

9-1-2003

## Ars Coketica: Ut Corporatio Universita Poesis

Deborah Wilhelm

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, [dwilhelm@calpoly.edu](mailto:dwilhelm@calpoly.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius>

---

### Recommended Citation

Wilhelm, Deborah (2003) "Ars Coketica: Ut Corporatio Universita Poesis," *Moebius*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol1/iss3/7>

This Essay and Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Moebius by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [mwyngard@calpoly.edu](mailto:mwyngard@calpoly.edu).

# ARS COKETICA: UT CORPORATIO UNIVERSITA POESIS

*Deborah Wilhelm*

I grew up in joyously green, relentlessly rainy Oregon, and Oregonians are known for, among other things, three loves: espresso (you have to have something to perk you up after seven or eight months of nonstop wet hair, soggy socks, and those nasty drips that sneak in behind your collar and roll coldly down your back), cigarettes (same philosophy, I suppose), and Pepsi. My friends and I didn't like coffee, the beverage of our parents and their obviously ill-informed generation, and we were too well-behaved to smoke, so we became rather dedicated Pepsi drinkers. We sat around the Marist High School cafeteria during the week and watched the endless drizzle outside, filling cup after plastic cup from the Pepsi machine for twenty-five cents a pop as the Steve Miller Band played "Swingtown" on the jukebox. At sleepovers on the weekends, we watched the rain collapse yet another painstakingly set-up tent and swigged our Pepsis from sixteen-ounce glass bottles as The Knack played "My Sharona." We were young. We were cool. We loved our pop.

Later, when I moved to California as a newlywed, two years married and three months pregnant, I stopped drinking pop in honor of our baby-to-be's health. The aforementioned baby arrived, healthy and charming and perfect, and I continued to abstain from pop because I was nursing him and didn't want anything unwholesome—not that bone-decalcifying carbonation, not that tooth-decaying sugar, not that mood-altering caffeine (which I really, really missed, by the way)—to enter his adorable little system, not even indirectly. Our child thrived, celebrated his first birthday with homemade whole-wheat carrot cake and ricotta cheese frosting, and was eventually weaned. I enjoyed, I think, perhaps a single pop—it was a Diet Pepsi—before finding

myself pregnant again (events not connected) and beginning another cycle of extremely clean living: pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, with another gorgeous, blue-eyed, perfect infant, a girl this time. Sadly, that inter-baby Diet Pepsi was the only pop I had over the space of five years.

By the time our second child was weaned, I had lived in smoggy, sunny California long enough to acquire some of the local customs, including calling pop “soda” and leaving the quaint, provincial Pepsi of my Oregon roots behind in favor of Coke. Everyone I knew in California drank Coke (that is, when they weren’t drinking Chardonnay, and I didn’t like wine—yet). We lived in a small, hot southern California town, in a small, hot upstairs apartment, with a toddler, an infant, and no air conditioning. Oprah Winfrey and a tall, fizzy Coke pretty much kept me on the reasonable side of the border between Merely Exhausted and Completely, Irremediably Undone. Each afternoon at three o’clock, I would gather up my beautiful, high-octane children and a kitchen timer set for 60 minutes, taking them all back to the tiny second bedroom of our apartment: “I know you don’t want to take a nap, Sweethearts, but we’re all going to have a little rest now. Just lie here quietly until the timer dings, and then you can come back out and play some more.” We all knew who needed the rest—the children had ya-ya’s to spare—but Mommy needed to sit quietly on the sofa (which, by the way, I had learned not to call a davenport, the Oregon term for said furniture) with an icy-cold Diet Coke and the televised illusion of adult companionship.

After the occasional Really Hot and Horrible Day, we’d seek out the air-conditioning at Carl’s Jr., the only restaurant we could afford back then, which had recently introduced a delicious innovation, now taken recklessly for granted at fine fast food joints worldwide: a soda fountain with unlimited refills. Carl’s sold Coke, Diet Coke, and a few other carbonated beverages whose names I don’t remember because they were irrelevant to me. The four of us would show up for lunch on Fridays, and we’d order two Happy Star hamburgers (fifty-nine cents each) for the children, one barbecue chicken sandwich, cut in half, for the adults to share, one large order of fries for the group, and one large drink. The treat was somewhat less than extravagant, perhaps, but we were on a budget (broke). The children had milk in their sippy cups, which we’d brought from home, but I’m a little embarrassed now to think about sharing that single 24-ounce Coke with my husband. We’d drink and refill, drink and refill, even though we knew that when the clever marketing strategists at Carl’s had dreamed up their very cool all-you-can-drink beverage bar, they surely hadn’t intended for two people to suck down all the Coke they could absorb by purchasing a single cup. I think there’s a word for what we were doing: stealing. Guiltily, we drank on.

Probably I ought to explain here that Coke for my husband and children meant Diet Coke for me. Before I had come to California, I hadn’t wasted much energy trying to

maintain a slender figure, the perpetual dampness in Oregon more or less demanding at least a minimal layer of fat as insulation. Also, the weather in Eugene hadn't been very conducive to regular exercise. The emphasis in Loma Linda, however, was on health and fitness, and with television as my lone adult companion and source of mentorship, I wanted at least the TV equivalent of exuberant, beautiful health: thinness. I asked myself, *What's the advantage of being blond and tan if I'm going to be fat?* I longed for that healthy-looking (thin) California girl figure, not so easy to achieve after producing two children. It is, after all, hard to look svelte and chic when you stay home all day playing Fisher-Price Weebles with your toddlers and polishing off the leftover peanut butter sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies from their plates. If I did get exercise in those days, it was walking-toddler pace, not exactly an aerobic workout, or with one child in the stroller and one in a baby backpack, which exhausted me within a few blocks of home and which, I am sure, compressed my spine by at least an inch. But I digress. Even Diet Coke can help you resist only so many "death by chocolate" brownies.

I did my best to look trim (carrots, celery sticks, Diet Coke, and only the occasional late-night heaping bowl of Heavenly Hash ice cream or my half of a six-pack of Klondike bars while the children were sleeping), and the children got smarter and taller and more coordinated, and we eventually relocated to San Luis Obispo, a charming and of course very fit college town. My son started school and, two years later, so did my daughter. I wept both times—right up until a newly discerned infinity of possibility hit me: I would have Free Time. With several hours of state-sponsored babysitting suddenly mine, I remembered that Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey were not the only adults in the world. I remembered reading, remembered speaking with other grownups and using words of more than one syllable, remembered the life of the intellect. The University beckoned, and I responded. I returned to college and drank Diet Coke as I imagine Horace might have done—to instruct and delight. Its caffeine helped me to maintain my alertness, which was often at low ebb after groceries, meal preparation, dishes, assorted scrubbing and dusting and lawn mowing, caring for two small but highly charged bundles of childish energy, helping with homework, getting them safely tucked away so that they could sleep and replenish their already vast stores of life force for the morrow, and then, at maybe 10 pm, opening a psychology book to study when all I really wanted to do was sleep. And yes, the "pause that refreshes" really did. Diet Coke's compelling, spicy sweetness gave me a little aluminum can full of portable pleasure to tote around campus as I navigated the day at Cal Poly, a 27-year-old wife and mother taking freshman- and sophomore-level courses populated exclusively by 18-year-olds, feeling as though I stuck out everywhere, a senior citizen among the Youth of Our Nation. Diet Coke eased my way.

It was not to last.

Imagine the betrayal I felt when I returned after one ill-fated academic break to find that all the Coke machines on campus had left for summer vacation and decided not to come home. Or perhaps I should say that all the Coke machines had been ruthlessly expelled from the Garden of Poly, and cherubim stationed with swords aflame at the Grand Avenue and California entrances to keep them out, unto the end of time. Or something like that.

The dawning of awareness was both insidious and shocking. I'd tried to buy a cool, refreshing Diet Coke on my way to class, stopping by my usual vending machine outside the Computer Science building. It was gone, replaced by a Pepsi machine. Weird, but not a cause for panic. I walked over to the bank of food and beverage machines in the bottom of the Dexter Building. Pepsi. I trotted off to Campus Market. Pepsi. I rushed all the way back across campus to The Avenue, Pepsi. Stowed in machines, stacked in refrigerators, flowing from soda fountains, bubbling everywhere across the entire Cal Poly campus, including all the secret and out-of-the-way places where there ought to have been Cokes, were Pepsis. Talk about disillusionment.

Of course, we all know now what happened: Pepsi, in exchange for what I imagine must have been a Very Large Sum of Money, received exclusive rights to distribute its products at Cal Poly. Coke and its fashionable little sister, Diet Coke, were no more. I began stopping at the Campus Bottle Shoppe on my way to class (no, I'd not started drinking—they have a Coke dispensing machine) to purchase a giant Diet Coke, which I tried to nurse along all day. I struck up an acquaintanceship with the couple who ran the Shoppe and found out that we lived quite near to one another, that we had children the same age, that we had a shared hope in the future. Anyone who sells Coke is probably a decent, honorable sort. I now know the neighborhood surrounding Cal Poly intimately—that is, I know where you can buy a good Diet Coke: Campus Bottle Shoppe (for the aforementioned reasons), Carl's Jr. on Santa Rosa Street (delicious but a little expensive, and you may have to wait in line for quite some time), the Seven-Eleven on California Avenue (but only as a last resort—I don't think they filter the water there, and the soda tastes just sub-par), and the Seven-Eleven on Monterey (not much better in terms of taste, but they do have caffeine-free Diet Coke, which is a sensible idea on the way home from a late night at work), among others.

And so I survived the crisis. I teach at Cal Poly now, and one of my big challenges for quite some time has been not to show up for an 8:00 a.m. class toting an enormous Diet Coke, which might offend my students, who seem mainly to drink coffee. Finally, however, the accumulated late nights of grading and the occasional episode of Jay Leno caught up with me, so I brought my caffeine-delivering beverage of choice to the early morning class. Eyebrows lifted. Smiles, a few of them smug, crinkled at the corners of mouths. Alas, a few noses wrinkled. But the next day, half the women in class brought

their own Diet Cokes. They'd just needed one brave, if slightly addicted, person to light the way. Teach and delight, indeed. 