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Gender-Neutral Pronouns: Inclusive, Subversive, Progressive

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Reflective Essay

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When my Writing 50 professor announced our research assignment last fall, I did not hesitate to list “queer issues” as my first-choice topic, eventually narrowing my focus to gender-neutral pronouns in the context of feminism and genderqueerness. While I chose this subject out of a genuine passion, I never thought I would discover so much from the research process itself. First of all, I was not expecting to learn or write about the official, decades-old usage of gender-neutral pronouns in a small Virginia community, nor did I anticipate citing a letter to the editor from a 1955 edition of the *New York Times*. Concern over whether my topic was broad enough to fill ten pages quickly gave way to bewilderment at having so much material and so much to say about it. I had written two long-form research papers in the past, but these were centered around more specific topics with relatively clear chronologies—the Panama Canal in eighth grade, and Harvey Milk in tenth. By focusing on the longer, more disparate history of gender-neutral pronouns, I had more room for interpretation and more freedom in the examples I used to illustrate my claims. In this sense, library resources helped me to achieve a balancing act: while the subject-specific databases and Interlibrary Loan afforded me access to a wealth of information, my interactions with staff, professors, and classmates helped me to narrow my focus and develop my arguments.

Like our two previous essays, the research paper was a multistep assignment, and Professor Kaplan encouraged our class to think critically about our sources at every step of the process. I was familiar with much of the assigned “Start Your Research” tutorial, but I appreciated its breakdown of the time frame and content of sources. The subsequent information session presented by Instructional Design and Technology Librarian Dani Brecher impacted my research even more directly: I knew about keywords and Boolean operators, but putting them to use in the library's subject-specific online databases was a new experience for me. In the following month I would utilize this resource extensively, especially the GenderWatch database. Had it not been for these options, I probably would have resorted to a combination of Google Scholar and ordinary Google searches, and likely would have missed out on several sources, such as an *Out* magazine article, that were too informal for academic journals yet too obscure for the first few pages of Google. I looked into physical resources as well, but what was readily available

at the library was not very relevant. Luckily I still had numerous electronic options to explore. Proofreading my paper the week before it was due, I wondered if I might be quoting a phrase in Bodine (itself a quote from a contemporaneous work) outside its proper context. I located the original article by M. R. Key in the library database, ordered it through Interlibrary Loan, and just a day later ended up swapping out the partial quote for the full one. For me, this experience, along with the knowledge that I had full access to any scholarly source I found through the databases, fully validated Professor Kaplan's emphasis on information literacy in the research process.

This emphasis, evident from the first few brainstorming assignments, became clearer as time went on. After the initial library instruction session, each student in my class signed up for a one-on-one meeting with Dani Brecher, to whom we pitched our ideas in exchange for suggestions on where else to find information. At the time of my meeting with Ms. Brecher, I was still considering including other elements of gender-neutral language in my paper, but with her advice I realized that I would find more than enough research on pronouns alone. From here I began to develop my central arguments. Peer edits were already a common feature of Writing 50, but because I was now presenting a short, unfinished version of my paper rather than a full first draft, I found my classmates' feedback to be especially encouraging, as they reassured me about the quality of my writing while identifying several changes from which my paper would benefit. My original thesis, for example, came across as more argumentative than assertive, and once alerted to this I sought to revise the paper's structure to arrive more naturally at my conclusions.

As many online sources as I had used, I felt that my paper needed a more personal perspective. Having heard great things about Professor Chris Guzaitis and her queer studies courses, I initiated contact and was delighted when she agreed to an interview. From her first answer to my questions I knew that she was a perfect match for my paper. Professor Guzaitis provided just the expertise and clarity of voice I was looking for to enhance my discussion of gender-neutral pronouns, and I am so glad to have had this opportunity to meet her before she announced her resignation.

My overall experience of writing my research paper was positive and self-affirming. I had previously been taught the index-card method of recording and organizing facts, and while this

approach may work for some, it does little for me. In contrast, I greatly appreciated this opportunity to forge my own path, with instruction geared toward access rather than method. I do not always hit my writing stride immediately, but with sufficient guidance and feedback I know that I can, and did, turn out something that I am proud of. The paper not only renewed my confidence in my expository voice but reassured me that I can write from a perspective of both allyship and scholarship, without coming across as either appropriative or ignorant. Perhaps most tellingly, my attitude toward any future research assignments has changed from mild apprehension to cautious enthusiasm; and I hope to continue learning just as much about myself as about my subject of study.

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Research Project

“Gender-Neutral Pronouns:
Inclusive, Subversive, Progressive”

Elise Berendt

Writing 50 Section 4

G. Kaplan

12/17/13

Gender-Neutral Pronouns: Inclusive, Subversive, Progressive

Language and gender share the distinction of being human inventions that are rarely thought of as such. Language in all its forms is so ubiquitous that, once fluent in one tongue or another, we cannot “turn off” the ability to interpret written or spoken words; however, the great variety in sentence structures and conjugations throughout the world demonstrates how a society devises its own methods of communication. Similarly, while most cultures recognize a basic dichotomy between biological males and females, the extension of this binary pattern of thought from sex to gender relies heavily upon social conventions and constructs. At the intersection of these two very broad ideas lies a pair of opposites: gendered language, and gender-neutral language. For all the attention given to controversies such as whether “man” includes “woman” and whether the creation of separate titles to denote femininity is validating or demeaning, gender-neutral pronouns—also known as epicene or sex-indefinite pronouns—are paid considerably less mind. Yet their recent revival in the feminist and queer movements hints at a much longer history of subversion and contention: various neologistic gender-neutral pronouns can be traced back to the 1850s, and more traditional alternatives have persisted even longer in the face of sometimes intense criticism. Ultimately, the value and permanency of these pronouns come down to the indisputable good they do for the people who adopt and project them. Gender-neutral language on the whole is a vital tool in recognizing diversity and creating a safe, inclusive space for all people; I will be focusing on pronouns partly because they are so common

in everyday speech, but primarily because they bring the sometimes stale and academic discussion of grammatical gender to a very personal level. Personal, and yet universal—a contradiction that exemplifies the remarkable intersectional potential of these words in an ongoing cultural narrative. While the history of gender-neutral pronouns is not without its setbacks and tensions, the time has come for reconciliation that preserves both the current plurality of options and the element of self-determination inherent in modern pronoun use.

The history of gender-neutral personal pronouns is nonlinear and multifaceted, but it has a clear beginning in the singular “they”. Emerging in the late 1300s to compete with the generic masculine pronouns of Old English (Churchyard 2), the epicene “they” enjoyed grammatical legitimacy for several centuries, included (per se and in its derivative forms) in the works of writers from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Jane Austen and Lewis Carroll (Churchyard 3). However, prescriptive grammarians in the late 1700s through 1800s began to arbitrarily impose certain rules of Latin grammar on the English language, including the idea that “they” could not function as a singular pronoun (2). This claim garnered public support and legitimacy, leading up to an 1850 act of British Parliament that, without specifically condemning the epicene usage, made a clear enough point by replacing “he or she” with “he” in legal language (Bodine). Radical measures of this sort were not taken in the United States, although sociologist Ann Bodine notes that American writers of the time tended to err on the side of conservatism, where “conservatism... means reliance on the authority of grammarians” (134). But just how far does this authority go? As Mark Balhorn demonstrates in the article “The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose”, the singular “they” is far from defunct; in fact, in the centuries since it was declared grammatically incorrect, most writers and speakers of English have done

little to curb their use of the construction—a consequence of the rule’s being prescriptive rather than descriptive (Bodine 130).

The modern-day ramifications of the condemnation of such a widely-used pronoun are easy to appreciate. As any student in the American education system can attest, the use of the singular “they” is frowned upon by teachers and considered improper, in the same way that sentences beginning with a conjunction or ending in a preposition are often taught as constructions to avoid at all costs. In an article for the journal *Language and Society*, Bodine conducted a survey of “thirty-three of the school grammars now [as of 1975] being used in American junior and senior high schools” (138) and found that twenty-eight condemned the epicene “they” as “inaccurate”. Meanwhile, “the [same] pupils are taught to achieve both elegance of expression and accuracy by referring to women as ‘he’” (138), an irony that likely did not escape the students themselves. While the surveyed texts are now out of date, the debate rages on in modern style books, which package the same fallacious claims in vaguer justifications. The American Philosophical Association’s Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language, for example, considers the singular “they” to be “CONTROVERSIAL (FOR INFORMAL CONTEXTS ONLY)” (Balhorn 393)—in all capitals, no less. Editors will indeed go to great lengths to stop formal, intentional uses of the pronoun from breaching this grammatical caution tape: Chris Guzaitis, professor of Feminism, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Scripps College, confirms that for academic writers “the use of singular ‘they’ requires a disclaimer,” in the form of “notifying the editor or including a footnote,” to avoid having this apparent mistake ‘corrected’ in a published article.

Amidst the highly avoidable controversy surrounding “they”, the introduction and use of other gender-neutral pronouns take on an often political character. In fact, feminists have, in

recent decades, pushed for “he or she” (occasionally, “s/he” or “(s)he”) not only as a substitute for the singular “they” but as a disjunctive pronoun with its own significance and nuances. Ann Bodine uses the term “androcentric world-view” to describe the social conventions and beliefs that shaped the politics of gendered language in Early Modern English, and which led grammarian Joshua Poole to write in 1646 that “the Masculine Gender is more worthy than the Feminine” and therefore deserved grammatical preference (134). Modern attitudes regarding the usage and order of “he or she” are, thankfully, much less rigid. The disjunctive personal pronoun came into widespread use in the early 1970s as a rebuttal to the sex-indefinite “he” (142), the argument being that such a construction is neither inclusive nor intuitive. While still associated with feminism and anti-sexism, “he or she” is now widely employed by the general public—if not always on its own merits, at least as a vehicle of political correctness. The 1993 article “The Language of Diversity”, which instructs employers in the use of inclusive language for the workplace, argues in favor of gender-neutral language, including pronouns, for the purposes of objectivity and the elimination of “unnecessary ambiguity” (Petrini 36). Such efforts can, of course, backfire. Discussing the practice of “hypercorrection”, Balhorn cites a quote from a 2005 newspaper—“employees have to prove he or she is growing, doing more or adding value to a company”—as an example of how “avoidance of sexism has prompted the writers to produce both unidiomatic and ungrammatical strings” (409). The disjunctive pronoun comes with another major drawback: while part of the general preference for “they” over “he or she”, in ordinary conversation as well as in the context of journalism (Balhorn 410), may come down to the latter’s relative unwieldiness, there is no getting around the fact that “he or she” treats gender as a binary construct with no middle ground between the feminine and the masculine. In this sense, its use can never be truly intuitive, nor entirely gender-neutral. For the writer, the disjunctive

serves as an obligatory reference (or perhaps acquiescence) to the demands of feminism and political correctness, and for the reader it may come across as a distracting attempt to “cover all the bases” for the purpose of avoiding offense—a reactive, rather than proactive, journalistic gesture. And this is only if the reader and writer themselves use gendered pronouns; for individuals who identify as neither he nor she, such phrasing may be downright exclusionary.

Yet, the problems inherent in the “he or she” construction justify the existence of another type of pronoun entirely. Since the mid-nineteenth century, various writers and other individuals have proposed their own neologistic gender-neutral pronouns as viable alternatives to “he” and “she” (Baron); since the mid-twentieth century this impulse has been linked in many cases to the movement for queer recognition and rights. While transgender and otherwise genderqueer individuals do not necessarily feel *uncomfortable* using existing gender pronouns (or the epicene “they”), many feel that being true to themselves and their gender identity involves claiming a new pronoun. And while Dennis Baron labels alternative epicene pronouns as “the word that failed” in a list compiled in 1993, certain entries in the list did have an impressive, if nearly invisible, run in linguistic legitimacy. According to an editor’s note in a 1955 edition of the *New York Times*, the “common gender” pronoun “thon”—a portmanteau of “that one”, proposed in 1858 by Charles Crozat Converse—made it into Funk and Wagnalls’ *New Standard Dictionary* in the guise of “a substitute in cases where the use of a restrictive pronoun involves either inaccuracy or obscurity, or its non-employment necessitates awkward repetition” (60). “Thon” occupied an entry in the dictionary only until 1964 (Marritz), but in the interim of a century plenty of other words, including “ip”, “hiser”, and “hse” (Baron), followed similar trajectories. The gender-neutral pronouns that have survived into the Information Age, namely the Spivak pronouns e/em/eir (subject/object/possessive) and the somewhat more

common ze/hir/hir, seem to strike the right combination of euphonic and modern-looking to circulate among online social activism communities.

Indeed, the Internet has reinvigorated the conversation around gender-neutral language as a whole, placing it in the context of queer studies. Professor Guzaitis views the Internet as a “disseminator of information” and “a space to ask and learn”, and suggests that online activism allows ordinary people, backed by the strength of their communities, to challenge normative conventions of gender and sexuality while bypassing the fear- or anxiety-driven reactions of the general public. Guzaitis, who begins the first classes of each semester by asking for her students’ preferred gender pronouns (PGPs), claims that students come in more knowledgeable about PGP and gender identity each year, quickly grasping the concepts even if they are not familiar with the terminology; she attributes their openness and awareness to a lifelong exposure to human diversity through the Internet. While most of her students prefer to be addressed by a gendered pronoun, the epicene “they”, or either of the two, Professor Guzaitis recalls at least two students over the past four years who have identified as “ze”.

Acknowledgement of pronoun choice is increasing offline as well. The University of Vermont, in an effort to accommodate transgender students, has for several years used “a software patch for its student-information system that puts students’ preferred names and pronouns on class rosters and identification cards but retains their legal names on financial-aid and medical forms” (Tilsley A19). As of 2010, hundreds of students, including seven or more transgender students, had made use of the software patch; a genderqueer student could conceivably utilize this type of information system to declare a neologistic personal pronoun for himself. Meanwhile, at the Claremont Colleges, the idea of a PGP—ideally included in every self-introduction, whether or not it occurs in a queer space—is a major step toward widespread

recognition and acceptance of all gender identities and gender pronouns. Still, according to Professor Guzaitis, PGPs are not yet used on a structural level: while student groups and organizations, especially those focused on gender issues, are likely to include them in introductory or ice-breaking exercises, the 5C administration and faculty are less clued in to the significance of pronoun preference. Consequently, “intervention, if it is to happen, should begin at that [administrative] level” (Guzaitis).

As neologistic gender-neutral pronouns have come to enjoy greater popularity and genuine usefulness in recent years, their ranks have expanded in novel directions. The rise of the personal pronoun “yo” among students in Baltimore, Maryland (Stotko and Troyer 262) is an intriguing example of a word emerging more or less organically into the local vernacular. Distinct from both the interjection to call attention to oneself and the slang abbreviation of “your”, this word translates primarily as “he/she”, and occasionally as “him/her”. Johns Hopkins researcher and linguistics expert Elaine Stotko and middle-school teacher Margaret Troyer used a variety of methods to analyze students’ use of “yo” between 2003 and 2005, including observing classroom conversation, asking middle-schoolers to fill in the speech bubbles in cartoon scenarios, and administering a survey that required middle- and high-school students to judge the validity of a set of sentences (264-6). While the origin of “yo” as a pronoun has proven elusive, its meaning is generally clear: when the researchers asked a different sample of students to paraphrase sentences from the original tasks, “of the paraphrases provided by the 16 students who participated, only 2 paraphrases... indicated that yo meant ‘you’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’. The others were consistently ‘he’ or ‘she’ or a noun such as girl, boy, person, or dude” (270). As “yo” has no possessive form, students have been heard to formulate sentences such as “Yo put his foot up”, in which a gendered pronoun is also present; this, along with “a pointing gesture [that]

usually accompanie[s] the pronoun's use" (264), suggests an important difference between "yo" and other gender-neutral neologisms: it does not necessarily circumvent or obfuscate the gender of the person being discussed. In fact, a follow-up conversation between Baltimore teachers and students several years after the original study revealed that, according to some students, "yo is used for boys, but... shorty is used for girls" (272). Whether or not this development foreshadows a new, more gendered path for the pronoun, the emergence of "yo" sets an important precedent: rather than a top-down effort by an established scholar to introduce a new word into the English language, it is a natural outgrowth of the speech patterns of young people who evidently felt that a gender-neutral pronoun would facilitate their conversations.

Elsewhere on the East Coast, the pronoun "co", with its long and vibrant track record, carries encouraging implications for feminists and queer activists alike. Twin Oaks, a small community in Virginia founded in 1967 by people who perceived the general cultural customs of the US as sexist (Flanigan 27), has for the past forty years recognized "co" as a gender-neutral pronoun both in informal speech and writing and in its own legal code. Conjugations of the pronoun have changed slightly since its initial adoption, with the possessive and reflexive forms "cos" and "coself" patterned after the forms of traditional gender pronouns. "Co" has even evolved beyond a pronoun into a noun: according to Flanigan, Twin Oaks members (of whom there are approximately one hundred) "use 'co'... instead of more standard words such as 'member,' 'communard,' or 'person'" (27-8) and will at times replace the word "man" or "boy" in compound nouns with "co", as in "snowco" or "cowco" (35). In this sense, "co" addresses another common feminist criticism of the English language: that it tends to assign a masculine gender to neutral professions and titles. Despite the dignity imparted by its inclusion in the community's law code, "co" is not exempt from a little self-conscious wordplay: the Twin Oaks

website states that “those who take a political stand for a gender-blind society by using, ‘co,’ to replace all personal pronouns... are called, ‘radico’” (5). While its usage may not extend beyond Twin Oaks, within the community “co” is a versatile pronoun that exemplifies the link between inclusive language and progressive ideology.

Even where ideologies line up, agendas may differ; and lying at the intersection of two complementary liberal camps—feminism and queer studies—gender-neutral pronouns can unfortunately cause friction between the two. The principal reason for this debate, according to Guzaitis, is a general sense of anxiety “among second-wave feminists in particular” that truly gender-neutral language will lead to an erasure of women. From a historical perspective, this concern is not entirely baseless; compared to how long women fought for the inclusion of “she” alongside “he”, the rise of neologistic pronouns and the increasing reversion to the epicene “they” have occurred at a remarkable rate (Guzaitis), especially since the start of the Information Age. It is important to remember, however, that apart from perhaps a few extremists, no one is calling for a complete overhaul of pronoun usage—in fact, this would be an exclusionary act, not an inclusive one, in the eyes of most genderqueer activists. Guzaitis explains, “in using ‘they’ for everyone, we deny gender identity in a specific way” for anyone who “wants their identity affirmed with gendered pronouns.” For example, if a transgender student self-identifies as a man but classmates continually refer to him as “they”, he may feel that his gender identity has been undermined to the same extent as if they were to call him “she” (Guzaitis). The same goes for cisgender individuals, who do not experience gender dysphoria but still deserve to have their identity affirmed by others. Furthermore, while the field of queer theory is relatively young, having emerged only in the past two decades, the gay liberation of the late 1960s began only shortly after second-wave feminism. This means that the interests of both movements have

coexisted almost from the beginning—including in the sphere of linguistics, where connections between queer experiences and alternative pronoun use are nothing new. In a 1972 *Linguistics* article, Mary Ritchie Key identifies “the language of homosexuals”—in which “the pronoun ‘she’ is used to designate the female partner”—as one of several instances of “nonobservation of selectional [pronoun] restrictions which produces anomalous forms” (28); although the wording is somewhat uncomfortable in retrospect, this is at least an early acknowledgement that certain groups view gender relations differently than the general public and perhaps need new words to express their identities and relationships. Rather than perceive the growing number of gender-neutral pronouns as a threat to the original words and their significance, proponents of gender equality should embrace neologisms as evidence of a rising culture of personal choice—the “preference” in the phrase “preferred gender pronoun”.

The key to reconciliation between feminism and queer theory on this particular issue is the acknowledgement that the former movement implicates the latter. Queer studies, which according to Professor Guzaitis “were created to bring a critical lens specifically to sexuality”, are essentially an offshoot of feminist thinking that has taken on a life of its own. Any feminist group that reacts with hostility to gender-neutral language, pronoun preference, or related developments is only undermining its own core values and goals. Fortunately, an increasing push for intersectionality confirms that the current generation of Internet-based feminist and queer activists is well aware of their communities' mutual interests, as well as of the potential for dynamic collaboration and solidarity with other marginalized groups (such as people of color) and parallel movements (such as sex-positivity). Professor Guzaitis views this intersectional focus as a promising next step, arguing that “feminists led the way to end gender discrimination and challenge normativity... What queer *does* is disrupt normative ideologies, specifically the

idea of a binar[y] masculine/feminine understanding of gender attached to sexed bodies.” From this perspective, it is only a matter of time before both communities converge once more into a coalition for equality and acceptance.

For every resolved issue surrounding gender-neutral pronouns and the causes that they unify, several questions remain unanswered. One such relevant debate centers around whether feminists and queer activists should strive to popularize the current variety of pronouns available, or pursue general acceptance of a single, ‘official’ epicene pronoun. Among those who would prefer “our language [to] evolve in such a way that there's an agreed-upon set of gender-neutral pronouns" is Adrian Quintero, the transgender son of “yo” researcher Stotko (Marritz 60). While Quintero’s approach is optimistic, advocating for the legitimization of gender-neutral language and depicting the general public as ready for such a change, it overlooks some of the basic advantages of the pronouns it upholds. Asserting one’s gender identity through pronoun preference returns agency and accountability to individuals outside the gender binary, who have largely been silenced, shamed, and invalidated in mainstream media and culture; and selecting from among a wide array of gender-neutral options is a crucial element of this choice. Even for those who refer to themselves in gendered terms, deciding which pronouns to employ in spoken and written language can be an empowering, interventionist, and even political statement against the perceived gender binary and other common but flawed “gender logic” (Guzaitis). Professor Guzaitis herself foresees an ‘official’ gender-neutral pronoun working its way into the English language eventually but argues that “in the near future, we will continue to have multiple pronouns,” as feminist and queer communities are still working toward recognition of existing options.

Gender-neutral pronouns have come a long way since the days of the universal, sex-indefinite “he”, and they may lead society to new insights and revelations as the English-speaking world evolves. In a culture that values both individualism and opportunity, it is only natural that we should combine these two ideals to champion self-determination in all aspects of life. After all, there are few acts more indicative of personal expression than that of consciously defining the terms of one’s own identity. If pronoun preference is to earn the attention and support of the general public, however, it must be more than just a cause, a debate, or a plot of common ground between social justice camps that nevertheless alienates outside observers. Gender-neutral pronouns must also be a non-political issue, a simple question of empathy and respect, because only through these human channels can they ultimately achieve quiet assimilation into the mainstream consciousness. After the more aggressive activism has run its course and fulfilled its purpose, it is this emotional core that will sustain the movement and guide it in the right directions. Whether or not the future of gender-neutral pronouns involves consensus as to which is the most correct or appropriate, or which most successfully bridges the gap between feminism and queer advocacy, these words unequivocally represent a fusion of liberal ideologies that may someday guarantee inclusion of, and equality for, all shades of human experience.

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