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Stefania Arcara

A Woman Is Talking To Death: Judy Grahn and The Feminist Poetry Movement

Abstract I: Il *feminist poetry movement* è una corrente della poesia americana degli anni Settanta che, come altri movimenti quali quello dei *Beat poets* degli anni Cinquanta e quello dei poeti antimilitaristi degli anni Sessanta, realizza una combinazione di arte e politica. Lo straordinario poema *A Woman Is Talking To Death* della poeta femminista lesbica *working-class* Judy Grahn, pubblicato nel 1973 e accolto con entusiasmo nel contesto del movimento di liberazione delle donne e in innumerevoli *reading* di poesia, intreccia esperienza soggettiva e collettiva e denuncia l'intricato nesso di oppressioni sulla base del genere, della sessualità, della razza e della classe, molto prima che venisse coniato il termine "intersezionalità".

Abstract II: The "feminist poetry movement" of the 1970s constitutes a distinct current in American poetry and, like other movements such as the Beat poets of the 1950s and the antiwar poets of the 1960s, achieves a combination of art and politics. The groundbreaking long poem *A Woman Is Talking To Death* by working-class lesbian-feminist poet Judy Grahn, published in 1973 and enthusiastically received in the context of the women's liberation movement, and at innumerable poetry readings, weaves together subjective and collective experience and denounces the intricate nexus of oppressions on the basis of gender, sexuality, race and class, long before the term "intersectionality" was coined.

Keywords: feminist poetry, Grahn, lesbian feminism, women's liberation movement, intersectionality.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. [...] Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought (Lorde 1984: 36).

1. The Feminist Poetry Movement: A Political and Poetic Revolution

First published in the December 1973 issue of the militant journal *Amazon Quarterly*, Judy Grahn's long poem *A Woman Is Talking To Death* is an extraordinary example of the combination of art and politics which characterised the feminist poetry movement in the United States between the 1960s and '70s. The poem was republished as a chapbook with illustrations by Karen Sjöholm in 1974 by the Women's Press Collective (Fig. 1), the first all-

woman press in the US (Garber 2001: 31). It was read in innumerable poetry readings and gained immense popularity in the national network of the women's liberation movement. Adrienne Rich, by then an established poet, described weeping when she first read *A Woman Is Talking To Death* (Rich 1980: 249) and recalled the experience of listening to Judy Grahn reciting the poem in 1974, in New York's Greenwich Village, by commenting that "[it] was a boundary-breaking poem for me: it exploded both desire and politics" (Rich 1993: 172). The powerful intensity of this poetic work crossed the boundaries of feminist circles when it was re-published in its entirety in the *American Poetry Review* in 1979. The inclusion of this text in a periodical of the "poetry establishment" (Whitehead 1996: xiii) signals the extent both of its success and of its poetic force, especially considering that, unlike Adrienne Rich's, Judy Grahn's poetry "does not emerge from the academy but from the streets" (Gale 2009). Its author is a self-identified working-class lesbian, a fact that, as Kim Whitehead remarks (1996: 55), placed Grahn "squarely outside the commercial literary realm, and even resulted in her exclusion from academic feminist conversations" for some time.

Judy Grahn played a central role in the early development of the feminist poetry movement, "one of the vital countertraditional poetic communities born in the cultural and political upheaval of the 1960s" (Whitehead 1996: xx). As has been observed, in the revolutionary cultural climate of those years, several political movements moved poetry from "polite lecture halls and quiet living rooms into the streets [...] but no one did it more intensely or effectively than the poets of the women's movement" (Reed 2005: 87). It is important to note that the feminist poetry movement constitutes a distinct current not only in American poetry, but also "among women poets" (Whitehead 1996: xvi), as "feminist poet" is not equivalent to "woman poet". Analogous to the Beat poets of the 1950s and the antiwar poets of the 1960s, feminist poets are militant writers who see art and politics as inseparable; however, their verse does not sink into propaganda or mere sloganeering (Whitehead 1996: xx). Although feminists have widely recognized their value, scholars have only recently noticed their importance in literary history, both for the level of their aesthetic achievement and as a community of poets with a political vision (Whitehead 1996; Garber 2001; Thoms Flannery 2005; Reed 2005; Berke 2016).

Poetry was one of the means of expression for militant feminists since the very beginning of the women's liberation movement, as testified by the early anthology of political writings, *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (Morgan 1970), which included a section entitled "Poetry as Protest". The boom in women's publishing connected with the establishment of women's presses and bookstores was extraordinary: more than seventy feminist periodicals and more than sixty presses were operating between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s (Seajay 1990: 56-57). In this vibrant environment, feminists realised the alliance between poetry and politics and fuelled the return to poetry as public performance that had begun with the Beat poets. During what has been called a "highly dramatic, performative era" (Reed 2005: 103), hundreds of public readings were organized at feminist bookstores, music festivals, demonstrations and rallies: poetry was no longer a solitary art, but a collective practice (Berke 2016: 156) through which the poet's personal experience could resonate in a large community. Judy Grahn recalls that "masses of women" attended lesbian-feminist poetry readings in the early days of the movement



Fig. 1. The 1974 edition by The Women's Press Collective, Oakland (used with permission).

(1985: xviii). In her 1982 pamphlet-essay *A Movement of Poets*, reflecting back on more than a decade of feminist poetry, Jan Clausen emphasised “the catalytic role of poets and poetry” (1982: 5) in the American women’s movement and she also identified lesbian poetry as the driving force behind the larger phenomenon of feminist poetry.

2. Interlocking Oppressions

Judy Grahn wrote *The Psychoanalysis of Edward the Dyke*, her first working-class-identified lesbian work, in 1964-65, before the emergence of the women’s liberation movement and before Stonewall (Garber 2001: 34)¹. Her writing contributed to the explosion of lesbian poetry that began in the 1970s (Garber 2001: 32). On one level *A Woman Is Talking To Death* may be read as a poem primarily relevant for lesbians, as the poet adopts a lesbian feminist perspective, but on another important level the author makes her particular view of society relevant to a wide politically engaged audience, as her lesbian-feminist politics and her poetic themes focus “on various forms of oppression – classism, sexism, racism” (Garber 2001: 44). Grahn’s poetic voice speaks from the socially abject position of an unemployed lesbian woman in early-1970s

homophobic America but, through her feminist perspective, recalls experiences of oppression that are common to all women under patriarchy: references to several kinds of male violence are scattered throughout the text (sexual abuse, domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, the witch trials). At the same time, the poem denounces violence stemming from other social power relations: police brutality toward black people, the racism of the criminal justice system, economic oppression, the senseless violence of war and the industrial military complex.

¹ In those years Grahn could not find a publisher for *Edward the Dyke* (Grahn 2009: 313), a satire on psychoanalysis and its “scientific” treatment of homosexuality. She then published it in 1971, in the collection *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* with The Women’s Press. Grahn’s reclaiming of words such as “dyke” and “queer” was pioneering and especially daring at the time. She “transforms the pejorative words like dyke and queer by recontextualizing them (twenty years before the rise of queer theory and the invention of the annual Dyke March)” (Garber 2001: 43).

In this groundbreaking work, Grahn weaves together in a single text subjective and collective experience to illustrate the nexus of power social relations in which all individuals are involved. In the same years the Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective described these relations as “interlocking” systems of oppression in their 1977 Statement, long before the term “intersectionality” appeared. Besides its aesthetic value, *A Woman Is Talking To Death* is one of the documents testifying the acute awareness of multiple social oppressions widespread in 1970s radical feminism. Its historical value is especially important as, despite an abundance of historical evidence, feminists from the second-wave, considered as a unified block, have been “mishistoricized, dismissed too quickly as middle-class, consciousness raising, essentializing white women” (Rhodes 2005: 22) by the academic narration prevailing since the 1990s. The political awareness, within feminism, of what Jules Falquet (2009) has called the “embrication” (interdependence) of social relations has been anachronistically post-dated to the mere coinage of the term “intersectionality” by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989². Yet, as Grahn herself points out, “[we] feminist poets, [...] Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and me [...] wrote of the intersections in our lives” (Grahn 2016: 17), a practice that contributed to form political ideas in the 1970s and beyond. These feminist poets wrote from their own direct experience: Grahn (2009: 312) recalled being one of the white radicals who acted as a human shield against police bullets to defend a Black Panther Office in San Francisco in a state of siege in 1969. She went on to establish the Women’s Press Collective in Oakland with other militant feminists who had all been active in other movements (gay liberation, antiwar, and environmental). For many years, she worked with the black feminist poet and former Black Panther Pat Parker (1944-1989). Grahn and Parker were “intensely collaborative poet comrades” (Grahn 2016: 15), read their poems together and in 1976 recorded a poetry album, *Where Would I Be Without You – The Poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn*, for Olivia Records.

As we shall see, in *A Woman Is Talking To Death* Grahn’s personal narration of her experience as a member of a dominated social group (woman, lesbian, working-class) is masterfully intertwined with the condemnation of interlocking systems of oppression and with her call for solidarity, resistance and rebellion.

3. The Art of a “Working-class Elegist”

The goal of transforming ordinary language into poetic words which possess “a density of signification, i.e. an inherent polysemy” (Corti 1976: 99, my translation) is realised by Judy Grahn through a lesbian speaking voice who is “a figure both of the satirist and the seer” (Carruthers 1983: 294). This ability to combine parodic elements, bitter humour and an intensely visionary, even prophetic, tone is evident in *A Woman Is Talking To Death* right from the poem’s title: here the poet plays upon the figure of speech “talking to death” (i.e. talking endlessly) which is commonly referred, in misogynist discourse, to women’s garrulity and

² As has been noted, “the question is not purely academic, if one considers that the adjective ‘intersectional’ has come into current use to qualify a feminism that is inclusive of ‘differences’, but perhaps not as aggressive when it comes to questioning, criticizing and attacking the social dynamics of their reproduction” (Ardilli 2018; my translation).

elevates it into a mythical dimension where the character of Death is addressed directly by the female protagonist of the poem. Not only does “new meaning thus arise out of language that is familiar” (Aviram 1987: 38), but patriarchal discourse is subverted and turned inside out by a female speaking subject.

The poem, divided into nine sections of various lengths, is written in free verse and poetic prose, and contains dialogues and interrogations, with a subtle combination of everyday language and lyrical images. The sections are tied together by the skilful use of repetitions and refrains, which indicate that the text is especially geared towards performance³. Adrienne Rich (1980: 250) praised the language of the poem, its repetitions, rhythms, and intricate structure “which may not be obvious on a first reading or hearing, but which works like the complexity of a piece of music”.

The first section’s title, “Testimony in trials that never got heard”, introduces the public dimension of the poem’s topic, while the opening lines evoke the private dimension of love, which, as we shall see, is not only personal, but political:

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me
my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands⁴.

While the ensuing verses consist of a narrative in everyday language and a matter-of-fact tone (“We were driving home ...”), this opening couplet, with its anaphora and regular long stresses (Aviram 1987: 39), employs the incantatory language of eroticism. These two verses are especially important as they function as the poem’s refrain, appearing again, with some variation, in sections five and nine, when the speaker is engaged in her confrontation with Death.

These opening lines, evoking parts of the body of the beloved, possess a remarkable quality: by choosing body parts unmarked by gender – “teeth” and “muscles” – Grahn challenges and re-invents the conventional love lyric of the Petrarchan (heterosexual) tradition where the female body is objectified through the male gaze and fragmented into eroticized parts. Through her strategy of *dé-marquage*, the author evades the capture of the lesbian body by the heterosexual / pornographic gaze⁵. At the same time, the unusual similes (teeth compared to geese and muscles compared to rope ladders) create lyrical images conveying ideas of freedom, flight and upward movement.

Commenting on *A Woman Is Talking To Death* in 1978, Grahn asserted that “this poem is as factual as I could possibly make it” (1978: 112): indeed, after the lyrical images of the

³ Repetitions and refrains give “an oral dimension to the reading of a poem, inviting the audience to participate” and they create a unity of theme and form (Whitehead 1996: 45).

⁴ All quotations from the poem refer to the first edition (Grahn 1974), with unnumbered pages.

⁵ A similar strategy of *dé-marquage*, i.e. referring to the physical body freed from gender marking, is used more extensively by Monique Wittig in *Le Corps lesbien* (1973). As Deborah Ardilli explains, “*dé-marquage* is the strategy implemented by the minority subject to eradicate the signs of subalternity and occupy the place of the universal confiscated by the dominant. Decomposing the body into inferior parcels, de/marking it from the selective valorization (lips, breasts, buttocks, reproductive apparatus) that make up the myth of Woman, ‘pulverising the heterosexual symbolic construction of the female body’” (Ardilli 2023: 49-50; my translation).

opening couplet, the first section of the poem presents the narrative account of a very factual experience, the recollection of an accident on the Bay Bridge on a cold February night, involving a black driver who killed a white man on a motorcycle through no fault of his own. The “queer” woman speaker of the poem happens to be on the site of the accident with her partner, and this leads to a series of interconnected events, reflections and recollections that unfold through the sections that compose the poem.

From the tale of the car accident witnessed by the speaker the idea of the “testimony” is developed, and the text becomes a meditation on the social system and on the transformative power of “love” – a concept which is expanded in unpredictable ways as the poem progresses. The protagonist will not act as witness for the innocent black driver involved in the accident, as she herself belongs to an oppressed group constantly under trial. A white working-class lesbian woman and a black man are united by their vulnerability as subaltern social subjects in a situation of danger, and are both associated with fear in the intense dialogue that takes place on the bridge, at night, immediately after the tragic event:

I'm frightened, I said.
 I'm afraid, he said, stay with me,
 please don't go, stay with me, be
 my witness – “No,” I said, “I'll be
 your witness – later,” and I took his name
 and number, “but I can't stay with you,
 I'm too frightened of the bridge, besides
 I have a woman waiting
 and no license –
 and no tail lights –”
 So I left –
 as I have left so many of my lovers.

The reference to abandoning “lovers”, which appears unexpectedly at this point in the narrative, is the first instance of the re-signification of “love” that will be realised in the rest of the poem: “love” is “purged of romantic-sentimental associations” (Rich 1980: 251); it is not only (and not primarily) an erotic feeling, but it comes to stand for revolutionary solidarity among subjects of sexually, economically and racially oppressed social groups. The term “lovers” in the poem crosses the semantic boundaries of common usage and overflows into broader meanings: “lovers” are not only literal lovers, but “more generally anyone who opposes oppression and seeks to survive it” (Whitehead 1996: 78), with the hope of building a new social order. This idea, however, is not expressed through emphatic statements or propagandistic rhetoric, but is quietly suggested by “an utterly believable, vulnerable poetic voice” (Backus 1993: 816), that of the protagonist who is grieved by her failure to support another vulnerable individual. She knows that her testimony would be of no value in court: “an unemployed queer woman makes no witness at all [...] what does she do and who is she married to?”. The social vulnerability connecting a working-class queer woman and a black man is subtly signalled by the variation in the refrain, this time referred

to a collective subject: “our lovers teeth are white geese flying above us, but we ourselves are easily squished”.

Another powerful re-signification, that of the word “indecent”, occurs in the fourth section, entitled “A Mock Interrogation”, the central part of the poem. A series of insistent questions are posed to the protagonist by a faceless interrogator, representing judicial, medical, religious and state authority – the voice of patriarchy and death – who condemns love between women as indecent and pathologises it as perversion. The questions “Have you ever held hands with a woman?” and “Have you kissed any women?” are answered in the affirmative (“Yes, many times”) by the speaker who responds unexpectedly with a list of women who are hurt, in danger, or in need of assistance, “women who had been run over, beaten up, deserted, starved.”, as well as women who were happy, dancing, climbing mountains, or “liked me better than anyone”. Thus, the poet not only counteracts the pornographic connotation attributed to women’s bodies by patriarchal authority, but also celebrates the idea of love as all-embracing solidarity.

Similarly, the following question of the accuser, who intends to shame her – “Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?” – is answered by the protagonist in such a way as to overturn the meaning of “indecent”: the real indecent, claims the speaker, is the failure to act with love, letting women down. She enumerates her “acts of omissions”: “I am guilty of not loving her who needed me”, of not having the courage of fighting “for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love”. The narrator further retorts:

These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra.

Through this turn, as has been noted, Grahn “elevates the question from an accuser and an accused to a question that implicates the whole world” (Enszer 2017). Through the power of poetry, words like “lovers” and “indecent”, as Adrienne Rich (1980: 251) remarked, “are forced to yield up new meanings”. As the poem goes on, the tone of the speaker becomes even bolder: in section five she defiantly addresses Death, the personification of the forces of social oppression: “Death, do you tell me I cannot touch this woman?”, with an emphasis that anticipates the apostrophe at the end of the poem. While the dominant tone of the poem is elegiac, combined with occasional parodic elements and bitter irony (“This woman is a lesbian, be careful”), in the conclusion the narrator subversively appropriates the fearless prophetic voice of the male literary and religious tradition (Backus 1993: 816). In the brief and intense final section, entitled “Hey you death”, she not only talks directly to, but defiantly laughs at Death, affirming the power of “lovers” (in the expanded sense the term has acquired):

to my lovers I bequeath
the rest of my life
I want nothing left of me for you, ho death
except some fertilizer

for the next batch of us
 who do not hold hands with you
 who do not embrace you
 who try not to work for you
 or sacrifice themselves or trust
 or believe you, ho ignorant
 death, how do you know
 we happened to you?
 wherever our meat hangs on our own bones
 for our own use
 your pot is so empty
 death, ho death
 you shall be poor.

In this finale the speaker offers her testimony, invoking the life-affirming commitment to love and solidarity in opposition to the forces of social death: the “lovers” will defeat Death and they will envision an alternative social order, a world liberated from power and violence. The “topos of political transformation” (Rhodes 2005: 1) informing these final verses can be fully appreciated when read in the historical context of their production, at the peak of the women’s liberation movement in the early 1970s: they are the expression of the driving force of the currents of radical feminism and lesbian feminism, with their belief in the possibility of a different, liberated world. *A Woman Is Talking To Death* is an outstanding example of the “textual performativity” (Rhodes 2005: 1) that characterised this revolutionary phase of feminism. As historian Alice Echols (2019: 243) remarks, after 1975 “cultural feminism eclipsed radical feminism as the dominant tendency within the women’s liberation movement”: the retreat into “a female culture” and the celebration of biological differences⁶ accompanied the rejection of the most radical feminist political thinking on gender and on interlocking systems of oppression.

Judy Grahn’s *A Woman Is Talking To Death*, which Adrienne Rich (1980: 251) described as “both a political poem and a love poem”, is recognized as a milestone in the feminist poetry movement and is also an important document that sheds light on the early history of American feminism. As Honor Moore (2009: xxvii) has acutely observed: “with this poem, the whole political enterprise of feminism was subsumed by poetic means into an understanding of the complexity of the stark power relations that involve gender, race, and sexuality”. It is not surprising that its poetic and political force continues to be relevant in the new millennium.

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⁶ Judy Grahn seems to have subsequently embraced cultural feminism, as her 1993 book on menstruation suggests: *Blood, Bread and Roses. How Menstruation Created the World*. This is the only work by Grahn translated into Italian (Grahn 2020). To my knowledge, her lesbian feminist poetry remains untranslated in Italy.

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Stefania Arcara is Associate Professor of English Literature and President of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies "Genus" at the University of Catania. Her research focuses on literary translation, women's writing, feminist literary criticism and cultural studies. She has edited and translated works by 17th-century quaker women, Victorian travellers, Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Siddal, Vita Sackville-West, Valerie Solanas, Andrea Dworkin. She is a co-curator of the blog *Manastabal. Femminismo materialista*. arcara@unict.it