

# In Conversation with Gail Jones<sup>1</sup>

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Gail Jones is one of the most prominent and sensitive contemporary Australian fiction writers. Her publications include a critical monograph, her two collections of short stories *The House of Breathing* (1992) and *Fetish Lives* (1997), and her five novels *Black Mirror* (2002), *Sixty Lights* (2004), *Dreams of Speaking* (2006), *Sorry* (2007) and *Five Bells* (2011). She has been shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award three times. In 2005, The Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) granted her its most prestigious prize, the ALS Gold Medal, for her second novel. A long list of other national awards should also be mentioned: the WA Premier's Award for Fiction, the Nita B. Kibble Award, the Steele Rudd Award, the Age Book of the Year Award, the Adelaide Festival Award. She is currently living in Sydney, where she combines her academic life as a Professor of Writing at the Writing and Research Centre of the University of Western Sydney with her passion for writing.

**M. Pilar Royo** I would like to start by congratulating and thanking you for the aesthetic pleasures you have provided us, your readers, with your two collections of short stories and five novels. Your fiction sparks off the beauty of words. When reading your work, one can feel the joy of a writer who celebrates writing and playing with the sound and textuality of language. Could you please tell us a bit about how it feels to create and work with language?

**Gail Jones** I am attracted to poetry, and as a novelist I read a lot of poetry. What I love about poetry is its quality of intensification and condensation, and the fact that it gives a privilege to metaphor. When I write prose, I am not thinking so much about the forward movement of the story, about the unfolding of the plot. I am thinking more about the texture of language because it is a more complicated kind of aesthetic compulsion. So I am delighted that you have pleasure from my work. It is always gratifying for a writer to hear that. However, there is still a mystery in the texture of language, of words put together in a particular way. I suppose I'm aiming for a kind of prose poetics.

**MPR** Your comment on the texture of language and your interest in poetry makes me think of Mark Tredinnick's definition of poetry. I remember that, at the reading 'Poetry in Cathedral Cave', at the latest Sydney Writers' Festival, he defined poetry as 'a kind of architecture of utterance, a kind of sculpture we make with voice.' Could you please comment on that?

**GJ** That is interesting. I think, when I write, I am concerned with the physicality of language; that the word is partly productive breath from inside the body; that we express things with language that has effects from and in the body. Sartre says 'the writer's style is his metaphysics.' By that he means that style also determines relationships of space and time, and the way that one thinks about subjectivity, the nature of the subject. My interest in the poetic style is to create a metaphysics which is about these relations that we have with other people, with the world, a sort of inter-subjectivity. All of those things are implied by 'metaphysics'. Yes, language is physical, it is about bodies, and trying to render the physicality of the world, but for me style is also metaphysical. Sartre was not concerned with the idea that style is just a transparent way of getting information across. He was interested in foregrounding its capacity to create a world, a position in that world, and a position of seeing.

**MPR** Could writing be regarded not just as a representation but also as an action? In other words, do you feel that your novels do not only represent, but they also *do* something?

**GJ** I hope so. Representation is one aspect of language, but reading and writing are both quite mysterious. I have just come from a writers' festival and every time I meet an audience and people talk to me about my work, I am aware of how specific reception can be: those things we share, and those things that are utterly specific to an individual reading. I suppose I like to think of the text as not just an active representation, but something that shifts in its communicative power; that it is a communication that is unstable and keeps on changing, and that readers change it; that you give a text to the reader, and the reader makes it her or his text. This is perhaps a very romantic view of writing.

**MPR** Actually, in *Sorry*, you create a community of readers. The book *The Lives of the Saints* connects characters; reading becomes a bond between them.

**GJ** Yes, though here it is only a community of two. I believe books break open our aloneness and are worth cherishing. Reading is one of the ways we meet other people and other minds, other consciousnesses, and other worlds.

**MPR** You have just talked about the metaphysical potentiality of language to inspire feelings and create worlds. But I assume language also has its limits. As is stated in *Sorry*, there are stories that 'can only be told in a whisper' (15). Your fiction tackles some problematic issues such as trauma, grief and loss at an individual and historical level. What challenges did you find when trying to write about these topics? Could you please give us an insight into how you tried to meet them?

**GJ** There are two issues there, I think. One is the limits of language, and the other is about trauma and loss as they act as a force upon language. Although I have confidence in the ability of language to communicate and to make worlds, one inevitably feels a sense of failure. Every writer knows the insufficiency of language and confronts it again and again, that there are always things that we cannot find the words for and that matter enormously. There is an extra-linguistic and, of course, a pre-linguistic world. I am also interested in silence, and what happens when people are silent. For me, one of the paradigmatic texts is *King Lear*. You remember, in *King Lear*, the king assembles his daughters, and asks how much they love him. His two eldest daughters are very eloquent, but the third daughter says, 'I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.' I find that so moving, and so exemplary of a certain kind of problem of the distance between feeling and language, and the failure, the *necessary failure* of language to contain everything. I want to honour and to represent that. And you are right, it often happens in situations of trauma and loss, so that is when 'failure' becomes exemplified. Something like the interruption of language, or the breaking of language, like stuttering, muteness, just falling silent, or the whisper, language that is barely uttered; these signify that space between the confident enunciation, the confident project of meaning, and what really happens in situations of crisis. This is something that I keep representing, I know.

**MPR** Could silence be thus interpreted here as a kind of bridge between feeling and language?

**GJ** There are two ways of thinking about it: one is a bridge, but another is a gap, the space between. I think of it in terms of lack, rather than as a frail bridge. I see silence more as a sort of scooping out of space.

**MPR** Because so much is contained that it cannot be expressed.

**GJ** Yes, and in a sense all of this is resting in a kind of dark hollow. There are things that cannot quite be seen, yet you know they are there. The special metaphor I am grasping for has to do with language traversing a space that seems not quite able to be perceived, perhaps unrepresentable, but perhaps also not quite visible. Does that make sense?

**MPR** Yes, it does. Your novels deal with characters' loss and pain. This could be regarded as a way of representing the pain of others. I wonder how this pain can be represented. Do you think that the use of these gaps is also an ethical way to represent it?

**GJ** I hope so. It is a big issue for me because I don't write in the first person, I write in the third person. I am interested in community and otherness, and I want to feel that there is a community of difference in which these things are rehearsed; that it is not about the tyranny of the same but about the community of difference. It is quite a challenge for any writer to get that right. In a famous phrase, Samuel Beckett states: 'fail, fail again, fail better.' So, I am trying with each book to fail better. I don't feel that I ever succeed, but if I can fail a bit better than the last time, then...

**MPR** Well, your failures seem quite a success to me.

**GJ** Well, you see, that could be the difference between the reader and the writer. When I look at my books now, I see only the flaws.

**MPR** There has recently been a notable development of trauma theory, which seems to have contributed to the creation or conceptualization of an aesthetics of trauma. You have published some articles in which you, as an academic, demonstrate your knowledge on trauma studies. For instance, in 'A Dreaming, a Sauntering' and 'Sorry-in-the-Sky' you discuss issues such as the notion of belatedness, mourning and empathic unsettlement. I wonder if your knowledge of trauma theory helps you to explore and develop the above-mentioned themes of trauma, grief and loss in your fiction. How does your academic knowledge impinge upon your writing? And, even more important, does your creative writing give you an opportunity to approach these issues in a different way? In other words, what is it that can be done and achieved by producing creative fictional works that deal with pain, loss, traumatic experiences that critical theory could not possibly explore in such depth?

**GJ** I think that there is an aesthetics of trauma, and I am aware of trauma theory. I do not set out to write a novel thinking that I am writing to a theory because that would be paralyzing. I would not be able to write like that. But clearly my academic knowledge has informed my thinking. Or, perhaps, to put it differently, it gives me certain understandings about the symbolic mechanisms by which trauma and loss operate. At the moment, I am much more interested in writing fiction than in writing critical theory. This is because in fiction there is the imaginative quality of affect that can be represented in a way that it can't in critical theory. Critical theory helps me after the event to determine what I have done. But I have to bracket that off when I write intuitively, and enter into an imaginative contract with the fictive being of characters. Otherwise it gets in my way. But you are right, when I look at my books now I can see how thoroughly I have internalized—for example—the idea that traumatic experiences are known belatedly. At the moment I am reading Gerhard Richter's *Afterness* (2011). Richter is a philosopher who is interested in the idea of things coming after,

surviving, after-life, after-image. He argues that these are part of modernity itself, not just of trauma or loss. And I am very persuaded by that idea that every novel is belated, and that our experience is in some bizarre way known fundamentally through retrospection. I have always been interested in the idea of looking backwards.

**MPR** So writing allows you to convey affect.

**GJ** Yes, I suppose affect is important to me, and theory is not a good place for the expression of affect. I am attracted to narrative and the idea of the stories that we do not hear, the ones that come from the margins, or from the oppressed, or the overlooked, the suffering... There is a quote by Frederic Jameson: 'history is what hurts.' And I keep this in mind, that if one is writing historically or retrospectively, there will always be suffering to encounter and to represent. If there is no suffering, there is no history. That sounds very gloomy and perhaps deterministic, but I take seriously the idea that to write *after* something, *after* an event or after a period of time is in part to find a way to represent suffering.

**MPR** So your novels would become vehicles through which those unheard stories can be expressed. Writing would become a way of achieving recognition and mourning.

**GJ** Yes, I think all of those things are elements of backward looking: recognition, mourning, witnessing and the stories of those whose voices have not been heard, sometimes because they are whispering, and sometimes because history has silenced them, or told them that their stories do not matter. And that may sound as if I am a historical novelist, and I am not really, but I am very interested in the ethical dimensions of these issues.

**MPR** Let's move on now to the next question. I remember that, in an interview on Blogcritics Talk Radio, you said that *Five Bells* is 'a book that works very strongly with the sense of patterning and design . . . patterns of connection, of solidarity' (Magdalena). This interweaving of patterns is both thematically and formally recursive in the rest of your work. You succeed in creating works composed of multiple layers of meaning, voices, perspectives, places, emotions. I was wondering: how do you manage to achieve this? Do you think up a narrative pattern before starting writing or is the gestation of your work more like an organic process?

**GJ** I am very attentive to structure and design and I think this interest comes from the visual arts, from the look of things, and how different shapes juxtapose to make an overall shape. The special imaginary that comes from working with visual arts transfers to an involvement with design and pattern. This is a very non-realist preoccupation. The artifice of the novel captivates me a great deal, and there is no reason why one can't represent in some empathic and authentic way the feelings of people and their everyday experiences, and also place them in a pattern. One of my influences is the Oulipo movement in France. Someone like Georges Perec, who deals with what he calls 'constraints' in the novel, wrote a book (translated into English as *A Void*) in which he audaciously deleted the letter 'e'. I'm fascinated by those writers who formally experiment, sometimes by producing a constraint rather than letting anything happen. *Sixty Lights* contains sixty lights, lights are constantly coming on, and it is formed by about sixty thousand words. There are also three parts, and I was thinking of the three legs of a camera tripod. With *Five Bells*, I wanted to write a novel set in one day, but I wanted it to be patterned on recognitions, moments of encounter, or sympathy between characters. I didn't begin by thinking 'this is how it will look,' I just knew that I wanted to write it over one day and I didn't realize until the end that I would have to reverse the

sequence of the telling so that narration both ends and starts with Ellie. There are some instrumentalist decisions to be made and some executive decisions—that this will be one day, this will be five characters but we only need four. Constraint is very generative of stylistic and formal decisions and that is what the Ouleprians understood. However the writing process itself is much more unpredictable and intuitive than this sounds.

**MPR** I observe that in your writing there are some words and symbols that are used recursively, for example hands and hats.

**GJ** That's very clever, nobody has ever mentioned the hats before.

**MPR** And in *Sixty Lights* it is 'mother of pearl' that is used several times.

**GJ** Yes, I think that's because of my childhood in the Kimberleys. The industry around Broome when I was a child was pearling, so I saw a lot of pearl shell. And it is not just pearls that are the product of pearl-diving, it is the shell that is called 'mother of pearl'. As a child, I found it beautifully redolent. I did not understand why the word 'mother' was there and for me it represented a kind of light. Have you seen pearl shells? Very lustrous, very shiny, with this inexplicable quality like moonlight. I'm not conscious of revisiting it again and again, but perhaps I do.

**MPR** Do you know why it is called mother of pearl?

**GJ** No, I need to look it up. You have prompted me to realize that I am using this. Nobody has ever mentioned this before. The pearl shell is also a very large shell the size of an adult hand and, as you noticed, I am very interested in hands. There may well be some connection there that you have also intuitively discovered that I have not known about myself.

**MPR** Place and memory are closely related in your work. Your characters are constantly moving away from their homes, yet they also carry with them and project onto the new places some of the memories of the places they left. Could you please comment a little bit on that?

**GJ** That is an appealing comment. I am very interested in memory as another kind of time. I keep reading descriptions of *Five Bells* saying that it is one day in Sydney as though it is in the present tense or simply happens in one day. But most of that novel is in fact in the past, but it's a past represented principally through memory. It seems to me that, in ontological and epistemological terms, memory exists as another time, one we transfer into the present and that mediates our present. I'm fascinated by memory and by forgetting, and I do want to try suggest a separate time of being, as though we carry a past within us that it interrupts and intercepts our selves in the present tense. That omnipresence of the past recollected through memory is very compelling. And I am enthralled by books centred on memory—Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*, *Invitation of a Beheading* or Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*—and curious about the ways in which subjectivity is constituted both through memory and its gaps.

**MPR** Do you keep any special memory, maybe from a place of your childhood in Western Australia?

**GJ** I was in Broome for only three and a half years, but it was between about the ages of seven and ten and a half, so it was a very important time. But, since we have been talking about mother of pearl, I do remember seeing enormous pyramids of pearl shell and men

sitting on them because one of the industries was to make buttons from shell. In corrugated iron sheds by the water Malaysian and Chinese men would sit on big piles of shells, sorting it on their palms and tossing it into other piles. There is the clattering sound of the pearl shells falling, and the way men held them in their hands, and a peculiar angle and shiny quality to the light. All of those things are still present for me in a quite striking way.

**MPR** Your writing also mingles and plays with the conventions of several genres: the romance / melodrama, the gothic, biography, even the detective story. Is there any genre with which you feel more comfortable when you write?

**GJ** I think of myself as a modernist writer, so I am using the resources of several genres. The assumptions that I make about where meaning lies, and how writing matters are probably high modernist. Something unusual about my work may be the employment of melodrama. I am interested in exaggerated feeling, and the way in which exaggeration sometimes stands in for feeling that is almost too subtle to be expressed. Perhaps, my approach to genre generally comes from cinema. As a child, I saw a lot of B-grade movies. Even in the Kimberleys, where there was no library, no television, no bookshop, no books, no radio, there was a little cinema and every Saturday we saw two movies. We drove in from the bush, from the outskirts of the town to this little cinema. So narrative is associated with large images, and I am very conscious that, when I write, my image repertoire and my engagement with drama probably come from the filmic, from cowboy movies, biblical epics and, musicals, B-grade genres.

**MPR** That's a curious mixture, you manage to combine high-modernism with B-grade genres.

**GJ** Yes, I guess I am hoping that, in an odd way, they fit together. And perhaps that is something distinctive about my style, I don't know. But I'm very interested in mass culture, in how mass culture illustrates feeling.

**MPR** In fact, many of your characters experience the feeling of watching a movie in the cinema. In *House of Breathing* there is one story which narrates the first experience of a girl in the cinema. In *Sorry*, they also go to the cinema to see Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*.

**GJ** In just about everything that I write, there is something to do with cinema. I am concerned with the archaeology and history of vision, everything from the shadow, just looking at one's own shadow, which is the simplest form of projection, to technologies of vision. *Dreams of Speaking* was partly about technologies of vision as well as of hearing. And I do think that modernity is characterized by contest between the word and the image; or what the word can do that the image can't; or what the image can do that the word can't. This is very exciting for me to contemplate. I do find it stimulating and intriguing to pursue philosophically that volatile connection between word and image. We are in a culture of omnipresent images, so the image has a status that the word doesn't, I think.

**MPR** Yes. I feel that sometimes you write images. Recently, I read an article by Brigitta Olubas on 'ekphrasis.' In this article she discussed the use and function of this notion in relation to Shirley Hazzard's novel *The Great Fire*. I thought that this term could also be applied to your novels; your writing is so visual.

**GJ** Yes. Ekphrasis is a significant category for me because it is precisely about how you can

put in words the details of a visual image as though it is another reality. There are many kinds of ekphrasis, but I think that this is one of the devices I often use. When I describe the opening of a movie, that is an active ekphrasis, and I am trying hard to see how much of this experience can be represented, or re-presented in words. Ekphrasis is one of the great mysteries of writing. From the time Homer describes Achilles' shield, it becomes an issue in writing. You are seeing the shield in words and as an object, both there and not there.

**MPR** And ekphrasis also creates aesthetic pleasure, a sort of emotion; it contains emotion.

**GJ** I think so, any active representation probably does.

**MPR** One of the most attractive things of being a writer, I feel, is that it provides you with a chance to enjoy the pleasures and freedom that imagination confers. I guess it might be exciting to be able to detach yourself from your own consciousness, your daily life in order to enter the consciousness of your characters and build up your own narrative space. Bill Ashcroft has published some articles ('Beyond'; 'Australian') in which he talks about the notion of the 'transnation'. In these essays he talks about what I have just said; he emphasizes the utopian possibilities of literature—the way in which literature makes it possible to imagine alternative worlds and allows characters—and I would also add writers and readers to freely move within and beyond national structures and borders. Would you agree with this idea? How free do you feel when you create your characters? Have you ever encountered any ethical limit or problem when creating a character and, if so, how have you solved this problem?

**GJ** Perhaps I don't know enough about Bill Ashcroft's model of transnation, but I am interested in the idea of utopian possibilities in literature. I believe that literature is a form of mobility, and that it enables writers and readers to move imaginatively. I've always felt that literature is a kind of activism, to put it crudely, an ethical and political activism at the service of those things that matter to me. One way of imagining that has to do with transport; it's to do with loosening imagination from its fixed and conventional positions, and setting it moving among difference, among other kinds of propositions about the real, or other ideas of how people work or think or labour.

How free do I feel when I create characters?

**MPR** I mean, is there a moment in which characters have their own consciousness?

**GJ** There is a strange way in which one is communing with spirits when one writes, so that the creation of a hypothetical figure from words takes on some kind of being that is difficult to explain. I often hear writers at writers' festivals saying that characters take on a life of their own, and I've always thought that sounded a bit banal. But, at the same time, there is a point at which, having created something, it begins to evade the determinations that writers try to foist upon it. There is a freedom to construct a community, a world of meaning in one's own terms. But I also have a strong sense of the world outside the text, and the fact that that is very different from the world inside any text. Constraints, exigencies and the power of the world, the pressure of the world pushing in on the text—these of course need to be recognised too.

**MPR** I was thinking of the Chinese character in *Five Bells*. I remember you told me that in China the novel would not get published, unless you erased this character from it.

**GJ** Actually a Chinese journal has decided to publish a short part on Pei Xing, which interests me because I'm a little worried about what will happen to the journal, whether they will be allowed to go ahead.

**MPR** Besides censorship, are there any challenges or restraints that you find when you write about characters that belong to another country, another culture?

**GJ** Yes, I'm curious about what happens when people move, the way in which so many of us have moved from other places. There are forms of mobility that are forced or coerced: refugees, asylum seekers, forms of migrancy that may be a liberation, but may also be a necessity. It seems that mobility is one of the urgent issues of our time. I want somehow to bring together the challenge of writing cross-cultural experience, with these issues to do with mobility, recognizing that not all travel is pleasurable tourism. With my character Pei Xing, I wanted to give a firm sense of what her life had been like before she moved, and what she both has and has not left that behind, so she is dragging the past with her and still trying to come to terms with her earlier experience in China. It seemed to me very important to give a density and specificity to her historical experience in the Cultural Revolution. I did read a lot on the Cultural Revolution memoirs, and I did find them very upsetting; so I felt I had to write carefully about historical circumstance.

**MPR** You said that you are interested in writing about what is underneath, about those voices that cannot be heard. It could then be argued that, in a way, you are talking for them. My question is: how can you talk for them without appropriating their voice? Are there any ethical limits when you write and how do you circumvent them?

**GJ** I think there are different issues for different political situations. For example, I was very conscious when writing a novel about the friendship between a white girl and an Aboriginal girl, that it had to be about white experience. I didn't want to marginalize Aboriginal people, but I didn't want to write from their point of view because, in Australia, that has such a fraught and difficult history. In Australia, there have been so many cases of, not just appropriation, but also of fraudulence, where an Aboriginal voice has been usurped in order to gain something, to gain a prize or to pretend to know Aboriginal subjectivity. I felt very cautious about representing from the point of view of an Aboriginal person. With the Chinese character I didn't have that sense of ethical cautioning in quite the same way, but I had a strong sense of responsibility to study and learn about the Cultural Revolution. When I went to Shanghai for a writer's residency I stayed on the twenty-third floor of a thirty-storey apartment, and I lived in Shanghai as the Shanghainese live in that part of the city. It looks conspicuously high-capitalist, and very successful and yet, beneath the surface, there are wounded histories and in some cases enormously heroic struggles against tyranny. I didn't want to write about the economic success of China. I wanted to write about Chinese history, and how to look to learn. I'm very aware of the arguments about appropriation, and I think of my writing as in the service of those groups that I want to represent. And choosing the way to offer service leads to different kinds of technical decisions about how a novel is constructed.

**MPR** Thank you, that really answers my question. Regarding mobility, it could be said that it is not only your characters that cross borders. We could say that you are a writer who is always on the road. Besides, three of your novels have been partially written abroad. How important for you is the physical place from which you write? Have any of your transnational experiences had a significant impact on your writing?

**GJ** Well, I think they all have. I find travelling very intellectually entrancing and I always learn things. I'm very pedantic and a bit of a nerd. I like to study places when I travel. So, for example, when I was in Salamanca, I was reading the history of Salamanca although what remains of that city in my writing is a very small episode in *Dreams of Speaking*, a description of the cathedral that has an astronaut carved in its stone façade. Of all my studying and learning about Salamanca, there was this one peculiar image I so adored that I wanted to save and put it in a novel somewhere. I took my character Mr Sakamoto to Salamanca on his honeymoon. It's hard to know how travel will provide the knowledge for a text, and I'm not seeking to write the places that I visit. Sometimes what happens at any place is rather random, rather contingent and fortuitous. But I have always loved travelling and started very early. I'm also preoccupied by cross-cultural experience, by the idea of the cosmopolitan, the fact that we are a human community that is now so complicated and so mixed.

**MPR** Concerning this idea of the cosmopolitan, interestingly, your writing mixes the local with the global. As has been said before, your characters move, you move, but there's always something of the place you left that remains. I mean, there's always something of mother-of-pearl in your writing. I would like to ask you if you could develop a little bit the idea of this possible global and local connection. How do you reconcile both things? Do we perhaps live in a glocalised world?

**GJ** That's such a strange word, glocalised. I'm not sure they are reconciled in my work so much as existing in a sort of charged juxtaposition. I think of it a little like an electrical charge, something that concentrates energy. Where the local and the global come together is often a place of strenuous feeling and a kind of instability and energy. I tend to think of it in very abstract ways. Writing requires the maintenance of the metaphoric, the ability to activate the kinesis within the metaphor. So I try not to systematize.

**MPR** What are your impressions about the influence of your Australian background on the production and reception of your writing?

**GJ** In some ways I am unusual among Australian writers in as much as I don't come from the urban middle-class. My background was rural and working class, and rural in very remote areas, for most of my childhood. I moved to the city when I was sixteen, and really only encountered literary culture when I was about seventeen, and first seriously read a novel. In Australia, around ninety percent of Australians live in the big cities of the South Western and South Eastern corners. We are very unevenly distributed. Most people, certainly most of the literary intelligentsia and academics, don't come from the country. Many have perhaps not met an Aboriginal person. (Aboriginal people are only two per cent of our population.) I think of myself less as an Australian novelist, than as a global citizen, and want to play these things one against the other. I'm suspicious of certain forms of national identity, especially essentialist identities that are linked to nation because, traditionally, these connect with militarism and certain forms of jingoism, with problematic ideas of purity and border control, and historically with the White Australia policy. There are many ways in which the traditional identity is something I would want to criticize, or even repudiate. I'm in a contradiction here. The contradiction is that I both identify and disidentify with a sort of dominant ideology of Australianness. That's a rather complicated answer, I'm sorry.

**MPR** I understand what you mean, I think things are not either black or white, things are

complex. I really like a sentence that Mr Sakamoto says in *Dreams of Speaking*: ‘we all contain contradictions’ (83).

**GJ** He was actually quoting Walt Whitman: ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain contradictions.’ That really appeals to me, that idea that most of us, all of us, contain contradictions, but we do our best to repress them.

**MPR** Would it be a good idea to learn to live with these contradictions instead of trying to repress them?

**GJ** Yes. I think we are in a culture that wishes to reduce and simplify identity. But it seems to me that the recognition of contradiction is a much more productive mode, I’d almost say a more psychologically healthy mode of being, if that doesn’t sound too deterministic.

**MPR** I agree with you. And the last question. One might say that *Sorry* is your most politically committed novel. As you suggested in another interview, *Sorry* is a novel which denounces ‘the forgetting of the so-called Stolen Generations in Australia’ (Block para. 18). It is a novel that has been read as a political allegory that criticizes John Howard’s refusal to apologize publicly to the Stolen Generations. The former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a public apology a year after the publication of *Sorry*. This gesture had a very important symbolic relevance; it seemed a step forward in the reconciliation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, the lack of a treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, together with the passing of discriminatory legislations such as the Northern Territory Intervention and the Stronger Future Legislation, seem to do away with the hope that the public apology aroused. In view of these measures, one might agree with those suspicions that the Australian reconciliation process is a mischief-making strategy whereby settler-Australia is egoistically searching for self-absolution, while disregarding the rights of the Indigenous community.

Of course, reconciliation is a complex and long-term project. In your opinion, how different is the situation today from the time when you wrote and published *Sorry*? What have been the achievements and failures of the Australian reconciliation process?

**GJ** It’s certainly true that many of us are very disappointed by the failure of the reconciliation process. It was for a time a position of righteous dissent and politically committed activism that felt as if it was in the service of solidarity with Aboriginal people. When I wrote *Sorry* I did not believe that there would be an apology. Rudd had not yet become leader of the opposition, Howard had definitively said that he would not apologise, and the future looked very bleak for reconciliation. Then, there was a change of government and the apology, and many citizens felt enormous relief, joy, and even elation. I thought that history would shift and that things could never be the same again. However, as you point out, there has been a winding back of Aboriginal rights, and a return to a kind of conservatism, and a kind of political quietism and defeatism.

**MPR** Although the political panorama looks very bleak, there might be some hope in the field of the arts. What role should artists and writers play now? Can reconciliation be achieved through art?

**GJ** I think what is very positive is to see Indigenous art flourishing in Australia. Indigenous art is extraordinary; there are amazing works of cinema, writing, poetry, song, dance. It really

has blossomed, and I think that's very interesting because I believe that if art has any social purpose, one of them is to keep hope alive. In times of political repression there are always artists who wish to make art matter, and to intercept or intervene in the process of constructing value. I'm fascinated by the politics of hope, and one of the quotes by which I live is from Antonio Gramsci: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.' So, intellectually, it is sometimes difficult not to feel pessimistic, but optimism of the will is part of the duty of anyone who is socially committed, and also part of the function of art, a necessary provocation in the face of what can seem a very monolithic political structure. I'm interested in old-fashioned critics like Ernst Bloch who wrote three volumes on hope. He said that 'a ninth symphony, once existing, cannot be retracted.' So, once you have something beautiful in the world that moves and engages other people, it cannot be reversed. I'm not talking about my own work in this way, I'm talking about Indigenous work. All of those Aboriginal novels, songs, dances, all of that artistic labour that is happening in the Indigenous community cannot be revoked. And, because it is irrevocable, it will survive; it might not achieve its full promise or meaning in this moment, but it will. I'm optimistic, and I do believe in hope. And I do think that it was ever thus with us, there are always political disappointments, but the renovation of hope is something that we are all obliged to participate in. I actually do believe that.

**MPR** That is a very optimistic wish to put an end to this interview with. Thank you so much for sharing your time and ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted by Maria del Pilar Royo Grasa, a postgraduate at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, working on the novels of Gail Jones. The interview took place in Sydney on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 2012, while Royo Grasa was based at the University of New South Wales with the support of a research fellowship awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, and was approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel B (approval number 12084).