

An Open Letter to The York Community

From The Excalibur Board of Publications
Re: Charges of Racism under the current editorship

Given the widespread criticism of *Excalibur*, arising out of the publication of a feature article during Black History Month which contained racist and classist passages, the Board of Publications has felt it necessary to apologize on behalf of the corporation, *Excalibur* Publications, for the hurt and outrage the article has apparently caused in the University community. A petition, initiated by the Ad-hoc Committee for The Rights and Dignity of the Black Academic Community and endorsed by the Carribean Students Association, The African Students Association, York Against Apartheid, and The Nelson Mandela Law Society, has already garnered upwards of 1000 faculty and student signatures, and has been instrumental in underlining the seriousness with which this matter should be viewed.

The Board would also like to acknowledge the Committee's assertion that there has been a problem on one other occasion this year (a racially offensive editorial cartoon which was removed by newspaper staff shortly after it was put on the stands).

We hope that this letter can serve as the unequivocal apology the community deserves. We also hope it makes it clear that we have no inclinations to shut our eyes and hope the issue goes away. A special meeting of the *Excalibur* staff, chaired by the Board of Publications Chairperson, was held on Wednesday February 27th, 1991, to air staff concerns on the problem, and to discuss ways in which to respond. Cindy Lewis, President of the C.S.A attended the meeting as a guest and spoke forcefully on behalf of the Ad-Hoc Committee. A meeting of the Board of Publications on Thursday of last week included a lengthy discussion of the Committee's demands and ways in which these kinds of incidents can be avoided in future.

It states quite clearly in the by-laws of the Corporation, that the editor "must ensure that the newspaper is free of sexist, racist, classist, or libelous material and is responsible to the Board of Publications for these kinds of editorial decisions." The newspaper has had, over its history, a tradition of active support and promotion of mutual understanding and respect between the University's various communities.

The constitution and by-laws of our organization differ somewhat from other student newspapers in a few significant respects, the most prominent of which is in its very strong safeguards for the editorial independence of the newspaper from unnecessary interference from the Board of Publications, from the student government, from the University administration. And while this policy can and has provided a unique opportunity for its editors and volunteer staff, it is not without its dangers. High turnover in newspaper staff from year to year, and a general decline in a long-term commitment of students to such extra-curricular activities has made it difficult to establish in recent years the editorial continuity it now seems is necessary to avoid these kinds of errors. More than ever, *Excalibur* is a learning situation for its writers and editors, and while this may explain some of the reasons why situations like this might arise in print, it does nothing to redress any damage which might be suffered by the community at large.

In concrete terms, then, the Board has undertaken to:

- a) Publish the open letter which you are reading now on the op-ed page of the March 13th issue of *Excalibur*.
- b) Reprimand the editor for the publication of the Article "Black History: The Struggle for Identity," in the February 4th issue of *Excalibur*, which in the opinion of the Board contains passages which were potentially offensive and hurtful to the community. We feel the editor should have exercised his editorial duties with respect to this article with greater diligence and sensitivity to the concerns of the York community.
- c) Extend an invitation to community at large to participate in a workshop-style forum which addresses these issues as they relate to student media. The workshop, "Toward A Non-Discriminatory Media" has been in the planning stages since last term and has been programmed by the Centre for Race and Ethnic Relations, YFS/FEY, CHRY FM, Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre, The Lesbian and Gay Alliance at York, and several campus newspapers. It will take place from 9:30-4:30 on Saturday March 23, 1991, in the Vanier Senior Common Room. The editor has been directed by the Board to attend and participate in that workshop.
- d) Research and draw up specific guidelines to aid incoming editors in detecting and eliminating racist, sexist, classist and other discriminatory overtones in newspaper stories. Staff workshops familiarizing incoming volunteers with the new guidelines will be instituted as a matter of newspaper policy.

We hope that these steps will serve as an indication of the Board's commitment to concrete solutions for dealing with this matter.

Sincerely,
Kevin Connolly,
Chairperson, Board of Publications