Realities and Fictions: Lesbian Visions of Utopia

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> Bringing my fantasies into the real world frightened me very much. It's not that they were bad in themselves, but they were Unreal and therefore culpable; to try to make Real what was Unreal was to mistake the very nature of things; it was a sin not against conscience (which remained genuinely indifferent during the whole affair) but against Reality, and of the two, the latter is far more blasphemous. It's the crime of creating one's own Reality, of "preferring oneself" as a good friend of mine says. I knew it was an impossible project.[1]

As author-character of *The Female Man,* Joanna Russ is here speaking not of creating a utopian vision of the future, but of becoming a lesbian. Both involved breaking out of "History" and "Reality" as they have been defined.[2] The problem being dramatized is what is possible for a young, white girl brought up in the fifties? What is realistic? And what is reality? On the surface, the tension of the novel lies in the conflict between men and women. But underneath we glimpse the effort to break through to an alternative paradigm, another set of possibilities.

This novel depicts the aspects of Everywoman as conceived in 1975 by its author. Each aspect, represented by a character whose name begins with J, dramatizes an apparently different woman whose ground of being and perceptions about what is real and what is possible differ from those of the others. Author/character Joanna veers back and forth between Jeannine's past-

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in-the-present, Jael's present-in-a-future, and the secret hope of Whileawayan Janet who is also unbelievable to her. For Janet is woman-identified, tied to men by neither love nor hate. Is it possible, especially for one conceiving of herself as Every-woman, to shift lesbianism from "unreality" or fantasy to "reality"? The novel documents a moment of that struggle.

Before coming out, Joanna had turned herself into a man, a metaphoric transformation in the quasi-utopian realm of science fiction whose precedents exist historically among the women who have passed as men.[3] This "solution" had been the logical extension of operating within a system of male supremacy ostensibly to subvert it. But was it possible to redefine reality? Simply to love women and build a just society, rather than to hate men and fight them? As the novel closes, Joanna kisses Laur while she reads, expecting the rebuke that will demonstrate the reassertion of the eternal order "(as it had to, of course)":

> *But she let me do it.* She blushed and pretended not to notice. I can't describe to you how reality tore itself wide open at that moment. It's like falling off a cliff, standing astonished in mid-air as the horizon rushes away from you. If this is possible, anything is possible . . . nothing that happened afterward was as important to me . . . as that first, awful wrench of the mind (p. 208).

After this, the world which she had seen as peopled primarily by men begins to appear flooded by women. She worries how her changing consciousness will be classified in the minds of others. "Does it count if it's your best friend? Does it count if you love men's bodies but hate men's minds?" (p. 209). And whose definition is right? Joanna moves in mid-sentence from the defensive denial to claiming a presumably ideal "tall, blonde, blue-eyed lesbian" identity (p. 209).

Part of the difficulty of making a paradigmatic shift away from male domination was the dearth of models in the culture, as well as the widespread belief that male and female difference was biological rather than socially constructed behavior. "I can't imagine a two-sexed equalitarian society and I don't believe anyone else can, either," Russ commented in 1975. "Where else (than science fiction) could one even try out such visions? Yet in

the end we will have to have models for the real thing and I can find none yet, and that is why Whileaway is single-sexed."[4]

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Freethinker Elmina Drake Slenker, who had been inspired by the "discovery" of contraceptives to advocate free love, shifted her views to seeing heterosexual intercourse as necessary only for reproduction. Finally, believing women's interest would best be served by abstinence, she envisioned a utopian female society perpetuated by parthenogenesis.[5] In 1915, Charlotte Perkins Gilman created the story of Herland, a rational and nurturant society, built on female sex sameness and equality.[6] The question of sexuality among the women is seemingly evaded; or perhaps the author simply relied upon nineteenth-century understandings.

The concept of sexual relations was defined at that time phallocentrically. Women were not expected to be sexual beings or to be sexually aroused by intercourse with males; they were permitted covert affectional and love relations and "lovemaking" with women. Without the phallus, the lovemaking was not defined as sexual.[7] Gilman could expect among her female readers little challenge to the almost invisible love relations among the women, and little regret for the "loss" of the largely unsatisfying duty of heterosexual intercourse. In the nineteenth century, a broad range of romantic relationships among women was common;[8] they were not seen as dangerous if they were conducted in forms that did not tread upon masculine prerogative. It may have been that very implicit solidarity among women—a solidarity fostered both by the conditions that separated the average nineteenth-century white woman from the male world, and by the organized feminist response to those conditions—which enabled Gilman to create and publish her feminist utopia. *Herland* is a fictionalization of Gilman's feminist theories and criticisms of patriarchal capitalism, just as her novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* dramatized the connection between "madness" and the white gentlewoman's imprisonment in genteel marriage.

After the turn of the century, when the medical profession operated as a control system for heterosexuality, loving intimacy was appropriated by male liberals as a new heterosexual standard in order to save the institution of marriage. Lesbian rela-

tions had by the twentieth century become possible alternatives to heterosexual relations, and the entrance of women not only into the industrial work force, but increasingly into higher education, the professions, and political life, caused a male reaction which made love relations between women appear perverted, criminal, and insane. Even liberal critics of Victorian society, such as the predominantly gay male Bloomsburyians in England, could espouse homosexual rights and socialism but could not believe women should be "independent of men" and found Sapphism "disgusting." They sent Virginia Woolf to doctors practicing "conversion of the Sodomites," "racial purity," anti-female eugenics, and rest cures[9] such as those Gilman depicted in *The Yellow Wallpaper.*

It was these forces to which Virginia Stephen Woolf, who had been incarcerated by them, referred in her 1936 feminist treatise *Three Guineas,*[10] where she advocates the Outsiders Society. Because her criticism of male civilization was taken as symptomatic of madness—and her lesbianism was viewed as neurosis which developed in women who pursued the unfeminine work of a professional writer—Virginia Woolf veiled the lesbian basis of her vision. The Outsiders Society was a strategic and perhaps utopian proposal. Women constitute an already existing group whose energy, labor, and lives are appropriated by men for their own aggrandizement in a system she saw requiring imperialism and war. During the rise of Hitler, Woolf called upon women to utilize their exclusion to withdraw services and support from the patriarchy. Without explicitly mentioning lesbianism, she tells the reader there are some things even she is afraid to write about because of sanctions occasioned by male fear, insecurity, and power over women.

Very little lesbian utopian vision-making survived in print until, with the advent of the women's liberation movement, journalist Jill Johnston called for "lesbian nation."[11] In 1973, Judy Grahn extended the sexual connotations of "wanting" a lover to the revolutionary—or utopian—dimension of wanting a city safe and healthy for women; "I wanted her as a very few people have wanted me—I wanted her and me to own and control and run the city we lived in. . . ."[12]

In France, Monique Wittig envisioned a global confronta-

tion of men by women, supported by a woman's culture, powered by cultural and material force, and encompassing women of all races, ages, and backgrounds. The diversity of the women in *Les Guérillères*[13] contributes to their strength rather than dividing them, and they battle, sing, and celebrate their way to worldwide feminist victory. A few longhaired men, who are willing to accept a feminist society of primitive communism, are allowed to live. Highly romantic, stylistically disrupted from linear, causal or dramatic/narrative structure, the novel envisions a female culture as a strength for battle and simultaneously denounces it as a fragmented vision inadequate to the new world. The counter-weight to glorification of battle and killing of males is located in a persistently witchlike women's culture.[14]

Here lies a central contribution of the work and one which has had broad appeal in the feminist movement as it evolved from the left, susceptible to believing "Paradise exists in the shadow of the sword" (p. iii). Wittig connects revolution and change not only with guns, but also with language and with the cultural bases for empowering women.

> The women say they have learned to rely on their own strength. They say they are aware of the force of their unity. They say, let those who call for a new language first learn violence. They say, let those who want to change the world first seize all the rifles. They say that they are starting from zero. They say that a new world is beginning (p. 85).

Wittig also assumes the necessity for transforming culture and putting women at the center by using the force of language and culture to crack (male) history. What appear as gaps in male history are women's experiences, and from this, called our weakness, we can build our strength. That message was crucial, particularly for women trapped intimately within white patriarchy.

> They say, we must disregard all the stories relating to those of them who have been betrayed beaten seized seduced carried off violated and exchanged as vile and precious merchandise. They say, we must disregard the statements we have been compelled to deliver contrary to our opinion and in conformity with the codes and conventions of the cultures that have domesticated us. . . .

> They say that there is no reality before it has been given shape by words rules regulations. They say that in what concerns them everything has to be remade starting from basic principles. They say that in the first place the vocabulary of every language is to be examined, modified, turned upside down, that every word must be screened (p. 134).

For white women whose culture was that of white male imperialism, the act of separating from male myth, language, tradition, mores, by using the intimate forms of self-expression available to them, especially to the more "educated," has been imperative for liberation of any sort. To express ourselves in forms that deny us is self-destructive.

What are the sources for a definition and naming of what it is we do want? Where do we turn to find ways to talk about the wisdom, love, peace, equality, and freedom we want to make manifest in the world? This is not only a linguistic and philosophical, but also a cultural, and spiritual, question. As Audre Lorde said in 1977:

> The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. . . .
>
> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give names to the nameless so it can be thought.[15]

The writers discussed here understand the importance of culture to the creation of radical consciousness; each seeks to empower women to act in her own interests, a process which cannot be postponed "until after a revolution" but which takes place every minute in creating a sense of alternatives to oppression, impotence and silence. But as we recover from powerlessness by turning our "weakness" through anger into our strength, have we kept the categories of victimization? Because biological difference has been used as a vehicle for power differentials, it is easy to assume that the powers of one group and those of the other are inherently different.[16] While there seem to be advan-

tages under conditions of struggle in being able easily to define "the adversary," the danger of using biological difference as a liberatory strategy is that the struggle for liberation also becomes biologically bound—and murderous.

Sally Gearhart in *The Wanderground*[17] begins with a vision of woman and nature as the victims of men, and natural allies in the last great struggle to save life on earth. The ritual connection of woman and earth as daughter-mother lovers is a powerful lesbian mythos. The rape of earth and the revolt of the mother provide the context for female solidarity and a definition of female energy as life-giving and male energy as violent; but Gearhart does not simply accept this dualism. Although she introduces virgin birth, retains her mistrust of "maleness," and does not envision the possibility of humane heterosexual society, Gearhart not only does not write men off, she even allows them to challenge the moral superiority and righteousness of women-as-victim. Claiming they are a special breed, different from other men, "the gentles" have learned to become autonomous and no longer feel they need the women; they are developing their own type of non-violent psychic powers. Evona distrusts them:

> "Non violent? Never. You know what will happen. You'll use your new power all right. You'll use it, perfect it, manufacture it, package it, sell it, and tell the world that it's clean and new because it comes from a different breed of men. But it's just another fancy prick to invade the world with. And you'll use it because you can't really communicate, you can't really love! . . .
>
> Andros did not flinch. But her words had reached him. He spoke quietly. "You still want it all, don't you? Just like everywoman since the dawn of time. You demand your holy isolation from men so you can develop your unique female powers, but you are threatened to the core by the suggestion that we might have equally unique powers—don't even whisper that they might be equally valuable" (pp. 170–80).

The underlying drama of the work is here revealed as the threat of the (male) "gentles" to female superiority. The radical feminist stance and the utopian vision of women's empowerment have been created on the moral notion that the victims of

male oppression were better than the victimizers. When an ideology assumes that social behavior is inherent, it is locked into an assumption that the oppressor cannot change. This is generally reinforced when he will not. But what if some do? Gearhart has been correct in utilizing the assumption, hidden so well in patriarchal culture, that men are dependent upon women for survival. And women know this, too, fearing they would indeed be murderers if they stopped holding up men. This self-protective tie is different from standing beside them. For if women really believed men did not need them to survive, women would not feel guilty for freeing men to support themselves. This truth has been so buried that to reveal and use it is a service.

Gearhart is careful, however, to describe the "gentles'" evolution as the product of practice, discipline, and painful growth to mutual dependency, not—like the women's—a "gift of nature." The maintenance of this distinction allows her to retain the possibility of biological superiority for females, a kind of moral ranking system for humans (women on the top, gay men next, and then men), while fudging questions about distinctions among women. Apparently, lesbians aren't biologically different, although the novel displays, while denying, a high level of disgust for city women—the distinction of geography replacing that of sexuality for women. Thus, there is no intermediary, organizable group of women, no space that is not either hill country or city space, either the women's community or female slavery. Women must either submit, or pass as men, in the city, or they can be part of building the new, all-female, utopian society. Utopian writing serves the function of highlighting present tendencies by solidifying and distancing them in a dramatic context that reveals their characteristics and contradictions; yet, by changing their context, it makes them inaccessible, remote, and apparently immutable.

Amid debate about whether women have ever lived free of male supremacy, in fiction as in anthropology, some women have looked to the pre-patriarchal past for evidence of the possibility of freedom for women.[18] In *Retreat: As It Was!*[19] Donna Young created a fantasy past, a vision of an advanced yet healthy civilization on the eve of its destruction by invading forces caus-

ing the genetic mutation that created males. The pacific women decided to reverse their millennial stance of nonviolence; they retool for war, and the novel ends with the town in ruins, a few survivors setting forth with the new male child to begin again, presumably to build the patriarchal society we have inherited.

The patriarchal city in several novels so radically disempowers women as to render them victims outside the realm of feminist action. In Charnas' *Motherlines*,[20] where procreation for an all-female society is achieved through intercourse with women's "more natural" allies, horses, the focus is entirely on divisions among women. The interest in the novel lies in the tension between the femmes, who have escaped from their servitude under patriarchal rule, and the Amazonian race of horsewomen, descendants of women who had programmed their own survival in the laboratories of the patriarchy before escaping to the land. The novel closes before we discover if the battle between the newly organized femmes and the men freed those enslaved in the city—or destroyed all the women.

Rochelle Singer's *Demeter Flower*[21] takes us into a fictional future after the holocaust when patriarchal fiefdoms have been established, except for an enclave of women who live secretly in northern California hills. The women fight among themselves, the younger women determined to leave and start another women's community elsewhere. Will their venture bring detection and pursuit? Will the divisions weaken the groups? Divisions also rock the community when a male invades and strategy must be determined; should they keep this enemy among them, kill him, or evict him and risk betraying their existence and location? There is no answer; the novel focuses more on the dangers to the women's unity than on working out an alternative social order, or addressing the plight of patriarchal city women.

By 1980, fears concerning divisions among women and the need for security against men, maleness, and capitalist patriarchy appear primal, obvious consequences of identifying women as a class and men as adversaries victimizing them. But racism, perhaps the most serious immediate division among women, has not been adequately addressed. *Wanderground* begins. But having two frightened women of color rescued by a group of (all-

white?) nonchalantly powerful women does not change the conditions they faced in the group to begin with. Rather, it is a white fantasy about earning unity. It is just these intermediate steps, dealing with the differences among us, that we need to envision and address. As the Combahee River Collective stated in 1977, "If black women were free"—and today they might include other women of color—"it would mean that everyone else would have to be free, since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of *all* systems of oppression."[22] White feminists must ask themselves what prevents women from acting on this knowledge, for that constitutes participation in oppression and destructive divisions among women. And women of color will continue on their own.

Today, the most dynamic and strategically empowering vision comes from women, primarily lesbians of color. Gloria Anzaldúa creates a powerful synthesis between the healing spirituality of her grandmother and the materialist analysis of the left, establishing a vital basis for unity. "I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*," she writes in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*[23]—a brilliant and moving feminist work, calling for an international feminism based on the recognition of the right of the colonized, including third world women in the United States, to form independent movements:

> But ultimately, we must struggle together. *Together* we form a vision which spans from the self-love of our colored skins, to the respect of our foremothers who kept the embers of revolution burning, to our reverence for the trees—the final reminder of our rightful place on this planet.
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> The change evoked on these pages is material as well as psychic. Change requires a lot of heat. It requires both the alchemist and the welder, the magician and the laborer, the witch and the warrior, the myth-smasher and the myth-maker.
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> Hand in hand, we brew and forge a revolution.[24]

NOTES

1. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 208.

2. See my article, "Lesbianism and the Social Function of Taboo," in *The Future of Difference*, Eisenstein and Jardine, eds. (New York: G. K. Hall, 1980).

3. See, for example, "Passing Women," in *Gay American History*, Jonathan Katz, ed. (New York: Crowell, 1975).

4. Joanna Russ, "Interview," *Quest* 2, No. 1 (Summer, 1975), pp. 45, 47.

5. Elmina Drake Slenker wrote *The Darwins: A Domestic Radical Romance* (1879), *John's Way: A Domestic Radical Story* (1877, 1884); *The Handsomest Woman* (1885).

6. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979). First published serially in *The Forerunner*, 1915.

7. See my paper, "Sex, Sexuality and Love Among Women Around the Turn of the Century." Forthcoming.

8. See, for example, Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981).

9. E. M. Forster to Virginia Woolf in 1928, during the trial of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*. See my paper, "Azalea Bushes and Asparagus Beds: Virginia Stephen Woolf and the Medical Backlash." Forthcoming.

10. Virginia Stephen Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936).

11. Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), reprint of her articles from *The Village Voice*.

12. Judy Grahn, *A Woman Is Talking to Death* (Oakland: Diana Press, 1974).

13. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. LeVay (New York: The Viking Press, 1971).

14. "They speak together of the threat they have constituted towards authority, they tell how they were burned on pyres to prevent them from assembling in the future. . . . Then they chant the famous song that begins, Despite all the evils they wished to crush me with/I remain as steady as the three legged cauldron" (pp. 89–90).

15. Audre Lorde, "Poems Are Not Luxuries," *Chrysalis* 3 (1977), p. 8.

16. A science fiction writer who raises some fundamental questions in terms of gender and race (while staying outside explicit feminist and lesbian thought) is Octavia Butler. Her ulti-

mate male power figure survives by a murderous dependence on the lives of others; neither his human and genetic experimentation nor the exercise of his authority is bound by "human values." Her ultimate female power is a healer. Can she either convert or defeat him? Without jeopardy to her offspring? The two characters are pitted against and bound to each other through centuries of genetic development, accounting for vast differences among humans. Arising from realities of living in a dark skin, Butler's fictions are compelling, though her vision of patterning raises doubts about non-biological social change.

17. Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1978). The history of this alliance is brilliantly treated in Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

18. Elizabeth Lynn's *Northern Girl* (New York: Berkley, 1980), third novel in a trilogy, while not exactly a utopian novel, also creates a past peopled with strong women, who can do anything that the men can do (except impregnate and rape). Although showing some fluidity among the characters of different classes, this is the only work discussed here not abolishing antagonistic class relations as a matter of course. Structured around the power of the old Tarot, the novel exhibits ambivalence about the use of violence. The spiritual and material are combined as forces, and while good city governance might require a ban on swords, the old dance-defense included them, and the ban exiled people of wisdom and spiritual strength. How to reconnect and achieve a balance of forces?

19. Donna J. Young, *Retreat: As It Was! A Fantasy* (Weatherby Lake, Mo.: Naiad Press, 1978).

20. Suzy McKee Charnas, *Motherlines* (New York: Berkley, 1978). Another non-lesbian writer, Marge Piercy, depicted a technological form of reproduction in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, adding a biological equalization of birthing and nurturing childcare work between males and females, without which, presumably, sex equality in Mattapoisett could not have been envisioned as a possible future. It is one, moreover, founded upon a continuing military war.

21. Rochelle Singer, *Demeter Flower* (New York: St. Martin's, 1980).

22. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist State-

ment," in *Power, Oppression and the Politics of Culture,* eds. Farley, Jensen, Goodman, Lorde, Smith (New York: Goodman, 1978). Reprinted in *This Bridge Called My Back,* Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981), p. 172.

23. Gloria Anzaldúa, from "Toward a Construction of El Mundo Zurdo," *This Bridge,* p. 209.

24. Anzaldúa, "El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision," *This Bridge,* p. 196.