

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 Everywoman, 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.⁵ 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 phallogcentrically. 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-