

# On Female Specific Language

by John Ferguson

I used to object to the constant use of the term 'feminism.' This label seemed to imply a definition of one group against another group. Men and their dominant mode of being have done this throughout history, especially in language, which 'feminist' thinkers have never tired of pointing out. They have referred to all that is human as 'man,' 'mankind' and the generic 'he.' The use of terms like 'feminism' and 'women's rights' seemed to be the mirror image of such exclusionary abuses of men in the past. It seemed to be a rather childish tit for tat.

However, upon further consideration, I think I may have realized some important features of this practice. In 1929, the Canadian legal system first recognized that the word 'person' in the British North American Act meant men and women. This decision of the British Privy Council came from an appeal from the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling that 'person' meant only men. Until then, the generic 'he' meant men.

In other circles, the definition of 'person' remained 'men' except where it was convenient to mean 'women.'

Herein lies the answer. Women are afraid that any accomplishments which are specifically not labelled 'feminine' will be usurped by the male agenda and claimed for itself, not only in the pages of history but in their need for role models and the credit which should accrue to women as great contributors to humanity. Where no specification is evident, there may be a risk of misappropriation. Even when women were able to get credit for their accomplishments, they have been subject to undervaluation by the dominant male establishment. One cannot be too careful in a world where power is maintained at almost any cost.

There is also a question of the visibility of the female presence which is not served by an inclusive or 'humanity' approach to the

problem. This inclusive approach also does not do justice to the historical condition of women and the kind of world which their

exclusion and male dominance has brought us.

This apparently 'inclusive' approach would be akin to the Jews speaking of the special injustices which have been done to them in the past as 'everybody's problem.' While there is no doubt that they are everybody's problem in one sense, there is something of the unique experience of a particular group which is left out of this manner of expression. History and the present is replete with instances of females being excluded from realms of activity and thought where they did not have explicit title to belong.

Admittedly, there is another danger here. Too much emphasis might be placed upon oppression as the sole source of women's commonality. This kind of basis for community and identity would be a resentment-filled frail ground upon which to build. However, the issue of visibility and acceptance is still fostered by this female-specific approach.

This concentration on femaleness is also a necessary element in developing a positive content of identity and sense of self and place. Thus, while the danger is real, it is one which is born alongside the many benefits of female-specific attention and language. The many positive effects will assist in dampening the focus on resentment and oppression which have often served to begin the identification of women with each other.

Of course, the final danger which women risk in articulating and discovering themselves is one of an entirely more bizarre sort. It takes the form of violence and backlash against this increasing visibility of femaleness and its need to create and assert itself.

While regrettable, this is hardly a reason to discourage their visibility. Women could once again

be blamed for the definition which has been foisted upon them and the victimization which it brought. The female agenda can hardly be held responsible for the extreme reactions of a few who do not understand the true origins of

oppression and domination and who cannot see the urgent need we have as a species for its expression.

Nothing worthwhile comes without some sort of struggle and we can only hope that the strength

of character and the promising new ethos which women engender will tower over such mindless retaliations toward their right to at least an equal share in humanity's thought, art, politics, identity and future.



Observe the ratio of Toronto Sun boxes to Toronto Star boxes to Globe and Mail boxes in Central Square. Hmm, what are the sociological implications here?

## letters

### Prof explains remarks

Dear Editor:

In your report (February 1, 1990) re: the YUFA Forum on the Sasakawa question, space evidently allowed no more than a one sentence account of the statement which I made to the Forum. As a result the thrust of my remarks was not fully evident.

I began by indicating that I was speaking on a purely personal basis since there had not yet been a formal discussion of the matter in our Programme. I underlined that prior consultation in the university regarding the donation clearly had been inadequate. I then outlined how my approach to the question is heavily shaped by a longstanding concern, as Graduate Director [of Political Science], to find proper funding for our graduate students. The income from teaching assistantships is woefully inadequate to meet the cost of living in Metro Toronto.

Finally, I observed that since York apparently would have total control over the disposition of the funds, the essential issue ap-

peared to be one of association with Sasakawa himself. While stating that I was "inclined" to believe that the funds could be accepted, I noted that it was only at the Forum that I had heard the full case for refusing them. I emphasized that these arguments must be fully examined.

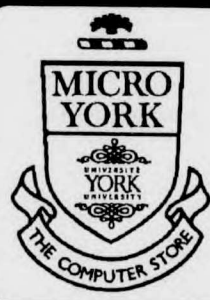
In the next few days meetings will be held in my own Programme to discuss this matter fully.

Yours sincerely,  
Kenneth McRoberts  
Associate Professor & Director of the Graduate Programme in Political Science

Dear "The Right Side:"

We would be very interested in receiving a letter to the editor from you, typed, double-spaced, with your name and phone number. We will withhold your name in the paper as long as we know who you are. Only then will we be able to publish your opinions. Thanks for the response.

The Editors



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