

# Interview with Karen Leona Anderson

June 7, 2011 by [So to Speak](#)

Filed under: [Interview](#), [Poetry](#), [Post by: Susan W](#)

Karen Leona Anderson, author of *Punish honey* from [Carolina Wren Press](#), received her MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop and her Ph.D. from Cornell University. To learn more about her, please check out her [bio on her website](#).

Karen was kind enough to participate in an interview for the So to Speak blog and to share a recent poem with us. Please note my interview questions are indicated with "S," and her responses are indicated with a "K."

**S:** What does feminism mean to you? Do you see yourself as a feminist writer and/or how do you position yourself or your writing in the feminist movement today?

**K:** Feminism is, very definitely, the starting point for my writing. By this I mean that I start with the assumption that gender identification is a major factor in shaping our lived experience and that not all gender identifications have equal power. I don't think I've suffered from extreme versions of sexism—just your garden-variety disdainful rejection of my work and interests, for the most part—but I know that my experience as a writer has been both affected by sexism and enriched by the feminist community.

Because I write from a perspective informed by biology, I'm deeply skeptical about essentialist ideas about female identity and I'm also hopeful about our ability to modify the gender cultures that shape us as individuals. So I write in part to articulate how feminine identity constrains us, in part to show how it might allow us to rethink our possibilities. In fact, for me, feminism (and social justice more generally) are really the key to reading my first book, *Punish honey*, in the sense that it asks us to reverse the socially informed metaphors that anthropomorphize the natural world: what if the ways that a beehive is like a bank, for example, are not instances of how the natural world justifies our current system? What if bee colonies don't signify that unpaid female labor should undergird capitalism but rather that our ways of seeing are limited by our cultural expectations? As you point out in a later question, the "economy of women" and their social position is one of the main concerns of *Punish honey*: I deliberately focused on the icons of femininity—the flower, the bee, the female animal—that would allow me to think through how our ideas about human gender color our view of the nonhuman world.

**S:** Beautiful descriptions in “Red Georgette,” as well as other poems, have feminine qualities and your reference to “next winter” reminds me of Sappho. What writers have been your influence in writing Punish honey or otherwise?

**K:** Thank you! Again, I’m skeptical of *écriture féminine* as a biologically bounded phenomenon, but the idea that a feminine vocabulary or syntax—of dresses, of flowers, of caretaking, more generally of what might be classified as “lyric” or “feminine writing”—is available to me turns out to be both a gift and a kind of limit. I’m expert in it, by virtue of identifying as a woman: I know about empire waistlines and how to bake a mean chocolate cake. But I’m also closed out of other vocabularies as a result of that identification, and in the book I try to expose those holes in my knowledge and experience. I think your question is also a good one in that some of my influences for this book—Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Alice Fulton, John Berryman, Harryette Mullen—are also writers who take that gender expertise seriously while also trying to push at or even transcend its limitations.

**s:** The recurring theme of Punish honey seems to be about the economy of women, or the positioning of women socially and politically. For example, in “Quasisociety” you mention “we can see: gold-banking colonies, yes,/ but also briefly females sharing a queenless nest,/ so near a field of flowers’ fabulous strapless numbers/ that each of them will breed and eat, /” in addressing the function of the female bee. How, if at all, do you feel this theme fits into your project? How did you decide to address female stereotypes and what message do you want to convey about femininity?

**K:** I want to suggest that femininity as a cultural force is multiple, fluid, and full of possibility but also inherently constraining, even oppressive; in the “Bees” section in particular, I wanted to get at the bodily and economic consequences of this force. Much of the research I did for this section of the book was focused on nineteenth-century beekeeping literature, which often used the beehive as a model of relentless female labor that ensured the wellbeing and wealth of the society as a whole. Underlying this work was a kind of monarchic-capitalist fantasy, with devoted, unquestioning, instinctive female laborers at its core.

“Quasisociety,” as you’ve cannily noted, is unusual in the book in suggesting an alternative to the models for collective female enterprises that are so often associated with bees; in this poem, the capitalist model (“gold-banking colonies”) is replaced with “a “quasisociety,” a looser, less centralized form of female economy. But I still wanted the trace of our current economy in the poem: the flowers are seen in terms of fashion, both commodified and fleeting, as is the utopian quasisocial bond that these bees form.

**S:** The epigraph in *Punish honey* hints at reading this book as Dickinsonian. I personally see the influence of Dickinson in your writing with your wit, the inclusion of modifiers interrupting sentence logic, and in moving by sound and elision. How do you feel Dickinson has personally influenced craft and process in your writing? Are there any poems in particular of yours that you feel are most representative of Dickinson?

**K:** I think that being influenced by Dickinson is both a boon—that ragged lushness of poetic form, the inside-out metaphors, the uncompromising philosophical ambition of her poems—and a curse—for who wants to sound like a third-rate Dickinson? But for better or worse, I think she is part of my brain; I’ve been reading her since I was a little kid (the cleaned up versions) and I wrote a chapter of my dissertation on her poems (the manuscript versions), so I think I’m stuck with her. It’s a little hard for me to identify a particularly Dickinsonian poem in the book, but I’d say that one of the places I was conscious of her influence is in the poem “Whipping Bee,” in which the idea of the quilting bee goes wrong; one of my favorite things about Dickinson’s poems is the way that sweet or sentimental situations go awry.

Because I’m conscious of Dickinson’s influence on my work, one of the things I used to temper her influence was to adopt a broken version of the syntax of the metaphysical poets, particularly Donne; their ambitions and wit were certainly similar to Dickinson’s, as was their love of the rhetoric of logic, but their insistence on their arguments being clear was a useful counterpoint to my tendency towards Dickinsonian adumbration and elision.

**S:** Your writing seems to combine researched social issues, combining the social world with the natural and physical world, for example in “Horseflesh.” You seem to build an idiosyncratic language of landscape. How do you feel about the new wave school of eco-poetics? Also, when writing how do you mesh these two worlds together?

**K:** I think I might be part of this wave, maybe. I have an essay in the eco language reader, a recent collection of essays on ecopoetics that Brenda Iijima edited, in which I discuss Dickinson’s poetry of the environment; and I do in fact believe that “environmental justice” and “social justice” are intertwined, if not always perfectly aligned. The book was, in large part, an argument for the idea that you can’t really critique people and the ways they treat each other without also looking at how they treat the non-human world—the animals and plants but also the water, the air, the rocks. My father is a botanist and my mother is a linguist, and both my parents are environmental activists, so this started early for me. I grew up with the idea that we need to pay close attention to the natural world and that language matters in that task; I also grew up with the consciousness that the nonhuman world will do just fine

without us if we choose to make it uninhabitable for ourselves. The apocalyptic strain in some of the poems, such as “Gas Pump,” is really about that for me; no one will care if we are gone but us.

**S:** Please share with us any recent projects or poems that you are working on.

**K:** I’m working on a new book of poems called “Receipt,” in which I use recipes and cash register receipts as the start of poems. This is a carryover from my interest in human and natural economies in Punish honey, as well as my interest in women’s labor; the most fun poems to write so far have been based on recipes from my mother’s Betty Crocker Picture Cookbook from 1956—a bizarre dip made from chopped ham and whipped cream called “Hollywood Dunk” or some odd cookies called “Last-Minute Date Raptures.” And one of the most embarrassing, but interesting, techniques has been using my own receipts to start poems—poems that take their starting points from some ill-fated skinny jeans from Ross Dress for Less or a modified version of the motto of the DC Metro “The Future is the Metro.” I think I’ve moved into a more historicized frame of mind, where the shiny trivia of the current moment blend with more lyric language. In preparing for this interview, I got to read some of your work, Susan, and I think here of your poem, “Banksy: Ekphrastic Brandalism” as a good example of what I’m hoping to emulate. Below, I’ve included a Betty Crocker recipe poem called “Last-Minute Date Raptures, which appeared in New American Writing this past fall. It’s indicative of the work in this new manuscript in that I am thinking about women’s traditional roles in the kitchen in the context of contemporary evangelism; and it has the added pleasure of describing a disastrous date.

#### RECIPE: LAST-MINUTE DATE RAPTURES

My female Virgil, glassy but straightfaced reports:  
bees on coke sign they’ve found more flowers

than they really have: the last minute date  
she set me up with evangelical at the end, a shame.

He is sober, I guess, but not enough  
to make a go of it, even with the Glorified Rice we ordered

and the plate of teacakes: This favorite  
of men came to us from a man: he quotes: nut riches

and filled with sparkling jelly. He wishes  
we could get back home to that. I submit

a gate of equal labor, unpearly, with  
revolving chores: none of your Wagon Wheels,

Raisin Jumbles, Hermits on the best blue plate.  
A verifiable kitchen, stainless and useful.

The tools for ascension—the whisk, the rasp—  
get his distaste, the mystery out: I'm a literalist.

We split the check. Others here seem  
less damned, over strawberry fools.

I might rather be them, either one:

one transported, one merely good with a spoon.