Becoming-Woman Across Utopian Spaces: Transfiguring Encounters with Joanna Russ’s The Female Man

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Possessing a disempowering position within society, oppressed groups need something more than a stabilizing of social space that consolidates their position on the margins.

Jennifer Burwell, Notes on Nowhere (87)

Joanna Russ’s tour de force 1975 feminist science-fiction utopia The Female Man is a text that hinges upon an impossibility to conceptualize womanhood outside of its patriarchal mythologies. This brilliantly edgy and sardonic text strategically mimes, deconstructs, and subverts the myriad images and meanings projected onto the contentious category of woman. In her 1991 seminal study Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s, Angelika Bammer situated the novel among other feminist utopian narratives of that period that mapped out a territory for ways of expressing resistance to patriarchal discourses. Bammer saw Russ’s text chiefly as a feminist beacon and a reminder that “women can’t simply dissociate themselves from patriarchy…, for they are themselves part of the system” (94). Bammer’s seminal analysis was presupposed on the Foucauldian notion of immanent resistance that can never be exercised on the outside of the system of power; on the contrary, it always arises within as “dynamic and heterogeneous: an ever-mobile ‘plurality of resistances’ dispersed throughout the network of power itself” (100). As such, The Female Man can be reread today, in a somewhat provocative fashion, through the lenses of Deleuze and Guattari’s project of philosophical nomadism. Fully aware of the risks involved in applying the Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical perspective to the reading of a feminist text, this paper aims at showing that such an encounter might bring a number of insights that productively deterritorialize and reinvigorate Russ’s
critically well-travelled novel without pushing it into the trap of an implicitly masculine, and explicitly gender-neutral, theory. Instead, one of the things that such a transfiguration of Russ’s text is capable of doing is benefit from the theoretical confrontation by showing the paradoxical potentiality residing in an intrinsically posthumanist conceptual apparatus, in this case the one created by Deleuze and Guattari, and in particular, their highly contested term of “becoming-woman.”

In the subsequent sections of this paper, I explore, firstly, the ways in which Russ’s critical utopia problematizes the intertwined notions of spatiality and temporality in relation to the issues of female embodiment and women’s identity. Here I contend that the text of The Female Man read vis-à-vis the Deleuzian anti-dualistic model of nomadic thinking and Deleuzo-Guattarian idiosyncratic vocabulary, specifically the notion of the rhizome, demonstrates Russ’s underlying idea of exposing the dichotomous thinking about male and female gender as implicitly patriarchal. Secondly, I examine the text’s strategically conceived critique of patriarchal reality presented as a default perspective and productive of the sexist objectifying discourse in the context of such recurrent figures as “the little girl” and “becoming-woman,” which are identified as operating at the intersection of Russ’s text and the theoretical approaches and ideas advanced by Deleuze and Guattari and Deleuzian scholars I rely on in this essay, and which paradoxically emerge as simultaneously illustrative of patriarchal appropriation and potentially deconstructive of it. At this juncture I also propose to examine Russ’s underlying argument regarding social construction of identity on the model of the dynamics between what Deleuze and Guattari termed as “molar” and “molecular” identity, which finally brings me to my concluding argument concerning the suggested shift observed in Russ’s text from the majoritarian to minoritarian feminist politics. This closing section also serves as a brief explanation of how critical utopia intersects with Deleuzian nomadism, despite Deleuze and Guattari’s explicit rejection of the concept of utopia, which effectuates a revised perspective on utopian thinking.

Written in the 1960s, Russ’s novel did not come out in print until in 1975, shortly after the publication of Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus (1972), and a few years before their famous A Thousand Plateaus was first published in France (1980). Whereas their oeuvre had been initially rejected by most feminist critics, recent decades have seen a kind of re-evaluation of their work and its uncertain promise for feminist theory. In particular, some of the major feminist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti,
Elizabeth Grosz, Kelly Oliver, and Dorothea Olkowski have extensively commented on Deleuze and Guattari’s work, forging what has come to be referred to as contemporary Deleuzian feminism, and translating their often inaccessible theory for a wider critical audience. Extremely careful in their explorations of the Deleuze-Guattarian project and the masculine discourse that underwrites it, and expressing their ambivalence about certain aspects of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, their thoughtful analyses nonetheless suggest that looking toward the horizon of thought delineated by Deleuze and Guattari might in fact carry considerable potential for the political goals of feminism. Kelly Oliver, for instance, devotes a separate chapter of her 1998 book *Subjectivity Without Subjects* to an alternative model of the so called “fractal politics” stemming from Foucault’s call for a proliferation of forms of immanent “individual resistance on all levels” (116), directly related to the Deleuzian rhizomatics according to which the subject becomes “a strange attractor within a deterministic yet chaotic system” further defined by Deleuze as “the subject effect” of tracing nomadic movements of agency (126). Along similar lines, Rosi Braidotti, while ambivalent about Deleuze and Guattari’s much disputed post-humanist affirmation of dispersion of subjectivity, underscores the significance and consistency of Deleuze’s argument ranging “from his global rejection of binary oppositions to the rejection of the man/woman dichotomy in favor of the continuum of interacting embodied subjectivities” (162). I will demonstrate that similar concerns are showcased in Russ’s feminist critical utopia.

In the chapter of her 1997 study *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation* devoted to the work of Joanna Russ and Octavia Butler, Jennifer Burwell focuses on strategic potentialities of feminist critical utopias, and their “structural and ideological permeability,” as ways of dislodging stable notions of subjectivity, agency, and social space through disruptive narrativization of femininity. Apart from emphasizing the tenuous “permeable” boundary between utopia and dystopia in Russ’s text, Burwell reads *The Female Man* as a science fiction critical utopia with dystopian undertones that exposes the “‘difference’ between man and woman as a conceptual ruse that denies women as a group access to empowering self-representations” (90). Her analysis of *The Female Man* serves here as a point of departure for interpreting Russ’s novel as a feminist intervention that can be further read in the context of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought, and in particular their figure of

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“becoming-woman” as a way of both re-territorializing and de-territorializing the contentious notion of socially constructed femininity.

In Tom Moylan’s 2000 study Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, the critic’s argument veers towards tracing the intensities of utopian impulses as implicated in patterns of nomadic thinking, which relates directly to a desire for “‘communal, even, quasi-tribal’ social systems” (80) very much in line with, as it seems to me, Deleuzian nomadism. On the same note, Moylan continues exploring the “radical capacity” of utopia, via Marxist thought coming straight from Bloch, as well as “education of desire” emblematic of utopian thought and realized through a speculative process of mapping out new testing grounds and trajectories outlined by revolutionary desires. Out of these lines of thought, Moylan forges his understanding of utopia as a set of productive and positive strategies and impulses capable of generating conditions for political change (87). Moylan sees Russ’s work as one of the germinal feminist critical utopias that embraced the dynamics of the “strains of socialist, radical, lesbian, and liberal feminism” (80). Consequently, this paper aims at showing that there is more to be said about The Female Man in terms of the feminist nomad thought that this work clearly exemplifies.

I – Girls on the Move: Toward a Utopian Space of Discorporation

In her Notes on Nowhere, Jennifer Burwell argues that Russ’s depiction of the four women traversing different social spaces and different historical/social realities “creates a ‘cognitive alienation’ that denaturalizes and contextualizes the protagonists’ contemporary identities and provides a model of the relationships between individual subject and social space that is one of dialogic interaction rather than representative homology” (90). Indeed, Russ structures her novel by placing the characters in a number of different universes thus dislodging them from their familiar contexts and making them move and interact across the lines of a variety of spatial-temporal planes. Early in the novel, Russ’s playfully speculative musing on an alternative plane of spatiality and temporality sets the utopian tone for the whole text:

To carry this line of argument further, there must be an infinite number of possible universes […]. Every displacement of every molecule, every change in orbit of every electron, every quantum of light that strikes here and not there—each of these must somewhere have its alternative. It’s possible, too, that there is no such thing as one clear line or strand of
probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one
to the other without even knowing it, as long as we keep within the limits
of a set of variations that really make no difference to us. Thus the paradox
of time travel ceases to exist, for the Past one visits is never one’s
own Past but always somebody else’s; or rather, one’s visit to the Past
instantly creates another Present (one in which the visit has already
happened) […]. And with each decision you make (back there in the Past)
that new probable universe itself branches, creating simultaneously a new
Past and a new Present, or to put it plainly, a new universe. (6-7)

Such a subversive approach to the notions of time and space is also part
and parcel of Deleuze and Guattari’s model of the rhizome theorized in A
Thousand Plateaus:

Let us summarize the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees
or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its
traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into
play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. […] It is
comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion.
It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from
which it grows and which it overspills. (21)

As a key theoretical figure in Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, the rhizome
effects positive dislocations of molar (fixed) identities, re- and
deterritorializes the subjects by opening them up to interaction and
difference, as well as constantly liberating multiple “lines of flight” and
resistance. In The Female Man, the character of Joanna becomes “the
exploded subject” (i.e.: the subject-effect) of the Deleuzian Body without
Organs, another crucial term used by the theorists, defined as “a living
body all the more alive and teeming once it has blown apart the organism
and its organization,” and driven by a utopian desire through different
temporalities and spatial planes (A Thousand Plateaus 30).

To resort once again to the Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology,
Joanna’s “exploded subjectivity” is seen as transfigured into a molecular
multiplicity that sets free the figures of Janet, the alien from a futuristic
matriarchal utopia called Whileaway, the self-effacing librarian Jeannine
from a patriarchal society that did not experience the Second World War
and in which the Great Depression has never finished, and finally the
female cyborg assassin Jael coming from yet another dystopian universe.
Neither of the spaces that the women originally inhabit, including the
utopian/dystopian ones, offers them full freedom from the ruling

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essentialist constructions of femininity. Joanna, despite her academic career and privileged social status, feels trapped in her socially determined female role and has to constantly remind herself that women intellectuals are bound to live lonely and conflicted lives. Janet’s apparently idyllic and secure lesbian Whileawayan world, underwritten by violence and extremely rigid work ethics, turns out to be far from ideal, Jeannine’s gendered society is defined by sexism, whereas Jael’s dystopia turns out to be yet another violent and unlivable world. Nonetheless, the new configurations in which the women meet along the way, as well as their peregrinations between their parallel universes become vehicles for imagining social change. The moment the women encounter difference by interacting with one another, the novel’s underlying frustration gives way to a vision of new uncharted spaces and new desires. The experience of difference along with the realization that certain spatial, and thus also social, boundaries do not hold originally causes understandable confusion and difficulty for Joanna. She learns that her ‘universe’ forces her to be divided between two equally dissatisfying and limiting realities, and realizes that it is no longer a livable space for her:

I live between worlds. Half the time I like doing housework, I care a lot about how I look, I warm up to men and flirt beautifully (I mean I really admire them, though I’d die before I took the initiative; that’s men’s business) … . In my other incarnation I live out such a plethora of conflict that you wouldn’t think I’d survive, would you, but I do; I wake up enraged, go to sleep in numbed despair … . (110)

More often than not, the women divide their time between desperate efforts to fulfill male expectations or giving vent to aggression through outbursts of rage and despair that define, and thus limit, their frequently ineffectual feminist struggle. Finally, however, the new conceptual space is created through a realization of how different yet intertwined their conflicted lives are. The novel’s underlying idea of utopian re-mapping of space facilitates change, revision, and the process of reimagining gendered spaces.

*The Female Man* articulates a utopian desire for a social space where the dichotomous gendered world that Joanna still inhabits and the default perspective of which is decidedly masculine are destabilized and deconstructed. In Russ’s novel, the ways in which social space is gendered threaten to foreclose on lines of liberating nomadic movements. In this sense, all the women’s parallel universes, including Janet’s matriarchal
utopia and Jael’s dystopian and violent world, call for resignification, destabilization, and subversion on many different levels: spatial, temporal, linguistic, and ultimately political. In her article “Écart: The Space of Corporeal Difference,” Gail Weiss evokes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of écart, traceable to Judith Butler’s spatial-temporal paradox of “becoming” seen as a non-linear “trajectory” that “involves a disparate series of backward and forward movements in which the subject repetitively, reflexively, turns back upon itself, and moreover, this self that the subject returns to is not a fixed self that is phantasmatically projected as a stable site of significance” (205). Weiss relates écart to Deleuze and Guattari’s work where an analogous conceptualization of space would be defined as “a strange space of discorporation that makes incorporation possible” and further conceptualized as a territory that enables flows and intensities of agency and desire thus allowing to “separate bodies from what they were, what they are not now, and what they may or may not become […], and therefore guarantees that our own body images will always be multiple” (206, 212).

As a site of discorporation, écart can be identified in Russ’s text if we trace her playfully ironic depictions of the women’s passages between different spatial-temporal realities. When Janet moves into Joanna’s apartment, she does not only invade her private space, and brings Jeannine Dadier with her, but also permeates the media-saturated aura of contemporary New York City, and even manages to literally melt through a wall:

That woman lived with me for a month. I don’t mean in my house. Janet Evason on the radio, the talk shows, the newspapers, newsreels, magazines, ads even. With someone I suspect was Miss Dadier appearing in my bedroom late one night. “I’m lost.” She meant: what world is this? “F’godsakes, go out in the hall, will you?” But she melted away through the Chinese print on the wall, presumably into the empty, carpeted, three-in-the-morning corridor outside. Some people never stick around. (25)

Janet’s strength and uncanny abilities to overcome material boundaries between objects are revealed on several other occasions in the novel as comedic interventions in Joanna’s reality.

In Russ’s novel, a possibility of such transgressive spatial-temporal differentiation is one of the key ideas. The novel’s conceptualization of
spatiality, just like the notion of écart as “a space of noncoincidence that resists articulation,” is not reducible to a handful of playful fantastic occurrences; instead, the text of The Female Man becomes an articulation of a desire for a site of such destabilization of molar female identity and a testing ground for identifying its molecular level of possible destabilization, multiplicity, and social transformation (Weiss 205).

II – From the Little Girl through the Female Man to “Becoming-Woman.”

The question of female identity and the marginalized position that women occupy in gendered social spaces lie at the core of Russ’s feminist text, as are the myriad ways in which femininity is culturally and socially constructed. In the novel, Russ voices these concerns in a characteristically parodic way through the figure of the Playful Philosopher Dunyasha Bernadettson, whose bizarre godlike marble statue becomes an egregious abstraction that mocks the idea of unrepresentability of womanhood:

At first She is majestic; then I notice that Her cheekbones are too broad, Her eyes set at different levels, that Her whole figure is a jumble of badly matching planes, a mass of inhuman contradictions. […] Persons who look at the statue longer than I did have reported that one cannot pin It down at all, that she is a constantly changing contradiction, that She becomes in turn gentle, terrifying, hateful, loving, “stupid” (or “dead”) and finally indescribable. (103)

Using this truly cubist image, Russ plays with the impossibility of representation of women and underscores the paradoxical nature of the essentially patriarchal concept of femininity. Consequently, the readers are presented with a completely incongruous caricature of a female figure made up of disparate elements only to learn that the statue is not the actual likeness of Dunyasha at all, but an ancient model that was used by her genetic surgeon. The statue also exposes a number of apparently anti-essentialist claims as inherently essentialist. Designed to outplay the paradigm of femininity, the statue becomes everything it tried to subvert, and the whole image simultaneously mocks and reifies the idea of the feminine as disconcertingly abstract and ultimately unrepresentable.

The parodic dimension of Russ’s text, however, is not merely deployed in the text to outplay sexist language implicit in masculine discourses that The Female Man so vehemently attacks. The ways in which
Russ reiterates certain figures and elements of these discourses throughout the novel evokes the concept of Luce Irigaray’s mimicry. The most vivid example of this strategy is the image of “a little girl” that reappears in The Female Man with a consistent and disturbing frequency, bringing to mind Irigaray’s strategic “hysterical” repetition that deliberately mimes sexist discourse in order to expose and subvert it. The Female Man is inundated with instances of such mimicry, its conspicuous example being the farcical party scene during which Joanna and Janet find themselves among a group of women playing a game of “His Little Girl”:

Saccharissa: I’m Your Little Girl.
Host (wheedling): Are you really?
Saccharissa (complacent): Yes I am.
Host: Then you have to be stupid, too. (35)

Later during the same party, Janet violently confronts the man whose sexist language is far from what the visitor from a world free of sexism can endure:

Baby, baby, baby. It’s the host, drunk enough not to care.
Uh-oh. Be ladylike. […]
“You are beautiful honey.” […]
“Give us a good-bye kiss.” […]
“What’sa matter, you some kinda prude?”
No, no, keep on being ladylike.
[Janet beats him up.]
[Joanna asks:] “Why’d you do it?”
“He called me a baby.” (45-7)

The confrontation between Janet and the party host shows how the category of woman is equated with the infantile figure of a naïve and vulnerable child, and serves as an illustration of women’s disempowerment effected directly by sexist language.

The figure of a little girl as “the site of a culture’s most intensified disinvestments and recastings of the body” (Grosz 175), which according to some critics can be traced back to Lewis Carroll’s Alice, and more directly to the psychoanalytical discourses of Freud and Lacan, both of which used of the little girl trope in their analyses, also disturbingly permeates the oeuvre of Deleuze and Guattari. As Gary Genosko explains in his voluminous study of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, their “little girl” (also frequently referred to as “Alice”) should be read as a kind of
“movement between or entwinement of the corporeal and the incorporeal” (1466). The movement of the “little girl,” as Genosko further argues, is what defines Deleuze and Guattari’s “figure of the subject without fixed identity which is peripherally produced in its traversal of surfaces” (1466). Needless to say, this aspect of Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical language, a performance of a carefully calculated provocation that relies heavily of the Freudian and Lacanian masculine discourses of psychoanalysis, has been severely criticized by the feminist commentators of their work. Undeniably, Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphors of “becoming-woman” and “little girl” are blatant and uncritical examples of patriarchal appropriation. However, Genosko’s observation that the little girl figure might in fact signify a kind of movement of destabilized identity, initiated on the sly in between the systemic strata and on the peripheries of hegemony, strikes me as particularly useful for re-examining Russ’s critique of social production of reified molar female identity that is always measured against and subsumed under the definition of manhood. To begin with, Russ views the category of gender as a social construct; her notion of gender is always shot through with the awareness of impossibility to imagine womanhood as anything but the opposite of or essentially inherent in the category of the masculine. The eponymous “female man” is a case in point—Joanna’s frustration for the most part derives from the awareness that she has to act like a man in order to be able to be treated like a human being in the male world. Put differently, she has to be a masculine woman if she does not want to be treated like a little girl. Calling herself the female man, she points to the linguistic impossibility to identify as a woman without subscribing to the term’s inherent essentialism: “‘Man’ is a rhetorical convenience for ‘human.’ ‘Man’ includes ‘woman.’” [Notice also that unlike the word ‘woman’ the word ‘Man’ is capitalized here.] … 1. The Eternal Feminine leads us ever upward and on. (Guess who ‘us’ is)” (93). In Joanna’s world, men possess, control, and manipulate language, whereas women do not have the linguistic means to imagine themselves outside masculine discourse. We learn that language is deficient because it lacks ways of expression of womanhood that would be more adequate than the one used in the book’s title; consequently, the linguistic subordination of the feminine becomes yet another sign of masculine hegemony. Although Joanna’s self-identification as the female man can hardly be a satisfying option, she nevertheless feels resigned to it, which shows how patriarchy forecloses on
the ways of articulating womanhood outside its molar identification congealed in language and already inscribed into the order of patriarchy.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write: “What we term a molar entity is, for example, the woman as defined by her form, endowed with organs and functions, and assigned as a subject” (275). For them, this molar identity must be destabilized in order to, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, “[put] into question the coagulations, rigidifications, and impositions required by patriarchal (...) power relations. ‘Woman’ is precisely the projection of (men’s) fantasies” (176). In Russ’s novel, and more specifically, in Joanna’s world, molar identity is the only available form of female selfhood that, to quote one of the characters’ sardonic remark, “inheres in the style of her attractiveness” (60). Molar structures of thought underlie both men and women’s daily conversations and create an apparently impermeable grid of signifiers and descriptors that defines the male/female power struggles. When a woman finally yields to male expectations, she hears him say the following lines:

HE: You really are sweet and responsive after all. You’ve kept your femininity. You’re not one of those hysterical feminist bitches who wants to be a man and have a penis. You’re a woman.
SHE: Yes. (She kills herself) (Russ 94)

The range of traits stereotypically attributed to molar femininity includes attractiveness, gentleness, acquiescence, domesticity, naivety, vulnerability, intellectual inferiority, as well as the disorder of hysteria. To use the Deleuzian terminology again, all these features make the female identity resemble an *empty* Body without Organs that, as Elizabeth Grosz explains: “is evacuated not only of organs and organization, but also of its intensities and forces. This body does not lack; its problem is the opposite: it fills itself to the point where nothing further can circulate. It is empty only in the sense that if a body is made up of proliferations, connections, and linkages, the empty BwO has ceased to flow” (Grosz 171). In Russ’s text, Joanna withstands the social pressure that urges her to become the empty BwO, and realizes that the molar identity actually deprives her of any sense of selfhood:

Woman is the gateway to another world; Woman is the earth-mother; Woman is the eternal siren; Woman is purity; Woman is carnality; Woman has intuition; Woman is the life-force; Woman is selfless love. [...]
I AM HONEY
I AM RASPBERRY JAM
I AM A VERY GOOD LAY
I AM A GOOD DATE
I AM A GOOD WIFE
I AM GOING CRAZY […]

(When I decided that the key word in all this vomit was self-less and that if I was really all the things books, friends, parents, teachers, dates, movies, relatives, doctors, newspapers, and magazines said I was, then if I acted as I pleased without thinking of all these things I would be all these things in spite of my not trying to be all these things. So—(205-6)

As the passage blatantly shows, women are deprived of any sense of identity precisely through having to constantly confront and resist the excess of identification projected on them. Furthermore, assuming that Janine, Janet, and Jael are in fact different aspects of Joanna’s persona (Joanna as a BwO), and that, as Jael says, they are “four versions of the same woman” that Joanna made up whiling away her time, we may perceive all of the women as different aspects of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “becoming-woman” (162):

She is an abstract line, or a line of flight. Thus girls do not belong to an age, group, sex, order or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes: they produce n molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through. […] It is not the girl who becomes woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl. (276-7)

Thus, the becoming-woman should be approached not as a process of assimilation, but as a kind of Deleuzian dehiscence (bursting open) and simultaneous radical destabilization of the molar female subject. In The Female Man, Joanna’s becoming-woman results in a multiplicity—a form of identity split into several different women. Along similar lines, Deleuze and Guattari introduce their understanding of molarity and molecularity as, respectively, negative and positive consequences of staying within or going beyond a stabilized fixed identity:

Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it […] not imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman. (275)
As they explain elsewhere in *A Thousand Plateaus*, however, molar and molecular identity politics are bound to run parallel: “It is, of course, indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics, with a view to winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity […]. But it is dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject, which does not function without drying up a spring or stopping a flow” (276). Through the figure of Joanna and her ways of connecting to Janet, Janine, and Jael, Russ delineates in her novel a possibility of the Deleuzian rhizomatic movement of positive desire that operates by linkages, circulations, and flows of intensities. To see the contentious concept of “becoming-woman” at work in *The Female Man*, therefore, we need to trace the women’s discontinuous movements and transactions to energies evocative of the Deleuzian “desiring machine”; an entity defiant of any essence or unity and capable of destabilizing any repressive system based on such a unity. As Elizabeth Grosz has it:

A “desiring machine” opposes the notion of unity or oneness; the elements or discontinuities that compose it do not belong to either an original totality that has been lost or one which finalizes or completes it, a telos. They do not re-present the real, for their function is not a signifying one: they produce and they themselves are real. They constitute, without distinction, individual, collective, and social reality. Desire does not create permanent multiplicities; it experiments, producing ever-new alignments, linkages, and connections, making things. It is fundamentally nomadic not teleological, meandering, creative, nonrepetitive, proliferative, unpredictable. (168)

In the novel, Janet Evason’s matriarchal utopia, albeit by no means livable or permanent, exemplifies a desire to experiment by testing new social arrangements that are radically different from Joanna’s world. Burwell argues that through the figure of Janet “Russ deploys the conventions surrounding utopia against contemporary values in order to disrupt them” (99). As Janet’s utopia and Joanna’s world clash, the difference that Janet brings to the patriarchal society of the 1969 exposes and targets its only apparently natural heterosexual order. Janet functions as a trickster figure through which Russ plays not so much with the possibility of erasing sexual difference by simply eliminating one of the sexes (hyperbolically presented as the one-sex Whileawayan universe); rather, as Burwell aptly remarks, she “disrupt[s] the gender game by introducing the possibility of a whole new set of rules,” and puts into

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question the problematic idea of what is considered natural and acceptable in both Janet’s (women-only society) and Joanna’s worlds (patriarchal society) (100). The contrast established between both is clearly a brilliant feminist provocation on Russ’s part. As such, as Peter Fitting aptly points out in his article “For Men Only: a Guide to reading Single-Sex Worlds,” it is strictly strategic. Fitting argues that “the description of a future without men is a more effective way of urging the reader to realize that the construction of a better society can only be accomplished through the complete elimination of patriarchy” (112). Fitting suggests that it is not men that Russ would like to see excluded, but rather patriarchy that she would like to see eradicated. Consequently, Whileaway is another hyperbole that Russ uses to set up and reinforce a point of contrast between the established order of Joanna’s universe and the radical erasure of the male sex in Janet’s utopia. Therefore, the figure of matriarchal utopia in Russ’s text becomes an excellent expression of a desire for alternative ways of imagining gender roles. The utopian scenario projected through the character of Janet becomes another significant vehicle of transgression in the text.

While Janet intervenes in the characters’ lives throughout the entire narrative, Jael, also known as Alice Reasoner, makes her early cameo appearance in the text only to disappear with a promise to resurface in the later part of the book. Jael, a postmodern version of Alice in Wonderland, is privy to the burden of knowledge about all the other women and their universes. Challenging the liberal feminism of the sixties, exemplified by the text’s frequent allusions to second-wave feminism and Betty Friedan’s Feminine Mystique, which I see as subtly satirized in the novel, Jael functions as a figure that exposes its shortcomings. As Fitting notes, Jael’s intervention in the novel brings a correction to the idea of Janet’s matriarchal universe by exposing its apparent natural emergence as a utopian myth (106). During one of her speeches, Jael says to Janet:

Whileaway’s plaque is a big lie. Your ancestors lied about it. It is I who gave you your ‘plague,’ my dear, about which you can now poetize and moralize to your heart’s content; I, I, I, I am the plague, Janet Evanson. I and the war I fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand years of peace and love and the Whileawayan flowers nourish themselves on the bones of the men we have slain. (211)

By saying that, however, Jael dismisses any radical form of feminism, including her own violent one, as limited. Her “voluntary hysterical

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strength,” which parodies the stereotype of hysteria as distinctly female, results in fatigue rather than relief, let alone any lasting social or political change. Jael’s world is a violent dystopian one; therefore, her intervention into the narrative is bound to be as short-lived as that of Janet’s, and becomes merely another disruptive device in the textual play that Russ offers to her readers.

Interestingly, it is Jeannine the Everywoman who emerges as the most empowered at the end of the novel. Jeannine is coming from a patriarchy outside history (The Great Depression is still a fact of life in her world, but the Second World War did not happen there at all.), which brings to mind Deleuze’s provocative statement urging women to sidestep “their past and their future” as a way of entering the revolutionary flow of becoming; living and looking past patriarchy (Dialogues 2). Apart from occupying an extra-historical position, however, Jeannine betrays a desire for extreme self-effacement, which I am inclined to read as an attempt to get out of her molar identity:

Stupid and inactive. Pathetic. Cognitive starvation. Jeanine loves to be entangled with the souls of the furniture in my apartment, softly drawing herself in to fit inside them, pulling one long limb after another into the cramped positions of my tables and chairs. The dryad of my living room. I can look everywhere, at the encyclopedia stand, at the cheap lamps, at the homey but comfortable brown couch; it is always Jeannine who looks back. It’s uncomfortable for me but such a relief to her. That long, young, pretty body loves to be sat on and I think if Jeannine ever meets a Satanist, she will find herself perfectly at home as his altar at a Black Mass, relieved of personality at last and forever. (92-3, my emphasis)

Joanna’s perception of Jeannine’s desire for emptying out her molar subjectivity as essentially negative is certainly understandable, since Russ’s initial depiction of Jeannine is based on an assumption that she is a glaring example of a woman victimized by patriarchy. When we are introduced to Jeannine at the beginning of The Female Man, she is portrayed as a water nymph or a mermaid, “an evasive outline in the back seat” of Joanna’s car; in brief, we meet Jeannine who “is not available to Jeannine” (20, 109). Despite all that, her eventual transfiguration, precipitated not only by interactions with the other women but also by stepping outside her own molar self, becomes evident towards the novel’s closure:

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Jeannine is out on town on a Saturday afternoon saying goodbye, goodbye, goodbye to all that. Goodbye to mannequins in store windows who pretend to be sympathetic but who are really nasty conspiracies, goodbye to hating Mother, goodbye to the Divine Psychiatrist, goodbye to the Girls, goodbye to Normality, goodbye to Getting Married, goodbye to The Supernaturally Blessed Event, goodbye to being Some Body, goodbye to waiting for Him (poor fellow!) [...] goodbye Politics, hello politics. She’s scared but that’s all right. (209)

Paradoxically, therefore, even though Jeannine is portrayed by Russ as an extremely vulnerable, fragile, and self-effacing character, it is not objectification or obliteration of the self that Jeannine finally succumbs to; the scenes in which she appears to melt into the surrounding objects may point to a desire for reaching a space that is not available to her until she finds her own sense of empowerment precisely through shedding her old identity.

III – “Rejoice, little book!”

At this juncture I feel compelled to briefly consider in the context of Russ’s feminist project the possible intersections between the concept of utopia and Deleuze and Guattari’s thought as openly opposed to utopianism.¹ In What is Philosophy? Deleuze and Guattari famously say: “Utopia is not a good concept because even when opposed to History it is still subject to it and lodged within it as an ideal or motivation” (110). In his commentaries on the utopian undertones in the Deleuzian oeuvre, scholar Ian Buchanan identifies the concept of “becoming” as the locus of Deleuzian utopian thinking, analyzing it alongside Fredric Jameson’s idea of utopia as process.² Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari go on to say: “But becoming is the concept itself. It is born in History, and falls back into it, but is not of it. In itself it has neither beginning nor end but only a milieu. It is thus more geographical than historical. Such are revolutions and societies of friends, societies of resistance, because to create is to resist: pure becomings, pure events on a plane of immanence” (110). Along similar lines, Elizabeth Grosz offers a feminist reexamination of utopia (in a large part via Deleuze and Guattari) in her thought-provoking Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space, where utopia is redefined as “a mode of becoming” (136). In these scholars’ valuable accounts, utopia has been productively rethought against the backdrop of changing
perspectives on the interrelated notions of space, temporality, and embodied subjectivity.

As I have tried to demonstrate, Russ’s critical utopia prefigures these concerns as a text working against the patriarchal status quo and instead operating on the principle of destabilization and resignification of its underlying codes. According to Angelika Bammer, towards the end of The Female Man we are reminded that “the shape of the future is still open: there are utopian and dystopian possibilities. But of these ‘options,’ not all are liveable. The choice—and attendant actions—are up to us” (95). Bammer’s comment points to the fact that Russ’s text also displays a considerable degree of ambivalence towards the classical version of utopia where the emphasis is unmistakably on the end-goal of defining an ideal society. Instead, The Female Man urges its readers to discern a radical shift from a closed model of finalized utopia to an open-ended model of utopia as process; as, indeed, “a mode of becoming” (Grosz 2001; 136). In this sense Russ’s critical approach to utopia fully resonates with the present-day feminist revisions of utopianism, such as the one found in Grosz’s speculative work. In the spirit of Deleuzian nomadic politics, Russ intelligently urges the female readers not to seek to destroy another man, but to “go on reading,” reminding us that the apparently hermetic territory of the dominant and oppressive system is never fully or even correctly mapped out (62). These uncharted interstices of patriarchy constitute potential loci for resistance, and the book becomes an expression of feminist nomad thought charting new trajectories of energies and new channels of desire that would allow transfiguration of spatial and temporal boundaries and conceptual testing of alternative grounds for both thought and action. Through its insistent questioning of the foundations of subjectivity, Russ’s text emerges as a speculation on “going beyond identity and subjectivity, fragmenting and freeing up lines of flight, ‘liberating’ multiplicities, corporeal and otherwise, that identity subsumes under one” (Grosz 1994, 178).

When Jeannine says goodbye to Politics and welcomes the lower-case politics toward the end of the novel, she also begins to traverse the porous line between molar and molecular feminist politics; majoritarian and minoritarian feminism. Whereas she clearly looks toward the horizon of the latter, the awareness that both currents run parallel and inform each other is an underlying trait of The Female Man. Deconstruction of molar identities is always under way, but it is never fully realized; the very desire for overcoming molarity and achieving molecularity is utopian. It is
precisely this kind of desiring-production that, as Dorothea Olkowski aptly observes in her article “Flows of Desire and the Body-Becoming,” entails restrictive and non-restrictive uses of desire through the interaction of which “every desiring-machine is completely capable of demolishing entire social sectors” (114). Finally, Russ leaves the reader with her wandering humble “little book” and a sense that her playful narrative is but a gesture in the series of gestures that we make every day in order for the things to change, thereby shifting the focus from the increasingly inaccessible and reified realm of the global Feminist Politics to the local, ephemeral, relentlessly resistant feminist politics, and its inevitable rhizomic movements created by breaking up of automatisms in both theory and practice.

Notes

1 Cf. David Bell’s 2010 article “Fail Again. Fail Better: Nomadic utopianism in Deleuze & Guattari and Yevgeny Zamyatin.” (Political Perspectives 4(1)), where Bell develops the term of “nomadic utopianism” as a Deleuze and Guattari inspired and freedom-oriented tradition of thought contrary to the authoritarian “State utopianism.”

2 See in particular Buchanan’s 2000 book Deleuzism: A Metacommentary and his 1998 article published in Utopian Studies “Metacommentary on Utopia, or Jameson’s Dialectic of Hope.”

References


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