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## Poetry, Activism, and Queer Indigenous Imaginative Landscapes: Conversations with Janice Gould

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"I've always felt that my memory of California, my imaginative landscape, is not entirely my own but is embedded in the memory of many tribal people, my own tribe, the Koyangk'auwi Maidu, in the other small nations of Indian people who inhabited California before it was ever named and was still Turtle Island."—Janice Gould<sup>1</sup>

Koyoonk'auwi writer and scholar Janice Gould (1949-2019) was born in San Diego, grew up in Berkeley, California, and earned her BA and MA from the University of California, Berkeley and her PhD from the University of New Mexico.<sup>2</sup> A poet, essayist, musician, photographer, teacher, and theorist—to name just a few of her accomplishments and interests—Gould, though she might seem quiet or introspective at first meeting, was a force to be reckoned with. Her passing on June 28, 2019 of pancreatic cancer was a significant loss, first to her family—her longtime partner, Mimi Wheatfield, her two sisters, her nephews, and Mimi's son and granddaughter—then to her many friends and her Aikido community, and, finally, as I'll speak more about here, to the larger literary community.

Gould was an important voice in queer Indigenous writing and is part of a generation of artists who sowed the seeds for the incredible blossoming of Two-Spirit/queer Indigenous writing and theory in the twenty-first century. Together with authors and friends like Beth Brant (Bay of Quinte Mohawk, 1941-2015), Chrystos

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(Menominee, b. 1946), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo, Sioux, Lebanese American, 1939-2008), Vikki Sears (Cherokee, 1941-1999), and Maurice Kenny (non-citizen Mohawk, 1929-2016), Gould was part of the first wave of Indigenous writers to openly embrace sexual diversity and to depict queer or Two-Spirit Indigenous people as lynchpins of their communities.

As a California Native person, Gould was a product of the dislocations and incredible challenges that face Indigenous people in this region in the wake of attempted genocide. Gould engaged her connections to and dislocations from her Koyoook'auwi heritage most deliberately in her first three poetry collections—*Beneath My Heart* (1990), *Earthquake Weather* (1996), and *Doubters and Dreamers* (2011). These texts address ongoing *processes* of identifications, practices, and locales that elsewhere I have argued we might term Indigenous assemblages.<sup>3</sup> Such mobile and generative sites coalesce around the *shifting* nature of events, experiences, and perception, around the known *and* unknown. And such embodied movements, as Gould speaks of in these interview exchanges, mark the texture of her life as the daughter of a white father and a Koyoook'auwi mother who was taken from her family after her mother's death and placed in an informal adoption arrangement that led to her being raised by three white sisters from Kansas.

In Gould's second collection, *Earthquake Weather*, she explains that her mother, Vivian Beatty, was born in Beldon, California to Harry and Helen (Nellie) Beatty, both mixed-blood Koyoook'auwi people living in what historically would have been their nation's territory.<sup>4</sup> When her mother died of cancer, Vivian was subsequently adopted by Beatrice, Henrietta, and Clara Lane, three sisters living in the San Francisco Bay area. Gould's preface tells the story of her family's move from San Diego to Berkeley when she was nine. In this relocation to the house of her mother's adoptive family, to use her words, "Berkeley's proximity to the Sierra Nevada and the small town of Beldon, on the

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Feather River, where my mother, Vivian Beatty, was born in 1914" functioned as a catalyst that led her to become "firmly attached and sensitive to my California Indian, or Konkow heritage" (viii). Gould's family took frequent trips back to these regions and, while she overtly acknowledges her lack of specific cultural knowledge, as we'll see in the following interview, she also speaks about the embodied connection she felt to the landscapes that were the home of her Indigenous relatives and ancestors.

Gould's somatic responses suggest that there are connections between humans and the other-than-human world that exist before and beyond settler colonial confines and the psychic impacts of colonial violence. As another Indigenous Californian writer, Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen/Chumash) argues, the dynamic restructuring of often-jagged cultural shards into what she terms a "mosaic," includes the need to acknowledge, rather than merely shunt aside, the realities of cultural fragmentations in many Indigenous California histories. In *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*, Miranda explains, "We've lost our language, our lands, our religion, our literature (stories and song). None of these things are recuperable, no matter how hard we work" (136). She continues, "I'm not whole. And yet, I *am* whole. What the hell! I'm a whole mosaic. Deal with it, world. White and Indian, and not only that, but Indian and reinventing myself in this Post-Colonial Art Project I've inherited" (136). I want to suggest then that as we consider Gould within a California Native context, we keep in mind the active processes of Indigenous assemblage, the power of memory and physical return, and the frank realities and aftermaths of attempted genocide.

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As our interview exchanges show, Gould is a poet interested in craft and contemplation. Her newest collection, *Seed* (2019), highlights this attention to lyric detail and, at times,

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formal patterns of meter. In terms of thinking across her entire body of work, Gould's books include the aforementioned *Beneath My Heart*, *Earthquake Weather*, and *Doubters and Dreamers*, together with *The Force of Gratitude* (2017) and *Seed*. Furthermore, along with publishing extensively in anthologies and journals, Gould wrote personal and critical essays and served as an editor as well. Notably, together with Dean Rader, Gould edited the first collection of scholarly work on Native American poetry, *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry* (2003). Before her death, Gould had just completed editing *A Generous Spirit: Selected Works by Beth Brant* (2019), which is a beautiful and necessary return to Brant's influential writing that includes an afterword by Miranda.

I'd known Janice Gould for some fifteen years or more before her death, having been a fan of her work since my graduate school days at Ohio State in the late 1990s. We met sometime after 2005 and corresponded often about *Sovereign Erotics* from about 2008 on. In those and subsequent years, we were in contact frequently as I was writing about her poetry and essays. I brought her to Kansas State during this period and also had the good fortune of seeing her at many conferences and panels. Across these years, Janice was unfailingly kind and generous, sharing family history, giving permissions, and telling stories in our email conversations, occasional phone calls, and coffees/meals when we were in the same spaces. We had fallen out of regular contact for a time, however, when she contacted me in 2018 to tell me about both the upcoming publication of *Seed*, and, at the same time, about her diagnosis. The news was simply heartbreaking.

I had long wanted to do a substantial interview with Janice about her work and history. In late fall 2018, after we'd exchanged a number of emails about *Seed*, which she shared with me and I blurbed, I tentatively reached out about conducting that interview. My hope had been to go to Colorado, but by late December Janice's energy

had begun to fail—a combination of the cancer itself and the subsequent treatments; at the same time, my own mother had fallen seriously ill. Given the limitations of both our lives, Janice suggested email exchanges so that she was able to answer questions as her energy allowed. The questions and answers that follow arise from those exchanges. I split and sent my questions in three segments; she would complete and return one section to me and I'd send the next. I include them, then, in their three parts. Part One engages her most recent poetry collection, *Seed*; Part Two engages California—though that focus also arises in other sections—and in Part Three, Janice answers my questions on her memories and involvement in Queer of Color and Queer Indigenous histories.

The questions in these three sections were answered from January to April 2019. Subsequently, they are not always in the same format—one appears as interstitial comments in which Janice inserted responses in a different colored font to my questions and the subsequent two are written as letters. In the latter two sections, I append my questions in footnotes when relevant. Because I find, and have always found, Janice Gould's stories, poems, and thoughts by turns compelling and thought-provoking, and because this is one of the last interviews she completed, I offer our exchanges in their nearly complete form.

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### Part One: Questions for *Seed*

**LT:** *Seed* is a gorgeous, contemplative collection. It was really a privilege to have the opportunity to read it as it heads toward publication. Can you talk about the collection? How it developed? What you see as its core?

**JG:** I started *Seed* as a manuscript in September 2018, but much of the writing probably emerged from a thought or desire I had been mulling over for some time, and that had

to do with a question I'm not sure I ever asked aloud. Was it possible for me to write from the dictates of spirit, from a place within that wasn't exclusively about me? I had "finished" writing a kind of memoir using something like a form of prose poems or vignettes; some of those pieces were fairly extensive. I had worked on that writing a long time, and I was interested in finding my back to a more lyric form of poetry.

In 2017 my partner Mimi and I were asked if we'd like to be part of a small, newly formed writers' group in town. We joined and had a few sessions with some other women writers in our community. For some reason, it really helped me find my voice again. It also helped me think about the craft of writing. It was exciting and nourishing to be with other writers who were also considering questions of craft: how best to convey a story, build a character, how to clarify one's thinking/writing, how to find the right image.

You need to understand that this is not part of my work life at all. I don't teach Creative Writing, I'm not in an English Department, and discussions about books and literature are not particularly interesting to my students, whose orientations are more typically sociological. My actual creative life has nothing to do with being in a milieu of writers and scholars who think about things more or less the way I do.

The first poem in the collection, "A Poem," was one I brought to our writers' group. It came to me more or less intact, and I wrote it down. Even though it called on a landscape I have put in words before, it also came from dream landscape, one that is similar to our worldly reality, but is always its own place. I'm fascinated by that place (and places) that return to me over months and years—or to which I'm returned. And I felt that I could perhaps write honestly from that dream perspective, that perhaps it was a way to open to spirit differently. The last sentence makes it seem like I had organized thoughts about this process. I didn't. It was more a feeling about which I was not fully cognizant.

**LT:** As the title suggests, there's a beautiful movement of growth in *Seed* from the first stirrings of germination to emergence to bloom and beyond. These natural transformations most often parallel human emotions in the poems—love and a deep contentment as well as loss and, sometimes, a sense of mourning (of past loves, past lives). Can you talk a bit about this? About the movement of the collection and/or these parallels.

**JG:** The collection was not planned. I realized after I had written the poem "Seed" and some of the other "garden" poems that I could start with "A Poem," which ends "as if a poem could emerge from a seed." It was coincidence because I'd written "A Poem" a year before and then had more or less forgotten about it. As I periodically do, however, I went through some older poems I had stored away, and when I found it, I realized it would work with the other writing, most of which, as I said, began around September 2018.

I wanted to write about the Beloved, who is also the beloved. I wanted to write about the Mother, who is also the mother. This allowed me to move into the realm of the ideal, yet I am someone who remembers that our feet are planted on the earth. Thus, many of the poems move between an ideal garden and my own poor rose garden, between an actual cabin where Mimi and I lived, and a cabin upon whose porch a group of angels could be sitting after the rain. But this makes up only a part of the collection.

In September I went to women's Aikido camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I can be a bit anti-social, and I wanted some privacy, so I stayed about forty-five minutes away at an inn where we had lodged before in the village of Chimayó. After each day's Aikido session was over, I would stop at a market and buy something for dinner, usually just cheese, fruit, wine and bread. Then I'd return to the inn and sit outdoors with a glass of wine while evening came on and watch the birds flitting around in the cherry tree, listen

to a donkey braying somewhere. I would relish that particular mildness that happens in New Mexico in September. I knew I could write, and though I was there ostensibly for Aikido, I had a feeling a poem or two was waiting for me and I knew I needed to make good use of this time.

Most of the "New Mexico" poems in the collection come from that time away by myself. But I also just wanted to reflect on the sacredness of certain times of day. I suppose in some religious traditions these are marked and prayer is required. I don't feel that way. I love how different times of day have different meanings. Of course, this means that one must actually take the time to reflect on sun-up or twilight, and I imagine that many if not most people would find that a silly and time-wasting exercise.

**LT:** I was struck by the poems that gesture toward writing, toward your process and feelings about the creative endeavor. I'm thinking here of "Poetry" and "Integrity" or even "Sunday" and "Beyond Knowing." Will you share a little bit about your writing process and/or your relationship with poetry and language and how you came to it?

**JG:** As for poems about writing, I figured it was my time to say something about this creative act. My relationship to writing has been fraught. As a young person I somehow felt what a poem could be, and thus like many young people, I was drawn to wanting to create this personal expression. In my first attempts, I was using metaphors and images without fully knowing what those terms meant. But later, reading poetry in literature classes in high school, for example, poetry confounded me. I was pathetically stupid about poetry, mute and frightened.

It did not make me hate poetry, but it hurt me that what others saw clearly remained opaque for me. Eventually I grew up enough to become intrigued all over again with what a poet can do with language. I had some good teachers who helped me



to understand better what I was not confident enough to understand before. Intuitively I began to feel not just the richness of sound and the beauty of image, but the rhythm of language that moved the poem forward.

I don't know if I have a writing process. Much depends on having free time and repose. But there is some mysterious requirement that I don't really understand that isn't about time or repose. It's a feeling that if I sit down to write, I will be able to follow through with it. I sometimes have ideas for poems—especially lately, being sick for several weeks—but I know that if begin, I will stop, the language won't come. I won't know where I'm going.

**LT:** Along the same lines, I'm also interested in how you would identify—do you see your poetry as autobiographical or confessional or are those not the right terms at all?

**JG:** Some of my poems are semi-autobiographical. In other words, I don't necessarily separate fact from fiction when it is meant to be blended, because that is what creates the seed of the narrative or story. I would not say my poems are confessional because these are not exactly confessions of guilt or contrition—more a sort of exploration of moments that I relive (mentally, emotionally) from time to time where I need to understand my vulnerability or shame, the difficulties of being a young lesbian in a world hostile to Gay people.

**LT:** I find "Contradiction" absolutely captivating. In it, the speaker (you? she?) calls herself a "tomboy" and names a desire for women, that is "Clearly a sin / that never feels wrong / except when I am found out." This aligns with poems like "Snow," "Mrs. Ryder's Hands," and "Fierce Defense." These poems detail a young woman's queer coming of age in a world that does not accept same-sex desire. They're painful and raw

and remind us how thin and recent LGBTIQ/Two-Spirit acceptance is and how difficult these realities were (and, let's be real, are still in many cases). Can you talk about your relationship with, thoughts about these poems, and decision to include them in this collection? As an aside, this set of poems remind me, in the best of ways, of *Beneath My Heart* and *Earthquake Weather*.

**JG:** "Snow" and "Contradiction" (and I would include "Black Hair") are more recent arrivals than "Mrs. Ryder's Hands" and "Fierce Defense," both of which I wrote years ago and then stored away. As you point out, they are in the vein of some of the poems in *Beneath My Heart* and *Earthquake Weather*. I think these poems needed a home, and I just decided to add them to *Seed*. I did hesitate a little, though, because I felt the rawness of those poems might jar against the more contemplative (quieter?) poems. But I like the intensity of those poems. I like their fierceness and passion.

I want to add that contemplation is not benign, not a benign activity; perhaps it is the result of an activity. Anyone who has meditated knows what a struggle it can be to keep coming back to breath or mantra, to return one's focus to whatever inward light one is seeking. There is pain or at least frustration at moments in how elusive this search can be. But then... there it is again, that still clarity.

**LT:** There are many poems in *Seed* that speak to what feels, for me as a reader, a deep peace or contentment, even if sometimes tinged with sorrow. I'm thinking of "Eventide," "Simple," "Benediction," "Ahimsa," and more. Am I imagining this? And, if not, is this thread arising from a particular moment, experience, a broader sense of knowledge, a particular place you find yourself in life and/or writing?

**JG:** I have studied Aikido for many years and have given a lot of thought to the deep beauty of this art. Some people would call it a martial art. I call it a path. Like any path, it presents its challenges, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. My study of Aikido has changed me. I have had to deal with anger and judgments I thought I had already dealt with. I have had to seek ways to be more compassionate, more empathetic, more humane. This answer goes hand in hand with the response to the prior question you asked.

**LT:** I have your published collections—*Beneath My Heart* (1990), *Earthquake Weather* (1996), *Doubters and Dreamers* (2011), *The Force of Gratitude* (2017), and *Seed* (I've never been able to get my hands on *Alphabet!*)—spread out across my table. They are dog-eared and tabbed with different colors and underlined. I find your work, by turns, stunning and painful and beautiful and often read it aloud to both myself and others. I'm currently, for example, completely obsessed with the last lines of "Weed":

Creator made me for some  
unstated purpose, perhaps  
to annoy and displease you,  
to disrupt your fundamental beliefs  
about order and meaning.  
Or to offer you another way  
to see beauty.

How do *you* see the body of your work? Can you chart a movement, change, shift, development—insert your own descriptor here—across your books? Take us anywhere you'd like with this question as you think across and among your books.

**JG:** In my first couple of collections I was concerned with creating a lesbian voice that was also a Native American voice. I was not trying for the erotic but for the intimate. That is still one of my goals: to open readers to the possibility of intimacy—with a loved one, with themselves, with the poem. It seemed important to emphasize my Native identity because I'm a California Indian (Concow or Koyoook'auwi). While the number of California Indian writers is growing today, when I began publishing there were only a few others that I knew of—Frank La Pena, for one. There were no presses that I knew of that were seeking creative writing by California Indians. Artists and basket weavers were better known to the public.

There is a bloody history in California when it comes to Indians. The Mission system, the creation of haciendas, and the enslavement of Indians as peons to work on those large ranchos. The Gold Rush—in a whole other part of California—brought the seizure of Indian lands by whites who wanted to strike gold and get rich quick. Meanwhile, Indians were without legal status. They became increasingly pauperized.

I felt I needed to somehow get that story across—not just the story of my own struggles with my mother, with homophobia, etc.—but the fact is, I grew up in Berkeley, California. I spent a good deal of my life in California. And as I grew as a poet, I knew there were other tales to tell, right from my own family. That's when *Doubters and Dreamers* emerged. In that book, I also wanted to play with more formal structures—the opening poem, "Indian Mascot, 1959," for example, is a sestina. I was beginning to bring in my relatives as characters who had an impact on me, and the landscape of the Feather River Canyon. I was delighted when University of Arizona Press was able to get Rick Bartow's "Two Views of Hawk" for the cover. I think that book is beautifully produced. It was a finalist for a couple of prizes, including the Colorado Book Award.

I was very pleased when Headmistress Press accepted my chapbook manuscript, *The Force of Gratitude*. It was a finalist for the Charlotte Mew Poetry Contest. That book includes some of the prose poems or vignettes I was working with in my as yet unpublished memoir, if that's what it is. So, there are autobiographical elements in that book as well, and attention to landscape.

Finally, I am very grateful and happy that Headmistress Press was excited about *Seed* and was willing to publish it in January 2019. It will have a showing at the AWP Conference in Portland, Oregon. I only wish I could be there, but much depends on how I feel after the treatments (I have Stage Four pancreatic cancer).

**LT:** Is there something else, something more you'd like to share as you think about *Seed* either on its own as a collection or in relation to the rest of your work?

**JG:** I love *Seed*. I was delighted with the cover that Mary Merriam designed—using a 1950s black and white photo of my dad and me. I'm deeply appreciative of the good words that other writers contributed to the volume with their blurbs. I've also been so pleased that *Seed* came to me when it did. Poetry work, for me, can take a long time. So, it was something of an astonishment that over the fall I was able to just keep writing. It was the Beloved who said, "Find the first word... and go from there," and each time that word came to me, I had something to say. I am not sure if that will happen again, but I'm grateful to or for whatever force or mystery it is that allows me to write poetry.

## **Part Two: Questions on California**

**LT:** Can you meditate a bit here on how you see your relationship to California, to Koyoonk'auwi landscapes, and/or to Koyoonk'auwi history today?

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California looms large in histories of the Red Power movement. I'm thinking, in particular, of the two occupations of Alcatraz, especially the eighteen-month occupation that began in November 1969 and ended in June 1971. Were you living in Berkeley during the take-over? Can you share a bit about your experience of that era?

Poems like "History Lesson" (*Beneath My Heart*), "Easter Sunday" (*Earthquake Weather*), and "Indian Mascot, 1959" (*Sovereign Erotics and Doubters and Dreamers*), among many others, teach readers something more than what "Easter Sunday" calls the "rich, false history of California" (41). You've been doing this work of pushing folks—especially non-Native folks—to see the often-difficult realities of California history for some thirty years now. Will this always be a part of your creative/theoretical work? Has headway been made here?

Finally, can you comment on the community of California writers today—whether Indigenous California writers or Native writers who call California home. (This could be a shout out to folks you love, a reverie on what's happened there since you started your career, or another approach of your choice.)

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JG: Hello Lisa,

I will try answering your questions as best I can. I'll begin with my relationship to California, a complicated topic. Since I have not lived in California for many years, and because I have lost significant relatives and simply do not know others of them, it seems my relationship to California has become considerably thinner. And when I speak of California, I am speaking mostly about the northern part of the state. I lost some connection to southern California after my family moved to Berkeley. Interestingly,

however, when I returned to San Diego in fall of 2017, I remembered exactly how to get to the neighborhood on Pt. Loma where I spent the first nine years of my life.

I guess we maintain relationship through memory and imagination of place—its smell, the feel of the air, important people, events, and activities that created the cloth of experience, visually, aurally, tactilely. My sisters and I were aware of our American Indian heritage, but what that meant in real experiential terms is hard to define. There were no specific Concow (Koyoook'auwi) objects that served as reminders of our ancestry other than some old photographs of my mom's mother, father and siblings. We also had photos of the town of Belden and some of its inhabitants, the railroad, the Feather River and surrounding mountains, and glimpses of the Beatty family homestead. My grandparents, who I never met because they died before I was born, were both "half-breeds," as the term had it. My grandmother was French and Concow and my grandfather Irish and Concow.

After my grandmother died, my mother's dad, Harry Beatty, allowed my mom, Vivian, to be "adopted" by the Lane sisters, three white women who were interested in adopting or fostering an Indian child. My mom was possibly between seven and ten-years-old when this occurred. The story of her mother's death, her father's abandonment of her, the break with her siblings, her apparent adoption by the Lanes, and much more, were tales my mother imparted to us over the years. The land still had meaning because of my mom's memories.

My parents would take us camping on the Feather River, or we would stay at our Aunt Lillian and Uncle Ivan's homestead, which was set back from the river several hundred yards, and about a mile from Belden's main street (it really only had one street). We spent time exploring the area by car, driving to places that had historical meaning and [importance] for some Indian people who had memories of significant sites where ceremonies may have been performed. For us, removed in time and culture from some

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places, these areas might be beautiful, but we had no particular attachment to specific places, or knowledge of what might have gone on among the Concow or Maidu people fifty or a hundred years earlier, other than what happened to members of our family.

Nevertheless, for me, especially as time wore on and I became more familiar with the history of the region, Belden, the Feather River, and other towns and sites became significant. The map of my knowledge expanded regionally, linguistically. I still feel a strong fascination about the life of Indian people, especially during the colonial era, just before and after California was seized from Mexico and eventually became part of the United States. Greg Sarris (Miwok) points out in his writing that among the Pomo, tribal people who lived west of the Concow across the Sacramento Valley, some preached what could be seen as a kind of assimilation, except that it wasn't. For example, dressing in western garb might better protect Indian women from the ravages of colonial white male settlers than the traditional clothing, which was scant. No doubt by the time of the Gold Rush, which began in 1849, some Indian people had already adopted Euro-American clothing and were employed as farm laborers, laundry women, cooks, wood cutters, and vaqueros. My grandparents dressed in late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century style.

As a young person, I hiked and backpacked in the Sierra Nevada and the Coast Range, on the John Muir Trail and in the Los Padres and Yola Bola Wilderness areas. We spent time on the coast, especially at Pt. Reyes National Seashore, where we could observe sea lions and sea otters, elk, deer, and many birds. There are many regional parks in the Bay Area, and we hiked in and explored these places as well. We learned to sail on San Francisco and Tomales Bays, went rock-climbing at Indian Rock Park in Berkeley and in Yosemite. We rode horses in the east bay hills. We lived about three blocks from UC Berkeley land, what was essentially open space when we were kids. The steep hills east of the campus were full of wild oats and milkweed, and in the canyons



there were oak and laurel trees, chaparral, and poison oak. We watched the fog roll in through the Golden Gate and over the bay, right up and over the hill that we lived on.

My older sister and I attended Merritt Junior College, which was an old technical/vocational school on what used to be Grove Street and later became Martin Luther King Boulevard. It was there, taking a journalism class, that I became interested in what was going on at Alcatraz. I wanted to visit the island. Shy as I was, I imagined that I would talk with some of the Indian people who were out there. A couple of friends and I located an office in San Francisco that must have served as the Public Relations headquarters, among other things. A young arrogant Indian guy was in charge, and he basically told me I could not go out to the island. He was so supercilious that I became incensed and walked out on him in the middle of his spiel. A few days later, my older sister and I went to the Friendship House in Oakland and spoke with an older Indian gentleman there who told us that Alcatraz was thought to be a place of bad luck for California Indian people, and he kindly discouraged us from trying to go there. My sister and I decided to listen to him.

I would guess that especially the older Indian man could see what a naïve and sheltered kind of young person I was. I really had no firm idea of what the issues were that Native people were protesting and that sparked the take-over of Alcatraz Island. I had not yet become politicized in any cognizant way. That didn't start to happen until I took Women's Studies classes (again through Merritt) and began to acquire a language for what I felt, thought, and experienced.

Being now so far from California in time and space, I have only a vague idea of what is going on in Native California, artistically and in other ways. I know that more scholarship is going on among the young scholars who are earning their doctoral degrees, and I applaud that.

### Part Three: Questions on Queer Indigenous History

JG: Dear Lisa,

Thanks for all your questions, all the work you've gone to in asking them... and for your friendly, scholarly self! It's been fun thinking about these questions and wondering what answers I will find to them.

How would I think about the three decades, '70s, '80s, and '90s? Many socio-political shifts and changes went on over that period of time. I found my own footing, though it took quite a while, because I was busy being angry for many years, and it was not until my mother passed away and I found my partner, Mimi, that I began to settle down psychologically and emotionally. I was still in a lot of turmoil, even through the '90s. I had so many changes to go through, so many challenges.

There was a lot of social unrest in the Bay Area [during that period]. After the People's Park protests and violence in 1969, Governor Reagan sent the National Guard to Berkeley and barbed wire was strung up along University Avenue, down to the Berkeley Yacht Harbor, where the Guard was encamped. From up on the hill, we could see clouds of tear gas being shot at protesters. The Zodiac Killer was on the loose, and all kinds of other bizarre killers and rapists were suddenly making headlines. I also believe a brisk business in drugs and prostitution was on Berkeley streets during the early '70s.

The general level of revolutionary fervor increased as militant arms of the Black Panthers and Brown Berets made their presence known. In 1974 the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnapped Patty Hearst a mile from where I worked; they had assassinated the Superintendent of Oakland Schools, Dr. Marcus Foster [in 1973]. Many of them eventually met their end in a shoot-out in Los Angeles.

As a young lesbian, I had no idea what I would be or do in the world. I had moved away from home, had lived in Oregon and Colorado, had returned home after the break-up with a girlfriend, was attending various Junior Colleges—Merritt and Laney—and delving into different majors every few months, wanting to find “practical” employment but being bored out of my mind with 9-to-5 jobs. I had fallen in love with a straight white woman, and, of course, I was experiencing all the intensity of her ambivalence [and also] the deep grief of not being able to talk about this with my family or old friends from whom I had become increasingly isolated. I was just beginning to experience what it meant to be out of the closet.

Gay Pride was a nascent movement in the early '70s, but it gathered strength during that decade.<sup>5</sup> I had begun working at I.C.I-A Woman's Place Bookstore. It was billed as an information center, and it certainly provided needed texts for women interested in building the Women's Movement, feminist theory, etc. It was also a center for lesbian artists, poets, and activists. Some excellent scholarship on the role of feminist bookstores in raising consciousness has recently been published. These were vital sites for organizing and activism, for sharing music, poetry, and prose literature, for developing a political consciousness. I participated in the Berkeley Oakland Women's Union (I called it bow-wow) through the cultural arts contingent made up of singers, actors, and other artists. We marched in a couple of the Gay Pride parades, singing and playing instruments. I met Cherríe Moraga at A Woman's Place; we already knew of each other. I marched with her and some of her friends during [a] Gay Pride March.

I was attending UC Berkeley in the 1980s. I majored in linguistics and focused my attention on Native American languages. I became friends with a small number of graduate students in that program, and graduated cum laude, having written up some work on the Hopi language. I had also been awarded a fellowship to do field work in

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Alaska through the Alaska Native Language Center. I worked on an Athabaskan language called Salcha; there were but two speakers left of that language.

While I was at UC Berkeley, I also took classes in Native American Studies, sitting in at times on Gerald Vizenor's literature class and later attending Wendy Rose's literature class, meeting poets Maurice Kenny and Mary Tall Mountain. Later I applied to and was accepted into the Ph.D. program in Linguistics, but dropped out of it, worked for a year in the department, and applied to the Master's Program in English at UC. That is where Mimi and I met; she was a year behind me in the program.

Oddly enough, the English Department did not offer any classes in minority literature at that time. These were mainly taught through Ethnic Studies. Mimi and I decided to organize a class through the English Department in which we would read literature by North American women of color. We were able to call on friends and faculty to help us with this project, including Professor Sue Schweik, who agreed to sponsor the class. We enlisted a number of women to teach the class, including Cherríe Moraga and Ana Castillo, Norma Alarcón, Merle Woo and Nellie Wong, Elaine Kim, Paula Gunn Allen, and others. The English Department was skeptical that the class would make, but on the first night nearly fifty women showed up. Some were students, others were staff.

I met Beth Brant probably in the mid-1980s. I think Beth had come out to California for some kind of literary residency. It was at least year or two before my mother died. I drove Beth out to Marin County where she would be housed in residence for some days. A year or two later Beth returned to the Bay Area, possibly when *Mohawk Trails* came out. She called me to say that Gloria Anzaldúa, who was living in south Berkeley or Emeryville at the time was having a party at her place and I should come meet her. I brought my girlfriend, Mimi, with me. I recall that Gloria had a computer and was working on the text of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. She showed us bits and pieces of the text; it seemed magical to me. Later, after Mimi and I moved to

Albuquerque, Gloria stayed with us during a National Association of Chicano & Chicana Studies (NACCS) Conference.

Through Beth I met Michelle Cliff (and later I met Adrienne Rich, both in Albuquerque and in Portland, Oregon, where she had come to do a reading.) Beth was instrumental in helping get my first book, *Beneath My Heart*, published with Firebrand Books. She sent a manuscript of my poems to Nancy Bereano and suggested that it might be a good candidate for publication. Nancy agreed, and in 1989 that book was published. Beth also helped me to meet Chrystos, who came to Albuquerque to read at Full Circle Books, a women's bookstore in town. Later, Chrystos stayed with us on yet another trip to the Southwest. Joy Harjo was living in Albuquerque, and she came to my reading at one of the bookstores, which is where we met. In addition to meeting other Native women writers, my partner and I met lesbian poet Margaret Randall and her partner, the artist Barb Byers.

The Returning the Gift conference in Norman, Oklahoma brought many, many Native American writers together. That is where I met Vickie Sears, as well as Linda Hogan, Betty Louise Bell, and others whose names I am not remembering now. Some of my poetry was included in an anthology, edited by Joseph Bruchac, that came out of that conference.

After obtaining my Ph.D in English from the University of New Mexico, many opportunities opened up for me in the 1990s. For one thing, while studying at UNM, I received a Ford Fellowship, which helped support my scholarly work. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Astraea Foundation for Lesbian Writers helped with the creative work (I took time from my studies to write). Over the years I have met many other Native American writers and scholars, both Gay and straight, both through my work as a scholar and also through my work as a poet: Greg Sarris, Craig Womack, Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Justice, Malea Powell, Ellen Cushman, Joyce Rain

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Anderson, Virginia Carney, Deborah Miranda, Cheryl Savageau, Margaret Bruchac, Heid Erdrich, Elizabeth Woody, Nancy Mithlo, Suzan Harjo, Marty de Montañó, Inés Hernández-Ávila, and many others. I have benefitted enormously and learned much from the friendships and acquaintanceships that I've had with my fellow Native Americans and with other non-Native scholars, like Dean Rader, Hertha Wong, Deborah Madsen, and yourself. In fact, Dean and I put together the first (and only?) scholarly book exclusively focused on American Indian poetry, *Speak to Me Words*.

As for the term "Two Spirit," I think it can be a useful descriptor, but there is a sort of ambiguity to it, and it seems to cover a wide variety of social-sexual expressions—and it feels like everyone gets lumped in together, even though everyone is quite different in how they live their sexual/erotic identities.<sup>6</sup> I've used it to describe myself in the past, partly because (in my mind) I have some androgynous qualities that I cannot deny. Chrystos once called me a "soft butch" when I was much younger. But I have no idea how I'm perceived these days, perhaps simply as an older woman, maybe a lesbian, with a short haircut.

I think it's still true, that quote you supplied from the *Ariel* article. For some of us, it is perhaps not such a burden to be "out."<sup>7</sup> Among liberal colleagues where I work, for example, being a lesbian is not an issue, as far as I can tell. Being a Native American lesbian poet is not a problem (probably since most people don't read my books—and I am just such a nice person!) It does not seem to be an issue for my students, and I expect that a percentage of them come from Evangelical Christian families that have little tolerance or love for LGBTQ people. But these young folks are in school to learn, to be exposed to thoughts and ideas that they probably did not grow up with. Whether they accept in the long term (internalize) the wide diversity of thought and expression that they are learning about, I don't know.

I'm aware that there are vast parts of the country at least as conservative as Colorado Springs, and in small communities it may still be that if a person is LGBTQ, they feel safest staying in the closet. I suspect that undisclosed erotic activity goes on in every community, and that it isn't discussed openly because in so many ways it still is not safe to live an honest life as the person you know yourself to be, loving whom you wish to love. And I'm speaking of both Native and non-Native communities. We live with a legacy of religious fervor that raises its bigoted head every now and then, fearful and intolerant of difference, and believing it has the right to judge and condemn others.

I am way out of the loop when it comes to younger LGBTQ Native American writers, except for my friendships with Jennifer Foerster and Byron Aspaas, both wonderful poets.<sup>8</sup> This has to do, in part, with the way I work. I'm a bit of a recluse. Also, I am very careful about the work I take in to myself because other people's writing can affect the process of my own composing. I really have to love the poetry I encounter otherwise I won't feel like spending any time with it. Some contemporary writing, whether by Native or non-Native poets, leaves me cold because it seems to have no internal fire or reality. Some of it seems far too wedded to "language," but the language seems to refuse the beggar at the door (the common reader) who needs light and warmth and a scrap of food.

It's hard to be a poet. The apprenticeship takes time. We learn from others, we experiment, but then we have to make our own way and find a language that can bear our truth. I guess that's the only advice I can give: do your work and do it honestly and generously. Sometimes that will mean encountering challenges or problems that are hard to solve, but it's important to persist if poetry means anything to you, and if it's to survive in a world where suffering is ever present, but where joy remains possible.

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I leave this final conversation wanting *more* of Janice Gould's words. Her thoughts on her poems, on writing, and the details she relates here about the queer coalitions of which she was a part at a crucial time in the rise of queer multiethnic and Indigenous literatures and activism speak to how much more she had to share, how much more that we could learn from her gorgeous art and rich experiences. Further, Janice's thoughts throughout these conversations point to how our embodied understandings of self and place shift in relation to time, to proximity, to health, and to the ebb and flow of memory. In thinking of the movements of Gould's experiences in/of California, I return again to the frame Miranda offers us for the active process of Indigenous assemblage: "I'm not whole. And yet, I *am* whole. What the hell! I'm a whole mosaic. Deal with it, world. White and Indian, and not only that, but Indian and reinventing myself in this Post-Colonial Art Project I've inherited" (*Bad Indians*, 136). Gould acknowledges this inheritance and its potential fragmentations throughout her writing, yet, as we see in the final words she offers here, still looks toward a world where "joy remains possible." It is that world she leaves with us as her legacy.

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*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Janice Gould" from *The Geography of Home: California's Poetry of Place*, Christopher Buckley and Gary Young, eds., 85.

<sup>2</sup> The spelling of Koyoonk'auwi (also known as Concow or Konkow Maidu) varies in English. As seen in the epigraph that begins the text, Gould was at that time using "Koyangk'auwi." I use Koyoonk'auwi, the spelling employed in her most recent work, throughout.



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<sup>3</sup> See Tatonetti, "Chapter Five: Toward Queer Indigenous Methodologies: Indigenous Assemblage and Queer Diasporas in the Work of Janice Gould," *The Queerness of Native American Literature*.

<sup>4</sup> Gould's parents and relatives lived in the wake of California Indian genocide. Besides remaining extant in oral histories, these events have also been documented in numerous historical texts. In particular, Brendan C. Lindsay's *Murder State* has documented "the creation, through the democratic processes and institutions of the people of the United States, of a culture organized around the dispossession and murder of California Indians" (2). This dispossession, the subsequent attempted fragmentation of Indigenous kinship systems of the remaining California Indian peoples are key factors behind the Gould's mother's adoption. See the preface to *Earthquake Weather* and Gould's "Singing, Speaking, and Seeing a World" for more on her family history.

<sup>5</sup> This section responds to two questions I posed: 1) "As someone who thinks a lot about the early years of queer Indigenous lit—the 1970s, '80s, '90s—it seems like there was this amazing convergence of writing and thinking and art. How would you think about that time? With the Gay American Indians forming, *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Living the Spirit*, and *A Gathering of Spirit* coming out, and your first books,—*Beneath My Heart*, *Alphabet*, and *Earthquake Weather*—being published. Were you consciously aware of (what I see as) a seismic shift happening?"; and 2) "OK, this is totally a question for me—I've always wondered—were you in the GAI? And did folks writing/publishing in the '80s/early '90s (you, Beth Brant, Paula Gunn Allen, Chrystos, Maurice Kenny, Vicki Sears, Carole laFavor, Connie Fife, Sharron Proulx-Turner and more...) know each other, hang out at all?"

<sup>6</sup> Janice's response here is in answer to this question: "Do you remember when you first started hearing the term "Two-Spirit"? What did that feel like/mean for you? Was it a descriptor you took up immediately? Is it one that still fits for you today?"

<sup>7</sup> The particular question to which she refers is: "Your 1994 essay in *Ariel*, "Disobedience (in Language) in Texts by Lesbian Native Americans" is incredibly important. Just as you were part of that first wave of creative writing, you were also in the vanguard of scholars doing critical/theoretical work on Queer Indigenous/Two-Spirit literature, as well. This essay in particular, which I still often teach, is hard-hitting and unapologetic. You talk overtly about California's settler colonial history and, among other things, about the power of the erotic in Indigenous lesbian writing (Sears, Brant, and Chrystos). There's a quote in that piece I've cited so many times:

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I am aware that in speaking about a lesbian American Indian erotics, and even more in speaking about lesbian love, I am being disloyal and disobedient to the patriarchal injunction that demands our silence and invisibility. If we would only stay politely and passively in the closet, and not flaunt our sexuality, we could be as gay and abnormal as we like. (32)

What do you think when you look back at that quote, at that piece, some twenty-five years later?"

<sup>8</sup> This paragraph and the next respond to this question: "There's a really amazing group of queer young Indigenous writers publishing right now. Do you have any thoughts about the new generation of Two-Spirit/Queer Indigenous writers? Advice for them?"

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