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My Hair Stood on End!: Talking with Joanna Russ about Slash, Community, and Female Sexuality

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Abstract: Joanna Russ is an award-winning science fiction author who wrote one of the earliest feminist analyses of slash fiction. In this interview, Russ reflects on her initial responses to slash fandom and considers its political and social meanings in the 1980s and today.

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Noted science fiction author Joanna Russ is perhaps most famous for her provocative novels *The Female Man* (1975) and *We Who Are About To* (1977), and her 1983 Hugo Award winning short story "Souls." Others know Russ primarily for her feminist criticism collected in works like *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts* (1985), and *What Are We Fighting For?* (1997). We, however, became interested in Russ because of her involvement in the early days of the Kirk/Spock slash fandom.

As feminists, academics, and slash fans we went in search of what had been written about this phenomenon—women writing sexually explicit, largely homoerotic stories about characters from film, television, and literature. What had others, particularly

feminists, made of this? Russ, we found, wrote the first important feminist analysis of slash fiction. Her 1985 essay, "Pornography By Women For Women, With Love" helped to set the terms of the discussion for feminist scholars who followed, and it is widely cited in fan studies. Russ argues that fantasy has to be read in more complex ways than simply seeing it as an effort at one-dimensional wish fulfillment. She posits fantasy as something rich and metaphorical. She reads slash as a genre that tells us new things about women's sexuality and sexual desire, things that—in 1985—weren't being talked about except in the very divided feminist "sex wars," where "pro-sex" and "anti-porn" feminists created ever more polarized stances. We were especially intrigued by this passage from Russ's essay:

> Only those for whom a sexual fantasy "works," that is, those who are aroused by it, have a chance of telling us to what particular set of conditions that fantasy speaks, and can analyze how and why it works and for whom. Sexual fantasy materials are like icebergs; the one-tenth that shows above the surface is no reliable indicator of the size or significance of the whole thing. Sexual fantasy that doesn't arouse is boring, funny, or repellant, and unsympathetic outsiders trying to decode these fantasies (or any others) will make all sorts of mistakes. (89)

In the twenty-six years since her piece was published, the slash world has changed a great deal (as has the world of feminist analysis). Academic scholars from a variety of fields—including media studies, literature, history, and education—now examine fan fiction and slash fiction.[1] Within the last decade scholarly texts and academic journals have considered the legality of fan fiction,[2] have presented it as a space to explore girls' online cultures and literacy,[3] have argued that fandom is a queer female space[4], and have questioned the dividing lines between pornography, erotica, and romance.[5]

We wanted to talk Russ, to have her revisit this idea of sexual fantasy, to have her discuss the phenomenon of a community of women writing erotica for the pleasure of other women, and get her take on current efforts to "decode" slash and slash fans. Though she is a bit of recluse and has published little in recent years (she suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome), Russ graciously agreed to be interviewed at her home in Tucson. The following conversation took place in May 2007, in her living room, among her books, movies, and a largely ignored (though nonetheless cool) rocketship on a wooden base that turned out to be her Hugo award.

JR I remember when I first got a phone call from a friend. She told me about slash, and I didn't get *mildly* interested, my hair stood up on end! I said "What? Can I get that?" "Yes," she said, "you can," and I began collecting them, and finally when the collection began to get utterly unwieldy and huge, I sent them to Bowling Green University, the Popular Culture Institute there. I wanted them to go somewhere they would last and not just be thrown out or whatever.

AP Does that mean that you don't have your slash anymore?

JR I don't have them with me, no. I have the few stories I wrote, copies of those, but that's it. I've found that because they're so erotic, after I finished one of them I would have this terrible thud as I came back to reality, and I decided I just didn't like that. So, sorrowfully, I sent them away, where they would be loved. I might think they are.

CF We've been particularly interested in not only the slash stories women are writing but also the kind of community they're building around these stories and the kinds of bonding that they have been doing, and also the language that they have come up with to be able to talk about the bonding. The women in the various slash fandoms clearly think of this as a female community, as a place where women can come together, where we can bond, women can sort of express desires that they can't normally express.

JR Oh yeah, they're very much aware of that. Some of them have to keep it secret that they read this stuff, certainly from their employers and often from their husbands. I think what happened, the way I have heard it, is that when Star Trek began, a lot of women who had not been interested in science fiction came to be interested through it, although it really is not that much of a female fiction. And what happened was, I suspect, that the Trekkies, the Trek fans, started going to conventions. Now science fiction fans have always done that, but these were specifically Trek conventions, and they got together, they got to know each other. And [slash] began, and I think about that time there were stories hinting that [Kirk and Spock] were in love, and then there were stories about one of them having died and the other saying "Oh God, now I realize it, why didn't I know it before," and [these women] kind of got into the subject.

AP One of the sets of questions that we have for you was about what the community of slash readers and writers was like before the internet. We can tell you some of what it's like now, because now there certainly are still cons, but so much of the community is happening on the internet and it is very immediate.

JR Yeah, I would think so. I don't have much experience in that.

AP Right, we didn't think that you did, so we were going to show you some of what is going on now if you're curious.

JR I know that before, the science fiction fans—and there are always some women, not a majority, but quite a few—one of the things that motivated them, that probably still motivates the community, is that they feel very isolated. You don't easily get in touch with people who are other fans. And every once in a while, I don't know how many times in the past twenty years, maybe three or four times, I would get a letter addressed to my publisher saying, "Help! I am a science fiction fan and I am out here in nowhere land. I cannot find another fan, what should I do?" And usually what I tell them is get the magazines, because in the back they have announcements of cons, and go.

AP So when you were reading slash, you found out that it existed because a friend of yours said "Hey, look at this thing that I found?"

JR Yes.

AP And did you go to cons?

JR No, I didn't. By then, the universities I was working for did not give out all that much money for travel. When they had I had gone to a lot of places, not SF cons, but I had all sorts

of things going on, conferences about this, that, and the other, technology in the future, and who knows.

AP So did you have other female friends who read and/or wrote slash?

JR Only this one. I did write to several of the women whose stories were published, and one of them got to be quite a nice friend, and quite interesting. I don't know where she is now, though, or what she's doing. But no, I never really got into the community. There is a woman, an academic, who wrote a book about the community [Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1991)]. It's not so much about the stories per se, although she certainly does a lot of that, it's about the kind of people who are in the community and what they feel and what is the kind of emotional center of the stories. I found it just fascinating.

AP Is she coming at it from a feminist perspective?

JR I think she gets to the center of the thing there. She's interested in the topics, the themes they're exploring, and it rang true to me, it really did. There was a guy in academia who did another book about it which is, I think, very schematic.

AP Was it *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins?

JR I think so.

AP He's actually come a long way since that book, but that has become a touchstone book in the field of fan fiction studies and fan scholarship more broadly. It's a book that everybody refers to.

JR It's not nearly as good as this one [*Enterprising Women*], I think, not nearly. He's somewhat schematic, and a little rigid. She's not interested in that. She says at one point that the material is like the stories of King Arthur—many, many different writers saying many, many different things, but that's all.

AP Could we ask you some questions about writing slash? I know that you don't do that now but in your essay "Pornography by Women for Women" you allude to the fact that you're writing it, and we didn't know if that was a literary device or if that was actually true.

JR No, I actually did.

AP We would love to hear about that, particularly because you are a professional writer.

JR Some of the others are too. Don't assume they're not. One of them is a lawyer, as far as I know, one is living on disability and worked for a while as a social worker. They turn up all over the place, and there are all sorts of theories about why. I think, to put it in a nutshell as far as I can remember, they're writing about issues that concern women very much, but they're doing it undercover in a way. These [the characters the writers create] are sort of

men but they're not really, you know? So [the women writers] can treat things that they could not do at all.

CF Did you enjoy writing slash?

JR I don't know, that brings up a question of writing, do I, quote, enjoy writing. In a way, yes, and in a way no. It's very hard, I mean, it really is. On the other hand I liked it immensely. I'm never happier than when I'm sitting in a corner typing. Yeah, I enjoyed it.

CF Was writing slash different in some way?

JR Yes, there was one way in which it's very, very different, and that is that the characters are givens. You don't have to stop and say "oh, by the way, this character is so-and-so and had this sort of childhood and blah, blah, blah," because everybody knows who they are.

CF Some people argue that fanfic writers aren't really writers or they can't ever be very good writers because they're just sort of playing in somebody else's yard.

JR Many of them, yes, that's true, but some of them are good writers. I don't know, it's hard to say. If you don't know the show, you can't really pick up what's going on, and that in a way makes it easier, that you don't have to create everything from scratch. The base, the foundation is already there. I couldn't talk about anybody else, but that's the way I felt, and it's kind of freeing in a way. It sort of is like talking about King Arthur and his knights; well you know who they are, come on, I don't have to tell you. Especially when you're writing science fiction, everything is new, and that's hard. And of course the other thing I think that got writers into [*Star Trek*] was that it's character-driven. It has ideas and it's character-driven. And that's *Buffy* too. What many of them do in other kinds of fan fiction is to say "you know all the public stuff, I'm going to give you their private lives, filling in what isn't there."

AP Did you read any *Buffy* slash?

JR No. I have been told it exists but I don't really feel that I'd want to. As I said, I'm too tired.

AP Well, we brought you some *Smallville* slash, just in case you want to see it but you don't have to take it if it feels like that would be too much.

JR Most of it is sort of pornography.

AP Well, we definitely want to talk about that.

JR If it doesn't turn you on, it's kind of indifferent.

AP And that was one of the great points that you made in your essay about slash, the fact that people who don't get it, who are not turned on by it, are not the right people to criticize it because they're missing some crucial elements, and I thought that was exactly right.

JR I think that applies to all kinds of fiction and all kinds of drama. If it doesn't affect you, then why read it?

AP And are you going to be able to have really useful insights about how it does or doesn't work if it doesn't work on you? So were your slash stories sexy? I mean, your regular novels are sexy, did the slash allow you to be more explicit?

JR Yes, and make my scenes longer. Yeah, it did I think. And yet there's a good deal of slash where that doesn't happen, but even there it's full of emotion and emotional intensity. I know from secondhand that many of the male fans of Star Trek who don't write this kind of thing were very offended by it. "That couldn't happen in a million years."

CF Many male fans are still not just offended, but incredibly vocal and hostile to slash.

JR "You're playing in my field, get out, take your little red wagon and go home." Yeah, something like that. I don't really know, apparently it's really threatening stuff.

AP And what is the threat? I have thoughts, we have thoughts on why it is so threatening but . . .

JR Tell me your thoughts.

AP Well, for one thing, I think part of what these slash stories are doing is making explicit a subtext that's already very much there, and so I think that is threatening; the fact that if we took off the blinders of heterosexism, the amount of homoerotic tension that is going on in mainstream American media all the time is incredibly visible. And slash makes it visible, and I think that's threatening.

JR I think so.

CF I think slash, too, makes visible female desire, and I think that freaks men out. Recently in the fangirl community someone had just read your *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, and she was very moved and excited, and she wrote this really long post about your book in relation to fanfic. The title of the post was "How Fanfic Makes Women Poor." She wrote this thing and basically what she said is that fanfic keeps women poor and silenced and marginalized because we are sort of over here doing our own thing out of the way and not competing in mainstream culture with men. And so regardless of what she actually said in the post, what it did is that all sorts of people came out of the woodwork to comment about fanfic, and why women do it and why they don't do it, and whether or not fanfic violates copyright law, and there have been weeks and weeks of this stuff, and "you didn't understand what Joanna Russ actually meant," and weeks and weeks of this stuff. And one of the posts that came out of it was by a male academic who thought that all of this uproar was completely silly, and discussed people who write fanfic, particularly people who write slash. He said that fanfic was horrifying and that fanfic writers were pathological, that fandom as practiced by women represents a regression to adolescent, juvenile, child-like modes of expression, and that fanfic writers were bad readers and demonstrated their childlike nature by being unable to engage. He even to some extent recognized the ways in

which that critique was completely gendered, that here were a bunch of women doing a bunch of silly things, over, in private, giggling, and that there was something deeply, deeply wrong about that, and that instead of doing that what we should be concerned with is creative art with a capital A.

JR Oh, that again. That's an old one, oh my god, several centuries old. [Samuel] Delaney once pointed out that in the nineteenth century the number, the amount of fiction written, began to just grow like crazy. And it got to the point where nobody could read all of it, and what happened was that it first split into two, there was high art and there was slush, so you knew what you should be paying attention to. Rider Haggard's book *She*, I don't know if you know the novel; it's a fantasy, it's the kind of thing that today if you saw it, it would have a swordsman and an incredibly buxom lady on the cover, and you'd say it's just trash. It is, actually, but he was considered absolutely on par with others. I mean, he might not be as good as they were, but this was serious fiction. And now we've been living with this split for so long, that that's the automatic thing you can defend yourself with. "Oh, but this isn't art, it isn't serious, it isn't real. It's juvenile." Anyway, I don't know. I hope there are a lot of young men growing up who don't hear of this and who don't think about it and won't do it anymore.

AP I think that the value, the categories of evaluation that we so often use to say this is pornography, versus this which is art, are suspect at best. I also think those judgments tell us a lot more about the culture itself and its assumptions than they do about the works they judge.

JR Yes, I would agree. You notice that some of the stuff by men that I would call certainly pornographic, Henry Miller, for instance, is taken very seriously. It's all so obvious. When women do it, it's silly, when men do it, it's serious.

AP It's either silly or it's horrifying, you know? It's either "oh, that's trivial, we can laugh that off," or it's that this is deviant. I think slash is an interesting space to look at in terms of that, because it is so erotically-driven, it is so explicit, it is so sexy. I mean, to me, when you said "my hair stood up on end," that was absolutely my response when I started reading slash, it was like "oh my god." The first thought was "oh my god," and the second thought was "how have I gone this long without having read this stuff," you know? I think it's really interesting that this sub-culture of literature exists and in thriving, but I also think it raises a lot of questions about our culture and female desire, which of course is one of the big things you talked about in your essay in 1985. We wanted to talk to you about to what extent those things are still happening and still true today. Do you feel that our cultural approach or cultural understanding of female desire is about the same now in 2007 as it was in 1985?

JR Well, it's a little different than it was in 1958. If I look really far back, yeah, a lot has changed, but it's weird, it's as if the guys are still running television and the movies, and they're trying very hard to keep it the way it was.

CF Do you think that shows like *Buffy* and *Xena* make a dent?

JR Yes, I think they do, and there's something interesting that a writer friend of mine, a man, told me; he lives in Pennsylvania I think. He said he and his wife went on a tour of one of the studios, and one of the things that they had for people, who were pretty largely young people and children, were two actors, a woman costumed as Xena and a man costumed as Hercules. He said the younger people were fascinated by Xena and they had lots and lots and lots of questions, but they weren't terribly interested in Hercules. This is irrespective of the sex. I think this is because in the *Xena* shows there is a lot of emphasis on personal feeling, and motives, and things like that; it's character-driven again. I think some of them said they'd like to have a mother like Xena. I have been reading a lot of sludge, just stuff like collections of mystery stories and science fiction collections. The mystery stories are very interesting because again, often the ones that women write are as good as or not as good as the ones the guys write, but the women write about personalities, about characters, and what is character-driven. The men tend not to; they are more comfortable apparently with technical problems. I think the best writers are the kind who do both at the same time.

AP Do you attribute this difference to just sort of continuing gender role socialization that puts women in the position of being the caretakers?

JR Well that certainly exists, and I don't know if it's quite enough to explain it, but it's a hell of a lot. I don't really trust biological research as it's going on now, because when it gets into the mass media, again, you have to get into new scholarly stuff before you find this, but if you have two groups of people and you're testing them for something, there's about a five percent chance that the results you get will just be chance. They're necessary because they're statistics, and yet when you see stuff in places like *Newsweek* or *Time* they're taking one and a half percent, for instance, as being terribly important. I also happen to know again from some of these sources that articles and books which talk about how different men and women are get reviewed and get talked about. Those which don't come up with that just disappear. It's obvious that this culture is extremist on the subject.

AP I have a whole unit in my Intro to Women's and Gender Studies course where we talk about that very issue because I think that that's incredibly true, that our culture loves to find biological justifications for gender-power differences.

JR Every culture will find justification for everything they believe or want to believe. I still think that a lot of the world is still in shock, and I think probably what brought it on was easier birth control. The sort of, where are we, what do we do now?

AP And our culture I think may be among that group.

JR Oh yes, definitely.

AP Conseula and I have been talking a lot about female desire and the fact that it seems to us that the lessons that we have been taught as girls and women about what desire was, what it meant, what it felt like, what shapes it took, that those lessons were all profoundly, profoundly wrong. In ways that as a thirty-four year old woman who has been a feminist for years and years, who teaches Women's Studies, I'm surprised at how surprising this is

to me, because I should know this by now, but it's like, it's even more wrong than *I* thought. So I just think that our culture, that we don't know anything about female desire.

CF And yet, here's this world of slash where this is all these women are doing, talking about it and asking questions.

JR But they're in disguise. They're disguised as a man. I once noticed that in slash there are so many references to these characters' penises that it's like a little label that says "Hello, I am" and the name. "I have a penis and I'm therefore male," but clearly that's not what's happening.

CF Why do you think that women can't have these conversations about their own desire through female characters?

JR I think it's something like this. As I said, the characters are not exactly male. They're disguises of some sort, kind of like "I have the proper genitals so I am male, please remember that." I have written a couple of stories myself in which women are disguised, literally disguised as men. You try to write about women and you don't have the cultural tropes that you could use, there's very little there. It's kind of like disguising yourself as an upper-class person, as an aristocrat. It counts, it matters that they're male. It makes what they do serious. Apparently the real message does get through, because you said a lot of the fans hate it. They don't think it's about men, they know better. [Writing about male characters] kind of frees your imagination or your memory or something. This had happened in the nineteenth century, quite a few women who were novelists would write stories about women who were disguised as men or they would write them from a male point of view, and that is saying "if I were only a man, I could do this or that, or be this or that." Some were not like that, there's an early detective novel, 1890 or something like that in which a young woman is a detective, and there's a lovely illustration from the first publications of this thing in a magazine then, and there she is with her skirts and her parasol and her hands are teeny. A drunken lout is about to hit a woman, and she is saying, "stop, sir," and she doesn't look as if she could hit a cream puff, but that's her. That did happen. But in many of them, no, it didn't.

I think [writing about male characters] has something to do with one's sense of oneself as an active person, as free. I mean, we have sense, we look around and we see those guys who are doing all sorts of stuff, even if they can't do it right, they're thinking about it. They're making fantasies about it, there are movies about it. So this becomes not only "we will show you the personal life of these people, which is left out of the mass media, but we will write about them as we know people on the inside, and they will ring true to us, to the writers and readers in a way they would not if they were women."

AP And I guess that's the part that interests me and that I have not found an adequate explanation for. That reading the stories about Clark and Lex for instance, in the *Smallville* slash, is really sexy, I mean, that stuff is hot, and works for me in a way that the stories about the female characters in *Smallville* don't work at all. Is that some sort of compensatory thing, because my identity as a woman is not solid enough?

JR No, I think that nobody's social identity as a woman is solid enough. And when you're doing this, you're inventing, you're fantasizing. It's still very much a different world for men and women. I remember somebody, a feminist at Cornell, once said to me, "I was talking to this audience and they were looking rather unconvinced, especially the guys, and then I said, how many people here put only their initials in the telephone listing in the telephone book?" And the women's hands all went up, and the men went, you do? They didn't know. They hadn't noticed. Yeah, they do. And that makes a big difference. It's like gay friends of mine who went to the March on Washington, and said we were all over the place, we got into a subway and it was nine tenths gay people. And she said you don't realize what a burden you carry until it's gone. Everything just went, it was wonderful, and I think that's true whatever the burden is. Whatever the minority burden or the sex burden, whatever it is, when it's gone you go, oh my god.

AP The social identity of a woman is such that sexual stories with women are not . . .

JR It's not real unless men do it, something like that, I think.

CF And so do you think that this new generation, the next generation of women are continuing to write slash like the women who were writing before? So many of the people in the *Smallville* fandom, for instance, are college students, twenty-year-old girls, so their social identities [are also not well-formed]? We would like to think that a generation later...

JR It's less than it was, because when I was an adolescent which was in the 1950's, nobody would have imagined [slash], let alone written it. And that's why when Patricia, my friend, said it's a world in which Kirk and Spock are lovers, and I said, "Where do I find that?" I remember once I was having one of the [fanzines] duplicated, and the illustrations I had forgotten about, and I was there watching them do it in this Xerox place. This elderly man kind of stood next to me and he saw one of the illustrations, and he went gray—shocked, very shocked. Yet I took [these same pictures] to a feminist group and I remember one woman saying "I don't want to see that," and I showed it to her and she said, "they're not there for us, they're there for each other," which was very subtle, it was true, in the illustration.

AP And yet I don't know that's true of the stuff that I read. In fact, I would say it's the exact opposite, that the characters are not there for each other, they're entirely there to create erotic bonds between the women who are writing and reading the stories. They're explicitly there for us.

JR Yes, I would say so, yes.

AP Not for each other.

JR Yet the woman I heard this from, my friend, is definitely heterosexual, and she loves [slash] too. I think it's fairly flexible stuff. You don't have to identify with this character or that, you can do both or neither; writing can do that. It's only after thinking, like today, about this that I realize how male-identified most science fiction is, especially since I've been reading anything from the sixties on, in science fiction. It's that idea of disguise that I

find myself coming back to. You can really, in a sense, be anybody or any*bodies*, plural, in writing. I used to write in the sixties, in the early sixties; I was writing stories, not science fiction then, in which the main characters were men. One day I sat myself down and began thinking, and I just tried to write a story about a thief and pick-pocket and that kind of person you keep finding in those books, who was female. I couldn't. And then I started writing and when I wrote I realized that it was a creation story, and the creation story for this particular world was that men were made from the sixth finger of the first woman, and that is why women only have five fingers on each hand. That worked, and suddenly I did this whole series about Alex, but she is still an exception in that world. And by the time I got to *The Female Man*, they aren't, in the whole population.

AP And yet, characters like Alex, and characters like Janet, and Gyl, in *The Female Man* are not necessarily exceptions now in that fictional world, but are still exceptions in the world of public discourse.

JR That's a good phrase to think of when you're asking, why did they write about men? That's what we have in the public discourse. And in those terms, if you like things that go into those terms (which probably, obviously you do), that's what you have to do. Work in the public discourse's terms. Some [slash writers] I think have been drifting away from that, but as I said, I am way out of the loop now.

AP Did you or do you see slash as potentially a kind of activist writing? Is it, for instance, a kind of writing that could challenge compulsory heterosexuality?

JR The second thing, no, I don't think so; the first, maybe. I think the women who write it were, at least in the eighties, aware that they were doing something they probably should not tell people about, especially their employers. I remember Syn Ferguson, who is a good writer, saying to me at one point "my readers need this, they really need it, and I know women who are keeping this a secret from everybody, including their husbands."

AP Why do they need it?

JR Because, as you say, this is a public discourse in which female sexuality really doesn't exist. I lived that out. I can still remember riding in the subway at about the age of seventeen, and I remember thinking oh my god, sex is so common, it's all over the place. I didn't think it was because I learned what the movies taught me.

CF Do you think that these women who are writing slash are doing a disservice by keeping it out of the public discourse? I think this is part of what that fury was about the woman who wrote about your book, that we're doing ourselves a disservice by keeping it secret. I write slash and I certainly don't publish it under my actual name.

JR Most of the women don't, they write it under pseudonyms.

CF Should we be? Should I go out tomorrow and publish it under my own name? Would that be better?

AP Is the secrecy actually serving the interest of the patriarchy that wants to keep women's desire under wraps?

JR It's probably doing both. I don't think you can separate the yes and the no on that, absolutely. Think of what it would do for you. What would be the consequences? I think that women who wrote it in the seventies and eighties had some idea of what they were doing, because I did see one group of slash writers in the eighties at a science fiction convention, and some guy came over and said "who are you?" which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do at a convention, and one of the women looked at him and said "we're a knitting society," or something along that line, and one of them called themselves the Women's Terrorist Society from Hell. Everybody laughed, and he laughed, but I think there was some truth to it. If you believe the public discourse then you have to also believe that female sexuality is a dreadful thing and must be squashed at all costs, and so on. I just hope there are many, many more young people who are growing up without that, without all of it, anyway. I think that's true. Let me tell you an anecdote about that. When I was in my teens I do remember reading *Forever Amber*, which was the scandalous book of the time, and the sex scenes always ended with three or four dots. I got to the point where if I saw three or four dots, it would turn me on, and now you think of it and it seems so absolutely asinine, three dots.

AP I do think that we're a lot more open about sexual desire in general, and female desire these days, but I think often female desire now is configured as something that is sort of a visible commodity for other people's consumption. The whole Girls Gone Wild phenomenon, that women are supposed to be sexy but not . . .

JR Sexy but not sexual.

AP Right, it's not about what do you feel, it's about what do you perform.

JR I think so too, I don't know what's going to happen with this. I would hope that the openness would leave a little more room. Some woman was commenting in somebody else's book about some event in her parents' group, where they went to see their daughters perform, and their daughters were imitating the sexy women from I forget where, and they were eleven and twelve. And the parents didn't like it and I thought I don't like it either. I really don't like it. This is not about being sexual. I don't know, I think it's a lot easier for men to find out who they are this way than it is for us, but still. One thing I have tried to do when I write, and Samuel Delaney was clever enough to pick it up at one point, was take the sex in my stories and simply make it part of the whole fabric. It's not special, it's not sacred, it's not demonic, it just happens. It's as much an ordinary part of life as heating your dinner up, or something, and I always worked very hard to get that over. That's the antithesis, the three dots, I guess.

AP Well right, because if something is so highly charged that you can't even write and you just have to put the three dots . . .

JR It's sacred and demonic.

AP I think that's exactly right.

CF Sam Delaney said about science fiction that it was a rich symbiotic environment that talks about what you desire. Someone was asking him about sexuality in his work and whether he thought the genre of science fiction allowed him to play, and he said that there was something, not just about science fiction books, but about science fiction culture, about going to cons, and about that being a unique place in allowing people to articulate what they desire and what they fantasize about, whether or not it was something they would actually do, that this freed them up in a way.

JR I think it's true. I remember talking to a young woman I knew when I was teaching in Seattle, who was a science fiction fan and I got to know a little group of fans there. She at one point said she had been a Mormon, and was no longer, she insisted on being thrown out, and she said what began to free her in her life was science fiction. I said how do you mean, and she said not necessarily the characters, who were very recognizable, not necessarily the plots, which were sort of imperial America stuff, but she said the landscapes, and the aliens. They give the feeling that things could be different. I think it did that for me too, when I was a teenager, and that's why I held on to it so. Things could be otherwise.

AP Which is a pretty radical notion.

JR Yeah, it certainly is.

CF Octavia Butler talks about the same thing in her interviews. About reading science fiction as a young kid and that what drew her to it was the possibility, even when the stories might have been hackneyed or imperial America, there was still something about it that suggested possibility.

AP It seems to me that, and I don't know if there's anybody to quantify this, but the number of people who are writing fan fiction now, the number of people who are involved, for instance, in the *Harry Potter* fan community . . .

JR Yeah, that surprised me a little.

AP It's stunningly large.

CF Incredibly large, and active, and prolific.

AP People just are writing novels and novels in response to these novels, and so it seems to me that although maybe it still feels subcultural for the people who are involved, it seems like it's got to be at some point, it's got to be less of one. Even though it's a secret, it can't be a subculture if it's the majority of people participating, right? It feels to me like maybe it's on this borderline of not being subcultural anymore.

CF Yet we might be walking down the street with tons of people who are reading and writing slash, but they're publishing it under pseudonyms. So that even if it's this ground-swelling stuff, it's still a secret.

JR They've got to keep it secret because they're violating copyrights, and so are the others.

AP Right, but that's another whole gendered issue that some folks have talked about, the fact that parody is looked on by the courts and by copyright holders much more favorably than slash. So people who are writing parodies that aren't sexual, who are often men, are not as liable as people who are writing slash, who are usually women. So it's an interesting gendered thing about what's considered copyright violation and what isn't.

JR There's something legal there, too, which is that parodies are making fun of the object, and they're not trespassing, really, on the same territory.

AP Well, it's considered a first amendment issue, which I think is right, but slash is not.

JR It's serious, that's why.

AP It's also, I think, because of all the stigma around women being into this dirty stuff.

JR I know there are women, some have told me, who don't want to sign their names because they're quite sure they'd lose their jobs, and they might. It's a pity, it is a pity. And there is very explosive stuff in there, I know. And one of the reasons I gave my collection away is I was spending too much time and energy on it, and it costs a bundle.

AP Well, this is a bad sign for us, Conseula. The fact that she's actually had to give it up, cause we have constant conversations about, is this bad that we're spending this much time reading slash?

JR It wasn't a matter of it being objectively bad. It was that every time I finished a [fanzine], the exuberance would carry me across the apartment and then I'd go, oh no, it's over.

AP And I think that may be one thing that's somewhat different with the internet communities, because now you finish the stories and you write to the author, and then you write to your girlfriend and you say "oh my god, go read this story," and then you excerpt, "here's a really sexy passage." This is what Conseula does to me all the time, "here's something really sexy," so that you won't be able to resist reading the story right now. And so it's sort of like, we don't have that *thud* because of the community.

JR I know, the characters have sort of become community personas, and I did not have that.

AP It would be a thud, I think, to finish the story and not be able to say "oh my god, Conseula, you have to read this."

And one of the things, too, that just reminds me of this that you mentioned in your "Pornography" essay, you said, "I mentioned just the premise of slash to eight women, and all of them shrieked," and I thought yes, there's something very true in that. I mean,

obviously it's true because it was your experience, but there's something about the female community and the shrieking. Conseula and I have these conversations about how we feel like we have tapped into our fifteen-year-old selves, and the shrieking, and the delight.

JR Possibly fourteen.

CF And I think that part of the guy who called fanfic horrifying and pathological, I think in part that's what he's reacting to, because if you see one of the stories posted online and the comments that come after it, a lot of it is sort of shrieking with words, and this whole sort of fangirl language that has developed to communicate that shriek, but on the screen, and it is like we're fifteen years old, or fourteen.

JR But we never got this when we were fifteen and fourteen, and that's the difference.

AP Yeah, it feels like it's tapping into some, I mean, I've been using words like "unruly" and "insurgent" sort of energy in myself that got disciplined out of me when I was a teenager.

JR It must be very different between you and me since I was a teenager in the God/Elvis 1950s, and there are women now [writing slash] who are younger than you are, who are fourteen and fifteen. I don't know what I would do with that. I do know that in feminist writing there have been women writing books and things like that in which they recount what happened to them in their teens, and what it meant to them. What I think of the mystification I was exposed to, it was just hard. I'm seventy, but this must have started when I was eleven or twelve, being squashed. Somebody was saying that for gay women to come out, they usually do it a good bit later than gay men, because you can't get a picture of yourself at all, one way or the other.

AP And that is one thing that I think, to a certain extent, I hope maybe has changed from when you were a teenager. I think at least teenage girls now, regardless of the distortions that our society puts around female sexuality, maybe know that having sexual feelings is a normal thing, and also I think know that gay and lesbian identities exist.

JR That is where I think it's really big and different, a big difference.
Coda: After the interview concluded, we gave Russ some slash stories we had printed out for her. While at the time she seemed to accept them more out of a desire to be polite rather than a genuine interest in the love affair between Clark Kent and Lex Luthor, those stories actually began a year-long correspondence with Russ. She wrote to us (in letters that she composed on the typewriter—she doesn't own a computer), commenting on the stories we'd given her and on slash and women and sexuality generally; we wrote back and sent more stories. When we met her she had opted out of the slash community (to a certain extent, she had never been part of that community), but we introduced her back into the community, and that community of female desire seemed to delight her as much as it has delighted us and other women who read and write slash in the communities that proliferate online today.

Russ is now 75 years old, but she is still a rigorous thinker—creative and critical—whose writings have been important to science fiction and feminism. Although we didn't

agree with everything she said in our interview, we were struck by how thoughtfully she engaged with a world that she now mostly views from the outside. We also remain impressed with how relevant her writings still are. Although much has changed from the world she intervened in with her fiction and her critical essays, too much remains the same, and her arguments and visions—about women, about gays and lesbians, about a society that allows everyone the space to enact their full humanity—still need to be acknowledged.

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[1] In particular, see Rhiannon Bury's *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005) and Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's edited collection, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006). The academic journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* is also an important resource for slash scholars.

[2] For instance, Abigail De Kosnik, "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?", *Cinema Journal* 48.4 (2009), 118-124; Anupam Chander and Madhavi Sunder, "Everyone's a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of 'Mary Sue' Fan Fiction as Fair Use," *California Law Review* 95.2 (2007), 597-626; and Rebecca Tushnet, "Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction, and a New Common Law" (*Loyola of Los Angeles Entertainment Law Journal*, 17.3).

[3] See the work of Rebecca Black, who has written several academic articles as well as a monograph, *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction*. New York: Peter Lang (2008). Also see Angela Thomas, *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age*. New York, Peter Lang (2007) and Catherine Tosenberger, "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction." *Children's Literature* 36 (2008), 185-207.

[4] For instance, see Eden Lackner, Barbara Lynn Lucas, and Robin Anne Reid's "Cunning Linguists: The Bisexual Erotics of Words/Silence/Flesh" (*Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse, eds. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006, 189-206), and Kristina Busse, " 'Digital Get Down': Postmodern Boy Band Slash and the Queer Female Space," *eros.usa: Essays on the Culture and Literature of Desire* (eds. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and Jopi Nyman. Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdanskiego, 2005: 103-125).

[5] See Catherine Driscoll, "One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance." *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse, eds. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006, 79-96) and "Annihilating Love and Heterosexuality without Women: Romance, Generic Difference, and Queer Politics in 'Supernatural' Fan Fiction," by Monica Flegel and Jenny Roth, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4(2010).

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