Revisiting *questions i asked my mother* in Conversation with Di Brandt

Jeffrey Aaron Weingarten

Over several weeks in the summer of 2015, I interviewed Di Brandt to talk with her about Turnstone Press's reissue of *questions i asked my mother*, originally published in 1987. In that conversation (conducted via email and included below), Brandt speaks about *questions i asked my mother* as her personal exploration of the ethical, moral, and existential queries of a lyric persona whose perspective constantly oscillates between her footing in the past—surrounded by her family in Reinland, Manitoba—and in her immediate present, as she experiences her distance from those times, places, and people. Although Brandt's poems are intimate explorations of this lyric "I," the interview also brings Brandt into dialogue with decades-long discourses on feminist revolution and Canadian multiculturalism. Thirty years after the original publication of *questions*, Brandt's sequence retains its lyric power because of its part in such dialogues. The interview below revisits these qualities of her text through the eyes of its author.

Brandt's comments in this interview often evidence that ability of hers to connect her lyric "I" to the world at large; that is to say, her "I" sees beyond itself and articulates meaningful relationships between her personal growth and the evolution of her era. Her "*foreword*" to *questions i asked my mother*, for instance, establishes the persona's long-held wish to connect meaningfully with the world. The section opens with lines that convey the education of an expanding young mind:

> learning to speak in *public* to write love poems
> for all the world to read meant betraying once &
> for all the good Mennonite daughter i tried so
> unsuccessfully to become acknowledging in myself
> the rebel traitor thief the one who asked too
> many questions who argued with the father & with
> God who always took things always went too far
> who questioned everything . . .
> ("*foreword*" n. pag.)

As Brandt says in our interview, that yearning "to speak in *public*" was as much a conundrum of her life as a young Mennonite as it was of her life as a young Canadian woman. Likewise, in *Wider Boundaries of Daring,* she and Barbara Godard consider the historical oppression of women who were excluded from (among other arenas) politics and literature, silenced by the world in which they lived (11). In both her poetry and criticism, she imagines the woman's voice as frequently muted, othered, or exiled. The above excerpt may be a "*foreword*" to *questions i asked my mother*, but it is also, in many ways, a foreword to her career as a distinguished poet and scholar who has evidently internalized Hélène Cixous' concept of "voice": a woman's discovery of her own

powerful voice (*voix*) affords an important way (*voie*) to see (*voir*) the world.

Brandt's poems engage often with such discourses and, of course, with a specific period in Canadian history: the feminist fight for a public voice and life underlay the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* published in 1970, just as members of different cultural communities became increasingly willing to add their voices to national discourses after Pierre Trudeau's public endorsement of multiculturalism in 1971. Reflecting on those vital symbols of a progressive social atmosphere, Brandt's speaker in *questions i asked my mother* feels comfortable as a smaller "i": she is not, as poets like Walt Whitman thought themselves to be, the world *embodied*, but rather a small fragment of an expanse. In this interview, Brandt explores that expanse, remembering and explaining the stories, writers, cultures, and politics that nurtured her early writing and that have sustained her passion for the arts and faith in the human imagination.

Brandt is the internationally recognized, multiple award-winning author of more than a dozen books of poetry, fiction, creative essays, plays, multimedia works, and literary criticism. In addition to *questions i asked my mother*, she has published *Jerusalem, beloved* (1995) and *Walking to Mojácar* (2010), with French and Spanish translations by Charles LeBlanc and Ari Belathar. Her literary-critical work includes *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature* and the groundbreaking anthology *Wider Boundaries of Daring: The Modernist Impulse in Canadian Women's Poetry*, co-edited by Barbara Godard (2009).

Jeffrey Aaron Weingarten (JAW): Whenever I read your work, I'm always struck by your form. In the case of *questions i asked my mother*, the long poem seems evidence of an exceptionally generative process. How did you know that the long poem form was appropriate to these poems? Were you modelling the book on something else or was it more intuitive?

Di Brandt (DB): I didn't set out to write a long poem. I was trying to write short poems, but they all ended up being about the same thing, and eventually I realized they were exploring a kind of cultural territory, were trying to tell a story, so I went with that. Retrospectively, I can name all kinds of long poems that might have been influential: William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (with his championing of "local colour" and "local pride"), Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* (the brave and vulnerable erotic self-expression in them, coupled with philosophical and ontological questions), Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* (with its hilarious mix of Biblical and pioneer prairie farm mythologies). But influences, as you know, are slippery things, often more identifiable in retrospect than at the time, when floundering through the chaos of not knowing what you're doing toward some sort of solid ground often feels quite solitary.

I also grew up in a very poetic family, a traditionalist peasant village Mennonite family in southern Manitoba, where my grandmother still held extended family "salons" in the old world style. All the little grandchildren had to sing a song or recite a poem for her or play the piano or violin before we got our little treats, at every important holiday and family gathering (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, her birthday, etc.), and there was much gorgeous *a cappella* hymn singing. And of course we heard the rich poetic cadences of the Bible on a regular basis. It's no accident that many of the grandchildren in that family became professional musicians, filmmakers, artists, intellectuals, and poets. Though we had to leave the community to go professional; obviously, there weren't those opportunities within the [Mennonite] community.

JAW: And yet, *questions i asked my mother* is deeply rooted in that same community. It fits with an entire generation of books that unabashedly explored local roots and prides.

DB: We didn't think of them as "local roots and prides." The family and the village, the tribe, represented for us in micro the social organization of the polis, and more ontologically, the cosmos. It was the centre and symbolic representation of the whole world to us. As the pressures to modernize increased, the traditionalism became narrower and narrower. But it still carried a lot of power then. So if I were going to write about anything whatsoever—and it seemed the only way I could actually learn to express myself with freedom and integrity—I had to write about my family.

I think the timing of *questions i asked my mother* was definitely connected to the new permission in the early seventies (as represented in the 1971 Multiculturalism policy) to speak about our various ethnic heritages without risking expulsion or not being taken seriously in professional contexts. (The universities, for example, had had quotas against many ethnic groups including women, Mennonites, and Jews until then.) And I was part of that new ethnic wave of writing of the eighties, of which Andrew Suknaski, Robert Kroetsch, Myrna Kostash, Eli Mandel, and so many others were also a part. Before that time, we had to all work *hard* to hide our ethnic identities if we wanted to get anywhere; after that, it was cool.

I was also trying to answer Northrop Frye's famous question, "Where is here?"—not just in the local sense but in the continental sense. We didn't have much Canadian content in our school curricula when I was growing up. In church, we learned about the places and stories of the Bible; at home we learned about the places our ancestors had lived in: Ukraine, Prussia, Holland. In school, we learned about British queens and kings. But "Where is *here*?" I kept thinking. You can see the speaker in *questions i asked my mother* trying to climb out of the stories set in other landscapes long ago into the here and now.

JAW: And how did your upbringing affect your ability to tell some of those stories?

DB: It was complicated. My upbringing was filled with internal contradictions, situated as it was amongst the medieval Mennonite traditionalism of my parents and grandparents and peasant village community, the innovative forward-looking funky sixties, a modern English school education, and occasional access to the new social media of the time. My parents were divided. On the one hand, they encouraged us to be really good at school and go for top-of-the-line professionalism, and, on the other hand, it was an attitude of "hunker down," "don't ask questions," "do what you're told," "stay with the old ways." It was a complicated time for the whole culture.

My mother's family consisted of prominent church people, and so "speaking in public" and telling the public stories of our people was part of my upbringing. My mother and some of my uncles and aunts were fabulous storytellers. We still lived in a traditional oral economy, for the most part. Telling a good story, with vivid details, that could hold the listeners spellbound from beginning to end, and be remembered well, was highly valued. They all loved poetry, and everyone could recite a huge repertoire of German and also English poems. That was obviously a great positive influence in developing my literary imagination and expression, and they were impressed with my poetry writing, and encouraged it, from a young age. But at the same time, I was supposed to become a proper Mennonite woman and practice public silence, and submission, and service to the patriarchy, publicly and in the family, at all times.

JAW: If you found it difficult to break out of those roles with the support of family, did you find support for your writing career elsewhere? Did you, for instance, have writers pushing you to join in the conversations of other young writers like Kroetsch, Suknaski, or Mandel?

DB: I had *them*! Particularly Kroetsch, whom I studied with at the University of Manitoba. He was an inspiring presence for me, a "permission giver," as he sometimes himself put it. I was lucky to meet influential women like Dorothy Livesay and Daphne Marlatt, who both took note of me and gave me lovely mentoring support over the years. The first professional writer I got to know was Paul Hiebert, of *Sarah Binks* fame, while I was still in high school, in a chance meeting at a little museum. He took me under his wing and used to take me for lunch and tell wonderful stories to inspire and guide me along in the turbulent years of leaving home and trying to figure out how to live in a modern city. And I had a beautiful women's writing group while I was writing *questions i asked my mother*, which gave me wonderful support. Jan Horner, Smaro Kamboureli, and Kristjana Gunnars were in it. A talented bunch.

JAW: It makes sense that you would, in some ways, feel more at home with those writers. Each of you was very much going against the grain.

DB: Yes. The "scandal" of *questions i asked my mother* was that I exposed the way the sacred stories of the Bible were being misused in Mennonite culture to justify the oppression of women and children, and to suppress freedom of expression and jubilation, and so on. That was a painful thing for the Mennonites to hear, and they would have tried to suppress the message entirely if they could have.

By the time I wrote *questions*, I was a doctoral student in English at the University of Manitoba, reading all kinds of contemporary experimental writing and cultural theory—remember, that was at the height of the feminist movement in Canada. We were all reading tons of feminist theory, from Adrienne Rich to Mary O'Brien to Luce Irigaray, and daily finding direct liberatory links between their texts and our own lives. The principle of the feminist movement was "the personal is the political." As women writers and academics we kept being disqualified in our observations, stories, experiences, theories, and self-expressions, because they had to do with the domestic or the personal, or because our identities were not already encoded in the received archives except as absences or forbidden subjectivities. So the principle of "the personal is the political" was very important to our lives, both personally and professionally, and very enabling to the writing of *questions i asked my mother*.

JAW: It must have been a challenge, having that urge to speak out, but coming from a community that was so silencing.

DB: Yes. Coming from a long history of exile and political persecution, as the Mennonites did, we took refuge in public silence; we were *die Stillen im Lande*. So drawing attention to our people beyond the strict boundaries of the culture seemed like a big public betrayal to them. I happened to grow up just exactly at the time the Mennonites were beginning to modernize, in the sixties. The farmers were mechanizing and corporatizing their farms. The children were able to attend high school. Church services began to be held in English instead of German. The parents could no longer control access to modern social media once transistor radios came along. And the arrival of television in our communities spelled the definitive end of the traditionalism. It was inevitable that there would be Mennonite writers coming out of that extraordinary moment of radical cultural shift.

The Mennonite people blamed us for destroying the traditionalism of the culture, but thirty years later I think it's clear that we weren't destroying it: we were documenting the radical changes the culture was undergoing at that time in order to understand what was happening to us, who we had been, and who we were becoming. It was an act of cultural and personal preservation, really. I had my family's encouragement to begin with, but later they saw my writing as frivolous and/or potentially dangerous. I wanted my writing to crack open the culture at its very heart. I was interested in identifying the place where the sacred stories of the Bible were being used to silence and oppress the women and justify extensive kinds of abuse against children in the community. I couldn't really find my own voice and vision without confronting that.

JAW: It's interesting that you've talked about "confronting," unveiling, and discovering, because these are vital concepts in your writing. Your poems focus often on what is "discovered" and what is "invented." And as you talk about those things, we're brought back frequently to some pretty big questions about the nature of faith. You were discovering a world outside the one in which you were raised, and so how did that newfound distance from Mennonite communities change your perception of God and religion?

DB: I'm delighted you mentioned the motif of "invented" or "discovered," which the young Diana in *questions* is particularly preoccupied with. It's the question of nature versus nurture, or the received versus the initiated, essence versus existence. Experts are still arguing over that question and it can't really ever be answered definitively, can it? The overlap of these categories is after all the evolutionary continuum, how the world grows and develops, in an intricate dance between mind and matter, imagination and experience, dream and reality.

In traditional Christianity, there was perhaps too much emphasis on the received as opposed to the experimental, on preserving the past, on humility and ancestral loyalty, on trusting in God and the bigger picture as something we are held by, rather than pushing forward into an altered future. That created a stifling narrowness that eventually had to bust open. In the postmodern, it has been perhaps too much the other way around. Too much emphasis on newness and change at the expense of stability and identity and respect for the past, the elders, the earth itself. A destabilizing broadness, bereft of divinity and humility and faith in a loving, meaningful universe, much lamented by artists: "the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

That is really the systemic breakdown of orientation and location described in personal and poetic terms in *questions i asked my mother*, though I like to think the looking forward to a "new tender flowering" at the end of the book carries enough promise with it to bring some sort of coherence to the whole. There is no other way to undo the restrictions and wounds of our too narrowly inward-looking traditionalist and too outward-looking overextended modern paradigms—both damaging in their ways—except to bring them home to one's own cultural investment in them, to walk through the shattering experience of their inevitable interface, hopefully to something more graceful, ethical, and creative than either could manage. We now seem to be moving, slowly but surely, toward a more creative and dialogic happy medium between extremes: let's hope we can do it gracefully and imaginatively instead of catastrophically. There are many signs everywhere that humanity is ready for moving forward into something smarter and wiser and calmer and more peaceful than these two opposing modalities, at war with one another.

As for belief, people like to refer to "faith" as a sort of private thing these days, and

it certainly has a deeply personal dimension; but ultimately, it's a political and philosophical and existential act, a choice you make about how you see the world, how you construct or find meaning, which God or gods you serve, where you put your faith, where you hedge your bets, what kind of community you invest in, what kind of vision you subscribe to. Were we created as whole beings, on a beautiful, intricate, divine blueprint (who somewhere along the way got damaged, perhaps through our own folly, and therefore are reparable, through hard work and remorse and tenderness and creativity) or are we merely random experiments in a brutal, alienated process of the survival of the biggest and toughest? All traditional religions propose some version of the former; modernity subscribes to a large extent to the latter. On the theoretical level, though, I think in practice we *must* have some sort of ethic based in a hopeful process that transcends our individual being, both as individuals and collectively, and holds us to an upward evolutionary continuum, otherwise we cannot really function in a human way at all.

In this sense, a sacramental, reparative, interdependent modality is much more rational and practical than an alienated one, however much people claim the opposite to be true in the age of science. Like most people, I waver sometimes between these modalities. But ultimately I think that a sacred cosmology, infused with divine love and meaning—where each small part is deeply, intimately connected to and contributing meaningfully to the whole—offers much greater hope for us in the present age. This is, I think, true for us as individuals, communities, and as a species facing the prospect of radical self-improvement or extinction. It also makes much more sense in an evolutionary perspective. I feel the shamanic cultures are still the most eloquent on these matters, understanding that consciousness is not restricted to cognitive function, but rather pervades the cosmos and infuses all of life with light and love and meaning.

JAW: Given how many connections you've had to sever or weaken (intentionally or unintentionally) to pursue your art, I wonder if you have ever felt—for lack of a better word—"lonely" as a writer? One of the issues you take up in *Wild Mother Dancing*, for instance, is becoming a writer and mother in a literary tradition that lacks affirming portrayals of mothers.

DB: What I proposed in *Wild Mother Dancing*, which began as my doctoral dissertation at the University of Manitoba in the late 1980s, is that in fact contemporary Canadian writers, especially women writers, were writing extensively about mothers and mothering, but that because of the pervasive absence of the mother in the Western literary tradition, these stories were being read, at that time, without adequate recognition of their subjects. For example, Daphne Marlatt, at that time, had published more than a dozen books, and the subject of mothering, of having a mother, of being a mother, of theorizing the maternal, in the personal and wider social and cosmological senses, was one of her main topics throughout her oeuvre. But these texts were being read, somewhat bizarrely if you think about it, for their linguistic and geographical and intercultural and genre experiments, but never for their main subject, the maternal.

It was a matter of literary training: people were reading her texts in light of a literary tradition that kept the mother absent or invisible. I might have done the same, except that I had young daughters to look after during the time I was writing my dissertation, and so couldn't help noticing this phenomenon. I desperately needed stories to reflect and comment on my own intense experience of mothering. Was it lonely to write about this? No! There was

a lot of excitement about this hot new topic in Canada in the late eighties. What was lonely was finding an adequate intellectual and emotional support group to complete the work, since my professors were mostly male and old school in relation to this subject then. So I had to be very persistent and thorough in presenting my case. But there was much at stake, after all, and the response from colleagues across Canada and internationally was astounding. Marianne Hirsch, who wrote *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, wrote me a lovely letter of encouragement (after I wrote her a fan letter expressing my admiration for her work, and its relation to my own). Andrea O'Reilly (who founded The Association for Research on Mothering [ARM] at York University) publicly credited *Wild Mother Dancing* with inspiring her whole amazing project. I'm so delighted by that and filled with admiration for the vast network of intellectual mother support she created. I wasn't doing this work alone, though it often felt that way: *Wild Mother Dancing* was at the front edge of a huge wave of writing on the subject of mothers and mothering which has changed the culture in radical ways. You can find stories about breastfeeding on the front page of newspapers now. Everybody and their dog writes about mothers and mothering (and fathers and fathering) now. This was unthinkable a few decades ago.

Did you know that in every century from the beginning of patriarchy in the time of the ancient Greeks, there has been a feminist movement to recover women's political power? And in every century there have been massively violent gestures of backlash, often culminating in large-scale war, to shut this feminine/maternal power back down again. Riane Eisler has tracked this historical rhythm in her interesting book *The Chalice and the Blade*. We're in that kind of cultural moment right now, aren't we? If we know that that's how our historical psyche works, Eisler writes, then we can transform this pattern into a more positive one, by paying particular attention to the response to feminism immediately afterward: that's where the pain of understanding how distorted and oppressive our histories have been sets in. And instead of trying to shut down that understanding in order to lessen the pain of it, we could put in place, rather, structures and processes of reparation, and healing. We could reintegrate the power of the feminine, the honouring of our mothers, the honouring of "reproductive consciousness," as Mary O'Brien called it, in ourselves, and in our collective stories and cultural practices. There's lots of that going on in our culture right now as well. We're at a very exciting choice point in the history of Western culture, and the history of our species as we know it.

JAW: Besides Mennonite writers such as yourself, where else do you see some of those stories emerging in the world?

DB: I feel that it is the Indigenous writers of North America who are giving us the best, most powerful models of "putting the Mother back into the story" now, to use Maria Campbell's resonant phrase. The public ceremony around the missing and murdered Indigenous women at this time is an incredibly powerful model for us to emulate. There are many missing and murdered women in non-Indigenous culture as well, or perhaps we should say, many missing and silenced and exiled and crazed mothers.

Two wonderful Indigenous writers who have written eloquently about being mothers and having mothers are Joanne Arnott and Louise Halfe. Greg Scofield has written eloquently about his "crazy" mother and the women who raised him as well. For each of them, telling this story is both a political and a reparative act. Jacob Scheier, a young Jewish writer from Toronto, has also written about his "crazy" mother (the very sane

poet Libby Scheier, who later became ill and died an untimely death, broken-hearted by the weight of her patriarchal peasant Jewish heritage) with a lot of political understanding, and in a healing way, also.

JAW: *questions i asked my mother*, too, is part of those forward-looking efforts, though. It does the same work that those authors you're mentioning do in their writing. That project obviously still resonates with readers, given that the book has been reissued. Nearly thirty years later, has the meaning of the poem to you as both a personal piece and as a contribution to a particular era of Canadian writing changed?

DB: Nearly thirty years later I look back at that very brave young woman and I'm filled with admiration for her and for the size and depth of her project. I'm filled with gratitude for all the extraordinary help and support I received during the writing of *questions i asked my mother*, and the extraordinary public reception of the book afterward, both in Canada and internationally. I'm grateful, too, for the many ways it inspired other people to write their own stories and take the project forward in a thousand directions.

I was thrilled to be included in Lorna Knight's literary installation at the National Library some years ago, called *Let Us Compare Mythologies: Half a Century of Canadian Poetry in English*, where *questions i asked my mother* was included as a representative of the literary achievement of the eighties in Canada. You can't really know, as a young person and emerging writer, what the size of the impact of your work will be, or how widely or iconically your personal musings might speak to the rest of the world. But it did feel as if my own life and the meaning of everything were at stake in that project, and that I had only the one chance to get it right. In a way, everything I've written since has come out of the questions I asked myself then. And I'm hugely delighted and honoured to have contributed to the imaginative development of Canadian and Mennonite and international life in an influential and liberating way.

WORKS CITED

Brandt, Di. *Jerusalem, beloved*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1995.

—. *questions i asked my mother*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1987.

—. *questions i asked my mother*. 1987. Introduction by Tanis MacDonald. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2015.

—. *Walking to Mojácar: Poems*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2010.

—. *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1993.

Brandt, Di, and Barbara Godard. Introduction. "A New Genealogy of Canadian Literary Modernism." *Wider Boundaries of Daring: The Modernist Impulse in Canadian Women's Poetry*. Ed. Brandt and Godard. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. 1-25.