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Published online: 19 Jun 2008.

To cite this article: Amanda Boulter (1999) Unnatural acts: American feminism and Joanna Russ's the female man, Women: A Cultural Review, 10:2, 151-166, DOI: 10.1080/09574049908578385

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09574049908578385

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Unnatural Acts: American Feminism and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*

Every act of becoming conscious
(it says here in this book)
is an unnatural act.¹

In 1973 Robin Morgan gave the keynote address to the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference in Los Angeles. She began by asserting her own credentials, the aspects of her identity which gave her a right to speak about the Women's Liberation Movement. She was a woman, she was a feminist and she was a lesbian—a claim made in defiance of those who asserted her heterosexuality. These facts, she argued, gave her the necessary authority to speak about one of the many divisions in the WLM which threatened to damage the sisterhood, the lesbian-straight split. The theme of her speech was unity, but she spoke to an audience that was to become utterly divided.

When Morgan asserted her identity as a lesbian she suspected that she was not the only woman at that conference whose self-definition was disputed. What she did not anticipate was that one of the delegates who responded to her, who celebrated their own status as a woman and a lesbian, was a male transvestite. Over the next few days debate raged about his/her controversial presence and contested identity. This male transvestite, who was in his own eyes a woman and a lesbian, single-handedly wreaked havoc on the sisterhood. Morgan reports that the conference 'promptly split—over

this man' as more than half the women attending the conference 'demanded that he [the transvestite] be forced to leave', while others 'defended him as their "sister"' (Morgan 1978b:171).

Robin Morgan presented this intrusion as an example of destructive and disruptive male behaviour that attempts to deny women their own personal-political space. And she made a convincing argument against this particular individual, suggesting that he was indeed out for trouble. But what interests me, looking back on this, is not the motivations behind the disruption, but Morgan's response to the kind of gender trouble, to quote a phrase, that this man stirred up. She was neither prepared for it nor interested in it, and she point-blank refused to engage, even in retrospect, with the problems and contradictions that his presence at that conference threw up. For Morgan, the definitions of (sexual) difference were clear; and the binary man/woman demarcated the feminist frontier. She did not and would not recognize this cross-identification as significant for feminist sexual politics.

The alien presence of the transvestite male woman (or female man) challenged the definitions of 'woman', 'lesbian' and 'feminist', which grounded feminism as a politics of experience, to raise uncomfortable questions about just whose experience and which experience counted. This man's intrusive presence exposed the problems of definition that trouble the heart of feminism and which Morgan preferred to ignore. He disrupted assumptions about an innate sexual or gender identity by implicitly asking what it meant to 'be' a woman. Could this identity be claimed or was it a natural fact? And, if not natural, did such transvestite identification then reconfigure both the potential subject and potential subjects of feminism?

These questions are familiar in the work of postmodern feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway who celebrate the possibilities of sexual boundary-crossing. Butler's construction of gender performativity and Haraway's theorization of the cyborg both focus on the dissident promise of 'unnatural' identifications (see Butler 1990, Butler 1993 and Haraway 1991). But in 1973, when the differences between lesbian and straight women, women of colour and white women, rich women and poor women, threatened to fragment the illusion of global sisterhood, such questioning of the legitimacy of the category Woman was for many dangerous and unwelcome.

But, of course, such questions were being asked, and especially by those who found themselves marginalized by the discourses of their own liberation movement. The now famous statements by groups such as the Combahee River Collective attest to many women's frustration with the reification of feminist rhetoric into an exclusionary politics. Their (and others') demands that the Women's Liberation Movement recognize itself as a white, middle-class feminism influenced the theoretical discourses of both black and white feminists in the 1980s. Questions about the differences between women were

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pushed to the top of the feminist agenda from a number of directions, both philosophical and political. The subject of women’s liberation was represented not as Woman but as ‘women’, a pluralism which it was hoped would encompass the differences between and within women’s identities. But arguments, such as Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller’s, that ‘multiplication is no escape from reification’ revealed the need for entirely new perspectives and contributed to a changing mood within academic feminism (Hirsch and Keller 1990:2). The articulation of global sisterhood and the assertion of the metaphorical figure of the Everywoman came to be seen as strategic but necessarily exclusionary discourses. Many feminist theorists rejected the search for an essence of womanhood and attempted instead to address the multiplicity of discursive and material practices which continually de/re/construct women’s identities. This ‘shift of attention’ away from ‘women’ to ‘the process of . . . “woman/women making”’ was both a liberating and a dangerous political move (Hirsch and Keller 1990:2). For on the one hand it left the question of who or what constitutes the subjects of feminism open—as it should be—but on the other hand it threatened the pragmatic grounding of collective feminist agency. How should we negotiate the contradictory identifications of the female subject as both a ‘dazzling collection of integrated fragments’ and a ‘theoretical, libidinal, ethical and political agent'? (Braidotti 1991:281.)

Re-reading the 1970s: Feminist Science Fiction

One way to approach these very contemporary conceptual challenges is to return to the creative texts of the 1970s. This is not to rehearse a series of exhausted political ideas or clichéd literary strategies, but to reconsider the ways in which feminist writers used fictional texts as an imaginative space in which to interpret, critique and develop the theoretical and political agenda of the emerging Women’s Liberation Movement. The explosion of feminist literature in the 1970s has made it the era of the ‘women’s lib novel’, a literary hype which later critics were swift to dismiss or disown. But, beyond the media spotlight, feminist writers were asserting their presence in less obvious literary contexts. One such was the very masculinist world of science fiction which in the 1970s felt itself assaulted by an alien crew of new and emerging women writers who were determined to challenge the gender stereotyping of the genre.

Feminists began (re)writing SF not only because they were tired of reading stories in which the women were either bimbos or BEMs (bug-eyed monsters), but because they recognized that the speculative mode of science fiction, what Darko Suvin termed the generic condition of ‘cognitive estrangement’, opened up new vistas for feminist fantasy (Suvin 1979:4).
The alternative visions of SF enabled writers to explore feminist futures, to reinterpret dominant histories and to allegorize the contemporary world. SF's brave new worlds and alien others suggested provocative interactions between art and politics, imagination and theory.

Suzy McKee Charnas, writing in 1975, argued that it was precisely this altered perspective which attracted her to the genre: "those of us who loved sf in spite of the fact that we never found ourselves in it loved not the achievement of the field, but its potentiality" (Smith 1975:8). Charnas identified SF as a genre that had much to recommend it to feminist writers and readers:

SF is a genre that is particularly suited to the transitional state of women today in our culture: actually, I think sf is suited to the needs of any group that feels itself to be oppressed. It offers a form unencumbered by the necessity to trot out the same old dreary details again in order to make one's point. The brainless boredom of life in the nursery, life in the laundromat, life in the dating-game, life in the typing-pool, is true, crushing, impossible. . . . It's too depressing and frankly it's very hard to write interestingly about boredom, or rewardingly about unrewarding lives. . . . Through science fiction, I can see the same drab realities illuminated with the brilliance of the strange; everything becomes transmuted, fresh, newly meaningful, full of writing-possibilities (Smith 1975:9).

The 'brilliance of the strange' is variously represented in definitions of science fiction as a distinct writing and reading practice. In fandom it is the 'sense of wonder' from the Golden Age of the pulps. In more critically conventional terms it is Robert Scholes's 'representational discontinuity' or Darko Suvin's 'cognitive estrangement' (Scholes 1975:62, Suvin 1979:4). For Charnas this defamiliarization is a pertinent political strategy for women's movement writers. The science-fictional transmutation of the ordinary into the 'newly meaningful' echoes the feminist practice of consciousness-raising, as a process of estrangement and redefinition. Like SF, CR defamiliarizes the humdrum aspects of women's lives to assert a discontinuity between those lived experiences and their ideological representation. Charnas outlines the correspondences between SF and CR (as both discourses which anticipate feminist futures) when she asserts that 'as the women's movement in all its forms touches more and more deeply the lives of women in all sorts of situations and states of mind, I think that more and more of them will try to regain the habit of questioning, and will discover the uses and delights of sf in that process' (Smith 1975:78).

In Charnas's critique, SF is figured as a writing practice which enables women to develop and articulate an oppositional feminist politics. Many women's texts of the 1970s present speculative futures which draw from
contemporary feminist analyses of society and work them through in a fictive context. But there were other works of feminist SF which went further and used the fantastic to reflect back upon the theoretical to expose the conceptual contradictions within feminism. It is these texts which offer feminists in the 1990s new perspectives upon evermore complex debates. The cogent metaphors of feminist SF can be seen as an imaginative resource in the process of constructing future feminisms.

For me the most exciting text of the 1970s is Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* published in 1975 (Russ 1985). Like many other novels of the period it is motivated by the energy, anger, sense of empowerment and self-discovery which positively characterized the WLM. But it does not conform to the novelistic structures of the 'true story of how I became my own person' (Coward 1984). At best we might suggest that it is a mocking perversion of that emerging mode of feminist confessional. This meant that despite the media furore about the 'women's lib novel', Russ was unable to find a mainstream publisher willing to accept her text. This was not just because of the science-fictional mode, but because Russ deliberately rejected the conventions of the novel.

In 1981, in *The Advocate*, Russ argued that *The Female Man* 'is not a novel. It's not that kind of shape.' Her challenge to novelistic convention was not just an expression of literary postmodernism. It was an attempt to represent personal feminist strength in and through collective political struggle. She asks: 'How the hell do you use a form that must end with individual failure or individual success when you're not talking about that at all?' (cited in Law 1984:151–2). The anarchic structure of *The Female Man* enabled Russ to articulate the contradictions within and between feminist perspectives without then reconciling them in a linear narrative. She used the possibilities of SF to create estranging visions and points of view which overtly challenged the gender politics of the 'zero world'. *The Female Man* generates a series of contradictions which remain deliberately unresolved. For instance, it repeatedly affirms the significance of women's experience as the foundation for feminist politics and feminist art. At the same time, it also attempts to transcend the category of Woman altogether and to explore feminism's promise of transgressive gender identities. In this way it confronts head on the questions that Robin Morgan refused to recognize.

### The Narrative Structure of *The Female Man*

*The Female Man* is a difficult book to read. It is structured in nine parts, which each contain between five and eighteen sections that range in length from three words to several pages. These disparate sections form a montage of different voices and perspectives as poetry and party games intersect with

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3 For a critique of this interpretation of the 'women's lib novel', see Lauret 1994.

4 Darko Suvin describes the zero world as the 'empirically verifiable properties around the author' (see Suvin 1972).
interviews, staged dialogue, lectures and confessions. There are four female protagonists, whom Rachel Blau DuPlessis has termed a 'cluster protagonist' (DuPlessis 1985:182). These women, who are all the same genotype, exist in four different parallel worlds. They are known as the four Js: Janet, Jeannine, Joanna and Jael. Of all the protagonists, only Jeannine does not speak for herself: Jael, Janet and Joanna each narrate discontinuous parts. The distinctions between the Js, and especially between Joanna and the persona of the author (also a Joanna), are often difficult to sustain, and the authorial character occasionally invades the text as the fifth J.

In interview, Russ has argued that the reader experiences the confusion of (often unidentified) voices as either a 'celebration', a kind of literary zap action or a 'torture' which will prove infuriating (Russ 1981:245). Either way, Russ engages the reader as an agent in the text, who must work to construct the novel's meaning. The act of reading is indeed an activity. To decipher the 'plot', we must unravel and re-articulate the montage of voices and worlds in each section. The reader's experience as a participant in the production of new meanings from these textual fragments reflects Joanna's experience as she negotiates her position in relation to the other women. It also simulates the process of consciousness-raising which is represented both in the narrative (in the construction of Joanna as a feminist-in-process), and promoted by the narrative in the metafictional feminist polemic.

The four Js represent alternative selves but, as critics have observed, they also represent different strategies for addressing the social consequences of gender inequality (see DuPlessis 1985 and Rosinsky 1984). The science-fictional intersection of past, present and future worlds brings conflicting ideas about gender into collision to expose the ways in which 'woman' and 'man' are culturally constructed. I have suggested that the narrative positions Joanna as a feminist-in-progress whose consciousness is raised by her alienating experiences in alternative worlds. However, as the text presents the evolution of a feminist subject, it also continually questions just who and what are the possible subjects of feminism.

Janet Evason is from a philosophically and technologically sophisticated feminist Utopia called Whileaway, a post-gender world where men no longer exist. Jeannine Dadier lives in an alternative 1969 (the year in which Russ began the novel) in which the Second World War never happened and the Depression continues. She dreams of marriage as the legitimation of her life. Joanna, also lives in the present (1969). Her world corresponds to Darko Suvin's concept of the 'zero world', but it too is 'made strange' by satire. Alice Jael Reasoner is the Agent who has brought the other women together. She is a vengeful murderess from a future dystopia which is enduring the final war of Us and Them. Her world is divided into Womanland and Manland as the Battle of the Sexes has disintegrated into a Cold War stalemate.
The four Js have been identified by critics as a fragmented representation of one woman, as 'different phases/faces of the same self', as 'intersect[ing] like dimensions of one personality', or even as 'various aspects of the female self' (Shinn 1986:167, Law 1984:152, Moylan 1986:63). The critical reintegration of the Js into a single self can be read as a reflection of the feminist concern with unified subjectivity in the 1970s. But critically collating the four Js into an Everywoman figure risks obscuring the unresolved disparities between them. *The Female Man* may be read literally as what Russ terms an 'attempt to get [her] head together' without proposing a unified 'female self' or resolving those fragments into a representation of Woman (Russ 1981:246). The interactions between the four Js also suggest the diversity fostered by the collective politics and communal impulse for change in the women's movement. The text cannot be reduced either to a metaphorical representation of women's fragmentation in patriarchy, or to a metonymical representation of potential feminist community.

How then are we to read the interactions between the Js? Does their shared genotype signal a culturally translatable essence of self or womanhood? Or does their genetic sameness highlight their cultural differences to question rather than confirm the nature of Woman? The metaphor of the female man, and the multiple interpretations of that contradictory identity in the different worlds, challenges the polarities of gender. *The Female Man* is an ironic title which both acts as a metaphor for the possibilities of cross-identification, and also exposes the incompatibility of the categories 'female' and 'human'. For Russ, women are made alien by the condensation of all humanity into Man. The narrative presents many versions of the female man, but this dialectical identity is one that proliferates beyond the text. The inconsistent roles which Russ imposes on her reader as she complicates the terms of gender also make us, whether male or female, potential female men.

Russ's *The Female Man* has received more critical attention than any of her other works, primarily as a feminist Utopia. However, the critical identification of *The Female Man* as a Utopian text often obscures the more difficult questions posed by the novel. The importance of Russ's text lies not in any individual character or world, but in the interactions between the Js and their different cultures: the alternative history, the ironic present, the feminist Utopia and the segregated dystopia. *The Female Man* does not use SF motifs to present possible futures. Russ argued that the narrative was not a proposal for either a separatist Utopia or a violent war against men. She claimed in *Quest*: 'Books are not blueprints. They are experiences. The worlds in *The Female Man* are not futures. They are here and now writ large' (Russ 1981:247). The future worlds in which Janet and Jael live mark both a celebration and a critique of the illegitimate gender possibilities which were being explored in the early 1970s by the
Women's Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Front. The dystopian world of Manland, for example, criticizes the sexual stereotyping of gay male role play, but it also confronts the challenges these transgressive identities present to feminist politics.

**Performing Gender: Representing the Male Women**

When Jael finally transports the three other Js to her world she takes them, disguised as lepers, into Manland to show them the state of the war. There they meet Anna, a 'half-changed': 'such a vision was he, so much he wore, such folds and frills and ribbons and buttons and feathers . . . the world exists to look at Anna; he—or she—is only a real-man turned inside out. An eerie sisterliness, a smile at Jeannine' (Russ 1985:171-3). Pronouns become difficult when describing Anna; 'he' has male genitals, and yet 'he' is an excessive parody of femininity, beside him the four Js look like 'four lumpy parcels' (172). However, the construction of these sentences draws the reader's attention precisely to the pronouns: 'such a vision was he'.

As the language available to describe these gender parodies is revealed to be grossly inadequate, so the authorial persona begins to assert her presence in the text by focusing the reader's attention on the processes (and possibilities) engendered in language use. Russ's indecision about the name of the bar, 'The Trench or The Prick or The Crotch or The Knife' (167), represents a textual openness which encourages and implicates the reader in the production of meaning. By refusing to decide upon one name, and effectively reminding the reader that there are always alternative possibilities, Russ underlines that these worlds are discursive worlds, representing only one possibility in an infinite range. She therefore exploits the science-fictional trope of parallel universes to indicate that these different worlds are the result of the choices we make (political or otherwise): 'every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility, that is, one in which you do and one in which you don't; or very likely many more' (6).

Manland demands that its 'real-men' are heterosexually orientated. Anna, as one of the little boys who failed the passage to manhood, has been transformed through a process of self-starvation and decoration into a model of sanctioned and legitimized femininity ('real-women' are loathed):

Little boys are made into Men—though some don't quite make it; sex-change surgery begins at sixteen. One out of seven fails early and makes the full change; one out of seven fails later and (refusing surgery) makes only half a change: artists, illusionists, impressionists of femininity who keep their genitalia but who grow slim, grow languid, grow emotional and feminine, all this the effect of the spirit only. Five out of seven
Manlanders make it; these are the ‘real-men’. The others are the ‘changed’ or the ‘half-changed’. All real men like the changed; some real men like the half-changed; none of the real-men like real-men, for that would be abnormal (167).

When Russ began writing *The Female Man* in 1969 the phenomenon of sex-change surgery was gaining greater scientific and medical recognition. In the mid-1960s the Johns Hopkins Hospital announced that it was to be the first American medical institution to specialize in the performance of transsexual surgery. This greater medical recognition corresponded to an increased media interest. By the 1970s articles about transsexualism or ‘gender dysphoria’ were appearing in wide-circulation women’s magazines such as *Redbook* and *Good Housekeeping* (Raymond 1980:xiv).

In *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), Janice Raymond argued that the male-to-female transsexual posed ‘the question of self-definition—who is a woman?’ which, ‘in true phallic fashion, is thrust upon us’ (1980:113). Whereas Raymond, like Morgan, resisted such questions as anti-feminist and divisive, Russ’s text represents them as precisely the areas of difficulty and contradiction that feminism must explore. In the SF fanzine *Khatru*, Russ proposed science fiction as a mode of writing which ‘at least theoretically’ challenged the ‘ancient dualities [of] day and night, up and down, “masculine” and “feminine”’. She suggested that in SF the contingencies of gender could be exposed and ‘the Eternal Masculine and the Eternal Feminine’ revealed as ‘the poetic fancies of a weakly dimorphic species . . . in a vain search for what is “natural”’ (Smith 1975:47).

Sophisticated technology enables Manlanders to transform the physical attributes of sex, but the ‘half-changed’ reorganize gender through ‘the effect of the spirit only’. Their physical or ‘natural’ body does not ground their sexual identity but is repeatedly manipulated by their performances of femininity. *The Female Man* suggests that if the ‘changed’ and the ‘half-changed’ are impressionists of femininity, then they are no more so than Jeannine and Joanna, who also practise such fakery when they:

dress for The Man
smile for The Man
talk wittily to The Man
sympathize with The Man
flatter The Man
understand The Man
dereferto The Man
entertain The Man
keep The Man
live for The Man (Russ 1985:29).
In these terms, the ‘eerie sisterliness’ between Anna and Joanna and Jeannine can be interpreted as a mutual recognition of shared performance. Anna also represents the female man. And we must note that his/her name echoes that of the protagonist and the author, he/she is also a ‘Joanna’, half-changed.

Esther Newton observes that, in the late 1960s, ‘the camp queen makes no bones about it; to him the gay world is the “sisterhood”’ (Newton 1972:111). Russ’s text critiques the implicit (and sometimes explicit) misogyny of camp gender parody as it also explores the subversive potential of parodic femininity. (The lesbian-feminists at the West Coast conference in 1973 who supported the male transvestite as their sister similarly recognized themselves as ‘the brotherhood of camp’ (Morgan 1978b:171).) In its representation of the ‘changed’ and the ‘half-changed’, The Female Man demonstrates the way in which femininity is not natural but is constructed within a heterosexual sex-role structure. And significantly it is not only gender but also sex which is shown to be a cultural rather than a natural fact. Russ’s text can be read as an assault on, or a Jael-like assassination of, what she terms SF’s ‘assumptions about “innate” values and “natural” social arrangements’ (Russ 1972:80).

Becoming the Female Man: Russ’s Exploration of Cross-Identification

Russ’s exploration of the generic masculine is indicated by the title of her text, The Female Man, which does not suggest a female human so much as an oxymoronic parody of sex. To be part of Mankind, a woman must be a man. There is ‘Java Man’ and ‘the future of Man’ and ‘the values of Western Man’ and ‘too many Mans to count or look at or believe. There is Mankind’ (Russ 1985:140). In Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s evocative phrase, Russ ‘ricochets’ between man as human and man as male ‘until we are astir and enraged again at the appropriation of all personhood by the term man’ (DuPlessis 1985:183). But Russ does not reveal the female man until the reader understands that the female woman is equally performative. Joanna promises to tell the reader how she ‘turned into a man’: ‘First I had to turn into a woman (Russ 1985:133).

The implication that Joanna must ‘turn into a woman’ follows closely from de Beauvoir’s suggestion that ‘one is not born a woman, but becomes one’ (de Beauvoir 1988:295). In Russ’s rewriting of that famous phrase, however, the passive ‘becomes’ has a renewed force as the imperative ‘had to’. As Meredith Tax argued in 1971, ‘we didn’t get this way by heredity or by accident. We have been molded into these deformed postures . . . we have had our mental and emotional feet bound for thousands of years’ (Tax 1973:26). Joanna’s gender transformations are both performed by her and upon her. She becomes a woman (as she must) and then she turns into a man (as she must to be human—for humanity is Man).

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9 Russ’s title might also be seen to pun on Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch (1970).
Joanna does not become a female man through a transcendence of gender as Janet does, or through Jael’s violent parody of heterosexual identities. She becomes a female man because she resists being a woman in a man’s world. *The Female Man* exposes the way in which seemingly dissident performances of gender are often coerced or forced upon women, who then construct themselves in culturally prescribed roles. When Joanna becomes a female man her masculine ‘drag’ is portrayed as a strategic and essential dissembling tactic for women existing in patriarchal culture:

if you walk into a gathering of men . . . you might as well be wearing a sandwich board that says: LOOK! I HAVE TITS! . . . If you get good at being One Of The Boys it goes away. Of course there’s a certain disembodiment involved . . . I back-slapped and laughed at blue jokes, especially the hostile kind. Underneath you keep saying pleasantly but firmly No no no no no no. But it’s necessary to my job and I like my job (Russ 1985:133).

Against the banter of a misogynist culture, which demands her disembodiment, Joanna’s gender performance is a necessary disguise that deceives her audience into forgetting her sex. Russ explains the necessity of women’s cross-identification in her critical article ‘Dear Colleague: I Am Not an Honorary Male’. She exudes mock sympathy for the ‘goodguys’ who accept women as ‘equals’ in a man’s world: ‘You like liberated women . . . In fact, you treat her just like a man, just like one of the boys. You even tell dirty jokes when she’s around. What’s your reward? She hates you’ (Russ 1974:40). The female man is baffling. She evades the legitimate identities of both men and women. Her masculinity does not compromise her ‘womanhood’ but constructs it as a resisting identity subtending her performance. She is culturally positioned as female, and yet is able to swap her position by imitating male behaviour. Hers is the artistry of drag.

In exploring ‘the imitative structure of gender’, Judith Butler returns to Esther Newton’s analysis of female impersonators in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Mother Camp* (1972). Butler suggests, following Newton, that drag ‘mocks . . . the notion of a true gender identity’ (Butler 1990:137). However, Newton’s work retains an ambivalence about the subversive potential of drag. Newton stresses that for the stage impersonators ‘the whole point of female impersonation depends on maleness’, but she also argues that drag ‘wrench[es] the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex’ (Newton 1972:102–3). She describes male drag as a ‘double inversion’. On the one hand it says to its audience, ‘my “outside” appearance is feminine but my essence “inside” is masculine [the body]’. On the other hand it symbolizes the opposite, ‘my appearance “outside” is masculine [my body, my gender] but my essence “inside” [myself] is feminine’ (Newton 1972:103). Similarly, but inversely, Joanna is saying to
her audience of men (and readers): ‘I am not a woman; I am a man. I am a man [outside] with a woman’s face [inside]. I’m a woman [outside] with a man’s mind [inside]. Everybody says so’ (Russ 1985:134, my additions). Joanna’s drag both articulates the dualities of gender and collapses categories of masculine and feminine, man and woman. Like Newton’s characterization of camp as a ‘strategy for a situation’ which highlights ‘incongruous juxtapositions’, the female man questions the binary constructions of gender to ask what it means to ‘be’ a man or a woman (Newton 1972:105–6).

In becoming first a woman and then a man, the female man intends mischief. She exposes the discursive methods by which men have appropriated the signifiers of humanity to assert that she too can claim that power:

I think I am a Man; I think you had better call me a Man; I think you will write about me as a Man from now on and speak of me as a Man and employ me as a Man and recognize child-rearing as a Man’s business; you will think of me as a Man and treat me as a Man until it enters your muddled, preposterous, nine-tenths-fake, loveless, papier-mache-bull-moose head that I am a man. (And you are a woman.) (Russ 1985:140.)

Joanna’s self-identified manhood in this sex-change manifesto, which also demands that the reader recognize himself/herself as a woman, is both discursively and collectively constituted. Joanna claims manhood, but it is the reader who must ‘call’ her, ‘write about’ her, ‘speak of’ her, ‘recognize’ her, ‘think of’ her and ‘treat’ her as a man. And it is only through this discursive process of identification that the realization of her manhood will happen. This sleight of hand on Joanna’s part, in which the reader actually produces the transformation while all the time being abused for not already recognizing her as a man, neatly allegorizes the duplicities of gender. Here the readers (as women) facilitate the narrator’s assumption of power (manhood) and his/her corresponding right to identify us, even though it is only our work (as readers) that enables his/her sex-change.

The Experience of Reading The Female Man

Writing The Female Man is, in Tom Moylan’s words, ‘Joanna’s own method of resistance’ (Moylan 1986:81). Writing the text is an assumption of power and an incitement to the reader’s sensibilities. But Russ/Joanna also offers a reciprocal role to the reader, who, by reading critically, participates in the discursive struggle for power. As Natalie Rosinsky points out, Russ presents ‘reading as a form of authorship, potentially destructive as well as constructive’ (Rosinsky 1984:75). Russ represents the reader as an active agency in the text who is able to choose what she reads: ‘If you don’t like it, you can
skip to the next chapter’ (Russ 1985:29). She confronts the reader, radically disorientating her by challenging and berating her for her implied reading practise; ‘don’t read between the lines, there’s nothing there’ (29). This textual device thus both constructs the (resisting) reader’s participation in the production of meaning, and the author’s attempts to direct that involvement. It also acknowledges the way in which the reader’s responses are beyond authorial control.10

The text is very obviously didactic and politically partial, but Russ’s engagement of the reader as a character, who will alternately enjoy, despise, applaud or simply resist her feminist intentionality, makes that authorial role inherently unstable. By deliberately constructing the possibilities of misreading and misinterpretation (in the reviews and extra-narrative voices), Russ integrates the challenges to the authority of her own feminist didacticism into the text. Such ironic strategies reveal the invasiveness of dominant discourses as they also reveal Russ’s awareness of the contentiousness of her text. *The Female Man* is written with pleasure as much as anger and Russ’s feminist humour directs, as it expresses, her feminist polemic. She expects her readers to recognize themselves within her representation of sexism, and draw from their own experiences of gender oppression in their reading practice. But most of all she expects us to get the jokes.

Russ’s literary polemic insistently grounds itself in terms of women’s experience of sexism. However, it also disrupts, through its non-sequential, fragmented structure, any easy elision between the writer’s, the characters’ and the readers’ experiences as women. Russ’s exploration of the relationships in the text, between for example character and author, or author and reader, is premised on a shared recognition of certain experiences. At the same time, Russ also recognizes that these very interactions, and the process of interpretation, implicitly construct the meanings and significance of the experiences she represents.11 Experience is both a defining category (feminism is a ‘politics of experience’), and continually open to redefinition (through, for instance, consciousness-raising or, in the narrative, through the interactions between characters, which include the various textual personae of the author and the readers). Russ’s text invokes the authority of experience at the same time as it parades its fictionality. As Joanna tells us when she dresses Janet for a party: ‘Oh, I made that woman up; you can believe it!’ (Russ 1985:30.)

In the finale of the narrative, the four Js meet for Thanksgiving. They exchange farewells, and say ‘goodbye to all that’ (209).12 Jael asks each of the others if their worlds will play host to Womanland’s armies; only Janet refuses. When they part, their connection to each other (as aspects of one woman) is highlighted by the characterization of a fifth J who embraces them all. But this authorial presence does not absorb or assimilate their differences. The Js refuse to be unified, and assert their individual agency: ‘I said goodbye
and went off with Laur, I, Janet; I also watched them go, I, Joanna; moreover I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I, Jael, I myself' (212).

As Angelika Bammer observes, Russ does not claim universal or timeless significance for her text (Bammer 1991:99). In contradistinction to traditional literary values, Russ prizes her novel precisely for its proposed mortality, not in spite of it. *The Female Man* is an act of resistance which anticipates its own political exhaustion. To underline the historical specificity of her narrative, Russ concludes the text with an envoi which contextualizes the book in geographical, feminist, social, personal, commercial and historical terms. This conclusion marks Russ's final ironic gesture. The envoi addresses the book itself, ignoring and marginalizing the reader who at the end of the narrative must reconstruct both her relation to the preceding pages and her role as a (newly feminist?) agent in her own (extratextual) cultural environment.

The envoi also implicitly connects *The Female Man* to the tradition of Great Literature from which Russ, as a woman SF writer, has been excluded. Russ paraphrases Chaucer's envoi in *Troilus and Creseyde* ('Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye ... And kis the steppes, where as thow seest pace/ Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace') to assert her own influences and Utopian hopes:13

Go, little book ... bob a curtsey at the shrines of Friedan, Millet, Greer, Firestone, and all the rest; behave yourself in people's living rooms ...; and take your place bravely on the book racks of bus terminals and drugstores. Do not scream when you are ignored, for that will alarm people ... Live merrily, little daughter-book, even if I can't and we can't; recite yourself to all who will listen; stay hopeful and wise ... Do not get glum when you are no longer understood little book. Do not curse your fate. Do not reach up from readers' laps and punch the readers' noses. Rejoice little book!

For on that day, we will be free (213-14).

The freshness of Russ's text is an ironic reminder that 'that day' has not yet arrived. *The Female Man* is of its time, and perhaps most dated by the rawness of its anger, which never fails to shock and appal my students. But the questions it raises have not been answered—we have newly sophisticated ways of phrasing them, but we continue to be entangled in the resistance to and embrace of the category 'women'. Russ's text helps us, especially young feminists, to realize that these questions are not an invention of postmodern feminism, but at the very heart of the Second Wave.

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