

[Manhattan, My Ass, You're in Oakland](#) [1]

February 22, 2017 [Featured Poetry](#) [2]
[Borders](#) [3]

Two Poems by Judy Juanita



Manhattan, My Ass, You're in Oakland

I drive a new friend around Oakland.
She's from some place called Portland.
Portland had slaves, I say—
Portland, Maine, you mean—
No. Oregon as well as Maine.

It's easy to get around My Fair Lady of a City,
My pretty pretty gritty gritty city,
Curled around its man-made lake.

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My city will not become the White House
Where James Hoban's slaves,
Ben, Peter, and David, *his* carpenters,
Someone else's bricklayers built an edifice.

This temperate city, 62 degrees year round,
Will not become another San Francisco
Who, in her glory, banished the people who built her.

Oregon used exclusion laws
In the 1840s and 1850s
To keep free negroes out and dared
The ones there to leave at once or else.

San Francisco used the laws of avarice
And greed to build its white houses,
While middle-class blacks and working poor
Who never knew they were equally unequal
Left through the same back door.

I drive my friend to Oakland's shopping hubs—
From Jack London Square to Chinatown,
From Old Oakland to Uptown.
Hey look, a freebie bus from dawn to dusk!
From Laurel to Fruitvale to Montclair Village,
Piedmont to Grand/Lakeshore and Temescal.

When we drive through Rockridge District, she's
astonished. "This isn't Oakland. It's Berkeley."
No, it pretends it's Berkeley
And keeps its blacks behind the counters.

I show her the back doors to the freeways.
The secret to getting anywhere here
in fifteen minutes tops.

"We built this city on rock and roll."
Nice try, Jefferson Starship,
But you left out the Fillmore,
Bobby Blue Bland, Bop City,
Sugar Pie DeSanto doing the splits.

Oh, baby, those splits built these cities,
So you're not coming to Oakland
And tearing down our spirit.
Manhattan, my ass.
Brooklyn, my ass.
Oakland is not the new San Francisco
No matter how many of us you displace.

My friend, you said at brunch
You jetted here to work at Genentech.
Jazz, the blues, and my parents came
The same way, riding the Santa Fe.
If we needed her bus fare for lunch,

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My mother walked from East Oakland
To the Naval Supply at dawn,
Seven miles from East 14th to 7th Street.
I said she gave us her car fare for lunch.
My devout Christian mother who didn't
Allow alcohol or swearing in her house
Walked past Esther's Orbit Room
And Slim Jenkins Supper Club,
Cared not a whit for John Lee Hooker,
But knew the hookers on the street
Were blessed angels at her feet.

To whom does Oakland belong?
The deer in the foothills?
The fauna in the ponds?
Don Peralta's descendants?
My mom and pop, whose plots
Sit silent in the wind?
The Hokan and Penutian hunting turtles and deer?

Do the dead Chumash own Santa Barbara
Or do Oprah and Jeff Bridges?

I want to coexist.
I live to coexist.
I love Oakland's turquoise sunsets,
Its rainbow of tongues,
Its unspoiled immigrants,
Their dreams as mangled as our schools.
These problems we keep working
our darnedest to resolve...

One more tip, my darling dear:
Don't take the wrong freeway exit.
Manhattan, my ass, you're in Oakland.



My Parents

"Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."
—Langston Hughes

I am old and fat and black.

A simple wonderful fact.

I bounced up those stairs like a helium balloon.

Up. Up. Up. While they weathered the typhoon:

Coon. Buffoon. Baboon. Until

they were old. And as fragile as daffodils.

It was structured. Awful. Simply fact.

And I sit at the top. Old, fat, and black.

Publishing Information

- Langston Hughes's line is from his poem "[Mother to Son](#)" [4] (*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Vintage, 1994).

Art Information

- "[High Above Lake Merritt](#)" [5] © Thomas Hawk; Creative Commons license.
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Judy Juanita's debut novel *Virgin Soul* (Viking, 2013) is based on her own experiences as a student activist and Black Panther in the '60s. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *13th Moon*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Lips*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Croton Review*, and *Obsidian II*; her plays have been produced in the Bay Area and New York City.

DeFacto Feminism: Essays Straight Outta Oakland (EquiDistance Press, 2016) was a finalist in the Ohio State University Non/Fiction Collection 2016. In it, she looks at the gap between black and female empowerment. She teaches writing at Laney College in Oakland, California.

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Links:

- [1] <https://talkingwriting.com/manhattan-my-ass-youre-oakland>
- [2] <https://talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/featured-poetry>
- [3] <https://talkingwriting.com/tw-channels-and-categories/borders>
- [4] <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/47559>
- [5] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thomashawk/10819230693>
- [6] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thomashawk/3178476647>