

Neutral Pronouns

A Modest Proposal Whose Time Has Come*

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L'auteure souhaite un retour au langage non sexiste ou plus spécifiquement aux pronoms qui reconnaissent et permettent un plus large éventail d'expressions sexuelles /genres. Elle soutient que l'utilisation des pronoms neutres serait le prochain pas dans le combat pour créer un langage non discriminatoire.

The general use of diminutive feminine endings has only recently faded from our cultural memory. Today, one would wonder at the use of manageress, suffragette, or ancestress when manager, suffragist, or ancestor would do. This shift from a diminutive to a more gender-neutral linguistic model is due to efforts of second wave feminists who, in the span of one generation, accomplished the formidable feat of establishing a standard of non-sexist language usage throughout Canada and the U.S., from legislation to the workplace to cultural productions. From the start of the liberation movement feminists coined new terms such as the title Ms., which functioned to displace marriage as a primary indicator of women's social status, then moved on to introduce gender-neutral occupational categories such as postal worker and fire fighter in the interests of employment equity.¹ By 1983, the Canadian government had started to issue guidelines for the use of non-sexist language and for the elimination of sex-role stereotypes (see, for exam-

ple, Employment and Immigration Canada; Emploi et Immigration Canada). Although this new standard initially met with resistance and derision, particularly in the mass media, the froth of androcentric dissent gradually receded from the front page of the newspapers to the back rooms of the office and the shift toward non-sexist language usage over the next decade became the preferred mode of communication throughout the public sphere.²

More recently, some transgender activists such as Leslie Feinberg have advocated a turn toward non-*sexed* language; language, or more specifically pronouns, that acknowledges and allows for a broader range of sex/gender and sexual expression. Critiquing gender assumptions, founding director of the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC), Riki Wilchins pointedly asks "what does gender identification *mean* if it doesn't tell us about a person's body, gender expression, and sexual orientation?" (2004: 131, my emphasis).³ Pronouns such as "he" assume exactly such meaning; that "he" is physically male, presents as masculine, and is the natural heterosexual counterpart to "she." At their most fundamental level, the meaning of pronominal forms is not only invested with gender, but with sex and sexuality such that the efficacy of several adjectives denoting the refer-

ent's human condition is compressed into a single powerful noun.

Activists' demand for pronoun neutrality is in many ways a continuation of the feminist commentary on sexist language since it mobilizes the critique that the pronouns he/ him/ his are never truly sex-indefinite regardless of grammarians' claims. Such agitation for the elimination of bias in language has a considerable history. As early as 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft expressed the wish:

to see the distinction of sex con-founded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour. For this distinction is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to woman.... (147)⁴

For Wollstonecraft, sex distinction was not marked by physical sex difference, but referred to the learned manners and behaviours that distinguished women from men within so-called civilized societies. Addressing women as naturally dependent beings similar to children was a sex distinction that operated to bar them from access to education, careers, and healthcare and thus to denote their secondary social station *vis-a-vis* men.

Agitation against the secondary status assigned to women through the enculturation of sex distinction

was taken up by reformers following Wollstonecraft and reached a new level of eloquence in Simone de Beauvoir's notion of the "other." In her groundbreaking study *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir commented that

the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is

Beauvoir to reject sex and sexual distinctions as well as the institutionalized paradigm of gender difference. Manifestoes and treatises describing women's oppressed condition began to circulate including that of *The Feminists*⁵ (1969a, 1969b) who declared that the construction of a two-sex system expressed through sex roles and heterosexuality must be destroyed if people were to attain a liberated

possibility of a linguistic system that unproblematically referred to a true sex.

These activists' and theorists' concern with sex identity did not, however, typify the focus of the liberation movements in which they were participants. Rather, the issue of sex identification was seen as tangential to discussions about oppression based on gender and sexual orientation. By 1980 Dale Spender declared that "new symbols will need to be created" for the goal of rendering women "linguistically visible" rather than for the purpose of eradicating sex distinctions from language (162). Although concerned that the English language was an active relay that was man-made and that made men, Spender and other feminists considered this circular production only insofar as it created masculine power, not physically-sexed "male" bodies (see, for example, Mouton). Sexism was defined as sex-bias within a two-sex system and was exemplified by the universal use of masculine pronouns that evoked stereotypic images of active, world-creating, men as well as by the more relative use of feminine pronouns that relegated women to sex-specific secondary roles. For language theorists, sexism did not include what early radical feminists or Foucault identified as the endeavour to *make sex*, that is, to create a relay between the antithetical pronouns "he" and "she" and two distinctly sexed bodies.

In contrast, trans-activists suggest that the pronouns *he/she* and *his/her* linguistically enforce a normative two-sex system through assumptions that the trans-subject does and ought to fit into one side of this binary opposition. A failed match between pronoun and person, they remark, is often treated as a defect of the person, for it is blamed on the individual's failure to express proper sex/gender identity instead of being seen as a deficiency of our restrictive pronoun system. Sandy Stone points out that "the transsexual currently occupies a position which is nowhere, which is

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indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (xviii)

Extended to the use of pronouns, "she" is not truly complimentary to "he" but is a dependent designation that signifies humanity only through association with, and difference from, a male subject. Beauvoir notes that the world is represented through men, both through their perspective and through their self-identification with the world. Subsequently, "he" is not merely a metaphor for universal humanity that a real man aspires toward from the depths of his immanence, but is instead a state of transcendence that is always already available to him through signification. In comparison, "she" is the immanence that "he" denies, a metaphor for the abject materialism that "he" transcends through ownership, control and, if need be, destruction.

Within a decade of Beauvoir's publication in France, the nascent women's liberation movement began to articulate a similar critique in Canada, the U.S., and Britain. In those early moments some vociferous radical feminist groups went further than

state of equality. A mere year later one of the radical movement's first full length books was released, *The Dialectic of Sex*, wherein Shulamith Firestone stated that

the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. (11)

Firestone confused early feminists' call to eliminate customs that distinguished the sexes with a call to eliminate sex/gender difference but nonetheless challenged the prevailing sexual binary that implicated the linguistic status quo. Revisiting this issue in the mid-1970s, Marilyn Frye added that "constant sex-identification both defines and maintains the caste boundary without which there could not be a dominance-subordination structure" (33), while Foucault ended the decade with his question, "Avon-nous *vraiment* besoin d'un *vrai* sexe?" (1994: 116)⁶. As a culmination of then current analyses, Foucault's question of sex validity further galvanized Frye's critique of sex-identification to undercut the

outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse," hence, Stone asks, how "can the transsexual speak?" (295). This question reflects Stone's concern that transsexuals are sex/gender-mixed insofar as they are one sex pre-op, another post-op, and perhaps neither in between. According to sexologists of the Harry Benjamin school, this "mixture" should be resolved through creating a story about one's past gender so as to eliminate the "he" in the past of one who is now "she." Hence, according to this school's logic, "she" cannot exist in the pre-op body, but only in fictions about it. In such situations pronouns act as regulatory instruments to be assigned only when and where authorities deem the existence of a properly-sexed body or culturally acceptable lie. While intersex, "inter-gender," "non-gender," or even "post-gender" conditions exist in different individual's lived reality they do not in language, thus people who do not conform to a rigid two-sex system are relegated to the discursive purgatory of non-signification.

If transgendered people cannot speak they are nonetheless spoken to and about, and here pronouns not only fail to signify but can lead to violence against the subject who is estranged within the binary sex/gender system. For example, in 2004 U.S. immigration officials denied the legality of a marriage between Jiffy Javenella, a Filipino man, and Donita Ganzon, a woman who had transitioned 25 years previously. Ann Rostow of *Planet Out* reported that

According to the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. policy "disallows recognition of change of sex in order for a marriage between two persons born of the same sex to be considered bona fide." The bureaucrats cite the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act to justify their denial of residency to Javenella, based on his illegal "same-sex marriage."

When Ganzon sought redress, the

officials' reference to her as "he" worked not only to revoke a marriage that had been legal during the four years previous to that point, but also to deny Ganzon's sense of self. Moreover, this denial turned a standard residency procedure into an issue of national security, one that has complemented U.S. Immigration's targeting of Filipinos for deportation since the September 11th attacks

session immediately shatters. Subsequently, the ensuing occasion of pronoun verification and correction often entails brutality and punishment, such as the rape, beating, and eventual murder that accompanied the discovery of Brandon Teena's "true" female anatomy.⁷ In this tragic case, murder was the force by which proper pronouns were legislated and such legislation was supported by the full

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(CFFSA). In this case, pronouns became a weapon of racial and sexual discrimination through inciting the force of an accepted two-sex system to which Ganzon suddenly did not conform. As has been shown throughout the history of human rights struggles, fighting for one's rights is substantially more difficult if one's personhood is denied in the process.

Riki Wilchins (1997) points out that although the use of "gendered" pronouns is typically predicated on the referred to person's gender presentation, the question of whether the pronoun is really suitable can only be answered with recourse to the notion of a true sex. Judith Butler adds the warning that this discursive

marking off will have some normative force and, indeed, some violence, for it can construct only through erasing; it can bound a thing only through enforcing a certain criterion, a principle of selectivity. (11)

Accordingly, when "he" is suspected of being "she" the questionable subject is selected out of the stream of "normal" society and subjected to public scrutiny. Normativity provides a thin veneer of protection that even a hint of gender transgres-

sion immediately shatters.

A number of resolutions to the grievous restrictions of our sex-specific pronoun system have been proposed. One popular solution is to use the third person plural in order to dissolve the sex/gender specificity of "she" into the sexual ambiguity of "them." Grammatical purists might contend that this use of the plural "they" as a singular neutral pronoun is improper and that "he" is already in common use. However, linguistic historian Ann Bodine shows that use of singular "they" has been common for over two hundred years, prompting an English Act of Parliament in 1850 that legislated the replacement of "they" with "he." The frequently incited rationale of "common use" fails to justify the retention of "he" since its application was actually legislated into existence. In fact, this same rationale justifies maintaining "they" since even an Act of Parliament failed to curb the prevalence of "he." Cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha nonetheless offers a different reason to spurn the easy adoption of "they" as a gender-neutral solution. Although mainly concerned with the colonizing affects of language in relation to racialized difference, Trinh's work suggests an analogous situation for sex/gender differ-

ence since the third person plural invokes an “us” versus “them” opposition wherein the selective “us” signifies a sex/gender norm that the excluded “them” cannot achieve. Acknowledging the objectivising function of “they” is a step toward recognizing the operation of power in creating categories of sex/gender and sexual deviation in the first place, for it is through the supposedly ob-

ing into standardization, the creative force of the radical movement was exhausted and even the more meagre goal of adding “she” to “he” was difficult to attain.⁸ While a success in itself, the question arises as to whether this additive solution fulfilled an end goal or was simply a reachable compromise at that historical moment. Considering Beauvoir’s critique that women live in a condition of onto-

through obliterating their existence, crossing out the term that designates these subjects is more a reminder of that obliteration than a correction of it.

Rather than addressing these problems by applying the plural third-person, “he or she” construct, or backlash, English users have a fourth option of adopting the sex/gender neutral pronouns *sie*, *hir*, *hirs*, and

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jective lens of science that the sexually aberrant “they” are excluded from among the white heteronormative “us.” Arguing that sex/gender and sexual non-conformity was a pathology that could spread through inheritance or socialization, early sexologists claimed that control of the abnormal subject had nothing less at stake than the survival of civilization and the human race. It is this very lens that continues to be used when “they” (Ganzon or Javenella) are not included among the white heteronormative “us” who deserve protection under Homeland Security or other legislation.

Most often, guidelines for non-sexist language usage suggest that writers use “he or she” or alternate between the two throughout a text. This advice is predicated on the assumption that the overall goal is equality of representation within a two-sexed system of signification. Although some earlier feminists had voiced the need to break entirely with the binary sex/gender system, their conviction arose at a time when a new vocabulary of dissent was expanding rapidly to express the analyses of the Black Power, student, hippie, women’s, and gay and lesbian movements. By the early 1980s when non-sexist language was finally pass-

logical dependence on men—a condition of “otherness”—the addition of “she” to “he” corresponds less to a shared reality between equals than to the lady’s auxiliary of the men’s club. If this is the case then “she” still operates as an accessory to “he” and would, in a different political climate, be disturbingly easy to annul.

A third solution of splitting or joining pronouns with a backslash (e.g. *she/he* or *s/he*) is less often used. These split terms are not only awkward, but retain the signification of sex dichotomy by keeping both pronouns while designating the transgender or intersexed subject with an unspeakable label—that is, a label that is literally impossible to enunciate. Aside from recalling the socially unspeakable status of “sexual ambiguity,” the splitting of sex/gender categories with a backslash in effect crosses out both categories leaving the trans or intersexed subject in the abject discursive realm of neither/nor. The ambiguity that arises out of the split term (*s/he*) does not signify autonomy, but is dependent upon and subordinate to the more legitimate sex-defined terms that give it meaning (*she* and *he*). Since the use of sex-dichotomized language has functioned to erase the history of transgender and intersex subjects

himself.⁹ There is a slowly growing print literature that employs different forms of gender neutral pronouns (see, for example, Feinberg); however, the *sie*, *hir*, *hirs*, *hirsself* form commands the broadest representation among English communicants on the Internet which, at this point, represents the largest collection of public works that has changed pronominal forms. As well, the use of the letter “h” in this form is more typical of English pronouns than are the “z” and “p” used in alternative neutral pronominal forms and allows for the more typical spoken contractions (e.g. *is he/iz-ē*).¹⁰ While some writers apply the gender neutral form only when designating subjects they deem to be sex/gender “ambiguous,” this practice marks them as “other” than the norm through regrouping them under a neologism. By neglecting to neutralize pronouns for everyone this partial measure not only fails to level the sex/gender playing field, but recreates a hierarchy ranging from the superior “he” to the inferior “*sie*.”

An attempt to modify only four pronouns seems a small affair in comparison to the feminist project of eradicating sexism throughout spoken and written English, yet in some ways this smaller endeavour supercedes the scope of the larger. It seems

to do so by questioning our anatomical status as dichotomously sexed human beings; however, this status is actually secondary to the conviction that information about our sex is incontestably public. Disclosure of our sex identity is treated as crucial information that we have no right to withhold. As Michel Foucault has noted in his *History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, during the eighteenth century sex came to constitute the truth of the subject, a fundamental expression of identity that must be ceded on command just as one surrenders one's passport or papers (1978: 56). In private our so-called sexual anatomy expresses no more about our identity than does our knee or elbow, but once public our anatomy enters into a sex/gender regime that aligns sex dichotomy with essential identity. Expression of sex identity that does not align with perceived anatomical sex has not only been treated as a lie, but as a criminal act.

The ponderous yoke of sex identity can be measured in the strength of the reader's rejection of the gender neutral pronouns that are used in this academic work. Indeed, adoption of these pronouns has not been easy since it has entailed going against all sex/gender training that I have received since birth. It might be argued that while "they" (transgender and intersexed people) should certainly be accorded the consideration of gender neutral pronouns, Sigmund Freud should be addressed as "he" because we know "his" true sex identity. This argument puts the cart before the horse, for it in fact claims that public disclosure of sex identity should be mandatory in the cases where we supposedly know that identity. In a strange reversal of logic, denying sex-identity privacy is taken to be the proper or even most respectful form of address. While referring to Freud as "he" is certainly more respectful than referring to him as "it," the real issue is the fact that sex-identity affirmation is not a choice, for it is the dictum that one *must* sex identify

that gives people permission to grope, assault, rape, and kill others who are seen as sex/gender "ambiguous." Freud may have possessed the proper anatomical credentials to pass as sex-identity male, but even he could not opt out of a widely accepted socio-political regime that mandates sex disclosure.

The situation of mandatory self-exposure is odd given that our sex identity is determined via our most private physical attributes—genitalia and sex organs. How is it that such private information is treated as undeniably public? Moreover, after nearly half a century of activism and theory aimed at sex/gender liberation how is it that the mandatory disclosure of sex is not judged to be as reprehensible as sexist language? What has gone astray within liberation politics that we are still so completely subjugated by the regulation of our sex? This last question seems tantamount to asking whether scholars read Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, which of course we do, but most often we read it for his critique of the regulation of *sexuality*, not of *sex*. It is also a question that cannot be answered here, although the authorized discourse of the scholarly realm is perhaps not only an appropriate but a necessary place to launch a refusal of the regulatory processes inherent in language itself.

While trans-activists have been among the first people to push for sex neutral pronouns this is not just a transgender issue, but one that has sweeping implications in terms of gendered relations of power. Although an infant, for example, can be gender-ambiguous a symbolic gender is assigned to him through colour-coded clothing so that "he" is not mistaken for "she" and need not be called "it." Should an infant be greeted using an "incorrect" pronominal address it is again the baby, parents, or interlocutor who is considered wrong, and not the regime of sex/gender differentiation referenced through pronouns. By extension, parents who want to protect their child from po-

tential discrimination may opt to give him a gender-neutral name. Among many additional examples is that of an applicant with a gender-ambiguous or unfamiliar name, who may nonetheless still be discussed without the necessity of uncovering his supposed true sex. Replacing gendered with neutral pronouns is the next responsible step in the struggle to create a nondiscriminatory common language insofar as it expands the definition of sexism to include the bias inherent in a rigid two-sex system as well as gender bias. Gender neutrality in our everyday referencing praxis extends the goal of creating non-prejudicial social norms, augments existing human rights through curtailing sex discrimination, allows for wider acceptance in linguistic practice that may impact social practice, and hence is a change whose time has come.

I am grateful to Greta R. Bauer, Delia Konzett, Sidney Eve Matrix, Emi Koyama, and Mara Witzling for reading this article and offering comments. Responsibility for errors, misinterpretations, or omissions are my own.

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*The title is taken from Jonathan Swift's satire "A Modest Proposal" (1729) wherein he suggested that the Irish eliminate the impoverished by eating their young. His underlying comment was that the existing socio-political system did indeed eat the young by allowing them to perish in body and spirit. The relentless regulation of a two-sex system has similarly devoured our young not only through on-going violence, but through our failure to acknowledge that it consumes the spirit of those who do not fit within its confines.

¹*Ms. Magazine* was established in 1972. National commentator Harry Reasoner predicted that the magazine would fail in six months due to lack of content (“20 Years of the U.S. Women’s Movement”).

²For what could be seen as a model androcentric rebuttal to non-sexist language use see Levin.

³More information on GenderPAC can be found at <http://www.gpac.org/>

⁴Note that Wollstonecraft’s qualifier, “unless where love animates the behaviour,” expresses an expectation of sex distinction where sexual intimacy occurs. Is “sex distinction” then a code word for heterosexuality? From a twenty-first century perspective it may seem doubtful that Wollstonecraft would approve of the “sex distinction” that love animates between a feminine and butch lesbian; however, her comprehension of sexual distinctions would not have been as finely tuned—most especially in relation to normativity and perversion—previous to the work of sexologists. Subsequently, love’s animation of sex distinction even between two women or men could have been the ingredient that could make same-sex relations acceptable to Wollstonecraft. As Foucault (1978) has pointed out, while the history of sexuality has not necessarily been repressive neither has it been progressive.

⁵The Feminists, formerly known as the October 17th Movement.

⁶In the original French version of this sentence Foucault is playing with the philosophical notion of truth (*la vérité*). This reference is weakened by the English translation “truly” with its connotation of sincerity and social propriety.

⁷For more on Brandon Teena see FTM International; *The Brandon Teena Story*.

⁸The struggle to make even minor changes to men’s linguistic hegemony is captured in Levin’s collection *Sexist Language*, which includes a wide range of essays and responses that critiqued and supported the need for non-sexist language.

⁹Pronounced: sie \ ze; hir \ hēr; hirs \

hēr; hirs \ hēr-self.

¹⁰Although there is contention between different linguistic communities as to which pronominal form to adopt, my suggestion is based on the premise that an international standard is less necessary than is a standard that works with the phonetics of each language.

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aversion

it becomes a dance, this
evasion.
I am so sure that two cannot be one.
it is an emotional impossibility.
you scowl and tromp down the hall
completing household tasks
with such utter bitterness
that the air reeks, becomes rancid
all because
I want to delve into
that deep spiritual self that needs to create
and not your loins.
I am sorry
if I cannot find
my desire for you, I cannot force it
into existence out of sheer will
but I do my duty,
gritting my teeth and fixing my stare inward,
thinking through the events of the day
or what I will need to do tomorrow,
laundry, dishes, dinner.
I cannot give you
this phantom child you seek
when I am not interested
in the begetting.
I cannot give you the hand-holding, the embrace,
the passionate kisses,
when I am not interested in our togetherness.
can you not let me go, now?
I really need to be
elsewhere.
anywhere
but
here.

R. Leigh Krafft's poetry appears earlier in this volume.