

Reproductive Futurism and Feminist Rhetoric: Joanna Russ's *We Who Are About To...*
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“Rhetoric is the ash of discourse.” Samuel R. Delany

I

In an article on feminist science fiction, Veronica Hollinger warns against taking gender too seriously as an analytic category. Citing the queer theoretical insight that gender is a second-order effect of compulsory heterosexuality, Hollinger argues for close attention to the rhetorical forms that solidify subjectivity. She writes:

In our struggle against a monolithic patriarchy which is, after all, a kind of theoretical fiction produced, in part, by the very feminism aligned against it we risk reinscribing, however inadvertently, the terms of compulsory heterosexuality within our own constructions. (303)

Joanna Russ's writings insistently present the imaginative challenges to the smoothly oiled technologies of heteronormativity that Hollinger advocates (302). As Judith Spector notes, Russ's protagonists are no longer interested in being creatures of gender designed for procreative purposes (371). Reproductive destiny is a key strand in the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. Yet reproduction has a double valence, neither side of which is by itself equivalent to physiological procreation. In the epistemology of heterosexual gendering, reproduction names the imagined site of fulfillment. An odd temporality, however, makes reproduction in this sense the permanent deferral of fulfillment. As Russ puts it in *The Female Man*:

Besides, what about the children? Mothers have to sacrifice themselves to their children, both male and female, so that the children will be happy when they grow up; though the mothers themselves were once children and were sacrificed to in order that they might grow up and sacrifice themselves for their children, so you begin to wonder whether the whole thing isn't a plot to make the world safe for (male) children. But motherhood is sacred and mustn't be talked about. (204)

While Russ's narrator construes this as an elaborate hoax perpetrated on women for the sake of perpetuating male privilege, such a reading partakes in the “theoretical fiction” Hollinger describes. Male privilege may be one result of this process; however, the founding assertion that the present must endlessly attend to the future interpellates men and women alike into sacred and

sacrificial reproduction, one highly valued mode of which is procreation. This indicates the second valence of reproduction: repetition. Rhetorical figures like safe children and sacred mothers evoke a nostalgic past that each person must labor to restore in the future. Reproduction makes procreation mean in this way. In other words, compulsory heterosexuality reproduces at the level of the subject the epistemology latticing its assumptions: first, that procreation will guarantee reproduction of the past into the future and, second, that reproduction- via-procreation is the sovereign task of each individual. For all its ostensible biological underpinnings, procreation becomes the sign of reproduction, the endless labor for fulfillment in the future. To refuse gender designed for procreative purposes is to refuse gender and its design; that is, it is to refuse reproducing reproduction, not procreation as such. In this discussion, I argue that the conflation of reproduction with procreation results in the often-toxic assumption that the refusal to procreate is a repudiation of futurity.

I borrow the term reproductive futurism from Lee Edelman's recent work on the homophobia embedded in the child-figure. In *No Future*, Edelman addresses the homophobic accusation that queer sexuality's attachment to pleasure without issue promotes deathliness. His answer, that we should embrace that accusation, has engendered much critical hostility. While I cannot fully recount the conversation here, the rancor of this debate suggests the broad appeal of reproduction, even for people who suffer as a consequence of this ideology. Much of my discussion aims at extending his assertion that reproductive futurism unifies even apparently opposed political positions. While my work owes much to him, I do not see the ready solution to this problem in the total rejection of futurity he promotes. Rather, I would like to propose through my reading of Russ's 1977 novel *We Who Are about To...* that futurity can be imagined outside of reproduction and indeed outside of human agency. I turn to Russ's novel to expose the binding work performed by reproduction-as-futurity and to offer a compelling alternative. The question of reproduction has rightly held a central place in feminist thought. In urging her feminist readers to locate compulsory heterosexuality as a political institution rather than a biological imperative or personal choice, Adrienne Rich poses the following question: "Why [have] species-survival, the means of impregnation and emotional-erotic relationships become so rigidly identified with each other?" (637).

While many scholars writing in the thirty years since her article's publication have interrogated compulsory heterosexuality, the supreme value of species survival as a discursive technology of compulsory heterosexuality has not received the same attention. Rich's question intimates that species survival designates an individual obligation to a collective human and non-human future. As I argue below, the critical reception of *We Who Are about To...*, like the debate around

Edelman's polemic, warns that this individualized obligation to survival sits uneasily alongside the critique of patriarchy.

II

We Who Are about To... centers on a small group of interstellar commuters stranded on an uncharted planet with no hope of rescue. Meaningless in itself, this crash violently negates the futures they had imagined for themselves, jolting them into dizzying epistemological uncertainty. Against this uncertainty, the commuters attempt to fence in the future by invoking the familiar narrative tradition of the frontier settlement where human civilization might take root and their lost futures be, if not quite restored, at least redeemed. This rooting of civilization, they decide, seemingly without discussion, must happen through childbirth. Reproduction functions as a metonym for a restored future as well as a mechanism for reinstating patriarchal hierarchy. Remarkably, the breeding plan is not a covert attempt by the male passengers to secure the sexual services of the female passengers. Administered by committee, and endorsed by everyone except the novel's narrator, this compulsory heterosexuality construes the future as the imperative of the present and turns procreation into an instrument of reproduction.

This consensus forms outside of the narrator's observation and since we have access to their stories through her voice-recorded diary entries, we at first know only that the commuters quickly begin to see themselves as colonizers. Successful colonization, their primary goal, does not mean successful survival, as might be expected, but survival for the sake of reproducing civilization through childbirth. Before they even step from their landing module, the narrator begins to list the reasons why they will fail. She notes that they literally have no foundation on which to base their actions: "A few weeks observation and perhaps we can guess if we're approaching the summer solstice or going the other way around, which could give us some idea of how long the seasons will be: could be ten years of summer" (14). This cynical empiricism marks her as an outsider and troublemaker. Yet they cannot simply ignore her or allow her to die by herself as she wishes to do. Instead, they try to force her to join them in their breeding plan. And so she kills them and, some seventy pages later, herself.

The narrator's refusal to participate in the breeding plan would seem to make her a heroic figure, or at least as espousing a political position recognizable to feminist readers. Even apart from this register, the novel's topos is political in the most rigorous sense, concerned with the establishment of governance, the right to bodily autonomy, the legitimacy of violent struggle, and the relationship of human life to future human life. In its historical context, too, the novel's premise bears directly on second-wave feminist demands for meaningful work and reproductive

rights. Even the generic context of the novel indicates political engagement, as the novel refuses the triumphal tonality traditionally associated with science fictional colonization narrative. Taken together, these three registers ask the reader to consider whether the establishment of social order via women's procreative capacity has been a foundational condition of human sociality. Equally important, the equation of procreation with the reproduction of social order asks us to consider whether one of the ideological mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality resides in the shared belief that civilization must be preserved.

Some critics have indeed embraced the narrator's refusal of the reproductive mandate. Yet Samuel R. Delany is right to call *We Who Are about To...* a "dangerous book" (149). This danger, I argue, lies in the novel's apparent polarization of reactions: life and death, the first associated with reproduction and the second with suicide and murder. In attempting to read the novel against the grain, several critics have reversed these values. Brooks Landon situates the novel in terms of conventional depictions of motherhood in formula literature, in which individualized species survival trumps even the collective survival it signifies. In this analysis, Russ's stranded passengers, for whom the reality that rescue will not come acts as a clarion call to colonization, represent standard formula fare against the nameless narrator's queer deathliness. Landon then rereads this deathliness as refusal to conform to the expectations of sacrificial motherhood. Marleen S. Barr argues that the narrator, in choosing death, really chooses life. "Music, books, friends and love" (133) are absent from the uncharted and uninhabited planet they seek to colonize and these, not bare survival, are the source of life. Delany implicitly locates the narrator as the novel's subversive element: "Russ suggests that the quality of life is the purpose of living, and reproduction only a reparative process to extend that quality, and not the point of life at all" (148). Of all the characters, only the narrator ever evokes quality of life as a standard for behavior.

Many more critics, however, have found the novel troubling. While Barr, Landon and Delany laud the book for subverting narrative formulas and epistemological expectations based on allegedly natural maternal instinct, other critics have found the novel hopeless, apolitical or nihilistic. While praising the book, Marilyn Hacker, in an early article, describes Russ as compelled to write a novel about death "as a statement of what is, in our time, the ultimate alternative to political commitment" (208). Thelma Shinn, in her article on women in science fiction, argues that the novel fails to attain an authentic politics because the narrator stubbornly asserts her individual preferences over the needs of the community, thus "forcing her to become the instrument of destruction" (211) and indicating that the real murder in this novel is the murder of the colony's future. Barbara Garland, in her brief review article, similarly disparages

the novel for rejecting “even the laws of biological survival and of society” (92). Jeanne Cortiel’s reading, in her monograph on Russ, effectively summarizes the critical reception of this novel when she writes, “*We Who Are about To...* is more about the impossibilities of life than about death” (208). According to the logic of these readings, the colonizers would appear to value life, specifically future human life, regardless of the incongruities of their position and the suffering procreation might entail. In comparison, the narrator’s insistence that their position is terminal appears at best juvenile and at worst homicidal. For these scholars, the novel represents a retreat from political engagement because the narrator’s choice violates the ground of political action itself: the commitment to survival.

The disjunction between the contents of the novel and the mixed reception of this work intimates that something discomforts this camp of readers. Their disturbing reaction seems to force the conclusion that the future does depend on reproduction, which in turn depends on restricting women's autonomy. Sherry Ortner’s essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” published contemporaneously with Russ’s novel, corroborates just such a conclusion. In Ortner’s anthropological review of traits common to all human social organization, Ortner includes acculturation to “a society of other individuals, an interest in personal survival and a commitment to continuity and survival, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals” (25). In this definition, to be human is to desire survival and reproduction above all else. Russ asks us to consider whether a woman’s life, given these universal conditions, is worth living. Indeed, this acceptance of universal, natural oppression might foster the reading of this novel as a failure of feminist politics. Yet, the recurrent concern for community in these readings points to a different conclusion: namely, that it is exactly the violation of the commitment to “survival and continuity, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals,” as Ortner puts it, that informs the monstrous character of this novel. When confronted with the moral choice between a return to a patriarchal order and violent resistance to that order's establishment, these scholars balk at the novel’s implication that annihilation is preferable to degradation.

The important point here is that the novel’s “pocket genocide” (152), as the narrator titles her actions, is ultimately less upsetting than that she murders her companions as a means of resisting future life. By killing off the colonists, by refusing to participate in their breeding plan, the narrator rejects the assertion that human life only acquires meaning by producing future human lives. Here we return to Cortiel’s gloss on the novel as “more about the impossibilities of life than about death” (208). We might construe this use of “life” as shorthand for a livable, human life, but we might also understand her usage more broadly: as life in total. A commonplace

denotation (i.e. “Life is such a struggle”) gives way to the specter of total annihilation, of the impossibility of life in the second sense. This annihilation, however, can’t refer to life in the present, since life is not presently impossible (even for the colonists), but to the future. Cortiel allegorizes future life as impossible given the narrator’s refusal of the reproductive mandate. In the shadow thrown by the phrase “the impossibilities of life” (Cortiel 208), the validation of the colonists’ embrace of the future seems less like enthusiasm and more like a desperate attempt to secure the future despite the oppressive consequences of that position. Ironically, then, the discomfort induced by this novel looks quite a lot like an endorsement of reproductive futurism, and the “biological laws” that structure women’s oppression.

III

While this conclusion is disturbing, I’d like to suggest that embracing the narrator’s argument does not take us away from reproductive futurism. Rather, where the antagonism between the two groups should render them structurally opposed, and would therefore lead us to expect that the narrator’s concern resides with the present, we find symmetrical concern with the future. This is so, I argue, because the two positions maintain their coherence through each other. As the narrator says: “But they won’t be able to leave me alone. I know. Not because of the child-bearing, because of the disagreement. The disagreement is what matters” (47). Officially, the group won’t let her go because of her procreative value; however, she performs a different and perhaps even more valuable service as scapegoat. Because she has so volubly aligned herself with death, failure and chaos, with the extra-human agency of the alien planet, she comes to stand in for it. The violence the group threatens, like tying her to a tree, aims at marking her difference from them and then incorporating it. Writing in a slightly different context, Robert Reid-Pharr defines the scapegoat in particularly apposite terms for this discussion: “The scapegoat, then, would be the figure who reproduces this undifferentiation, this chaos, this boundarylessness. The violence directed against the goat would mitigate against prior violence, the erosion of borders that has beset the entire community” (373). Displacing the trauma of the crash onto the narrator consolidates and gives form to their anxiety, but it doesn’t mean that she is complacent. While she scoffs at their procreative fantasy, she builds her own vision of reproduction, one equally attuned to preserving a civilized future.

In one of the few explanations for the breeding plan that the novel offers, for instance, John Ude, the burgeoning patriarch, explains that the narrator can’t go searching for water because she, like the other four women, is “too valuable to put in danger” (31). In response to the narrator’s evasive answer, he reminds her sententiously: “Civilization must be preserved” (31). This commonplace implies that civilization has been threatened, and that they must take action to

secure its preservation from that threat. “Civilization,” she replies, “is doing just fine. We just don't happen to be where it is” (31). Her rejoinder underscores the distance between a biological explanation for the breeding plan and its function as a political or ideological fantasy. Humanity will not be jeopardized if they choose to die, or to value their own lives over the lives of future generations. Loading the obligation of civilization onto the eight stranded strangers puts in place a new goal, the only one with enough force to mitigate their loss, and at the same time replicating at the level of the collective the individual romance narrative that similarly concludes with childbirth and the hope of perpetuation. On the other hand, any civilization they might build would not be civilization in the sense they recognize, as the narrator reminds them through a series of rhetorical questions: “Do you want your children to live in the Old Stone Age? Do you want them to forget how to read? Do you want to lose your teeth? Do you want your great-grandchildren to die at thirty?” (25). At which point, Cassie, who wants to bear children, hits her. Where Cassie and the others imagine childbearing as an abstract good, a disembodied method for resuscitating civilization, the narrator insists on its material consequences. Yet, her version similarly delimits and reifies the future. Rather than actual material consequences, the possibilities she lists stand in metonymically for a harmed life, one that, like losing civilization, must be prevented at any cost.

Of all the colonists, Ude most represents reproductive futurism's investment in repetition. In attempting to tempt the others onto the planet, he crafts a figure of the Earth as both a sacrificing mother and a justification for further sacrifice.

Come on now, come on dearies, it's like Earth. And we know Earth. Most of us were born on it. So what's there to be afraid of, hey? We're just colonizing a little early, that's all. You wouldn't be afraid of Earth, would you? (20)

The narrator sees clearly that Ude's encouraging speech invokes “Earth” not as a physical place but as a social and symbolic space, as a mother (“born on it”) who cares for her children. The only “Earth,” however, that the colonists know how to survive in is the one they left, where food is purchased, energy comes out of a wall socket, and medical technology is at least minimally available. In other words, on their Earth, survival denotes something beyond livingness. As our narrator tartly replies, another vision of Earth might serve as a more apt analogy:

Oh, sure. Think of Earth. Kind old home. Think of the Arctic. Think of Labrador. Of Southern India in June. Think of smallpox and plague and earthquakes and ringworms and pit vipers. Think of a nice case of poison ivy all over you, including your eyes. Status asthmaticus. Amoebic dysentery. The Minnesota pioneers who tied

a rope from the house to the barn in winter because you could lose your way in a blizzard and die three feet from the house. Think (while you're at it) of tsunamis, liver fluke, the Asian brown bear. Kind old home. The sweetheart. The darling place. Think of Death Valley in August. (20)

Remarkably, in attempting to undermine the frontier fantasy she sees coalescing around her, the narrator deploys a congruent discourse of futurity. The accuracy of her description, and its bitter majesty against Ude's clearly symbolic use of Earth, obfuscates its directive: think only of what might go wrong. She might have included autumn leaves, sunsets and beaches in her list and still have had an accurate description of Earth. Instead, the narrator's sense that they are already dead collapses harm that may or may not be in the future into the present. In effect, the planet has already killed them, since she perceives the only life it offers as guaranteed to harm them. No less than for the colonizers, the present serves only as a measure of the future. She doesn't oppose civilizational discourse, in fact she repeats it in the form of its other: nature's malignity.

Moreover, the narrator has no immunity to the symbolic power of their home planet. Meditating on her decision to die, she compares her reaction to the current situation to how she might feel were she on Earth:

If Earth had been hit by plague, by fire, by war, by radiation, sterility, a thousand things, you name it, I'd still stand by her; I love her; I would fight every inch of the way there because my whole life is knit to her. And she'd need mourners. To die on a dying Earth, I'd live, if only to weep. (27)

Like Ude, the narrator personifies Earth. In so doing, she replaces his Oedipal scene with the quite different and specifically non-reproductive metaphor of female lovers. This shift, however, obscures the work of personification, which is to turn the planet into a person. While her earlier characterization of Earth presents nature as a fierce antagonist to human survival, here the narrator conflates human and non-human nature and makes "Earth" a synecdoche for social order and human futurity, especially via procreation. Fire, war, radiation, sterility: these are human troubles, civilizational troubles. In this description, the narrator identifies Earth's death with its sudden hostility to human futurity. In effect, dying on a dying Earth is just what she is doing, since her opposition to procreation is an attempt to preserve the reproduction of civilization. To make this fantasy work, she must insist on the virulence of the future.

One particularly provocative moment in the novel occurs at the pinnacle of the group's attempt to convert the narrator to their breeding plan, when Ude rhetorically questions the narrator's desire for death: "Really," he says, "I cannot understand why you want to die" (46). She has, at

this point in the novel, not yet announced her plan to suicide. Rather, Ude's statement assumes that her refusal to allow the possibility of survival and the desirability of colonization amounts to suicide. Her reply reverses the terms of this assumption by asserting that life lived for the future is not life at all:

John Donne, John-John-with-your-britches-on, John
Whittington-turn-again-lord-mayor-of-London-town, we are dead. We died the
minute we crashed. Plague, toxic food, deficiency diseases, broken bones, infection,
gangrene, cold, heat, and just plain starvation. . . . My God, you're the ones who
want to suffer: conquer and control, conquer and control, when you haven't even got
stone spears. You're dead, Galvanism. Corpse jerking. Planning. Power. Inheritance.
You know, survival. My genes shall conquer the world. That's death. (46)

Here, the narrator makes her critique of reproduction explicit. She does not oppose childbirth as much as what it means: "Planning. Power. Inheritance." Yet her own list of potential harm hinges on planning and power. She, too, has plans that she will enforce, likewise premised on survival, though with a different object in mind. This collapse of probability into certainty, no less a reaction to epistemological disorientation than the other colonists', ultimately leads to her murders. Certain that the future has already been harmed, she attempts to control the damage. Thus the murders merely complete what the crash began.

Even her syntax reflects this slippage. For instance, she describes Nathalie digging a latrine like this: "Nathalie's digging experimental sanitation pits with a collapsible shovel. And every once in a while it does" (21). She records these events after they happen, at night so the others won't hear her; she is already in command of the plot. The reader, on the other hand, reads as if it were the present. The ambiguity of the second sentence in the above quotation sends the reader back to the first sentence to establish what thing she is referring to and what it does. This return puts in the past of the reading time an event (the collapse) that hasn't happened yet in the narration, though it has in the narrator's experience. This recursive style structures the narrative. Yet, I would argue that this particular usage by no means accidentally involves a literal and temporal collapse. This syntactic reversal intimates a more pivotal reversal: she who predicts harm becomes the harm she predicts.

This is a shocking novel, but it isn't nihilistic or apolitical. Rather, this shock aims to reveal the shared commitment to human futurity that binds together political movements of all kinds and couples resistance to oppression through a common, but commonly unstated, boundary. On one

side, potential catastrophe marks the limit of political resistance. No matter how oppressive its organization, survival of the social body remains paramount. On the other side, the height of political power resides in futurity and the triumphal revivification of the body politic in that future. Both positions sacralize future life for its own sake, and not for the particular lives that might be led in that future. For all that the narrator appears to reject futurity, ultimately through suicide, her obsessive cataloguing of possible future harm reveals her shared commitment to the future. For all her insistence that civilization will be fine without their help, she sacrifices her life to prevent the degradation of civilization. Russ's critics are right to see in this novel a pessimistic evaluation of political struggle: movement between these two poles isn't movement at all.

The homology between the novel's own apparent polarization and the critical bifurcation I have mapped should therefore give us pause. As Delany implies, in the same essay cited earlier, the narrator only appears to offer an opposing position. He names her "the most 'civilized' person among the passengers" (149), but then clarifies the definition of civility through Walter Benjamin's aphorism "Every act of civilization is also an act of barbarism" (149). While the novel does challenge the ease with which procreation becomes synonymous with reproduction and its attendant metaphysics of futurity, progress and life, I contend that that critique comes to us not through the narrator's defection from the group, or her fatalism toward their survival, but from the novel's own organization. Rejecting the ostensible choice the novel offers allows a third possibility to emerge.

IV

Consider the novel's title: *We Who Are about To*. . . . The novel's first line, "About to die, and so on" (7) appears to conclude the anticipatory temporality of the title, to fulfill the death already intimated by the allusion to the Latin salute. The structure these two lines create together, however, is not linear but chiasmic. By replacing the specificity of a verb with these ellipses, the title enunciates not an act but a condition: the awaiting of the future as the infinitely delayed time of conclusion. The first phrase of the first line offers a false resolution of this condition, one that the second phrase immediately undermines. By the time we read these words, the crisis that precipitated them has been averted; they are not "about to die" and so they must "so on." The polarized critical positions map onto the tension between these two ordinary phrases, but ignore the critique inherent in the title. For the title is playing with the temporality of reproductive futurism. It appears to offer imminent fulfillment, but mischievously replaces it with a condition. Neither parts of the first line signify real resolution. Death, the narrator's answer to threatened civilization, attempts to evade, but complies with, the "so on," i.e. repetition. In both, the present

becomes the time of wounded openness against which the future must be made to mean fulfillment.

I'd like to suggest a different way to read this "so on." Importantly, the colonists are lost not only in space, but also in time. Genealogical succession, the "so on" of reproduction, derives its meaning-making force from conceiving of time as unfolding in a straight-line running out to meet the horizon. Space travel is already a perversion of this conception of time. As the narrator ruminates, "The light of our dying will reach you (whoever you are) only after you yourselves are long dead, after your own Sun has engulfed you and then shrunk to a collapsed cinder with no more light in it than what we saw that night" (19). Sarah Lefanu, in her article on the role of readership in Russ's work, sees this temporal delay as part of the strategic function of the narrator's diary: "In the preservation of the journal, however, there is implied a future community with a reader inside language that alleviates her despair to some extent by situating her own perspective as the discursive past of some even more remote future" (her italics, 252). The narrator reminds us that this future is already here as we are reading and as she is struggling.

Moreover, the diary evinces little fidelity to chronology or narrative sequence. It does not attempt to give a sequential or full version of events and often typifies characters through gesture or standard refrain rather than presenting them to the reader. She doesn't pretend to care about their stories, narrating their actions capriciously, sometimes to show the accuracy of her initial impressions and sometimes to show surprise. This technique creates a sense of volatility, fragmentation, and unanticipated collusions. She insistently invokes her reader to remind us that the act of reading entails not her survival as might be expected but her death. She is already gone, and so her lies and confessions, her motives and her desires, are simply not important. She doesn't understand them anyway. Only her words remain, the traces of her living and dying, which, though they grant her a posthumous existence, slip utterly out of her interpretive control. The second half of the novel, which describes her long starvation period, is perhaps the least faithful to any narrative arc and, diegetically, the least concerned with interpretive control.

During this long starvation period, the planet suddenly returns and with it an alternative to the sacralized future and the sacrificial present. Without the symbolic overlay the group insisted upon, and without anyone to convince of the possible harm awaiting them, with indeed the harm already accomplished, the ecology emerges as alien: neither threatening nor comforting, just alien. Only in the very last pages of the novel, and coming as if a sign of her readiness for death, does she see the planet as utterly indifferent to her. First, she experiences the landscape as a

symphony, specifically as Handel's Messiah bellowing "Forever and ever!" but soon sees her own mistake:

And they played and they sang and I wept, everything I ever knew, for Baroque music is keyed into Isaac Newton's kind of time; it's the energy of that new explosion of philosophic time: perspective, mathematics, instant velocity, the great clock, the great wheel, the Great Godly Grid. [...] Over here the Phoenix Reaction and God as Engineer. Over here entropy, suffering, death. And then the real Einstein, too complicated for me although I know what I am supposed to like, Stravinsky and after; it makes my head ache, referring to things in all dimensions and sometimes backwards. And then it turns primitive, this is a bloody great dynamo and this a laboring flute. (164)

In this final meditation, the struggle over which narrative will structure the colonists' lives on the planet appears as two versions of "the Great Godly Grid" of Newtonian physics and purposeful teleology forever and ever under the reign of reason. Beneath the comforting regularity of the "great clock," however, lurks the apprehension of mechanical failure and encroaching decay. As a story about the future, the law of entropy offers the timeless conservation of energy only by projecting an increasingly lifeless and uninhabitable world. As I have been arguing, conserving future life by constraining its form is an entropic strategy requiring deathly immobility. By moving away from replicative Newtonian time to "the real Einstein," the narrator gives up controllable predictability, and its attendant anxieties, for the complexity of a future that moves in its own course, offering some plenitude and some harm, but always resisting our projections and predictions, always an epistemological void that no fence can contain nor narrative subdue. It is here that we can discern a future without harm, for this is an understanding of the future robust enough to recognize the complex historical, ecological and textual dynamics swerving all human intention.

V

Writing a decade after the publication of this novel about the divisive "sex wars" of second wave feminism, Russ articulates a feminist methodology divorced from moral law: "The feminism I know began as politics, not rules for living. To call X a feminist issue did not then mean that there was a good way to do X and a bad way, and that we were trying to replace the bad way with the good way. X was a feminist issue because it was the locus of various social pressures (which made it visible) and those social pressures were what feminism was all about." (Magic 77) In this statement, Russ defines "politics" not as a means of assuring the ascendancy of certain practices over others but as a method of releasing the energy caught up in an intensive

field so that it can go on to engender new forms. The future, more particularly the continuation of the human into the future, is one of these loci of social pressure so intensive that it determines the limits of action, grounds discourse, and draws all fantasies into its orbit's gravity. To practice feminism, in the sense Russ describes, is to recognize the more than human, more than reproductive forces shaping the future. I began by arguing that compulsory heterosexuality relies on our fidelity to the future and casts procreation as the only true guarantee of that future. By ending with this quotation, I'd like to reassert that discourse, as one of the forces shaping the future and as the wellspring of reproductive futurism, never fully remains under our control. We can only push toward the new.

NOTES

This article received generous attention from my working group, Jesse Schwartz, Justin Rogers-Cooper, Karen Weingarten and Jamie Skye Bianco. My gratitude to them, for this and for much else.

1. This temporality recalls the Freudian Oedipal narrative, which Teresa de Lauretis describes in this way: “The end of the girl’s journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting him, Prince Charming. For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of his journey. Thus the itinerary of the female’s journey, mapped from the very start on the territory of her own body. . . is guided by a compass pointing not to reproduction as the fulfillment of her biological destiny, but more exactly to the fulfillment of the promise made to ‘the little man’” (italics hers, 133). Judith Roof makes a similar point by recourse to laws regarding copyright and legal custody, showing how both privilege male ownership of creative and procreative issue. My argument is intended to highlight the shared complicity, or what de Lauretis calls “seduction” (137), of both men and women in overvaluing individualized responsibility to the future. This might help explain why stories such as Russ’s, which reverse the Oedipal metanarrative by assigning active questing to female characters, are only partially successful in avoiding patriarchy. Indeed, I would argue that *We Who Are about To...* is such an upsetting novel because it posits the failure of reversing the Oedipal metanarrative without also rethinking futurity.

2. To clarify: There has been much writing on fetal representation and abortion politics; few of these, however, directly interrogate anxieties around human futurity and species-survival. I can’t review all of the works written on abortion by feminists, but see for an example Haraway.

3. Beyond the scope of this essay, but relevant to this discussion, is Russ's engagement with Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover Landfall*, first published in 1972. See her response to Vondra McIntyre's review in *The Witch and the Chameleon*. *We Who Are about To...* can be read as a response to Bradley's novel.

4. In a series of letters and book reviews written between 1979 and 1980 for the journal *Frontiers*, Russ registers the joy of isolating, naming and describing universal conditions of women's oppression, despite the fact that they turn out to be identical, in her words, to "the establishment of civilization."

5. In a compelling, but ultimately unconvincing, reading of this novel, Patrick Murphy argues that the narrator is engaged in heroic defense of the alien planet's ecology.

6. In "Exterminating Fetuses: Abortion, Disarmament and the Sexo-Semiotics of Extraterrestrialism," Zoe Sofia argues that the collapsed future is a mainstay of science fiction. Her reading of male reproductive metaphors as a form of technological determinism against the "generative energies in non-heterosexuals and others who choose not to reproduce themselves" (58) is clearly close to the argument I am pursuing here.

7. E.g. "We who are about to die salute you."

8. For an excellent overview of these debates, see Echol.

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