Foreword

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I have a vision. The streets of Midtown Manhattan are filled with professors, professional critics, editors, and literary award judges. They are all dressed in their ill-fitting suits—they could afford better tailoring but that, of course, would indicate to their audience that something like beauty is important—yet they are tearing them off to replace them with sackcloth. They are on their knees, they are decorating themselves in ashes.

Slowly they crawl out of their blue glass skyscrapers, their suburban commuter rail stations, their off-campus housing to join the mass. It's not a howl that you hear but a low, unceasing moan. A few, the more dramatic and in need of attention, flog themselves with branches and nylon rope. All of these men, all of these white men, every man who ever told a publishing assistant at a party while pinning her to the wall, "You know I am in an open marriage," every man who ever used the word "histrionic" to describe a woman's memoir or "articulate" to describe a black man's performance or who spent two paragraphs speculating about the body of a trans writer in what was supposed to be a review of their work, every professor who uses Kanye lyrics in a lecture to show he is with it but who teaches an all-white syllabus, every man who has referred to a Brontë or Emily Dickinson or James Baldwin as a "minor" writer: they are all here.

They have come to atone. They have come to ask for absolution. They have been forced into an encounter with their

unconscious, they have finally seen the truth of their bias—the need they have had to believe that anyone not of their demographic was a charlatan or a bore—and they have been laid low by this information.

The sidewalks are crowded with all those whom they have dismissed and betrayed: everyone who has been marginalized and written out of the history of literature. They are interested in the spectacle, but skeptical. They have seen this type of performance before, this display of “How could I have been so wrong?,” which was then followed up either by a return to previous behavior with slight modifications or an attempt to get laid. But they are transfixed by the sight, and they find themselves disappointed that they are still capable of hope: hope that finally they will be seen for their true selves and not through these men’s projections.

When the men finally reach the water, they toss their clothes onto the bonfires that have been burning all night. The stench of burning polyester fills the air. “Forgive us,” they cry, as they hand over their positions to the spectators and write letters of resignation. “We didn’t realize.”

Reading Joanna Russ’s *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, I wondered, what the hell is it going to take? For decades we have had these types of critiques; we have had books and lectures and personal essays and statistics and scientific studies about unconscious bias. And yet, still, we have critics like Jonathan Franzen speculating on whether Edith Wharton’s physical beauty (or lack of it, according to his assessment of her face and body) affected her writing; we have a literary culture that is still dominated by one small segment of the population; and we have a sense that every significant contribution to the world of letters was made by the heterosexual white man, a sense that is reinforced in the education system, in the history books, and in the visible world.

This complaint wasn't even exactly fresh when Russ wrote her book, which I do not say to diminish her accomplishment. It is always an act of bravery to stand up to say these things and risk being thought of as ungrateful. Your small pile of crumbs can always get smaller.

But what is it going to take to break apart these rigidities? Russ's book is a formidable attempt. It is angry without being self-righteous, it is thorough without being exhausting, and it is serious without being devoid of a sense of humor. But it was published over thirty years ago, in 1983, and there's not an enormous difference between the world she describes and the world we inhabit.

Sure, there have been some improvements. The ratios of bylines with regard to sex and race have improved, but that was mostly due to persistent online campaigns of shaming rather than any sort of editorial revelation. The unconscious assumptions that create our expectations for women writers or black writers or gay writers often remain the same. If you look beyond the numbers and into content, you'll see that white men are still the experts—still the objective and universal voice of reason. Black writers are often only asked to write about black issues or urban issues or sports or music. Women are often only asked to write about their feelings or work/life balance or domestic issues. Gay writers are asked to write about identity politics or sexuality. And so on. (But while we are at it, we are still mostly only hearing from white men who *want* to provide the objective and universal voice of reason, not all of the weirdos and gender nonconformists and mystics and those marginalized by something other than sex or race, and I long for their presence in the conversation, too.)

And so I ask, again and again and again, what is it going to take to have a full reconsideration of how literature has been dominated by one small worldview, to see how our ideas of greatness

are affected by our own need to see our selves, our gender, our nation as great, and to see radical plurality as this exciting, beautiful thing, and not a threat to your tiny little self?

Russ did not write “like a woman,” so it’s not clear what to do with her. She did not write about domestic or interior spaces; her writing is neither pretty nor diplomatic. As a nonfiction writer and critic, particularly in both this work and the remarkable *Somebody’s Trying to Kill Me and I Think It’s My Husband: The Modern Gothic*, she does not simply name the injustice, she goes after the source. She understands how a fragile Self will need to define itself against an Other, and she is wise enough to see this is not an issue of misogyny per se but something that has the potential to infect us all. That need for the Other to be a specific something, so that in reflection the Self can be something better, creates a lens that makes it impossible to see the Other clearly without risking the Self. We can only see and judge art through this lens, unless we stubbornly refuse to.

White women will do this to brown women, the rich will do this to the poor, gay men will do this to lesbians or bisexuals. And of course, if somehow we lived in a matriarchy, women would do this to men. This might seem like a banal observation when you read it, and yet so few have written it down before. This makes Russ a keener critic than someone like Angela Carter, whose work has entered the feminine canon because she had a tendency, despite all her wild glory, to say rather banal things about the male/female dynamic. She lined it up much too neatly with the predator/prey dynamic. Carter writes “like a woman,” so we know what to do with her. The only other woman critic I can think of who worked on Russ’s complicated level was Brigid Brophy, who has also been very unfairly left to languish in obscurity.

As a novelist and short-story writer, Russ did not simply create hazy gender utopias out of her science fiction space operas,

nor did she write in the way of her male peers like Heinlein, Halderman, or Ellison, with their big(ish) dicks in space. In books like *We Who Are About To* and *The Female Man*, she used speculation to question the present, not simply to reframe it, putting her more on a par with Samuel Delany than more womanly writers like Marge Piercy or Octavia Butler. She had a remarkable mind, one that found it easy to see through tropes and lazy, self-satisfied plotlines to mess with the trouble underneath. In *We Who Are About To*, she firmly and eruditely reveals stories of survival against the odds, a theme all demographics are quick to indulge in unthinkingly, which in her case are not heroic tales of endurance but truly about people who are willing to do any amount of damage to the world, to others, or to the environment to ensure their own comfort and safety. This woman works so deeply in our collective unconscious that it's surprising her work ever saw the light of day.

It would be nice to think that a nonconforming writer burdened by some sort of designator (woman writer or queer writer or . . .) wouldn't slide into the cracks of literary history, but of course this is one of the ways to *Suppress Women's Writing*, as she outlines in this work. We are all burdened by certain expectations others have for us, but some are punished for their deviations more than others.

One way she and other writers like her—writers of all genders and races and sexualities who refuse to meet their audience's expectations—are punished is to not let their influence be felt. Russ wrote about this in *How to Suppress* in the context of Emily Dickinson, who, while she is finally seen as a genius, also is often seen as some sort of singular creature without precedent or antecedent in American letters. She has no mothers, she has no daughters. People, and by people I mean critics who are invested in shoring up male hegemony, do not draw a line from contemporary poets back to Dickinson because, critics assure

us, “she had no influence on anyone.” We read her, yes, but she is not integrated; critics do not place anyone within her tradition. Writers like Dickinson become outliers, then, and are isolated from their own nation’s or art form’s history. It’s rejection dressed up as flattery.

And so it is with Russ. She is mentioned and name-checked from time to time, but she has not been incorporated into the wild world of 1970s and ’80s science fiction, or women’s writing, or American literature, certainly. We do not see her mothers, we do not see her daughters, because critics don’t care to tease them out. (This might seem like a minor complaint—not finding a writer’s space—and yet it is not a compliment to treat a writer like she is a changeling, or beamed down from a UFO, or sprung up from the earth fully formed. Writers are influenced—they work within traditions—and if that tradition is dominated in the academy by, let’s say, Hawthorne and Hemingway, or Heinlein and Dick, that reinforces the singular importance of these writers, and it tells aspiring writers looking for a tradition to help shape their work to read these and not those. Thus hegemony is reinforced.)

But her influence is felt all the same, mostly in other underappreciated or marginalized voices. Christopher Priest, who uses speculation’s interrogative powers in much in the same way as Russ, is clearly in her thrall. It would be hard to see a place for Katherine Dunn’s deeply weird *Geek Love* in the conservative 1980s literary scene if Russ hadn’t made a little space for it by fighting for publication for years. The most exciting voices in contemporary genre or genre-influenced writing, like Nnedi Okorafor and Sarah Hall, work in her wake.

I came at Russ sideways, through Riot Grrl and AK Press distro and those hideously ugly Grove Press Kathy Acker paperbacks, seeing her name-checked by the punk rock chicks who created their own culture through zines and mix tapes when

they failed to see themselves in the wider culture. And so her very legitimate lineage, in my eyes, also includes all those girls who gave themselves purposely bad haircuts, who spent hours copying their manifestos at Kinkos on hot pink paper, who sharpied Sleater-Kinney lyrics onto their jeans, who were really into Livejournal for a while. This unofficial passing down of women's writing from girl to girl, from woman to woman, is something Russ notes here as an antidote to women missing from the academy. If the official history neglects to tell you where you came from, you can always create those pathways yourself.

This book, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, is familiar, yet strange; it is part of a recognizable genre of writing, yet different. She refuses to come to easy conclusions, she refuses to let her exasperation overtake her thinking, and she refuses to let anyone—anyone—off the hook here. She does not apologize for her serious tone, either. After all, what is art but an expression of how we all live and feel? It is not separate from life, it is not frivolous or decadent, it is an articulation of our souls. And if our souls are sick due to unexamined racism, misogyny, or homophobia, then looking at and criticizing art is another way of looking directly at and diagnosing our souls. Or it can be, in the right hands.

Here is my fear: that if Russ is rediscovered, reshelfed, and reintegrated, her work will be mistakenly put among all of the other books by women and other marginalized populations: *Here Are My Grievances*. (Put her where she belongs, in a space with zero qualifications, *Literary Criticism* or *Essays* or just *Literature*. Spare her the indignity of the subgroup.)

It's popular, now that women are gaining voices and power, for us to refuse to see our own hidden unconscious biases and to distract others from seeing them by pointing out the biases held against us. There is a wider and wider market for this in

women's writing, because it does not require any thinking and, as another singular weirdo with no mothers and no daughters, Simone Weil, once put it, "There is nothing more comfortable than not thinking."

White (straight, middle-class, gender-conforming) women are now an established market, and because of that, we are pandered to. And it turns out that women often like the same Self-reinforcement that men do. As women gain entry into the halls of power, which have been occupied and protected by men, they show that they will behave in the ways that their predecessors did. They too will demonize, willfully misunderstand, and compartmentalize all of the Other demographics. You can see it in awards for women's writing (it should not surprise anyone that the powerful elite consistently find the writing of this small sliver of women, the sliver that most closely resembles themselves, to be the "best"), you see it in the way women critics review other people's books, and you even see it in the way women now write about powerful men. They use the same exact tactics Russ outlines in this book. In 2015 a white woman complained about sexism in publishing, a black man responded by complaining about the racism of the white women who work in publishing, and another white woman in the *New Republic* (echoed by other white women across the knee-jerk spectrum) told him to please shut up, sexism is definitely worse.

I am worried that new readers of this book will mostly see themselves as the suppressed and not the suppressors—that they will refuse to see their own unconscious biases and the forms they take, such as turning up their noses at a Caribbean writer, for example, for being too localized and not universal enough, or that they'll refuse to read a queer writer because "it's just not my taste, you know?" I am worried that we're all subdividing into tiny, highly specific demographics, and that I'm only going to be encouraged to read the works of other white,

middle-class, heterosexual, spinster, Cancer-sun and Taurus-rising women who come from the rural Midwest but now live in an urban area, because only they can truly understand and speak directly to me. It's a cliché that literature builds empathy. It can help you along in that process, but only if you aggressively work against the impulse to treat literature like a mirror. The first step is to notice that you are doing that.

I think what Joanna Russ was doing was trying to figure out how we can truly encounter one another: how we can cross the line from seeing the individual to seeing a shared humanity. That is a radical project. So I urge you, as a reader, not to look here for your own name, your own gender. Not to let this book be a reinforcement of your own worldview. Not to use it to keep from thinking. We owe Russ a bigger debt than that. We are all her daughters.

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How to Suppress Women's Writing

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