

We Wuz Pushed

Conversation Pieces



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by Lee Mandelo

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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually-created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
Volume 32

We Wuz Pushed

On Joanna Russ
and Radical Truth-Telling

by

Lee Mandelo





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“We would gladly have listened to her (they said) *if only she had spoken like a lady*. But they are liars and the truth is not in them.”

—Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*

To speak radical truths—unapologetically, ferociously, rudely when necessary—is the central purpose of Joanna Russ’s influential body of work in science fiction, feminist theory, and criticism. Radical¹ truth-telling takes many forms and addresses many concerns in Russ’s writing, but at the core of her work, from feminist critical theory like *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* to a Robinsonade like *We Who Are About To...* to lesbian realist fiction like *On Strike Against God*, it remains: a burning intent to demystify and clarify, to destroy obfuscations, and to reveal real truths as she perceived them. Her willingness to revise those perceptions and incorporate fresh evidence that required her truths to evolve demonstrates her ultimate understanding of truth as potentially mutable and intimately personal but also supported by social or scientific evidence. In this way, the concept of “real truth” is problematized and individualized but not ultimately rejected. The centrality of this project of radical truth-telling is universal through all her works, the one guiding intention and unifying theme that reoccurs consistently despite all other variations throughout her career.

Russ’s truths are informed by a feminist consciousness, but she is also concerned with a host of other intellectual and critical engagements, including

1 “Radical” in the sense of the radical feminist movement as well as radical social movements, placed at odds with what was perceived as soft or apologist feminism that worked within the cultural frame of “speaking like a lady.” This definition of the term places it at odds with both reactionary and middle-ground social criticisms.

socioeconomic, literary, and scientific truths. Russ's work values all truth and will not brook omission or wish-fulfillment; she "has a trait far less common in sf [than a varied body of work]: a distrust of easiness, of solutions that magic away human fallibilities" (Sleight 199). This unwillingness to take the easy route is what supports a project of radical truth-telling, a project that includes feminist truths about patriarchy, socialist truths about individualized existence in society, and extrapolative truths about science and rationality, among others. These various lenses, which are nearly always juxtaposed in her work, make it impossible to limit Russ to any one field. She is not *just* a lesbian feminist, or *just* an sf author, or *just* a literary critic. As speculative fiction theorist Farah Mendlesohn says, "Russ's voice needs to be understood from these different perspectives; she is a thoroughly three-dimensional author and cannot be viewed through only one lens" (ix). Her project of radical truth-telling spans and unites these "many and overlapping" (ix) concerns—the concerns of a theorist and the concerns of an author in love with her chosen field, the concerns of a lesbian feminist and the concerns of a critic.

Mendlesohn also argues that Russ is "a writer whose angry creativity burns the complacent veldt of narrative... [whose] purpose was to challenge the agendas of others" (vii-ix), but I would go further in stating her purpose. Challenging agendas is only one part of the project of radical truth-telling that extended from Russ's earliest works through the end of her life, following her through all the shifts and transitions in her career. She was also engaged in extrapolation—the

project of science fiction as a genre and of feminist theory—and uncovering hidden truths about women, women’s history, and women’s writing. While challenging the patriarchal agenda is a part of the project of feminist truth-telling, it is not the culmination. The truth-telling must go further than simply challenging extant agendas—as a project, it must construct new, radical ones.

This central purpose does not mean that she was in perpetual agreement with herself down the years. It has been argued by several critics, among them her close friend and associate Samuel Delany, that Russ’s later writings “can be read as ‘mounting critiques of her own earlier works’” (Newell & Tallentire 67), and it has also been proven by Russ’s own speeches counter-acting her earlier arguments—for example her apology for the transphobic content of *The Female Man* (“Legendary...”)—that she does not always remain on the side of the truth she originally spoke. The disagreements and conflicts that arise from Russ’s own works in conversation with each other do not detract from her essential purpose, however; if anything, these tensions over the years and throughout shifts in career show that she was willing to change her own mind and ideology when she considered that her previous ideas no longer spoke necessary, radical truths. As Dianna Newell and Jenea Tallentire conclude, “Russ’s extraordinary trajectory... reminds us that authors and critics do not come to their careers fully formed and changeless, but develop over time, and ‘with the times’” (80). This trajectory of change and revision of prior truths is a valuable part of the truth-telling project.

This essay considers Russ's body of work as a unified whole connected by a central purpose: that of radical truth-telling. While there has been one prior book considering Russ's oeuvre, Jeanne Cortiel's *Demand My Writing*, it is concerned with the specifically feminist political and social implications of Russ's work, and not so much the ways in which her body of work constitutes a coherent project. Aside from Cortiel's text, the majority of critical engagements with Russ's writing are focused on one specific work, or one thematic aspect of a handful of works—not with her entire, unified project. *We Wuz Pushed* provides a more cohesive look at the larger central feature of Russ's writing throughout her career.

I. WE WUZ PUSHED: Why Truth-Telling?

Joanna Russ is frequently explicit about the reasons that any writer—including herself—might have to embark on a project of radical truth-telling and the reasons that these projects are vital and necessary. The motivations are as multifarious and complex as her position in the field of culture, but at the core is a simple driving imperative: she does it because *there's no other choice*. Russ makes the inevitable nature of radical praxis explicit in the text of *On Strike Against God*, with a dialogue between Jean and Esther (in this case specifically about feminism, but it is largely applicable to the drive toward radical truth-telling as a whole):

Leaning her silly, beautiful, drunken head on my shoulder, she said, “Oh, Esther, I don’t want to be a feminist. I don’t enjoy it. It’s no fun.”

“I know,” I said. “I don’t either.” People think you decide to be a “radical,” for God’s sake, like deciding to be a librarian or a ship’s chandler. You “make up your mind,” you “commit yourself” (sounds like a mental hospital, doesn’t it?).

I said Don’t worry, we could be buried together and have engraved on our tombstone the awful truth, which someday somebody will understand:

WE WUZ PUSHED. (37)

That final line, simple, evocative, and unforgettable, is the core of the drive to truth-telling—hence the title of this essay. It is not a choice; it simply *is*. “In a perfect world I would not have to be a feminist and gay activist and I could spend my life discussing H. P. Lovecraft” (Russ, *To Write* 60), but this is not a perfect world, and so the truth-telling must be done. The motivation for Russ to undertake this project is one and the same with the drive toward radical praxis that comes with seeing the truth for what it is, and seeing the obfuscations for what they are—once seen, it cannot be unseen, and it must be shared or else the untruths will proliferate.

Russ and other writers concerned with truth-telling (Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Suzy McKee Charnas, Ursula K. Le Guin) have been pushed by so many things, not least of which are *other writers* constructing mystifications and obfuscations of the truth. Russ’s article “The Image of Women in Science Fiction,” recently reprinted in *The Country You Have Never Seen*, critiques these failures on the part of the speculative fiction community in no uncertain terms. One reason to undertake a project of radical truth-telling is to destroy those inaccurate, insidious heterosexist mythologies about “*men qua Man* and *women qua Woman*” (Yaszek 46). Russ argues within the essay that, while science fiction is supposed to be the leading edge of social and technological extrapolation, many writers fail to extrapolate about gender and sexuality and instead just carry forward the societal norms of the contemporary world. As Helen Merrick summarizes: “The lack of ‘social speculation,’ argued Russ, was owed not to a ‘failure of the imagination outside the exact sci-

ences,' but rather to an acceptance of cultural conditioning and stereotypes that sf authors, in particular, should oppose" ("Female 'Atlas'" 53).

Lest the article's accusation of contemporary failure to engage in truth-telling regarding social issues seems unfair, those problematic other writers step up to (rather unintentionally) prove it. In a condescending response in the fanzine *Vertex* that he titled "Reply to a Lady," award-winning and commercially popular sf author Poul Anderson replies to the article in a way that perversely proves Russ's arguments. Helen Merrick, in a lengthy deconstruction of the entire exchange between Russ, Anderson, and other writers, provides the key points:

[Anderson writes] "the frequent absence of women characters has no great significance, perhaps none whatsoever." Anderson's [position] recalled earlier arguments conflating women and sex, arguing that in many works there was no need to introduce women or to "bring in a love interest":

[He said,] "certain writers...seldom pick themes which inherently call for women to take a lead role. This merely shows they prefer cerebral plots, not that they are antifeminist."
(*Secret* 59-60)

This response—not by an older writer brought up on the pulps like Asimov or Clarke (as if age is an excuse for sexism), but by a writer of the same generation as Russ herself—is one of many similar outcries against Russ's project of truth-telling and in favor of

the deadly status quo. The fact of its existence is a reason to undertake radical truth-telling, a *push*. Anderson's phrasing and argument are insidious; women only belong as love-interests, and so it's not a writer's fault if they have no women, because romantic stories aren't cerebral—and by extension, women aren't cerebral, and don't belong in stories about science and extrapolation. Russ's project of radical truth-telling is a direct response to these sexist mythologies. The existence of these myths and their motivation of a whole field of writers, aware or unaware of them, is a pressing reason to engage in truth-telling. To listen to these mindless, damaging stories and essays and letters without a spark of rage and without a response containing real, radical truths, *is not an option*. WE WUZ PUSHED.

While the motivations for engaging in a project of radical truth-telling are often seemingly obvious—for example, in addition to the other reasons explored here, Russ directly says in the 1975 *Khatru* symposium, “There is nothing like *public* protest to lift the spirits. I consider it a civic act, like paying one's taxes, and personally satisfying” (Gomoll 73)—those motivations alone are not sufficient to explain the “why?” of embarking on a truth-telling project. It's not only about the personal, internal drive to shout the truth. It's also about the social necessity for truth-telling, the modes available for truth-telling, and why it is culturally valuable; “most of what Russ writes [...] is as much concerned with its external effects as it is with exploring ‘internal’ spaces” (Cortiel 1). The whys and wherefores of the radical truth-telling project expand beyond the

internal—*there is no other option*—to the external in their effects on the world.

As for the vital importance of radical truth-telling with regards to feminist and queer narratives, as well as those of other oppressed groups, Russ is clear. In her essay “What Can a Heroine Do? Or, Why Women Can’t Write,” she says, “The problem of ‘outsider’ artists is the whole problem of what to do with unlabeled, disallowed, disavowed, not-even-consciously-perceived experience, experience which cannot be spoken about because it has no embodiment in existing art.... Make something unspeakable and you make it unthinkable” (Russ, *To Write* 90). The necessity of finding ways to speak the unspeakable—a project of radical truth-telling—is the necessity of finding a way to *be*. “The problem of trying to express something that has no means of expression becomes the problem of invisibility and muteness, both of which easily lead to a lack of existence in the well-known equation of silence and death” (Luis 116). Truth-telling, finding the words for communicating experience and making it therefore real, is survival. It is no less important, no less vital, than that.

This emphasis on finding ways to speak about the unspeakable is an idea common to feminist analysis from classic texts such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which discussed “the problem with no name.” Attempts to find ways to speak the truth were and continue to be primary objectives of feminist theory and praxis alike. Russ is a member of the continuum of women trying to find ways to explain their new mythologies; she is aware of and continuing prior work in feminist theory through her novels, short

stories, and nonfiction alike—doing so via a project of truth-telling.

Why, then, if the motivation for and necessity of radical truth-telling have been established, is science fiction the mode Russ chooses for her project? She is grim in “What Can a Heroine Do?” (“The roles are deadly. The myths that serve them are fatal,” [Russ, *To Write* 93]), but the point of the essay is to explore the idea that women need new modes of speech and to argue that these new modes can be found not in mainstream literature but in speculative modes, like science fiction and fantasy. “Women cannot write—using the old myths. But using new ones—?” (Russ, *To Write* 93) The reasoning behind the primacy of speculative fiction in Russ’s project of radical truth-telling is centered not just in her love of the genre, but in her belief that it is a way to create new mythologies and induce new frames of argument where real truth can be illuminated. She argues for its possibilities thus:

Science fiction...carries a heavier intellectual freight (and self-consciously so) than we are used to. [It is] didactic. [It] implies that human problems are collective as well as individual, and takes these problems to be spiritual, social, perceptive, or cognitive—not [...] sex-linked problems.... I would go even farther and say that science fiction [...] provides myths for dealing with the kind of experiences we are actually having now, instead of the literary myths we have inherited, which only tell us about the kinds of experiences we think we ought to be having (92).

Those inherited myths are the myths of capitalism and patriarchy, which glorify domination, success on the backs of others and the environment, sexual violence, and female passivity. Those myths are deadly mystifications; they must be worked around, and the only way to do so is with a form of storytelling that allows real truth to slip in, as it does not *automatically subscribe* to those prior received myths.

Russ's answer to the problem of "why women can't write" (according to received male-dominated critical criteria) is that women can't write their own narratives within myth-systems that debase them, that destroy them, that simply do not have room for them. Women can only write, and write the truth, engage in these projects of radical truth-telling, in forms that have not already been subsumed and that offer *openings* for truth. Russ's structuring of possibilities for women writers, as Jeanne Cortiel says, unites feminist theory and sf: "Feminist theory becomes part of the 'science' in science fiction while practice motivates the text" (6). This happens because speculative modes leave an extrapolative opening for that theory to enter. Speculative modes are the form that allows for truth to come through, from the ghost story to science fiction; sf is the vehicle for creating those new myths and for making the unspeakable spoken.

Having resolved why radical truth-telling needs sf from the angle of a feminist theorist, Russ also discourses from the position of an sf critic on why speculative fiction needs *actual* truth-telling and not the continuation of obfuscations and wish-fulfillment fantasies—multifarious engagements, again. Her opinion

on the necessity of truth—scientific, extrapolative, etc.—in speculative fiction is encapsulated in a critical analysis of heroic fantasy narratives written in 1979 for *F&SF* that provoked uproar among the audience of the magazine, and in her response to the uproar, also printed in 1979. The response clarifies her position on “reality” (Russ, *Country* 170) and truth in sf in a way that is useful for further understanding what motivations were at work in her own project of truth-telling as well as her sense of what was intrinsically necessary about truthful narratives.

In the clarification, Russ says “I know it’s painful to be told that something in which one has invested intense emotion is not only bad art but bad for you, not only bad for you but ridiculous” (169). However, she does not believe that she was wrong, and proceeds to explain why—after the initial defensive responses—readers should pay closer attention to what she has said about the fiction they are consuming, and does it more gently than is usual for Russ (“I didn’t do it to be mean” [169]). The lure of heroic fantasy is not one that she’s insensible to—that “promise of escape into a wonderful Other world” (169)—but rather is tempted by, having spent her youth reading similar escapist fantasies and enjoying them deeply, and as such also understands that the promise can’t be *fulfilled*. The desire to turn away into heroic stories “and daydreams about being tall, handsome (or beautiful), noble, admired, and involved in thrilling deeds” (170), which Russ fears is a “symptom of political and cultural reaction to economic depression” (169), is not necessarily stupid, but it *is* dangerous. These are wish-fulfillment

fantasies, which Russ is inherently suspicious of, as they “are not the same as theoretical speculation which produces medical and technological advances” (170)—the sort of thing good sf can do—and are not *real*. Writers may tell folks lies for a living, but those lies, at least to Russ, must have reality and truth behind them.

She continues:

It isn't the realists who find life dreadful. It's the romancers. After all, which group is trying to escape from life? Reality is horrible *and* wonderful, disappointing *and* ecstatic, beautiful *and* ugly. Reality is everything. Reality is what there is. Only the hopelessly insensitive can find reality so pleasant as to never want to get away from it, but painkillers can be bad for the health, and even if they were not, I am damned if anyone will make me say that the newest fad in analgesics is equivalent to *the illumination which is the other thing (besides pleasure) art ought to provide* (170, emphasis mine).

The final sentence explicitly clarifies Russ's opinion on what it is that art ought to do, and according to her, that is to provide truth—here, illumination—as well as the pleasure of its consumption. Pleasure without truth, entertainment without illumination, is vapid, “simply fake,” and “once the reader realizes that escape *does not work*, the glamour fades” (170, emphasis original). This is why truth-telling is necessary, and what motivates it in Russ's own work. For example, *We Who Are About to...*, discussed further on, is a deconstruction of the

wish-fulfillment fantasy of a vastly giving and comfortable universe. Escape does not work, and illumination of the truth is not only as important in art as pleasure, but is in fact what *provides* the pleasure, as she concludes her essay: “There is no pleasure like finding out the realities of human life, in which joy and misery, effort and release, dread and happiness, walk hand-in-hand. We had better enjoy it. It’s what there is” (170).

This exploration of what it is that makes heroic fantasy “not only bad for you but ridiculous” (169) is at one and the same time an exploration of what makes reality/truth in speculative fiction necessary. Of the same duet of columns, Edward James says, “Russ has thus neatly segued from an attack on heroic fantasy into a defense of science fiction and reality” (30). Illuminating truth via extrapolation, without turning away from the ugliness of reality, is what Russ idealizes in these essays; she is explicit about the necessity of truth-telling in contrast to the dangers of wish-fulfillment fantasies. The argument is also *specifically* about speculative fiction, reading and writing it, but not specifically about feminism or queer politics or any of Russ’s other intersections with criticism. Nevertheless, it can easily be translated over to those arguments as well; truth-telling, though its focal points may shift from specific political discourses to analytic literary criticism, is still truth-telling.

The “why” of Joanna Russ’s project of radical truth-telling is at once simple—*it is the only option*—and motivationally complex in the forms that it takes, but it is definitively a major concern of Russ as a writer. She returns to the concept too many times, too directly, for

it to be otherwise. However, the declaration of intent and exploration of motive alone are not adequate to prove the centrality of the project in Russ's body of work. To this end, the next step is an analysis of the project of radical truth-telling in action: the presence of a central truth-telling theme in her work, what arguments are made with it, and how the texts fit into a larger project devoted to illumination. These analyses—judging by Russ's own criteria of what constitutes real art—prove the primacy of the project of truth-telling in her work by showing its existence actualized in text, not simply as an intellectual concept upon which she has expounded in theoretical essays.