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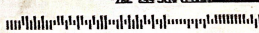
Louis Carlos Bernal, "Dos Mujeres" (Two Women), Douglas, Arizona, 1979. © 2019
Lisa Bernal Brethour and Katrina Bernal.

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If this cultural silence can be broken, we'll need more than a handful of memoirs about trans kids written by their parents. We'll need to read books written by trans authors, such as Cooper Lee Bombardier and Janet Mock, and many more. We'll also need the stories of trans children, those who hover in the historical archives and those who are alive today. Maybe then our combined voices can shatter the silence. Maybe then we can celebrate the gift of trans kids and love them for who they are. ♀

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Cunning

Eruptions of Inanna: Justice, Gender, and Erotic Power

By Judy Grahn

New York, NY: Nightboat Books (Sapphic Classics Series), 2021, 224 pp., \$17.95, paperback

Reviewed by Lisa L. Moore

Rule with cunt power," Inanna announces early in Judy Grahn's latest book. "I see with cunt eyes." Inanna is the "goddess of erotic love," protector of sex workers and temple prostitutes, advocate for sexual joy and freedom, and the deity "most beloved of Sumerian poets." With this invocation, Grahn lets us know that although it's based on decades of ethnographic and academic research, *Eruptions of Inanna* is not a disciplined and disciplinary book. Instead, it is a kind of divination, a series of inspired retellings that documents the presence of women, queer, and transgender energies in the earliest human spiritual traditions.

Judy Grahn is one of an important group of lesbian feminist poets whose prose writings are foundational documents in feminist and queer studies. Grahn, who has lived in the Bay Area since the early 1960s, is less often cited and centered than New York-based figures like Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, but hers were among the earliest lesbian writings of the Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation Movements. Her work remains an important source for feminist recoveries of matriarchal cultures and goddess religions in folklore and religious studies as well as in spiritual and movement communities.

Grahn's series of verse portraits, *The Common Woman*, was published in 1969. Its haunting final lines ("the common woman is as common as the best of bread / and will rise") went viral before the Internet. Recited at rallies and meetings, on the radio, at concerts, in theaters, at battered women's shelters, giving its name to more than one feminist bookstore, the poem became a feminist mission statement. Meanwhile, Grahn's satire, "The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke," written in 1965 and first published in 1971 in *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems*, was a bold early critique of the treatment of queer people by the psychiatric profession and contributed to the decision by the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the DSM in 1974. Her 1974 masterpiece, "A Woman Is Talking to Death," established Grahn as an important practitioner of the twentieth-century long poem.

As a theorist, Grahn is similarly prolific. *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, the first of her seven books of cultural theory, was published in 1984. A deeply researched and imaginative exploration of the persistence of the slang, cultural customs, and spiritual roles of homosexual and transgender people, based on archaeology, religious history, literary records, etymology, personal interviews, and memoir, *Another Mother Tongue* created a newfound sense of historical belonging

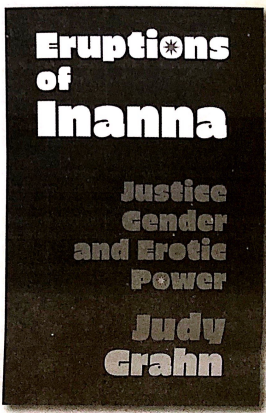


Akkadian cylinder seal depicting Inanna, c. 2200 BC., Oriental Institute, Chicago.

for queer people who were told we had no history, had never been tolerated, much less revered.

Eruptions of Inanna continues this work for the present moment of climate disaster and rising authoritarianism, when Inanna's power and values are urgently needed: "she protects nature and is the animation of nature, an intelligent, formative, relational, interactive, communicative, compassionate, balancing, and co-evolving force in the cosmos." The book tells five tales, a series of historical "eruptions of Inanna," when the ancient Sumerian goddess has appeared in altered guises in patriarchal religious traditions.

Grahn's spells are cast in the subjunctive: at times, she lets us know "I'm guessing," that sometimes "we can only guess" about the meaning of the ancient poems. Grahn's research has always delved into the history of words, especially "gay words," the slang and underground languages found in historical and contemporary queer communities, so she is well aware that "guessing"—the word and the action—has ritual and magical roots. Obsolete meanings include "to take aim" and "to esteem." In aiming at, estimating, esteeming the forgotten "cunt power" of the



goddess poetry that shaped the Bible, the Koran, and the Torah, Grahn elevates them and restores them to those othered by gender and sexuality in Abrahamic traditions.

And it's the unique role of the poet, especially the poet of erotic love, that has preserved and transmitted this revelatory understanding. In the movement cultures in which Grahn came of age, poetry was in the process of being both democratized and elevated, called upon for its ritual and public power to begin a march, create a vigil while standing on the street, and mourn the deaths of those the state and patriarchal society deemed disposable. She notes how Sumerians accorded "special status" to "musicians, poets, scribes, sex priestesses, and highly skilled craftspeople" and they "listened to their poets." We could say the same for the elevated role of figures like Grahn, Lorde, and Rich in the women's movement.

The central figure in Grahn's act of recovery is a Sumerian woman poet named Enheduanna, who left a substantial legacy of poems to Inanna behind, inscribed on clay tablets not rediscovered until the twentieth century. "Allow me to sing her praises," Grahn writes, creating a ritual on the page: "Enheduanna is surely one of the greatest poets who has ever lived." Grahn posits that Enheduanna's story of being cast down from high degree, suffering extreme misfortune, and then being restored to Inanna's favor is the source for the story of Job that appears in all Abrahamic traditions, but the Biblical version of the story is shown of its respect for women's and trans feminine powers and sex magic. Following Enheduanna, Grahn connects the story to environmental damage

and recovery and to the volcanic powers of the earth, which must be respected or they will destroy our small human societies. Grahn writes, "the great poet used a volcanic episode to teach a moral lesson of ecological justice ... many contemporary activists will recognize this situation."

Born in 1940 in Chicago, at the age of eight Grahn moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where her father hoped to find work. Her parents were intermittently employed throughout her childhood, and her mother's schizophrenia made home life difficult. But Grahn treasured both the heritage of poetry she encountered at home and at school, and the connection with the sacred and the non-human world she experienced in the mountains and deserts of Southern New Mexico.

She joined the US Air Force but was discharged "less than honorably" at twenty-one for being a lesbian. A natural activist, Grahn participated in the first Mattachine Society picket of the White House in 1963. She moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where she threw herself into civil rights, workers' rights, and the women's and gay liberation movements. She was a creator of the lesbian counterculture of the period, helping to establish Gay Women's Liberation, one of the first women's bookstores in the country (ICI: A Woman's Place, in Oakland), the iconic Woman's Press Collective, and eventually a program in Women's Spirituality housed at Sofia University in Palo Alto. Her work has been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Book Review Award, the Before Columbus American Book Award, and the Stonewall Award. Since 1997, the Publishing Triangle, after awarding her a Lifetime

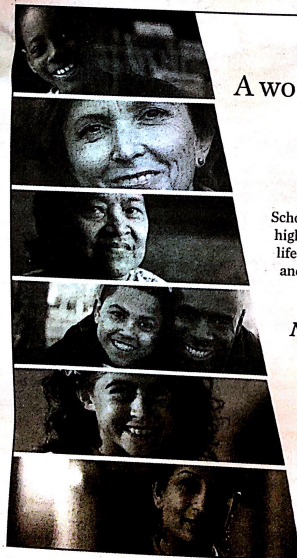


Judy Grahn

Achievement Award, has issued an annual Judy Grahn Award in Lesbian Nonfiction.

Audre Lorde died in 1993, Adrienne Rich in 2012. Grahn is one of the few lesbian feminist poets of her generation still with us. *Eruptions of Inanna* is therefore a unique document that brings sixty years of lesbian feminism into conversation with the present moment of surging misogyny and ecological despair. Bluntly anticipating Inanna's next coming, Grahn writes: "In our era, she's overdue." ⁵⁶

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