

Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds

by Elissa Goldberger

ANOTHER MOTHER TONGUE: GAY WORDS, GAY WORLDS. by Judy Grahn. Beacon Press, 1984.

If Judy Grahn's book, *Another Mother Tongue. Gay Word. Gay Worlds.* sat in the produce section of a grocery store instead of on the shelves of most bookstores nowadays, it would resemble a pomegranate. Like the fruit, Grahn's book requires one to participate fully in the process of eating — taking time and thought to explore the worlds within. Grahn's personal accounts and stories, intermittently mixed with her historical data of Gay people, are both delightful and bitter, amusing as well as uncomfortable, not unlike the pomegranate's thin bitter linings that separate the kernels. Another similarity is that both the pomegranate and the book are distinctive from other shelf inhabitants, literary and edible. Grahn's style of writing as well as her research methods are unique, and refreshing in that difference. Other affinities aside, however, *Another Mother Tongue* is clearly full of the power, boldness, and pleasure of the pomegranate's rich juices.

Gay people, according to Grahn, serve the function of mediator between worlds, making the crossover between the distinct subcultures of men and women. This is the role of the shaman in any society, the one who "crosses the abyss." Hence, a drag queen of the 1960s screaming through downtown Manhattan and risking being blown away by a shotgun full of anti-faggot rage was performing a loaded, shamanic act. He was leading men into the dangerous world of women; he was crossing the abyss between the sexes. (p.44)

Similarly, Gay people have been transformers, pathbreakers in making acceptable certain forms of behavior that were formerly confined to one sex. In ancient times, it was the men in drag who were let into women's sacred rites. These men led the way in the transformation of women's knowledge — agriculture science, astrology, midwifery — into men's domain. Now, when men have been in exclusive control of the sciences and have denied women access to them, that direction must be reversed. According to Grahn, this process was and is being led by Lesbians, women who enter the men's world of behavior and knowledge, and pave the way for other women to follow.

But, Gay characteristics, Grahn emphasizes, are not mere limitations of the dominant heterosexual culture. For example, a drag queen (a man dressed in female attire)

is *not* trying to be a woman. In his blatant Gayness a drag queen is the orthodox practitioner whose core position helps sustain Gay culture. Grahn traces the term drag queen, queen of the fairies, to its roots in the ancient customs of the fairy people who inhabited the British Isles before the Celts. Ceremonial cross-dressing and homosexual rites were features of the Old Religion of the fairies. They were ruled by the queen, the king being secondary in power. Similarly, the contemporary fairy queen is frequently a social focal point among Gay men, an organizer and a doer, a person to go to for advice and aid, the one who knows about people and events. (p. 87)

In the same way, the roles of butch and femme are offices or life-roles within specifically Lesbian circles, and are not limitations of heterosexual roles. "If the taking on of butch/femme roles were merely the imitation of male/female roles, we could expect the partner of a femme to be an 'homme,' which is french for 'man.'" (p. 147) Instead, however, butch probably derives from the French word bouc, or goat, a sacred animal to the ancient tribal peoples of Europe, a link which again refers to the shamanic/priestly role performed most likely by Gay individuals.

In using slang words and contemporary Gay attributes as her springboard, Grahn presents a unique way of doing historical research. Her pathways are based on the assumption that our present societal beliefs have roots in the experiences of the cultures from which we came. For instance, "fairy" is

a derogatory term (in the dominant culture) because of the destruction of the fairy tribes by the Romans. Not only were most fairies killed or forced into hiding, but they themselves, in survival necessity, condemned their own customs. Grahn's style of research connects us to our past, and, just as strongly, presents a model for breaking several assumptions upon which we blindly conduct our lives.

Grahn's research method is at the core of her unpretentious writing style as well. Her opinions frequently dot her historical accounts. Moreover, *Another Mother Tongue* is a dedication to Grahn's first lover, Von, to whom Grahn addresses personal notes throughout the book. She often includes conversations and stories others shared with her alongside well-documented historical data. Although I sometimes found Grahn's letters to Von and her use of personal accounts as choppy and uncomfortably over-vulnerable, I liked the freshness and the boldness of her work.

In Chapter 7, "Riding with the Amazons," Grahn deftly braids her own experiences in the U.S. army in the 1950s with the stories of women warriors throughout history. As a vic-

tim of the military Gay witch-hunts of the '50s, the consequent social and family disgrace she endured was horrific enough for Grahn to hide much of her writing behind anonymous pen-names and/or file drawers for years. *Another Mother Tongue* is a conscious and courageous step in Grahn's process of claiming her role in this world as a Gay-Amazon-Poet-Woman. Grahn states that "this book is a spear from my good right arm, fiery arrow from my well-earned bow, and shield, and horse, and tent, and blanket." (p. 170) Although Grahn's military battle experiences were held within office walls, her enemies being of her same nationality, Grahn's book is not a retaliatory message to her commanding officers who discharged her for being Gay. Rather, it is a positive affirmation of her own life. Grahn wrote this book for herself, in order to find her roots and her family members, as well as to validate her own experiences. *Another Mother Tongue* is Grahn's spear, and because of that, I can use it to find my sword. After reading her book I now carry the strength and encouragement of her words with me in seeking my place in the ancient line of warriors.

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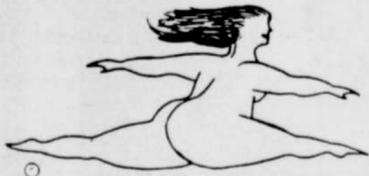
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