, worship, social hierarchy, subjective relationships within the social order, and ideology ad infinitum. The gendered He/God, like the Wizard in Wakoski’s citations from Baum, is “invisible” infinitely into the past and on into the future, unless he chooses to present a representation of himself or unless we—all citizens of and visitors to the Emerald City of Oz and partakers in the world manipulated by a supreme image maker—refuse to accept that invisibility and begin to look for signs that indicate his presence and his nature. Although the Einstein of Wakoski’s text has maintained belief in an “external world independent of the perceiving subject...[as] the basis of all natural science” (23), he merely represents another god-like text in the culture, the scientist-god who believes in a law of the universe, a set of rules by which the world and those of us within it are compelled to perceive the world and to operate within it.

Recall that physicist Nick Herbert claims that “there is nothing there to know about” (81) because the real is “observer generated”; it is always a text written from a particular perspective. One of the dangers of living under patriarchy is that all that we see from our observer position is often shaped by patriarchy. Teresa de Lauretis reminds us that “the book written in the name of the father is always a testament, whether old or new. It is a book without an author, but drenched in an author-ity” (64). That it is without an author, is, of course, a falsehood; it’s just that the author, like Oz-God is invisible, but omnipresent nonetheless. However, because observer position does affect what gets seen and known, orientation is significant in determining “reality.” That the Oz-God orients himself via his “throne” and that only from this position will he deign to permit Dorothy “to converse” with him reinforces the hierarchical dichotomy of royal (male) monarch to subjected (female) vassal. The former is magnificent and immortal, infinitely beautiful, true, powerful, and present, while the latter is “common” and “mortal”: she is subject-ed and not “subject” (as in “first” in language), accepting as inevitable the dictates of he who is “Great and Terrible.” Dorothy is put in her place: her presence is not the given; it is the permitted. The “Great and Terrible” Oz-God owns the power of speech and expects his subjects to acquiesce to their supplicative speech position. Ironically, but purposively, in her text, Wakoski manipulates the act of speaking, first to show that speaking has been the province of
patriarchy, then to wrest it from the mouth of god and presume its power for women, especially
the woman poet, herself.

It is not by accident that Wakoski selects this passage from the fairy tale to include the
wizard’s designation as “the Voice.” In Genesis, God spoke and the world came into being.
Speaking, naming, calling forth—these are the acts in which subjects are given their corporeality
and their relationship to the world. Judith Butler asserts that “what is constituted in
discourse...becomes the condition and occasion for a further action” (187). Discourse has the
power to enact what it names; who owns the Voice possesses the power to call non-being into
being. Dorothy, representing the young girl beginning her quest for identity, has no being until
she is recognized and addressed by the Voice; only with his permission, only at his will is she
permitted to speak. Her speaking takes the form, not of naming or of constituting herself, but of
supplicating, of placing her desires once again at the feet of the father.

Although Oz-God attempts to establish conditions for that speech, the minute he invites
Dorothy to speak, he opens a Pandora’s box of trouble for the status quo. In speaking, women are
provided with the opportunity to articulate the terms and dimensions of our desire—which terms
and dimensions we may not have heretofore fully conceived. The moment we can speak, we can
assume the god position, the creative position, just as the poet does in the act of writing her
poetry. This is what feminists mean when we claim “voice”: we are claiming our own self-
creative acts. By our own speech acts, we do not so much discover what we are and what we
want as create what we are and what we want. Even within Baum’s story of The Wizard of Oz,
Dorothy is called into being by the pen and imagination of Frank Baum. Wakoski’s act of
interfusing Dorothy’s story with that of her own woman-persona in The Emerald City of Las
Vegas represents a subversive act of a woman’s “stealing the language” to give new life to an old
heroine.

Wakoski explores the ways in which the all powerful, all knowing, all speaking god can be
dethroned and removed from his position of dominance. She effects this dethroning through the
trope of Dorothy’s act of speaking her mind, of questioning Oz-god’s power, and of discovering
that his power is an assumed, presumed, constructed one. When Dorothy learns of his fraudulent
assumption of power, she realizes that if she wants her needs to be met, all she can get from him
is encouragement. He cannot make anything happen for her. She herself must embark upon her
journey and quest; she must assert her own energy and imagination on her own behalf: she must
become the “aggressor” (*Medea* 111), the “chooser” (112), the heroine/herown of the story. Dorothy speaking, questioning, questing provides the model for Diane the poet, who speaks, questions, and quests through her poetry.

However, before Dorothy can commence her own quest, she must dislodge Oz-God, as well as other god avatars, from his position of dominance. Oz-God in Wakoski’s use of Baum’s text, like other familiar and comfortable images of order in the universe, represents a “wonder”ful and powerful stabilizing presence. When he pulls assorted images of himself out of his little bag of tricks and flashes them onto an invisible screen to communicate with his subjects, he is actually presenting whatever avatar he thinks will appeal to individual subjects. The clever Oz-God generates relationships through the representational matrix while at the same time he serves his own agenda as master of every situation. Through the force of representation, he can grant the male figures in the story what they think they want. From his position of mastery of the language, he merely names things into being: he says “brains” and, *voila*, the scarecrow is intelligent; he articulates a heart into being for the tin-man and courage for the lion. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a self-satisfied Oz-God congratulates himself on the success of his artifice: “Oz left to himself smiled to think of his success in giving (the men) exactly what they thought they wanted. ‘How can I help being a humbug,’ he said, ‘when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can’t be done?’” (*EC* 156) A humbug, he is both a projection of his own imagination and a figment of his supplicants’ imaginations or lack of imaginations. To the extent that they surrender their imaginations to the power of his representations, they permit themselves to be subsumed into the myth of the Great “Our Father” who solves all problems, grants all gifts, and assuages all griefs. “He,” not us, then owns the camera that projects the images we all take to be reality.

Despite Oz-God’s apparent invisibility, the diligent Dorothy-investigator rips away the curtain to reveal the *machina ex deus*—the machine in the god, the discursive representationality of Oz-God. Note, it is not the men—all of whom get “what they think they want”—who feel the necessity to probe further into the nature of Oz-God, but Dorothy, whose needs can not be met, even remotely, by the Oz-God. Wakoski acknowledges that the world functions through “secrets the way religious fanatics think that if you understand God in a particular way you are privy to a special kind of power” (*Medea* 115). In the same breath, she claims an enlightened feminist perspective of this world: “I am a feminist in believing that male culture has some of that secret
power about it” (115). Seeing behind Oz-God’s façade, for Dorothy, as a representative of the iconoclastic questing woman, “means that everything changes: the old identifications and the old securities are gone” (Daly 4). Once Dorothy removes the illusion of the wizard’s power, she reveals him as the pudgy, balding, inefficacious old man he is.

Initially, disconcerted by the realization that god is not the all-powerful maker of things that happen, Wakoski’s Dorothy feels confused, disappointed, and helpless. This revelation of the betrayal of the god figure to realize his promises opens up the possibility for the woman to pursue a different future: she now has not only “the right to initiate action” of her own (Medea 46), but the necessity. Jolted out of her complacent anticipation of god’s ability to operate (in) the world, she eventually realizes that she must take command of her own future. The discovery of god’s representationality and hence his impotence to act for her unleashes her from her bondage to him into a new freedom to act for herself. We discover, as does Dorothy, that she never needed him at all to effect the goal of her quest; her self-fulfillment lay within her power all along. Just as the wizard provided an opportunity for Dorothy’s voice to be heard, so the dissolution of his omnipotence opens a space for Dorothy to act on her own behalf. Once the relationship shifts away from the omnipresent “everywhere” of god, the invisible pervasiveness of god’s presence, and the debilitating inequity of the throne-driven “up-there/down here” orientation between god and his subject, the questing woman3 of Wakoski’s poetic text realizes she is not merely a pawn in the grand chess-player’s game.

The Dorothy of Wakoski’s text, who grapples with the toppling of her own safe gods, represents the woman in the culture reorienting herself for new possibilities. She can cry: “I want to be the quester” (Medea 46); she can and must turn to her own personal resources to pursue goals of her own choosing. In recognizing the failure of god to ensure the fulfillment of women’s deepest desires or even to secure our world and to make it genuinely safe, women, like Wakoski’s Dorothy, assume a new kind of courage, what Mary Daly calls existential courage: “the courage to see and to be in the face of the nameless anxieties that surface when a woman begins to see through the masks of sexist society and to confront the horrifying fact of her own alienation from her authentic self” (4).

Women, like Dorothy here and like the questing woman we saw in Chapter 2, in discovering the constructedness, not just of god, but also of the whole universe, have felt horrified, devastated, and disappointed, but amazingly liberated, jubilant, and anticipant. Shaken to our
foundation, women haven’t known what to say, how to god ourselves, how to direct our own actions, to claim our own experience. We are learning to conceive of new maps to self-realization, of new words to articulate our desires, of new names to call ourselves. Through Dorothy’s discovery of the Wizard’s façade, Wacoski shows how the inquisitive and adventurous women have the potential to conceive the dynamic of the world differently from what we have been lead to believe. Buoyed by this new conception, the questing woman can “be[come] more than [she] was meant / to be” (*Medea* 36). Dorothy, ready to make her own way, is caught in the space where prescription is evolving into invention. Women today find ourselves both frightened and excited by this sudden opening up of possibilities—and of risk. In some ways, as the gods of patriarchal authority are increasingly unmasked, we are facing an abyss, a great unknown into which we are leaping, without maps, without guides, without models. In other ways, the great unmasking initiates the great new adventure-quest in which our individual creative imaginations can effect significant changes in who we are. Wacoski shows how women can share in the way in which the world, the self, the self in the word, and the self in the world can be conceived and articulated: we can “make our own choices” (12).

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While the Wacoski persona of the poems protests that she “want[s] to be more / than [she] was meant to be,” she still feels caught in old texts that give her pause: “what is the story I am destined to tell?” (132) Her struggles mirror the struggles of women in the culture: our romantic and comforting visions don’t die easily. Despite the revelation of the fraudulence of the primary cultural male-image—the ever-pervasive god-figure, Wacoski’s woman persona admittedly clings to mythic and often romanticized, if still painful, images of men through which to define herself as a woman, even as she recognizes their falseness. Acknowledging that “we shape our lives from myths and archetypal patterns” (Jacobsen 70), the poet struggles with differentiating “real” patriarchal figures from their textual-historical-biographical-mythological-iconographic representations. Her ambivalence and vacillation critique the self-acknowledged situation within which women often find ourselves. Women have grown up valorizing men into superdads, superlovers, and superheroes, even as we have known them to be flawed. To disperse the fiction of the cultural male hero, Wacoski must tackle the second significant man-myth: that of the father-lover. In the poem “The New Moon, a Scar,” she announces:
Thus, she inherits from the mother the legacy of the father, once hidden away, sequestered in her mother’s closet, but now imposing the “will” of the father on his daughter. This “invisible” hat represents the unseen, but nonetheless, pervasively present will of patriarchy always hovering just out of sight. The will of the patriarchy that demands a macho hyper-maleness and a concomitant “right femaleness” (Jacobsen 68) then originates in images of Wakoski’s own father, a naval officer who was gone all the time: “I am haunted by my father, the sailor” (Jason 21). In Wakoski’s poetry, the father figure assumes various “hero” shapes: from George Washington—whom Wakoski parodies as father of his “cunt-ry,” to Beethoven—whose dynamic and patristic music drowns out all other melodies, to the Argonaut, Jason—whose false promises and abandonment provide the informing archetype for Wakoski’s relationships first with father and, later, with lover. Specifically, the most complex and intricate of the myth figures, the abandoning father-Jason becomes entangled with the mythic representation of the betraying lover-Jason, who then becomes transcribed into Wakoski’s own abandoning-betraying terrorist-lover, the Motorcycle Betrayer/Motorcycle Mechanic.

Examining the many facets of the Jason image affords a fruitful investigation of ways the father-lover informs Wakoski’s exploration of woman’s subjectivity. Both Jason and Medea are two key figures in The Archaeology of Movies and Books, in which the volumes Medea the Sorceress and Jason the Sailor form the forerunners for The Emerald City of Las Vegas. Throughout the texts Wakoski personally identifies with Medea—“I have to turn the Diane character into Medea” (Medea 97) in which she personally identifies with Medea as both the betrayed woman and the sorceress survivor. The Jason of her texts represents the father-lover as the archetypal seducer/betrayer/abandoner who sets up the paradigmatic necessity of “right femaleness” (Jacobsen 68), that is, being physically attractive, duly submissive, and sexually desirable. It is this “right femaleness” that generates within women “the only one betrayer possible: one’s own false expectations of reality” (Medea 19).

The confusion of father-lover clearly derives from father Freud: Freud claimed that women attach their first desires onto their fathers then transfer them to their lovers, so they are always dominated by the imperative of pleasing the “father.” Luce Irigaray describes the “Freudian
woman” as “forever fixated on the desire for the father” (87). This “Freudian woman,” whose whole identity is shaped by her relationship to her father, “remains subject to the father and to his law, for fear of losing his love, which is the only thing capable of giving her any value at all” (87). This woman enacts the patriarchal script designed by that father and dictated by his law to keep her subjected to the father’s “will” (EC 121). Wakoski herself feels the presence of her own father’s expectations even when he is not there:

I am almost invisible;  
he doesn’t see me….  
my father’s naval hat  
with the gold anchor shining against the patent visor  
is in my closet now. (122)

When Wakoski’s Navy Dad wills her his officer’s hat, he is naming her the heir of his Father-legacy. Emotionally and psychologically, she bears its burden, ascribing all her (lack of) worth to her father’s (non)acceptance of her. The discourse of his abandonment of his wife and two daughters, then, provides the prototype for the stories of the poet’s subsequent life. She becomes the Medea to his Jason—“I’ve thought of myself as Medea, my father as the original Jason” (Jason 21), and all the men in her life become neo-Jasons only too eager to re-enact the discursive paradigm of betrayal and abandonment. Through her insertion of herself into the story—“I have always known that I am Medea, not that I acted out her life, but that I was she” (Medea 94-5)—, she explores the conflicting possibilities inherent in the woman as Medea: the young romantic “who [does] not know how not to fall in love with the Jason who betrayed [her]” (186, my italics), the faithful wife who is “dumped” by the unfaithful lover after he has abused her gifts (26, 75), and “the sorceress who escape[s]” and transcends the limits of the imposed hero-prerogative (186). The Medea-persona’s presentation of Jason, like the Wizard of Oz, like the Navy Dad, leads her back to the personal dimension in which she confesses, “how prophetic this tale [of Medea and Jason] was to be in living my own life” (26). As a young woman, she was abandoned by her lover, compelled to “give up her baby” and fly like Medea with “dragonlady power, to Berkeley” (98-99), instead of to Athens. In this key connection between the myth and the woman’s life, we see points that Wakoski insists upon: one, women’s lives are often determined by our relationships with men, but two, we can, like the Medea Wakoski loves to love—“I claim the version of the story in which she flees from bloody Corinth to Athens in a chariot drawn by dragons” (176)—, take command of our own lives and define our own futures.
Through her poetry, Wakoski, then, rereads and remythologizes the Medea story not to verify the “truths” of the traditional interpretations, but to deconstruct them and to revision them. In the process, the poet invites the reader to engage in a similar deconstruction/reconstruction process. Because Wakoski defines “a poem [a]s an act of disguise, like a good murder mystery, [which] must offer clues to its revelation and the reader must feel that [s]he can discover what’s really there” (sic, “Whitman? No, Wordsworth” 16), the reader must delve into the web of allusions and of select details in Wakoski’s text to discern the secrets beneath the surface, the “[b]eautiful secret things, wrapped in many layers” (16). For Wakoski, “[p]oems need these big secrets, whether they are Freudian, biographical, evolutionary, or social, historical, political. A poem has to reveal a secret” (16). Thus, the poet expects us to look beneath the surface of those initial acts to discern the “contradictions, dualities, and paradoxes” (TNP 101) that initiate both a “traditional” reading of Medea as victim/villainess and a “feminist” reading of her as radically courageous.

Using select references to the Medea/Jason story, along with meditative commentary and personal applications, the Wakoski persona again critiques the power of myth to determine women’s subjectivity. The complex dynamic of the evolving relationship between Medea and Jason has provided a prophetic parallel to Wakoski’s own woman-experience. Her reading of the traditional mythic text enables her first to examine the ways in which women enact the two expected roles of “angel” and “monster” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). As the poet-persona of her own text, rewriting, as it were, the mythic tale, Wakoski reveals “not only that she herself is fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes…but that male-defined masks and costumes inevitably inhabit her, altering her vision” (19). Wakoski slips into and out of her Medea identification as she ascribes to both the angel identity and the monster identity and rues them both, finding herself caught in a triangulation of prescription, perception, and invention which, in turn, causes her to vacillate between self-perceptions of victim, villain, and self-creator.

In examining the Medea/Jason myth and Wakoski’s ironizing pastiche of that myth, I will show how the Wakoski persona works through “the central female paradigms” of daughter/lover/wife/mother as well as monster/Medusa/virago to “unfurl an awesome capacity for self-creation” (Auerbach 9). This self-creative activity centers around the poet’s ability to recognize herself within the central paradigms, to explore both how she inhabits them and how they inhabit her, and to transcend the limitations of them all. I will explore how the Wakoski persona evolves
erratically from angel to demon. She begins as the passive “Cinderella-Medea” waiting for her awakening by the arrival of the prince-hero (Medea 112) only to become the Medea-sorceress cohort of the marauding terrorist-interloper, “leading him successfully through many dangers” (176). Then, she transforms from the angelic cooperative sexually-attractive wife and mother of his children into the rebellious Medea-Medusa-demon, empowered by her rage (105, 174) to a new energetic, dynamic, vital, aggressive, and assertive self—angel transfigured, woman transformed. That Medea’s acts largely circulate around and derive from her perception of herself in relation to the Jason-man-hero demonstrates Wakoski’s awareness that one of the significant ways women conceive of our subjectivities is through our convoluted relationships with the father-lover figure in the culture. That the Medea-sorceress avatar transcends the man’s behavior indicates the poet’s conviction that the woman-roles can be deconstructed and remanipulated into a whole new biomythography of her own with herself at the center of this new herstory. However, to arrive at deconstruction and reconstruction, the poet must first revisit the original story.

One part of the poet identifies with the Medea angel, the lady-in-waiting, the one who expects her destiny and her identity to center around the Force of the male hero. Wakoski presupposes the familiar pattern of the passive young woman waiting expectantly in her father’s house for the arrival of the hero-lover. It is he who will awaken her to her sexual attractiveness, which she interprets as “falling in love,” and to her creative potential, of which she is not at all aware, the latter subsumed in the former. She will bequeath both to the dazzling hero. Like the Wakoski persona, the traditional woman, reading the text in a traditional way, thrills to the arrival of the fabulous and handsome Jason-hero. The force of his terrorist magnetism attracts the woman reader as well as the susceptible Medea because we’ve all been taught that this is what we’ve all been waiting for: the kiss of the dashing prince. That he needs her to execute his plans augments his attractiveness, and Medea succumbs to the romance of their collusion. He, in turn, expects Medea to subsume her energies in his enterprises, and she willingly complies in the name of Love. What this angel Medea does not see, but which Wakoski suggests, is that while Medea’s motives center in love—“What a mistake!” (25), Jason, not burdened by the inconvenience of “falling in love,” woos her out of purely selfish motives: his goals are all about Jason, “a Jason taking what he wanted…[who] thought of all of his stories as problems to solve in the most expedient way” (178). In addition, Medea does not initially realize that her
contributions to the relationship far outweigh his: it is her magic and not his puny masculinity that enables his enterprise. Thus, Wakoski’s Medea, unaware of the dimensions of her own sorceress power, is seduced by the glamorous aura of the heroic Jason-lover, who, if we look beneath the surface, is a terrorist in prince charming clothes: a disinherited, disenfranchised wanderer-opportunist whom Wakoski herself calls a “cad…without honor” (178).

Blinded by love, Medea does not anticipate the betraying quotient that will later evoke the epithet: “Oh, Jason, you rat” (105). Under the spell of romantic and selfless love, she supplants allegiance to father with allegiance to lover, succumbing to the implied promises of reciprocal love, fidelity, loyalty, and happily-ever-after that women expect attend such romantic love. To secure these presumed promises, Wakoski’s Medea uses her considerable skills as a sorceress, her “magical help” (75), to insure Jason’s success. Her actions, unlike Jason’s self-centered intent—to solve his problems “in the most expedient way” (178)—, are motivated by her “angelic” willingness to self-sacrifice. Medea offers herself up, then, as the exchange value: her magic, her creative power, and her erotic energy serving as the dowry she brings to the “marriage” with Jason. In exchange, she expects to be loved and cared for “till death do [they] part.”

Medea, like other women in the culture, is a victim of the failure of romantic love to effect a life-sustaining mode of existence: her “own false expectations of reality / Reality / deep reality / Destiny” (19). Medea falls in love with Jason, and it is this love which motivates her to throw herself in with his destiny: “love does make people behave in ways they wish they had not felt they had to” (105). What Medea does not see and what women have been prevented from seeing is that “falling in love” has always been about opening ourselves to the patriarchal agenda of marriage and exploitation. Such “falling in love,” which is really the sexual-erotic awakening young women experience, has, in our culture, been attributed to the attraction to a man. Wakoski explains: “I have thought a lot about love and its terribleness, which for me has always been connected with sex. It is like enchantment and does not seem connected with anything we idealize it to be” (176). This arousal, which we have always felt could be consummated only in marriage to and coitus with men, has been, in fact, a blossoming of our erotic selves, what Auerbach calls character: “the self’s latent and awesome powers” (205), “perpetually vital, capable of infinite dimension and change…inhabiting a medium that bridges permanence and transience…[,] humanly richer than eternity” (192). Not knowing that “Love is the opposite
of Liberty” (*Medea* 176), women have gratuitously turned our creative-erotic resources over to a patriarchal agenda instead of cultivating it as part of our personal growth. We have repressed, distorted, and disrupted the potential of the unwritten stories of our own lives, thereby, squandering the treasures of our selves for the stultifying “promises” of that Navy-Dad-sailor and of that handsome, importuning Jason-terrorist. In subscribing to the patriarchal expectations of desirable womanhood, which is essentially passive and fraudulent, we write ourselves out of a personal story in order to serve either as secondary characters in men’s stories—“tragic women” (178), or, like Medea, as antagonists to the hero-protagonist.

According to Wakoski, when the Jason-lover-husband rejects Medea for another woman, he violates the inferred contract on two levels. First, he clearly fails to live up to his end of the romantic bargain to love and cherish Medea until death. Second, as she has allied her fortunes with Jason, his abandonment constitutes the removal of her entire *raison d’etre*—she had sacrificed all for love. Because women have defined ourselves in terms of men’s love, when deprived of that love, we experience the abandonment as a betrayal that leaves us empty and bereft of our legacy of hopes, dreams, and expectations. Wakoski ties this to images of her own abandoned mother and to her personal feelings of inherent emptiness: “My image of my mother alone, with my father gone all the time, is an image of emptiness and failure. I have always felt that I had to be with a man in order to be complete” (59). Wakoski, in her Medea mode, continues “to be obsessed with the idea that if a man does not desire a woman, there is something wrong with her” (59). Un-loved and rejected, she views herself as no longer desirable, therefore as worthless. Because all worth has been assigned to the relationship with the man, the woman has no self beyond that relationship: she is “almost invisible” (*EC* 122). As readers contemplate Medea’s leaving the “king”dom of her father in order to help Jason attain the “king”dom of his alleged birthright, we suddenly see what isn’t in the story—where is Medea’s “queen”dom? Even when we neologize “queendom,” the word conjures, not the power and dominion that would accrue to a monarch of the realm, but associations of subservience and submissiveness to the king. Men have *domain* and *domination*; women have *domicile* and *domestication*. Wakoski moans that Medea is the tragic woman at best while Jason is the hero (*Medea* 178).

Thus, seduced by the promises of romantic love, women have expected the “queendom” of their lives to end in the happily-ever-after of fairy tales. What happens, though, when the king abandons his queen as Wakoski’s own father abandoned her mother with two small children? As
I have already indicated, the poet took the father’s leaving personally as a consequence of her not having enough of the right femaleness to keep “a wandering daddy at home” (*EC* 30). The burden of blame is assumed by the “failed” women, mother and daughter. This failure for Wakoski is perceived as the failure to retain sexual attractiveness. Thus, Wakoski, herself seduced by the promises of romantic love, grew up thinking of herself, and consequently, the Wakoski-Medea icon, as a victim. The corollary in Medea’s story arises when Jason suggests that Medea “amenably accept his marriage to the princess” (*Medea* 74, my italics), while he thinks Medea will remain the angel of myth, the “lovable woman [who] is a silent and disinherited mutilate” (Auerbach 8). Because he expects that Medea will continue in her cooperative angel mode of self-sacrifice, he does not anticipate that “the fullness of [her] extraordinary and dangerous being might at any moment return through violence” (8). Indeed, he expects her to be his victim, though he would probably call her anticipated behavior “cooperation.”

So obsessed with the myth of femaleness dictated by the cultural texts, the Wakoski persona, like many young women today, continues to pine and to yearn for a return to the submissive daughter/beloved/wife position even as she depicts her men as betraying, though ever-romantic, Jasons. However, shifting perspectives, Wakoski posits an alternative view of the Medea figure—that of villainess. While we might want to value the villainess over the victim and while Medea’s behavior actually undermines any possibility of her unequivocally being conceived of as a victim, how do we reconcile her representation as pariah, the personification of jealousy and of womanhood run amok? What the Jason-dominated Medea story demonstrates is that when women violate the established limits of the subject-positions that sustain patriarchy, their rebellion is seen as less “extraordinary” than “dangerous” (Auerbach 8). Medea’s place in a story, written by men and meant to be interpreted patriarchally, reveals her as a heinous violator of the sacred icon of passive, gentle womanhood and of motherhood: she is a monster. Her behavior shifts her from her prescribed role of the one to whom things happen, but who does not make things happen for herself, to the threatening position of the monster who disrupts the order of the universe by her subversive actions.

Ironically, Medea’s initial acts of rebellion against her father’s family and house, condoned because instigated on Jason’s behalf, anticipate her later rebellion against her husband’s family and house. Angel-in-waiting, like angel-loving and angel-mothering, harbors a hidden monster-
within, which can potentially erupt into violence when duly awakened. Gilbert and Gubar claim that “the monster may not be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within the angel” (29). Because dedicated to Jason’s well-being, Medea’s initial aggressive acts—never seen in the same heroic light as Jason’s own—are expected as only part of her legacy in the patriarchal “will” of rights. However, when she presumes an assertiveness and an aggressiveness on her own behalf, behaviors normally ascribed to the masculine prerogative, she is considered “‘monstrous’ because they are ‘unfeminine’” (28).

In a traditional reading, a Medea, assertive and aggressive on her own behalf, must be cast(rated) as the villain of the piece because she potentially threatens the stability in which the male protagonist is the hero, the dominant one, the one with the power and the agenda. If we subscribe to a Freudian reading of the text, Jason harbors latent fears of Medea’s magical, woman-sorceress power, fears which might be characterized as fear of castration, fear of losing his position as the manly man, his power as the sexual aggressor, and his role as the adventurer-hero. A little too disturbing, Medea’s acts must eventually be cast as vicious and treasonous.

Seeing that Medea had the temerity to thwart her father’s dictates and territorial hegemony must have disturbed, at least subconsciously, the Jason-lover-hero, even as he exploited those actions for his own benefit.16 Had he not been so absorbed in his own problems, he could possibly have foreseen the demon lurking within her angel persona. Just as she thwarted her father’s authority, she could undermine the patriarchal authority of her husband’s household as well. The emerging serpentine cunning of the sorceress initiates the necessary self-assertiveness in which women must engage if we are to extricate ourselves from men’s myths and visions of us and to write our own stories and to craft our own identities. The process begins with the woman’s extricating herself from domination of the father’s household and the values that inhabit that household—seen in Wakoski’s father’s hat ensconced in her closet. Then, she must stop seeing herself as that “inconvenient person to be married to” (Medea 75) foisted onto her by whatever Jason-heroes dictate her “place.” Finally, she must acknowledge the just rage that awakens the latent monster within.

Wakoski herself confesses that she has always confused the heroine Medea with the monster Medusa: “I used to mix up the names Medea and Medusa…and it caused me to wonder if that terrifying teeth-mother witchlike character of a woman with snakes coming out of her head might not be our image of a woman who could kill her children out of pride or scorned love”
Because Medea has thus been associated with the hideous Medusa, it is easy to dismiss her as pariah, as monster—deranged, hideous, horrifying, a total violation of right womanhood. Murderous motherhood is problematic even for the feminist: the mother who kills her children commits the unforgivable sin. When Medea, driven mad by Jason’s betrayal, kills her children, every reader recoils in horror. Yet, despite our horror, at the heart of this problematic lies one of the essential conflicts of feminism—how to rewrite the story so we don’t have to keep reliving the same old tired clichés of patriarchal dominance—even if that rewriting entails violating what we’ve been taught to hold as sacred, and which we do, as feeling women, hold sacred—the lives of our children and our connection to them.

Still, Medea’s child-murder is very complicated. On the one hand, Wakoski feels sympathy for the very horror of what Medea has done:

And yet here was this story of a woman [Medea] who was a sorceress, who used her magical powers after she fell in love with Jason to help him in his adventures and to rescue him, speaking of her pain and her passion at his betrayal when he married another woman and going into the horror of her feeling that her only option was to murder her children…. (TNP 70)

Ideally, children, born out of their mother’s body, originate in woman’s love for her man and in the couple’s resultant intimacy. As embodiments of that love and intimacy, children represent extensions of the woman’s body and identity, even as they represent the only weapon she has against her oppressor. So, in killing her children, Medea is striking against herself as much as she is lashing out against Jason. In commenting on the dilemma of Medea as a woman driven to “the most terrible of choices” (Medea 119), Wakoski laments that “[i]f the only power a woman has in a love relationship with a man is through her children, no wonder motherhood is such a dire institution” (119) and no wonder Medea used it as a weapon on her own behalf even though it resulted in the horrible consequence of her losing “everything she ever loved” (177). The self-loathing that women have experienced from having aligned our self-worth exclusively with “failed” relationships with husbands/lovers has often motivated us to enact a kind of “self”-destruction that parallels the rejection we feel. Medea enacts a similarly motivated “self”-destruction. Her self-denigration must surely have been exacerbated by the realization of the extent to which she had colluded in her own subjugation and ultimate rejection. Having leased her awesome powers to the man’s estate, she could only reap her grim legacy. Besides, surely,
had she been looking, she should have seen Jason for the opportunist that he always had been instead of as the macho-hero-image that he presented.

Directed by Wakoski, the perceptive feminist reader is struck by the desperation of the means to which Medea had to resort in order to make herself heard. Medea must have felt utterly powerless to assert any meaningful action on her own behalf that does not also punish her by depriving herself of everything she ever loved. That she resorted to this act of destruction represents her realizing that she could not touch Jason in any other way. We might see Medea’s destroying her children as a symbolic eradication of the imposition of the angel-role of motherhood upon women: no children, no motherhood. In this sense, the justifiable, albeit angry, excising of the symbols of her failed love relationship threatens patriarchy. On the one hand, for Jason, the children represent a part of the bride-price tithe woman must pay to perpetuate the father’s line. Similarly, Jason’s taking on a new wife signals his (re)productive prerogative to continue procreating. When Medea kills Jason’s children, she deprives him of the fruit of his (re)productive capacity; in killing his new wife, she further reduces his (re)productive potential. When she “kills” him as well, she removes his power over her and extricates herself from the emotional bondage the relationship has imposed upon her: “No regrets” (99), the Wakoski-Medea avers. On the other hand, her act changes the whole dynamic in which she is compelled to fulfill the angelic role of the acquiescing, placating, silent mother.

The radical actions of the woman-demon opens up the possibility for a new identification of the woman in the story. Wakoski characterizes this new identification by her name, Diane, which she associates with Athena: “I have loved being called ‘Diane.’ I have loved all the associations with the Moon, and I have loved the image of Athena, the goddess of the hunt and chase (and chastity), with her silver arrows and what has always seemed to me, the image of a chooser. Not a waiter” (112). Her connections to great female goddess figures like Athena and Diana—both powerful mythic warrior women who act intelligently, physically, and singly without the aid of male consorts—enable her to recognize that there are options for the feminine subjectivity other than that of either angel or monster. Women can “dis-identify” with the failed patriarchal signifiers of angel and monster that keep us in our place and that stifle the unfolding of our creative potential. Although women can not deny the force of those signifiers altogether as we can not obliterate past oppression or the burden of the messages we have borne from our culture, we do not have to perpetuate the victimization without what I like to call “imaginaction,” another
word for Auerbach’s “self-renewing resilience” (227) which is “an act of devotion to the self’s latent and awesome powers” (205). By combining imagination with action, women can both conceive and effect another subjectivity, another self, another set of relationships. In that imaginacting, we can recreate, reconstitute the “real” world. We don’t ever have to go back to being unequivocally Medea, the victim virago—even as we don’t ever stop being her, the de-romanticized, failed heroine. By reexamining the representations of men in assorted personal, historical, and mythological texts, women can revision and reconceive our own representations and thus change the ways in which we relate to men, the ways in which we can think of ourselves, the ways in which we can act in the social world, and the ways in which within that world we are ourselves perceived and treated.

In the biomythography of her poetry, Wakoski often moves from the realm of traditional myths with which she personally identifies to that of the mythically autobiographical. While Jason serves as the epitome of traditional hero and lover, he represents and introduces the lover paradigm in Wakoski’s personal life, the contemporary “hero/lover.” Feminist theorist Robin Morgan reminds us that the traditional hero is “the mythic father” of both the “terrorist mystique and his twin brother, the manhood mystique” (53). Jason-hero behind the heroic façade becomes Jason-terrorist: amassing his little army of Argonauts, covertly invading another’s territory, ruthlessly pursuing an aggressive, obsessive, self-aggrandizing agenda, and attracting the love of women. The heroic façade presented by the hero/terrorist is imperative because it “preserves and enhances his mystery; it impedes revelation. It keeps us (women) from recognizing him with each deadly reappearance” (57, Morgan’s parenthesis). Yes, it “preserves and enhances” his agenda and the agenda of the patriarchal culture that creates him and his story, and it “impedes the revelation” of his true motives and his modus operandi, as well as his self-revelation. The Jason-character, for Wakoski, serves as the prototype for a plethora of other terrorists disguised as iconic heroes: there are “a million young Jasons” (Jason 111). Wakoski would agree with Morgan when the latter claims, “[w]e recognize less what lies behind his [the hero/terrorist’s]… mask: the leading man of popular entertainment culture, the hero of millions” (57), because we are absorbed in his charm, his mystique, his mastery/mystery; we even love his darkness. The mask to which Morgan is referring is less the image of the handsome and harmless hero like Prince Charming. Rather, it represents that of the posturing, overtly phallic terrorist that populates Wakoski’s text—the rough and tumble Marlboro Man, his phallic (horsepower)
revving between his legs (EC 184) and his six-shooter or his rifle holstered close by—, whose rugged individualism justifies murder and mayhem under the pretext of taming the wilderness and creating order out of chaos. The contemporary version of this cowboy is the Motorcycle Mechanic astride his sleek Vincent Black Shadow Bike, revving between his legs, accompanied by his beautiful, loyal, but vicious Doberman and the muzzle of his gun. While the former mask hides the terrorist beneath the charm, the latter disguises the terrorist beneath the appearance of a brute rugged masculinity, primitive but deceptively benign, which women love to love:

“Women, myself, we / need to love a beast” (Jason 41).

Wakoski has manifested a particular interest in revealing both the appeal and the revulsion evoked by the terrorist mystique that underlies these assorted masks that hero-men assume. Her revisionist remythologizing of the apparently benign heroized masculine mystique of Jason’s character as well as that of other iconic heroes from Prince Charming, whose agenda she has revealed as potentially “rape or abduction” (EC 41), to movie icons like Clint Eastwood and Paul Newman whose “glinting” and “hustler” eyes (43, 104) bespeak a sexualized terrorist regimen/motivation demonstrates one side of the revelation process.19 Her treatment of her own Motorcycle Betrayer, whom, along with other of her leather-jacketed lovers, she equates with the “Prince of Darkness” (TNP 41), represents her examination of the other kind of male-mask, the romanticized terrorist, whom Morgan would call “the technological-age manifestation of the hero” (55) and which I will show serves as a kind of negative contemporary cyborg.

An explication of Wakoski’s preoccupation with the Motorcycle Mechanic,20 a character from her personal biomythography, reveals another aspect of Wakoski’s perception of the complex nexus of women’s interrelationships with men. The Motorcycle Betrayer poems, like others which are materially partially biographical, partially fictional, evoke issues women face. These poems demonstrate some of the complex ways in which language, images, conceptions, appearances, expectations, and assumptions mask the presence of a darker “reality” relevant to the creation of women’s (and men’s) subjectivities. Through the narrative of her relationship with this man, his dog, and his gun outlined in her text, Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski explores the way in which a perceptive poet-participant in events can discern, through images, the negative aspects of her experience with men. This Motorcycle Mechanic, as one of her leathered lovers whom she equates with someone “out of a fairy tale” (42), represents “the mystery of masculinity” (95). That she calls him “a mystery. Never quite there” (sic 42) indicates that the
poet recognizes that this lover/terrorist/man was/is as much a creation of her imagination (a text) as a “real” human being. In fact, the poet admits that the men she has “loved” are “structure[s] composed of images” (42); each constitutes a “set of beautiful memorable images we string together with different narratives” (42).²¹

The simple narrative she weaves from a set of these memorable images consists of a cast of three, playing out a grim plot. “Diane” is living with the motorcycle mechanic and his dog, a beautiful Doberman “with a gleaming black coat and clipped ears who was vicious and bit people, though she loved us” (40) and they loved her. Eventually, for no specified reason, the motorcycle mechanic decides he doesn’t want to maintain the relationship with Diane, so he hops onto his Vincent Black Shadow Bike and rides away to the woods taking his beloved female Doberman with him. However, it turns out that the dog is too vicious, biting everyone who comes to visit; besides, she is too dependent on him, so he shoots her. Over and over, in Wakoski’s text, images of man-woman-dog/dog’s body-bike-and-gun weave: always there is the sleeping dog lying between the lovers on the bed; always the dog bites; the man leaves; the man shoots the dog; the man shoots, bites, shoots, leaves, shoots…. The images seem to run together: Wakoski, woman and poet, as well as the reader cannot help but wonder “about these images, knowing that [she] could not really connect them, but still knowing that somehow they were a structure, a connection” (41).²²

The poet’s imagination fuses the images of dog/man/machine into a kind of cyborg: “a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway 696), a “creature simultaneously animal and machine who populate[s] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (697). When the poet vacillates between images of “when [he] became [his] dog” (TNP 93) and “thinking of the man [she] love[s] / whose mind is a big racing bike” (94), she is crafting in her imagination a set of “contradictions that do not resolve,” a pastiche of incompatible things held together by a “necessary” tension (Haraway 696), a creature fabricated out of a pastiche of texts from the culture and from her personal experience. This terrorist/lover is what Haraway calls “a creature of [a new social] reality, as well as a creature of fiction” (696), “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (697) of the poet’s experience and of her perception of women’s relationships with men. This cyborg of narrativized images reveals the complicated nature of the constructed beings we are—woman and man and dog, gun and motorcycle.
In the tapestry of the poetry texts, Wakoski cleverly interweaves and interchanges images and implications. There is a kind of sense and continuity to the weave of images, yet a discontinuity and confusion at the same time. The dog is black, a black shadow of a dog, sleek and beautiful black body in the bed. The man, himself a kind of sleek black shadow hovering over the woman’s life and imagination, loves the dog, lies in the bed, sports a shiny black leather jacket, and rides his large Vincent Black Shadow Bike. The woman, from the outset of the poem, is clad in a “coat, soft and black, like a panther” (41) with shiny black boots; she, too, lies in the bed; she notices the dog’s muzzle, imagines “the black muzzle of the gun” (41) shooting the dog. The biting becomes confused with the shooting:

did your dog bite everyone you met
because you could not bite them
or shoot them
but she could do the biting and then you could shoot her? (93)

Man-motorcycle-dog-gun become facets of a single set of images: “when you became your dog and began biting all your friends” (93).

The dog “who lay between” them, two humans struggling to love, represents the “mystery of masculinity” Wakoski associates with the Motorcycle Mechanic himself—his sleek, darkly mysterious, primitive, powerful, muscular, leathered beauty, the mystery of his terrorist mind ready to leap, to bite, to assert its pent-up mastery of mystical animalistic power. The Doberman is the Motorcycle Mechanic’s own black shadow, dogging him into all of his living spaces. She is him, of him, for him: she has that brute “SIZE” that “matters” so much to women (EC 57); she shares his bed and his home; she does his bidding without his even having to articulate those desires. The man’s/dog’s relationship with the Diane-persona of the poem determines the woman’s very self-image. Diane loves the Doberman that bites, because she somehow feels that though the dog bites everyone else, it will never bite her because it loves her. When the dog actually does bite her, she is not so much physically injured as surprised and emotionally devastated by this act of apparently unwarranted aggression against her. It is tantamount to betrayal and rejection. She sees in that bite a failure of herself and not a failure in the dog. She sees in that bite her own unlovableness and not the dog’s enacting years of calculated breeding and careful training. She does not see the bite as a sign of the dog’s constructed “instinct,” nor as a warning about the dog’s equivocality, a sign of its unchangeable nature, or a foreshadowing of her lover’s leaving her. What a hurtful surprise: this dog—animal, phallic, muscular, taut,
responsive, but deadly—, who sleeps in intimate contact with her body has the temerity to bite her; the man—animal, phallic, muscular, taut, responsive, but deadly—, has the potential to shoot what he loves.

That the female dog representing the “mystery of masculinity” is disembodied from the sleeping man and that it is interposed between the two lovers indicates that this “mystery of masculinity” is an anima(l)istic aspect of the man’s self. It does not actually constitute him; rather, it is an aspect of himself incorporated into his life, taken into his bed, into his sexual (libidinal), sleeping (subconscious) life. The man is trained to his mystery of masculinity, bred to it; it is a cultivated construct that passes for “instinct” and “nature.” His own masculinity then becomes both that which lies between the lovers preventing intimacy, the sword between Beauty and her Beast (EC 37-8), and that which he cannot escape even in his sleeping moments, indicating that the sexuality inherent in this powerful phallic animal represents the animal sexuality that brings the two together, yet keeps them apart, and, as Wakoski later indicates, prevents his own self-confrontation and self-knowledge. This dog, then, represents a danger and a threat to both woman and man, yet it is loved and cherished, desired and desirable. Its dark beauty and seductive mystery are intoxicatingly erotic. Its animalistic vivacity, its powerful assertiveness, its primitive potential viciousness, and its ultimate vulnerability represent what Robin Morgan calls the terrorist mystique: “[S/]He is a fanatic of dedication, a mixture of impetuosity and discipline; [s/]he is desperate and therefore vulnerable; [s/]he is totally at risk, and therefore brave; [s/]he is an idealist yet a hardened realist. Most of all [s/]he is someone wholly given over to a passion. But this passion is death” (57). All of this is made palpable by the living breathing animal, as though desire and character and intention and ideology become man(I)fest in this dog’s body/this god’s body.

Dark men, the terrorists like the Motorcycle Mechanic, evoke worship by women:

Women, myself, we need to love a beast, to feel that it could transcend itself for love, for us, for beauty. (Jason 41)

In the poem, “Craig’s Hummingbirds,” Wakoski characterizes this proclivity to worship:

Once I said I was afraid of looking into your [man’s] eyes as if I would fall into them and disappear, ….I’d already looked into them and seen beauty the way someone sees God and builds a whole religion. (EC 63)
That Wakoski is clearly “building a whole religion” around the love of this man—seen through the image of the dog—plays out in one of her early descriptions of the Doberman:

as if she were an Aztec shadow
that followed me and eyed my breasts
for sacrifice
as if she were the only comfortable chair
in a room full of straight-backs. (*TNP* 92)

If we juxtapose a citation from the poem “SIZE”

I like men who are large…
I like them with flaring cobra shoulders or python arms
to hold me as if they were chairs or fathers (*EC* 57),

we can see how the poet’s mind works around and through the web of images. “Our Fathers,” “Our Daddys,” “Motorcycle Mechanics/Betrayed,” all represent the dear comfortable large Patriarchy that we think will support us, hold us in comfort and protection, take us to bed, love us, whereas in reality it will only bite, shoot, invite to its agenda of death. While we worship the shadow, the fiction of the large and powerful hero, Wakoski shows us that the god we make of men is but a shadow bent on sacrifice, gazing down at us as sacrificial victims. That this religion of the man-god is “the only comfortable chair” indicates that, as a seat of power, it is the best of a bad lot. We see that because its ultimate agenda is dismissal, rejection, abandonment, erasure, or destruction of woman-being, the illusion of divinity cannot be sustained even under the aegis of its powerful romanticism.

Wakoski’s awareness of her own almost cultish intoxication with a hero-worship religion based on seeing beauty in men’s eyes—that bestial, primitive, animalistic, but so-appealing manly beauty—and on disappearing into it is terrifying rather than comforting, destructive rather than creative. Robin Morgan incites us to examine the etymology of the word religion: “Religion is about something else…, from the Latin, is related to being *bound by rules*. Religion is about terror” (88). If we do investigate the definition of the term, we discover it is indeed about an “obligation or bond”: religion is the “human recognition of a superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship” or “the effect of such recognition on conduct and mental attitude” (*COD* 877). Women fall in love with these darkly passionate sorts; we are conditioned/taught/trained to love them as a form of cultish coercion, what Morgan calls “recruitment by romance” (201), but which, as we have seen with the Jason/Medea story, too easily turns to rejection and abandonment, or worse, to violence and
abuse, symbolized by the shooting of the dog who loved the man and did his bidding. That women have made a religion of love and have so idolized men that we have made gods of them has serious implications for women’s self-image. We have so idolized men that we turn into, not just their subjects or disciples, but their pets, conforming our conduct and our mental attitudes to their needs, subjecting ourselves to the vulnerability and risk of a hideous emotional bondage that deprives us of our wits and requires that we sacrifice our wills to what we have come to see as entitlements by men, by the culture, by ourselves—even when we know or at least sense that something is not right with this dynamic.

While Wakoski on one level sees the dog as the primitive, sexualized/phallic/animalistic power of the man/terrorist whom she adores, she also implies that the dog represents the woman caught in “an intricate emotional bondage” (Morgan 215) to this romantic terrorist hero. When Wakoski initiates her reverie about the man and the dog, she pictures the latter as “black caviar” (TNP 41), an exotic delicacy to be eaten, in juxtaposition to herself clad in a black panther-like coat and shiny black boots. She is clearly equating herself with the dog and both with exotic eroticism and immolation: “form of life” becoming “its content / doubling back on itself” (93). Both are female; both love the man unequivocally; both lie in the bed with him, close to his body. Both have been trained, bred, and defined—conduct, mental attitude, even their bodies “clipped” and cultivated to do his bidding or to suit his fancy. Both become too dependent on him (41), fall victim of that dreadful/deathful dependence on his attention, his approval, his approbation, his affirmation, his agenda. Both are subjected to his dismissal: abandonment, betrayal, and that final alternative to rejection—death.

In some ways, Wakoski indicates that dog/man/god cannot but enact what he has been bred to, what he has been trained to do, what he has been constructed as being. This man from Wakoski’s narrative is driven by what—the machines and bodies—he takes to bed with him. He wants to love; he wants to sleep snuggled up with a warm body—woman/dog; he wants to withdraw from love and from obligation, from connection and dependences; he wants to rev and to shoot, to ejaculate, evacuate, reject. This Prince of Darkness is no more unequivocal than are Witches. He, too is defined by the images with which he is surrounded/surrounds himself. The black shadow dog conflates with the Vincent Black Shadow machine representative of the “power between his legs,” that masculine sexuality now equated with terrorism, phallus-ism, masculinity; the masculine-identity becomes the “mystery of masculinity” represented by the
black-leather jacketed Motorcycle Mechanic/Betrayer. In turn, the Doberman’s sleek black body is compared to the equally sleek “black muzzle of the gun” (41): muzzle of dog, muzzle of gun; dog’s muzzle bites Diane; man’s muzzle shoots dog. In this version of the story, it is inevitable that the dog will pursue the imperative of its teeth, just as the “hero” will enact the impulse of his phallus: gun, motorcycle. The motorcycle enacts abandonment and rejection; the gun enacts death. He’s driven to ride, to rev, to clip, to train, to bite, to shoot, both to cultivate dependence and to hate it. These terrorist acts “pass for manhood” which we love as an “avatar of power” (Morgan 57).

By the end of the poem, Wakoski posits the possibility of a different scenario, a rewriting of the age-worn script—what about a new dog? a new set of images? Will this enable “a different person”?

will your new dog
also bite?
Or will that dog
someday take a gun and shoot you? Or will this dog
neither bite nor shoot
and
that having happened
will you
be a different person? (sic TNP 93)

This implies the possibility that men hate being Men—they want to be something/someone else, but their teeth/phallus won’t let them. But are teeth real? is the phallus a thing that revs between their legs? Or are these ideological constructs, pieces of texts that can be erased and rewritten? We see in the Motorcycle Mechanic a Branwell Bronte, from “For Catherine Who Says She Is Wuthering Heights,” attempting, by drinking himself to death, to anaesthetize himself against himself, against “manhood,” against the essentialism of having to be a masculine man:

Men were the prisons
and the prisoners
and the men who didn’t want to be
became
the worse imprisoned. (EC 84)

Wakoski implies in her text that the Motorcycle Mechanic will always be lonely, always insuring his own isolation. Surely, like Branwell, this Motorcycle Mechanic Man is miserable, lonely, and confused, driven by drives he scarcely understands. Who would want to be this man, living alone with his gun and his motorcycle, having alienated or destroyed all the living things he could/
would love or who could/would love him? Though Wakoski implies that he will continue to train dogs to bite, dogs he feels compelled then to shoot, that he will continue to woo women only to reject them, she does question wistfully if this masculine modus operandus represents the pattern of the way things are and are always meant to be ad infinitum. Do the images find/define us, or do we find/define them? In positing new questions, new identity positions, and new possibilities for conduct and for mental attitudes, Wakoski opens the whole (cultural) text for that transformation so essential to the formation of new subjectivities—not just for women, but for men as well. If it is true that women have defined our gendered identities in terms of men, then redefining ways that men can be can significantly affect the possibilities of redefining women. In the poem “Your Sister in Jail,” Wakoski plays around with shifting roles to explore these redefining possibilities.

It is this different person—a different kind of man, along with the woman terrorist that Wakoski implicates in her poem “Your Sister in Jail.” Through the manipulation of two key tropes, the dance and the gun, Wakoski tests the performative parameters of gender, both the consistency of performance and what Judith Butler calls the “constitutive instability” (218) of the gendered identities ascribed to women and to men. In the poem, Robert’s sister, does not cooperate with the rules of patriarchy, developed through the trope of the dance, and violates the world order by stealing her father’s gun and holding up a 7-Eleven. In refusing to acquiesce to the dictates of the dance dynamic, she rejects “the normative force of performativity” (188) that constitutes her identity as a woman. Then, when she usurps men’s phallic prerogatives by stealing and wielding a gun, Robert’s sister further disrupts masculine power. Robert himself challenges his gendered identity by abandoning the binaried strictures of partnered dance to dance alone to his own music. These acts of violation of the sacred order of gender operate on various levels to open up possibilities for the de-genderization of identity and the freeing of subjects—men as well as women—from the restrictions of performative imperatives that have kept the patriarchal power grid in place.

The dance in the poem serves as a complex trope paradoxically representing both conformity and rebellion. In one case, sexual difference is materialized through the ritual of the dance, symbol of the heterosexual matrix of partnered interaction and activity in which the man is the leader—the lover/husband, the father/god—and the woman is the follower—the wife, the daughter. In the other case, the dance affords an opportunity for creative self-expression or what
I have called imaginaction: the body’s creatively enacting an imaginative, innovative, novel set of patterns and behaviors, thereby expanding gender beyond the law of the authoritarian text that defines it.

The dance represents the imposition of this “regulatory law.” Two forces in the dance dynamic combine to determine the parameters within which the discrete gendered identities can perform. One is the music, and the other is the binaried partnering that comprises dancing itself. Together, these forces dictate the scope and limitation of action through which sexual difference can materialize. Wadoski asserts that everyone dancing is expected to find the rhythm and to be able to go with it, not against it. (EC 127)

Furthermore, she less than subtly insists that while everyone expects conformity and everyone is expected to conform, these expectations originate with “your father” and with “your partner” (128), this latter being gendered male (to his female partner), who insist that everyone hear and adhere to the prescribed music. This dance dynamic consisting of both music and dancing is another text written in the name of the father, a patriarchal text dictating performative parameters, a text “without an author, but drenched in an author-ity” (de Lauretis, Technologies 64) that imposes what Butler calls “hegemonic force of regulatory law” (2) upon discrete gender participation and practice. The music/rhythm is set; the pattern of the steps is set; the partnered binary is set—and the fathers are watching. The dance imposes its ritual binary partnering and requires conforming the two bodies to each other, not in any kind of mutualism and synchronicity, but rather, in a dialectic of the binary in which the man leads and the woman follows, the follower conforming her steps, motions, rhythms, etc. to those of the male leader. Both female follower and male leader are in turn expected “to fit in with the other dancers” (EC 129), and to “dance the way / everybody else does” (129), “to find the rhythm” (127), and “to go / with it, not against it” (128), even if “[they] don’t really like the music” (129). If gendered behavior is performed accurately and well, then all is right with the world: the majority prevails, the dance progresses smoothly, and all are considered “sane”—everyone “gets it” (127). When men and women perform their gendered duties as prescribed within the sphere of expectations and assumptions, they verify gender necessity. However, “[d]emur” and “you’re straightway dangerous— / And handled with a chain” (Dickinson 2515):25 when women fail to perform
gender accurately, they violate the social order and must be held accountable: i.e. thrown in jail, like Robert’s sister.

Because gender is an act, a set of prescriptions determined by the cultural texts designed and dedicated to the production and maintenance of a rigid set of social relations, symbolized in the poem by the dance, Robert’s sister is called to the female-gendered role in the dance: she is the follower; she must fit in, do the dance as prescribed—“find the rhythm” (*EC* 127). She must enact the requisite set of behaviors that fulfill the expectations of her gender performance.

However, Butler contends that the signifiers that call us to “being,” such as “woman,” fail “fully to describe the constituency they name” (191). Hence, the signifiers can potentially become sites of resistance: Robert’s sister’s gendered identity then can become a site at which she can contest the rigid performative demands of the signifier.

Acting out of a dejection and an anger perhaps originating in her having come late to the dance, her having “start[ed] in the middle of the dance” (*EC* 127) and thus her not having had a say in how the ritual was to be enacted—what patterns, designs, relationships were to evolve—, Robert’s sister decides not to participate. Her dissatisfaction with the restrictions that inhere in her gendered performative in the dance dynamic initiates her dissidence and rebellion. When she says “Who cares” and “Fuck it. Fuck you” (128), she is rejecting the continuity, even the constituency, of her place in the system, shaking up the matrix, and initiating the “discursive rearticulation” (Butler 191) of her very womanness. Butler theorizes that it is not simply the repetition of prescribed acts that maintains identity, mostly because these acts cannot remain “self-identical,” but, often more importantly, identity is sustained by “that which is refused from construction, the domain of the repressed, forgotten, the irrevocably foreclosed” (245). There are certain behaviors within the culture that women and men cannot broach: women are not permitted to ask men to dance, and women may not lead; women must not wield guns, kill children, opt for abortion, or disavow marriage; men cannot dance alone to their own music, cry, become house-husbands and “moms,” allow their sons to wear tutus, to play with dolls or to play “household” in addition to or instead of football, racing cars, and war games.

When Robert’s sister steps into this forbidden “elsewhere,” a plethora of disturbances result from her actions. Because her act is not authorized by her name “woman,” it deauthorizes the set of social/sexual relations, thereby, providing a window for widening the possibilities of expanding performance parameters. In addition, Butler defines agency as “a hiatus in iterability”
which itself is “the compulsion to install an identity through repetition” (220); hence, by her act, Robert’s sister interrupts identity performance and the so-called “perfection” of gender and initiates a woman’s agency, a unique and individualized gesture that interferes with gender coherence and instigates a leakage. Perhaps most significantly, Robert’s sister’s act of resistance exposes the “male-centered frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are reproduced by the discourse of male sexuality or as Luce Irigaray has so well written it, of hom(m)o-sexuality” (de Lauretis, Technologies 17). Finally, we can’t ignore the impending “punishment”: Butler’s “hegemonic force of regulatory law” (2) insists on discrete gender performatives that cannot be broached with impunity, that is, without incensing Cixous’ “cops of the signifier” (“Medusa” 348). The necessity of imposing a regulatory system leads to Robert’s sister’s going to jail. Chaffing at the strictures of the dance, Robert’s sister, does more than just reject the system. In frustration, she steals her father’s gun and holds up a 7-Eleven store. Her vigilante act results in her being thrown in jail. She fails; she is virtually erased, shut-up, literally, in the jail and, figuratively, in her inability any longer to speak for herself in tones other than lamentation and self-pity.

While both Robert’s sister’s act of leaving the dance and stealing the gun are the negatives, oppositional rejections of a model she would not imitate, her fatal mistake occurs when she attempts to garner male power to herself, to assume ownership and control, not of language, text, story, myth, but of the phallus, gun, penis. She with penis/phallus/gun is not the repressed, abjected woman we saw in Chapter 2 seeking an alternative to the encountered controlling texts. Rather, this woman represents another kind of “constitutive outside…the unspeakable, the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable that secures and hence fails to secure the very borders of materiality” (Butler 188)—another kind of prison for herself. By acting her bold “penis envy” and seizing her father’s gun/phallus, she expects to “make them dance to her rhythm” (EC 127). Instead of being compelled to dance to their rhythm, she incites a “potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, not contained, any representation” (de Lauretis Technologies, 3). Yes, her hyperbolic act might have had the potential to effect change, but she is “contained”; she is “handled with a chain” and thrown in jail where she languishes, but still “doesn’t get it” (EC 127). Now she is out of the fray altogether. Because agency is “a reiterative or rearticulatory practice immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (Butler 15, my italics), Robert’s sister’s act does not demonstrate any genuine agency, does not achieve its goal.
of carving a place for women in the power grid of culture. This does not mean that she is not
heard, that she is not noticed, but, instead of being seen as powerful in her own right, she is
perceived as dangerous—and treated accordingly. The nature of her threat is that she has indeed
shattered the limits of the feminine gendered performative. However, her act is seen as
ineffective because she has failed to realize that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the
master’s house” (Lorde 110). She becomes the terrorist she seeks to avoid. She doesn’t want to
conform to the demands of the patriarchal text of the dance, but even her verbal response: “Fuck
it. Fuck you” calls on the phallus/penis to serve as the power tool that will effect her release from
the phallus/text.

Because the phallus/gun has conventionally been invested with power, Robert’s sister
thinks that by stealing/owning/wielding it, by assuming the phallic father’s position of author-
izing the script and making them “dance to her rhythm” (EC 127), she can share in the power
that accrues to phallus/gun/father/author. When she is contained and handled with a chain,
thrown in jail, she bemoans the failure of “the gun” to materialize on her behalf the promise of
its power. She realizes the gun did indeed possess the power to make the people in the 7-Eleven
do what she wanted, but in the end, the outcome wasn’t what she wanted after all. Her behavior
constituted an act of desperation borne of an out-of-control anger, abjection, and dejection. It
was oppositional without being constructive. It broached the nonlivable elsewhere instead of the
erotic elsewhere. Now, vilified as a villain, a pariah, a terrorist, a madwoman, she is jeered at,
scoffed at, and pitied. None of these reactions places her into the position of power she
anticipated. What made her think she would win this game his way?

Though Wakoski attempts to point up the futility of Robert’s sister’s decisions,26 some fruit
is borne out of such dramatic and traumatic gestures. Her hyperbolic deeds of stealing her
father’s gun and robbing the 7-Eleven signifies that small efforts often go unnoticed; therefore,
grand, even grotesque, ones need to be devised in order for women to be heard at all. Into the
reiterative mix of patterned behaviors abrogated by only a modicum of alternatives, a trauma
intervenes: a totally subversive dramatic act that destroys forever the limits of any unified and
singular definition of sex/ gender. That Robert’s sister could take possession of the gun, even if
doing so is not the best way to make a statement, indicates that women can act. Theatrically,
dramatically wielding the gun becomes a form of coming out in drag, of gender cross-dressing
that creates the constitutive antagonism and “queers”27 the whole notion of a closed system of
gender identity. In the narrative of gender, Robert’s sister innovates a space in the discourse to rewrite the cultural narrative that defines her. She creates “a view from ‘elsewhere’” (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t* 25). In this poem, however, she is consigned to another kind of elsewhere—the jail. When she screams at Robert—the brother/savior/man—to write to her, to notice her, to hear her, when she calls him the writer, she does so as an accusation:

nobody cares what I think,
what I want, you always seemed to care,
why don’t you write to me YOU’RE A FUCKING WRITER. (*EC* 128)

She does not understand why what she thinks and what she wants don’t matter; why she isn’t being heard; why her story isn’t being told. Ironically, or not, it is being told, albeit equivocally by Wakoski, not by the man-writer, but by the woman poet who struggles, herself, with identifying and dis-identifying with the rebellious woman.

While Robert’s sister pays the price for her iconoclasm, she does still step into Butler’s “undetermined interval” (220), which we have seen as a kind of structured negativity, a space that represents the beyond of the limitations of (her) gender performances. Her act of “courage” and defiance sets a precedent for Robert’s own subversive, albeit more subtle and successful, act of resistance. Robert, also oppressed by the strictures inherent in *the dance*, feels no less frustrated than his sister at a system which so narrowly defines the parameters of his being in ways he has not supported, affirmed, or advocated. However, he is the more savvy of the two, apprehending that rebelling against the authoritarian text at every, indeed at any, turn could land him into the clutches of the sex cops as well:

…if
[he] followed her rhythm instead of the one that the band’s already playing
[they]’d both be in jail, and what good would that do? (*EC* 128)

No more than his sister does, does he like the music or even the dance, but his consciousness of his oppression does not preclude his desire for survival:

what you have to do to survive, and how survival isn’t
a matter of necessarily liking the band, the tune, your dance partner
or even dancing itself…
you do your best,
fit in with the other dancers. (*EC* 129)

In a way that his sister “doesn’t get it” (127), Robert does “get it”: he is aware of the social necessity of conforming his behavior, his body, even his thinking to “fit in with the other dancers.” This does not mean that he is not cognizant of an inner music, an inner self that yearns
to be different. Like his sister—“it must be genetic” (128)—, he longs for that “elsewhere,” that “entre,” some other sense of space more compatible with the unique and visionary about himself. In the poem, the poet-voice informs us that Robert “too w[as] dancing to a different rhythm,” that “[he] kn[e]w what it mean[t] to be different, but [he’d] / never flaunted it” (128) like his sister flaunted her dissidence. His acts of difference are secretive, perhaps totally private. He is savvy enough to know that if he, like his sister, did not conform to the public/social dictates of the dance, they’d “both be in jail” (128). He would be branded as an anomaly, as someone who had “something missing / or something that shouldn’t be there” (128). But this evening, in this moment, he drops out of time, out of the dialectic of his performativity: this evening he dances alone, in public.

When Robert, after the “real”—that is, the partnered—dance is done, asks the band to play the kind of music to which he can dance his own dance, he shows us all that there is room, publicly as well as privately, to defy memory, prescription, and external and internal determinism. He can exert not just a private resistance, nor just a social deviance or traumatic iconoclasm like his sister’s, but a subtly, patient, quiet gesture that effects an iconoclasm of its own:

you’re secretly happy when someone comes up
to you the next day and says, “That was really a great dance you did
all by yourself out on the dance floor
…. Hey,
Everybody’s got to find their own rhythm. (129)

Robert’s personal/private/public dance becomes the vehicle par excellence for the dehiscence of a plethora of effects. First it expresses a personal “vision,” that which is not only “most private, intimate, unusual, [and] unique,” but also “that part of you which is somewhat repressed or put down because it doesn’t fit in with the forms. It may be in fact that part of you that you have to create, that is completely unique. In other words, the ability to create something unique about yourself” (TNP 334).

However, it is so much more than that: as a site of resistance, this singular dance becomes the vehicle both for the assertion of his rebellion against the stultifying system of gender determination and for an agency that signals a new power of self-re-generation, akin to Butler’s rearticulation/rematerialization and Wakoski’s “something unique about yourself.” If, as Butler claims, “‘effects’ are vectors of power” (187), the “effect” of this singular dance-act affords
Robert and anyone else who would emulate him an opportunity to assert a self-approbation to power; a new body materializes in the wake of this new act, one that Robert’s sister could have appreciated and understood: “Too bad your sister couldn’t have / been here to see you dancing like that” (EC 129). This is about identity, subjectivity somehow extricated from the complex matrix of gender performative regulations. His act is androgynous in that it falls outside of either gender role: he neither leads someone else, nor follows: he enjoys himself, dancing alone to music of his own choosing. For one brief moment he enters one of those parallel universes of which Wakoski speaks so often, a space where he can live a different life than the one prescribed. He “imaginacts” another subjectivity, another self, even another public relationship—as his friend comes up to congratulate him. Appreciated, perhaps even envied, if not emulated, his act has potentially opened the door to future identity rearticulations to come. He has found and founded a viable “elsewhere,” a narrativizable, livable, speakable, danceable “entre” where he can man-I-fest an I, an agency, a choice, a difference. And, “secretly happy” (129), he has attained a measure of self satisfaction and a new tolerance for the stultifying reality to which he must return: he doesn’t “mind as much going back to dancing the way everybody else / does” (129).

Robert’s and his sister’s acts both violate gender stereotypes, yet individually and collectively, they teach us something about the necessity of shaking up the matrix that reinforces gender roles. While Robert would not, and certainly we would not want to, emulate his sister and become liable to her consequences, it is the “simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination” (de Lauretis, Technologies 714) of the ideological and cultural texts. Both agents represent Donna Haraway’s “new fictions of social reality”: “condensed images of both imaginative and material reality” (697), “world-changing fiction[s]…mapping [new] social and bodily realit[ies]” (696-7). Both present a “synthesis of hope and courage” that includes separation and return, “breaking from the past and consciously creating your own history” (Daly 27). While through this small, rather subtle, less than hyperbolic act, Robert does not stop being Robert; however, after the dance is over, he can savor the new dimensions of himself. Not only is he “secretly happy when someone comes up /… the next day” to congratulate him (EC 129), but we sense he will never go back to being unequivocally the old Robert.

What Wakoski demonstrates in this poem is that while femininity and masculinity are “forcible citation[s] of a norm” (Butler 232), the norm is not inviolable. Robert, especially as a
man enacting a more feminine behavior, threatens the solidarity and security of female/feminine, male/masculine. When he chooses to dance alone, he does not merely seize the power to dance to his own music without a partner; his choice has repercussions. It enables us to conceive of the world in terms other than partnered in binaries, the quintessential binary and perhaps the most applicable here being what Adrienne Rich has called a “compulsory heterosexuality” (Blood, Bread, and Poetry 23) that imposes a whole set of regulatory laws upon gender identity and gender behavior and gender relationships. While Wakoski feels that Rich often used unfortunate language to talk about gender relationships, she agrees with Rich that if we can disidentify with the gendered norm of the culture, then we are all part of the “lesbian continuum” (51). Wakoski would agree that lesbian can signify finding a balance between the woman in us, the man in us, and the human in us. Thus, the lesbian continuum, then, represents “a range of woman-identified experience, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support…the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (51). Thinking of ourselves as “lesbians” might entail discovering heretofore socially forbidden selves, reinventing ourselves, stretching ourselves, bringing into the light that which has been excluded, hidden, and unacceptable, and experimenting with new ways of being “that have not [been] taught you, that you have to learn, learn as yourself” (TNP 333). The narrative of gender is an ongoing effort to navigate the spaces of discourse—whether the text be a dance, a snippet of biography, a myth, a long-held belief—; to revision our roles within that discourse; to imaginact our way out of confining discursive spaces; to reinvent ourselves—again and again. Wakoski, “interested in…differences instead of samenesses” (324), would certainly agree that difference is liberating.

Although Wakoski attempts to get past her dysfunctional relationships with the men in her personal life, she continues to see them as “romantically,” albeit negatively, defining. One part of herself wants to conceive of herself as the singular dancer, as the one with the “dragonlady power” (Medea 99) as a vibrant taking of command of her life, as Dorothy making her own adventure, as Diane-Athene—independent, strong, assertive. However, she has shown too clearly how women defer to men. That she still speaks of and conceives of her god in masculine terms and conflates him with “father,” even “lover”; that she still yearns for her father’s approbation; that she still wakes each morning to the hopeful possibility that “men could really love [her]” (EC 22)—all attest to the power of patriarchy over her life, and by extension over the
lives of women in the culture. Just as the Wakoski-persona-poet continues to define herself through her relationships with men, so women in general cannot completely transcend our relationships with the pervasive and persistent patriarchal influence of culture. It is not just “men” who influence us, but also the plethora of masculinist discourses and texts and institutions and thought patterns that impose their codes upon our thinking and behaving. Degendering god and/or regendering “him” as female, disentangling our identities from our connections with men—fathers and lovers—require not just asserting strength of will or seizing phallic-guns or slashing motorcycle tires. Women must unmask the god façade, must dis-inherit themselves from that old navy hat, must seize the keys to the motorcycle or, like Medea, the reins to the chariot and make our own way. Making ourselves in new ways entails a unique and eccentric vision to cultivate a new mindset, a new vocabulary for articulating an identity, a new language with which to construct ourselves.

Chapter Four End Notes

1 I am including in this term both Wakoski’s references to her personal experience as well as written texts—the poems, prose works, interviews, myths/stories she has made up that constitute her written accounts of her biography.

2 Throughout her text, The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism, Robin Morgan discusses the phenomenon of the terrorist-demon-lover.

3 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the quest.

4 In Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski explains: “what art is, is to pull away the masks one by one and reveal what is behind the veil. That’s what we mean about the mystery of art. Somehow you can’t do it without the process of creating the masks first. It’s like enlightenment that you have to go through this journey of taking away your innocence and seeing things perhaps even falsely in order for that innocence or pure perception to mean anything” (322).

5 “That is what destiny is: / something unalterable” (Medea 49).

6 In a letter to Craig, Wakoski confesses: “My image of my mother alone, with my father gone all the time, is an image of emptiness and failure. I have always felt that I had to be with a man in order to be complete” (Medea 59).

7 Wakoski explains: “Like my father, then the figure of George Washington who becomes a symbolized father figure. Because he was the father of our country, I began to think of myself, partly with a pun on the word cunt, as country. Again, country is a feminine entity, and therefore what the country relates to is the father, the masculine” (sic TNP 249).
8 Other citations indicating her identification with Medea include but are not limited to: “When I was young, I fell in love with the story of Medea. I identified completely with the betrayed sorceress” (Medea 26); “the time I first felt my passionate identification with Medea” (26); “I have always known that I am Medea, not that I acted out her life but that I was she” (94-5); “I can still be the young girl, the teenager who identified with Medea” (27).

9 Although the biomythological poem entitled “Medea the Sorceress” uses the third person, Wakoski indicates that the “she” is an avatar of herself as a young compromised coed. The whole segment of which I quoted a part in my text reads:

So, as if she were Medea, when the letters came
talking casually about his dates with other girls, un-pregnant girls,
she decided that she would have no choice. She
would kill him, and her children, and like the Sorceress
leave for another world, in her chariot drawn by dragons.
She gave up her baby. No regrets. Only the weak
have regrets.
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 Cafe
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. (98-99)

It is noteworthy that Wakoski often invents “biographical” details to make a point, so the identification of the poet with the protagonist of this poem does not necessarily constitute conflation.

10 The citation from Gilbert and Gubar reads: “Women’s roles…are ultimately variations upon the roles of angels and monsters…reflecting an elaborate typology” (17).

11 Wakoski tells Craig in a letter: “I can still be the young girl, the teenager who identified with Medea, and simultaneously, the sorceress who escaped and who is now beyond all that” (Medea 27).

12 Both Auerbach and Gilbert and Gubar assert this claim in different ways: “for the angel’s otherworldly power translates itself imperceptibly into a demonism” (Auerbach 4); “the monster may not be concealed behind the angel; she may actually turn out to reside within the angel” (Gilbert and Gubar 29).

13 Auerbach discusses the Carlylian hero, himself as “most receptive to the Force,” that is, as a being so caught up in the abstractions of “True, Divine, and Eternal [which for Wakoski might be called the “Real, Unchanging God-World”], which exists always unseen to most [like Oz
behind his curtain]” that his very humanity “dissolve[s] in the Force which is the nonhuman essence of things” (199, my bracketed inserts).

14 Robin Morgan lumps all the avatars of the mythological and contemporary hero-types into a single “terrorist group: “the sexy Masked Man. The Lone Ranger. Zorro…. [t]he swashbuckler, the highwayman, the pirate, the daredevil, the outlaw. The Frog Prince. The Beast menacing Beauty. The costumes, uniforms, disguises, worn by men of the church and the military…and by men of the corporation, and by hip-radical or the Yuppie, the biker or the chieftain. The hero’s disguises and the emperor’s clothes were cut by the same tailor, and for the same purpose” (57).

15 See Buschendorf: “Medea is not only a personification of jealousy…but…a victim of love” (611).

16 Gilbert and Gubar claim that men must “castigate the cunning of the serpent—at least when that cunning is exercised on her own behalf” (28), but by implication, not when it is being exercised on his!

17 “For Butler, dis-identification “follows when the temporarily constituted unity promised by the political signifier fails to fulfill its promise” (219).

18 Morgan’s description of the terrorist reads: “he magnetizes us as an avatar of power. We recognize this as an unhealthy power. We recognize less what lies behind his ski mask or feature-contorting nylon stocking….” (57). Thus, the mask here is the hideous one of the dark one rather than the handsome and charming one.

19 Other icons she celebrates include: cowboy singers, surfers, Beethoven, George Washington, Einstein, Pony Express Rider, her clever little leading men: Bluemoon Cowboy, King of Spain, Silver Surfer, Motorcycle Betrayer, Motorcycle Mechanic, Steelman, and at the root “Our Daddy,” the St. Nick Dad, the Sailor in the officer’s hat, and father-lover-god.

20 Like Jason, the Motorcycle Mechanic/Motorcycle Betrayer according to Wakoski herself serves as the prototype for men in her life who have loved then betrayed her.

21 Wakoski contends that images represent “the structure, the bones, gleaming behind the flesh” (TNP 40), not just of poems but also of the very fabric of life itself:

Our lives are metaphors for life,
sometimes a dog
only
a symbol for another
dog. (sic 40)

While “images are a way of shaping poems” (40), it is apparent that they are also a way of shaping experience and perception as well; they generate a kind of corporeality that gives shape to experience, to perceptions, to our self-conceptions. Because images represent just another layer/ form of language subject to interpretation, Wakoski explores the layers of the meanings of the images associated with this story:
I wonder
if my life is a poem
or if poetry is my life;
I wonder at what point the form of my life
became its content,
doubling back on itself. (EC 93)

For Wakoski, then, images create not just poetry but the shapes, colors and textures of reality as well:

Do we choose the symbols for our lives
and then write the poems?
Or do the poems write our lives in ink that stains more than fingers? (92)

22 When I first read Toward a New Poetry, I was struck by Wakoski’s repetition of the events of the story of the Motorcycle Mechanic, his lover, and his dog. I wondered why she persisted in peppering her text with repeated references to the images and the events of the narrative. It seemed like she was laboring and repeating what didn’t need reiterating. Yet, as I gathered my thoughts about the men in the poems of The Emerald City of Las Vegas, the figures of this Motorcycle Mechanic, his beautiful and vicious female dog, and his rejected and abandoned female lover hovered at the edge of my consciousness, demanding a place in my account of Wakoski’s men. Images do haunt us with their speculative, meditative, narrative, and formative potential.

23 I’m punning here on the anima/animus because Wakoski considers herself a Jungian.

24 The beast here is the beast in the man:
    she sees that he is an animal, not a disguised
    man, an animal trying to raise himself, impossibly, to a human level.
    Not that enchantment gave him bestiality but the opposite:
    that enchantment
    can force the beast of self
    to try to dress, live, love
    like a man,
    beyond his nature, and thus be
    more beautiful to a woman than any
    manly form could ever be. (Jason 40-41)

25 I’m citing from “Much madness is Divinest Sense” in which Dickinson asserts that those who attempt to thwart the “majority” are considered dangerous and must be handled with a chain. Wakoski references Dickinson several times in The Emerald City of Las Vegas and actually sends her an “Angel Wire” of poetic connection in the poem by that name. (60-61)

26 Wakoski expresses this futility when she characterizes Robert’s sister’s feelings:
    this place is awful, it’s just like
    everyplace else, nobody cares what I think
    …I am so
    unhappy. And she still doesn’t get it. (EC 128)
Butler claims that “the term ‘queer’ emerges as an interpellation [call] that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, within performativity” (226). I am enacting, in my use of queer as a verb, Butler’s admonition to “redeploy, twist [it]…from a prior usage in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (228). Queering here means to undermine gender identity and to affirm cross-dressing and drag as viable options for “a departure [from] a set of historical reflections and [for] futural imaginings” (228).

Wakoski was intrigued with the idea of dancing alone: in the poem “Moneylight” she posits the possibility of eluding old “teenage music” and any “shadow man” to dance alone herself:

Last night I danced alone  
in my darkened living room.  
Usually when I do this  
I am rock ’n rolling, in a way I’d be  
embarrassed to do  
in public. I dance alone  
because that kind of dancing doesn't  
require a partner, anyway. (Medea 179)

Wakoski wishes that Rich had not used the word “lesbian” “because I think that so totally confuses the issue,” because the concept is “so repugnant to many of us that we can’t take it for its value” (TNP 333). In addition, “it implies so many of the wrong things and so much takes us away from the real notion of invention of self to a very kind of stereotyped notion of a socially forbidden self” (334).
Chapter Five: Women for Women Makes Morewoman

Throughout my discussion of Diane Wakoski’s poetry, I have been arguing from a poststructuralist feminist point of view that gender identity is not innate, but is constructed from the cultural texts. From the moment we are conceived and sets of chromosomes conspire to determine our biological sex type, the process of our becoming is initiated, and we women begin being “girled”—especially today with the prevalence of ultrasound photography that identifies pre-birth gender. Once we are identified and named, Wakoski bemoans:

the only return possible
[i]s a shadow, and it was that
which depended on the name. (EC 105)

Wakoski implies here that we are born without substance, like a shadow, without identifiable features, and that these features materialize only when we are named and thereby called into being and then respond to the interpellation(s) of that call. We continue the development of our gender identity under the force of the patriarchal law dictated by the cultural institutions and technologies that fashion our realities, our truths, our common sense perceptions. Some of the significant informing texts include: the institution of motherhood or what Cixous has unaffectionately called “motherages” (“Medusa” 361); the Oedipal bias of gender determination, articulated through the theories of Freud and perpetuated by the scientific/psychoanalytical community; and what Adrienne Rich has rather infamously called “compulsory heterosexuality,”1 the process of being acculturated to define ourselves exclusively or, at least primarily, in terms of our relationships with men.

In an effort to counter a male-centered bias that has informed women’s identity, many feminists—including Adrienne Rich, the French Feminists—Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray—, psychoanalytical feminist Nancy Chodorow, and certainly Wakoski herself—have advocated for women a stronger identification and connection with other women, beginning with our mothers. In her poetry, Wakoski embraces the feminine associations of women with women as providing significant contributions to her own subject formation. In this chapter I will discuss the way in which her poetry examines women’s relationships as positive, energizing, regenerating, and supportive.

While Wakoski herself concedes the constructedness of women, in disentangling herself from the myriad myths, stories, texts, words, theories, beliefs, rituals, and technologies that do define her woman-self, she affirms a “core” of feminine component(s) that can contribute to the
on-going fashioning of the woman-self. In *Toward a New Poetry*, the poet identifies this core as: “what is most private, intimate, eccentric, unusual, unique, visionary about the person. …that part of you which…doesn’t fit in with the forms…. In other words, the ability to create something unique about yourself” (334). She acknowledges and resists the constructedness of women seen through masculinist perspectives represented by the camera, wielded by a man’s hand/eye in “the only light” (*EC* 103); she has railed against a world view dictated by a contrived patriarchal god, by singularly interpreted patriarchal myths, and by other narrowly circumscribed ways of women-being in the world. Through what I call her women-centered poetry, Wakoski discovers an alternative position “from which to draw [her] life” (*EC* 101). She balances women’s influences against men’s. Claiming her uniquely feminine experience, Wakoski examines her relationships with women to see how these relationships also inform her identity as a woman. Returning to her roots, primarily drawing on her own biomythography, she revisits her connection to her mother, to other women—othermothers,² soul-sisters, nonbiological mothers, girl-friends—, to the multiple women who she is constantly becoming herself.

Wakoski presents a wide range of women’s relationships in a kind of “lesbian continuum” which Adrienne Rich has defined as “the greatest possible variations of female identified experience” (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 73). Included in Wakoski’s continuum are intuitions of misgiving, alienation, and threat about other women as well as feelings of connection, empathy, and affirmation. Wakoski’s tentativeness towards other women—“I turn away” (*Medea* 164)—originated in her ambivalent feelings towards her own mother. Many women today suffer from conflicted mother-women feelings. Seeing women as “threatening” (*Jason* 72), as “other,” has often precluded women’s establishing meaningful relationships with other women or, at least, has inhibited our freedom to mentor and to touch each other deeply mentally, spiritually, and physically. Luce Irigaray contends that a woman’s “rejection of the mother is accompanied by the rejection of all women, herself included” (69). Thus, in the frightful causal chain, women have consequently rejected the mother, felt uneasy with other women, and failed to value what is of worth within ourselves: our sexuality, our eroticism, our bodies, desires, and personalities. Wakoski’s poems, which so clearly demonstrate that she loves to love men even as she loathes being dictated to, dismissed by, and determined by them, also explore the possibilities of other kinds of love—affirmation, and physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social connection with
women—to influence her woman-identity. Relationships with women, then, serve as sites of resistance where the woman poet and reader can revision women’s subjectivity.

One of the most fraught relationships women experience, and Wakoski is no exception here, is our connection—our identification and disidentification—with our mothers. Wakoski’s poetry presents the layered relationships of women with our mothers as a significant influence on crafting an identity. In addition to revisiting her own past and reflecting on her early and persistent conflicted mother-feelings, Wakoski analyzes her conception of herself as a young girl and her relationship with her mother through a remythologization of the Demeter/Persephone stories, which feature throughout *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*. What the Wakoski persona-poet indicates that she wants is several-fold: to love her own little-girl self; to forgive, accept, and love her mother, without actually “becoming” her; to feel valued and beautiful and loved even if she is old and ugly, even if she is not like Cinderella or Beauty, even if she is—perhaps even because she is—like Medea/Medusa.

Psychoanalyst feminist Nancy Chodorow asserts that we arrive at gender identity and individual separation not through differentiation and isolation but through relationship. French feminists Cixous and Irigaray and many other feminist theorists, including Chodorow, expand this to include a deep and essential connectedness of women to women that begins with our connectedness to that first woman, our mother. Chodorow’s experiments and theories of gender, relation, and difference provide valuable insights into a reading of Wakoski, as the poet forays into this particular relationship of mother-daughter as well as into other of women’s relations with women.

According to Freud’s theories, this whole process of gender differentiation derives from a heterosexuality that compels the woman to define her sexuality/gender in terms of the boy’s/man’s. Nancy Chodorow, however, presents a different version of gender differentiation that accounts for masculine paranoia and fears of castration, feminine matrophobia—which includes both fear of the mother and fear of becoming the mother, and the over-all de-valuing of women’s gender identity.² Chodorow posits that it is the boy child that grows into estrangement through differentiation and not, as in Freud, the female child, because it is the boy who, as he separates into individuality, discovers that he is essentially physically unlike the mother of whom he thought himself an extension—or perhaps whom he thought an extension of himself. His angst at separating from the “primary oneness with the mother” (13) and his unconscious desire
to return to that femaleness of which he thought himself a part “continually, usually unnoticeably, but sometimes insistently, challenges and undermines the sense of maleness” (13). This could account for men’s need to define, as Freud does, sexual differentiation in terms of the male’s experience and to demonize women’s power by transforming it into the hysterical, the witch, the dragon, the gorgon. It could also account for men’s need to resort to authoritarian behavior and even violence, such as the Motorcycle Mechanic’s shooting the dog, to ensure the singularity and hegemony of this sexual identity, to prevent any encroachment/infringement by so-called female attributes/sexuality. The clear and discrete gender boundaries have been invented by men to salvage their own identities from the assimilation—“devourations” and “motherages” (Cixous, “Medusa” 361)—by the primary female principle, the mother. By extension, then, according to Chodorow, girls undergo difficulties in establishing a feminine identity because of their “identification with a negatively valued gender category and an ambivalently experienced maternal figure” (14).

In Wakoski’s poetry, mother becomes a kind of metaphor for a complex set of woman-feelings and -identifications. First, it represents women’s primary, and conflicted, relationships with our initial significant sexual (gendered) partner—our mother. Born of women, we are all “lesbians” by virtue of this intimate connection, this “primary intensity” (Rich, Lies, Secrets, and Silence 202) with our mothers. She is our first connection to women and to life itself. What a joyous bond this should be. Yet, instead of feeling joy in this connection, we have felt revulsion; we have been robbed of our first, nascent jouissance. In our being alienated from that first connection, we have become alienated from a core “essential” part of our identity, our own self-mother, our own mother-identity. We have been deprived of our delight, joy, pride, and excitement in this relationship and in ourselves. All subsequent and consequent “motherages” we have suffered derive from this initial alienation—another kind of disorientation, dys-orientation, deprivation of our jewels, our erotic selves, our mother-selves. For Wakoski, mother further represents what is unloved, unlovable, ugly, distasteful, impoverished, repulsive in herself, and, by extension, these qualities many women in the culture have come to experience and to disparage within ourselves. This metaphor signifies the ways we have cared for and failed to care for ourselves. Wakoski’s wild and uncontrollable emotions as a child, her feeling of being mean, ugly, and selfish (EC 122), derive from her conflicted relationship with her mother. Wakoski resents this mother and the “ugly images of femaleness” (187) that attend her. In the mind of the
daughter, the mother somehow deserved abandonment by the romantic and debonair, heroic Navy Dad. Within this girl-becoming-a-woman, a struggle ensues as she grapples with her mother-heritage and faces self-images of plainness, of intelligence, of strength and desire that threaten her own attractiveness to men. Always lurking in Wakoski’s closet, symbol for the psyche-self, is not the “gold blouse” (123) of Judith Minty, her othermother, but the brocaded hat of her Navy Dad, heirloom without mercy:

   my father’s written
   his will: “give my daughter
   this officer’s hat which used to
   sit in her mother’s closet.” (121)

Young girls unconsciously assimilate often emotionally charged gender attitudes and “object images” (Chodorow 11) from the mother that both affect and effect the development of self, the accumulation of messages from the culture (i.e. the father) and from the mother in (un)willing collusion with the “father.” These messages and gender attitudes are often experienced as “internalizations of feelings about the self in relation to the mother, who is then often experienced as…overwhelming” (Chodorow 11). In the absence of the “real” father, as in Wakoski’s childhood, the mother becomes the scapegoat and may, in fact, appear from time to time witch-like—like wicked step-mothers out of fairy tales—, dragon-like, or gorgon-like to us as she comes more and more to represent that de-valued gender identity to which we are compelled by our name, “girl,” and by the biology which has so identified us with her. Yet, Wakoski demonstrates, as does Chodorow, that it is not through separation that we attain individuality, but through a “fundamental interconnectedness, not synonymous with merger” (Chodorow 12).

However, having grown up in the ambivalence of her love/hate relationship with her mother, Wakoski speaks here as her own signatory, “Yr. Lady of Duality” (EC 69), out of two sides of her mouth. With one side she denies her mother, but eventually she will have to reconcile and claim the mother. First, though, she is in denial: “I [am] my mother’s daughter: …not!” (188); she does not want to be associated with the compromises, with the failures, frustrations, anxieties, angers, and futilities that she has seen as comprising her mother’s lot. Intuiting that she has inherited her female identity even before she has a chance to choose it, Wakoski chafes at the connection

   some bead, a silver
   bracelet your mother slipped on your
arm before birth, echoed in the hospital, in the plastic tag around baby’s wrist. (Medea 114)

Part of Wakoski feels bound to her mother; that is, she feels bound to replicate her mother’s life: “a child to replace her mother” (118), to become her, to become subsumed in that “image of [her] mother alone, … an image of emptiness and failure” (59): “Isn’t that the greatest punishment my mother inflicted on me as a child—to constantly tell me I was exactly like her” (Jason 135). She fears that she could be sucked into her mother’s female existence, hates that she could become so enmeshed and entangled in her mother’s “destiny” that she would lose herself: “my anger with her [my mother] is my [own] unwillingness to face my destiny. How I hate the idea that I inherited my destiny from her” (Medea 136). For Wakoski destiny represents “something unalterable” (41), something over which she has no control: “I felt so out of control” (EC 122), something which constrains her and prohibits her identity from emerging and asserting itself. From our mother’s umbilical, women commence to conform to our “unalterable” and manifest destiny as females in the culture. I am using umbilical here figuratively. The term implies a genetic connection, but as we saw in Chapter 3, what we have often construed as genetic, normal, and inevitable in our gendered parameters has in fact been constructed by the cultural texts. So Wakoski’s reference to the little plastic band fastened to the baby’s wrist identifying her is an apt description of how we inherit our mothers’ destinies: they are affixed, like a label, identifying us and insuring that within “the little girl” is already “a little woman” (EC 164), that is, that the little girl’s womanhood—her being like her mother—is insured from the moment that she is born.

Women don’t want to inherit the mother’s relationship to patriarchy symbolized, on the one hand, by the little “plastic tag” affixed at birth and, on the other, by that subversively present father-hat—out of sight, perhaps, but never out of mind—imposing its silent authority. So women are torn between two devils—the compulsory heterosexuality that ensures that we think of ourselves always and only in terms of our relationships with men, in terms of patriarchy and the texts of patriarchy, and the motherage that has ensured that we grow up to become our mothers. The Wakoski persona, feeling that “mother” slip under her skin, rebels against the usurpation: “I [am] my mother’s daughter: everything that she was not!” (188). Unwitting and unwilling heir to the mother-legacy (that father’s hat), her own personality seems “dangerously
to blur and overlap with [her] mother’s; and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, [she] perform[s] radical surgery” (Rich, Of Woman Born 236).

Many of these conflicted mother-daughter difficulties play out in Wakoski’s remythologization of the story/stories of Demeter and Persephone. According to Mara Lynn Keller, who has studied and analyzed the ancient Demeter/Persephone myth, the contentious relationship between mother and daughter has evolved out of patriarchal textual transformation of the original mother-daughter story. Keller, depicting the initial Demeter/Persephone story as essentially one of expansive generosity of women’s nurturancy, contends that men have rewritten the Eleusinian goddess story to be about abduction and rape in order to assert their authority over this too-powerful woman-ness and to keep women in their place under the domination of men’s physical superiority and the impetus of the phallus. In her allusions to Demeter and, especially, to Persephone, the daughter, Wakoski integrates a plethora of possibilities of what she calls her own “oddball or perverse interpretations of things [like her] interpretation of the Hades-Persephone story” (Medea 105). Through a variety of images and allusions to Demeter and Persephone in diverse contexts, the poet explores Demeter as both the mother of abundance and the mother of grief and loss and Persephone, with whom she personally identifies (105), in a variety of aspects. These latter include a young and vibrant Persephone full of “freshness” (105), a Persephone, seduced, abducted, raped by the dominant male figure of Hades (105), and a Persephone who comes to an “understanding [of] being in hell…Iclimbing out of the abyss” (104), thus, a Persephone for whom “no tunnel / back to the light can be / too long for [her] to ascend” (107) to a renewed sense of herself.

The original myth and religion centering on Demeter and Persephone featured their positive connection as women within a continuum. Both myth and religion celebrated Demeter’s universal fecundity and served “to instruct girls about their fertility and unfolding patterns of women’s lives” (Keller 43). Mother and daughter, positively connected to each other through the bond of mutuality, biologically similar bodies, and interconnecting experiences, shared an affirming influence and future. While they relished each others’ womanhood, they also anticipated positive heterosexual union. In the original version of the story, the mother’s relation with men was not a yielding or succumbing to the phallic power of the man, but a response to her own erotic desire, “a thoumos, meaning spirit, passion, feeling” (46). Only later versions undermine the vitality of the woman’s erotic by insisting that Iason, her preferred lover, raped
Demeter; still other sources have the goddess raped by Zeus, Poseidon, or Hades. The transformation of the story from the fulfillment of the personal/female erotic to the assertion of male phallic dominance verifies the fear and insecurity men have felt in the presence of woman power, perceived as potentially threatening.

It is the transformed, subverted women figures, a reinvisioned Demeter and Persephone, that Wakoski interrogates and remythologizes in her poetry. For the poet, contemporary women’s lives have somehow been negatively caught up in the play of passion and crucifixion:

What is
the name of the rose?
[...]
Rose, the passion,
the symbol for passion.
“Rosy” crucifixion, to kill
yourself for love. Isn’t that
what all of us do?
Sex, like snow on a grave. (EC 105-6)

We have seen that the erotic passion which is the mystery of Demeter, the mother, is not equal to a sex that is fleeting and cold, like snow on a grave. Rather, it is something else—beyond crucifixion: it is her thoumos, her own vital woman’s sexuality and desire played out in her meaningful heterosexual relations and intended to be passed on to the daughter of her blood. However, because that daughter, who is also Demeter’s future, has been removed from the sphere of the passion of the mother-woman-self, “like snow on a grave,” Demeter is left to mourn: killing herself—and all of nature around her—for love of her daughter. This grieving mother is the knowledgeable wise woman regretting the loss of the possibilities of the young and vital woman self to the world of man. Her continuity in Persephone is curtailed, circumvented, circumscribed. Thus, the snow of winter, which represents both the mother’s grieving for the lost daughter and the mother’s loss of her own futurity in and through that lost daughter, symbolically separates the mother from the daughter. Later, Wakoski, the poet, wishes to shake the onus of this wintry, grieving mother. Seeing in her personal mother, not the sexually vibrant and passionate Demeter figure, but the mother contorted by grief—“old...complaining / and bitterly about how no one loves her” (sic Jason 122), the persona laments: “I long for a place where there is no winter, no / grieving mother” (EC 159).

Persephone’s “life” like that of Demeter has been complicated by the intrusion of the masculinist imperative. Originally about “freshness” (Medea 105), the story centered on the
fulfillment of Persephone’s womanly destiny rather than on her being subjected to the compulsory heterosexuality of Hades’ brutal demands. Initially, Persephone separated from her mother, not in a wrenching departure, but as an initiation of daughter into the mother’s work as healer and queen of the dead. Persephone’s sojourn in the underworld, undertaken to succor the dead, to bring to them her wisdom and healing power, symbolizes her initiation into the significant, meaningful, self-chosen work of women. In this context, her journey “down underground” (105) represents for Wakoski the “ascent [that] is descent” (104), that necessary encounter with some inner woman-core (Persephone is also called Kore), perhaps akin to Cixous’ repressed, unconscious (“Medusa” 350). This ascent that is descent represents a stage in the process of Persephone’s engaging in her mother’s work and in becoming her own self. Wakoski articulates this process as the journey to new reality: “deep reality is the journey underground. And the ascent—well, that’s the reality we can observe and it is us, the eyes, the cameras, the light. It is poetry. It is everything which is meaningful to us” (Medea 104).

However, the text of Demeter/Persephone with which we are most familiar is the patriarchal version which erases the positive effects of the original Eleusinian mother-daughter relationship. In the version we are all accustomed to, Persephone, her identity subsumed in Hades’, her sexuality consummated in her “killing [her]self for [his] love” (EC 104), is seduced/abducted by the man/god/beast—Hades—(Medea 105) and forced into a compulsory relationship with him. Thus, Persephone is transformed from a woman within the continuum of strong women, pursing a woman’s agenda, into a victim, driven by her own compulsion to “fall in love” with the wrong (hu)man (105). The mother, Demeter, is transformed from the generative, generous, open-handed loving mother to the grieving, introspective, woman of winter: “Sex, like snow on a grave” (EC 106), and thus her potential positive influence on her daughter is displaced. The rewriting of the Demeter/Persephone stor(ies) becomes symbolic of the disruptive role of phallogocentrism in women’s lives, insuring disconnection, grief, loss, and separation among women. Rich articulates the dilemma well when she accuses: “patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize these images [of the mother and the daughter in ourselves] and to project unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom onto the ‘other’ woman” (Of Woman Born 253), alienated, isolated, abjected—within ourselves.

Wakoski manipulates her insight into the impulse of the woman to “kill [her]self for love.” Applying this line to the patriarchal story of Persephone as stolen, usurped, abducted, the poet
intimates that Persephone allowed herself to be “seduced” by Hades, (Medea 105), that is, by patriarchy, by the masculinist magnetic attraction that we saw in Chapter 4 as the seduction of the terrorist-hero. This Persephone-figure, shunning her mother’s influence, gets subsumed into the man’s story, ironically with her will and against it.9 Wakoski suggests that Persephone, like Wakoski’s “Ice Queen,” for whom “the sliver of ice / is in [her] own eyes,” is seduced into “see[ing] every boy as beautiful, every / handsome man as someone whom [she] would follow blindly” (EC 176). Even the beast (Hades) becomes “more beautiful to a woman” (Medea 40) and “[w]omen… / need to love a beast, to feel that it could transcend / itself for love” (41). Thus, the direction of her story turns on the man’s prerogative, and the girl abandons the mother, whom she comes to hate, and loses the fulfillment of a self her mother-legacy could have informed. In disconnecting Persephone from her mother, whether through seduction or abduction and rape,10 Hades ensures the isolation of daughter from mother (love) and the severance of an important tie to the powerful woman-mother-love in herself. Confined in his space—his “rocky tunnel”—, Persephone abrogates the place in her world insured by her mother. It is not just her body which is abducted; her promise of fulfillment is stolen, sequestered, and squandered by Hades’ desire. This seduction/abduction always means abandoning the mother and, consequently, the woman-self for the man’s life—his world—, and his world means “darkness.” Further, it is his abduction that initiates the mother’s mourning, the onset of winter, the transformation from sex as passionate thoumos into “[s]ex like snow on a grave” (EC 106). All of this female self-immolation insures death to her self-possibilities and to her feminine futurity.

Helene Cixous castigates the woman who kills the woman/child/mother inside herself: “And woman? woman, for me is she who kills no one in herself, she who gives (herself) her own lives: woman is always in a certain way ‘mother’ for herself and for the other” (Coming 50, my italics). Yet, this is the dilemma that Wakoski presents: the woman, in wanting to die for love (of a man), of necessity, has to kill something positive and powerful and meaningful in herself. In presenting this dilemma, the poet forces the reader to query: where does this impulse to kill one’s self for love come from? Surely, it is not love that kills, but something else. Demeter’s killing herself for love (of the daughter) provides Wakoski with an articulation indicating that we need to grieve for that lost woman potential and that this grief creates a nearly unbearable climate of winter for women. Persephone’s killing herself for love is tantamount to “disappear[ing] into the rocky tunnel” (EC 106), into “hell” and “the abyss” (Medea 104). Her life becomes enshrouded with
regrets and losses instead of fulfilled by hope and future. These—the rocky tunnel, hell, and the abyss—are translated into the patriarchal nightmare she must journey through before she can return to the mother and to her own woman’s fulfillment—her ascent which presages a new reality and initiates a new spring.

In her transformation of the Demeter/Persephone story, Wakoski reinterprets key symbols associated with Demeter, the snake and winter, and, in association with Persephone, the tropes of the pomegranate and the rock. The snake, as I analyzed in Chapter 2, is a multifaceted symbol representing in Wakoski’s poems that female power that is both positive—the treasure of woman’s erotic desire, her inner core self—and negative—threatening danger, disturbance, and a woman power so unacceptable to “society” that it is demonized as devil, gorgon, or dragon—all icons of evil and disruption that must be conquered and destroyed. In the early Eleusinian religion, snakes were sacred to the goddess. They were revered as protectors of the harvest and as symbols, through the shedding of their skins, of healing, of growth and variability, and of reincarnation, another kind of birth/rebirth—newness, beginnings. When Wakoski acknowledges that she is carrying around her own “Mother-rattler” (EC 15) with its treasure of diamonds and danger, she is acknowledging her connection to the potential for healing, growth, and rebirth that reconnects her to the mother, but, as we have seen, this connection still carries a powerful negative bias for the contemporary woman who is the poet. The snake represents for her the negative connotations that contemporary women associate with our mothers—dangers of succumbing to being like them, to losing our own identities in the maw of the mother, to having our own woman-being demonized.

Another significant image associated with Demeter that Wakoski also associates with Persephone is winter. When the poet-persona characterizes herself as “Persephone in winter” (104), she is reflecting the new legacy from the mother: winter, grief, loss, separation, disconnection, and

the ugly images of femaleness
offered by [her] mother
with her poverty-teeth
her bandaged-flat breasts…
her misshapen feet which have been squeezed into
cheap ill-fitting dance shoes. (187)

Rich says for all women who, like Wakoski, have felt betrayed and “wildly unmothered” (Of Woman Born 225): “[e]ach daughter…must have longed for a mother whose love for her and
whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death” (240). Here rape refers specifically to Persephone’s (and perhaps even Demeter’s) rape and abduction by Hades, but in a larger context, it represents the betrayal we have felt from our mothers for their capitulation to the patriarchy.

Irigaray explains the personal split of the self sacrificed for hom(m)osexuality in this way: “You/I become two, then for their pleasure. But thus divided in two, one outside, the other inside, you no longer embrace yourself, or me. Outside, you try to conform to an alien order. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything you meet. You imitate whatever comes close” (210). This is the “You/I” both of (m)other and self and of self-self, one’s inner mother/multiple self/selves. On two levels there is a subjugation of the self/selves to the demands of patriarchy, that is, “their pleasure.” On the one hand, there is the transgenerational passing down of the “heritage” of patriarchy; on the other, there is the sense that women have of betraying ourselves, of being split within ourselves as we wrestle with the imperative to being—“embrace yourself”—and the impulse to being loved by men—“fuse with everything you meet”: “You/we are sundered” Irigaray writes (210).

The “Persephone in winter” envisioned by Wakoski and with whom the poet identifies personally, is a woman sundered from herself: “but I am Persephone in winter, / with a rock instead of a pomegranate in my hand” (104). The pomegranate representing the woman-womb, as key to a woman’s reproductive capacity, as part of her sexual matrix, and as symbol of the inner zone of her own womanbeing, becomes circumscribed by sexual demands that have nothing to do with her erotic, with her self, with her choice, with her thoumos. If she—poet-persona/Persephone—is holding a rock out instead of a pomegranate, does this mean that she must transform the beneficence of her many-seeded womb-pomegranate into a rock-weapon? What is the cost to women when their many-seeded-ness, their potential for difference and multiplicity are petrified into a rock, without feeling, without potential, without generativeness, without organicism, without hope, and without future? The image of Persephone with her rock instead of a pomegranate represents for Wakoski the imperative of sterility imposed on the fecund woman by the dire, dark demands of the patriarchal culture into which she is subsumed. Patriarchy, in the shape of “Hades,” determines the contours of climate and the effluence of nature, and thus it controls women’s lives and women’s futures. Implicit in Wakoski’s text are questions. Is this women’s only destiny? Is a life driven by patriarchy our only alternative? Must
we be caught between a rock and a hard(-on) place? How angry must this Persephone be as she yields her rock—not dissimilar perhaps from Robert’s sister, in “Your Sister in Jail,” with her angry gun, here a transformed symbol of sexual futility in the hands of a powerless woman. Wakoski characterizes this frustrated Persephone as

the dark shadow of the Kore
who must disappear, who is finally lost
in the crumbled underground. (EC 159)

However, if we take the poet, who rails against the erasure that this disappearance implies, at her word in advocating her “oddball or perverse interpretations of things, [her] interpretation of the Hades-Persephone story” (Medea 105), we must reread Persephone’s dilemma. A significant place to initiate such a rereading is to reexamine the role of the rock itself. A first reading of “Persephone with a rock instead of a pomegranate,” as we saw above, incites a vision of Persephone becoming at one with the dark and “crumbling underground” world of Hades (159). The multi-seeded pomegranate, as the symbol of her woman’s burgeoning sexuality and reproductive potential, is, through Persephone’s sojourn with Hades, displaced. The “womb” with which she returns is a rock, hard, cold, and infertile, instead of the pomegranate bursting with its own fecundity. Hades—the paradigm of the masculine in the culture—has transformed her fruitfulness into barrenness. But, we can read this text through the lens of Butler’s reading of Lacan in which

a “rock” …not only resists symbolization and discourse, but is precisely what poststructuralism itself resists and endeavors to “dissolve.” This solidity figures the Lacanian real, the outside to discourse and so is a figure that fortifies the theoretical defense of that which must remain unfigurable and so might be said to perform the impossibility that it seeks to secure. The rock thus figures the unfigurable. (198)

I contend that this rock which figures the unfigurable represents, in Wakoski’s “oddball interpretation” (Medea 105), Persephone’s own resistance to succumbing to Hades’ world (read, patriarchal imperatives). When the poet says, “something more substantial than language anchors us” (EC 106), she is defying the power of discourse, that is, the limiting way in which a story, or a set of signs, can define us. Her rock is the rock of resistance, of “lack”11 of participation—even as it is also what we have left behind—the “symbol” of the woman’s infertility. The rock, as a sign endorsed by Wakoski in her poetic text, then, becomes a positive image, a site of resistance
to the power of discourse to define her. It can be seen as the something “more substantial than language that anchors us.”

Yet, at the same time that the poet advocates alternative interpretations of the Persephone story and sees the rock as a means of circumventing reified significations within patriarchal discourse, she asserts that “women are flowers. There is no way to escape that image, nor is there any reason to want to escape it. Persephone in a field of flowers…” (104). Part of her questions whether there is something more substantial than language as she defers to old thinking. Part of her prefers the uncomplicated vision of the customary Persephone who makes that journey to meaning through her Demeter-mother-connection to the world of winter and snow on a grave. Part of her acknowledges that every mother longs for the power to prevent the abduction, the disappearance, the loss of that daughter, that extension of her own body, her potential future. Yet, the Demeter, who “can never stop mourning the loss of Persephone” (159) and who changes the world into winter is too pitiable a figure, whom daughters hate to love and love to hate. What a conundrum: the mother, powerless to save her daughter from a compulsory heterosexuality that limits the multiplicity of her *thoumos*—and the daughter wanting to be saved, angry at the mother for her failure to save. According to Rich, “the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr” (*Of Woman Born* 236); yet, here it seems to stand for so much more—for the whole panoply of frustrations, futilities, and failures, angers, anxieties, and agonies—a “hell” and “the abyss” (*Medea* 104) initiated by patriarchy and visited upon women.

Like Rich, like many of us, Wakoski wishes she could reinvent her mother: “I long for [a place] where there is no winter, no / grieving mother, no necessity for forgiving or loss” (*EC* 159). In a perfect world, women would opt for a “world without winter / or grieving. Without snow, or loss, / or waste” (159), that is, without rape and abduction or loss of mother-daughter-connection. We would like not to have at our center, as an aspect of ourselves, this abject mother who, caught between her failures as a woman to make her own life happen for herself and her angst at not being able to ensure that her daughter’s life would be safe from the same strictures, visits her winter upon us and upon the world. This is the woman we wish we were *not*. But this wish to reinvent the mother, to hate the mother, like so much else in our female constructedness derives, not from nature, but from the way the text has been man-ipulated. Cixous reminds us that “unhappy the daughter who learns from her ‘mother’ to hate the mother!” (*Coming* 51) We
cannot hate our mothers without hating ourselves. What we hate in our mothers is that part of ourselves we have not been able to accept, to live, to love, to acknowledge.

In understanding and connecting to our mothers’ losses, oppression, and abjection, we can triumph over the winter imposed by patriarchy and return as an image of “Persephone / gathering crocus” (EC 105). This Persephone does not deny but defies: she defies winter, she defies her own erasure—“I …who must disappear”—(159)) and subversion—the “I…who is finally lost / in the crumbled / underground” (159). These poems are all about defying the hold those old stories exert over how we live our lives, how women think of ourselves, how we conceive of ourselves, how we relate to each other, how we love each other. Embracing the mother’s loss, linking our experience to hers, not rejecting the mother—all enable women to mother ourselves: “In woman, mother and daughter rediscover each other, preserve each other…the daughter in the woman is the mother-child who never stops growing” (Cixous, Coming 51). Wakoski, herself, concludes: “We need to love ourselves AND to love otherness” (Jason 135).

Although it is clear that we must make peace with our mothers, that we must reconnect with them and empathize with their experiences, even as we share many of them, numerous contemporary feminists, Wakoski included, posit as potentially healing, even essential for women’s identities to materialize, a closer relation with other women beyond only the mother. Chodorow claims that we are primarily relational beings and that “[t]he integration of a ‘true self’ that feels alive and whole involves a particular set of internalized feelings about others in relation to the self” (Chodorow 9). It is, thus, paramount that we take into account other of women’s relations with women in the fashioning of women’s subjectivities.

In revisioning and revaluing our relationships with women from mother to othermother to foremother to mother-woman-mentors to “girl friends,” we can see ourselves differently and value our differences as well as our likenesses—our differences from the paradigm, our differences from each other, and our own differences as we continually discover and create who we are becoming. We do become women and that becoming cannot be about assimilation or sameness or imitation or conformity. Yet, we become through a combination of our own self-fashioning, our individual ability to en-vision ourselves as “eccentric, unusual, unique, visionary” (TNP 334).

Wakoski’s diverse relationships with women enable her to see herself in a different light, in fact in a myriad of different lights: “The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has
direct bearing upon the product which we live and upon the changes which we hope to bring about in those lives” (Lorde 36). The lights of Wakoski’s women-centered poetry counter the “only light” by which she has been defined by the “[M]an…[who] lives behind / the camera” (EC 103),\(^{12}\) and they bring into relief something “invisible”:

[some]thing which is there, but which
no one sees, or which is only a form
not yet illuminated (122).

For Wakoski, as for many contemporary feminists, there is this something invisible that dwells within us yet to be illuminated. Lorde calls it “a dark place within, where, hidden and growing, our true spirit rises” (122); for Cixous it is, among other concepts, “an inconceivable region, deep down inside me but unknown” (Coming 10); for Irigaray, it is a strange “geography of her desire” (28), a kind of “elsewhere” (29) that is also a “sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed” (31), and for Rich it is at once “deep reservoirs” (Of Woman Born 223) and a kind of void or darkness, probably not unlike Wakoski’s cave/tunnel, out of which will come our rebirth—this “void is the creatrix, the matrix…the darkness of the core” (Blood, Bread, and Poetry 191). Our diverse connections with other women enable us to discover depths and contours and aspects of ourselves we perhaps have not heretofore been able to discern, and, from these discernings, to create. These women connections bring new lights to bear on how we are seen and on how we see ourselves and each other; they give form to the formless, visibility to the invisible, credibility to what has been devalued. Beyond that, the women in the poet’s life provide the lights of growth and expansion and possibility for Wakoski: “I would look…searching / for something which might be *invented* with a different length of light” (EC 63, my italics). So this exploration of connection is about invention as much as it is about discovery—she is becoming; she is being invented; she is inventing herself. Through the plethora of othermothers, she mothers herself in a different way by giving birth to herself. She incorporates all those other feminines, and she peoples herself with them. When she says,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It is not} \\
\text{light, but rather,} \\
\text{our sense} \\
\text{of light.} \\
\text{Of destiny} \\
\text{never averted (100),}
\end{align*}
\]
she is claiming her own power to envision herself anew and, through relationship, to reinvent herself.

In the poem “Our Lady of Chanterelles,” Wakoski introduces us to her particular friend, poet Judith Minty, through whom Wakoski envisions positive aspects of women’s interconnectedness. Several key images converge in the poem to give it depth and complexity and a perspicacity that challenges the reader to syncretize the disparate elements into a coherence. Primarily through the imagery of light and maps and food, Wakoski revisits the mother-daughter relationship through the mother-daughter combo of Judith and her daughter Annie, then moves her meditation on to Wakoski’s relation to Judith as her “othermother,” who will render a positive reading of Wakoski’s own map and affirm her as a woman.

As the poem opens, the Wakoski-poet-persona stands on the outside looking in on an intimate moment. As an outsider, she feels old, ugly, and strangely empty: “My hand’s map seems empty and smooth / dry as Death Valley” (115). This could parallel the sense of exile, of elsewhere, of emptiness that serves as the creative source of self-fashioning. In desperation, the poet-persona will turn to her friend, who has an uncanny “eye for beauty,” to “show [her] the secret, the beauty of this desolated terrain” (114). And Judith can. Judith, brimming with imagination and crowned “with the light of chanterelles” (114), not only knows “what to look for[, h]ow to read it [the hand’s map]” (113), but also possesses the magical ability to transmit her coordinates to others. Judith’s being surrounded with the light of chanterelles indicates that she possesses an aura of the exotic, the intricately lovely, the rare and sumptuous, the subtly colorful like the chanterelle mushroom; whereas, Wakoski associates herself with the “wrinkled, brainy morels of her own state” (114)—ordinary, dull, gray, mottled, chunky, and gnarly—anything but exotic. She will turn to Judith in hopes her friend can shed a different light on her.

Wakoski uses several unique conceptions of light—“kitchenlight,” “maplight,” and “mushroom light” (114)—that she associates with Judith to facilitate her own changing self-image. Not only do these lights illuminate Judith’s world, but they become the lenses through which Wakoski assesses Judith’s own seeing. These are not the cold and foggy winter lights (81) or the steamy, “heavy gravelly light[s] of afternoon” (168), but new “lengths of lights” that reveal aspects of women’s communality. First, Wakoski watches as Judith sits in the “kitchenlight” with her daughter over a meal Annie has prepared. But this is no ordinary meal; rather, it is a meal created out of wild-woods fungi and exotic kitchen skills. Annie, a prize chef,
has, with her “chef’s hand so skillfully trained” (114), transformed this fungi with her culinary artistry into a delicate gourmet cuisine. The “kitchenlight” which represents women’s domesticity is itself transformed by these women ritually toasting a “nectar-y chardonnay,” sumptuously dipping “the bread of Marin County…in green olive oil,” and mutually partaking of a meal of “risotto cooked with fennel and porcini mushrooms” (114). The imagination Annie infuses into her art Wakoski attributes to the mother as she sees “Mother daughter, traveling in mushroom light,” wonderfully connected in ways Wakoski herself could only wish with her own mother. The foods Wakoski associates with her mother are foods of poverty and lack of taste:

- salty things like
- Campbell’s soups, frozen enchiladas in processed cheese sauce,
- bacon white bread sandwiches (197),

foods she snubs because they always remind her of the ugly images of the female world she is trying to transform. Envying this mother-daughter their continuity, their camaraderie, their chanterelles, and their chardonnay, the poet-persona promotes them as a model.

What she senses in their connection is the positive energy of possibility as the energy of the mother is communicated to the daughter and reciprocated. Wakoski articulates this communication and sets up the opportunity to share in it through the image of the hand’s map:

> And your hands
> Mother daughter traveling in mushroom light
> what do they really map or, touching,
> see? A dotted road of light, leading to a center?
> Like the illumination that reminds me I’m in exile?
> Unable like you to make two maps, or is it two roads?
> turn into one inexorable
> set of lines on my palm? (114)

The poet-persona is analyzing, questioning, shifting lights as she tries to maneuver herself into the relationship, to bask first in the kitchenlight of their shared meal, then the mushroom light of their shared imaginations, now the maplight that enables them to interconnect and to share their woman’s journey. She wants to come in from outside, from exile, from “afar, from always: from ‘without’, from where witches are kept alive” (Cixous, “Medusa” 348), from the desert where she has journeyed alone. She sees in the mother-daughter a woman-woman connection she has never been able to see in her own biological mother, who has represented for her the capitulation to patriarchy and to the culture that she equates with destitution, ugliness, deprivation, abandonment, debilitation, and banality. She sees in Judith a countervailing figure to her mother,
a kind of counter mother who can offer that different kind of mothering, and perhaps even enable Wakoski to see her own mother differently as all their histories as women converge.

Indeed, what she sees by maplight in the converging lines/roads on those hands’ maps is the possibility of converging stories, women’s lives coming together and informing each other, mother infusing daughter with that “eye for beauty,” daughter feeding her mother new and exotic foods crafted with her own hands. It is too intoxicating to pass up, so Wakoski turns to her friend:

Our Lady of Chanterelles
I turn to you. Open your hand: show me the secret
the beauty of this aging desolate terrain. (EC 115)

Suddenly, she is filled with hope that in fact a beauty exists in herself where she has only seen ugliness, that Judith with her secret of seeing, her secret of touching, might illuminate an aspect of Diane that is—beautiful. The center to which Judith leads her daughter, and vicariously Diane as well, is that zone of womansoul, that “inconceivable region deep down inside me but unknown, as if there might exist somewhere in my body…another space, limitless” (Cixous, Coming 10).

In another poem, “Botticelli’s Edges,” Wakoski continues to explore the rich connection she is making with Judith. Wakoski’s self perception is transformed through Judith’s gaze of approval, the gift that gives. Not only does Wakoski blossom under Judith’s gaze, but the other woman’s affirmation effects a whole process of transforming the way in which Wakoski sees her own potential as a person. In the poem, Judith and Diane (Judith and I”) are traveling across the desert together seated, traditionally, “in the back seat” (EC 125) of the car; Judith’s husband is driving. Diane, having recently purchased a Harris tweed jacket at a thrift store, feels like she could be Venus on a shell—after Botticelli’s Venus—, a “crisp Diana / Athene-huntress” (125). One glance in the rear-view mirror of the husband’s car at her own “hag face,” itself “a thick mask of flesh… / a melt down to fat and bones” (125), quickly disabuses her of her Athene-huntress/Botticellian-Venus illusion. Almost at the same moment, she exchanges smiles with Judith; they connect—“spirit-sisters.” In that moment of connection, there is both a uniting and an empowering that Cixous characterizes as a uniquely shared experience of growth and affirmation: “She comes in, comes in-between herself me and you, between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me, without the fear of ever reaching a limit. She thrills in our becoming” (“Medusa” 361).
This connection is not about having to live up to any preconceived images or expectations; it is about affirmation, about transcending limitation and misperception and self-abuse; it is about opening:

“See this jacket.
I got it at a thrift store for $11.”
I smile at Judith wanting to please this bowsprit of garage sailors
this Thrift-shopper par excellence. (126)

Judith’s reply—“It fits you perfectly”—finds Diane “sharp-edged… / [with a] clear Slavic boned face” (125), and Diane revels in her “new look.” The new look is derived from the light in Judith’s eyes—approval, affirmation, conspiracy, conjunction. Wakoski characterizes the glow of this light as, not camera light or movie light that tends to focus only on expected attributes, but “Emerald Light, Rose Light, Apple Light” (103), lights of beauty and hope and delight.

Further, the new look is not just the way Diane looks in this perfectly fitting jacket; it is also the new way that Diane can look at things. A whole new perspective emerges, a maplight that can potentially enable Diane to chart a course out of “the chaos of eternity” (126) she associates with her own aging and ugliness. Judith has, with her smiling look and her kind words, given the gift that gives. Through that gift, Wakoski can, as Chodorow informs us about relationship, “feel that empathy and confidence that are basic to the recognition of the other as a self” (11), and one’s self as a self built out of that other in mutuality. Diane sees Judith’s self-confidence and her self-love, and these become Diane’s own. The poet-persona respects Judith’s vision and poetic imagination, so when Judith compliments her, she incorporates a new self-vision to assuage unconscious attitudes inculcated in her from early childhood—the work of patriarchy and our mothers under the spell of the “fathers.”

Often, as Rich has noted, we need other love, the love of women who love themselves, of women who are not necessarily our biological mothers, but who mother us nonetheless and enable us to mother ourselves. Enlarged by the show of approval, Wakoski can celebrate a conjunction of women: Diane, “reborn in somebody / else’s Harris tweed jacket” (126) is rewritten in the eyes of the poet—Judith Minty, as well as in those of Diane Wakoski herself writing this poem. Wakoski always comes back to her own poetry. Through this poetic writing/rewriting, “everything grows, your body unfurls, your skin recounts its hitherto silent legends” (Cixous, Coming 42); the internal opens out into the external, and a new self is born. Diane is “daughter” to the “mother” Judith, and she is “mother” to herself, the “daughter is the
woman who is the mother-child who never stops growing” (51). Wakoski feared becoming like her mother, because she saw her as passive, plain, banal, unimaginative, ugly, selfish, and disempowered. Her mother may have been all of these things, because she saw herself in those ways and communicated that hideous vision of herself to her daughter. Part of Wakoski’s journey—as she sits in the back seat with Judith—is to learn to love “all the women inside her” (51), the jowly hag-face as well as the Diane-Athene-huntress, her internalized biological mother, perceived as a witch, as well as her internal self-mother, perceived as a goddess. What she comes to see and what she reveals to the reader, without denying her own “real” mother, is that essential identification with the productive and creative drive of femininity that Judith—as poet, friend, mentor, colleague, spirit sister, othermother—comes to represent: a new kind of mothering.

Though Wakoski celebrates this connection of women to women, it is her own ability to continue to craft new ways of seeing that she claims. The mirror, once the purveyor of her dysfunctional self-image, becomes the site for communality whereby two women can come together and view each other approvingly with their gaze(s). Further, it becomes a means by which Wakoski can view herself anew, both through the eyes of approval from her friend’s compliment and through her own eyes, as she crafts and sees the myriad faces that comprise her self. Of course, we never get away completely from the mirrors of the culture that tell us how to look at ourselves. Perhaps what Wakoski would have us do is to manipulate the mirror to our own advantage, to take command of it and not let it dominate us completely, as it does in Snow White, where the witch queen is so determined by the “reflection” of her mirror that she has no life outside the dictates of that scopophilic voice telling her she is either beautiful, or less (than beautiful), thus nothing.

Women’s connections, as we have seen, assume many shapes. A tremendously powerful form of connection, often vilified in the culture and demonized as sinful or aberrant is touching. Wakoski acknowledges in Judith that part of her friend’s secret wisdom resides in her touch:

And your hands,
Mother daughter…
what do they really map or, touching,
see? (EC 114, my italics)

Touching for women can become another way of seeing, of listening/hearing, of affirming, of connecting and sharing contact, and of eliciting a response. When Wakoski poses the question to
Judith, she is doing so for all of us women who are attempting to come to terms with our bodies—not just how these bodies look or how they are looked at, but, importantly, how they act and how they feel: how they enact internal feelings, how they react to the feel of other bodies, how they behave in constricted ways, how they can be liberated from old messages, interpellations, performativities, tensions, and perceptions, and how they can be opened to new experiences. In the poem, “Alexander,” Wakoski uses the Alexander Technique as a complex metaphor for: the power of woman touching woman to reach women, to awaken and to energize us, and to teach us to tap into our own creative resources; the complicated mutuality of interchange between the inner self and the outer self, the way in which the mind/spirit affects the body and the body affects the mind/spirit; the necessity of the integration of physical, mental, and spiritual energies to restore well-being and to effect growth, expansion, creativity, and liberation.

Believing as many other Alexander teachers do that “by changing our awareness and our thinking, we create change in our bodies,” contemporary practicing Alexander teacher, Judith Grodowitz, claims that the Alexander Technique “teaches direct participation in living and moving in your body as you want to” (par. 1, my italics). It attempts to undo “unconscious habitual patterns of tension” (par. 6), often generated by our self perceptions and by ways in which we have customarily related to our own bodies and to others within the culture. The body often becomes the domicile of these tensions. A good Alexander teacher restores, through the magic of “listening touch” (Arnold, par. 3), the body’s natural grace, poise, flexibility, fluidity, lithesomeness, sinuousness, eroticism, and sexuality. Wakoski acknowledges that her Alexander teacher is

- teaching [her]
- a posture which in its soft infinities
- and wavy smoothness, will release [her] from pain, give [her] strength, make [her] an object free to be loved. (EC 112)

While Alexander teachers do not have to be women, in the poem, Wakoski’s technician is Mary Montgomery, so her Alexandering experience provides yet another way in which she as a woman connects to this other woman in a way that energizes and affirms her even as it integrates aspects of herself, cultivating a sense of her being “present in the moment and thus more responsive to [her own] creative possibilities” (Grodowitz, par. 2, my bracketed insert). Mary articulates the parts of the Diane-persona’s body—touching, moving, releasing tensions, loving
each part: shoulder, arm, neck, finger, hands. With her “listening touch,” this Alexander teacher
gives Diane’s body both a physical, tactile approval, and a hearing, an attention, an attunement.
It is as if through the touching and the smoothing of that skin, those muscles and body parts,
Mary can hear the inner Diane and awaken her, first to the sensual pleasure of this touching, then
to a greater awareness of her own inner strength.

Alexandering elicits another kind of movement from outside to inside—this touching,
listening, “listening touch” from Mary’s hands through Diane’s skin to her inner core—and back out, so that all parts of the self are brought into awareness, integration, expression, and continuity, where attention and intuition merge and effect the body’s well-being, where the body’s new posture of “soft infinities / and wavy smoothness” can free her from pain. In
Alexandering this liberation from pain is a major phase in the healing process. The pain from
which Wakoski feels herself released is not just the pain of physical tensions, awkward body
postures, and stressful patterns of physical movement, but also the pain of hurtful negative self-images: feeling out of control, mean, selfish, ugly, old, fat, wrinkled, and unlovable: that is, a woman in a patriarchally determined world.

When Mary begins her smoothing touch, Diane senses a reluctance in her own recalcitrant wrinkled skin, “which will not stay unwrinkled in place” (EC 111). Wakoski, whose wrinkled skin initially fails to respond to the smoothing touch of the Alexandering hands, resists as if there were a part of herself that refuses to let go of her self-perception as old, hag-like, blue-veined, and ugly, which we saw in Chapter 3 constitutes not just a body perception but an actual body materialization. Those old habits of being, symbolized by the recalcitrant skin that refuses to be “unwrinkled,” fight against the healing touch, keeping old tensions and dysfunctional body perceptions in place. Actually, it is not Mary’s task to remove those “real” wrinkles from Diane’s exterior, but, through loving, nurturant smoothing, to caress that exterior into a compliance that in turn will lead to an openness. Once Diane opens to her, Mary can, through listening touch, reach a deep well of being within; there she must first strip away harmful habits of thought that inhibit well-being and growth, then effect in Wakoski an awakening to a heightened self-awareness, so that through the power of the poet’s own thought processes Wakoski can integrate body, mind, and spirit, resulting in a new being-in-the-world, “unencumbered by habitual patterns of movement and mind” (Grodowitz, par. 6).
Part of what Mary, the teacher-guide, is accomplishing with Diane, the student-learner, is to encourage Diane to unlearn the harmful body messages, tensions, and habits she has derived from negative self images and inculcated into her behavior, then to learn new “postures,” new ways of being in her own body. Certified Alexander teacher Joan Arnold explains that “you are learning something that deep down, your body already knows” (par. 6). This deep down has either been forgotten or obscured under the weight of negative cultural messages. We have come to think of ourselves according to these texts and messages and to enact the resultant self-perceptions, forming habits of thought and action that have not been rooted in a core self-awareness and choice, but rather in this superimposed paradigm: “shut up,” as Cixous claims, “inside the spurious Phallocentric Performing Theater” (“Sorties” 84). Consequently, our bodies have often felt knotted and twisted, distorted and malformed.

However, Cixous also claims that “every subject who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallocentric Performing Theater sets up his or her erotic universe” (84, my italics). Wakoski’s use of the term, bed, integrates two aspects of women’s experience, the domestic and the erotic. On the one hand, Mary’s actions, likened to the daily, ordinary drudgery of women’s domestic work, is transformed into something mystical, spiritual, energizing, artistic, and creative when the masseuse works on the wrinkled skin of the poet’s body as if she were making a bed: “she is making the bed of my body, smoothing and smoothing my back / as if it is a sheet” (EC 111).

But Mary’s work entails more than a perfunctory smoothing out of bedcovers or the punching out of muscular lumps and knots under that old sheet of skin. Through the healing power of Mary’s laying on of hands, Diane releases herself to her new “lover.” That Diane’s body is a bed, a place where the body of Diane and the hands of Mary can meet, elicits an erotic sexual connotation, so this act of touching, smoothing, soothing, caressing, stroking, awakening of one woman by another becomes a celebration of the potential mutual exchange “of primary intensity” (Rich, Lies, Secrets, and Silence 202) without orgasm.

Through the Alexandering metaphor, Wakoski takes the lesbian continuum to yet another level by transforming this “lesbian” sexuality—woman touching woman, woman awakening woman, woman with woman “as if she [were] a lover who wants / to know the particular beauty” (EC 112) of that womanbody—into a powerful coming into herself. This is sexuality in another skin; it is an eroticism, a physical awakening that does not demand marriage or penetration or orgasm. It is an eroticism that entails a kinesthesia of connection, of listening, of being present
to other, to self, and to the moment: an attuning, energizing, inter-connecting energy between woman and woman, between teacher and student, between lovers. It is the touch that effects an openness to greater possibility and being.

This woman’s touch, this openness between the two women—the one touching, the one being touched—is like Irigaray’s shared “world”: “Our ‘world.’ And the passage from the inside out, from the outside in, the passage between us, is limitless. Without end…. When you kiss me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears” (210). This “kiss” does not have to be a literal kiss, any more than this touching is what we have thought of as lesbian sexuality. Rather, as part of what Cixous calls a new “Eros dynamic” (“Medusa” 361) or what Waksoski has already ascribed to Judith as “violating Dionysian order” (EC 125), it is an opening of one woman to another, one body to another that enables possibilities and new real-izations. The Alexander teacher’s gentle, approving, loving, and encouraging touch guides Waksoski; it “release[s her] from pain, give[s her] strength, make[s her] an object free to be loved” (112). Through the power of that touch, the poet-persona opens to her own inner self, to her own womansoul, to her own woman power—to be loved, to be lovable. Through that touch she can move in a freer, more integrated and creative way. Alexandering enhances movement by integrating well-being with various elements of movement.

Movement, for Waksoski, is another powerful metaphor that conceptualizes women’s coming into subjectivity. One of the ways Waksoski characterizes her new liberated and creative movement is through the imagery of skating. In the poem “Roller Skate Jazz,” the poet-persona reverts to her girlhood—that place “your body already knows” (Arnold, par. 6)—and a time when, with clunky metal skates affixed to her shoes, her body sings along a path unencumbered by curbs and bumps. It’s like having been Alexandered: she could say with Cixous, “I am spacious singing flesh…in the moving, open, transitional space” (“Medusa” 358). The poet recalls:

I like the way our arms move
when we skate alone, back and forth, the comfort
of movement rather than pain, the arms,
like sea anemones swaying above our bodies (EC 34).

In Alexandering as in skating, movement supplants pain, and there is a sense of lightness and a divesting of trouble:
we are not much
more than an inch
away from everything that will engulf us some day

we’re human on our old metal roller skates
…and we are
learning how to live
above the earth, not breaking the connection. (35)

The feeling, “like walking on air” (Brennan, par. 5) that results from successful Alexandering, is not about disconnecting from painful things, “realities” we’ve believed as truths, real truths like aging, loneliness, death, and pain, but retaining our humanity, perhaps discovering it, and learning new coping skills, new ways of seeing/being/carrying ourselves, experiencing ourselves, remaking ourselves. As in Alexandering, skating enables the parts of the body to work in concert to create a new kind of music, to negotiate new spaces opened up. This is the “jazz” of skating:

   smooth as pianos, Bill Evans
   playing riffs the way your feet move so naturally,
   Eddy Gomez on bass (EC 34),

It is not the haunting music of Beethoven, nor the raucous “country music” of her mother’s tastes, both of which speak of that banished “Dionysian order” with its

   random perhaps-chains
   perhaps-sequences
   maybe-patterns that we feel must shape our lives (44),

but jazz, which is all about improvisation, about smooth-nesses, about individuality and differences, about melody and syncopation, about old tunes being made new—a whole new call to language.

The Alexander work that facilitates our tapping into our inherent beauty, grace, power, poise, well-being, strength, expressiveness, and creativity aligns the touch work, the body work with “[e]lements of story, language, visual imagery, writing, and drawing [that all] will come into play to support movement” (Grodowitz, par. 6), openness, change, connection, awareness, awakening, response. Cixous verifies this connection when she says: “Text: my body—shot through with streams of song; …what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force” (“Medusa” 352). Woman force launched by relationships with women! Just as Wakoski’s relationship with Judith Minty enabled the poet to see herself in new, more positive lights, thereby exposing a myriad facets of her woman-being, so Mary’s Alexandering touch awakens her to new layers of woman-feeling.

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Touch distills into connection, connection into belonging, belonging into well-being, well-being into new visions for a new poetry. Wakoski, for whom the language of poetry is the language of biomythography—writing one’s self into being—, claims that

words are more
than we can ever know
yet only distillations
of touch. (EC 37)

The poet, for whom words emerge through new visions and new tactile awakenings, revels in these positive relationships with women: with Judith the poet and with Mary the Alexander artist. These women open up possibilities of Wakoski’s own self expression through language. For Wakoski, the poet, her progress is always about coming to language, to poetry, and finding in her words and lines and poems a way to articulate the streams of song that are her becoming. Instead of warring with her body, instead of seeing her body as a battle ground between “Athene-goddess” (EC 124) and “hag-faced” witch (124-5), between “Botticellian Venus” (125) and wiry-haired Medusa (133), the woman poet learns to listen to herself: “It’s all in the balance. We need to love ourselves AND to love otherness” (Jason 135, Wakoski’s capitals). Instead of slaying the dragon, the poet becomes the dragonlady (Medea 99) and integrates all the parts of herself: that Medea-Medusa angel-monster-heroine-goddess we saw in Chapter 4 can become the multifaceted and complicated “Diane, Dianne, Dian, Dyan, Dyanne, Diane” (114) “full of contradictions and paradoxes” (111). Through the gentle, subtle, but powerful “listening touch” of another woman, women can get in touch with ourselves and celebrate the multiplicity of our selves. When Wakoski says, “Women, myself, we” (41), she is hearkening to Irigaray’s “You/ I/ We” (210). The out there of Mary Montgomery gets incorporated into an in here of Diane Wakoski, and, voila, Diane is enlarged, expanded by this other woman who becomes her. The deep structural support cultivated through the Alexander Technique provides for a physical well-being and optimism that initiates this awakening. The physical and the emotional and the spiritual and the mental are not separate—touch one, you touch them all. Wakoski and Judith exchange smiles and affirmation—make a mental, spiritual connection, and Diane feels beautiful, intelligent, intuitive, energized, valued, loved: she can do anything. Mary smoothes out the wrinkles in that old skin and touches the core Diane, so that she feels “as if [she] could be / anything” (EC 22). In the new light of these women relationships, she exchanges the
“unalterable” destiny (*Medea* 49) imposed on women by “the old / myths” (45) of the patriarchy for the world of possibility.

Through her poetry, Wakoski pays tribute to women giving to other women and women accepting the gifts of fore-experience, touch, fore-language, personality, motherage, and mothering. Young girls flying along the yellow brick road on roller skates, women touching other women’s bodies and getting past those old skins, women being touched, women sharing hand maps over Campbell soup or chardonnay and porcini mushrooms, daughters loving their mothers loving their daughters—all come together in relationship and contribute to the dimensions of women’s experience. All these women experiences enlarge the individual woman and put her in touch with her own possibilities as a woman: “Always in motion: openness is never spent or sated” (Irigaray 210).

The contemporary feminist regimen requires that we continually confront the status quo, challenge relationships, attain the courage to redefine those relationships, even if that means confronting our own demons and violating societal taboos. When we deprive ourselves of each other, we become true outcasts, truly desolate and destitute. If we agree with Chodorow that “we are all to some degree incorporations and extensions of others” (10), then the more we deprive ourselves of these relationships, the smaller we will be, the less we will be. Wakoski, who grew up feeling that “women are threatening, witch-like in their power” (*Jason* 72) and, consequently, has feared women and has denied herself friendship with them (20), through this poetry grows and expands beyond her “isolated world” (26) to recognize her need to accept the women in others, so that she can love the other woman in herself. The more she surrounds herself with other women and acknowledges and develops assorted woman-woman relationships, the more she is enlarged, the more she becomes entranced by the discovery of her own multiplicity. She as we, when we reconnect to the community of women, become “morewoman” (Cixous, *Coming* 55).

**Chapter Five End Notes**

1 Rich’s ideas of what constitutes compulsory heterosexuality is rather complex, but the following can serve as a useful summary: she sees it primarily as “a political institution which disempowers women” (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 23), an “enforce[ment of] women’s total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men” (34) so that “women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable” (39). Further, Rich sees men’s heterosexual behavior as “behavior which reiteratively strips women of their autonomy, dignity,
and sexual potential, including the potential of loving and being loved by women in mutuality and integrity” (40). For my purposes, I will be using the idea of “compulsory heterosexuality” in a rather broad way to indicate the ways in which women have determined their identities as well as their sexuality in relation to men and to patriarchal agendas.

2 The idea of “othermothers” is developed in Patricia Collins’ text, especially 119-122. I am using it here to refer to the way in which women often look to other women to mother us in ways that our own mothers have been unable to. In a poem early in the series, Wakoski confesses to an aversion to relationships with women, an aversion she attributes to her mother:

   but here is yet another facet of my
   childlife to blame her for:
   my fear of women which has never made it possible
   for me to even want
   a woman as a friend. (Jason 20)

This citation notwithstanding, the poet demonstrates in The Emerald City of Las Vegas, through the plethora of references to women who have informed her well-being, that she does see in the community of women a valuable means of connection and affirmation for herself. See “For Linda’s Mother,” “For Catherine Who Says She Is Wuthering Heights,” “Alexander,” “Our Lady of Chanterelles,” Healing Goddesses,” and “Botticelli’s Edges.” What she expresses in the poem “Neighborhood Light” (Medea 162-64), about an abused woman, is Wakoski’s personal inability to offer personally that same affirmation to other suffering women: “I turn away / I turn away” (164), but the poem expresses a sense of loss and anguish at her own inability to reach out to other needy women. She cannot be the “othermother” to other women, except through this poetry.

3 Rich ascribes the particular usage of matrophobia as “fear, not of one’s mother or of motherhood, but of becoming one’s mother” to poet Lynn Sukenick (Of Woman Born 235, Rich’s italics).

4 See Chapter 4.

5 See Chapter 5.

6 In “Laugh of the Medusa” this theft takes the form of a castigation of men: “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves…” (Cixous 349). Rich frames her critique in terms of an “institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood that demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man” (Of Woman Born 218), in the process becoming “wildly unmothered” (225), “growing up with women / hating the women’s world” (EC 73), or at best “having been taught a compromise and self-hatred” (Rich 235).

7 In Chapter 2 I discuss the mother as Mother-rattler, keeper of the jewels of the woman-self.

8 That Demeter could eventually evolve into Hecate, as Persephone evolves into her mother, Demeter, ties in nicely with Wakoski’s use of the witch figure which I discuss in Chapter 3.
Although Wakoski does not reference Hecate specifically, she does make a good case for the three stages of woman—the young, the mature, and the old—as being all part of a single complex woman-self, as well as representative of the continuity of women.

9 "Seduction is another possibility, or abduction. It implies something which is against one's will, but do we fall in love willingly? And do we do the foolish things we do for love willingly or because we cannot help it---we are compelled beyond our will? I don't mean to be simpleminded, but love does make people behave in ways they wish they had not felt they had to" (Medea 105)

10 In her avowedly “oddball and perverse interpretation” of the Persephone story (Medea 105), Wakoski engages in a kind of pseudo etymological examination of what “really” happens to Persephone in the patriarchal version of the story: “rape’ is only one way we translate the Greek word for what happened to Persephone. Seduction is another possibility, or abduction” (Medea 105). What Wakoski is doing here is challenging the signifier. That she never actually provides the Greek word she is “analyzing” indicates that what she is broaching is not etymology so much as signification. According to Judith Butler, “signification itself initially takes the form of a promise and a return, the recovery of an unthematizable loss in and by the signifier, which along the way must break that promise and fail to return in order to remain a signifier at all” (199). That Persephone struggles to fulfill the promise of return through her ascent from the tunnel represents her woman’s struggle to rise out of the “hell”/“the abyss” (104) to which she has been consigned by Hades, as representative of the patriarchy. Her return—“ascent is descent” (104)—marks ascendance and transcendence, a triumph of the woman self, though this is not an unequivocal triumph.

11 In her discussion of the rock as used by both Lacan, to represent the real, and Freud “to denote the resistance of women patients” (200), Butler also equates the “rock” with “lack” (199). Thus, it makes sense to see the rock of resistance as a lack of participation in the “phantasmatic investments and expectations” of patriarchal ideology (199). Without any pretensions to expertise, I realize that neither I nor Wakoski is a scholar of Lacanian theory, and that the poet is certainly using her own references to the real in ways significantly different from Lacan; nonetheless, my use of Butler’s interpretation of Lacan’s theory does render a fruitful reading of Wakoski’s text.

12 See Chapter 1 for further development.

13 I am borrowing heavily from language that Adrienne Rich uses to articulate this idea: “Many women have been caught—have split themselves—between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure. Often this ‘counter-mother’ is an athletics teacher…, or an unmarried woman professor, alive with ideas, who represents the choice of a vigorous work life, of ‘living alone’ [or living differently—having connections to daughters, etc.] and liking it” (Of Woman Born 247, my bracketed insert).
I’ve turned around an idea about the gift that gives from Cixous: “She, the one coming from forever, doesn’t stand still, she goes all over, she exchanges, she is desire that gives. Not shut up inside the paradox of the gift that takes…” (*Sorties* 99).

“Mary Daly has suggested to [Rich] that the ‘nonbiological mother’ is really a ‘spirit-sister’ (a phrase that affirms her in terms of what she is rather than what she isn’t)” (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 252 note).

Light is one of those ubiquitous tropes peppering Wakoski’s texts that invites a thorough investigation that goes beyond the scope of this dissertation: light waves, cups of light, reflections of light, different lengths of light, camera light, the light of chanterelles, summer light, winter light, morning light, afternoon light, moon light, champagne light, dragon light, fill-light, splintered light, November light, bright light plus the mushroom light, maplight, kitchenlight, Emerald Light, Rose Light, Emerald Light, day’s light, gravelly light, Movie light, the light which turns to ice.

The Alexander Technique was originally designed in 1890 by F. Mathias Alexander as training for singers and actors, both to maximize the use of their voices and their bodies, and, through that maximizing, to get in touch with their creative inner selves. The objective was to create a sense of wholeness to maximize performance. He began by focusing on “reeducating” the body to overcome “habitual patterns of malcoordination.” Recognizing that the body and mind are an integrated entity, he evolved his technique into a complete psychophysical reeducation. Today, Alexandering often includes healing touch and other body-mind activities to integrate the whole person and to get the Alexander student in touch with her/his inner self so that the outer self can function in conjunction with it.

I am borrowing from certified Alexander teacher, Joan Arnold’s discussion: “Using the Alexander Technique, you can learn to strip away harmful habits, heighten your self-awareness, and use your thought process to restore your original poise…. With the Alexander Technique, you come to understand much more about how your body works, and how to make it work for you. You can tap more of your internal resources…” (par. 6).

I particularly like the definition of kinesthesia in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as “The sensation of bodily position, presence, or movement” (391). All of these aspects of the term illuminate my application of it to Alexandering.
Conclusion:
Making and Being: Rose Selavy/C’est la vie—and That’s Life

For Wakoski making supercedes being: “each time / we reshape a thing, it gathers power, and / to make is richer than to be” (EC 52). Making and being, language and subjectivity. Throughout her poetry and through the language of that poetry, Diane Wakoski brings her being to life: she creates a biomythography. This creative process entails her visiting myriad “sites,” where she examines, interrogates, explores, and posits, through her renovations in language and remythologizations of texts, the possibilities of her woman’s self-discovery, self-perception, and self-fashioning. These sites vary from traditional cultural myths to contemporary landscapes, from icons of popular culture to recollections of her autobiography. Questioning what she has been taught is real and true and inevitable, she embarks upon a journey of discovery in which she unmask the way language has held her in bondage. Along the way she mercilessly scrutinizes her woman’s body and agonizes over the way in which the female body in the culture has been constructed through diverse messages—some subtle, others blatant. She revisits her relationships with her family—mother and father—to reorient self-concepts that derive from those relationships. And, she resuscitates failed relationships with men and acknowledges surprisingly fruitful connections with women to calculate the effects these have had on her sense of identity. All of these, and the language that gives shape to them, constitute the sites of resistance where this woman poet has contested and critiqued, grappled with and acquiesced to the cultural constructs imposed on her self-imaging.¹

What has emerged from Wakoski’s extensive poetic excursion into cultural texts, into geographies of place and woman-identity, into interpersonal relationships and personal history is a new insurgent writing, a new calligraphy. Having chosen language itself as her weapon par excellence in her arsenal of resistance—a feminine language, the language of poetry—, she has created a revisionist mythology, a personal biomythography, a writing of her own life with its truths and fictions, its experiences and illusions all woven into a pastiche of intertextuality, a veritable “mosaic of quotations” (Kristeva, Reader 37) that continually invites interrogation and renovation. It is a life in motion, a text in transit.

According to poststructuralist theory, language is the very site of subject formation: all of us are bound by language which constructs “relationships and identities and maintain[s] the structure of power within socio-ideological matrices” (Diedrick 551). The set of codes “imposed
on reality to prefigure our perception of it and ourselves” (Radloff 640), language also serves as “the site of a struggle over meaning” (Weedon 8). It is this very dichotomy of language that Wakoski explores as the place where “reality” is created and meaning imposed and where realities and meanings can be interrogated, contested, and revisioned. Her intense investigation through the language of poetry has universal implications, as all of us—women/men, old/young, poor/affluent, ignorant/learned—are determined by language. Our language enables us to see ourselves and our world, even as it obfuscates its own ideological bias and agenda.

The work of Diane Wakoski contributes significantly to any scrutiny of the role of language/texts/writing/poetry to the conception and the creation of a sense of self. One of the most prolific contemporary authors with over forty volumes of poetry and poetic theory to her credit, Wakoski is a voice to be reckoned with. Her work incises on the cutting edge of innovation. Her truly innovative structure juxtaposes excerpts from a contemporary fairytale, The Wizard of Oz, with citations from Nick Herbert’s scientific study of quantum physics; allusions and fragments of old myths and fairytales interwoven with images of movie-stars and clips of popular films; references to personal letters and details of autobiography interposed with vacillating forays into disparate landscapes. Through a panoply of texts and images, she awakens her readers to new ways of looking at old texts, to new ways of using language, to new strategies for remythologizing cultural texts. Thus, her transpositions of texts and language generate new ways of conceiving of the world and of ourselves within that world. This makes her work dynamic and important, full of energy, hope, vitality, ingenuity, and vision. Taking to heart Whitman’s admonition to “make it new” (TNP 102), Wakoski favors the transformative potential of remythologizing old texts into new myths, of generating new representations and significations in the process: “what life is about is transformations…what art is about is transformations” (103).

Through these new representations and significations, the poet embarks upon her quest for identity. Wakoski’s poetry relentlessly engages in the search for identity in a world of overwhelming texts clamoring to contribute to that identity. Many of us in the postmodern age feel inundated by the cultural texts; many of us are attempting to find or to make a personal meaning out of the cultural cacophony; many of us are wrestling with body images, with our interpersonal relationships with our fathers/lovers, with our mothers/othermothers/friends, with the woman/man who is the self and the animus/man // anima/woman we perhaps wish we could
be, the women and men and selves we would love to love in fruitful and positive and constructive ways. Wakoski takes us on a wild journey through the cultural texts to perceive a variety of “reals” for ourselves; to explore our myriad relationships, positive and negative; to discover our own worth as individuals, as corporeal beings, as person-alities, as women, as American women, certainly, but also, as thinking, feeling beings whose self-constructs are contingent largely upon the language of the interplay of cultural texts and our own transpositioning of them into a revisionary text of our own making—the making of ourselves.

But Wakoski’s new mythological revisions, despite their universal resonance, continually emanate from and return us to Wakoski’s “personal mythic self” (“What is American about American Poetry?” par. 1), which is both American and feminine. In an interview, Wakoski asserted that her “mythic self is a particularly American self...who embodies many of the traits associated with archetypal Americans” (par 1). She poetically celebrates what she considers particularly American concerns: American history—its little cults and rituals, its heroes and myths, its cultural traditions and stories—; America’s “embrace of popular culture” and her own transformation of it “into a serious aesthetics” (par. 3); American’s “celebra[tion of] their bodies” (par 3) and the self that emerges from and infuses the performances of those bodies; America’s romance with a language “of hard and essential American speech” (par. 1).

However, Wakoski is not just a significant American poet, but a woman-poet. American poetry, going back to Whitman, originates in the body and celebrates the emergence of a highly individualized self that participates fully in the ethos of the culture. Wakoski in our time brings to fruition, in an almost epic woman’s text, the very values of theme, persona, context, language, tone, and attitude that Whitman inaugurated as the great innovator of a new American voice and poetry commensurate with the American ethos. Only, despite undercurrents of androgyny, Whitman’s voice was a man’s voice. Admittedly a “daughter of Whitman” (Wakoski, “Whitman? No, Wordsworth” 34), Wakoski brings to her work a decidedly woman’s voice. Unwilling to accept an identification as a feminist poet, Wakoski, nonetheless, has applauded the appeal her work has for women readers, especially feminists (Fox, par. 6), even as she has rued her inability to garner the high accolades from the Pulitzer committee (par. 9). She proudly announced to Alan Fox in an interview, “I am happy to be a woman. I happily use a female persona” (par. 6) and in Medea the Sorceress, she reassures her friend Jonathan: “I know that I am glad I was born a woman, and I have never once longed to be a man though...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” (*Medea* 111). In *Stealing the Language: The Language of Women’s Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker surveys the wide breadth of feminist poetry from Emily Dickinson to contemporary women writers including Diane Wakoski, recognizing and ensuring Wakoski a place among feminists who attempt to “steal the language” and to “make it new” and to grapple with difficult feminist issues.

Her value as an artist centers in the compelling quality of her language, the multi-layering of her text, the near-epic nature of her very large and convoluted text, all harnessed to a feminist agenda with American overtones and universal resonances. One of the most important achievements attained by feminists of the 20th century is our refusal to accept the codes of language only as confining and definitive. Language has the potential to be liberatory even as it tends to constrict and to contain. Wakoski’s poetry liberates language from its denotative constraints; the poet’s demythologizing and remythologizing of old narratives enables a poststructuralist dream—the ongoing construction of a self that is constantly changing, constantly reinventing herself, constantly challenging the ways in which she sees and is seen—even as she reflects, nostalgically perhaps, on those old fairytales that promise beauty and love and happily ever after. Although Wakoski recognizes that she will never get past the old texts and that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (*Kristeva, Reader* 37), she invites what the American continent has offered: endless possibility—for exploration; for development; for infusion of personality, vision and temperament; for the creation of a new language, a new ethos, a new being—woman-poet in America/in the world.

Making and being. Language and subjectivity. While for Wakoski, “art is a process of life…[and] the outcome of the life…[and] a manifestation of it” (*TNP* 251, 255), the act of writing signals an “act of imagination as a hope of transformation” (“Stalking the Barbaric Yawp” 804). She insists, “you probably can’t be a poet if you can’t create yourself in some unique way” (*TNP* 334). Thus, when the poet celebrates her composition, it is both the composition of her poetic text and the composition of the poetry of her identity: the two acts are inseparable. For Wakoski, the artist, the form and the content shape each other so the writing becomes the means to life, life the source of art. What better way to conclude this excursion into Wakoski’s text than to go through the language of her poetry once more, to discern how a personal woman’s subjectivity, for Wakoski, derives from the language of her art: poetry. In a
cluster of poems at the very heart of *The Emerald City of Las Vegas*—“Sketching Flowers,” “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote,” and “From Shells to Radishes”—, Wakoski, for whom all poetry is personal (*TNP* 248), broaches that particular connection between art and subject formation.

In the poem, “Sketching Flowers” (*EC* 101-2), the poet focuses on the heart of her enterprise as a woman, as a poet—the crafting of an identity as a woman through the language of her art, poetry. Subjectivity and signification are metonymized into the *rose* and art/writing/poetry into *drawing*, this latter as a means of bringing the rose/subjectivity into being.³ *Drawing*, which literally stands for *sketching* and for *deriving* (“drawing from”), also represents writing and its corollary speaking—this latter symbolized by the “saffron tongue” (105) and the “antiphonal energy of word and voice” (46)—ultimately representing poetry and poetic language. By distinguishing that “Naming is the mystery but not the passion” (105), Wakoski acknowledges the need to examine, first, the different uses of language and, then, the different ways language fashions constructs within an ideological context and to interrogate these resultant cultural constructs. The discerning *I* must distinguish between interpellations deriving from the language of the culture and the subversive potential of a language of “Imagination” (101), with a capital *I*.

In the poem, “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote,” (104-7), Wakoski draws attention to the *name* of the rose, to interrogate that name and the whole naming process and its corollary, interpellation. She takes her cue from Gertrude Stein, that the rose is a sign, a device of naming: “A rose is a rose is a rose” (106).⁴ Then her oblique allusion to Umberto Eco’s inquisition of rose in his novel, *The Name of the Rose*, initiates her interrogation of the rose as name/sign laden with centuries of literary, historical, and cultural “memory.” When the poet-persona asks, “‘What is / the name of the rose? What does it mean?’” (105), ⁵ she is questioning the role of language in determining the identity of the individual. Is the rose simply an arbitrary sign that can be purified into only itself? Does it have an identity outside its name? Or is it a name that accrues to it a history of associations—literary, cultural, emotional, biblical, etc? How can we divest the rose of its naming assignation and use it for the girl’s name, “Rose Selavy” (107)? How can we use it for poetry, for subjectivity?

The poet-persona vacillates between a certainty that we are grounded and determined by language, that there is nothing “more substantial / than language [that] anchors us” (106) and an emerging belief that “there is something more substantial than / language” (106, my italics) after
all. Language here represents that socially-defined sign system by which we express, communicate, and “make” the nuts and bolts and nuances of being and the world. That which articulates and constructs who we are, it is a seemingly linear and historical, simple and straightforward rational, “meaningful” sequence of codes. However, even as language speaks—articulates, says, and narrates—who we are, it creates the unarticulated, the unsaid, and unnarrated. It is about layers of meaning and about contradictions and differences and paradoxes: “It is the contradictions, dualities, and paradoxes that give us real ideas” (TNP 101). It is a synchronous dialogic of disparate discourses conversing, arguing, competing. As Teresa de Lauretis urges, “one must be willing to begin an argument and so formulate questions that will define the context, displace the terms of the metaphors, and make up new ones” (Alice Doesn’t 3).

Either there is only the name of the rose, or there is something else as well. The journey from disbelief to belief, non-acceptance to acceptance of another “reality,” of multiple possible universes, is the journey Wakoski invites her readers to share to get beyond the naming potential of language to its more useful, feminine/feminist, poetic potential—to articulate the elsewhere, the interstices, the shadowland of the unconscious, the inner self without which there can be no identity. This is not to say that the self can be expressed in something other than language. No, Wakoski herself accepts that

we chain ourselves with the only chains we ourselves can forge
a linking of vowels, of consonants, of
sounds, never beyond language, though
not always understood. (EC 75)

However, to arrive at this place where she can possibly “control the images of [her] life” (185), the woman-poet must confront language in its naming faculty. First, she must recognize the imperative of name/naming, then she must undermine it, and finally, steal its signifying power. When Wakoski claims that naming is “the mystery”—“the mystery of black words on paper” (75), she signals that it has been ritualized into a cacophony of denotative, enunciative, and connotative density; the name is riddled with palimpsestic polysemy and obfuscation, i.e. the mystery. Not the passion, it is lack—lack of vitality, resourcefulness, dynamism, personality, i.e. passion. It is the passion—generated by her woman’s “real world” experience (TNP 318), her rage, her repressed unconscious, her intuitions that there is something else, her Imagination—that vitalizes this woman’s poetry: “passion…is certainly an ingredient of great art” (320).
The new question now is “What is the name of the woman?” Is it that woman is a woman is a vast void or a site of resistance? Is she a shadow emerging from the rocky cave (EC 106) or a site of a new insurgent writing (“Medusa” 350)? Is she a construct with no more substance than that granted by language or a tablature of rag or wood pulp (EC 102) upon which the poet—who for the French feminists and for Wakoski herself is the voice of the woman—can now draw the rose which is herself (102)? Lingering on is the question of the culture: how does woman have being if the patriarchal phallogos does not impart it to her? According to Adrienne Rich, for women to come to a personal language, “there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive” (Lies, Secrets, and Silence 43). The work of being born into language is not so easy as merely posing a question; it entails an arduous process. It also does not mean that we pose the questions in the old way. A new calligraphy and new forms are required. The rebellious Eve/Woman, having “discovered [the world’s] / multiplicity” (EC 151) comes into a new place where she, too, has access to the forms which are power, the “forms which resemble complex / living things that remove us from / our animal past” (52), that now unleash the “trapped spirit” (46) and can “predict the future” (74).

The rose and the act of drawing the rose, then, come to represent the confluence of mystery—layers of meaning—and of passion—a self (yet) to be discovered/created. The poet-persona’s goal is to use the rose for herself, to steal it, to usurp it, to strip it of its associations, and then to make it her own, to infuse it with her spirit so it can articulate and predict a different future. Thus, when Wakoski queries “What is the name of the rose?”, she is both defying the “mosaic of quotations” that have accrued to the name and acknowledging that she has to get through the rose to the “other side” (107). For her “A rose is a rose is a rose” represents a new possibility for a new language—interpretation, not just mimesis; identity and subjectivity, not just interpellation and signification. For Wakoski “A rose is a rose is a drawing, is a girl, Diane, Rose Selavy.” She deconstructs the sign through interruption, interference, and interposition, to infuse it with her own iconography and associations; it will become, through this deconstruction, the means by which she can articulate her own subjectivity. When the poet-persona of the poem draws the rose, she claims this personal language potential for herself. The name—not generic rose—but Rose is “Rose Selavy” / “Rose, C’est (Selavy) la vie” (106), an individual girl’s name; it is the rose “that is life,” the Rose of the woman’s identity, the rose of an ontology with a
content: “Our forms cannot exist until we discover our own real content, and that in some way is our lives” (*TNP* 102)—the content of a person-ality and a self.

In “The Rosy Trickster, Old Coyote,” she articulates the uncertain position of the woman poet initiating her entry into writing:

> Somehow I know we have not been given all the facts. Some vital piece of evidence is missing. It is not just that we do not know “the name of the rose” but that we are missing the tongue, the key to what the rose is, which is not contained in its name. (*EC* 106)

Word(s) which once seemed so comfortable because spoken with such thundering and obvious authority by patriarchy, now seem strange—herself estranged within them and beyond them, experiencing something “missing.” This something has been missing all along, but only now appears as this great emptiness—the vacated power of her own speech. Breaking away from the old words—an act, as we have seen, itself fraught with difficulty—does not suffice; now the so-called emancipated woman must find her own missing tongue, words of her own that will reveal “what the rose is, which is not / contained in its name.” But as Wakoski herself attests: “[a]rt is not easy” (47) and when she says art, she means speaking and writing, which means taking command of the language and making it work for her.

For the woman just breaking into writing/poetry/art, her first efforts are tenuous. In the poem, “From Shells to Radishes,” the poet sees her writing as a “blot of ink on the immaculate sleeve, like blood / spreading from [her] pen” (185), and she questions what it means “to control the images of [one’s] life” (185). The blot of ink on the white sleeve is like the intrusion of the woman into writing, which, like woman’s blood, is messy, chaotic, disruptive, horrifying. That she sees the ink as blood reveals how personal writing is for women. The blood stain represents the tithe of blood now extracted from the woman poet as she commences to write, to birth herself into language.

This being born into language is like the bursting through a barrier from death to life: “On the one side there is life. / On the other death” (106). In *Toward a New Poetry*, Wakoski explains how she is using this metaphor of sides:
the artist is the [woman] looking at [her]self in the mirror. That narcissistic, constant search for self-knowledge and finally, in order to really get the ultimate self-knowledge, bursting, breaking through the mirror in this act that looks like it will shatter the self and only result in bloody carnage…, [she] bursts through the mirror with all this blood-shattering imagery and emerges totally whole on the other side, where [she] can look at the world. That is when [she] becomes the art. (250)

Although Wakoski admits that “no matter how much we reject the culture we live in, we are extensions of it” (Healey 16), she counters with “what real poetry [is] all about [is] creating a personal mythology rather than simply participating in the mythology of your culture” (TNP 310). The woman being newly born into language rejects mimesis and interpellation, refuses to be reflected, but goes through language, acceding to all its potentially bloody reprisals, to arrive at a new place—on the other side, a site of resistance where she can refashion her own subjectivity and conceive of a new identity. She becomes her art.

Yet, in the poem, Wakoski insinuates that the ink blot is an interpretation, a counter violation, a stroke against the man’s “long reach,” which he insists is associated with “wrestling” (EC 185), itself a kind of stylized violence sanctioned (like war) by the culture. She sees beyond his facile explanation and connects that long reach with the slain body of the dead pelican on the beach (185). Throughout her poetry birds have paralleled her own free-flying spirit in the imagery of hummingbird wings, yellow finches, purple martins, swallows, sparrows, blue-birds, blackbirds and cardinals. The “shadow of a black bird’s wing” (21) and the “[r]ed cardinal flashing its color” (180) in a white winter landscape are not unlike the black/red ink/blood blot spreading ominously across the man’s white shirt. Thus, she conveys in the image of this dead bird not just her own flight arrested by the man’s long reach, but her own resultant gruesome death. Haunted by the association of the blot, the man’s reach, and the dead bird, she clearly sees that her writing has provoked the man (who wrestles) to grapple with the spirit of the woman writer, characterized by the powerful and beautiful/ugly pelican and to wrestle it to death—death to the woman’s free spirit. She is aware of the precarious position of the woman writer in the culture. While she would like to think the blot portends “flamingo wings” (186) and “flaming saffron tongues” (105)—beautiful and exotic, these are obscured by the encroaching image of the dead pelican, its flight totally arrested.

Thus, when Wakoski associates the ink blot of her own first efforts at writing with the dead pelican, she is visualizing her own worst fears—that writing, instead of proffering life,
harbingers death; instead of recognition through writing, she will experience only dismissal; instead of expression, she will net only convolution and obfuscation; instead of control and order, only chaos and confusion—a futile spilling of her own woman’s blood. However, Audre Lorde reminds us that “[o]ur poems formulate the implications of our selves, what we feel within and dare make real…, our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors” (39). The ink blot possesses great value: it does articulate the woman poet’s fears, her most cherished terrors—those that comprise her very self in process, navigating an untested terrain. It is her life blood that generates that text, that makes the ink flow and spread. Her act of writing is her act of tapping her own most precious life-giving source, of discovering and expressing and inventing a self, of flying free, flying “in the path of her own will.” (Griffin 226, her italics)

For Wakoski, the foray into the language of poetry entails assuming the voice of a woman. When the poet herself speaks of the language of poetry, she explains that she has “been using womanhood as a metaphor for being a poet…[w]hen I talk about femaleness or the woman’s role in the world, what I am really talking about is the poet…the feeling proposition in the thinking world” (TNP 289). Likewise, Julia Kristeva accounts for the language of poetry as the expression of a kind of feminist impulse. Kristeva characterizes poetic language as that which introduces into the rational linear world of phallogocentrism (her thetic) another set of experiences beyond censure and law and order (her semiotic chora) (Reader 112). For Wakoski, “[w]hen we are writing poetry, we really are writing out of a very personal self” (TNP 93). And this personal self is creating her own order, her own reality, her own mythology: she is expressing her own passion for living.

But first, she must wend her way through the chaos of informing cultural texts—the images, allusions, fragments, letters, myths, features, sites, and names Wakoski weaves into her poetry. To the first-time reader, the sheer volume and apparent incongruence of this chaos overwhelms at times with apparent confusion, even disunity and triviality. But therein lies her challenge. She claims the poet must institute façades/masks/surfaces in order to strip them away (322). This patina of textuality replicates what we experience in our life-journey and insists we investigate exteriors to discover the great secrets (Wakoski, “Whitman? No, Wordsworth” 16) that lurk under the surface—layers and layers of potential meaning. Such stripping away enables enlightenment. In Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski defines enlightenment as “when you have to go through this journey of taking away your innocence and seeing things” (322). The persona of
“Sketching Flowers” begins her journey to enlightenment when she admits to her own naiveté and obtuseness. Having conceived of herself as an artist working freehand, she had thought she was acting out of imagination. Like many of us, she had naively thought her ideas were her own, that somehow they reflected her individual inner vision, unmediated by anything but her own intuition. However, part of her journey entails questioning her “inner eye”: “If I had an inner eye” (EC 102) she speculates. What does this inner eye see? If she is honest with herself, which this journey to enlightenment requires, she must confess that “the patterns, / the maps, the designs that [she] could follow” net a “nothing there,” or, at best, that which is “unrecognizable,” hardly a shape at all (102). What we learn through this experiential moment is that the so-called inner eye does not perceive some latent individual identity or personal subjectivity. It is neither in touch with the unconscious untutored by the culture nor with Kristeva’s semiotic chora, preceding symbolic influence. Rather, like the outer eye, it suffers from its own brand of near-sightedness and astigmatism (102), a failure to perceive.

The division of her own sight into an inner eye which perceives only unrecognizable forms that are barely shapes at all and an imperfectly corrected outer eye that is nearsighted and astigmatic suggests the very ambiguity of vision itself. The spectacles, as we have seen in Chapter 1, represent the culturally imposed vision. Those who suffer from astigmatism must correct their faulty vision with the spectacles of the cultural texts. They must be brought into conformity with the way things are seen. Astigmatism, signifying a “structured defect in the eye or lens preventing the rays of light from being brought into common focus” (COD 53), thereby preventing the perception of sharp, distinct forms, creates a blurring of those images. This blurring can be taken in two ways. In one way, the persona does not clearly see the supposed necessary reality of the structured world. This fault is a stain, a stigma, that must be ameliorated by the cops of the signifier, in Wakoski’s text symbolized by the compass-thick corrective lenses. That she calls these lenses “compass-thick” indicates that they will establish “true north,” “the true real”—which we have seen, through our excursion into quantum physics, does not exist: “There is no real world out there,” Wakoski insists (“CPM” 6).

In another way, the blurring sets the persona apart as one who sees, not so much imperfectly, as differently—not “brought into common focus,” not in conformity with the vision perfectly dictated by the cultural text. This a-stigma-tism is a complicated vision: one that is clouded by a strange commingling of chaos, obfuscation, and discernment and one that violates the logos, the
imposed cultural text. It is also allegedly an imperfection in need of correction. And it is
avowedly feminine and part of a regenerative process that entails the woman’s entry into
language. With a little work, a little studying of those old maps and texts, with a little re-
visioning, the woman writer can come to a sense of personal vision that surmounts the negativity
of her astigmatism. The persona’s astigmatic eye(s) need not be seen as a stain or a liability as
the word implies, but as a chance to escape the compulsory vision of the compass-thick
spectacles.

Eventually, it is the revisioned and revisionary eye/I of the woman who has struggled that
 enables the woman artist of the poem to see some new possibility in the panoply of lines,
numbers, and letters, the maps, designs, and patterns that have been floating chaotically in her
head. She can finally “focus it [the eye] / on the center of the unfolding rose!” (EC 102) With her
revisionary eye, she can triumph over the cultural unconscious that has informed her thinking
and can find the axis, the point of connection that enables her to begin to make and, thus, to be
(52). In effect she enacts Cixous’ revolution: “As soon as you let yourself be led beyond
codes…., the words diverge; you are no longer enclosed in the maps of social constructions…
meanings flow” (Coming 40). Having “studied” the maps of the cultural unconscious closely, she
awakens to “a road [she] never dreamed was there” (EC 102). The waking dream represents the
infusion of the Imagination, borne of her inner interrogation and investigation, and becomes a
kind of bridge between the nothing there, the chaos, the unrecognizable unexplorability, on the
one hand, and, on the other hand, the absolute constructedness of the apparatus of the
phallogocentric system that subtly forges those “chains…[she] feels must shape [her] life” (44).

In Toward a New Poetry, Wakoski asserts that “what life is about is transformations. …art
being the life of the imagination recorded, life being the act following the recorded imagination”
(103). The function of the artist is to transgress the hegemony of the sign and to transform it—as
a means of transforming herself. The constant search through the lines and words and signs of
culture’s mythologies—for the rose, text, model from which to draw—this for Wakoski is the
very substance of life. Through art/poetry, we invent ourselves—constantly. Through the poetic
process, tapping her own woman-vision’s version of her rose, she has discovered that the
woman’s place in the system is, as Kristeva contends, not “single, complete, and identical” with
it, but always “plural, shattered, incapable of being tabulated” (Reader 111). Thus, she must
continue her search for new signs, for new signifying systems, for new ways of seeing: “each

Through the imagery of the artist’s drawing of the rose, Wakoski creates a new point of articulation and thus a new ideological context for self conception. The point of articulation represents what Kristeva explains is the “instinctual intermediary common to the two systems” of culture and of self that enables “the articulation of the new system with its new representability” (Reader 111), that is, poetic language. Thus, the rose the woman poet-persona ultimately draws, while it may begin with a rose and while it may resemble a rose, does not just imitate any of the roses from which it can draw. What results is a postmodern pastiche, a conversation perhaps, a polylogue that borrows from, even as it resists, the lines and shapes, the sequences, patterns, and designs of the rose, the myths, stories, words, syntax, and grammar of the language. If we agree with Kristeva that “any text is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37), then we concede that even art/poetry derives from the ideologies of the cultural texts. There are roses out there to be drawn from, but even they are interrupted, distilled, and structured through perception: “[t]here is no real world out there and the only thing that’s interesting is how successfully we can convey or communicate our own perception of it” (“CPM” 6).

For Wakoski, making supersedes being, hence being is contingent on making. Being does not stand outside language, ideology, interpellation, the thetic, the law, the system, the chains, sequences, and patterns, but we have a new responsibility to see that it does not stand within these either. In fact, Wakoski would assert that it does not stand—it moves; it flies; it fluctuates like tides; it is the moving sand constantly reforming itself; it is the journey…, the journey to find not just new signs and new representations, but new sign systems and new representabilities. And these are multiple, plural, fluctuating, on the move between the new and the old: “we know that each time / we reshape a thing, it gathers power” (EC 52). This is what contemporary feminist theorists mean by transgressions and transformations: poetry requires a constant reshaping, a continual regathering of our own power to make and to be. Cixous’ new calligraphy, which comes out of “everything we don’t know that is written out of me” (“Medusa” 361) presents new significations for new layers of meaning.

Poetry is the means by which the woman/poet accomplishes this complex process of search, struggle, revision, and writing. Through poetry, the poet both apprehends an allegedly given,
objective reality and creates new reels/reals. She infuses into the fictional narrative of the “real” her personal experience in order to “institute a model of becoming” (Kristeva, Reader 134). Taking command of perception, the poet is the visionary who determines what the camera eye sees, what lengths and kinds of light are imposed, what kinds of lenses comprise the spectacles. It is she who can determine how the world is seen and distilled and revisioned and drawn. Through this act of poetic revisioning, both she as creator and we as readers can awaken to the knowledge that we, in fact, do live in more than one universe at a time.

In another sense, poetry is the quest-journey to enlightenment, through the geography of the culture, with all its gaudy casino-glitz and its hyperreal-mirage of the 2% chance of winning, to discover a personal place and space that supercedes it. Poetry, enabling the encounter with old maps and new, insists on our revisioning those old maps and on our discerning in them of heretofore undreamed of roads and territories to be discovered—even that dark continent overrun with snakes and serpents and Mother-rattlers that must be not just encountered but also embraced, then revisioned and redrawn.

Poetry is the language through which women have been able to encounter the geography of our bodies, to articulate those bodies, to love our bodies, to write our bodies, thus to bring them into new light, new conceptions, new being, and a new eroticism. We have, through poetry, eschewed the culture’s determination of youth and beauty as our only modes of meaningful being. Instead, we now have the language with which to claim our body’s special beauties—sometimes characterized by fat or by wrinkles, by less than perfect figures or by graying hair. In addition, we now, through poetry, can revision and rewrite all the names we have been called in new and more positive ways: names like mother, witch, beauty queen, movie star, old hag, Medusa, Witch of the West. Poetry is the language with which we can demythologize their stories and, through a new knowing, craft new stories, new myths, and new mythologies.

Through the language of poetry, we can defy the hold of patriarchy over us and refuse to define ourselves only in terms of our relationships with men or through the phallogocentric language that has been ascribed a god-like author-ity and author-ization. We can take the phallic pen instead of the phallic gun as our means to revolution and independence. Poetry prevents our being jailed or being shot because we refuse to dance to the old patterns and tunes and because we no longer fit into some patriarchal design. With poetry as our tool, we no longer succumb to the temptation to use the master’s tools to rebuild the foundations of our new houses. Poetry
facilitates our godding ourselves into being, as we accept our hurts and our triumphs and weave them into our own stories, supplanting the heroes of old myths—like Jason—with heroines/herowns—like Medea revisioned: with “dragonlady power” (*Medea* 99).

Poetry is that antiphonal language through which we can converse not just with the culture, but more importantly with each other—and we discover we are not alone in how we have felt and how we have been taught to think of ourselves. Through poetry we can reassert our connection to each other—woman to woman and woman to man in truly reciprocal and shared ways. We can recreate the community of women and relearn how to acknowledge and to love each other. We can accept our mothers as significant suffering, loving “other” women in our lives. In acknowledging our kinship with them, we can embrace the mother within who suffers, loves, and gives birth to our selves. We can connect to women novelists like the Bronte sisters who were saving themselves by remaking themselves in new ways through their novels; to women poets like Emily Dickinson (*EC* 61) and Sylvia Plath (198) who struggled poetically with what it meant to be, in their own day, a kind of cyborg—intelligent, sensitive, talented women in a world that expected women to be “lily hands”; and artists like Georgia O’Keeffe (198), whose daringly vaginal, fiercely emotional, stridently phallic paintings challenged the way women were supposed to express themselves in “art.” Through the language of poetry, we can appreciate having been touched and affirmed by individual women who surround us in our everyday lives, whose pains and joys have matched our own and whose care has made us feel as though we belong—these significant women in our lives who become roses from which to draw our own rose(s).

Poetry is the most universal language as it is the most private language. While it is the language that enables the poet to confront the cultural texts and through a new use of language, through new rhythms, cadences, words and arrangements of words to create herself anew, it also forces readers to dig down deep inside to make discoveries of our own. I, as a reader, have partaken of the quest with the poet. This is my journey. What I am doing in this dissertation is reading Wakoski, not necessarily to decipher single/personal meanings nor to recreate her meanings into my words, but to discover layers of meaning, multiple readings, and, from those meanings and readings, to imagine and to generate a whole new text—my rose—that both installs and deconstructs, even as it analyzes, extrapolates, ironizes, interpolates, expands, leaps from, reaps, reads in the leaks and ruptures and gaps, and fills in those lacunae with my own
Imagination/vision/revision and poetic insight. I, too, have taken the pen in hand and put the point to the wood pulp; I too am struggling to find a poetry with which to articulate meaning—my meaning. Wakoski claims that all her poems are about the writing of poetry even as they represent her personal biomythography. This is what women’s writing is—it is about becoming: becoming women, becoming artists, becoming multiple, becoming… Thus, Wakoski’s poems are texts that I read and pastiche and reread, roses from which I can draw, even as I insert into my writing my vision(s). So, this dissertation, one line, one word at a time, becomes my rose blooming on the page—my own “rr-rr-rrrrrrrr Rose C’est (Selavy) la vie” (106).

Poetry is not a luxury: it is the feminization of language, the language of women, because it constantly seeks to violate the old forms, the old teleologies, tautologies, and theologies. Constantly seeking new forms, new shapes, new rhythms, new sites of resistance, new myths, new meanings for old words, and new words for old meanings and new, it is the speaking/voicing, drawing/writing of the rose—the rose of our outer vision and our inner—along with a bit of magic, dream, and Imagination leaking through from the margins, from elsewhere. As we take command of camera/spectacles/pen, we take the pictures, write the script, transposition the myths to reflect our vision of the world. And Diane Wakoski has shown us how. Even as the act of writing then shatters and disrupts, we are creating new patterns and designs for ways to be in the world. Our unique, changing, fluid vision, underwritten by tides and emotion and experience and risk, even the eerie feeling of living in more than one universe at a time, caught like the cyborg between material and imaginative reality and loving it, enjoying the postmodernity of this new and strange and wondrous, albeit frightening, position, drives our poetry, our language of the feminine. Through poetry Wakoski has shown us how to reinvent language, rewrite mythologies, reconceive history into ourstory. With this vibrant woman’s pen liltingly tapping out the lines, curves, sequences, designs, patterns, and words, we make the rose of the self: that rr-rr-rrrrrrrosy bloom on the page for all the world to see. Rosy-Diane blooms on the pages of her poetry as I a reader/writer/poet myself bloom on these with these words that I have scripted. All woman writing can say with Wakoski:

I wonder if my life is a poem
or if poetry is my life;
I wonder at what point the form of my life
became its content,
doubling back on itself. (TNP 93)
For Wakoski art is about life and life is about art. We cannot live without creating ourselves in some way through language; we cannot use language without living. By the end of her text, Diane Wakoski has claimed all her heroines and anti-heroines for herself, from Cinderella to Gretel, from Helen to Eve, from Deborah Kerr to Kelly McGillis, from Medusa to Medea, from Dorothy to the Witch of the West, from Mother rattler to her own Polish mother, from the Diane she has conceived herself to be, remembered herself to be, wanted herself to be, to a newly emerging Diane, who finally admits that she is the creator of all of those avatars of herself—she is indeed her own mother, the true heroine of her own text; she has godded herself into being by absconding with the word and making it her own.

**Conclusion End Notes**

1 Teresa de Lauretis’ definition of imaging as “the process of the articulation of meaning to images, the engagement of subjectivity in that process, and thus the mapping of a social vision into subjectivity” (*Alice Doesn’t* 39) pulls together the key components of the process Wakoski manifests in her poetry. Through Wakoski’s art—the act of drawing/writing the poetry—, old models of imaging are infused with new vitality, and a new vision emerges, one inspired by an “Imagination” that generates new imaging processes, which, in turn, generate new “realities.”

2 I hesitate to use the term epic here because it hearkens back to a traditional notion of the epic hero, who is singularly masculine and whose story reinforces the values of the culture. However, Wakoski herself has thought of her own work as a kind of epic of America (Fox, par. 16) spoken in a woman’s voice (Spindler, par. 7).

3 The rose in Wakoski’s personal iconography has a special significance. Her account of her association of the rose with poetry can be found in “Blue Shadowed Silk”: “‘rose is a rose is a rose’ Gertrude Stein’s pithy statement of modernism, locating the poem in language and interpretation rather than mimesis always attracted me because a real rosebush first defined poetry for me” (61). She also accompanies this explanation with a poem:

   When I was seven.
   Sitting on the concrete step of the little Orange County house with the
   sagging screen porch.
   Seeing our dusty scrubby front yard with its one scrawny rosebush.
   Seeing a rose on it! (61-2).

   This rose, this touch of beauty in an otherwise bleak landscape, gives shape and form to all the space around it, transforms it into something else by its mere presence, by the attention which it draws to itself. The little girl, Diane, could see that “something else” could redefine her world through the intermediary of this one rose, which, for her, became, at that moment, the emblem of the poetic vision.

4 “Civilization begins with a rose. A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. It continues with blooming and it fastens clearly upon excellent examples” (*As Fine as Melanchta*).
5 Wakoski does not cite Umberto Eco, but the text in her poem is in quotation marks, and she says later:

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It’s the girl’s name
being referred to, that he
even as a priest longs for. (EC 105)
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6 Teresa de Lauretis transforms Stein’s famous line: “‘rose is a rose is a rose is a black hole’” (Technologies 67) to indicate the void of language and identity into which the woman within the culture can fall.

7 In a powerful poem entitled “Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices,” Audre Lorde uses the tithe of blood as a trope to articulate both the precious and dangerous place of woman in the culture and the price women pay for that place (Undersong 201).

8 I am borrowing Audre Lorde’s expression: “The Master’s tools will nevelr dismantle the Master’s house” (Sister Outsider 110).
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Vita

Cordelia Maxwell Hanemann was born in Marksville, Louisiana, on August 28, 1946, to Sybil Bordelon Maxwell, a native of Marksville, and her husband, then Captain Benjamin Beam Maxwell, a war veteran from West Helena, Arkansas. Growing up in a military family, Cordelia, nicknamed Korki, attended schools in Sindai, Japan; Texas; Louisiana; Virginia; and London, England. After graduating from high school, where she considered her position as founder and editor of the school newspaper, *The Tiger Tableau*, as her greatest achievement, Cordelia began her college career as a novice in the religious community of the Sisters of the Most Holy Sacrament in Lafayette, Louisiana. Before taking final vows, she transferred to the University of Southwestern Louisiana, now University of Louisiana, as a piano major. In her junior year, she became an English major. Graduating *magna cum laude* in 1970 with a Batchelor of Arts degree, Cordelia remained at the university as a graduate assistant, focusing her studies on contemporary American literature. When she married Louis Lucian Hanemann in 1971, she took a sabbatical from her schooling to teach music and to begin a family. Young Louis junior came before she graduated in 1975 with her Master of Arts degree. The ensuing years saw the birth of Benjamin and Craig Hanemann. During this time, Cordelia taught high school, coordinated the religious studies program at her church, gave piano lessons, coached soccer, and ran a household of three boys and a husband. In 1987 the family moved from Lafayette to follow Louis senior’s jobs: first to Amarillo, Texas, and then to Fayetteville, North Carolina. In 1995, the couple were divorced, and Cordelia began teaching at Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina, where she recently received her ten-year teaching recognition. A generalist at Campbell, she teaches four classes per semester; she serves as liaison between the English department and the School of Education; and she supervises English student teachers. Cordelia now resides in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she enjoys reading, writing poetry, gardening, dancing, hiking and camping, playing the piano, and visiting with her burgeoning family. In May, 2005, she will receive her Doctor of Philosophy degree in English.