



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

IRCS Technical Reports Series

Institute for Research in Cognitive Science

---

12-1-1997

## **Burglars, Babysitters, And Persons: A Sociolinguistic Study Of Generic Pronoun Usage In Philadelphia And Minneapolis**

Lou Ann Matossian  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/ircs\\_reports](https://repository.upenn.edu/ircs_reports)

---

Matossian, Lou Ann, "Burglars, Babysitters, And Persons: A Sociolinguistic Study Of Generic Pronoun Usage In Philadelphia And Minneapolis" (1997). *IRCS Technical Reports Series*. 58.  
[https://repository.upenn.edu/ircs\\_reports/58](https://repository.upenn.edu/ircs_reports/58)

University of Pennsylvania Institute for Research in Cognitive Science Technical Report No. IRCS-98-13a.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/ircs\\_reports/58](https://repository.upenn.edu/ircs_reports/58)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Burglars, Babysitters, And Persons: A Sociolinguistic Study Of Generic Pronoun Usage In Philadelphia And Minneapolis

### Abstract

To the feminists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in their quest for legal personhood, belongs the credit for identifying language as both instrument and mirror of women's social status. Following a review of language as an issue in the U.S. woman suffrage movement, the present study documents contemporary generic pronouns in colloquial Euro-American usage. More than 1200 tokens were collected in four urban neighborhoods (Elmwood/Southwest and West Mount Airy in Philadelphia and Beltrami and Fuller in Minneapolis) by means of oral-history interviews and written questionnaires on topics of local interest. The settlement history and social networks of these four communities are presented. Statistical analysis shows that *he* was seldom used for epicene referents and appeared only about half the time even for masculine-generic referents. Indeed, the predominance of singular *they* and the near-absence of *she*, even for feminine-generic referents, appeared to be *faits accomplis* in colloquial usage. In contrast to the overtly gendered pronouns, the referential nonsolidity of singular *they* was conducive to pronoun switching and also explained why *they* was preferred for generic use even when the referent was female. Female language-users tended to avoid epicene *he*, and their use of singular *they* was also less masculine-biased than that of males. Evidence of continuing prescriptive pressure included the cross-age phenomenon of pronoun avoidance in writing when the referent was inclusive or feminine. However, correlations of age with education and occupation further suggested that a steady middleclass shift away from prescriptive "generic *he*" has been underway in colloquial English since at least the end of World War II. Suggested research directions include historical study of feminist linguistic thought and sociolinguistic field observations of contemporary generic pronoun usage. (Pronominal gender, agreement, woman suffrage, sociolinguistics, feminism, usage, oral history, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, English)

### Comments

University of Pennsylvania Institute for Research in Cognitive Science Technical Report No. IRCS-98-13a.

BURGLARS, BABYSITTERS, AND PERSONS:  
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF GENERIC PRONOUN USAGE  
IN PHILADELPHIA AND MINNEAPOLIS

Lou Ann Matossian

A DISSERTATION

in

Linguistics

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

1997

---

Gillian Sankoff  
Supervisor of Dissertation

---

William Labov  
Dissertation Committee

---

Donald Ringe  
Graduate Group Chairperson

---

Sally McConnell-Ginet  
Cornell University  
Dissertation Committee

COPYRIGHT

LOU ANN MATOSSIAN

1997

For Kristine Louise Hoover  
and in memory of Nessa Wolfson  
feminist and scholar

We notice in language as well as in life that the male occupies both the neutral and the male position. This is another way of saying that the neutrality of objectivity and of maleness are coextensive linguistically, whereas women occupy the marked, the gendered, the different, the forever-female position.

—Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*  
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 55.

# Acknowledgments

Thanks are due, first of all, to the members of my dissertation committee, Professors Gillian Sankoff and William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania and Sally McConnell-Ginet of Cornell University, with thanks for their guidance and faith in this project over the long haul. My parents, Garo S. and Mary Allerton Kilbourne Matossian, and my partner, Kristine Louise Hoover, have not only contributed financial support but are themselves lifelong examples of scholarship and dedication to personal and professional goals. I am particularly grateful to Kris for heroically transcribing, over a period of years, countless hours of interviews into reams of neatly typed pages. For last-minute computer assistance, I thank her and Steve Merjanian.

Acknowledgment is also due to Patricia Rogers and Wendy Larson for the use of their personal computer to carry out the statistical analysis. Kris, Pat, and Wendy, along with Eleanor Hoover and Tim Hodgdon, were my “home” dissertation support committee in Minneapolis, providing encouragement through the ups and downs of a writer’s life. Finally, I would like to honor the memory of Professor Nessa Wolfson, late of the University of Pennsylvania, to whom this work owes much, although she did not live to see it completed.

## ABSTRACT

### BURGLARS, BABYSITTERS, AND PERSONS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF GENERIC PRONOUN USAGE IN PHILADELPHIA AND MINNEAPOLIS

LOU ANN MATOSSIAN

GILLIAN SANKOFF

To the feminists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in their quest for legal personhood, belongs the credit for identifying language as both instrument and mirror of women's social status. Following a review of language as an issue in the U.S. woman suffrage movement, the present study documents contemporary generic pronouns in colloquial Euro-American usage. More than 1200 tokens were collected in four urban neighborhoods (Elmwood/Southwest and West Mount Airy in Philadelphia and Beltrami and Fuller in Minneapolis) by means of oral-history interviews and written questionnaires on topics of local interest. The settlement history and social networks of these four communities are presented. Statistical analysis shows that *he* was seldom used for epicene referents and appeared only about half the time even for masculine-generic referents. Indeed, the predominance of singular *they* and the near-absence of *she*, even for feminine-generic referents, appeared to be *faits accomplis* in colloquial usage. In contrast to the overtly gendered pronouns, the referential nonsolidity of singular *they* was conducive to pronoun switching and also explained why *they* was preferred for generic use even when the referent was female. Female language-users tended to avoid epicene *he*, and their use of singular *they* was also less masculine-biased than that of males. Evidence of continuing prescriptive pressure included the cross-age phenomenon of pronoun avoidance in writing when the referent was inclusive or feminine. However, correlations of age with education and occupation further suggested that a steady middle-class shift away from prescriptive "generic *he*" has been underway in colloquial English since at least the end of World War II. Suggested research directions include historical study of feminist linguistic thought and sociolinguistic field observations of contemporary generic pronoun usage. (Pronominal gender, agreement, woman suffrage, sociolinguistics, feminism, usage, oral history, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, English)

# Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	vii
List of Illustrations .....	xii
Preface.....	xiii
Introduction.....	1
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Language and Woman’s Rights, 1850–1920 .....	5
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Third-Person Generic Pronouns: The State of the Art .....	23
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
Approach to the Problem.....	64
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Two Philadelphia Neighborhoods .....	84
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Two Minneapolis Neighborhoods .....	120
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
Burglars, Babysitters, and Persons .....	144
Conclusion.....	189
<i>Appendix A</i>	
Participants .....	199
<i>Appendix B</i>	
Tables .....	202
Bibliography.....	235



# List of Tables

## *Appendix B*

<i>Table 6.1</i>	Frequencies of third-person generic pronouns occurring with all referents.....	202
<i>Table 6.2</i>	Frequencies, comparison with Newman 1992, adult usage, epicene referents only.....	203
<i>Table 6.3</i>	Frequencies, comparison with Newman 1992, by gender of referent, adult usage only.....	203
<i>Table 6.4</i>	Pronoun x Speaker Sex .....	204
<i>Table 6.5</i>	Referent Gender x Pronoun.....	204
<i>Table 6.6</i>	Referent Gender x Speaker Sex x Pronoun.....	205
<i>Table 6.7</i>	Referent Gender x Speaker Sex x Pronoun, oral data only.....	205
<i>Table 6.8</i>	Pronoun x Referent Gender.....	206
<i>Table 6.9</i>	Pronoun x Speaker Sex, masculine referents only .....	206
<i>Table 6.10</i>	Pronoun x Education, epicene referents only.....	207
<i>Table 6.11</i>	Pronoun x Education, epicene referents, written data only.....	207
<i>Table 6.12</i>	Pronoun x Neighborhood (proxy for income), epicene referents only.....	208
<i>Table 6.13</i>	Pronoun x Occupation (proxy for class status), adults, epicene referents only.....	208

<i>Table 6.14</i>	Pronoun x City, epicene referents only .....	209
<i>Table 6.15</i>	Pronoun x City, epicene referents, oral data only .....	209
<i>Table 6.16</i>	Pronoun x Age, epicene referents only .....	210
<i>Table 6.17</i>	Pronoun x Age, epicene referents, oral data only.....	210
<i>Table 6.18</i>	Pronoun x Education x Age, epicene referents, adults only.....	211
<i>Table 6.19</i>	Pronoun x Referent Gender x Speaker Sex .....	212
<i>Table 6.20</i>	Pronoun x Referent Gender x Style.....	212
<i>Table 6.21</i>	Pronoun x Gender of Referent and Context, Det + NP only.....	213
<i>Table 6.22</i>	Pronoun x Gender of Referent and Context, oral data, Det + NP only.....	213
<i>Table 6.23</i>	Antecedent x Pronoun .....	214
<i>Table 6.24</i>	Pronoun x Antecedent .....	214
<i>Table 6.25</i>	Pronoun x Antecedent .....	215
<i>Table 6.26</i>	Pronoun x Education, oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only.....	215
<i>Table 6.27</i>	Pronoun x Neighborhood (proxy for income), oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only.....	216
<i>Table 6.28</i>	Pronoun x Occupation (proxy for class status), adults, oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only.....	216
<i>Table 6.29</i>	Pronoun x City, oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only .....	217

<i>Table 6.30</i>	Pronoun x Age, oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only .....	217
<i>Table 6.31</i>	Pronoun x Age x Education, adults, oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only.....	218
<i>Table 6.32</i>	Pronoun x Speaker Sex, oral data, antecedent <i>some</i> only .....	218
<i>Table 6.33</i>	Pronoun x Antecedent x Style, Q-NP antecedents, Minneapolis only.....	219
<i>Table 6.34</i>	Occupation x City, adults, oral data only .....	219
<i>Table 6.35</i>	Pronoun x Antecedent, Q and Det NPs only, comparison with Newman 1992.....	220
<i>Table 6.36</i>	Antecedent x Pronoun, Q and Det NPs only, comparison with Newman 1992.....	220
<i>Table 6.37</i>	Pronoun x Referential Solidity, oral data, comparison with Newman 1992.....	221
<i>Table 6.38</i>	Pronoun x Education .....	221
<i>Table 6.39</i>	Pronoun x Neighborhood (proxy for income).....	222
<i>Table 6.40</i>	Pronoun x Occupation .....	222
<i>Table 6.41</i>	Pronoun x Age.....	223
<i>Table 6.42</i>	Pronoun x Education x Style, Minneapolis only.....	223
<i>Table 6.43</i>	Pronoun x Style .....	224
<i>Table 6.44</i>	Pronoun x Gender of Referent x Context, Det + NP only.....	224
<i>Table 6.45</i>	Style x Antecedent x Pronoun.....	225
<i>Table 6.46</i>	Pronoun x Notional Number x Style .....	225

<i>Table 6.47</i>	Third-person Singular Pronoun Avoidance x Notional Number, Minneapolis, written data only.....	226
<i>Table 6.48</i>	Third-person Singular Pronoun Avoidance x Referent Gender, Det + NP, Minneapolis, written data only.....	226
<i>Table 6.49</i>	Third-person Singular Pronoun Avoidance x Age, gendered Det + NP antecedents, written data only .....	227
<i>Table 6.50</i>	Third-person Singular Pronoun Avoidance x Writer Sex, masculine Det + NP antecedents, written data only .....	227
<i>Table 6.51</i>	Occupation x City, adults, oral, epicene referents only.....	228
<i>Table 6.52</i>	Pronoun x City x Occupation, adults, oral, epicene referents only .....	228
<i>Table 6.53</i>	Pronoun x City x Occupation, adults, oral, epicene referents only; derivation of expected values for Philadelphia .....	229
<i>Table 6.54</i>	Pronoun x City, adults, oral, epicene referents only; Philadelphia occupational mix corrected to that of Minneapolis .....	229
<i>Table 6.55</i>	Pronoun x Occupation x Style, adults, epicene referents only.....	230
<i>Table 6.56</i>	Pronoun x Occupation, mean of oral and written scores, adults, epicene referents only.....	230
<i>Table 6.57</i>	Pronoun Avoidance x Occupation, adults, writing, epicene referents only .....	231
<i>Table 6.58</i>	Pronoun x Age, mean of oral and written scores, adults, epicene referents only.....	231
<i>Table 6.59</i>	Pronoun x Age x Style, adults, epicene referents only.....	232
<i>Table 6.60</i>	Pronoun x Education x Age, adults, epicene referents only; derivation of expected values for secondary-school graduates.....	232

<i>Table 6.61</i>	
	Pronoun x Education, adults, epicene referents only; expected age mix of secondary-school graduates corrected to that of college graduates ..... 233
<i>Table 6.62</i>	
	Pronoun x Age x Education, adults, epicene referents; significant contrasts only, by generation ..... 233
<i>Table 6.63</i>	
	Pronoun x Age x Education, adults, oral, epicene referents; significant contrasts only, by generation; all ages corrected to the baseline year of 1989 ..... 234

# List of Illustrations

<i>Figure 2.1</i>	Proportion of feminine imagery cued by the generic <i>he</i> in “Moulton experiments” with schoolchildren .....	46
<i>Figure 2.2</i>	Proportion of feminine imagery cued by the generic <i>he</i> in “Moulton experiments” with college students .....	47
<i>Figure 2.3</i>	Effect of experimental design on proportion of feminine imagery cued by singular <i>they</i> in “Moulton experiments” .....	50
<i>Figure 2.4</i>	Proportion of feminine imagery cued by singular <i>they</i> in open-choice “Moulton experiments” .....	52
<i>Figure 2.5</i>	Proportion of gender-inclusive imagery cued by singular <i>they</i> in open-choice “Moulton experiments” .....	52
<i>Figure 2.6</i>	Proportion of masculine imagery cued by singular <i>they</i> in open-choice “Moulton experiments” .....	53
<i>Figure 6.1</i>	<i>He</i> as a proportion of all epicene pronouns, adult usage, by style and occupational status .....	181
<i>Figure 6.2</i>	<i>He</i> as a proportion of all epicene pronouns, mean of oral and written scores, adult usage, by occupational status .....	182
<i>Figure 6.3</i>	Avoidance rate, in adult writing, of <i>all</i> epicene pronouns, by occupational status .....	183
<i>Figure 6.4</i>	<i>He</i> as a proportion of all epicene pronouns, mean of oral and written scores, adult usage, by age .....	185
<i>Figure 6.5</i>	<i>He</i> as a proportion of all epicene pronouns, adult writing, by age .....	185

<i>Figure 6.6</i>	
<i>He</i> as a proportion of all epicene pronouns, adult usage, by style and age.....	186
<i>Figure 7.1</i>	
English third-person pronouns, generic human referent, according to traditional grammatical prescription .....	190
<i>Figure 7.2</i>	
English third-person pronouns, generic human referent, according to colloquial usage.....	194

## Preface

Due to the contrasting purposes of oral history and sociolinguistic analysis, transcription of the interviews does not conform to a single standard throughout this work. In the chapters which give historic background on Philadelphia and Minneapolis neighborhoods, excerpts of conversation that bear on a single topic or narrative have sometimes been placed together in thematic or chronological order; further editing has eliminated false starts, hesitation noises, and interjections such as *like* and *you know*. For the purposes of sociolinguistic analysis, however, conversational excerpts are presented as spoken.

Audiotape recordings of the interviews are in the collection of the Department of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania.



# Introduction

Twice in the last hundred and fifty years—in the 1870s and the 1970s—there has been an upsurge of American public interest in what may appear to be a rather obscure and esoteric point of prescriptive grammar, namely the use of the masculine singular pronoun to refer to a hypothetical or generic individual of either sex. Both periods have coincided with peaks of feminist public activism; in each century, likewise, reactionary writers have sought to discredit the movement by portraying feminists as narrow-minded women obsessed with trivial linguistic projects.

What we now call the “generic *he*” was certainly more than an occasional literary annoyance to those nineteenth-century women who sought equal rights through constitutional reform, beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. From the beginnings of Anglo-American society, the legal and religious texts on which women’s social status depended had all assumed, usually without discussion, that the body politic was composed exclusively of males.

In seventeenth-century North America, “contemporary comments about the composition of the community overlooked the possibility that women might participate independently in the development of collective norms and values,” says historian Mary Beth Norton.

Such words as ‘inhabitants’ and ‘persons’ and such phrases as ‘all residing in the collonie’ were employed as the equivalent of ‘male inhabitants,’ ‘men,’ or ‘male residents’ rather than being used in sexually inclusive ways. . . . In 1644 John Winthrop [the governor of Massachusetts Bay colony] defended such usage by arguing that ‘an affirmative proposition may be true, though it comprehend not every partic[ular], as when we say All the Country was Rated to such a charge, no man will conceive that everye person and everye woman, etc, was rated’ (1996: 197–198)

As Norton points out, not only were women excluded from “All the Country”; they were not even considered in the class of “persons.” Consequently, not only *he* and *man*, but even such apparently gender-neutral terms as *person* and *citizen* offered women no guarantees of equality—except where penalties or punishments were concerned.

This, at any rate, was the painful conclusion forced on feminists of the nineteenth century by an 1875 Supreme Court decision concerning the newly adopted Fourteenth Amendment, which had defined national citizenship in gender-neutral language but had also introduced the word *male* into the U.S. Constitution. Thereafter, interpretive arguments took second place to alternative strategies, including mass organizing and civil disobedience, until the vote was finally won in 1920. Parallel developments took place in other English-speaking countries, Germany, and France.

Fifty years later, theorists of the Women’s Liberation movement highlighted once again the political assumptions that created the masculine-generic rule, as well as the political consequences that followed from its application in writing. Before long, feminist intellectuals were asking more general questions about the role of language in perpetuating women’s subordination in daily life, and the ways in which women manipulate language (and other symbol systems) to negotiate a way around their second-class status.

In the academy, these lines of inquiry led to a mushrooming of interest in gender, literary theory, and psychoanalysis that continues to this day, though often under cover, it must be said, of a nearly impenetrable thicket of professional jargon. A more accessible public debate over gender-inclusive language is still taking place in the churches, where attention is focused on Bible translation and reform of the hymnals and liturgies. Also available to a wide audience is the current generation of editorial style manuals, which generally advise careful writers to avoid the third-person singular pronoun in generic reference.

In marked contrast, theoretical work in semantics has for the most part treated the prescriptive masculine pronoun—not to mention its competitor, singular *they*—with studied indifference, so that even now one has the impression that this politicized topic, if not actually trivial, at least lies outside the realm of serious scholarship. With some notable exceptions, as recently as 1992 it could be said that “even from a purely linguistic standpoint, the lack of work is striking because study of the pronominal-antecedent relation has been central to the development of contemporary linguistic theory” (Newman, 452). On the other hand, gender in a broader social sense has become a standard category of analysis in descriptive sociolinguistics, where studies of sex differences in language use have a long history.

A vast and somewhat repetitive literature on generic pronouns does exist in the neighboring discipline of experimental social psychology, which places a commendable emphasis on the scientific observation of actual linguistic behavior. Nevertheless, few attempts have been made to study the usage of anyone other than college students in formal testing situations, or to present the insights gathered there in a historical, social or interdisciplinary context.

The present study is an attempt by a sociolinguist to document the various third-person generic pronouns now being used in four non-academic urban neighborhoods, two in Philadelphia and two in Minneapolis, and to correlate variations in usage with social factors such as sex, age, and socioeconomic status, and also with linguistic factors, the semantic characteristics of the referent. This project has been undertaken in the hope that examples from relatively unselfconscious speech will provide an observational base for further theoretical and experimental work on a complex, interdisciplinary topic.

Providing historical, intellectual, and social context, the preliminary chapters begin with a discussion of third-person generic reference as a political issue in the nineteenth-century U.S. woman’s rights movement. Next comes a review of the last

quarter-century of literature on generic pronoun reference, from which the hypotheses of the present investigation are derived.

This study's approach to the problem, a statement of the hypotheses themselves, and the method used to investigate them, are covered in a subsequent section. Described here is the classically sociolinguistic procedure, pioneered by Labov and his associates, of audiotaped interviews in a residential setting, followed by statistical analysis on the computer.

The four neighborhoods are introduced through ethnographic description—amounting at times to oral history—gleaned from the linguistic data as well as published sources. This study's findings are then presented and analyzed. A summary of the whole work and directions for future research are presented in the conclusion.

*Chapter One*

# Language and Woman's Rights 1850–1920

Dictionaries, as well as men, need revolutionizing, that justice be done woman.

—Prentice Mulford  
Letter to *The Revolution*, 26 January 1871

The existence of the generic masculine has posed an active challenge to English-speaking feminists for at least a century and a half. To make this observation is, however, to stake a claim that still needs documenting, since, with few exceptions, feminist studies of language tend not to be historical, while most historians do not concern themselves with language as a topic of inquiry. Most feminist language scholars, regardless of discipline, write in the context of the contemporary women's movement, limiting their attention to the period after about 1970. Conversely, in the feminist historical record, language, to quote Kramarae and Treichler's *Feminist Dictionary*, "is everywhere and nowhere" (1985: 19).

Another reason for this neglect may be the activist, rather than academic, orientation of earlier writers. After all, in a century when few women went to college, one scarcely expects to find a sustained theoretical discourse on gender and the politics of language. Furthermore, linguistics as we know it today had not yet taken form during the nineteenth century; instead, scholarship on language was carried out in disciplines such

as philology, philosophy, theology, and law. Because the latter two, however, also bolstered powerful institutions—church and state—which made explicit use of language to keep women subordinate, feminists found themselves engaged in the politics of language as a matter of practical necessity.

This chapter follows the nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. woman's rights movement as it contended with just one of many linguistic issues, the interpretation of "generic" language, especially as used in public settings.<sup>1</sup> Because its ambiguity could be and often was used to marginalize women—effectively denying them social and political rights, in particular the right to vote—feminists at first maintained that the masculine generic should be considered truly generic, that statements such as "all men are created equal" did include women in the scope of humankind. Gender-neutral expressions, such as *citizen*, *person*, and "we, the people," were also assumed to encompass women, at least in theory, if not in actual practice.

From the 1850s through the 1870s, woman's rights activists advocated this inclusive interpretation in a variety of contexts, from local reform organizations to the U.S. Supreme Court. By the twentieth century, however, feminists had come to regard the generic masculine as an expression of what Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as early as 1911, called "our androcentric culture."

---

<sup>1</sup>Parallel linguistic struggles were taking place in other English-speaking countries at this time: see Stopes 1908, Strachey [1928] 1979: 113–23; Pankhurst [1931] 1978, Chapter Two; Ritchie 1975; and Sachs and Hoff-Wilson 1978: 23–40. For France, see Hause and Kenney 1984: 10–12, and for Germany, Evans 1976: 80. The *History of Woman Suffrage* (ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., 6 vols.) also covered the woman's rights movement, including language issues, in other countries.

*The Woman's Rights Movement*

One notable pioneer, prior to 1850, was the abolitionist Sarah Grimké, whose *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1838) discussed women's condition from legal, religious, and social perspectives. Citing text after Biblical text, Grimké objected to sex-specific interpretations that denied women an equal place in humankind, beginning with the Creation:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them (Genesis 1:26–27).

In this passage the word *man* “is a generic term including man and woman,” according to Grimké. “In all this sublime description . . . there is not one particle of difference intimated as existing between them. They were both made in the image of God (Letter I, 32).

The Seneca Falls convention of 1848, a regional gathering, made its point in direct and explicit terms. “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal . . .” Generally, as used in the Declaration of Sentiments, the term *man*, unqualified, means male human beings. There is also a wealth of alternative expressions: *the family of man*, *the people of the earth*, *the people of this country*, *mankind*, *the [human] race*.

In 1850 the woman's rights movement held its first national convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. The woman suffrage resolutions (which used terms such as *person* and *human being*) included a call for the restrictive word *male* to be stricken from every state constitution, a demand which would be repeated for the next seventy years. At the second national meeting, held in Worcester in 1851, the interpretation of generic language was once again made a feminist issue. The Declaration of Independence was cited in a resolution which, in one form or another, became another standard feature of

woman's rights conventions. Beginning with close paraphrase, the resolution concludes with a feminist linguistic analysis:

we charge that man with gross dishonesty or ignorance, who shall contend that "men," in the memorable document from which we quote, does not stand for the human race; that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," are the "inalienable rights" of *half* only of the human species (*HWS* I, 826; emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup>

While some feminists were beginning to analyze the position of women in legal writing, others went on to consider sexism in other forms of public language.

Ernestine Rose, a noted lecturer originally from Poland, reported that a member of the British Parliament, one Mr. Roebuck, had recently advocated voting rights for tenement dwellers. When asked whether his proposal included both sexes, he demurred on the grounds that the "happiness of society" depended on excluding women from the vote.

"Society!" exclaimed Rose. "What does the term mean?"

As a foreigner, I understand by it a collection or union of human beings—men, women, and children, under one general government, and for mutual interest. But Mr. Roebuck, being a native Briton and a member of Parliament, gave us a parliamentary definition, namely: *society means the male sex only* (*HWS* I, 538; emphasis added).

At the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention in June, 1853, Thomas Wentworth Higginson spoke in favor of woman suffrage, citing the state bill of rights. Higginson's argument, which occasionally echoed that of Ernestine Rose, was remarkable for two reasons. First, he presented, in extended form, a pro-feminist interpretation of constitutional law—a rhetorical strategy that would reappear after the Civil War as the "New Departure." Second, Higginson drew a connection between women's status and the language of daily life.

Politically speaking, in Massachusetts all men are patrician, all women plebeian. All men are equal, in having direct political power, and all women are equal, in having none. . . .

We see the result of this in our general mode of speaking of women. We forget to speak of her as an individual being, only as a thing. A political writer coolly says, that in Massachusetts, "except criminals and paupers, there is no class of persons who do not

---

<sup>2</sup>*HWS* refers to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. (1881–1886), *History of Woman Suffrage*, vols. 1–3 (rpt. 1985, Salem, N. H.: Ayer).



exercise the elective franchise." Women are not even a "class of persons." And yet, most readers would not notice this extraordinary omission.

I talked the other day with a young radical preacher about his new religious organization. "Who votes under it?" said I. "Oh, (he said, triumphantly,) we go for progress and liberty; anybody and everybody votes." "What!" said I, "women?" "No," said he, rather startled; "I did not think of them when I spoke." Thus quietly do we all talk of "anybody and everybody," and omit half the human race. . . . Indeed, I read in the newspaper, this morning, of some great festivity, that "all the world and his wife" would be there! Women are not a part of the world, but only its "wife" (*HWS I*, 251).

Were women a part of "the world"? Feminists challenged this very expression at the so-called "World's Temperance Convention," held in New York City in September, 1853. When the call went out to "the friends of temperance," the Women's New York State Temperance Society, headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, sent delegates. After a strenuous debate, the women's credentials were rejected. "Think of it, a *World's* Convention, in which woman is voted not of the world!" exclaimed Lucy Stone in a letter to *The Una*, a feminist newspaper [*HWS I*, 502]. In a meeting she commented that any time women were excluded from a "world's" convention, "it should show us something of the amount of labor we have to do, to teach the world that we are a part of it." Like Thomas Higginson and Ernestine Rose, Lucy Stone then took this analysis of public language one step further:

I took up a book the other day, written by the Rev. Mr. Davis, in which he sketches the events of the last fifty years. He states that the Sandwich Islands at one time had one missionary at such a station; Mr. Green—and his wife! Then he went on to state another where there were nineteen—and their wives! Now these are straws on the surface, but they indicate "which way the wind blows," and indicate, in some sense, the estimation in which woman is held (*HWS I*, 163).

### *Reconstruction Debates*

By the end of the Civil War, women's legal status had begun to improve; however, the restrictive word *male* continued to limit their civil rights in every state. Reconstruction introduced a new obstacle: the proposed Fourteenth Amendment, which

would introduce the word *male* into the federal constitution as well.<sup>3</sup> Seeing a threat to nearly twenty years of feminist progress, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony lobbied vigorously against the measure. Their efforts to substitute gender-neutral wording failed, however, as neither party was willing to endorse full civil rights for black women. Ironically, Democrats countered the threat of black suffrage by appropriating feminist rhetoric from, of all places, the abolition movement. Comments such as these were quoted out of context:

I have read speeches and heard a great deal said about the right of suffrage for the freedmen. . . . What does it mean? Does it mean the male freedman only, or does it mean the freedwoman also? (*HWS II*, 112–114).

Caught in the middle, reformers who supported civil rights both for blacks and for women briefly maintained a single demand for “universal suffrage,” defined as “equal rights to all,” regardless of “race, color, sex, property, or education” [*HWS II*, 170, 171]. By 1869, however, the growing frustration of woman suffragists was evident. Ernestine Rose, who seventeen years earlier had remarked that “society means the male sex only,” now warned that once again women’s interests were being obscured:

I understand the word universal to include ALL. Congress understood that Universal Suffrage meant the white man only. Since the war we have changed the name for Impartial Suffrage. When some of our editors, such as Mr. [Horace] Greeley and others, were asked what they meant by impartial suffrage, they said, “Why, man, of course; the man and the brother.” Congress has enacted resolutions for the suffrage of men and brothers. They don’t speak of the women and sisters.

They have begun to change their tactics, and call it manhood suffrage. I propose to call it Woman Suffrage; then we shall know what we mean. . . . I am a foreigner. I had great difficulty acquiring the English language, and I never shall acquire it. But I am afraid that in the meaning of language Congress is a great deal worse off than I have ever been. I go for the change of name; I will not be construed into a man and a brother (*HWS II*, 396–97).

### *The New Departure*

---

<sup>3</sup>According to Section 2 of the amendment, if a state denies or abridges the right of its eligible *male* citizens to vote, the number of its congressional representatives shall be reduced “in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such State.” Female citizens are not mentioned.

The passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 was at first regarded as a grave setback for women's constitutional rights. In October of 1869, however, Francis Minor, an attorney, outlined an argument that the measure had in fact *already* enfranchised women.

The logic behind this "New Departure" relied heavily on Section 1 of the amendment, which declared: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States . . . are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." American women, being "persons," were therefore citizens, whose "privileges and immunities" states were forbidden to abridge. Of course, variations on "we, the people," from the preamble to the Constitution, were as familiar to feminist orators as the declaration that "all men" (including women, of course) were created equal. Thus the New Departure, while reflecting the latest changes in the law, was very much in the rhetorical tradition of woman's rights.

*Women as "Persons": Bradwell*

The first major test of this approach, *Bradwell v. Illinois* (83 U.S. [16 Wall.] 130) concerned the editor of the *Chicago Legal News*, Myra Bradwell, who, having passed the state bar examination, was refused a license because she was a woman. Petitioning the supreme court of Illinois in September, 1869, Bradwell cited the state's interpretation rule: "When any party or person is described or referred to by words importing the masculine gender, females as well as males shall be deemed to be included."

Although the licensing requirements for attorneys used the word *person*, Bradwell did not attempt to prove that women were "people." Instead, she devoted her entire brief to the scope of masculine generic language in state law (*HWS II*, 602–603). "[T]he pronoun he, not only in this section, but the whole chapter, is used indefinitely for any person," she claimed, "and may refer to either a man or a woman." Bradwell also quoted

extensively from the state bill of rights, which guaranteed religious freedom, due process, and other liberties to “men.” “It will not be contended that women are not included,” she wrote. “Will women be deprived of the right of trial by jury because the masculine pronoun is used?”

In denying Bradwell's petition, however, the Illinois court simply pointed out that the state's interpretation rule did not apply “when there is anything in the subject or context repugnant to such construction.” What was “repugnant” to the court was the idea that women might hold public office, including, strictly speaking, the “office” of attorney. The U.S. Supreme Court later denied an appeal based on the Fourteenth Amendment.

*Woman Suffrage in the Courts: Anthony*

In November, 1872, while *Bradwell* was pending in the high court, Susan B. Anthony and about fifty other women registered to vote—and actually cast ballots for president—in Rochester, New York. Arrested and released on bail, Anthony lectured throughout two counties on the theme, “Is It a Crime for a United States Citizen to Vote?” This speech recapitulated every point made by feminists during twenty years of contending with masculinist generics in the law, including the New Departure theory that women were “persons” under the Constitution. Anthony also highlighted the absurdity of sexist language:

[I]t is urged [that] the use of the masculine pronouns he, his, and him, in all the constitutions and laws, is proof that only men were meant to be included in their provisions. If you insist on this version of the letter of the law, we shall insist that you be consistent, and accept the other horn of the dilemma . . . (*HWS II*, 635–636).

“There is no she, or her, or hers, in the tax laws,” said Anthony. “The same is true of all the criminal laws.” Did these not apply to women?

In the law of May 31, 1870, the 19th section of which I am charged with having violated, not only are all the pronouns masculine, but everybody knows that that particular section was intended expressly to hinder the rebels from voting.

(So much for legislative intent.)

. . . Precisely so with all the papers served on me—the U.S. Marshal's warrant, the bail-bond, the petition for habeas corpus, the bill of indictment—not one of them had a feminine pronoun printed in it; but to make them applicable to me, the Clerk of the Court made a little carat to the left of "he" and placed an "s" over it, thus making she out of he. Then the letters "is" were scratched out, the little carat placed under and "er" over, to make her out of his . . . and I insist if government officials may thus manipulate the pronouns to tax, fine, imprison, and hang women, women may take the same liberty with them to secure to themselves their right to a voice in the government (*HWS* II, 636–637)

Anthony lost her case in a highly irregular trial. Not only was she not allowed to testify in her own defense; the judge also *directed* the jury to find a verdict of guilty. When Anthony's lawyer objected, the judge dismissed the jury altogether and pronounced her guilty himself, reading an opinion that may have been written in advance. Anthony was prevented from appealing because her lawyer, over her protests, "chivalrously" paid her fine.

#### *Woman Suffrage in the Courts: Minor*

The final test of the New Departure was instigated by its author. Francis and Virginia Minor sued a St. Louis registrar, Reese Happersett, in 1872—the same year in which Susan B. Anthony voted. Three years later, *Minor v. Happersett* became the only woman suffrage case ever to be heard in the U.S. Supreme Court (88 U.S. 162). This historic decision at last acknowledged that women were indeed "persons" and therefore citizens. Citizenship, however, did not confer suffrage. Some citizens had the right to vote, while others did not. The power to grant or abridge that right rested with the states,

the Court unanimously declared, because “the Constitution of the United States does not confer the right of suffrage upon any one” (*HWS II*, 742).<sup>4</sup>

*Women as “Persons”: Lockwood*

*Minor v. Happersett* brought to an end all hope of gaining the vote under the Fourteenth Amendment. Over the next several decades, however, other female “persons” challenged the scope of generic terms. Some tried to integrate the ranks of the legal profession, with mixed results. In August of 1875, for example, a Wisconsin court refused to license Lavinia Goodell because “ignoring the distinction of sex” would “emasculate the constitution itself” (*In re Goodell*, 39 Wis. 232, 242, 20 Am.Rep. 42).

A landmark case of 1894 (*In re Lockwood*, 154 U.S. 116) concerned Belva Lockwood, the first woman attorney admitted to the Supreme Court (Hoff 1991: 183). Although she was a “person” licensed to practice law in several states, Lockwood was denied reciprocal membership in the Virginia bar. In rejecting Lockwood’s appeal, the state supreme court departed from the federal precedent, established in *Minor v.*

*Happersett*, that the word “person” applied to women. The U.S. Supreme Court, as it had done in *Bradwell*, affirmed the decision of the state. According to one legal historian:

The historical and legal importance of *Lockwood* lies in the fact that the Supreme Court chose to allow states to confine their definition of a “person” to males only. This, of course, was exactly the same question that Anthony had first posed in Rochester, New York, when she had voted in 1872. From 1894 until 1971 [*Reed v. Reed*, 404 U.S. 71], states could maintain that women were not legally “persons” by virtue of this single Supreme Court decision (Hoff 1991: 184).

---

<sup>4</sup>A contemporary legal historian has argued that the concept of “second-class citizenship” enshrined in this decision became the basis for racist “Jim Crow” laws in later years (Hoff 1991: 175).

*Lobbying before Congress*

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, before Congress, at party conventions, and in state and territorial legislatures, lobbyists for a constitutional amendment continued to affirm the “personhood” of women. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton told a Senate committee in 1878:

This is declared to be a government “of the people.” All power, it is said, centers in the people. Our State constitutions also open with the words, “We, the people.” Does anyone pretend to say that men alone constitute races and peoples? When we say parents, do we not mean mothers as well as fathers? When we say children, do we not mean girls as well as boys? When we say people, do we not mean women as well as men? (HWS III, 81)

Suffragists occasionally went on the offensive. Testifying before a Senate committee in 1880, Lillie Devereux Blake ridiculed the misleading use of words such as *person*, *people*, *man*, and *citizen* in the speeches of male politicians. In Maine, she noted, there had recently been “a little unpleasantness” because, it was said, “the people of Maine” had not been permitted to express their will at the polls. “Why, gentlemen,” said Blake,

I assert that a majority of the people of Maine have never been permitted to express their will at the polls. A majority of the people of Maine are women, and from the foundation of this government have never exercised any of the inalienable rights of citizens. . . . It appears to me that what Mr. Blaine said in that connection was nonsense, unless indeed he forgot that there were any others than men in the state of Maine. I don't suppose that you, gentlemen, are often so forgetful (HWS III, 164)

What if politicians were to abandon this pseudogeneric usage? As an example, Blake quoted a recent speech by President Rutherford B. Hayes, which referred to “our people” and “the primary rights of citizenship.” “I am afraid,” said Blake, “that Mr. Hayes, when he wrote this, forgot that there were women in the United States.” She then rewrote the passage to reflect what was really meant: “*half* our people” and “the primary rights of our *male* citizens” (HWS III, 165). “If Mr. Hayes had thus expressed himself,” Blake suggested, “he would have made a perfectly logical and clear statement.” She left the Congressmen with a tongue-in-cheek proposal:

that hereafter, when making your speeches, you will not use the term 'citizens' in a broad sense, unless you mean to include women as well as men, and that when you do not mean to include women you will speak of male citizens as a separate class, because the term, in its general application, is illogical and its meaning obscure if not self-contradictory (*HWS III*, 165)

### *Grammar and Gender*

In the decades after the Civil War, journalists and educators also concerned themselves with the masculine generic, as discussions of proper usage became a popular literary pastime. Kenneth Cmiel (1990) has shown that "verbal criticism," as it was then known, was first written by educated gentlemen concerned about the erosion of class distinctions. For this very reason, however, advice on grammar appealed to the upwardly mobile as well. Dennis Baron, a historian of the prescriptive movement, has observed that "[b]y the second half of the nineteenth century, grammarians were more explicit about gender concord and the generic *he*" (1986: 194). Using the generic masculine instead of singular *they* was thus promoted as a mark of social status.

At the same time, verbal critics were also interested in improving the English language, and some felt that an entirely new pronoun was needed. Richard Meade Bache, whose *Vulgarisms and Other Errors of Speech* appeared in 1869, thought it might be "a great convenience" (quoted in Baron 1986: 199). In 1884 alone no fewer than nine articles on this subject appeared in the literary journals.

Richard Grant White, a newspaper columnist and one of the most prominent verbal critics, took the opposite view. "First, the thing can't be done; last, it is not at all necessary or desirable that it should be done," he wrote in 1868, responding to readers' queries. Speakers "of common sense and common mastery of English" would use *man*, as in the word *mankind*, along with the pronoun *he*. White's tone then turned sarcastic, and explicitly antifeminist. "Any objection to this use of *man*, and of the relative pronoun," he sneered, "is for the consideration of the next Woman's Rights Convention,



at which it may be discussed with all the gravity beseeching its momentous significance.” Relenting slightly, White suggested the use of *one* “to free the language from the oppression of the sex and from the outrage to its dignity, which have for centuries lurked in this use of *man* and *he* . . .” ([1868] 1899: 221).

In legal contexts, of course, far from asserting that *man* and *he* necessarily excluded women, woman's rights advocates had always insisted on an *inclusive* interpretation; to do otherwise would have conceded from the outset that women had no political rights as a part of “the people.” Meanwhile, it was conservative legislators who maintained that words such as *person*, *man*, and *he* were not generic enough to allow women to vote. Outside the legal system, however, individual women did occasionally consider the relationship between sexism and everyday language. Thus in the pages of *The Revolution*, a radical feminist newspaper, an alternative “verbal criticism” took shape between 1868 and 1871 (see Rakow and Kramarae 1990 for the following excerpts).

Dear “Revolution”:

Do you know of any reason why ministers always address their congregation as “*Brethren*”? Said congregations are invariably composed principally of women, and I don't know why their presence should be totally ignored.

I don't think any form of address is necessary, but if something is needed to fill up a pause, why can't they say, “Friends,” or “Christian Friends”? (182).

Several contributors discussed the *man* . . . *he* construction, although opinion was now divided as to its inclusiveness. Occasionally the tone was humorous; sometimes it was earnest, as in this open letter to the *New York Tribune*:

When the slaveholders talked of the will of the majority, the *Tribune* was trying to make them see that there could be no fair majority, where one half the males were not allowed a voice. Are you not as blind in regard to women? When you talk of securing to each the “ownership and enjoyment of *his* rightful gains,” will you please amend and say *his or her*? (189).

And it could be philosophical, as in a meditation on women's auxiliary status in

“Christianity and chivalry”:

Let those who boast of the royal position which civilization has given to woman, look for additional light in the very use of the words man and woman. While her name has become the synonym of frailty, fickleness, and levity; a little word of only three letters has been made to embrace in its signification every human being that has ever lived on the planet. In science, literature, and art, *man* is the central word around which the word woman revolves as a mere nebulous satellite. In Holy Writ, also, man is all in all. . . . It is man that fell and man that is to be redeemed, but who ever heard of the fall of woman! . . . How is all this explained? Is it that man and woman are one? Unfortunate[ly] for women, man is always the *one* (182).

These commentaries, like those of Rose, Higginson, and Stone, are certainly intriguing to us today. How widely such opinions were shared remains an open question, however. Available evidence suggests that the woman's rights movement *as a whole* was never particularly interested in changing the language of daily life. On the other hand, *antifeminists* such as Richard Grant White did occasionally raise the issue as a means of ridicule. As late as 1919, the lexicographer James Fernald could write: "The masculine has stood as the representative gender for a 'time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary,' and that immemorial prescription still holds good, even in this period of militant feminism" (quoted in Baron 1986: 203).

### *Radical Voices*

If Sarah Grimké, along with other radical women such as Lucretia Mott, pioneered the critique of masculinist generics, then certainly *The Woman's Bible*, appearing at the end of the century, drew heavily on the religious and political roots of U.S. feminism. Written primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* was not, as some have called it, a new translation; rather, it was a commentary on selected passages, incorporating insights gained from a lifetime of feminist activism. Whereas antifeminists, both inside and outside the legal system, had long quoted the Bible against women's rights, Stanton drew critical parallels between the sexism of Scripture and her own society. For example:

Our civil and criminal codes reflect at many points the spirit of the Mosaic [law]. In the criminal code we find no feminine pronouns: as "He," "His," "Him," we are arrested, tried

and hung, but singularly enough, we are denied the highest privileges of citizens, because the pronouns "She," "Hers," and "Her," are not found in the constitutions. It is a pertinent question, if women can pay the penalties of their crimes as "He," why may they not enjoy the privileges of citizens as "He"? (74).

Elsewhere she observes that for women, "the masculine pronouns apply only to disabilities. What a hustling there would be among prisoners and genders, if laws and constitutions, Scriptures and commandments, played this fast and loose game with the men of any nation" (127).

The radicalism of *The Woman's Bible* was quite alarming to moderate and conservative suffragists, who publicly dissociated the movement from one of its founding mothers. Yet among feminists at large, the even more visionary work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman found a ready audience, particularly in liberal churches and on college campuses. Gilman often alluded to language issues in her fiction and social theory, particularly in *Herland*, published serially in 1915 (Matossian 1987).

In this novel, set on the eve of World War I, three male explorers discover a feminist utopia, a peaceful and cooperative world of women who reproduce parthenogenically. In exchange for information about the outside world, the men are allowed to tour the country. They also learn the women's language, which, as one might expect, does not use masculine generics. At first this is confusing:

"No man would work unless he had to," Terry declared.

"Oh, no *man!* You mean that is one of your sex-distinctions?"

"No, indeed!" he said hastily. "No one, I mean, man or woman, would work without incentive" (61).

After more than a year in *Herland*, Van, the most progressive of the men, analyzes the issue as follows:

When we say *men, man, manly, manhood*, and all the other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities . . . of men everywhere, doing everything—"the world."

And when we say *women*, we think female—the sex.

But to these women, in the unbroken sweep of this two-thousand-year-old feminine civilization, the word *woman* called up all that big background, . . . and the word *man* meant to them only male—the sex (137).

By the end of their stay, recalls Van, “we were now well used to seeing women not as females, but as people, people of all sorts, doing every kind of work.”

### *Epilogue*

During the two centuries of constitutional history since 1787, the Supreme Court has recognized women as legal “persons” for less than fifty years: from *Minor* to *Lockwood* (1875–1894) and from *Reed v. Reed* to the present (1971–1997). Meanwhile, corporations—contrary to Congressional intent—have been recognized as “persons” since 1886.

Prior to 1920, the ambiguity of *person*, *man*, and *he* complicated civil as well as criminal trials, affecting the rights of women, especially married women, to own and convey property, hold office, enter the professions, vote, sue in their own behalf, and defend themselves in court. Even after suffrage was won that landmark year, women’s right to serve on juries was still contingent on the interpretation of generic wording; in fact, as late as the 1940s, court decisions were sometimes overturned because women jurors were not legal “persons.”<sup>5</sup>

Ridicule of the feminist movement, with language as an occasional motif, continued at this time. “At a women’s conference some years ago a member got up and pointed out that the tyranny of man appeared no less in the laws of grammar than in the laws of the land,” recalled Philip Boswood Ballard, an English writer. He then went on to make fun of the speaker’s proposal for a set of alternative pronouns (Ballard 1934: 7–8). Ten years later, Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock observed that *he or she* had begun to displace the masculine generic pronoun. “The women’s vote has set up a sort of timid

---

<sup>5</sup>For examples, see *Commonwealth v. Welosky* (276 Mass. 398, 177 N.E. 656), *State v. Emery et al.* (224 N.C. 581, 31 S.E.2d 858), and references cited therein.

deference that is always afraid of omitting or insulting them," he complained, sounding like antifeminist language critics before and since (quoted in Baron 1986: 196).

In 1923, looking back on woman suffrage, Carrie Chapman Catt observed that getting the word *male* "in effect" out of the Constitution had required more than nine hundred separate political campaigns over a period of fifty-two years (quoted in Flexner [1959] 1971: 173). As women's legal situation improved, however, the interpretation of generic wording waned in importance as a feminist issue. Although gender-neutral pronouns were still occasionally proposed, most writers on language were silent about sexism for the next half century.

There were exceptions, however. Even in the post-1945 period, a time which has been called "the doldrums" of the U.S. women's movement, language issues remained important to some feminists (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 56). Mary R. Beard devoted an entire chapter of *Woman as Force in History* (1946) to criticism of masculine generic usage. During the early 1950s, other feminists worked for congressional legislation to guarantee that generic expressions such as *man*, *person*, and *people* would be interpreted to include women.<sup>6</sup> Yet it seems that not until feminism's second wave did the topic of language and woman's place reach a mass audience. By that time few realized what had gone before.

---

<sup>6</sup>Rupp and Taylor (1987: 35, 63) mention two examples of such legislation, each intended to circumvent opposition to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. A Declaratory Act drafted by Rose Arnold Powell would have guaranteed that generic *man* in the Constitution included women. Similarly, the Hunt Resolution, introduced in the Senate in 1953, proposed that generic words such as *person*, *persons*, *people*, and the personal pronouns be interpreted to include both sexes. Opposed to these alternatives was the National Woman's Party, steadfast in its support for the ERA, which read: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." In this camp as well, there were activists who objected to masculine generic usage. Fannie Ackley wrote to a colleague in 1953, "if one sex has to mean all humanity, surely it would be more logical to use 'woman' instead of 'man', since it is womankind that bears and rears all humanity" (56). For more on feminist language issues during this period, see Rupp and Taylor 1987: 39-40, 47, 52-57; and Miller and Swift 1991: xix.

Whether one considers women's efforts to build organizational communication—through public speaking and assembly, literacy and publication—or ponders the social definitions that kept women silent in the churches and denied them a voice in the laws, linguistic issues can be seen to permeate the history of the U.S. woman's rights movement from its inception (Matossian 1990, 1992). Although, to be sure, most reformers were concerned with social practice rather than sociolinguistic or semantic theory, feminist writers from Sarah Grimké to Charlotte Perkins Gilman did maintain a political tradition of linguistic inquiry that continues, both inside and outside the academy, in our own day.

What contemporary scholars have been saying about women's personhood as a linguistic issue—as reflected, specifically, in generic reference to human beings—is outlined in the following chapter. The remainder of this work describes the present investigation, which, in the spirit of Ernestine Rose, Thomas Higginson and Lucy Stone, situates this issue where they first sighted it: in “the world” of everyday speech.

## Third-person Generic Pronouns: The State of the Art

We are re-examining even our words—language itself.

—Attributed to Redstockings, 1969, and to New York Radical Women, ca. 1970<sup>7</sup>

**D**uring the 72-year struggle for the right to vote, as the previous chapter has shown, women’s efforts to be recognized as full legal “persons” required them to challenge the very terms of a political discourse that had traditionally relegated women, and their rights, to the margins of American democracy. In the late twentieth century the second wave of this movement—beginning about 1970 with Women’s Liberation and proliferating in innumerable directions since—reopened the question of “woman’s place” (as Robin Lakoff put it) in the discourse of daily life.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Redstockings of the Women’s Liberation Movement [1969] 1978, “Principles,” reprinted in *Feminist Revolution*, ed. Kathie Sarachild [Kathie Amatniek], 205. New York Radical Women [undated] 1970, “Principles,” in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, ed. Robin Morgan, 520. The full text of the “Principles” is identical in these two citations.

<sup>8</sup>“We do not wish to lose sight of the fact that it was the women’s liberation movement that pushed this field of study into prominence, and created the atmosphere for its acceptance and legitimation,” wrote the editors of a landmark annotated bibliography on women and language (Thorne and Henley 1975). “. . . [A]s the women’s liberation movement forwarded the book, we hope that the book in turn may forward the movement” (x; see also 6–7).

With regard to masculine generics, the first analyses from movement sources included Densmore 1970, Faust 1970, Toth 1970, One 1970–71, and Orovan 1971, although Millett had already highlighted the problem in *Sexual Politics* ([1969] 1971: 83). The social significance of masculine generics was a recurring theme in *The Female Man* (Russ 1975), a celebrated science fiction novel written during the same period (1969–71). Nichols (1971) and Toth (1971) were

Perhaps nowhere has the linguistic marginalization of women been more apparent to contemporary writers than in conventional generic or hypothetical reference to the individual human being, particularly in the English pronoun system with its prescriptive third-person *he*. Over the last quarter century, scholars in a variety of disciplines have documented this usage, explained its historical origins, and sought to delineate its possible relationship, in a neo-Whorfian sense, to a worldview that places men and not women at the conceptual center.

The following review of this literature is divided for the convenience of exposition into “theoretical” and “empirical” sections. The so-called “empirical” studies involve external observation or experimentation, while “theoretical” works (regardless of the author’s field) may rely instead on introspection, hypothetical examples, and anecdotal evidence. What is at issue here is the kind of evidence being presented, and whether or not it includes systematic documentation of actual usage within a defined speech community. The latter method is characteristic of the sociolinguistic approach.

In practice, of course, empirically verifiable claims may be based on either sort of evidence, and the ones made in this literature will be summarized in Chapter Three as the hypotheses for the present study, which takes place not in the classroom or language lab but in the urban neighborhood.

---

among the first to bridge the gap between Women’s Liberation and academic approaches to this topic; however, a general course on language and the sexes was taught by Mary Ritchie Key beginning in 1969 (Thorne and Henley 1975: 6).

Much more could be written on the field’s activist origins: for further documentation, see Miller and Swift 1991: xvii–xxii; Nilsen 1977; Martyna 1983; and Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983: v, 8.



## THEORETICAL LITERATURE

### *Overviews*

Several recent book-length treatments of language and the sexes have taken a political position on the prescriptive masculine pronouns. For example, Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980), true to its title, asserts that "men have encoded sexism into the language to consolidate their claims of male supremacy" (144). To support this strong statement, Spender cites the promulgation of prescriptive *he*, particularly in the nineteenth century, and hypothesizes that women (resisting linguistic sexism) are the primary users of an alternative, namely singular *they*.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, *Women and Men Speaking* (Kramarae 1981) considers the possibility that "words and the norms for their use have been formulated by . . . men" as a dominant group, and that therefore "the words and norms for speaking are not generated from or fitted to women's experiences" (1). Kramarae finds specific support for this "muted group theory" in the work of Martyna (1978a, 1978b) and other researchers on prescriptive pronouns. However, "the muted group theory neglects the complexities of gender, class, and race dominance. The theory does not provide us with clear possible explanations of *how* a dominant male language is established and maintained" (50). Finally, Kramarae makes the empirically testable observation that politicians and teachers addressing women are now less likely to use prescriptive *he* than formerly (51).

Frank and Anshen, in *Language and the Sexes* (1983), state that in practice, pronoun choice for a referent of unknown sex "will . . . often depend on culturally

---

<sup>9</sup>For documentation of the history of prescriptive *he*, which does not entirely support Spender, see Bodine (1975) and Baron (1986). In general it may be argued that Spender's model of language change gives entirely too much credit to prescriptivists. While they have done much to shape written Standard English since the eighteenth century, they have largely failed to restrict the complexity of ordinary spoken usage. The persistence of singular *they*, for example, suggests that "man's" control of language has not been terribly effective.

defined sex roles” (71). Singular *they*, as an alternative, “has prevailed in colloquial usage” (88). These too are empirically testable observations.

In *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985a), Cameron attacks the notion that prescriptive *he* is unmarked for sex, as asserted (for example) in a much-cited letter to the Harvard *Crimson* by members of the linguistics faculty.<sup>10</sup> If unmarked terms are those which can be used generically, then it is circular to argue that prescriptive *he* is “generic” because it is unmarked. If semantic neutrality characterizes unmarked terms, surely this is a personal judgment influenced by one’s standpoint within a particular culture. Finally, she argues, if masculine generics occur more frequently than other kinds, this is undoubtedly the result of prescriptive pressure rather than any inherent neutrality.

Having rejected prescriptive *he*, Cameron is, however, not satisfied with “cosmetic” reforms such as singular *they*. The problem, in Cameron’s view, is that masculine generics, together with sexist thinking, tend to obscure the possibility of female referents. “Non-sexist” terms give a superficial appearance of neutrality but fail to challenge sexist thinking by making female referents visible. Cameron therefore advocates a sort of linguistic affirmative action—generic *she*, which, like the term *herstory*, is intended to highlight unconscious prejudice.

---

<sup>10</sup>According to Miller and Swift (1977: 68–69), the Harvard *Crimson* (11 November 1971) reported that a group of student theologians at Harvard Divinity School had called for the avoidance of masculine generic reference to the human species or to God. A few days later, seventeen members of the Harvard linguistics faculty, including the distinguished chair, Calvert Watkins, issued a letter which read in part: “For people and pronouns in English the masculine is the unmarked and hence is used as a neutral or unspecified term. . . . [This fact] is simply a feature of grammar. It is unlikely to be an impediment to any change in the patterns of the sexual division of labor toward which our society may wish to evolve. There is really no cause for anxiety or pronoun-envy on the part of those seeking such changes” (*Crimson*, November 16). Newsweek publicized the story (“Pronoun Envy”) in its issue of 6 December, prompting a response from another linguist, James L. Armagost of the University of Washington. “A reasonably inquisitive person might wonder why the masculine is unmarked,” he wrote. “The question deserves a better answer than: ‘What a coincidence that the masculine is unmarked in the language of a people convinced that men are superior to women.’”

Frank and Treichler, editors of *Language, Gender, and Professional Writing* (1989), include an introductory survey of issues, with considerable discussion of pronouns and mention of both theoretical and empirical work. This volume includes a set of guidelines with much linguistically informed discussion of the various pronominal choices: generic *he* is rejected, but so is the use of *they* with a singular antecedent. The consciousness-raising function of *she* is recognized (141–81).<sup>11</sup>

Penelope (1990) also briefly discusses prescriptive *he*, which she calls “the most visible part of male dominance in English” (115). After reviewing the history of this usage, and citing examples of generic *he* and *she* in published writing, Penelope concludes:

[O]ccupations outside the home are conceptually classified by English speakers as male-specific, and so commonly replaced by the pronoun *he*. The kinship terms are the only nouns in English that demonstrate “natural gender” in the pronouns that replace them. Other examples . . . show that *she* is used to refer to a noun only when a speaker thinks of that noun as [+female]. That is, women are explicitly mentioned in discourse only if some activity is thought of as *womanly* or *feminine*. (119)

According to Penelope, the relative distribution of these two pronouns indicates that “the noun classification system set forth by the prescriptive grammarians . . . is now established,” with the exception of singular *they*. In general, Penelope’s account of generic pronouns is quite similar to that of Spender.

### *Linguistics*

Although most of the works cited above were written by linguists, a sampling of articles in fact suggests that very few have taken an interest in the topic of generic pronouns, and an even smaller number have chosen to confine the discussion to descriptive semantic theory. Thus Newman (1992), reviewing the literature on “singular epicene pronominals,” observes that

---

<sup>11</sup>Thanks to Sally McConnell-Ginet for this reference.

a number of well-regarded linguists such as Baron, Bolinger, Lakoff, McConnell-Ginet, Newmeyer, and Valian have lent their authority to what is essentially a debate about prescription in spite of the long-standing tradition of shunning such questions in American linguistics (449).

Hook (1974), for example, makes explicitly antifeminist arguments in defense of the prescriptive rule, while Stanley (1975, 1979), a passionate feminist, openly acknowledges that the whole controversy is basically political (a position also explored in Bendix 1979). Several articles by McConnell-Ginet (1975, 1978, [1980] 1985) discuss prescriptive usage as reflecting the false universalization of masculinity and male experience. “Recent discussions of the sexist implications of pronoun usage have done relatively little to enhance our understanding of the semantic structure of pronouns,” she wrote in 1979.

Feminists who claim that the generic use of the masculine *he* is unclear or unfair or both have often uncritically accepted an overly simple view of linguistic structure and functioning. On the other hand, linguists have mainly responded in a prescriptivist tone by trying to set people straight on what pronouns “really” mean or by knocking down straw women espousing absurdly naive views of the relation between language, culture, and cognition. (63)

Cameron (1985b) has explored “the interaction of ideology and linguistic description . . . in relation to ideas about the grammatical category of gender” in two apparently unrelated contexts: Indo-European scholarship and contemporary feminism. She discovers surprising parallels, concluding that

[i]n both cases, linguistic scholarship defended the social and linguistic *status quo*; but the arguments used to do this were dramatically different in each, reflecting different historical conceptions of sex difference and its connexion with language. (19)

For Sklar (1983), likewise, “there is a sense of *déjà vu* in much twentieth-century linguistic gender theory,” due to the apparent convergence of prescriptive and descriptive approaches to the masculine generic. “Ways of talking about linguistic gender have changed,” she writes, “but the extra-linguistic motivation has not . . . the subtext still reads that the masculine is dominant, primary, the feminine subordinate, subsumable” (358).

Discussion within the context of descriptive linguistics has, nevertheless, taken place. Both McConnell-Ginet, as early as 1975, and Haegeman (1981) have suggested that generic singular *they* is extending its range to prestige varieties of English. Haegeman believes that while feminism has motivated the self-conscious speaker, the standardization of *they* represents the strengthening of the primary contrasts [+ANIMATE] and [+ HUMAN] over the old tripartite English gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter)—a trend already evident in relative pronouns (*who* [+HUMAN], *which* [-HUMAN]) and the 's genitive [+ANIMATE]. Haegeman also makes the empirically testable claim that singular *they* never refers to a specific person (*my teacher*) or to a member of a sex-specific class (*sister, mother*).

A valuable review by Newman (1992) very ably relates the discussion of “epicene pronominals” to the ongoing study of the relationship between pronouns in general and their antecedents. In the traditional view, represented for example by Bosch (1983, 1987) and Cornish 1987, pronouns are mere place-holders: they substitute for nouns but contribute little or nothing to the meaning of an utterance. In contrast, MacKay and Fulkerson (1979), among others, have espoused the more dynamic view that pronouns, like lexical items, have their own semantic value. Thus pronoun choice reflects “a number of different semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic factors” (Newman 1992: 453).

Using data from televised interview programs, Newman himself argues for the latter position. He identifies three interdependent semantic factors that condition speakers' choice of a pronoun: “presuppositions about gender roles associated with the referent, notional number of the referent, and the extent to which the referent can be posited as a specific individual” (447). (For this last property Newman introduces the term *referential solidity*.) Countering the claim that English lacks a truly neutral generic pronoun, Newman demonstrates that *they*, in actual spoken use, is primarily associated

with nonsolid referents, indeterminate or “epicene” gender, and to some extent with neutrality of number, while formally singular pronouns such as *he* are rather more definite about all three.

One concludes from this study that, rather than suffering from a lack of generic pronouns, English speakers would seem to have a variety of choices which they can use, more or less consciously, to create different connotational effects. Yet as Newman regretfully acknowledges, prescriptive norms also affect which pronoun will be chosen: the sociolinguistic options are considerably narrower in formal writing. Nevertheless, Newman’s analysis of extemporaneous discourse (along with McConnell-Ginet 1979) allows the discussion of generic pronouns to take place in the context of a truly descriptive linguistics. (As a systematically observed, empirical investigation, Newman 1992 will also be discussed below, in relation to experimental work, as well as in a subsequent chapter.)

### *Sociology and psychology*

Huber, a sociologist, argues (1976) that the imprecision of masculine generics makes them inappropriate for scientific and legal writing.<sup>12</sup> For example, she shows that the following statement, taken from an unidentified sociology textbook, is demonstrably untrue for women:

The more education an individual attains, the better his occupation is likely to be, and the more money he is likely to earn (89).

Huber concludes: “To the extent that distributions of education, occupation, and income differ by sex, the generic use of male pronouns makes a muddle of sociological discourse” (89). In psychology, essays by Shepelak ([1977] n.d.), Silveira ([1980] 1981),

---

<sup>12</sup>Beard, in the classic *Woman as Force in History*, devotes an entire chapter to documenting this problem (1946: 47–76).

and Henley (1985) review much of the empirical research presented below. All advocate elimination of the prescriptive rule: Shepelak proposes the use of *they* as well as both masculine and feminine generics, while Silveira speculates that a reduction in the use of prescriptive *man* and *he* could result in a long-term reduction in sexist thinking.

### Philosophy

An extended theoretical discussion appears to begin with an essay by Beardsley (1973–74) which examines *referential genderization*—the attribution of sex in words (including generic pronouns) which refer to human beings—as well as its ethical implications. Subsequently, Moulton ([1977] 1981) argues that prescriptive *he*, *man*, and the like are too ambiguous to be interpreted as reliably gender-neutral, despite the best intentions of the speaker.<sup>13</sup> Not only are many intended neutral uses clearly inappropriate for one sex or another (e.g., *Man suckles his young*), but in addition, shifts in speaker intention from neutral to sex-specific reference are unpredictable and often go unnoticed. Furthermore, empirical studies (see below) show that hearers usually comprehend apparently neutral uses sex-specifically. Moulton parallels this situation to other forms of “parasitic reference,” whereby a whole class may be known by the name of a high-status member (such as the brand names *Kleenex*, *Xerox*, *Band-Aid*).

Beardsley (1981) counters by arguing (weakly) that conclusions drawn about *man* as a false generic *word* need not apply to *-man* as an agentive *suffix*. Beardsley admits, however, that for at least some people, *-man* reflects “the pervasive assumption in our society that agents are male” (157). Assuming that sex distinctions are unnecessary and irrelevant to much discourse about human beings, Beardsley advocates using gender-

---

<sup>13</sup>Compare the position of Duran (1981) that at least some gender-neutral usages of these terms do exist whenever both speaker and hearer are predisposed toward such an interpretation. Moulton’s point of view is shared by Daly (1978).

neutral language wherever appropriate: forms such as agentive *-man* are to be *made* neutral through *contextual degenderization*—frequent and explicit application to females. Beardsley categorically rejects *parallel genderization*—use of the agentive *-woman* for females—on the grounds that this alternative strategy would introduce *more* sex-specific reference, not less.<sup>14</sup> The *-person* suffix is also found wanting on the ground that it undermines a *philosophical* distinction between *person*<sub>1</sub> ‘human being’ and *person*<sub>2</sub> ‘moral agent and bearer of moral rights’. Aside from the fact that few speakers other than moral philosophers care to distinguish these two meanings, this objection contradicts Beardsley’s demarcation between suffixes and words. The further objection that *-woman* and *-person* are “cumbersome” is a stylistic rather than a philosophical judgment.

Following Beardsley (1973–74), Korsmeyer ([1977] 1981) maintains that referential genderization perpetuates cultural concepts of sexual dualism which in turn may be used to rationalize sex discrimination. In particular, masculine generic reference not only obscures the presence of women but also guarantees that any overt mention of females draws disproportionate attention to sex-specific characteristics of women as distinct from men. As a remedy, Korsmeyer, like Beardsley, encourages the use of gender-neutral terms but (unlike Beardsley) also advocates parallel genderization. Korsmeyer believes that these practices will widen people’s concepts of women but also appears to think that such linguistic change will be easily accomplished.

From a wider perspective, Kuykendall (1981) explores the notion, within philosophy, of a feminist practice of linguistics. In arguments familiar to sociolinguists, Kuykendall criticizes the Extended Standard Theory’s paradigm of the solitary, rational speaker uninfluenced by culture and also questions the assumption that judgments of

---

<sup>14</sup>Significantly, Beardsley does not consider another logical alternative, “reverse contextual degenderization”—the use of *-woman* for both sexes. In general, Beardsley’s aim (eliminating sex distinctions) is exactly the opposite of Cameron’s (making women *more* visible).



intelligibility and grammaticality can be explained by syntactic structure alone. The acceptability of singular *they*, for example, is attributed to recent feminist social influence on judgments of acceptability—a consideration which, she says, a feminist linguist would be more likely to take into account.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, feminist linguistic analysis makes explicit the cultural presuppositions built into such constructions as masculine generics. In effect, Kuykendall is attempting to develop an ethnolinguistics of gender.<sup>16</sup>

### *Religion*

The language of religious practice has become a central concern for many feminists, whether they seek to transform traditional worship or abandon it altogether. For these writers, androcentric language about God parallels masculine generic reference to humanity so as to justify male rule in both heaven and earth. Gross illuminates the paradox as follows: All religious language is inevitably limited to analogic and metaphorical statements about God and hence cannot be taken literally. Yet if the God of Jewish (and Christian) tradition is a personal deity, anthropomorphic pronouns must be used despite tacit acknowledgment that God transcends human sexuality. For Gross, the fact that these pronouns (and their accompanying images) are exclusively male “mirrors and legitimizes the profoundly androcentric character of Jewish society” ([1981] 1983: 237).<sup>17</sup> Or as Plaskow puts it:

---

<sup>15</sup>Kuykendall’s analysis of singular *they* contradicts the historical evidence (e.g., Bodine 1975) that this construction, far from being recent, predates organized feminism. On the other hand, feminist agitation *has* promoted the acceptability of *they* in standard written English.

<sup>16</sup>*Gender* is used here not in its traditional grammatical sense but in a social sense familiar to feminist anthropologists (e.g. Rosaldo 1980: 416) and linguists (e.g. Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983).

<sup>17</sup>This is not to say that “Jewish society” in particular is especially sexist compared to other societies. Gross’ point is equally relevant to gentile societies which practice male monotheism.

If God is male, and if we are in God's image, how can maleness *not* be the norm of Jewish humanity?<sup>18</sup> If maleness is normative, how can women not be Other? And if women are Other, how can we not speak of God in language drawn from the male norm? (1983: 228)

Feminists of faith agree that exclusively male language for God constitutes a form of idolatry (Mollenkott [1983] 1985: 89, Plaskow 1983: 228, Ruether 1984: 16). In like manner, masculine generic pronouns proclaim the universality of male experience especially among people "brainwashed by eighteenth-century grammar" (Mollenkott [1983] 1985: 3). For religious feminists, therefore,

the specific criterion which implies a mandate to reject certain forms of God-talk is expressed in the question: Does this language hinder human becoming by reinforcing sex-role socialization? (Daly 1973: 21)

Ruether (1984) sees the central task of feminist theology as the systematic reconstruction of all religious symbols, including God-language, to delegitimize sexism and express liberation from patriarchal rule.

The late Nelle Morton's holistic theology of language (1985) is difficult to assess from the perspective of empirical linguistics. A central interest is the social function of religious imagery as expressed through language, a study which spans several disciplines, yet the method deliberately blends the intellectual, physical, and emotional so as to transcend traditional scholarship altogether. As a feminist, Morton was deeply concerned with the impact of sexist cultural mythology on the lives and minds of women; conversely, this work also documents women's subversion of sexist ideology through the development of a feminist spirituality. In Morton's view, language both reflects and perpetuates cultural values at every level: thus

[t]here is no doubt in the minds of liberated women that the common speech of the American people presents an image of male control in pulpit, politics, education, industry, and the family (20).

---

<sup>18</sup>Although Plaskow, like Gross, was writing for a Jewish audience, the argument is obviously relevant for Christians as well.

In contrast, “[feminist] consciousness can best be identified in the new language of the sisterhood as compared to the language one can now hear being spoken on the street” (14). By encouraging each woman to name her own experience in (and on) her own terms, women “hear each other into speech,” an active, empathetic hearing that makes authentic self-expression possible. It follows that language grounded in and reflective of male experience alone is inadequate for the self-expression of a whole humanity; thus masculine generics (for example), with their implicit male-as-norm ideology, should disappear along with patriarchy itself. (There remains the empirical question of whether masculine generics—as opposed to other forms of sexist usage—really do exist at every level, from the pulpit to the family and the street.)

Morton’s perspective has been an important influence on Daly, whose “postchristian” work shifts focus from male-female relationships to the affirmation and empowerment of women together. Like Cameron (1985a), Daly points out that gender-neutral language obscures women’s alienation under patriarchy: in effect, “there are no generics in English” (1978: 326) because our cultural preconceptions of polarized gender categories make neutral interpretations difficult, if not impossible.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, Daly uses etymology and word-play to elaborate and celebrate a multiplicity of female images (with appropriately feminine pronouns).

Some feminists remaining within organized religion have found themselves unwilling or unable to do away entirely with the language of male imagery. While they acknowledge the healing power of female imagery, their fundamentally androgynous vision finds expression in the reform and expansion of existing theology and liturgy. Thus Gross, who advocates the use of “female language, especially pronouns” for God,

---

<sup>19</sup>This is also Moulton’s argument ([1977] 1981), cited earlier. Daly’s evolving views on “pseudogeneric” usage are traced in her autobiography, *Outercourse* (1975: 102, 162–63, 173, 181).

concludes that “the imagery of Goddess takes us far beyond the simple insertion of female pronouns into familiar contexts,” for “Goddess completes the image of God and brings wholeness” ([1981] 1983: 246). Plaskow recommends the use of sexually dimorphic images as the best way to acknowledge the limits of language and God’s fullness (1983: 229). Likewise, Mollenkott, whose book, *The Divine Feminine* ([1983] 1985), is a compendium of female images drawn from traditional sources, calls for both male and female *metaphorical* imagery but would also avoid sex-specific pronouns in *direct* reference to God. Clark, Ronan, and Walker (1981) advocate a twofold strategy, depending upon the worshipers and their goals. A balance of male and female imagery will produce very different results from the exclusive use of female imagery, they write, but each may be effective in an appropriate context.

Many feminists have concluded, however, that an androgynous vision which fails to question our *existing* concepts of male and female cannot hope to transcend traditional gender categories. Thus Clark ([1977] 1981) argues that we cannot simply alternate God the Father and God the Mother week by week, not only because of certain negative connotations of motherhood but also because the father-son relationship of the Holy Trinity is so embedded in Christian worship. Although Clark considers the possibility that the Christian concept of God cannot be redeemed from patriarchy, she stops short of declaring Christianity irrelevant to women. Within Judaism, Ozick also fails to resolve the conflict, rejecting androgynous imagery as a subtle assault on monotheism but declaring that “[t]he relation of Torah to women calls Torah itself into question” ([1979] 1983: 150). Similarly, Fiorenza argues for a feminist “hermeneutics of suspicion” which straightforwardly assumes that “biblical texts and their interpretation are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions” (1984: 47). Yet this seems to contradict her statement, just two pages later, that “all androcentric language must be understood as generic language

until proven otherwise” (49). Here Fiorenza appears to presuppose the feminist authority and truth of the Christian Bible.<sup>20</sup>

An alternative position, taken for example by liturgist and translator Marcia Falk, proposes not to address God as any sort of divine Person or transcendent Other. Influenced by the Jewish Reconstructionist movement as well as feminism, Falk rejects “a hierarchical construct of God and world” as a model for human relationships, especially those between the sexes (Falk 1996: 420). In dialogue with Plaskow, she also maintains that anthropomorphic theology excludes alternative experiences of the holy while promoting “the belief that the human species is ‘godlier’ than the rest of creation” (422). Ultimately, says Falk, “the question of whether Jewish prayer *needs* to address God as ‘you’ is a highly charged one, perhaps even more provocative than the feminist challenge to the gendered God” (419).

Whatever their positions on imagery for the divine, however, religious feminists unite to condemn the use of exclusively masculine generic language for human beings. Roberts, for example, rejects the general terms *man* and *mankind* “because women’s lives are, in markedly important ways, different from those of men” (1984: 98). Clark, Ronan, and Walker (1981) as well as Callaghan ([1979] 1981) advocate using the existing resources of English, such as (for example) singular *they* in all but the most formal situations. Each of these writers understands that liturgical reform is no superficial exercise but constitutes a challenge to deep-seated prejudice: as Clark puts it, “the words

---

<sup>20</sup>Regarding the controversial issue of gender-inclusive biblical translation, Fiorenza takes the intermediate position that both androcentric and generic texts exist. Therefore “[a] historically adequate translation must not either further patriarchalize biblical generic texts . . . or veil their patriarchal character and impact in generic language” (1984: 49). How to sort the exclusive and the inclusive remains problematic.

themselves are a means of consciousness-raising” (1981: 85).<sup>21</sup> Yet Callaghan warns that attempted language reform without prior social change “simply leads to a chain of euphemistic substitutions” ([1979] 1981: 141n) such as *person* for ‘woman’ and *Ms.* for ‘Miss.’

Summing up the view of many, Mollenkott concludes that because of its presumed effect on thinking, gender-inclusive language is necessary (though not sufficient) to bring about human sexual equality both within and outside organized religion. While she believes that “grammar can be manipulated . . . with very little effort” ([1983] 1985: 1), changing actual usage will admittedly be more difficult. The struggle is worthwhile, however, says Mollenkott, because “at issue is the health of our relationships to others, to ourselves, and to our God” (117).

### *Summary*

All the writers discussed so far either argue or assume that the use of masculine generic words and imagery, whether in relation to God or the human species, arises from and helps to perpetuate a conceptual system that universalizes male agency and obscures or stereotypes that of women. The underlying political assumption is that this conceptual system (sexist thinking) shores up the social arrangement (patriarchy) in which women are subordinated to men, not only in words and imagery but also in actions with material consequences.<sup>22</sup> Hence the prescriptive tone of most writing on the problem of masculine generic reference.

---

<sup>21</sup>Thus Russell, in an article on women and ministry (1984) suggests that gender-inclusive language for both God and human beings implicitly questions the exclusive right of men to serve as clergy.

<sup>22</sup>This assumption, and the relationship between actions and words or images as means of subordinating women, is also relevant to feminist debates about pornography. For example, Catherine McKinnon, the antipornography activist and legal scholar, has recently borrowed from linguistics the theory of performative speech, first enunciated by J. L. Austin (*How to do Things*

With regard to the solution, however, disagreements arise. At one extreme is Beardsley's strategy of contextual degenderization, through which masculine generic expressions are to become, perforce, more gender-neutral the more they are applied to female referents. An alternative remedy (advocated, for some situations, by Korsmeyer, Beardsley, and Mollenkott) is to sidestep gender altogether through the use of sex-neutral terms, but this solution is criticized by other writers (e.g. Cameron, Daly, Gross, and Plaskow) as inadequate to the project of actively bringing women's agency into view.

Affirmative strategies for accomplishing this task include parallel genderization, which would juxtapose or alternate masculine and feminine wording and is proposed (for some contexts) by Korsmeyer and most of the theologians cited above. In contrast, and at the other extreme from Beardsley, are writers such as Cameron and Daly, who reject the ideal of androgyny as hopelessly embedded in traditional gender categories. From this point of view, it appears that only the shock of the feminine generic can jolt the imagination out of those accustomed tracks.

While the challenge of reconciling this prescriptive literature with descriptive linguistic theory is considerable, the positions outlined above can be evaluated as empirical statements about the mental imagery evoked by the third-person pronouns *he*, singular *they*, *he or she*, and *she*. Findings to date on the meaning and usage of specific pronominal forms are discussed below.

## EMPIRICAL STUDIES

### *Overview*

---

*with Words*, 1962). Her argument is that some speech (such as pornography, and hate speech generally) constitutes, in and of itself, an act of subordination. See McKinnon 1993: 21, 121n30.

Empirical studies of generic pronouns first appeared about 1970, became quite numerous after 1975, and continue into the 1990s. Published surveys of the literature include Martyna 1980b, Silveira [1980] 1981, Todd-Mancillas 1981, Schau and Scott 1984, and Henley 1985. Silveira's review essay includes 35 references; the present discussion (expanding on Matossian 1979) covers about fifty studies.

Most researchers have focused their attention on the written language as used or understood in laboratory settings. The experimental tasks fall into several broad categories: making self-conscious judgments about the gender of referents in isolated sentences; correlating gendered imagery with written material; producing gendered written material from a cue sentence or phrase; matching personal traits, including gender, to an occupation or hypothetical character; and recalling the content of gendered written material. A list of such studies appears below.

*Experimental studies of written generic pronouns, usage and understanding, by task*

1. Make judgments about referential gender in written material
  - a. self-conscious judgments, isolated sentences (Kidd 1971, MacKay and Fulkerson 1979, MacKay 1980b)
  - b. comment on own response, after experiment (Martyna 1978a, 1978b, 1980a)
  - c. choose gendered name for hypothetical character (Martyna 1978a, experiments 5 and 6; Niedzielski 1992)
  - d. match gender and occupational information (Bem and Bem 1973; Shepelak 1976, 1978; Callaghan [1979] 1981; Stericker 1981; Lanktree and Briere 1980; Briere and Lanktree 1983; Brooks 1983)
  - e. additional studies (Luepton 1980, Wise and Rafferty 1982, Hamilton, Hunter, and Stuart-Smith [1992] 1994)
2. Correlate gendered imagery with written material
  - a. create illustrations for written material (Harrison 1975, Khosroshahi 1989)
  - b. select illustrations for written material (Nilsen 1973, Schneider and Hacker 1973, Harrison and Passero 1975, DeStefano, Kuhner, and Pepinsky 1978, Wilson 1978, Lowry 1980, Kuhner 1981)
  - c. verbally describe one's own imagery for written material (John-Steiner and Irvine 1979, Hamilton 1988a)
  - d. judge gender of visually ambiguous photograph presented with written material (Wilson and Ng 1988)



- e. judge whether or not gendered illustration applies to written material (Martyna 1978a, experiments 3 and 4)
3. Produce written material from a cue sentence or phrase
  - a. add tag question to sentence containing generic antecedent (Langendoen 1970, Marcoux 1973, Nilsen 1977b)
  - b. supply missing generic pronoun in sentence blank (Green 1977, Valian 1977, Jacobson and Insko 1985)
  - c. complete sentence fragment (Duyvendak 1978; Martyna 1978a [experiments 1 and 2], 1978b, 1980a; Hamilton 1988a, 1988b)
  - d. write short narrative from cue (Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Hyde 1984, Richmond and Gorham 1988, Switzer 1990)
4. Recall content of gendered written material (Crawford and English 1984, Fisk 1985)

Prescriptive attitudes toward generic pronoun usage in written English have been measured in two ways, each involving explicit, self-consciously linguistic judgments. In one type of experiment, subjects are asked to evaluate written material (typically, isolated sentences) for either grammatical “correctness” or “sexism,” depending on the study.<sup>23</sup> An alternative method (Adamsky 1981, Harrigan and Lucic 1988) has subjects answer a written questionnaire about usage, in these cases from an obviously feminist perspective. Both measures, once again, involve explicit, self-consciously linguistic judgments.

Textual surveys measure the frequency and connotations of generic pronouns in standard, rather formal English. Most of these studies analyze a large corpus of books and periodicals, that is, copy-edited, published material.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the preponderance of written-language studies, sociolinguistic reports on generic pronouns in spoken English have been few and far between. During the 1970s, gay men’s use of *she* (in reference to a man) received some attention, and two

---

<sup>23</sup>Bate (1978), MacKay (1980a), and Hairston (1981) asked subjects to make prescriptive-grammatical judgments about sample material, while Murdock and Forsyth (1985) asked subjects to make feminist judgments.

<sup>24</sup>Textual surveys of generic pronoun usage are: Nilsen 1973, 1977; Burr, Dunn, and Farquhar 1972; Graham [1973] 1975; American Psychological Association 1975; Greene 1976; Bowd and Arkell 1979; Dubois and Crouch 1979; Veach 1978; MacKay 1980a; Cooper 1984; and Meyers 1990.

other studies of generic pronouns in casual speech also appeared.<sup>25</sup> More recently, Wang (1991) had participants answer questions about hypothetical people, described so as to represent feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral stereotypes.<sup>26</sup> Newman (1992) analyzed the transcripts of television interview shows. Only one, rather inconclusive, attempt has been made to correlate, in a systematic way, oral with written usage (McMinn, Lindsay, Hannum, and Troyer 1990).

### *Findings*

Empirical studies show over and over again that cultural concepts of gender govern the use and interpretation of gendered pronouns for sex-indefinite antecedents. In textual analysis, in observations of spoken usage, and under a wide variety of experimental conditions, the available evidence strongly supports Frank and Anshen's claim (1983: 71), mentioned earlier, that pronoun choice depends on sex roles; that is, on gender as a socially constructed category. This connection is especially clear when gendered pronouns are metaphorically assigned to non-human antecedents, including inanimate objects, and to individuals, regardless of biological sex.<sup>27</sup> The evidence further

---

<sup>25</sup>Pronoun usage among lesbians and gay men is discussed in the following works: On gay men's use of *she*, see Rodgers [1972] 1979 (lexicon), Key 1975 (brief mention), Rudes and Healy 1979 (ethnography), White 1980 (brief mention), and Goodwin 1989 (brief mention). On lesbians' possible use of *he*, see brief mentions in: McConnell-Ginet 1979, Rudes and Healy 1979, and Kennedy and Davis 1993. On the use of *they* to conceal gender, see Hayes [1976] 1981, Painter 1981, and Zevy & Cavallaro 1987 (brief mention). Outside the homosexual context, other observations of generic pronouns in casual conversation include Hockett 1958 (brief mention), Mathiot 1979, and McConnell-Ginet 1979.

<sup>26</sup>For example, here is an interview question coded for feminine stereotyping: "Suppose you had to go out on sudden notice and you needed a babysitter for your kid. If the going rate was \$3 per hour and you knew your kid was a brat, would you offer to pay more?" Thanks to Sally McConnell-Ginet for her abstract of this study, a Cornell University master's thesis, which I have not seen (McConnell-Ginet, letter to author, 13 April 1977).

<sup>27</sup>As Newman (1992: 473) has pointed out, transsexuals (and others who "pass" as the opposite gender) are the exception that proves the rule. As far as I know, no pronoun study to date has included such individuals. Anecdotally, however, the following commentary (in a letter to *off our backs*, a feminist newspaper) may be of interest:

supports the “dynamic” position that pronouns, independently of the nouns they represent, do contribute to the meaning of utterances.

Sex differences in using and understanding generic pronouns are found with equal consistency across this literature. Although, as Daly (1978) maintains, both male and female language users tend to interpret generic pronouns androcentrically, females include both sexes more often than do males. Conversely, as predicted by Spender (1980), males lead in the use of masculine generics such as *man* and *he*, even for gender-neutral antecedents, while females and especially feminists have a greater preference for alternative forms.

Age differences also interact with gender as children acquire generic pronouns, especially in reading and writing. In the earliest years, egocentric (own-sex) interpretations are usual, followed in elementary school by some inclusion of the opposite sex. Beginning in adolescence, however, girls appear to lose the ability to visualize females in gender-neutral contexts, resulting in masculine or neutral imagery instead of masculine or feminine. (Girls who become feminists, however, seem able to reverse this process, at least in self-conscious linguistic tasks.) For boys, who experience no such loss of own-sex imagery, masculine interpretive bias persists into adulthood, even among profeminist men.

Differences among the various generic pronouns themselves can also be summarized in a few words. Those overtly marked for one gender (*he*, *she*) seem to be

---

One problem I have in acceptance is that I sometimes think ‘he’ for certain m-to-fs [male-to-female transsexuals] who don’t pass as women as well as some others (because of their physique). I think this freaks out people but the fact is we are programmed with only two pronoun choices. I interviewed two people who are ‘third gender’ and there is no pronoun for them yet. Sometimes my psyche comes up with ‘she’ and sometimes ‘he.’ The main thing to me is to try to match my pronoun to the person’s self-identification, if they even care anymore (Siegal 1994).

Note the author’s use of singular *they* in this confusing situation, and her attempt to echo the individual’s social gender claim (“self-identification”), even when it appears to conflict with biological sex. For more on transsexuals, see note 62.

least effective at including both sexes, regardless of the experimental or observational setting. Quite different considerations are at work, however, in the two alternative forms. *He or she*, which makes explicit the possibility of feminine as well as masculine reference, appears to satisfy prescriptivists and feminists alike but has rather formal, self-conscious connotations. Singular *they*, which contains no overt gender cues, also permits vagueness in number; interpretation, therefore, depends quite heavily on context. To the prescriptivist, dedicated to clarity and accuracy of expression, such properties are maddening, but to the descriptive linguist they represent a fascinating flexibility.

GENERIC *HE*. This masculine generic pronoun is associated most often with typically masculine antecedents (such as *an engineer*), to a lesser extent with sex-neutral or “epicene” ones (*a student*), and rarely, if ever, with typically feminine referents (*a nurse*). For example, in a sentence-completion experiment by Martyna (1978a), involving 435 students, *he* was supplied for 96% of the masculine antecedents, 65% of the neutral ones, and only 7% of the feminine referents. Conversely, when presented in a sex-neutral context, prescriptive *he* is usually interpreted in a masculine rather than inclusive way, a phenomenon Silveira ([1980] 1981) has called “people = male bias.”<sup>28</sup> Similar findings have been reported for species *Man* and other masculine generic nouns.<sup>29</sup> All of this supports feminist contentions (e.g. Huber 1976, Moulton [1977] 1981) about the

---

<sup>28</sup>Martyna 1978a, kindergarten through college; Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7; Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 to 12; Lowry 1980, grades 3, 5, 7, 9, 11; Shepelak 1976, grades 3, 5, high school, college; Marcoux 1973, Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, MacKay and Fulkerson 1979, Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Briere and Lanktree 1983, Hamilton 1988a and 1988b, Hamilton, Hunter, and Stuart-Smith [1992] 1994, Khosroshahi 1989, all college students.

<sup>29</sup>Nilsen 1973, nursery school to grade 7; Harrison and Passero 1975, grade 3; Harrison 1975, junior high; Kidd 1971; DeStefano, Kuhner, and Pepinsky 1978, ages 10 to 23; Schneider and Hacker 1973, Veach 1978, both college students; John-Steiner and Irvine 1979, college students and teachers; Wilson 1978, teachers. See also Todd-Mancillas 1981, review of fourteen studies; Schau and Scott 1984, review of ten studies.

ambiguity of prescriptive *he* and *man*.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps as a result, masculine generics have been shown to facilitate judicial decisions and career expectations that marginalize women.<sup>31</sup>

Social characteristics of the language user also play a significant role in using and understanding masculine generics. Compared to college students, speakers with less access to prestige varieties of English have been largely ignored in these pronoun studies; however, preliminary evidence suggests that they interpret masculine generics according to sex-specific rather than prescriptive norms.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, differences based on the gender of the speaker or writer have been very frequently observed. Although language users of both sexes associate *he* and *man* primarily with masculine antecedents, even in gender-neutral contexts, males lead this trend.<sup>33</sup> Female usage and interpretation are more inclusive, even in childhood, while college-educated women rely heavily on prescriptive norms and may be especially sensitive to pronoun cues.<sup>34</sup>

Both of these broad findings are clearly evident in a line of studies beginning with Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978) and replicated, with minor variations, over a twelve-year period (Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Hyde 1984, Khosroshahi 1989, Switzer

---

<sup>30</sup>The ambiguity of masculine generics became a feminist issue in the nineteenth century (see Chapter One and Stopes 1908) and was among the first linguistic topics analyzed by Women's Liberation theorists (see note 2, this chapter).

<sup>31</sup>Stopes 1908; Ritchie 1975; Shepelak 1976; Martyna 1978b; Lanktree and Briere 1980; Stericker 1981; Hamilton, Hunter, and Stuart-Smith [1992] 1994. See also Chapter One.

<sup>32</sup>John-Steiner and Irvine found that "Navajos . . . interpreted the word *man* as meaning 'male person', while non-Indian men and women sometimes responded to the generic sense of the word, *man* as human beings" (1979: 96). No statistics are given. Lowry (1980) found a highly significant interaction between type of generic term and family income ( $p < .0001$ ) in a study of 458 suburban students. In an comparative study of students at three different colleges, Schneider and Hacker (1973) likewise found a correlation between the cost of tuition (a proxy for family income) and sex differences in the interpretation of *man*.

<sup>33</sup>Niedzielski 1992, kindergarten to grade 2; Martyna 1978a, kindergarten to college; Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7; Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 to 12; Harrison 1975, junior high; Marcoux 1973, Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Hamilton 1988, Khosroshahi 1989, McMinn et al. 1990, all college students; Meyers 1990, adult college students.

<sup>34</sup>Martyna 1978a, experiments 1 and 2, kindergarten to college; Marcoux 1973, Stericker 1981, both college students; Wilson 1978, teachers. See also the literature reviews mentioned above.

1990).<sup>35</sup> In its basic form, a “Moulton experiment” asks subjects to write a narrative from a gender-neutral cue sentence such as the following (adjusted for grade level): “In a large coeducational institution the average student will feel isolated in his introductory courses.” Alternative generic pronouns (*their, his or her*) are tested in different experimental groups, and the proportion of female characters is recorded for the resulting narratives.

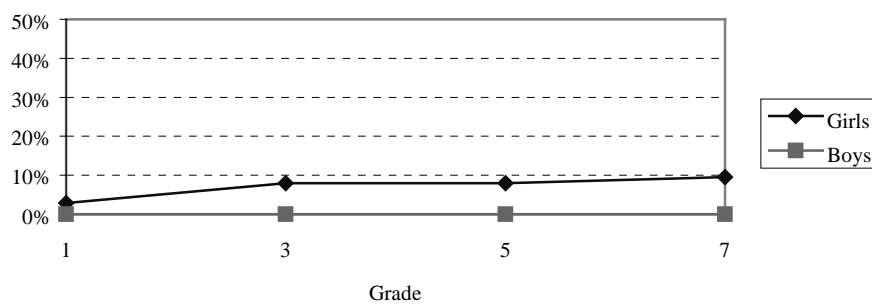


FIGURE 2.1. Proportion of feminine imagery cued by the generic *he* in “Moulton experiments” with schoolchildren (Hyde 1984, grades 1, 3, 5; Switzer 1989, grades 1, 7).

As seen in Figure 2.1, the perceived maleness of *he* was absolute for all boys from first through seventh grade: not one wrote a narrative with a single female character. The girls, at every grade level, were more inclusive than the boys, but not much more: female characters appeared in their narratives less than ten percent of the time. Thus the overall proportion of female characters was less than four percent.

<sup>35</sup>The size and composition of the experimental groups were as follows: Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978: N = 490, college students. Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983: N = 212, college students. Hyde 1984: N = 310, grades 1, 3, 5, college. Khosroshahi 1989: N = 55, college students. Switzer 1990: N = 471, grades 1, 7. A total of 657 children between grades 1 and 7 were tested, as well as 881 college students. The former three studies (forced-choice experiments) were not designed to include gender-inclusive answers, while the latter two (open-choice experiments) do report such responses. Khosroshahi, unlike the others, asked for a pictorial rather than a written response. These variations in experimental design made no difference in the interpretation of prescriptive *he*.

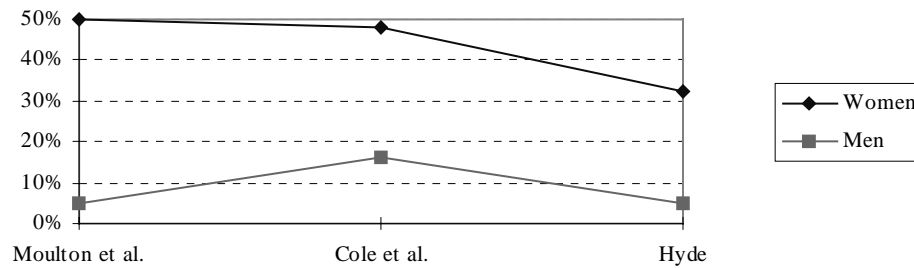


FIGURE 2.2. Proportion of feminine imagery cued by the generic *he* in “Moulton experiments” with college students (Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978; Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983; Hyde 1984).

College students, as seen in Figure 2.2, appeared to be more inclusive, presumably because of their greater exposure to prescriptive norms. Averaging for all students, the proportion of female characters clustered around 25% for the pronoun *he*. Women students, however, accounted for nearly all of this increase, while the men’s interpretation remained almost entirely sex-specific. Although there is some variation in the results, women included female characters, on the average, over 40% of the time, while the men’s stories were more than 90% male.

According to surveys of published writing (magazines, newspapers, textbooks, children’s books, and the *Congressional Record*), truly sex-neutral uses of *he* seem to be quite rare.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the predominance of *he* as a generic has declined steadily. This usage was virtually categorical in 1971 (MacKay 1980a) but was increasingly avoided through 1979 (Cooper 1984). Although no corresponding rise was seen in alternative generic forms, the ratio of *he* to *he or she* dropped tenfold, from 53:1 to 5.3:1 in a corpus of well over half a million words (data from Cooper 1984). In experimental settings, some studies have found that those especially likely to avoid using *he* as a generic

<sup>36</sup>See, for example, Graham [1973] 1975. The same observation was made by Dubois and Crouch (1979) concerning species *Man* in a million-word sample from 1961, the Brown University *Standard corpus of present-day American English*.

include feminists, children with nontraditional career goals, and girls and young women in general.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, an observational study of highly self-conscious writing by adult college students (Meyers 1990) found that the women led in the use of alternatives to the generic masculine, including the simple solution of pluralizing the subject. Without establishing a causal link, the evidence is consistent with Kramarae's 1981 observation that politicians and teachers—that is, professional communicators—were avoiding the use of masculine generic pronouns when addressing audiences of women.

The perceived narrowness of the generic masculine may, in fact, not be limited to gender. In one study (Stericker 1981), prescriptive *he* in job descriptions was interpreted as less inclusive of several disadvantaged groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, senior citizens, and disabled people. Similarly, Veach reported in 1978 that in a campus newspaper, *man* referred most often to higher-status males. More research is needed to substantiate these results.

SINGULAR *THEY*. The results cited above suggest that gender-neutral terms are less prone than masculine generics to sex-biased interpretation and may even allow for wider demographic diversity. On the other hand, because speakers appear predisposed toward sex-specific interpretation of one sort or another (Wise and Rafferty 1982), they must depend on their knowledge and beliefs, which often include the notion of masculinity as normative. As Daly (1978) and Cameron (1985a) have argued, unless the possibility of feminine reference is explicitly signaled, even gender-neutral wording may

---

<sup>37</sup>Avoidance by feminist women and pro-feminist men: Duyvendak 1978, Jacobson and Insko 1985, McMinn et al. 1990, all college students; Bate 1978, university professors. Children whose career goals are not traditional for their gender: Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 to 12. Although two studies (Duyvendak 1978, Luepton 1980) report no sex differences in usage or interpretation, most researchers have observed females to be quite sensitive to pronoun cues. Martyna (1978a) documents that females from kindergarten through college use alternatives to *he* more often than males do, but finds no differences based on feminist beliefs.



be interpreted, disproportionately, as masculine.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that in gender-neutral sentences, singular *they* is more effective than generic *he*, but less effective than *he or she*, at conveying feminine or inclusive imagery.<sup>39</sup>

Not only presupposition but pragmatic context has a noticeable effect on the comprehension of singular *they*. In contrast to the gendered pronouns (*he*, *she*) and the disjunctive pronominal *he or she*, the pronoun *they* is not overtly marked for gender; therefore, its interpretation depends to a greater extent on contextual cues. Evidence for this hypothesis comes from studies that distinguish *they* from *he or she* but vary in experimental design.

When children and young adults are free to generate their own response, but must choose either a masculine or a feminine interpretation (forced choice), *they* tends to be judged as masculine.<sup>40</sup> When a sex-specific response is not required (open choice), more children judge *they* to be inclusive, but college students remain masculine-biased.<sup>41</sup> Finally, when students must choose their response from a prepared list, and when that context explicitly offers both feminine and masculine interpretations, even college

---

<sup>38</sup>This interpretive bias gives rise to the problem of false inclusion, first encountered by feminists of the nineteenth century with regard to *person* and *citizen* (see Chapter One). Likewise, Daly has argued (1992: 162–63) that such apparently gender-neutral words as *androgyny*, *God*, *homosexuality*, and even *human* “assimilate and diminish women’s Selves for the sake of something that is imagined to be more universal, or bigger, or better. . . . They all serve to engulf women’s be-ing into a phallogocentric system of language, thought, and behavior.” (The author’s capitalization and hyphenation have been used.)

<sup>39</sup>Niedzielski 1992, day care to grade 2; Hyde 1984, grades 1, 5, college; Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7, college; Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Hamilton 1988a, Khosroshahi 1989, all college students; partial confirmation from Martyna 1978a, experiment 5, college students. Similar results for non-gendered nouns such as *people*, compared to forms such as *men and women*, Harrison 1975, junior high. See also DeStefano, Kuhner, and Pepinsky 1978, ages 10 to 23.

<sup>40</sup>Hyde 1984, grades 1 to 5, college; Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Martyna 1978a (experiment 5), both college students.

<sup>41</sup>Switzer 1990, grade 7; Khosroshahi 1989, college.

students interpret singular *they* inclusively.<sup>42</sup> In general, forcing a sex-specific choice appears to suppress feminine interpretations in favor of masculine ones, at least for younger children acquiring singular *they*. College students seem to be less sensitive to the effect of experimental design.

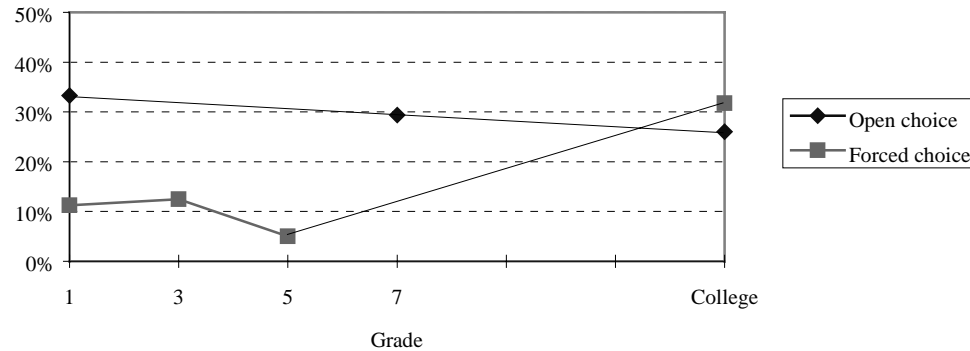


FIGURE 2.3. Effect of experimental design on proportion of feminine imagery cued by singular *they* in “Moulton experiments.” Average of males’ and females’ scores is shown (Switzer 1989, grades 1, 7; Khosroshahi 1990, college).

Both presupposition and pragmatics are also at work when *they* is used intentionally to conceal or downplay the fact of gender.<sup>43</sup> Several observers have noted, for example, that closeted lesbians and gay men sometimes refer to a partner or lover as *they*.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, a polite speaker may choose *they* when gender is obvious but pragmatically irrelevant, according to Weidmann (1984), who calls this a “nonassertive” conversational strategy. In Newman’s 1992 analysis, however, the general vagueness (referential nonsolidity) that makes *they* so effective as a generic pronoun also accounts

<sup>42</sup>Martyna 1978a, experiment 6.

<sup>43</sup>Densmore alludes in an early essay to “the case of an individual whose sex is not known or when the speaker would prefer not to reveal it” (1970: 9, emphasis added).

<sup>44</sup>Hayes [1976] 1981: 45–57; Painter 1981: 73–74; Zevy and Cavallaro 1987: 89, Goodwin 1989: 19. A lesbian ethnography by Krieger (1983), however, includes noncloseted examples of gender-specific singular *they* in interviews with informants. For related discussion see Newman 1992: 466–67.

for its ability to soften the focus on specific individuals. Such instances may be relatively rare, but counter to Haegeman 1981, they do occur.

As with masculine generics, the sex of the language user plays a role in the interpretation of gender-neutral wording. In contrast to *he or she*, which they identify disjunctively as their own sex, both girls and boys tend to assume that singular *they* includes both sexes. Once again, boys lead in own-sex (i.e., masculine) interpretations of singular *they* regardless of the pragmatic context.<sup>45</sup> In no pragmatic context does either sex show feminine bias in response to gender-neutral wording.<sup>46</sup>

Grade level also affects the perceptions of this pronoun in gender-neutral sentences. Very young children are more likely to assume that singular *they* refers to their own sex, while early adolescents are more inclusive.<sup>47</sup> Between seventh grade and college, however, the interpretation of singular *they* appears to shift dramatically, from an inclusive to a masculine-biased response, while feminine interpretation persists at a low level.<sup>48</sup> The most likely explanation seems to be that acquisition of singular *they*, and its integration into reading and writing skills, is being documented until junior high school, when students first encounter the masculine-generic rule. More research is needed to test this hypothesis explicitly.

---

<sup>45</sup>Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7; partial confirmation from Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 to 12.

<sup>46</sup>Hyde 1984, grades 1 to 5, college; Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7, college; Martyna 1978a (experiments 5 and 6), Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Khosroshahi 1989, all college students. Interesting observations have also been reported for *person*. In some contexts the word seems to be a euphemism for 'woman' (Veach 1978, Callaghan [1979] 1981). But on a college campus where most *chairpersons* were men, the interpretation was predominantly masculine (Callaghan [1979] 1981).

<sup>47</sup>Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7; partial confirmation from Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 to 12.

<sup>48</sup>Richmond and Gorham 1988, Switzer 1990, grade 7; Khosroshahi 1989, college. These three studies are comparable variations on the familiar "Moulton experiment," discussed above.

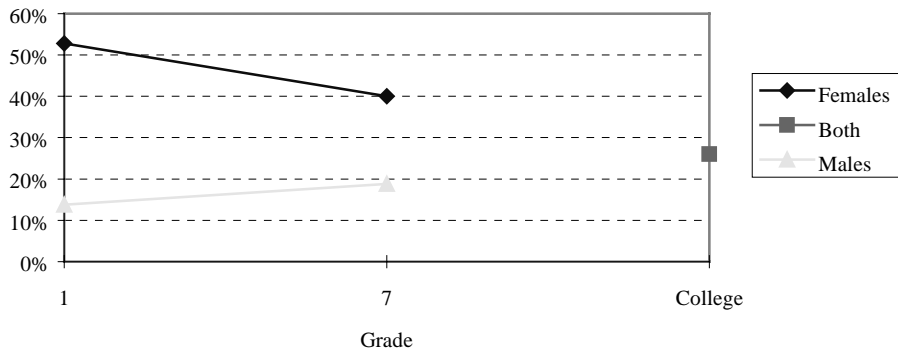


FIGURE 2.4. Proportion of feminine imagery cued by singular *they* in open-choice “Moulton experiments” (Switzer 1989, grades 1, 7; Khosroshahi 1990, college).

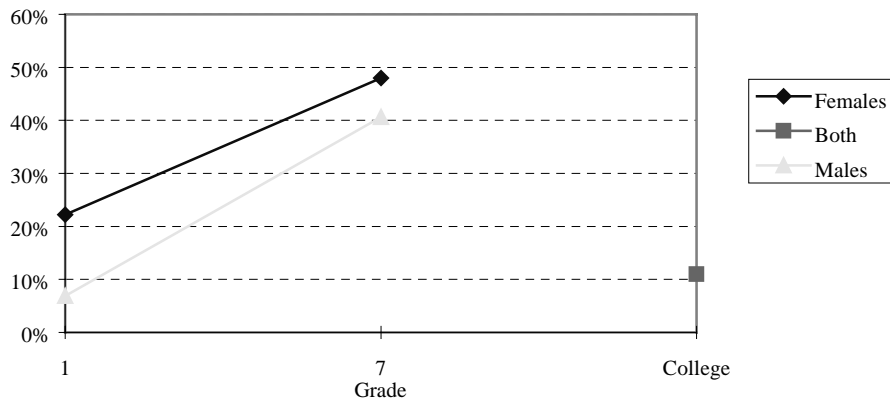


FIGURE 2.5. Proportion of gender-inclusive imagery cued by singular *they* in open-choice “Moulton experiments” (Switzer 1989, grades 1, 7; Khosroshahi 1990, college).

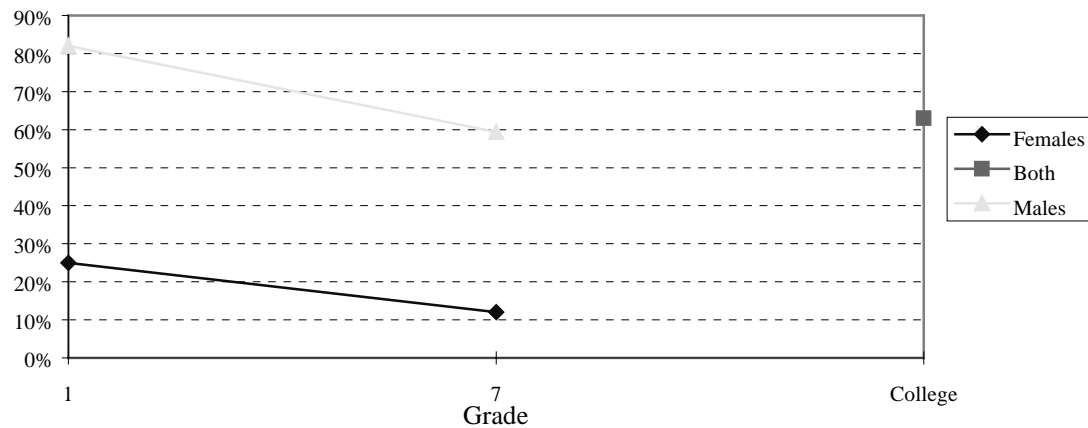


FIGURE 2.6. Proportion of masculine imagery cued by singular *they* in open-choice “Moulton experiments” (Switzer 1989, grades 1, 7; Khosroshahi 1990, college).

The effect of grade level seems to be different for male and female students as well. Although girls and young women, regardless of age, lead in feminine and inclusive understandings of singular *they*, females experience a slow but steady erosion of feminine interpretation throughout their schooling.<sup>49</sup> (See Figure 2.4.)

Moving from interpretation to studies of usage, one finds that singular *they* tends to co-occur with certain kinds of antecedents. In experimental settings, students from kindergarten through college most often respond with *they* when the referent is gender-neutral.<sup>50</sup> In conversation, *they* is also associated with distributive quantifiers such as *any*, *each*, *every*, and *some*, as well as indefinites such as *a person*.<sup>51</sup> Television interview programs (Newman 1992) replicate both these findings. Regardless of the antecedent, however, girls and young women may lead in the use of singular *they*.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Switzer 1990, grades 1, 7, college; Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 to 12; Khosroshahi 1989, college; all are “Moulton experiments.” See also Martyna 1978a, experiments 1 and 2, kindergarten through college, where the loss of feminine imagery is documented.

<sup>50</sup>Martyna 1978a, experiments 1 and 2, kindergarten through college, both oral and written; Green 1977, college students, written. In interviews conducted by Wang (1991), *they* was the most common generic pronoun choice even when the antecedent was gender-stereotypical.

<sup>51</sup>Langendoen 1970, English teachers; McConnell-Ginet 1979, informants not specified.

<sup>52</sup>Martyna 1978a, kindergarten through college. However, Meyers (1990), observing highly self-conscious writing by adult college students, found no sex differences in the use of singular *they*.

As Bodine (1975) and others have pointed out, unlike the other third-person generic pronouns, singular *they* has been stigmatized for at least two centuries. Language attitudes have therefore been measured in a number of studies with avowedly prescriptive goals. Not surprisingly, those who judge written singular *they* as “unacceptable” or “incorrect” tend to be professional communicators and others especially attuned to the standard language.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, in conversation, as McConnell-Ginet has observed, “all but the most determined purists” use singular *they*.<sup>54</sup> Her observations support Frank and Anshen’s claim (1983: 88) that *they* has prevailed in colloquial usage.

In writing, however, even purists make distinctions regarding singular *they*. A prescriptive survey by Hairston (1981) found that *they* was judged most acceptable when referring to a quantified antecedent across an independent clause boundary:

Almost everyone dislikes her; they say she is careless and indolent.  
and least acceptable within a single clause, or across a

dependent clause boundary, when referring to a noun modified by an article (Det + NP):

\*When a person moves every year, one cannot expect them to develop civic pride.<sup>55</sup>

---

Wang (1991) found that women were more likely than men to use *they* unprompted; that is, in response to interview questions that did not contain a pronoun cue. This was the only sex difference she found.

<sup>53</sup>Groups identified in the literature include: high-income “professional people” over 40 years of age, such as attorneys and business executives (Hairston 1981); graduate students in English literature (Harrigan and Lucic 1988); and college professors (Bate 1978). Among the “professional people” in Hairston’s survey, women’s prescriptive judgments were especially strong. Editors may be added to this list, in light of McKay’s observation (1980a) that singular *they* is virtually absent from published formal writing. Even a feminist editor such as Nilsen (1984) considers this pronoun too controversial for use in *English Journal*, a professional publication.

<sup>54</sup>McConnell-Ginet 1979: 75; see also Densmore 1970 and Conklin 1974. Bate (1978), interviewing college professors, noticed that individuals who said they disapproved of singular *they* nevertheless used this form in conversation.

<sup>55</sup>Both examples from Hairston 1981, written questionnaire distributed to high-income “professional people” over age 40. Similar results reported by Langendoen 1970, English teachers; Valian 1977, college students; MacKay 1980a, informants not specified.

Accordingly, Sklar (1988), a liberal prescriptivist, would permit the use of written singular *they* for animate or human antecedents with certain quantifiers (*any, every, some, and no*). Her argument, rare among prescriptive writers, is “based on an analysis of the actual behavior of indefinite constructions in English” (411).

Taking a different measure of language attitudes, Harrigan and Lucic (1988) asked a sample of adults, mostly graduate students and university faculty, to estimate how often they heard various generic pronouns in speech. *They* was predicted at 23%, *he* at 49%, and various other forms at 34%. (Likewise, Penelope has estimated that “speakers persist in using *he* and *man* as pseudo-generics at least 50% of the time, especially in mainstream media such as television” [1990: 227].)

In fact, these introspective judgments do closely parallel actual usage as observed in television interview programs, where antecedents of *they* appeared 29%, *he* 47%, and other forms 23% of the time (Newman 1992). In addition, an observational study of highly self-conscious writing by adult college students (Meyers 1990) found that *he* and *they* were each used about a third of the time. Thus, as predicted by McConnell-Ginet (1975) and Haegeman (1981), singular *they* certainly does have a place in standard English, but whether these figures represent an expansion of its range remains unclear.

*HE OR SHE.* As a distinctly non-controversial alternative to generic *he*, this coordinate pronoun has received little attention. Both prescriptive grammarians and their feminist critics accept *he or she* as correct but cumbersome, while descriptive analysts tend to view it as the formal equivalent of singular *they*, lumping both together as gender-neutral pronouns.<sup>56</sup> More than formality, however, sets *he or she* apart from singular

---

<sup>56</sup>Martyna (1978b), who did distinguish between the two, found that *he or she* was more characteristic of writing, while *they* is commonly used in spoken English.

*they*: like the noun phrase *men and women* (as opposed to *people*), the co-ordinate pronoun explicitly signals the possibility of feminine reference.

We therefore find that in experimental settings, as noted above, *he or she* is interpreted as feminine more often than either generic *he* or singular *they*.<sup>57</sup> In one study, college women were better able to recall the content of both gender-neutral and male-oriented essays when *he or she* was used.<sup>58</sup> Young boys, on the other hand, taking their cue from the inclusion of “he,” may judge *he or she* as more masculine than gender-neutral *they*.<sup>59</sup> Once again, pragmatic context affects interpretation, although to a lesser extent: as Martyna found, both *they* and *he or she* are understood as inclusive when the experimental design offers feminine choices.<sup>60</sup>

Sex differences are also evident in the use and interpretation of *he or she*. Although language users of both sexes tend to view the co-ordinate pronoun as inclusive, girls and young women lead this trend.<sup>61</sup> Feminist women, especially, favor an inclusive interpretation.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, *he or she* is used more often in writing by young women and feminists (including pro-feminist men), and by children whose career goals do not conform to traditional gender roles.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, one study found that young men who used *he or she* in their own formal writing (term papers) showed just as much masculine

---

<sup>57</sup>Switzer 1990, grades 1 and 7; Hyde 1984, grades 1 through college; Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Wilson and Ng 1988, Khosroshahi 1989, all college students. See also Harrison 1975, junior high.

<sup>58</sup>Crawford and English 1984.

<sup>59</sup>Switzer 1990, grades 1 and 7.

<sup>60</sup>Martyna 1978a, experiment 6, college students.

<sup>61</sup>Martyna 1978a, kindergarten through college; Switzer 1990, grades 1 and 7; Hyde 1984, grades 1 through college; Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Wilson and Ng 1988, Khosroshahi 1989, all college students.

<sup>62</sup>Khosroshahi 1989, college students.

<sup>63</sup>Richmond and Gorham 1988, grades 3 through 12; Jacobson and Insko 1985, college students. Richmond and Gorham also found that adolescents use written *he or she* more often than younger children, probably reflecting a difference in language acquisition. Meyers (1990), however, in an observational study of adult college student writing, found no significant sex difference in the use of *he or she*.



interpretive bias as the men who used *he* exclusively. “Their language includes women,” says the researcher; “their thought does not, or at least not yet.”<sup>64</sup>

Again in contrast to *he* and *they*, attitudes about *he or she* have not been much studied. In a written questionnaire, adults in a university setting (mostly graduate students and faculty) estimated that *he or she* occurred in speech 22% of the time, about the same rate as singular *they* and half as often as generic *he*.<sup>65</sup> While the predictions of *he* and *they* closely approximated their actual frequency in television interviews (Newman 1992), an antecedent of *he or she* appeared only once in 5 to 6 hours of programming.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the overestimation of *he or she* was due to its relative acceptability as a gender-inclusive, and grammatically “correct,” alternative to generic *he*.<sup>67</sup>

GENERIC *SHE*. If *he or she*, the non-controversial alternative, seems a bit taken for granted by researchers, the idea of a feminine generic is apparently too far-fetched to be taken seriously. At any rate, *she* has been very little studied; it is not usually incorporated as a possible response in experimental design.

---

<sup>64</sup>Khosroshahi 1989: 520. Fifty-five college students were tested. In response to gender-neutral paragraphs with various generic pronouns, “reformed-language women” (those who used *he or she* in their own writing) drew female images about 60% of the time. “Traditional-language” women drew the inverse percentage, 40% female images. Both groups of women, however, were far more inclusive than the men, who drew male images about 90% of the time. No difference was found between “traditional” and “reformed-language” men. Says Khosroshahi, “our results suggest that for women, the deliberate adoption of a new linguistic practice for ideological reasons is associated with an authentic change of heart . . . . For men, on the other hand, reform of language seems to be a relatively superficial change . . . . What seems to have motivated them to change their use of generic pronouns, then, is a concern about the impression they make on others” (522).

<sup>65</sup>Harrigan and Lucic 1988.

<sup>66</sup>*He or she* also seems to be quite rare in written English. Between 1971 and 1979, the coordinate pronoun occurred only once per approximately 25,000 words, according to data in Cooper 1984, discussed above. The total corpus, drawn from various published sources, numbered 525,000 words, or about 21 instances of *he or she*.

<sup>67</sup>University professors interviewed by Bate (1978), for example, expressed an overwhelming preference for *he or she* over various other generic pronouns, including the masculine. Conversely, *they* received the most disapprovals, and *he or she* the fewest.

Those studies that do include some measure of *she* invariably find, just as Penelope (1990) observed, that the feminine pronoun is used sex-specifically, not inclusively, among speakers of all ages, whether in experimental settings, casual conversation, or television interviews.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the feminine pronoun is so vividly marked for gender that it can be used metaphorically to attribute stereotypically feminine characteristics, as when speakers personify non-human antecedents (Mathiot 1979) or in certain in-group contexts among gay men.<sup>69</sup> Earlier, Korsmeyer ([1977] 1981) had predicted that disproportionate attention to women's sex-specific characteristics (real or attributed) would result whenever females were overtly mentioned in a masculine-generic context. Going a step farther, Penelope has analyzed the disproportionate genderedness of *she* as a characteristic of the Patriarchal Universe of Discourse, which posits masculinity as the norm in *most* contexts.

Although even a feminist editor like Nilsen (1984) rejects the possibility of *she* as a gender-neutral pronoun, self-conscious examples have been noted. Adamsky (1981)

---

<sup>68</sup>Niedzielski 1992, kindergarten through grade 2; Shepelak 1976, grades 3, 5, high school, college; Martyna 1978a, experiments 1 and 2, kindergarten through college; MacKay and Fulkerson 1979, experiment 3, Briere and Lanktree 1983, both college students. See also McConnell-Ginet 1979, informants not specified; Newman 1992, television interviews.

<sup>69</sup>Rodgers [1972] 1979, Key 1975: 94, Hayes 1976, Rudes and Healy 1979, White 1980: 239–240, Goodwin 1989: 18, 49. Rudes and Healy, observing the use of *she* in a gay bar, concluded that the feminine pronoun connotes both the positive value of physical beauty and negative values such as lack of control, unnaturalness, and nastiness. (These stereotyped notions of femininity are shared by heterosexuals as well.) Between 1981 and 1982, Goodwin found that *she* was not only “female impersonators’ standard usage” (49) but also frequently accompanied *girl*, “a standard word meaning ‘gay male’” (18). White described *she* as a mild or joking insult, its stigma derived from attributions of femininity.

Historically, lesbians’ use of *he* has not paralleled that of *she* among gay men; indeed, by the late 1970s, the very existence of a lesbian *he* was in doubt (McConnell-Ginet 1979: 70; Rudes and Healy 1979: 54n1, 55n4). During the 1940s and 1950s, however, working-class lesbians in Buffalo, New York, reserved the masculine pronoun for “passing women,” who often found wider opportunities in the world while disguised as men. The feminine pronoun was used for lesbians, including “butches,” whose femaleness was not a secret (Kennedy and Davis 1993: 168, 410–11). Instead of the parody and stigma that gay men associate with *she*, access to privilege and power accompanied this lesbian use of *he*. See also Faderman 1991: 172.

reports that a control group of college students used *he* in term papers about three-quarters of the time and *he or she* for the remainder. In contrast, when the instructor announced her intention to use *she* gender-neutrally, students in an experimental group echoed this form in their term papers about half the time, dropping *he or she* altogether. Their comments clearly indicated, however, that the function of the feminine generic had been ideological, calling attention to the feminist critique of language. Further examples, including some from published sources, are discussed by Frank and Treichler (1989: 162–66). Jacobson and Insko (1985) have also observed that in experimental settings, college women and feminists sometimes assign *she* to male antecedents as an intentional role-reversal. If *she* is too female-identified for use as an all-purpose generic pronoun, then as Cameron (1985a) recommends, it certainly seems to be an effective consciousness-raiser.<sup>70</sup>

A sex difference in the use of generic *she* for neutral antecedents is recorded, but not discussed, by Martyna.<sup>71</sup> Female students supplied this pronoun nearly ten percent of the time, in proportion to self-reports of feminine imagery. Male students, however,

---

<sup>70</sup>Thus also Densmore 1970: 11–12. Interestingly enough, it is possible to use generic *he* as a consciousness-raiser wherever *she* might be expected. For example, Janice G. Raymond, author of *The Transsexual Empire*, explains her rhetorical strategy as follows:

I have chosen to put the words “he” or “she” and “male” or “female” in quotation marks when they refer to a pre- or postoperative transsexual. This is to indicate that, while transsexuals are in every way masculine or feminine, they are not fundamentally male or female. . . .

[I]n places where syntactical structure made it awkward to use the pronoun *they* when referring to transsexuals, I have chosen to emphasize the pronoun *he*. I do not intend this usage in the commonly accepted, pseudogeneric sense. Rather the use of *he* is intended to reinforce the fact that the majority of transsexuals are men . . . . Transsexualism is originated, supported, institutionalized, and perpetuated primarily by males and it directly affects mostly men ([1976] 1994: 4, 14).

This intentional use of *he* is especially emphatic in Chapter Four (99–119), where Raymond argues against accepting transsexuals as lesbian-feminists. In contrast to other chapters, no attempt is made to pluralize the antecedent or concede any use of the feminine pronoun, even in quotation marks. It can be no accident that this section, which comprises less than ten percent of the book, includes half the tokens of generic *he*.

<sup>71</sup>Martyna 1978a, experiments 1 and 2, kindergarten through college. See also Martyna 1978b, 1980a.

seemed to be actually repressing their own use of *she*. Although they reported feminine imagery more often (22%), boys and young men supplied the feminine pronoun at only one-tenth of this rate (2%), far less than the girls and young women. Meyers (1990) found that only the women in her sample of adult college students used *she* in writing about “the educated person”: the context of the assignment (a required proposal for the student’s degree plan) suggests that this usage was self-referential.

As one might expect, *she* is used infrequently in generic reference. Harrigan and Lucic’s mostly academic participants (1988) guessed that the feminine pronoun occurred in speech about 12% of the time, which was not very different from Newman’s observation of 19% for television interviews (1992). But Newman himself was disturbed by this. “Frighteningly,” he remarked, “the use of gender indeterminate human NPs surpasses that of clearly female ones. The low usage of *she* is a far greater indictment of sexism in our culture than the relatively rare use of the prescribed form [*he*] that has been so attacked for its sexism” (472).

### *Conclusion*

If theoretical discussion of generic pronouns has amounted, for the most part, to prescriptive debate, the most obvious criticism of the empirical literature is its limited social scope. Over the last two decades, approximately eight thousand individuals have taken part in the experiments reported here: about 98% have been students in school settings, either the classroom or the psychology laboratory. About half the students are enrolled in college, although children as young as kindergarten have been tested. Adults over 21 are typically educators, while nonacademic adults, when included at all, are likely to appear only in surveys of prescriptive attitudes. Other demographic

characteristics such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status are seldom mentioned in the experimental literature.

This narrowness has suggested to some commentators that conclusions based on experimental research may be premature. Discussing MacKay (1980a), Pateman appears to dismiss the vast majority of empirical studies with the following statement:

The most general objection to the tradition of experimental social psychology is that its laboratory findings are not generalizable; the experiments tell us what subjects do when experimented on, no more (1982: 437).<sup>72</sup>

And in a general review of research done since the 1960s on communication and gender, Epstein cautions the reader: “Almost all the studies of sex differences have been based on the behavior of college students, and largely in experimental settings” (1988: 219).

Fortunately for the purposes of comparison, a handful of observational (not experimental) studies of spoken usage do exist: Mathiot 1979, McConnell-Ginet 1979, Rudes and Healy 1979, Goodwin 1989, and Newman 1992. Only Goodwin, and Rudes and Healy, adequately specify the speech communities under discussion (gay men in Bloomington, Indiana, and Buffalo, New York), and only Newman includes statistical as well as qualitative analysis. Newman’s speakers were originally interviewed in the highly self-conscious medium of national television.<sup>73</sup> An experimental study based on

---

<sup>72</sup>Significantly, MacKay’s reply does not address the issue of social applicability. Furthermore, the careful reader will note a self-contradiction regarding the political dimensions of this research. On one hand, we are told that “MacKay . . . had a small group of ‘subjects’ examine and make nonpolitical judgments” concerning singular *they* (MacKay 1983: 75). But compare this statement: “MacKay gave the political goal of finding an alternative to prescriptive *he* first and *sine qua non* priority . . . . Of necessity, MacKay’s sample of ‘subjects’ all accepted and took for granted the goal of avoiding use of prescriptive *he* and made their judgments within that political framework” (MacKay 1983: 76).

<sup>73</sup>As Newman himself points out, the guests on television interview shows are typically writers (authors and journalists) as well as entertainers and politicians; in other words, professional communicators. Says Newman: “the close relationship between this particular form of spoken discourse and much of the written language currently being published was an important factor in the selection of this particular corpus” (1992: 455).

In addition, *The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* and *Nightline*, two of the nine programs monitored by Newman, have been shown to rely overwhelmingly on “white men from powerful

interview data is Wang 1991. Textual analyses, also discussed above, likewise focus on public communications such as academic, journalistic, and commercial writing.

Thus it seems that despite a fairly sizeable literature on generic pronouns, published over a period of more than twenty years, not much is known about written or spoken usage by individuals (particularly adults) in their own residential communities or in settings not heavily weighted toward prescriptive norms. Meyers (1990: 234–235) has addressed this problem in terms especially relevant to the present study:

In addition to age, the effects on usage of education, sex, urban/rural residence, and region are among those variables worthy of investigation. . . . Metropolitan area Minnesotans appear unusually sensitive to matters of language inclusivity. Attempts to determine whether or not this is so must await similar studies in other regions.

---

institutions” as interview guests, according to two studies by Hoynes and Croteau (1990). The first study of *Nightline* found that over a forty-month period, “89 percent of the U.S. guests were men, 92 percent were white, and 80 percent were professionals, government officials, or corporate representatives” (1990: 2). No significant differences were reported in the second study, which monitored both programs. *Crossfire*, another show mentioned by Newman, has a similar format. One wonders, therefore, whether the high rate of *he* reflects prescriptive pressure (as predicted by Cameron [1985a]), a preponderance of male speakers and male references, or all of these factors. Although daytime talk shows were also monitored, Newman does not offer an analysis of possible contrasts in usage patterns between different kinds of television program.

The present investigation, situated in four Philadelphia and Minneapolis neighborhoods, extends the reach of previous empirical studies and theoretical writings on the topic of generic pronouns. Drawing on hypotheses culled from this literature, a sociolinguistic approach to the problem is outlined in the next chapter.

## Approach to the Problem

In the previous chapter we concluded that over the last two decades, understanding of the English epicene pronouns has been severely limited by two methodological shortcomings: in the theoretical literature, a prescriptive tendency; and in the observational literature, confinement of the investigations to students in school settings, even there without consideration of such demographic characteristics as ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Theoretical work in linguistics on other aspects of the English pronoun system continues, of course, but in a highly abstract and (for most educated readers) inaccessible vein, virtually without reference to epicene usage. Meanwhile, in a separate track, one continues to find classroom- and laboratory-based experimental studies characterized by thoroughgoing statistical analysis but fairly repetitive conclusions.

In contrast to these trends, and despite the limitations of its formal setting, Newman's 1992 study of televised interview speech stands out as an attempt to address current theoretical issues by moving the focus of observation off campus. Also noteworthy for its ethnolinguistic approach is Rudes and Healy 1979, an account by participant observers of *she* as used in a gay men's bar. In order to minimize the effect of prescriptive norms on epicene pronoun usage, the present study offers a further shift of perspective—to children and adults in their own residential speech communities—as a



basis for evaluating a list of hypotheses summarized from the literature of the last twenty years.

Following a brief historical overview of the English personal pronouns, this chapter restates the epicene pronoun problem and defines an envelope of variant forms. The hypotheses and their sources are given, along with a description of the sample and the classically sociolinguistic method of tape-recorded, face-to-face interviews used in the present investigation.

*Origins of the English personal pronouns*

Standard accounts of the evolution of the English personal pronoun system can be found in Pyles and Algeo 1982 and Robertson and Cassidy 1954. The latter make the interesting observation that the personal pronoun is “the one part of speech that retains in ModE [Modern English, after 1500] a degree of inflection comparable to that which it had in OE [Old English, 449–circa 1100]” (124). In both periods the pronoun system included three cases, three persons, and (in the third-person singular), three genders. Grammatical number has likewise endured from OE (which recognized the dual as well as singular and plural) to the present day.

Following are the first- and second-person forms of late OE and early ME (Middle English), as reproduced in the standard accounts:

FIRST PERSON	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Dual ('both')</i>	<i>Plural ('all')</i>
Nominative	ic 'I'	wit 'we'	we 'we'
Accusative and Dative	me 'me'	unc 'us'	us 'us'
Genitive	mīn 'my/mine'	uncer 'ours'	ƿe 'ours'

SECOND PERSON	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Dual</i>	<i>Plural</i>
Nominative	ðu ‘thou’	git ‘ye’	ge ‘ye’
Accusative and Dative	ðe ‘thee’	inc ‘you’	eow ‘you’
Genitive	ðin ‘thine’	incer ‘your’	eower ‘your’

The authors note that after a period of free variation, the separate accusative forms of OE (*mec*, *uncit*, and *usic* in the first person; *ðec*, *incit*, *eowic* in the second) were replaced by the dative.<sup>74</sup> Dual forms were lost after the 13th century, during the ME period; the consonant of *ic* was also dropped and the vowel of *us* was shortened. Changes in the second person included, by the fourteenth century, the polite substitution of *ye* and *you* for the singular forms, which Pyles and Algeo list as *þe*, *þîn*. Their account gives the following nominative forms for the first and second persons in ME:

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
FIRST PERSON	ich, I, ik	we
SECOND PERSON	thou	ye

Changes in early ModE (1500–1800) included the standard capitalization of *I* and the replacement of nominative *ye* by objective *you*. By the eighteenth century *thou* had become a regional form, along with such plurals as *you-uns*, *youse*, and *you-all*.

The evolution of the third-person pronouns began from the following OE paradigm (given by Pyles and Algeo), where, in contrast to the first and second persons, the singular was declined for gender and the dative and accusative were distinct:

<sup>74</sup>Robertson and Cassidy 1954: 124–25, 126–27; Pyles and Algeo 1982: 120–21.

THIRD PERSON	<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>	<i>Neuter</i>	<i>Plural</i>
Nominative	he ‘he’	heo ‘she’	hit ‘it’	hī ‘they’
Accusative	hine ‘him’	hī ‘her’	hit ‘it’	hī ‘them’
Dative	him ‘him’	hire ‘her’	him ‘it’	him/heom ‘them’
Gen.	his ‘his’	hire ‘her(s)’	his ‘its’	hira/heora ‘their(s)’

Robertson and Cassidy list *hæ* and *hīe* as variants of both the nominative and accusative forms of the feminine pronoun, and the plural paradigm is given as *hīe*, *hīe*, *him/heom*, and *hiera/heora*.

Formerly it was thought that the OE distinction of grammatical gender was replaced in the ME period by “natural” gender, roughly approximating the biological sex of the referent. In fact, however, as shown statistically by Moore (1921), both gender systems were present in OE and in early ME.<sup>75</sup> Strong adjectives and most pronominal words tended to follow grammatical gender, while the personal pronouns *he*, *heo*, and *hit* (‘he,’ ‘she,’ and ‘it’) were used almost exactly as they are today. The following example is given by Baron (1971):

þa þæt wif ahloh wereda drihtnes  
nalles glædlice, ac heo gearum frod

‘then *the woman* [neuter article] laughed at the lord of hosts, by no means kindly, for *she* [feminine pronoun], advanced of years, . . .’

(Cædmon, *Genesis*, lines 2382–2383)

The statistical finding of nearly universal agreement between the personal pronoun and the biological sex of the referent led Moore to conclude that “natural gender did not *replace* grammatical gender in Middle English but survived it” (1921: 91).

<sup>75</sup>In a sample of ten OE texts comprising 4,725 gender-distinctive pronoun forms, conflicts with “natural” gender occurred between 0% and 5% of the time. Similar results were obtained for ME and for a Germanic group consisting of Gothic, Old High German, and Old Saxon texts. Even in Greek and Vulgate Latin translations of the New Testament, pronominal words were rarely (3%) in conflict with “natural” gender, which suggests that this phenomenon is not limited to the Germanic languages.

Other notable developments in ME were: (1) the merger of accusative and dative forms, resulting in the loss of the accusative; (2) the appearance of plural *th-* forms, most likely of Scandinavian origin; and (3) the introduction of *she* from a source or sources not yet identified. Proposed explanations include the borrowing of Old Norse *sja*, analogy with the demonstrative feminine pronoun *seo*, and even phonetic development from *heo* (see Robertson and Cassidy, 127 n. 34).

Thus there arose in this period numerous variants of the feminine nominative, of which one (*hē*) was identical to the masculine: *he, hie, ho, she* (Robertson and Cassidy); *cho, he, hī, ho, hye, hyo, scho, she* (Pyles and Algeo); *he, heo, sche, scho, she, sheo* (Penelope 1990). According to Pyles and Algeo the existence of an interchangeably masculine or feminine form was “certainly a well-nigh intolerable state of affairs” (158), but this psychological explanation is questioned by Penelope and also by Wolfe (1989: 86–89). (Certainly there are other languages to which grammatical gender does not seem so fundamental.<sup>76</sup>)

#### *The epicene pronoun problem*

“Had *heo* merged phonologically with *he* in ME, as it undoubtedly would have, ModE would have had a generic third person singular pronoun,” Penelope observes. “But it didn’t and we don’t” (4). Bodine (1975), on the other hand, points out that *they* was commonly so used, without opposition, prior to the nineteenth century, along with *he or she* and sex-indefinite *he*.

With citations dating back to 1526, the *Oxford English Dictionary* likewise states that *they* is still (1933) “often used in reference to a singular noun made universal by

---

<sup>76</sup>For example, in Armenian, another Indo-European language, either of the third-person singular pronouns (deictic *an* and anaphoric *inke*) may be translated as *he* or as *she*, depending on the pragmatic context. See Samuelian 1989: 310–311.

*every, any, no, etc.*, or applicable to one of either sex (= ‘he or she’). And Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990: 231–232) go so far as to dismiss sex-indefinite *he* as “hypercorrected nonsense”:

We think that it should now be indisputable that the historical material shows that the indeterminate *he* is, if not exactly a grammarians’ invention, a usage pressed upon a *they*-using public and that it has not displaced the traditional use of *they* for third-person singular indeterminate from spoken English.

In a certain sense, the “problem” of the epicene singular pronoun has always been a prescriptive issue, although, as Newman reminds us, “the focus of the debate has evolved substantially with the changing values of language critics” (1992: 447). According to Bodine’s account, now considered standard, the androcentric values of prescriptive grammarians produced, by the mid-eighteenth century, the first of many rules designating *he* rather than *they* as the correct sex-indefinite form.

Its sexist origins notwithstanding, however, the masculine-generic rule of construction was at first used to advantage by woman’s rights activists of the nineteenth century in their arguments for constitutional equality (see Chapter One). This rhetorical strategy was abandoned once it became clear that both masculine and gender-neutral expressions in the law did indeed include women—but only for punishments and penalties, not for privileges or rights. The twentieth-century phase of the debate was foreshadowed by *Herland* (1915), a feminist utopian novel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman that rejected masculine-generic wording altogether. As Bodine observed in 1975, “This matter has taken a new turn recently with the insistence of many feminists that ‘he’ should not be used when the referent includes women, and that speakers of English should find some substitute” (130).

In another sense, however, the choice of a sex-indefinite pronoun can indeed be problematic for English speakers because, as Newman explains, “gender agreement in English is limited to third person singular of the pronominal system”:

It is likely that this factor becomes entangled with social concerns through the tight relations in English between sex and gender—the pragmatically oriented agreement system called natural gender. Even when typical pragmatic cues are lacking—such as when there is no clear referent to carry the characteristic sex—the speaker is forced to supply one or act as if one were there. The onus of determining antecedent gender falls, therefore, on the speaker in such cases, and *because the decision is pragmatic, it reflects perceptions of the real world*. It is easy to see the social import attached to such decisions. (448; emphasis added)

For prescriptivists and descriptivists alike, therefore, the epicene pronoun problem in English—and the related phenomenon of generic expressions for human beings—arises from the worldview allegedly being expressed or understood by users of the language. And not just any users, for as Mary Beard pointed out in 1946, “innumerable rights of person and property may turn upon the mere meaning of ‘man’ in laws, ordinances, and judicial opinions” (49). The practical consequences of the predominant androcentric worldview were certainly apparent to woman’s rights activists struggling for inclusion as *persons* and *citizens* during the nineteenth century.

In an interesting parallel, however, the feminists of France, speaking a language permeated with grammatical gender, faced a similar struggle during the 1870s and 1880s over the scope of political designations such as *français* and *citoyen* (Hause and Kenney 1984: 10–12). German suffragists too sought recognition as legal “persons” after the turn of the century (Evans 1976: 80). Thus while the problem of epicene expressions may be more typical of a “natural” gender system, as in English, it can also arise whenever a system of grammatical gender coincides with androcentric practice.<sup>77</sup>

What then is the worldview suggested by the use of *he*, singular *they*, *she*, *he or she*, and other epicene forms such as *one* and *it*? Or to put the question quite bluntly: is a speaker or writer who uses *he* more sexist than one who uses alternative forms?

---

<sup>77</sup>In *Talking Gender: A Guide to Nonsexist Communication* (1991), King considers French as well as English in her discussion of usage and guidelines. Thanks to Sally McConnell-Ginet for this reference.

This study did not attempt a direct answer to such questions. In the first place, if the last several decades have taught us anything about feminism, it should now be clear that the movement incorporates a number of political viewpoints, many of which are in tension with one another, even to the point of disagreement over *feminism* as an overarching term.<sup>78</sup> Given the current state of philosophical diversity, devising a sexism-feminism attitude scale for use across different speech communities would be extremely difficult. For present purposes, a less ambitious but achievable goal was to monitor differences in usage between male and female speakers.

In the second place, prescriptive pressure, more than sexism, may motivate at least some people to avoid singular *they* in favor of *he*. (Since women have repeatedly been shown to use more standard forms than men (Labov 1991: 210–14), but presumably have a less androcentric worldview, the potential for conflict in women’s usage was of particular interest.) This study took such measures as educational level and occupational status as indicators of prescriptive influence, and also included a writing task in order to elicit a relatively formal response.

A third consideration was the probability that a person’s language sample would yield various epicene pronoun forms (*he, they*, etc.) but few tokens overall, again making it impossible to correlate individual usage with attitudes. The present study assumed, however, that semantic characteristics of the antecedent conditioned pronoun variation within individual usage as well as across demographic groups.

Thus the basic question addressed here may be stated in straightforwardly descriptive terms: what social and linguistic factors condition the use of various epicene

---

<sup>78</sup>This was also true in the period after 1945, when the National Woman’s Party was “the only national organization to identify publicly as a feminist organization,” and many activists coined alternative words to avoid the stigma of the *feminist* label. One woman active in the early 1960s identified the word as an “in-house” term (Rupp and Taylor 1987: 39–40, 53).

pronouns in colloquial American English? Or restated from a strategic point of view: what communicative resources does the array of epicene pronouns offer to language-users, especially women?<sup>79</sup>

The envelope of variation was defined for this study as the third-person pronouns *they*, *he*, *he* or *she/she* or *he*, *she*, pronominal *one*, and *it*, when used in reference to an indefinite, hypothetical, or quantificational human antecedent regarded as formally singular in number. (The locutions *'em* and *'im* were not included because the two could not be reliably distinguished in speech.) In the written responses, a zero response—defined as a space left blank or filled with a non-third-person pronoun such as impersonal *you*—was also counted as a token.<sup>80</sup>

An important difference between this approach and Newman's is that tokens were here defined as each and every occurrence of the *pronouns* listed above, whereas Newman designated tokens as occurrences of *antecedents*. Although the results were similar, the method used here allowed the observer to track alternation between one

---

<sup>79</sup>Some clarification of the term *epicene* is in order. A word of Greek origin, *epicene* means "common gender" and appears in Baron 1991 along with *generic*, the more traditional term. Pointing out, however, that *generic* in semantics literature denotes a single representative of a class, Newman (1992) broadens the term *epicene* to include quantificational as well as technically "generic" pronoun antecedents of uncertain as well as common gender. Deferring both to Newman and to the general reader, the discussion so far has used *epicene* and *generic* in an equally broad sense, preferring the latter as the more familiar term. In the hypotheses listed below and discussed in Chapter Six, however, *epicene* is used in its original sense (contrasting with *masculine* and *feminine*); see "Linguistic Data," below.

<sup>80</sup>Impersonal *you*, although it frequently occurred in the interviews, was not regarded as comparable to the third-person forms for several reasons. First, its *semantic* scope is quite different: compare, for instance, the possible readings of *A person likes to have (his, their) dinner on time* and *A person likes to have your dinner on time*. Like *they*, the pronoun *you* can be used with singular or plural antecedents, but singular *they*, a stigmatized form, is more limited than *you* both socially and semantically. No doubt because the second person has no gender-distinct pronoun forms, impersonal *you* has not been the focus of social controversy about language, inclusivity, and the sexes. While the semantics of this pronoun deserve attention, it is not examined in the present study.



pronoun form and another for the same antecedent. The greater number of tokens generated this way also allowed for more reliable statistical analysis.

The specific propositions tested in this study—of which some are intended to conflict with one another—are derived from the existing literature as discussed in Chapter Two. They are as follows:

### *Hypotheses*

HE

1. *He* will be the most commonly used generic pronoun (Harrigan and Lucic 1988; Newman 1992).
2. *He* and *they* will occur with equal frequency (Meyers 1990).
3. Males will be the primary users of *he* (Meyers 1990).
4. For all speakers, the most frequent antecedents of *he* will be masculine (Frank and Anshen 1983).
  - a) This trend will be led by males (see the “Moulton experiments,” Moulton, Robinson, and Elias 1978, Cole, Hill, and Dayley 1983, Hyde 1984, Khosroshahi 1989, Switzer 1990; see also references at Chapter Two, note 18).
5. Most masculine antecedents will be associated with *he*. This trend will be led by males (Martyna 1978a).
6. At least some epicene antecedents will be associated with *he* (Martyna 1978a).

This trend will be led by (reference the “Moulton experiments,” above, and Cameron 1985a):

  - a) college-educated speakers
  - b) higher-income speakers
  - c) those with higher-status occupations
  - d) Philadelphians (as compared to Minneapolitans in this study; see Meyers 1990 on Minneapolitans)
  - e) adults
  - f) femalesand occur more frequently in (g) writing.

7. Epicene NPs in a masculine context (e.g., a *person* playing a boys' game) will be associated with *he* less frequently than masculine NPs (such as a *burglar*), but more frequently than epicene NPs in a gender-neutral context (implied by Frank and Anshen 1983, Penelope 1990, Newman 1992).
8. *He* will be used rarely, if ever, for feminine antecedents (Martyna 1978a, Frank and Anshen 1983, Penelope 1990, Newman 1992).
9. The most frequent antecedents of *he* will take the form Det + NP (Newman 1992).
10. Most Det + NP antecedents will be associated with *he* (Newman 1992).
11. At least some Q-NP antecedents will be associated with *he*.

This trend will be led by (prescriptive usage, see Cameron 1985a):

- a) college-educated speakers
  - b) higher-income speakers
  - c) those with higher-status occupations
  - d) Philadelphians (as opposed to Minneapolitans in this study; see Meyers 1990 on Minneapolitans)
  - e) adults
  - f) females
- and occur more frequently in (g) writing.

#### SINGULAR THEY

1. Singular *they* will be the most commonly used generic pronoun (McConnell-Ginet 1979, Frank and Anshen 1983).
2. *They* will follow *he* in frequency (Harrigan and Lucic 1988, Newman 1992).
3. The primary users of *they* will be (nonstandard usage, derived from Cameron 1985a):
  - a) noncollege adults
  - b) lower-income residents
  - c) those with lower-status occupations
  - d) children
  - e) females (Martyna 1978a, Spender 1980, Meyers 1990).
4. *They* will be used more often in speech than in writing (reflects nonstandard usage; see above).
5. Spoken usage will include more *they* than *he* or *she* (reflects nonstandard usage; see above).

6. For all speakers, the most frequent antecedents of *they* will be epicene. Females will lead this trend (Richmond and Gorham 1988, Switzer 1990).
7. Most epicene antecedents will be associated with *they* (Green 1977; Martyna 1978a).  
This trend will be led by:
  - a) females
  - b) Minneapolitans (Meyers 1990).
8. Epicene NPs in a gender-neutral or inclusive context (e.g. a *person* playing a game open to both sexes) will be associated with *they* more frequently than epicene NPs in a gendered context (e.g. a *person* playing a boys' game or a girls' game). Gendered NPs (such as a *burglar* or a *babysitter*) will be associated with *they* less frequently than epicene NPs (implied by Frank and Anshen 1983, Penelope 1990, Newman 1992).
9. At least some *they* will be used for masculine antecedents. Males will lead this trend (Richmond and Gorham 1988, Switzer 1990).
10. More masculine antecedents will be associated with *they* than with *he or she* (see references at Chapter Two, note 23, "Moulton experiments").
11. *They* will be used least often for feminine antecedents.  
Females will lead this trend: see references at Chapter Two, note 32.
12. More feminine antecedents will be associated with *they* than with *he or she*: the converse of hypothesis 7 under HE OR SHE, below.
13. *They* will be used more frequently for Q-NP antecedents than for Det + NP antecedents (Newman 1992).
14. Most Q-NP antecedents will be associated with *they* (Newman 1992, see also references at Chapter Two, note 34).
15. Most Det + NP antecedents will not be associated with *the* (Newman 1992).

HE OR SHE

1. In speech, *he or she* will follow *they* in frequency (McConnell-Ginet 1979, Frank and Anshen 1983, Harrigan and Lucic 1988, Newman 1992).
2. *He or she* will be used more in writing than in speech (Martyna 1978a).
3. Written usage will include more *he or she* than *they*: reflects prescriptive usage.
4. The primary users of *he or she* will be . . .
  - a) females (Jacobson and Insko 1985, Richmond and Gorham 1988)
  - b) college-educated speakers: reflects prescriptive usage
  - c) higher-income speakers: reflects prescriptive usage
  - d) Minneapolitans (Meyers 1990)

e) adults: reflects prescriptive usage

5. *He or she* will be used most often for epicenes, less often for feminine referents, and least often for masculine ones: This examines the disjunctive pronoun's unique ability to represent both genders explicitly.
6. More epicene referents will be associated with *he or she* than with *he* (see references at Chapter Two, note 23).
7. More feminine antecedents will be associated with *he or she* than with *they* (see references at Chapter Two, notes 23 and 40).
8. *He or she* will be used more for Det + NP antecedents than for Q-NP ones (Newman 1992).

SHE

1. *She* will be the least commonly used generic pronoun (Harrigan and Lucic 1988, Newman 1992)
2. Females will be the primary users of *she* (Meyers 1990).
3. The most frequent referents of *she* will be feminine (Frank and Anshen 1983, Penelope 1990, Newman 1992; see also references at Chapter Two, note 51).
4. Most feminine referents will be associated with *she* (the converse of the previous hypothesis)
5. *She* will be used rarely, if ever, for epicene referents (Penelope 1990).
6. (Self-conscious, feminist usage) Epicene referents will rarely, if ever, be associated with *she* (Adamsky 1981, Jacobson and Insko 1985).
7. *She* will not be used for masculine referents (Penelope 1990).
8. The most frequent antecedents of *she* will take the form Det + NP (Newman 1992).
9. (Prescriptive usage) At least some antecedents of *she* will take the form Q-NP (Newman 1992).

### *Oral Interviews*

A total of four neighborhoods were selected: one lower-income and one higher-income, in each of two cities, Philadelphia and Minneapolis. They are described in Chapters Four and Five. For consistency, and to minimize the potential impact of alternative grammars (such as African-American Vernacular English, or Spanish), all

participants were white and native speakers of American English. Thus the results cannot be generalized beyond this population.

The interviews in Southwest Philadelphia took place on a single block of twin rowhouses in 1977, beginning with a school crossing guard and continuing through word-of-mouth recommendations and door-to-door canvassing. Nineteen recordings by Elizabeth Champion, E. Colby Franzese (Madden), and Lou Ann Matossian<sup>81</sup> were used in the present study. Additional, more free-form interviews were conducted in West Mount Airy by Neubauer et al. in 1980 and 1981; ten are analyzed here. In Minneapolis, interviews were conducted by Lou Ann Matossian between 1987 and 1989, 11 in the Fuller neighborhood and 18 in Beltrami. The latter two neighborhoods were matched, using census data, to West Mount Airy and Southwest Philadelphia respectively. All told, the tape recordings (each 60 to 90 minutes long) covered 64 individuals. A description of the participant sample is given below.

At the time the Philadelphia interviews took place, the investigators were not studying pronoun usage. As graduate students, they were examining systematic shifts of phonological variables between narratives and other interview contexts, and the interview questions at first reflected that interest. Originally developed for the Project on Linguistic Change and Variation (see Labov 1980: 251–265), the questionnaire had been intended to elicit stories of street fights, childhood games, and other aspects of Philadelphia neighborhood life. The range of speech styles recorded, from hypercorrection to the relative unguardedness of narrative, immediately raises an interesting issue for the study of generic pronouns.

---

<sup>81</sup>Campion, Franzese, and Matossian 1978. All were enrolled in William Labov's *Study of the Speech Community* class (Linguistics 560) at the University of Pennsylvania. Neubauer et al. (see below) were also students of Labov.

Sociolinguistic studies normally focus on narrative style as that least influenced by prescriptive norms; yet narratives, which recount the actions of specific people, yield few general statements. Instead, generic pronouns tend to occur when the speaker has some emotional distance from the topic: for example, while explaining the rules of a game, as opposed to recalling a particularly memorable victory.

In Minneapolis, therefore, the interview questions were modified not only to reflect local interests but also to elicit more generalizations. When discussing rule-oriented topics such as games and fights, participants were asked, if they did not make the matter clear, whether girls, boys, or both sexes took part. In this way gender categories were constructed, as far as possible, from the speaker's point of view.

#### *Written Questionnaire*

To test for shifts in pronoun use between formal and informal styles, a written questionnaire was also introduced in Minneapolis at the close of each interview. Adapting the model pioneered by Martyna, participants were asked to complete twelve sentence fragments, of which seven contained determiner-NP antecedents and five included quantifiers. All were gender-neutral except for the items starred below, which were intended to bias the response:

- (1) *If someone wants to make friends in this neighborhood*
- (2) *If a neighbor wants to organize a block party*
- (3)\* *If a babysitter hears a suspicious noise outside*
- (4) *Whoever comes to the door selling things might get No for an answer unless*
- (5) *Everyone has the right to express an opinion as long as*
- (6) *Usually no-one moves out of this neighborhood unless*
- (7)\* *If a burglar hears you coming in the front door, chances are that*
- (8)\* *If a person runs out of sugar while baking a cake*
- (9) *When a teenager wants to stay out late*

(10)\* *If a neighbor needs a screwdriver when the hardware store is closed*

(11) *When a child is looking for a good place to play around here*

(12) *Anyone can get along in this neighborhood as long as*

Note that *babysitter* and *burglar*, the subjects of (3) and (7), have relatively gendered connotations, even as isolated words. In contrast, identifying *person* and *neighbor* as gendered subjects depends on the contextual cues given in (8) and (10). The point of this distinction was to test not only the fact of gender, but also its relative salience, as possible influences on generic pronoun use.

Following the model proposed by Newman, various quantifiers (items 1, 5, and 12) were also introduced, each in a gender-neutral context. Here the idea was to examine the significance of number in pronoun choice by comparing quantifiers of different scope. Including quantifiers also permitted their comparison to determiner-NPs as a test of referential solidity. According to Newman, who introduced this distinction, a nonsolid referent is “hypothetical, generic, or quantificational,” and a solid referent is “a concrete specific entity” (1992: 459).<sup>82</sup> Except for semantically plural referents of mixed gender (e.g., *everybody*, referring to both sexes), all epicene NPs are by definition referentially nonsolid. Any NP which is semantically neutral in number (e.g., a hypothetical *somebody*) is nonsolid as well. In contrast, the *somebody* that designates a particular individual of known gender must be referentially solid.

### *Participants*

The 64 individuals (43 female and 21 male) who took part in this study ranged in age from 4 to 81 in a bimodal distribution with peaks at ages 9–12 and 33. (The mean age was 33 years 4 months, and the median was 34.) Thus, although three or possibly four

---

<sup>82</sup>Here Newman is using the term *generic* in its narrow sense to denote a representative of a class (1992: 471 n. 2).

generations were represented, women in early middle age and their young children were typical participants.

AGE	4-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89
	18	9	13	10	6	4	3	1

The largest occupational groups were students (17), comprising all those under age 18 except the four-year-old preschooler, and homemakers (16), these being the individuals most likely to be at home and accessible to the interviewer. Homemakers together with children enrolled in school amounted to just over half of the sample.

In this study, occupation was used as a proxy for class status (examples given below), with the participant's neighborhood standing in for household income. Students, being underage and living at home, were assigned the class status of their parents. Homemakers were assigned an occupational status midway between the homemaker's last waged job and the breadwinner's occupation. Because most couples proved to be no more than one level apart, this method resulted in minimal distortion of occupational status while recognizing the homemaker's work history.

Upper Middle Class (9 adults): higher-status professionals, corporate executives  
(physician, scientist/engineer, professor, attorney, architect, national political lobbyist)

Middle Middle Class (12 adults): lower-status professionals, corporate middle management  
(teacher/librarian, trainer/educator, journalist, police captain)

Lower Middle Class (19 adults): small entrepreneurs, industrial managers, supervisors, clericals  
(union business manager, clerical worker/supervisor, custodial supervisor, cook/partner in small neighborhood restaurant, manager/partner in small neighborhood bar, nurse, real estate agent, warehouse manager)

Working Class (6 adults): skilled and semiskilled workers



(auto mechanic, railroad laborer, firefighter, factory worker)

All but two of the homemakers had attended high school but not college. Of the 46 adults in the sample as a whole, 20 did not have a college education; indeed, only one current college student was included in this study.

EDUCATION (adults)	Secondary 20	Vocational 5	Undergrad 13	Postgrad 8
-----------------------	-----------------	-----------------	-----------------	---------------

Educational levels were defined as follows: Primary, to eighth grade; Secondary, to twelfth grade; Vocational (Vo-Tech), vocational, technical, or trade school, also including certificate programs and two-year college degrees; Undergraduate, the bachelor's degree; Postgraduate, any degree higher than the bachelor's.

Four neighborhoods were represented, two lower-income (total 40 individuals) and two higher-income (24). There were 30 Philadelphians and 34 residents of Minneapolis.

NEIGHBORHOOD	<i>Lower-Income</i>	<i>Higher-Income</i>
<i>Philadelphia</i>	Southwest 20	W. Mount Airy 10
<i>Minneapolis</i>	Beltrami 20	Fuller 14

See Appendix A for a list of participants.

### *Linguistic Data*

The tokens were identified as *they, he, she, it, he or she/she or he, one*, non-pronominal responses such as zero (in the written data only) or repetition of the antecedent noun where a pronoun would be expected. Also noted were any alternations in pronoun forms governed by the same antecedent. In addition, the transcripts were scanned for any evidence of pronoun cues accidentally given by the interviewer.

Recorded separately were the antecedents themselves, comprising nouns quantified as *every, any, no, some, one* (and pronominal *one*), or *each*; relative pronouns

*whoever, whichever* (referring to a person); determiner noun phrases beginning with *a* or *the*; impersonal *you*, species *Man*, and (in the written data) the zero responses.

Antecedent gender was coded as feminine, masculine, or (in the narrower sense of “common gender”) epicene: as stated above, this information was either volunteered by participants or elicited during the course of the interview.

An initial attempt to classify the topic of discussion was soon abandoned because the categories—neighborhood, home/family, school, games, fights, crime, religion, jobs, and the like—proved, in practice, to be too indistinct and not definitely related to pronoun usage. As noted earlier, rule-oriented explanations of fights and games were especially rich in hypothetical statements and hence in epicene pronouns as well.

Finally, the mode of communication, oral or written, was recorded, including the item number of specific test questions in the written portion of the interview.

### *Analysis*

A data set of 1,414 tokens was gathered, of which, on the writing task, 147 were not third-person pronouns. These were tentatively classified as avoidance responses and set aside. Frequencies were then calculated for the remaining 1,267 third-person pronoun tokens.

The hypotheses listed earlier were tested by correlating *he*, *they*, *he or she*, and *she* with the relevant demographic and linguistic categories; significant results ( $p < 0.05$  or better) were identified through chi-square analysis. The same method was used to track possible avoidance responses in the written data.

Finally, the set of all tokens referring to epicene antecedents was isolated in order to determine the incidence of *he*, the pronoun form favored by prescriptive grammarians (and condemned by their feminist critics) for sex-indefinite reference. Correlation and

chi-square testing were again used to track shifts in usage between oral and written styles, as well as variation by age and gender. More discussion of the analysis is incorporated with the results in Chapter Six.

## Two Philadelphia Neighborhoods

### *Defining the Speech Community*

This chapter and the next introduce the four neighborhoods, two in Philadelphia and two in Minneapolis, being considered as urban *speech communities*. This concept, foundational to the study of language in its social context, will be briefly reviewed here; descriptions of the neighborhoods follow.

From the perspective of quantitative sociolinguistics, Labov (1972) has characterized the speech community in terms of “participation in a set of shared [linguistic] norms” (120). With respect to actual usage, these may be observed as abstract patterns of variation (of which speakers may be unaware) corresponding to different levels of formality. Alternatively, linguistic norms may be expressed as overt judgments shared by all members of the community. “In fact,” says Labov, “it seems plausible to define a speech community as a group of speakers who share a set of social attitudes towards language” (248 n. 40).

For the ethnography of communication, Hymes (1972) has defined the speech community in similar terms, as “a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. Both conditions are necessary” (54). In the same volume, Gumperz states: “To the extent

that speakers share knowledge of the communicative constraints and options governing a significant number of social situations, they can be said to be members of the same speech community” (1972: 16).

That there will be variation in individual and collective usage is assumed in these definitions. For according to Labov, “a speech community cannot be conceived as a group of speakers who all use the same forms” (1972: 158). Gumperz adds:

members of the same speech community need not all speak the same language nor use the same linguistic forms on similar occasions. All that is required is that there be at least one language in common and that rules governing basic communicative strategies be shared so that speakers can decode the social meanings carried by alternative modes of communication (1972: 16).

Particularly in the ethnography of communication, it is also assumed that a speech community arises in the context of local social networks. “Probably,” says Hymes, “it will prove most useful to reserve the notion of speech community for “the local unit most specifically characterized for a person by common locality and primary interaction” (1972: 55). Shared knowledge about appropriate ways to communicate “depends on intensity of contact and on communication networks,” says Gumperz (1972: 16). “The existence of shared values and of regular communication patterns requires empirical investigation.”

As we saw in Chapter Two, such an approach is rare though not unknown in the existing literature on pronoun usage.<sup>83</sup> In the following descriptions, the existence of a speech community is inferred from local social networks of white American English

---

<sup>83</sup>An exception is Rudes and Healy, who characterized their informants as “acculturated Gay males, i.e. males who have ‘come out’ in the sense that they spend a significant portion of their time interacting socially with other individuals who are more or less open about their sexual orientation to other members of the Gay community, in local[e]s which are for the most part exclusively Gay, e.g., bars, baths, social organizations” in Buffalo, New York (1979: 50). In this study the existence of a speech community was inferred from shared self-identification, frequent social interaction, and common locality.

speakers within the geographic boundaries of the neighborhood. A historical perspective on the socioeconomic development of these residential areas is also offered.

## CATHOLICS ON THE COLOR LINE

Here, on this street, we have Polish, Irish. We have Italian, we have every kind.

—White woman, age 44, October 1977

“We want them out!” “Beat it!” “Move! Move! Move!” “Nigger get out!”

—White mob outside the home of an interracial couple, 21 November 1985

In the southwest section of Philadelphia, to the east of high-speed Lindbergh Boulevard, stretches an industrial no-man’s-land of several square miles, criss-crossed by railroad tracks and dotted with the huge tanks of oil refineries, from which a sulfurous smell occasionally drifts over the slow meanders of the Schuylkill River. West of the Boulevard lies a district once known as Paschallville and listed on road maps as Elmwood, but identified by its residents as Southwest.<sup>84</sup>

“The area is made up of working-class people,” a Philadelphia newspaper columnist observed.

They watch a lot of television, yell for the Flyers and pray for the Eagles. They live pretty much in the neighborhood of hoagie stops, taprooms, funeral homes, Mrs. G’s Deli, Lyn’s Shoe Store, rowhouses, Madeline’s House of Beauty, Century 21 signs and graffiti.<sup>85</sup>

According to the most recent U.S. Census data available in 1985, Elmwood had a median family income of \$17,600, just above the citywide figure of \$16,388, and was home to 20 blacks and 7,000 whites, mostly of Irish and Italian descent.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup>“Elmwood” was the name appearing on, for example, *Franklin’s map of Philadelphia and suburbs* (1982). However, the City Planning Commission defined the “Paschall” and “Elmwood” districts in considerably narrower terms. On their map (reproduced in Cutler and Gillette 1980: xi), the wedge-shaped northeastern portion of “Eastwick” was roughly equivalent to the neighborhood that journalists called “Elmwood” and local whites called “Southwest,” where the interviews for this study took place.

<sup>85</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1985, 15-A.

<sup>86</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 November 1985, 2-B; *Jet* magazine, 16 December 1985, 6. In an adjoining tract, where this study took place in 1977, the demographics were similar. Whites living

“A white enclave hemmed in by black neighborhoods, Elmwood has long been plagued by racial tensions,” reported *Time* magazine in late 1985, when white mobs protesting the arrival of black and interracial homebuyers led Wilson Goode, Philadelphia’s first black mayor, to declare a state of emergency.<sup>87</sup> One white protester tried to “make the point that we have a tight-knit neighborhood that is being surrounded by a black sea.”<sup>88</sup>

### *Social Geography*

The extent to which race defined Elmwood’s landscape was likewise evident in interviews conducted for this study in 1977. Asked to name the boundaries of her neighborhood, one young white woman responded, “What, for colored and white, you mean?” followed by a detailed description of current racial settlement patterns (PH-77-5-12). “Beyond Sixtieth and Woodland starts your black neighborhood,” said

---

there called their neighborhood “Southwest” in careful distinction from most districts west of the Schuylkill, where the majority was black. “When you listen to the news and all, we are categorized as West Philadelphia,” said a lifelong resident, who pointed out that this label did not agree with local usage (PH-77-5-2).

<sup>87</sup>For national media coverage, see *Time*, 9 December 1985, 34; *Jet*, 16 December 1985, 6; *People Weekly*, 16 December 1985, 143–144; *Jet*, 13 January 1986, 38, and 9 June 1986, 38. *Time* noted that “angry whites there have accused real estate brokers of blockbusting, an old and devious practice of moving black families into a white neighborhood to frighten residents into selling at rock-bottom prices.” The prospect of drastically lowered property values was particularly ominous to white working-class homeowners, one of whom told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: “We have people here who can’t afford \$50,000 or \$60,000 for a house, and they can’t leave” (22 November 1985, 2-B). For a white working-class perspective, see the letter by J. Bonelli, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 December 1985, 24-A.

Redlining by insurance companies was another economic practice which, eight years earlier, was already causing resentment in Elmwood. “They’ve put us in the risk area,” said a lifelong resident. “At one time, with car insurance and all, we were considered suburban rates. Now we’re in the risk area of West Philadelphia, so it has expanded quite a bit down here” (PH-77-5-2).

<sup>88</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 November 1985, 1-B.

another young housewife, naming an intersection to the north. “And I would not consider that in this community” (PH-77-5-11).

Railroad tracks run down the neighborhood’s northeast boundary, approximately at Sixtieth Street, with the church of St. Mary of Czestochowa just beyond. To the northwest, buses and trolleys follow busy Elmwood Avenue from the huge General Electric plant (occupying three square blocks between Sixty-seventh and Seventieth), through a small shopping district, and downtown. Woodland Avenue, an extended northwest boundary, is another commercial street parallel to and just beyond Elmwood, with railroad tracks running down the corridor between them.

At the time of the interviews, the southwest boundary was a residential color line from St. Clement Catholic Church and School (Seventy-second Street and Paschall Avenue) to Elmwood Park (Seventy-second and Passyunk Avenue), the Post Office and playground (Seventieth and Passyunk) and Lindbergh Boulevard. Extending southwest towards Philadelphia International Airport, the black neighborhoods known collectively as Eastwick were regarded by Elmwood residents as alien territory.

Within these boundaries, but on the outer edges of the neighborhood, were the Catholic church and school that locals called “Lady Loretta” (Our Lady of Loreto); three public schools, Bartram High, Tilden Middle School, and Patterson Elementary; a VFW hall; and various corner bars. It was at Our Lady of Loreto (Sixty-second Street and Gray’s Avenue) that white protesters met just before the demonstrations began on November 20, 1985.<sup>89</sup>

The heart of this community, residents said in 1977, lay between Sixtieth and Sixty-eighth Streets, and Elmwood Avenue to Lindbergh Boulevard. That area corresponds almost exactly to the emergency zone declared by Mayor Goode eight years

---

<sup>89</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 November 1985, 1-A.



later. Near the center, on Buist Avenue, were St. Barnabas Catholic Church and School, along with the convent of the teaching Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary. At a press conference following the 1985 demonstrations, the white community was represented by a policeman who headed the Catholic Youth Organization at St. Barnabas.<sup>90</sup>

Not far away, Sixty-first and Sixty-third Streets lead to Passyunk Avenue, allowing access to and from the South Philadelphia parishes where many of the residents grew up. “It’s like on a boundary line, the Schuylkill River,” said a local boy in 1977. “Yeah, yeah. As you go on the south side of the river, it’s South Philly. As you come over the other way, it’s Southwest” (PH-77-5-6).

To sum up the social geography of this neighborhood in a few words, it appeared that the white community had long considered itself a peripheral outpost of South Philadelphia while also welcoming migrants from formerly white areas of West Philadelphia. Defining themselves in opposition to the majority black population west of the Schuylkill, working-class Irish, Italians, and Poles—whatever may have been their relationships in the old neighborhoods—clustered together on the basis of a shared notion of whiteness which in Elmwood was practically synonymous with Catholicism. Local communication networks, bolstered by neighborhood institutions such as parish churches and parochial schools, reflected this fundamental perception.

### *Settlement History*

Southwest Philadelphia or Elmwood began as a rural village laid out in 1810 east of Cobbs Creek and south of Mount Moriah Cemetery.<sup>91</sup> Most likely it was a convenient stop for wagons traveling between Gray’s Ferry, an important transfer point for

---

<sup>90</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 November 1985, 6-B.

<sup>91</sup>“Mondal,” a milling settlement of colonial New Sweden, occupied a nearby site as early as the 1640s. See Weaver 1930.

Schuylkill River commerce, and points south and west of the city.<sup>92</sup> No doubt aided by the opening of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore railroad in 1838 and the Baltimore and Philadelphia line in 1886,<sup>93</sup> Paschallville grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century, dedicating St. Clement Catholic Church in 1865 and eventually becoming a “streetcar suburb” within the city limits.

Migration towards this area began in earnest between the two world wars, as urban development spread outward along Woodland, Gray’s, and Elmwood Avenues. “They built these houses right after World War I for the men working on Hog Island shipyard,” said a senior citizen in 1985; indeed, block upon block of “airlight” single-family row houses sprang up in the 1920s, followed by the two public secondary schools, Bartram and Tilden.<sup>94</sup> On “Dale Street” (a pseudonym), upwardly mobile workers were attracted to the two-story brick structures that included a basement, kitchen, dining room, sitting room (living room), and enclosed front sunporch (also known as a parlor), and upstairs, three bedrooms and a bath.

Demographically, most of the new arrivals were native-born, “either old-stock Americans or of Irish or German descent,” with a small minority of Jewish immigrants in the commercial zone.<sup>95</sup> The founders of St. Barnabas in 1919 were probably Irish Catholics (the school’s athletic teams are known as the Shamrocks), and further ethnic diversity produced Catholic churches dedicated to St. Mary of Czestochowa (1927), the

---

<sup>92</sup>See Clark 1982: 128.

<sup>93</sup>These dates are given by Roberts (1980), who discusses the impact of railroads on the urban development of Philadelphia.

<sup>94</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 November 1985, 2-B.

<sup>95</sup>Miller, Vogel, and Davis 1983: 240; Whiteman 1973: 250. Two probable sources of Irish migration are West Philadelphia and “Ramcat,” located southwest of Rittenhouse Square between Gray’s Ferry Avenue and the Schuylkill. See Clark 1980: 131–32.

symbol of Polish nationalism and religious liberty, and Our Lady of Loreto (Italian, 1932).<sup>96</sup>

By the Depression, an impoverished black population was also living in the deteriorating older housing on either side of Woodland Avenue,<sup>97</sup> but a lifelong resident born in the early 1930s said the area had always been “predominantly Catholic” (PH-77-5-2). In 1985, a man named Reilly, who had grown up in the area, described the neighborhood as “strongly all white—it used to be Irish.”<sup>98</sup> Bearing out his observation, Census data show that from 1930 to 1950, the white population south of Baltimore Avenue remained steady at 95%.<sup>99</sup>

Unlike some of the more affluent outlying communities, such as Mount Airy, Paschallville was never entirely residential. Many of its people were employed in the neighborhood, most likely at General Electric or the Fels soap works at Cobbs Creek and Island Road, but also at the Navy Yard, about five miles away in South Philadelphia (PH-77-5-15). A contemporary sociologist characterized the neighborhood as “predominantly an area of workingmen’s homes,” with settlement moving in several directions, especially below Elmwood Avenue and 60th Street.<sup>100</sup>

Most of the adults interviewed in 1977 appeared to belong to a second wave of interurban migration that began just after World War Two. Typically, young couples, the

---

<sup>96</sup>“Shamrocks,” interview with a St. Barnabas student (PH-77-5-6). Church directory information, *The official Catholic directory* (1995), vol. I, Philadelphia section; significance of St. Mary of Czestochowa, vol. II, 8. According to Varbero (1973: 266, fig. 12.2), the Poles who attended St. Mary’s came over the Schuylkill from a district known as “The Bottom,” at Gray’s Ferry and Wharton Avenues, which also contained Italian and Irish parishes. Golab (1973: 219) states that in 1915 “the bulk of those employed” at the J. B. Brill Co. in Southwest Philadelphia were Polish laborers.

<sup>97</sup>See Weaver 1930.

<sup>98</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1985, 2-B. Unfortunately his age was not given.

<sup>99</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 1-A.

<sup>100</sup>Weaver 1930: 62, 68.

husbands just out of military service, bought houses here after a year or two of renting an apartment or living with the older generation.<sup>101</sup>

It was in the 1950s, however, that the sons and daughters of the first wave of migration—those who had grown up between the wars—began to move out to the suburbs, and many of the homes they left behind were taken by blacks. Whites accelerated their flight from the city as the black population north of Woodland Avenue expanded from 15% in 1960 to 55% in 1970 and 84% in 1980. South and east of Woodland Avenue, the pockets of black population grew more slowly, from 9.5% in 1960 to 29% by 1980.<sup>102</sup> With racial tensions rising and property values on a thirty-year wane, less-affluent whites kept moving south and west as far as they could within the city. By 1985, ironically enough, both black and white ward politicians agreed that Southwest Philadelphia's economic distress was affecting both races equally.<sup>103</sup> "I have white divisions, and I have black divisions, and it's the same," said one. "This is one of the few neighborhoods left in Philadelphia where you can buy a home for about \$15,000. Both black and white—this is their last chance. Where are they going to go?"<sup>104</sup>

Philadelphians who came of age in the postwar era often said they moved to Southwest because their husband or wife had grown up there or because it was convenient to the husband's employment. However, another motivation for the upwardly mobile working class was the fear of violent crime elsewhere in the city.

We've had people move here from fairly rough neighborhoods because their children couldn't go out at night. . . . [Q: Where did they move from?] The West Philadelphia area, some of the bad parts of South Philadelphia. . . . But I would say the majority is really West Philadelphia. The projects, where they have bettered themselves. Not *bettered* themselves,

---

<sup>101</sup>See, for example, PH-77-5-3.

<sup>102</sup>Census statistics are cited in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 20-A.

<sup>103</sup>Economic distress in Southwest Philadelphia was, of course, tied to the impoverishment of the city as a whole, a product of deindustrialization and the flight of capital to the suburbs. See discussion of West Mount Airy, below.

<sup>104</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 20-A.

but been able to afford a little more, I guess. Doesn't make them a better *person*.  
(PH-77-5-2)

That this was also a racial fear was confirmed by comments made to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* during and just after the 1985 demonstrations. "It's been four neighborhoods I've been chased out of. I really don't want to move again," said a woman who had arrived in the early 1970s. A woman in her twenties, who had grown up on the same block, explained: "Once a black family moves in, their tolerance is so low because of what they have seen and what they fear. It's almost an innate fear of blacks."<sup>105</sup>

Residents concurred that Southwest, although not an ideal neighborhood, was somewhat safer, or possibly more genteel, than the neighboring areas. "You're always hearin' stuff about robberies an' all," said Danny, a young Elmwood boy, in 1977. "With the robberies, murders, it always seems like it's either West Philly or South Philly" (PH-77-5-6). While Danny and a friend, Kevin, bluntly described their South Philadelphia peers as "ratty," "mouthy," and "bad news," a young mother from a suburban background remarked diplomatically that South Philadelphia girls seemed to grow up awfully fast compared to girls in Southwest (PH-77-5-5).

Nevertheless it should not be concluded that all Southwest Philadelphians, even years after moving in, had left their old neighborhoods behind. In 1985, a senior citizen wearing a blue South Philadelphia String Band windbreaker told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that he had moved to Elmwood in 1947 but still returned to South Philadelphia every New Year's Day to participate in the Mummers' Parade.<sup>106</sup> In all, most of the adults interviewed in 1977 had either grown up in South Philadelphia or married someone else who had. Many traced their attitudes toward race and religion, ethnicity and

---

<sup>105</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 November 1985, 1-A; 22 November 1985, 1-B.

<sup>106</sup> For extensive background on the Mummers' Parade, a tradition rooted in the white, working-class, Catholic neighborhoods of South Philadelphia, see Hoover 1989.

social class to formative experiences over two generations in the neighborhoods across the river.

*Catholics and Color in South Philadelphia*

The sons and daughters of Italian immigrants in prewar South Philadelphia remembered a close-knit area where “you knew people for blocks” (PH-77-5-7) and Depression-era poverty drew neighbors together. “If you came from a neighborhood, you were all starving,” said a retired mechanic.

We didn’t have the problems you’ve got today as far as racial or anything, because I come from a neighborhood that was really a mixed neighborhood. We had Irish, Italian, Jews, blacks, Filipinos, you name it. . . . There wasn’t any group or individual you couldn’t find. Hungarian, Jewish, German, French. They were there. And they were all livin’ together, an’ I thought it was great. (PH-77-5-14)

A crucial distinction between the old neighborhood and Southwest, in this man’s recollection, was the absence of a single bullying majority or targeted minority group.<sup>107</sup> “Generally a gang’ll pick on the weaker people,” the man recalled, “and since we were such a mixture there wasn’t a weaker group.” Whether or not his neighborhood was exceptionally harmonious, it is also possible that immigrant Catholics of various ethnicities had not yet redefined themselves, as a later generation would, in terms of shared “whiteness.”

The latter view is partially supported by an anthropological study of Philadelphia Mumming (Hoover 1989), which traces evolving definitions of “whiteness” in working-class South Philadelphia.

Elite views, not the conditions of proximity and competition with black Philadelphians, created a problem of self-definition for South Italians that was inextricable from the social definition of blackness. Which of these two groups ought to be the most socially inferior was much debated among Philadelphia’s leaders and employers (103–104).

---

<sup>107</sup> According to Varbero (1973: 256–57), in the 1920s “at least nineteen different nationalities were represented” in the densely populated wards of South Philadelphia.

When the Irish and South Italians—neither of whom was considered white by Anglo-American elites—arrived in Philadelphia, “shared Catholicism and working-class status were not enough to unite them,” says Hoover. “Nor was either able to coexist easily with the Polish Catholic community until after World War II.” For the younger generation, however, the construction of a common “white” identity did more than bridge these ethnic divisions. Through identification with the city’s elite, it also created a symbolic claim for increased socioeconomic privilege (Hoover 1989: 119–120).

Beginning in the 1960s, reaction to the civil rights movement reinforced and solidified this newfound sense of white identity in South Philadelphia, Hoover continues. Accordingly, racial polarization and conflict left a lasting, and more negative, impression on the children of that time and place. One woman recalled hostilities between white students on the way to Catholic schools and black students going to nearby public schools. “They wouldn’t let us off at our bus stop,” she said.

They used to keep us on the bus. And they used to spit on our heads or pull us by our heads. That’s in the Sixties. Right after Martin Luther King, when he was assassinated.

Even before he was assassinated, a lotta trouble started before then. ‘Cause even when we were in grade school, . . . the niggers used to push us. . . . They used to knock us all over the streets. (PH-77-5-12)

A young Elmwood girl characterized Bartram High in similar terms:

Well, that’s a public school. So, really, more coloreds go to public school. ‘Round here they do. [Q: How come?] Well, they’re not Catholic. . . . Some colored people aren’t Catholic, just Protestant. They all go to that school. Most of the whites are scared to go there, ‘cause you’d get jumped an’ all. Couple people got jumped. (PH-77-5-4)

Among the prewar generation, however, traces of earlier, less rigid racial attitudes could still be found as late as 1985. “I don’t go for all this talk about ‘niggers’,” said a thirty-year resident of Southwest. “When I heard people using that language, I remembered how the Italian people were treated. If you were Italian, they spat on you. The Irish got it, too.”<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1985, 15-A.

*Southwest: Lingering Distinctions*

On a November Sunday just after the 1985 demonstrations, the organist at Our Lady of Loreto Catholic Church contended that parishioners got along with people of all races. “We have the League of Nations here,” she said. “There’s no problem with that.”<sup>109</sup> Likewise, when interviewed in 1977, a number of adults living on Dale Street proudly emphasized the harmony and ethnic diversity not only of their block but also their congregation, the 3,300 families of St. Barnabas Catholic Church.<sup>110</sup> “We have Polish, Irish, Italian, Czechoslovakian,” said a woman of Italian descent, evidently confusing “Czestochowa” with “Czechoslovakia” (PH-77-5-1). “And we do have some black people,” another parishioner added, a bit self-consciously. “I’ve never really thought of it” (PH-77-5-2).

Within their parish, some neighbors said, inter-ethnic marriage was not a sensitive issue.

Usually, if one is Catholic, as long as the other’s Catholic, whatever nationality they are doesn’t matter, as long as they’re Catholic. I mean if they’re a good Catholic. One that loves their religion, practices their religion. (PH-77-5-1)

But the woman who had included blacks among the ethnic groups at St. Barnabas seemed a bit startled by the general follow-up question, “Do they intermarry?” “Intermarry?” she replied. “You mean Polish, Italian? Oh, yes” (PH-77-5-2). Even among the white ethnic groups, other parishioners observed, marriage preferences continued to follow traditional lines. “I know of mixed couples, Irish and Italian that are married,” said an older man of Irish descent, “but the people in the neighborhood pretty well stay with their own” (PH-77-5-3).

---

<sup>109</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1985, 1-B.

<sup>110</sup> This figure was supplied by a longtime parishioner (PH-77-5-2).



Asked about nearby Catholic schools, two eleven-year-old Irish boys, students at St. Barnabas, provided another local perspective on religion and ethnicity. Their own school was open to everyone, not just Irish people, explained Kevin matter-of-factly, while “Lady Loretta” accepted only Italians. As for St. Clement’s, he continued, “they take *any* kinda people.” “Orientals!” Danny chimed in, prompting giggles and whispered comments between the two friends. There was also the “University o’ Polish” (more giggles), St. Mary of “Czechoslovakia—or some’m like that,” Danny concluded, obviously having trouble with the name (PH-77-5-6).

All of this suggests that while relations among various Catholic groups were basically amicable, nationality still provided, to a certain extent, a measure of social closeness or distance. However, lingering ethnic distinctions paled into a common whiteness at the borders of the neighborhood, and between the parochial and the public school.

### *The Color Line*

I knew a friend—well, I still know ’im—Tom Gooley. Well, he got jumped the other day. Elmwood Avenue. The guy was clear of his house, waitin’ for the trolley.

An’ this black kid came over [to] him. He said, “Hey, bro’, ’s there any cops aroun’?”

An’ ’e said, “No.”

An’ ’e [the black kid] punched him in the face.

The other kid [another kid] ran over to the bar ’n’ said that they’re jumpin’ Gooley.

An’ they [the men] came out. His father ran around, he came out with a lead pipe. Gonna hit them. But the [black] kid took off in the trolley. (PH-77-5-6)

Narrated by a young boy, this story of an apparently random assault perfectly illustrates the racial nature of such confrontations, at least as interpreted by local whites. One kid sucker-punches another at the neighborhood’s border: the next thing you know, “they’re” jumping Gooley, and the drinking buddies from the corner bar—Italians, Irish, Poles—

are running around with lead pipes, ready to beat hell out of the first black people they see.

Regardless of nationality, gender, or age, Southwest residents spoke of the surrounding black communities as a collection of “bad neighborhoods” where assaults on straying whites could occur at any moment. “The heart of West Philadelphia—I would really stay away from [there],” declared a middle-aged woman, laughing nervously at the very idea (PH-77-5-2). “In the car, I would ride past,” added her younger neighbor, “but I mean, walking, you just don’t trust ’em. You don’t know what they’re gonna do” (PH-77-5-12).

White teenagers did, however, cross over into West Philadelphia on the way to West Catholic, the area’s only parochial high school, where reports of racial confrontation—recalling South Philadelphia in the Sixties—were common. Said a young boy:

My brothers, they tell me about up at West Philly High, they get off at the bus one or two blocks away from there. They always start trouble with you up there. Say you’re from West Catholic and all. They’ll start taking care of you. (PH-77-5-6)

Closer to home, both black and white students attended Bartram, where if anything the racial situation seemed to be even worse.

My friend Gary, he goes down there. He wants to go to West Catholic, ’cause they’re *torturin’* up there [at Bartram]. When he comes to class, they all start on you, about four of them. He tries to stand up to them, but ya can’t. Hit one of them, and the whole pack’s gonna come get you. (PH-77-5-6)

A somewhat older woman also pointed to “the white kids in the neighborhood” as the instigators of violence against black students coming in from other areas. “With the buses going back and forth, they’ll throw things at the buses, and stuff like that,” she said (PH-77-5-12).

During the late 1970s, having developed a reputation as “problem schools,” both Bartram and Tilden Middle School were being abandoned by many of the Southwest

parents who had once attended them. By 1985, in the census tract where the protests took place, 80.5% of school-aged children were in the parochial system.<sup>111</sup> This internal version of “white flight,” instead of breaking up the old neighborhood, strengthened its identity as a set of interlocking parishes.

*The Parochial School as a Neighborhood Social Institution*

Sending the children to Catholic school may have been less expensive than moving to the suburbs, but for local families, especially the Poles and Italians, the financial sacrifice was said to be considerable. Nevertheless, in addition to a more segregated environment, parents believed the parochial system offered at least two worthwhile advantages over public education: religious training, to be sure, but also—perhaps especially—authoritarian discipline. “I tell you, I think you’re better off in a Catholic school,” an Italian mother declared,

. . . because the nuns, they’re *firm*. . . Catholic school, there’s no playing around. You’re going to school to *learn*, and they make you understand that” (PH-77-5-5).

In addition to educating neighborhood children, the church and its schools also provided recreational activities for area adults. “Usually over in the school basement, that’s where we have all our get-togethers,” said a St. Barnabas parent (PH-77-5-6). Asked where local people might gather to have fun, another woman responded, “The only thing I could say is the church, when they run socials. I would say that was it, the church hall.” Was there no other local hall? she was asked. “Not really,” the woman replied. “No, no community thing. The church is more or less where you’d go” (PH-77-5-15).<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 November 1985, 2-B.

<sup>112</sup>Examples of church-sponsored social events were West Catholic High’s “Monte Carlo Night,” where neighbors gambled to raise money for the school’s athletic teams, and the St. Barnabas school carnival, held in a local playground and followed by a party for volunteer workers from

On the afternoon of November 20, 1985—hours before the first white demonstration in Elmwood, which was scheduled for that night—Brother Edward Gallagher, principal of West Catholic High School, assembled about 200 students from the parishes of St. Barnabas and Our Lady of Loreto. “I had one thing in mind,” he recalled. “‘Don’t be there. I don’t want you there.’” Attending both demonstrations, Brother Gallagher recognized four of his students and sent them home. Although the protesters “got the city’s attention,” he said afterwards, it was “in their best interest . . . not to fight” the movement of blacks into the neighborhood.<sup>113</sup> Brother Gallagher’s actions, and the fact that he was interviewed at some length by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, further attested to the local authority of parochial educators.

#### *Social Life Outside the Church*

Although the church and its schools provided the basic institutional framework of neighborhood life, local social activities did take place outside it. A nearby veterans’ hall, for example, had until recently hosted a “Twenty-Twenty Club,” an arrangement whereby neighbors contributed a dollar per week for twenty weeks; at the end of this period, about twice a year, a dance was held, with food and a live band. Men also congregated in neighborhood bars, at least one of which included a dining room for families.<sup>114</sup> Block parties had also been popular at one time, some neighbors recalled. In 1985, a teenaged girl said that the white protests had been “like a block party.”<sup>115</sup>

Several people reported in 1977 that they spent social time with family members who lived within walking distance or in South Philadelphia, their old neighborhood. The

---

the neighborhood. (Also mentioned was a Polish club at or near St. Mary’s, although its relationship to the church was not made clear.)

<sup>113</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 November 1985, 6-A.

<sup>114</sup>The “Twenty-Twenty Club”: PH-77-5-6, PH-77-5-11; bars: PH-77-5-6, PH-77-5-8.

<sup>115</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 November 1985, 2-B.

common experience of rearing children also brought adults together. Two neighboring mothers were such good friends that, said one, “I could talk to her and tell her things that I wouldn’t [tell] even my own family” (PH-77-5-12).

On the other hand, some older residents, no longer bringing up children, complained that there was too much social distance in the neighborhood. “Years ago, people were more warm,” said the wife of a retired mechanic. “They were more friendly. They had more time for each other. Today, if they say hello to you, you’re lucky” (PH-77-5-5). The coldest neighbors, another woman observed, were young families who had recently moved in from more dangerous parts of the city. “They’re a little bitter, I guess. I don’t know how else to put it. They seem to be against everything. You kind of would like to be friendly, but they just won’t let you” (PH-77-5-2). This group, simmering with resentment, was prominently represented among the white demonstrators eight years later.<sup>116</sup>

### *“Antisocial” Socializing*

For kids in their early teens—longing for independence but too young for the wider world—“hangin’ on the corner” with friends was an attractive alternative to church-basement functions with their parents and younger siblings. Adults reported that groups—some called them gangs—of eight to ten kids could be found at local playgrounds and street corners, sometimes taking over the sidewalk so that pedestrians had to walk in the street. From time to time, it was said, police would cruise by and break up unusually large gatherings, but kids seemed to see this as harassment rather than brutality.<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 November 1985, 23-A.

<sup>117</sup>It should be noted that the police themselves may have belonged to neighboring families. “This is a cop-environment neighborhood,” explained one resident, who was acquainted with several

These young people were blamed for a number of local problems, including drug use, loitering, vandalism, and residential burglaries. Neighborhood youths were also said to enforce local turf boundaries (PH-77-5-12); indeed, just five years before, the playgrounds just north of Sixtieth and Woodland had become battlegrounds for black youths and a white gang known as the Dirty Annies.<sup>118</sup> In 1985 as well, the crowd of white demonstrators was “predominantly young”; a few days later, asked about the possibility of further racial unrest, a parishioner at Our Lady of Loreto remarked, “If anything happens, it will be because of the kids.”<sup>119</sup>

### *Neighborliness*

Whether they were acquainted through church, parochial schools, their children’s networks, or sheer residential proximity, adult participants expected other local whites to behave in a “neighborly” fashion. In their view it was regrettable, and perhaps even a comment on society generally, for people not to acknowledge their neighbors with so much as a casual greeting on the street. Beyond this minimal standard, socializing within the neighborhood (especially among kin, but not limited to them) was welcomed, although one resident maintained that more social distance was maintained in Southwest than in South Philadelphia (PH-77-5-11).

Help in the neighborhood, whether in the form of occasional favors or assistance in emergencies, was another aspect of “neighborly” behavior. Ordinary favors included

---

local officers. “They all live around here” (PH-77-5-11). For more on gangs, see PH-77-5-3 and PH-77-5-4.

<sup>118</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 20-A. In 1971 and 1972, two teenaged boys and a young man of twenty were murdered in separate incidents that took place near the Myers Recreational Center (Fifty-eighth and Kingsessing Avenue). Police said the assailants in the second case were members of the Dirty Annies. Said a black youth at the time, “I think we—the whites and the blacks—should just go into Cobbs Creek Park and have it out, barehanded.”

<sup>119</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 November 1985, 1-B; 25 November 1985, 2-B.

the circulation of children's hand-me-downs, babysitting (including unforeseen, last-minute needs), fixing minor car trouble, providing emergency transportation, giving first aid for children's bumps and bruises, and scaring off a potential intruder.

In a neighborhood of attached rowhouses, certain types of emergency demanded immediate attention, as much for one's own safety as for the sake of "neighborliness" or close personal ties. Thus, one woman praised her next-door neighbor's quick response when a plumbing accident threatened to flood her home, while another mentioned that neighbors had come to the aid of a local resident when an electrical fire broke out in her kitchen.

An equally illuminating perspective on local norms of "neighborliness" was provided by several accounts of conflict between individuals living on the same block. The usual cause was children's misbehavior—bullying or vandalism. An aggrieved adult might yell at the culprit to stop, followed by discussion with the child's parents (PH-77-5-1). Chronic provocations that could not be ignored might lead adults to verbal challenges, physical confrontation, extended family feuds, and, ultimately, involvement of the criminal justice system.<sup>120</sup> At every stage of conflict, however, exchanging words (whether calm or heated) was an ideal carried over from the social networks of South Philadelphia, where, said one man, "you just knew everybody. Now if they didn't like some'm you were doin', they would come tell you first" (PH-77-5-7).

Although conflicts could be resolved—or a standoff reached—by means of an apology, two neighboring women with a long history of conflict over their children went

---

<sup>120</sup>PH-77-5-12 includes several extended narratives of, and commentary on, conflict between neighbors. In another interview, a middle-aged man explained that avoiding a fight was better than confrontation "'cause it's not only you you're involvin'. Quite often, you're involvin' your family" (PH-77-5-14).

farther than that when they resolved to “talk civilized” instead of fighting.<sup>121</sup> They began to greet one another on the street; a few months later, when one of the women was at home recovering from surgery, her former enemy knocked on the door and offered to babysit. From then on, visits and confidences were exchanged, and the two became close friends (PH-77-5-11, PH-77-5-12).

All these markers of “neighborliness”—greetings, requests and offers of help, verbal negotiation and confrontation, social visiting, and exchanging confidences—helped to define a neighbor in communicative terms as a local resident (including nearby kin) with whom one had, or could potentially have, words. Within this sociolinguistic perimeter, physical safety was the expected norm.

Outside the boundaries of potential communication, the absence of “neighborliness” meant, conversely, that physical safety could not be expected and conflicts could only be avoided, not negotiated or resolved. In Elmwood it was blacks whom white residents defined as communicative outsiders—in effect, permanent strangers. This was the attitude underlying the story of Tom Gooley (see above), in which a pretended conversational opener by a black youth led directly to assault.

At the opposite pole from “neighborliness,” and signifying the complete rejection of possible neighbor status, were acts of physical violence. Turf wars between black and white youths in the early 1970s have already been mentioned; in addition, Southwest interviewees reported in the fall of 1977 that the home of an interracial couple, just one

---

<sup>121</sup>Significantly, it was a racial insult that had provoked the conflict between the two women, of whom one was Italian-American and the other was of mixed South and East Asian descent. When the white woman’s boy called the Asian-American woman a “nigger,” the latter’s young daughter hit him and wiped his face in the snow. However, the Asian-American woman, although somewhat dark-skinned, had grown up in a white neighborhood in South Philadelphia, belonged to the Catholic church, had married a lifelong Southwest resident (white, and relatively well-off), and was hostile to blacks (PH-77-5-11, PH-77-5-12).



block away, had been set ablaze that summer.<sup>122</sup> Although one resident implied that “a gang of kids” might have been responsible, it was significant that “nobody helped out” (PH-77-5-12), either during or after the fire.<sup>123</sup>

### *Epilogue*

In June 1979, less than two years after the interviews for this study took place, sniper fire from a factory roof at Sixtieth Street and Springfield Avenue struck down three black teenagers, one of whom later died. Hours later, in the same area, a white teenager riding a trolley was beaten by black youths, as was a 57-year-old white man who had stopped for a traffic light. As a result, Bartram and Tilden schools were forced to close a week before the end of the regular term, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported.

A few nights later, 300 black youths spilled out of a Southwest Philadelphia church and engaged in a bottle-throwing, traffic-stopping protest. The same night, a mile away, two white youths were pulled off their bicycles and clubbed by six black youths carrying baseball bats. In yet another incident, white youths wielding pipes smashed the car windows of a black man waiting at a traffic light.<sup>124</sup>

The following April, just three blocks from the site of the interviews, 25 to 30 black youths carrying bats and clubs chased three white boys into Finnegan Playground (Sixty-ninth and Grovers Avenue). One of the whites was stabbed and killed. A few days later, about ten blocks away, a black man waiting for a trolley was stabbed by four white youths. That year the city established a neighborhood organization, the Southwest Task Force, to promote dialogue and prevent further violence.<sup>125</sup>

After the 1985 protests, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called upon “the neighborhood’s leaders, its politicians and its priests” to heal what editors called “the

---

<sup>122</sup>See interviews PH-77-5-5, PH-77-5-10, PH-77-5-11, PH-77-5-12, and PH-77-5-15.

<sup>123</sup>Arson also followed the 1985 demonstrations. See *Jet*, 13 January and 9 June 1986.

<sup>124</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 20-A.

<sup>125</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 20-A.

shame of the city.”<sup>126</sup> With religion such an important factor in Elmwood’s social geography, perhaps it was only appropriate that members of the local clergy, both Protestant and Catholic, took a prominent role in calming racial tensions.<sup>127</sup> Organized as the Southwest Interfaith Ministerium, they called for an end to public demonstrations and also offered support to “community residents who went to the two couples and offered their apologies and other people who did not approve of the demonstrations but had not spoken out.”<sup>128</sup> Perhaps aided by this encouragement, neighbors made a number of conciliatory gestures—personal visits, letters of apology, a bouquet—to the black and interracial homeowners whom protestors had targeted.<sup>129</sup> Speaking to a journalist, a thirty-year Elmwood resident offered these words:

I know some fine Negroes. I’d welcome them as neighbors. The bad ones, well, they’re not welcome. But people who throw bottles and rocks at kids don’t belong in this neighborhood. That’s not what we stand for.

If this neighborhood isn’t strong enough to welcome Negroes, I’m not so sure of what people are trying to protect. A good neighborhood is not just decent buildings. A good neighborhood is good *people*.<sup>130</sup>

## THE “PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC” OF WEST MOUNT AIRY

Mount Airy, a largely white, middle-class neighborhood of northwestern Philadelphia, lies between two historic settlements: Germantown, to the south and east, and wealthy Chestnut Hill, across Cresheim Creek to the northwest. The picturesque

---

<sup>126</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 6-C.

<sup>127</sup>Other organizations working toward this end included the Southwest Task Force, the Crisis Intervention Network, Operation PUSH, and Black Family Services. On November 27, the city’s Human Relations Commission and the Philadelphia Board of Realtors announced a 90-day real-estate solicitation ban to prevent blockbusting in Southwest. (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1985, 1-A; 28 November 1985, 6-B; and 29 November 1985, 2-B.)

<sup>128</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 30 November 1985, 22-D.

<sup>129</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 November 1985, 6-A; 24 November 1985, 20-A; 26 November 1985, 12-A.

<sup>130</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1985, 15-A.

Wissahickon Valley of Fairmount Park forms a natural boundary to the south and west, running parallel to the Schuylkill River just beyond. According to historian Meredith Savery (1980: 197),

Settlement in the Mount Airy region began in the eighteenth century as the wilderness gave way to farms and the Cresheim and Wissahickon creeks were harnessed to provide power for mills. The Germantown Turnpike, from downtown Philadelphia to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, became an important artery early in the century, and there are still a number of eighteenth-century buildings—inns, farmhouses, and large summer estates—along Germantown Avenue.

Today this thoroughfare separates West from East Mount Airy.

The neighborhood is named after the summer residence of Chief Justice William Allen (1704–1780), a “Presbyterian grandee” who served briefly as mayor of Philadelphia.<sup>131</sup> Farms, resorts, and wealthy retreats characterized the region until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when streetcar and especially railroad lines first brought Mount Airy within the reach of upper middle-class commuters.<sup>132</sup>

Not all the residents of Mount Airy were quite so well off, however. East of Germantown Avenue, bounded by Gorgas Lane, Upsal Street, and Chew Street, was a former mill village known as Franklinville, with a sizeable Irish population and a small but expanding number of black families. Since the nineteenth century Franklinville’s craftsmen, millworkers, laborers, and farmworkers had been providing essential labor power to Mount Airy as a whole (Savery 1980: 199, 205).

---

<sup>131</sup>The phrase is E. Digby Baltzell’s. For more on William Allen and early Mount Airy, see Jellett 1915: 280–81, 338; Lippincott 1917: 43–44, 96; Macfarlane 1927: 50, 79–81; Jackson 1932: 53–54, 909; Bronner 1982: 63; and Baltzell 1979: 150. For a general history of Mount Airy (published jointly by the local neighborhood associations) see Thomas 1979 and the *Mount Airy 1982 Community Calendar*.

<sup>132</sup>The trend from rural elegance to suburban gentility was spurred by real estate speculators, beginning on the east side along the Reading line (1854). In 1884, the financier Henry Howard Houston convinced the Pennsylvania Railroad to open its own line on the west side; electrical power was brought in the same year. See Savery 1980.

By 1922 several Irish Catholic families in the Holy Cross parish had left Franklinville for more affluent parts of Mount Airy. One daughter of Irish immigrants recalled in 1980 how her parents had moved from Ross Street, on the east side, to “Mount Olive Avenue,” on the west:<sup>133</sup>

At that time . . . my dad was on the trolleys, and the trolleys ran on Germantown Avenue, one block away, and the school was two blocks away, and the church . . . My dad only had to walk up the street . . . to get the trolley to take him to work. And we had the train at the foot of the hill . . . So what more could you want? You didn't need a car in those days. (PH-80-2-18)

The move across Germantown Avenue did not, however, remove these families from the parish social networks, which continued in full force on Mount Olive. Perhaps as a result, this woman was easily able to recall many Irish families on both sides of the neighborhood but was less clear about more immediate neighbors barely a block away:

Never any Irish down the street. That's up here, this is down there. Not Irish down there, just plain Pennsylvania people, or whatever they were . . . I didn' know any of 'em. But up the street, out of the, say, sixteen houses on that side of the street, say fourteen was Irish. And this side was German. The first block and down the hill was. (PH-80-2-18)

The housing they found on Mount Olive Avenue and nearby blocks had been custom-designed about 1910 specifically to appeal to upwardly mobile families. In contrast to the row houses and small semidetached homes on the cramped lots of Franklinville, Mount Olive offered large, four-bedroom English cottages and spacious yards.<sup>134</sup> Other amenities included stone and half-timber detailing, oak woodwork, slate roofs, fireplaces, French windows, and screened porches.<sup>135</sup>

In the 1940s this resident married, acquiring the house from her parents, who continued to live there as extended family to her own children. Growing up in this house

---

<sup>133</sup>A pseudonym has been used.

<sup>134</sup>By the 1920s, however, these houses had begun to fall out of fashion as “Mount Airy, East and West, became a center for colonial revival architecture. Large and imposing homes replete with fanlights, pediments, dormers, and columned entranceways replaced the mansard-roofed, gabled, and bracketed styles of the late nineteenth century” (Savery 1980: 209–210).

<sup>135</sup>Thanks to Kristine Hoover for these observations.

during the 1950s, the next generation, like those before, appreciated the convenience of easy public transportation and especially the shopping area. “We had the greatest one there was,” said a younger woman.

Years ago, when I was little, . . . [we] used to love to [go] out the street to the stores . . . . We had [a] ladies’ dress shop and a movie theater . . . . The A and P was there, so everything was right here. (PH-80-2-18)

A retired teacher, who had arrived in 1941, also warmly recalled shopping on Germantown Avenue:

We had a big food store that even had a kitchen, . . . with cooked food that you could take out. We had a very fine bakery. We had a dress shop. We had a fruit store. We had an Acme . . . . We had a wonderful paint store . . . . We had everything. We had a five-and-ten, and a gift shop. Oh, it was really . . . a nice section. (PH-80-2-16)

The vitality of the commercial district was no doubt aided by a second housing boom in Mount Airy after the Second World War. During the 1940s and ’50s a new generation of automobile commuters moved into the undeveloped areas, especially east of the Reading railroad line. According to Savery, however, the proliferation of multifamily housing—twins, quadriplexes, and apartment buildings—did not significantly affect Mount Airy’s white, middle-class identity, nor did it alter Franklinville’s status as a working-class, increasingly black, community (1980: 217–18).

Race became an issue on Mount Olive Avenue late in the 1950s, when homeowners around West Mount Airy began to get telephone calls from real-estate developers urging them to leave the neighborhood. “It was block-busted,” said a resident in her early thirties.

[Developers] just inundate an area and try and make people sell out cheap. And then they’ll sell to black people at a much higher price, and they’ll make a profit. In the process they really tear up the neighborhood, and they create all kinds of animosity. (PH-80-2-4)

The response in West Mount Airy was mixed. While some white families did move out, those who stayed organized the West Mount Airy Neighbors association in 1959. (East Mount Airy followed suit in 1965.) The purpose of this group, according to

the woman just cited, was not to keep black families out but “to try to create a neighborhood that was integrated peacefully, and integrated happily,” without a drastic drop in property values. WMAN “went after the real estate people,” she said.

At some time there was an ordinance passed in the city council that you can’t put up For Sale signs if the neighborhood’s being threatened . . . They refused to allow people to put up For Sale signs, and they did a lot of publicity . . . that this didn’t have to happen, I think working with the schools and everything. (PH-80-2-4)

Such an approach was successful enough to bring West Mount Airy to national attention, and thereafter residents took pride in having created “a neighborhood where . . . integration works” (PH-80-2-4). This positive attitude was also apparent in the schools. One woman who was a student at the time recalled that “this whole Mount Airy section, and this area in particular, was supposed to be one of the . . . model places for integration, because we worked so well” (PH-80-2-18). Another neighbor said that WMAN “is what held the neighborhood together then” (PH-80-2-16).<sup>136</sup>

Unfortunately, even the best efforts of the neighborhood associations were not enough to insulate Mount Airy’s residents, black and white, from the general impoverishment of Philadelphia in the postwar decades. Between 1946 and 1968 historians have documented an enormous shift of business, industry, and taxpaying population to the suburbs, even out of state, while the city suffered from a dramatic increase in violent crime, drug trafficking, and racial confrontation. Although the older housing stock was deteriorating, funding from reinvestment was not made a priority; at

---

<sup>136</sup>A black perspective on this critical period is given by a Mrs. Wilson, quoted in a research report by Neubauer et al. (1980). Immediately upon moving to Mount Olive Avenue in 1958, she and her husband received a harassing telephone call and one hostile visit, followed by an apology from another white resident, who noted that the harasser didn’t live on their street. After that, Mrs. Wilson resolved to be “neighborly” but reserved in her relationships with the white neighbors, preferring to socialize with black families on adjoining blocks. When interviewed 22 years later, Mrs. Wilson could name only three white residents; the rest of the block, for their part, seemed scarcely aware of her presence. Neubauer et al. point out additional demographic factors—generation, religion, political orientation—that isolate Mrs. Wilson from the common interests of the block.

the same time, failing municipal services contributed to Philadelphia's physical decline. (See Clark and Clark 1982.) These trends continued through the 1970s, when the city lost over 100,000 *more* manufacturing jobs, a drop of 44% in ten years. Under Mayor Frank L. Rizzo (1971–79), however, the mounting need for social services was met with inflammatory racist rhetoric and vigorous, even brutal, law enforcement (Wolf 1982).

The effects of this general impoverishment were particularly dramatic on Germantown Avenue, which “has really gone downhill” since the 1950s (PH-80-2-18). The comments of other, more recent residents contrasted starkly with earlier views of the commercial district:

Germantown Avenue is a bit hairy at night . . . I would not walk [to the liquor store] at night. We don't go up there at all. I just don't like going to Germantown Avenue. I just don't like the kind of people around there. (PH-80-2-16)

In the last four years [i.e., since 1976], Germantown Avenue has deteriorated. A lot of empty stores now. The liquor store is crummy. Germantown Avenue is a crummy area. With empty storefronts you're bound for trouble. (PH-80-2-2)

In this increasingly embittered social climate, West Mount Airy's reputation as an affordable, relatively crime-free, and politically progressive neighborhood began, about 1972, to attract a new generation of young parents. Said a member of this group:

The people . . . who moved in were looking for a neighborhood of similar people, [by] which I mean [that] there are people here who had at least some commitment to integration, . . . who would say, “I don't want to live in an all-white neighborhood. I don't want to live in the Northeast. I don't want to live in the suburbs. But I want to live someplace that feels safe. And I want to live someplace where my kids can go to school.” (PH-80-2-4)<sup>137</sup>

On Mount Olive Avenue the newcomers formed a mutually supportive network as tightly knit, and at least as homogeneous, as their Irish Catholic predecessors had ever been. In 1980, one member of this network described her peers with affectionate irony:

You'd be surprised how many people were born in 1947 on this street, . . . or who are going to be thirty-four, . . . and have young families. And they had their children—they had their first child the same year. They all went to college. . . . They were all . . . a little bit left in the

---

<sup>137</sup>Note that these stated motivations allow for tension between “a neighborhood of similar people” and the integrationist ideal.

sixties. They lived in University City or Powelton or Center City. They had some experience with a commune, or with travel, or whatever. It's a common story, and they all ended up here. (PH-80-2-4)

“It's all predictable,” said another member of this group, also clearly amused.

You could feed us into a computer; in fact, it's frightening when ya— [laughs]. You know, you don't have to interview these people. You just check out their income tax forms and ask racial, ethnic questions, you can figure it all out. (PH-80-2-27)

This resident named “age, children, and class” as defining characteristics (PH-80-2-27), with left-wing politics playing a supporting role:

This particular block . . . tends to be teachers, writers, professors, professional people, who're mid-thirties aging activists, but whose political activity tends to be through professional work. . . . The newer residents tend to be young couples, often, though not always, with two incomes, educated, professional, and not in very dire need, that's for sure. (PH-80-2-9)

In a context of residential mobility and political choice, however, “class” proved to be a slippery category for this participant, variously referring to material upbringing, career expectations, social values, or present occupation. Attempting to clarify the ambiguity, he came out with a rather succinct group portrait:

I would say that class and age . . . describe the block, . . . and I keep saying “professionals,” and that's not quite accurate. . . . “Middle-class” and “upper middle-class” don't quite fit either. . . . Some of the people are children of the upper middle class. . . . I think of 'em as sort of declassed professionals who are artisan-intellectuals. . . . They have upper middle-class values and lower middle-class incomes [laughs] or something like that. And youngish, in their thirties, and with little kids. (PH-80-2-27)

Given a close age range, a shared socioeconomic background, common values, and the challenge of creating a satisfying community life in a declining city, it was not surprising to find that the newcomers had chosen a traditional-looking strategy: cooperative organization. Neubauer et al., for example, documented an “intricate” borrowing and exchange network involving perishable goods (groceries, flowers); utensils, tools, and machinery (coffeepot, shears, ladders, lawn mower, power equipment, car); money; and personal services (watering flowers, house-sitting) (1982: 20–22).



While this kind of cooperation is often necessary in communities where essential resources are scarce, on Mount Olive Avenue it represented a deliberate economic choice. Like the decision to live in the city in the first place, conscious cooperation was seen by the newcomers as a positive alternative to the conspicuous self-sufficiency, even anomie, of suburban life.

We think sometimes of moving, . . . to satisfy our sense of a more elegant house—not that we could afford one—or to be in a single house, rather than a twin, or finding a place where our kids could go to school without hitting strikes all the time. But I would . . . feel such a sense of loss, I think, for the neighborhood . . . It’s hard to step into a place where there isn’t one, and create it, and build it. . . . [T]hose are the real laborers, who are creating communities where there aren’t any. (PH-80-2-24)

Daily social interactions on Mount Olive Avenue reflected this communitarian ethic. One expected, for example, to converse with the neighbors, crossing the street if necessary. “It’s probably one of the codes of the neighborhood,” said a young professional woman.

You do stop and chat. . . . I guess the code is always to talk, and probably to stop and chat for some time. . . . Not with everybody, but a good percentage of people, and even people that you— . . . For someone who is a neighbor, you generally would chat about something for five minutes or longer. (PH-80-2-24)<sup>138</sup>

In addition to self-conscious economic choice, the newcomers’ religion further distinguished them from the older neighbors, most of whom were Catholic. The newcomers, despite their other similarities, came from a variety of religious backgrounds, and many, if not most, were not publicly observant (Neubauer et al. 1981: 30).

What the newcomers did share with one another was a political preference—rather than an economic need—for collectivist, grass-roots solutions to the practical problems of urban life. When it snows, for example, the newcomers organized

---

<sup>138</sup>Not all the newcomers approved of this practice, however. One self-described “conservative in a liberal area” was alarmed by the social openness of his neighbors:

Most of these people are leaving doors open, saying hello to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes by . . . There are times when you just don’t do that. You have to take precautions. You live in an urban area, with the mix that you have. You learn [to be streetwise] (PH-80-2-16).

themselves into what they called “Chinese work gangs,” shoveling together from one end of the street to the other. “We have a sort of a people’s republic here,” said a resident proudly (PH-80-2-24).<sup>139</sup>

A third distinction between the newcomers and the older residents was overt engagement (positive or negative) with the politics of second-wave feminism, especially among the women. At one end of the newcomers’ continuum was a professor of women’s studies and her husband, who was also committed to feminist principles. At the other end, a conservative male newcomer was quick to identify feminism as a disturbing element of neighborhood politics:

I think that Women’s Lib is totally—quite bizarre. . . . It’s totally in epidemic proportions [here], and I think that the children have problems identifying . . . who’s the man and who’s the woman. Lots of role reversals. (PH-80-2-16)

While it was true that several of the men, who did not work nine-to-five hours, participated actively in their children’s daytime lives, this resident’s perception of a complete role reversal was exaggerated. In fact, just as in more traditional communities, the women, not the men, were primarily responsible for child care, the one activity that virtually defined social life on Mount Olive Avenue. For example, one woman in her thirties said she was “very intimate” with other mothers her age but more distant with their husbands, with whom she had less in common (PH-80-2-4). Jane Bach’s assessment of neighborhood social life was blunt: “The women go out. The men don’t. The men

---

<sup>139</sup>While being interviewed, several of the newcomers volunteered information about their political commitments, professional activities, subscriptions, and the like. These included: SANE Education Fund, Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, Center for National Security, National Women’s Studies Association, American Friends Service Committee, and the Consumer Party; periodicals mentioned include *Friends Journal*, *The Nation*, and the *Monthly Review*. (See Neubauer et al. 1982: 28–29). Different evidence (leading to the same conclusion) came from another resident, a finance industry lobbyist who complained that the neighborhood was “far too liberal.” His wife, more tolerant of the neighbors, described this man as “the only person on the street that isn’t a liberal. He’s, like, the oddball on the street” (PH-80-2-16).

aren't friendly like the women are. They're kind of in different directions. They don't have the friendship that the women have" (PH-80-2-16).

Thus it appeared that the collectivist orientation of the newcomers, while grounded in a politics shared by the men, was practiced and maintained on a daily basis by a network of mothers. Collective childcare is what gave the block its "homey" feel; at the same time, it offered individual women the liberty to pursue other, less traditional, activities. A women's studies professor acknowledged her indebtedness to the neighborhood women's network, among other resources:

Sometimes people say, "Oh, how do you do it? You work full-time, you've got kids, you're so involved in things." And I do it because I don't do it all myself. I mean, I do it because I have a . . . daycare center where I feel confident. I do it because I have a husband that . . . stays home one day a week and is involved in childcare. I do it because I have a neighborhood where we work out parent switches. . . . It's a lot of sharing of responsibility, which eases the burden of doing every little detail yourself (PH-80-2-24).

Without the flexibility of shared mothering, said another neighbor, "I couldn't survive."

See, if you need to get your kids to school, you can say, "Take this kid; will you take my kid, and I'll bring these kids home." . . . My doors are usually open to . . . any of the kids that want to come in. And my kids can go into other people's houses without worrying about it too much (PH-80-2-4).

Collective childcare maintained women's solidarity in other areas as well. "The women don't really talk about each other," said Jane Bach. "We have a common thing . . . 'cause we all have little kids, so we kind of support each other when it's necessary." One can only talk about kids just so long, Bach pointed out good-humoredly. "It gets boring, I must say. After the second kid, it's kind of a drag [to] have to get it all over again. And husbands, we complain about husbands a lot" (PH-80-2-16). Another neighbor, explicitly feminist, was more positive. "That feeling of sisterhood is so strong," she said. "We're very aware of it . . . and very grateful that it exists" (PH-80-2-4).

All this mutual support nurtured not only the children but also a feminist vision of an urban community that sustained individual women but remained fundamentally

collective and matrifocal. For a woman who had been trained to counsel nursing mothers, this vision was fulfilled one year when five babies were born on the block:

It was so beautiful to go through . . . pregnancy with those other women . . . to just be so close to them . . . It was just a delight. . . . One person over here who had a baby the same time said that it was like a little village. . . . Everybody'd be sitting outside nursing their babies, and the other little kids would be riding up and down, and we'd just be hanging out together. . . . It was just so nice! (PH-80-2-4)

The women's studies professor's vision of sisterly community also depended on the proximity of city life:

I remember Adrienne Rich talks in one essay about—I guess it's in *Of Woman Born*—about how much of a sense of community she had when she was a graduate student, all living in a place, sharing childcare responsibilities communally, always having someone to talk to. . . . As the husband moves up the economic scale, you move farther and farther away from networks, and end up in these big single homes, big lawns, big distances between people, and it increases especially women's sense of isolation, as they're locked in those houses. (PH-80-2-24)<sup>140</sup>

In contrast, she said, “[feeling] part of a place . . . is what I love about this neighborhood.”

For several reasons, therefore—economic privilege, a collectivist political philosophy, and a strong network of feminist mothers—the apparently old-fashioned strategy of sharing resources became, on Mount Olive Avenue, part of a larger work of social transformation, to the great satisfaction of the newcomers, most of whom saw their block as “an obvious place to move” (PH-80-2-9). The evidence of low housing turnover

---

<sup>140</sup>In fact, Rich wrote movingly about her own deep ambivalence and spiritual isolation as a young mother. This informant was probably thinking of the following passage (Rich 1976: 53):

For mothers, the privatization of the home has meant not only an increase in powerlessness, but a desperate loneliness. . . . In Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1950s, some married graduate students lived in housing built on the plan of the “lane” or row-house street, where *children played in a common court, a mother could deliver her child to a neighbor for an hour, children filtered in and out of each other's houses, and mothers, too, enjoyed a casual, unscheduled companionship with each other*. With the next step upward in academic status, came the move to the suburbs, to the smaller, then the larger, private house, the isolation of “the home” from other homes increasing with the husband's material success. . . . [T]he academic wives in their new affluence . . . lost something: they became, to a more extreme degree, house-bound, isolated women. [Emphasis added.]

The emphasized passage coincided closely with the newcomers' descriptions of Mount Olive Avenue in the 1980s.

(but rapid, word-of-mouth sale) and the wistful comments of visitors (see Neubauer et al. 1981: 17) indicated that others also saw the newcomers' intentional community as a viable model for urban life.

From the perspective of the 1990s, it would be interesting to discover how the Mount Olive community has changed as the children enter their teen years. "When it's full of teenagers," predicted a young father, "when there're sixty teenagers on this block, ten years from now, it'll be hell" (PH-81-2-27). In particular, how has the mothers' network adapted, especially as grown children leave home? Have the women built up enough solidarity—not just as neighboring mothers, but as friends in their own right—to sustain a highly cooperative way of life? Have they held to their communitarian ideals throughout a conservative, even reactionary, time?

The pressure to relocate for the sake of one's career may also have affected the Mount Olive community, though in varying degrees. For government employees, this consideration may not be so strong, but what about business and professional people employed in the private sector? How many have resisted the push of upward mobility? A conservative newcomer, who openly disdained his neighbors and sent his son to Chestnut Hill Academy, perhaps has moved by now, and maybe some others, more sympathetic to the block, have received distant job offers too favorable to turn down. "The only people who move away," said the husband of a career woman, "have some other professional opportunity. . . . Their allegiance is more to a profession than to a neighborhood, or to community, really" (PH-80-2-9). In a later interview, looking ahead to the 1990s, he expressed his own ambivalence:

It'll be interesting to see if people still live here. . . . When Kate and I moved here, we never dreamt . . . that this would be our permanent house. We had the older American dream that there would be a first house, and we expected the first house to be better than this house that we're in. But now it's pretty clear that this is the last house, unless we make a real geographic move . . . . In terms of mobility within Philadelphia or suburbs, I guess there is

the slightest chance . . . we occasionally talk about whether we will have to fall to the inner suburbs. (PH-81-2-27)

This man was concerned that the Philadelphia public schools were ill-equipped to challenge what he called “normal bright kids from the professional classes,” who tended to be set apart and labeled as “mentally gifted.”

It is the tracking system that worries me, alright? Racially and otherwise. But on the other hand, this is the only two daughters I got, . . . and the school is not high-powered, and as it gets up closer to seventh and eighth grade, . . . things get worse. (PH-81-2-27)

This couple had friends, the man said, who moved to Narberth and Bala Cynwyd, “not to go to the most posh areas, but to get a decent school system.” For a parent like this participant (a Yale alumnus) educational upward mobility would be a persistent temptation.

Coping with inadequate city services, such as snow removal, was the kind of challenge that strengthened the Mount Olive cooperative network in the 1970s and early 1980s. Inadequate city schools were another, less tractable, problem. If establishing their own alternative school was unrealistic, and the Philadelphia public school system was unacceptable, the parents had two options: move to the suburbs, and support a public school system there, or choose a liberal private school (such as Germantown Friends) and continue to support the city in other ways, as a taxpaying resident. Either outcome was sure to affect the cohesiveness of the Mount Olive community. “I’m just curious to see how permanent some of these people are,” said the resident just cited, “[how] we are as a group, with small kids, or whether the pressures of the school system getting worse. . . . Those of us who use Houston [a public school] know that things don’t get better [in the upper grades]” (PH-81-2-27).

The concerns of child-raising transformed the neighborhood networks twenty years ago and maintained them at least through the early 1980s. Has the same imperative dissolved the Mount Olive community in the 1990s, or have the ties of chosen

interdependence been sustained? For these residents of West Mount Airy, as in other neighborhoods, the answer is bound up with the political economy of Philadelphia as a whole.

## Two Minneapolis Neighborhoods

### ON THE EDGE OF AFFLUENCE

Nearly all the blocks [in Minneapolis] are rectangular, and the streets and avenues straight. Notable exceptions to this general rule are several additions that occupy somewhat hilly ground, diversified by low ridges and hillocks or knolls of morainic drift. Such a tract is called Washburn Park, in the south edge of the city, surrounding the Washburn Home, an orphanage, bounded on the south by the Minnehaha Creek and parkway (Upham [1920] 1979: 604).

Tangletown (also known as Washburn Park), an enclave of winding streets around the Washburn Tower, is an ever-so-American community of picturesque, 1920s homes. Because of the steep terrain it is always an attractive neighborhood, but the combination of quiet secluded streets and a tropical growth of trees and bushes in the summer offer all that a resident could want for in an inner city neighborhood (Ervin et al. 1976: 51, 53).

**T**hese two views of a single residential area, recorded a half-century apart, sum up Tangletown's enduring appeal to the upwardly mobile urban homeowner. Formerly known as Washburn Park, the neighborhood's rising contours and curving streets, its spacious homes and wooded lots, all create a unique atmosphere that real-estate agents like to describe as "charming," "storybook," or "romantic." Although the claim could be disputed, a few go so far as to call Tangletown "the city's premier neighborhood," and nearby housing markets, such as on "Country Home Lane," benefit from its prestige.<sup>141</sup>

The historic neighborhood of Washburn Park was first laid out in 1886 as a country retreat for local businessmen, but an economic downturn postponed housing construction until after the turn of the century. In 1931 Washburn Park acquired its last

---

<sup>141</sup>A pseudonym has been used.



major building, a distinctive water reservoir tower. Rising to 130 feet on one of the highest points in Hennepin County, the Washburn Tower is considered by residents and real-estate agents as the symbolic heart of Tangletown.

Administratively, Tangletown falls within the Fuller division of the Southwest city planning district in Minneapolis. Fuller is bounded by Forty-sixth Street on the north, Interstate 35W on the east, Diamond Lake Road on the south, and Lyndale Avenue on the west. For most people, however—realtors and residents alike—the core area of Tangletown is enclosed by Fiftieth Street, Nicollet Avenue, Minnehaha Creek, and Lyndale Avenue.

Peripheral to the core neighborhood, though sometimes also called “Tangletown,” are two other areas between Lyndale and the freeway: one is the strip between Forty-eighth and Fiftieth Streets, and the other extends east of Nicollet between Fiftieth and Minnehaha Creek.<sup>142</sup> West Country Home Lane, only two blocks long, lies west of Nicollet Avenue; East Country Home extends one block east of Nicollet.

#### *Country Home Lane and Tangletown*

The relationship of Country Home to Tangletown is somewhat complex, mediated as it is by historic, economic, administrative, and topographic boundaries that crosscut the area in various ways. In common with their Tangletown neighbors, Country Home

---

<sup>142</sup>Sources of information about neighborhood boundaries include the following: the May 1983 issue of the *Tangletown News*, published by Tangletown Neighbors Together; interviews and participant observation at the neighborhood’s Independence Day parade, 4 July 1987; a door-to-door survey of residents on Nicollet Avenue below Fiftieth Street, July 1987; a telephone survey of seven local real-estate agents, representing six different companies, August 1987; face-to-face interviews with three real-estate agents at “Tangletown” open houses, August 1987; and a survey of real-estate classified advertisements, *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 1987–88. The core area defined as “Tangletown” exactly coincides with the highest-quality housing in Fuller, as mapped out by the Southwest Planning District, Citizens Advisory Committee (1978: 6). Houses in surrounding blocks are frequently advertised as “Tangletown” or “bordering on Tangletown.”

residents, interviewed in 1988, delineated a core region to which their own curving street was peripheral, though not unrelated. As individuals, however, they gave conflicting or conflicted answers when asked whether their block was part of Tangletown.

Residents who included Country Home, at least “technically,” within Tangletown tended to cite the newsletter published by Tangletown Neighbors Together, whose definition, in turn, was based on the historic settlement of Washburn Park, itself also relevant to some residents.

Those who drew a more restrictive neighborhood boundary cited the physical barrier of the Washburn and Ramsey school grounds, as well as economic considerations. “The school really divides,” said one (MP-88-1-4). “[It’s] the other side of the high school,” said another (MP-88-1-3). A similar distinction was made just north of Country Home, where housing prices and property taxes were lower.

Regardless of how they defined the neighborhood boundaries, residents agreed on the distinctiveness of curving streets within the surrounding city grid:

I guess if it’s on a windey street, it seems like Tangletown, and if it’s on a straight street, it doesn’t seem (laughs)—except I know our street winds, but I don’t consider it Tangletown (laughs). (MP-88-1-9)

A smaller-scale definition of the immediate neighborhood was elicited in several ways, including a direct request to draw the boundaries on a city street map supplied by the interviewer. Residents were also asked, for example, where they would feel safe on an evening walk and where neighborhood children went trick-or-treating at Halloween.

The results were quite consistent. Residents who moved in between the 1940s and the 1980s favored the area west of Nicollet Avenue (a busy commercial zone) as far as Pleasant Avenue and as far north as Forty-eighth Street. In addition, Fuller Park (Forty-eighth and Pleasant) and the school grounds (between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth) were cited as play areas. While the most permeable boundary appeared to be on the west, in the

direction of Lake Harriet, some residents also considered Snyder's Drug, at Forty-sixth and Nicollet, to be a "neighborhood" store.

*The Social Setting*

The residents interviewed for this study, representing about half the households on the upper block, spanned nearly fifty years of settlement on West Country Home Lane. Throughout this period, their reasons for moving to the neighborhood reflected the aspirations of an expanding family: a larger house, nearby schools and playmates for the children, a physically attractive setting close to outdoor recreation, and transportation to jobs elsewhere in the metro area. Thus, although Country Home Lane (and Tangletown generally) lay well within the Minneapolis city limits, its appeal was substantially that of the old "streetcar suburbs" such as Philadelphia's West Mount Airy.

CHOOSING THE NEIGHBORHOOD For the majority of residents, who did not grow up in the city, buying a house on Country Home came after a conscious decision to live in Minneapolis. A teacher and a homemaker from Milwaukee both thought the neighborhoods were more consistently kept up in Minneapolis than in St. Paul, where there were "very, very small pockets of houses" they liked (MP 88-1-3). Moving to the city also involved, for some, a conscious decision not to live in the suburbs, while the quality and variety of local educational options attracted parents from far and near.

Thus situated within walking distance of Washburn High and Ramsey Junior High, with Lake Harriet on the west and a convenient freeway on the east, Country Home was a prime location for prospective homeowners with school-aged children. With a relatively low crime rate and many young families nearby, "it looked like it would be a good neighborhood for kids" (MP-88-1-4).

In tension with this hope during the late 1960s were racial fears associated with south Minneapolis. A suburbanite who described herself as “really protected and really sheltered” was warned by friends in town that “colored people were gonna move in” south toward Forty-sixth Street and west toward Lyndale Avenue (MP-88-1-6). But when racial fears were not so acute, the physical setting of Country Home Lane gave it an air of economic stability combined with a pleasing distinctiveness.

LIVING ON COUNTRY HOME LANE In contrast to their fairly consistent reasons for moving in, residents’ experiences as members of a social network were quite varied. Not surprisingly, neighbors who fit the prevailing demographics of the block—whose children grew up together and left home about the same time—rode the generational waves with relative ease, while those who did not fit were socially somewhat marooned. A second factor, more linear than cyclic, was the steady influx of middle-class married women into the paid labor force. On Country Home Lane, as elsewhere, there were now fewer adults at home during the day to maintain the social networks that children initiated. This may explain why, for example, the elaborate block parties organized a generation ago were not revived by later residents.

In 1940, a 32-year-old police investigator, his wife (a social worker) and their young children moved into the upper block partly because, said the husband, “we liked the people that we saw” (MP-87-1-1). Their new neighbors, other young families like themselves, included “professional men, different ways. The doctor over here. Professional salesman, representative. This man was a chemical engineer.” Career women were few, according to the couple’s daughter, now a real-estate agent. Except for her mother and a physician on a neighboring street, “the women, most of ’em, were home.” Nevertheless, “it wasn’t like a coffee-clutch neighborhood. It wasn’t like you had a buncha ladies sitting around with nothing better to do. They were all really quite

creative people.” These housewives of professional men were themselves “highly educated, every single one. Most all of ’em [went] to college, I think maybe everyone,” the daughter recalled.

Demographically, this family seemed to have arrived at a fortunate time, just when social networks on the block were consolidating themselves for the next generational cycle. Said the daughter:

I don’t remember new people moving into our block. The houses remained in the same families forever. It was not a transient neighborhood. It was really like a small town. . . . There was lots of security, the feeling of—if you had a problem, . . . there was always someplace to go. (MP-87-1-1)

This “small-town” feeling was focused, apparently, on networks of children who congregated on the family’s front porch. Adult networks, when not centered around children’s activities, are remembered as having been fairly loose. Asked whether neighbors tended to help each other out, the husband replied, “Oh, mildly, yeah. We didn’t break our necks.” The daughter added, “I don’t remember everybody going out and shoveling out somebody else [in winter]. Everybody kinda took care of themselves, their own families.”

Another man (MP-87-1-2), a research biochemist, moved to the lower block in 1950 with his wife, who had grown up in the area. When severe illness prevented her from looking after their two young children, a neighborhood woman helped out at first. Eventually, however, the limits of neighborly helpfulness were reached, and the responsibility for full-time childcare was shifted to in-laws. Welcoming new arrivals to the block, on the other hand, was expected of neighborhood women. “When someone moved in across the street,” the man recalled, “we had an old neighbor that lived next to us, and he insisted that my wife go there with a cake.”

In 1968 this couple, now with six children, moved to a larger house on the upper block, which turned out to be “a little more organized than [the lower] one was.”

Most of the people knew each other directly. They’d been living here for years. They played cards together, bridge, things like that.

Although this family were on friendly terms with the families on either side, demographically they found themselves out of synch in their new surroundings:

When we moved here, most of the people were much older than we. Then gradually we turned out to be much older than they are now. . . . We were probably middle-aged, but it was getting to the point where some of the families moving here were quite, quite a bit younger than us. If they played bridge or something, my wife didn’t end up in the bridge games [laughs]. She was too old for ’em.

The wave of younger families that arrived around 1970 included a housewife and professional volunteer (MP-88-1-6), and her husband, an architect. Instead of a neighbor with a cake, a Welcome Wagon hostess greeted them with discount coupons, food samples, and a “horrid and unique” ashtray, all courtesy of local businesses. Such a welcome was nevertheless appreciated, however; in later years this resident herself brought casseroles to other new arrivals to “return the kindness that was brought to me.”

During the 1970s “this was a very young neighborhood,” she continued. Interviewed in 1988, a high-school boy who grew up next door remembered playing ball games, tag, poker, and hide-and-seek with other children on the block. Mothers shared maternity clothes, older girls babysat for neighbors, and a few men played golf together or did extra shoveling after a big snowfall. Neighbors were also supportive when “a very, very serious fire” damaged a house down the street.

Adult social events organized by neighborhood women included, at one time, a “progressive dinner” for both the upper and lower block of Country Home:

You would go to one [house] for hors d’œuvres, another one for your salad, the following one for your main course, another one for the dessert. You kind of wander around the neighborhood. It’s kind of fun.(MP-88-1-6)

The most warmly-recalled activity was the annual Country Home block party, which included all the families on the upper block, neighbors on Pleasant Avenue with adjoining property, and even grown children who had moved away. A few weeks in advance, three of the women circulated a newsletter announcing the date and calling for volunteers. The street was barricaded on the day of the event, which began with the arrival of a fire truck and a children's parade of decorated bicycles, wagons, and buggies. Barbecue grills, tables and chairs were moved into the street, and those who didn't own a grill could share with a neighbor. At dessert there was a cakewalk, with homemade cakes as prizes. Other entertainment included "haunted houses" to crawl through, elaborately staged home movies, and slides of the block party from the previous years.

Between about 1973 and 1977, said one of the organizers, "we'd have lawn parties that were out of this world."

They did this faithfully for a number of years, and then it just started getting to be the same people doing it. It got to be more and more of a chore, particularly when women started going to work and time became a little more precious. It's difficult to put these things together. And they started moving out.(MP-88-1-6)

A "WORKING NEIGHBORHOOD" Like their predecessors, the new influx of families that began arriving about 1980 brought young children with them. At first, recalled a physician, "it was the kind of neighborhood where they still had block parties. I think there was one block party after I came, but they talked about the woman who lived here, who was a big organizer of things" (MP-88-1-4). According to another neighbor (MP-88-1-9), however, "nobody had great enthusiasm" for the revived tradition, and it was not repeated.

Fond memories soon gave way to the perception—universal among the later arrivals—that the character of the neighborhood had changed from a tightly knit community to a more impersonal one. For perhaps the first time in its history, the upper block of Country Home Lane had become primarily "a working neighborhood"

(MP-88-1-3): that is, a community whose women, employed outside the home, no longer had time to organize social events. Without this adult followup, friendships between small children on the block, though perhaps more important than before, no longer guaranteed cohesiveness, and older neighbors without children were now more socially isolated.

Occasional attempts were made to compensate for this trend. Early in the 1980s, “wives and the women in the neighborhood had some sort of, one or two coffee klatsches a couple of times,” which helped a few of the newcomers get acquainted. Unfortunately, an apparent effort to revive the older model of neighborhood social life only created tension:

One thing my wife didn’t particularly appreciate was the few references to—that she could do this or that because she didn’t have to work. She felt like she was fairly busy, too. There’s sort of a tendency to think you got all the time in the world if you don’t have a job outside the home. (MP-88-1-10)

Certain traditions of neighborly helpfulness were, on the other hand, kept. Babysitting and pet-sitting were requested and offered, and neighbors still met one another while working outside in the yards or when mail ended up at the wrong house. Although the severe Minnesota winters curtailed outdoor activity, blizzards created needs for help that only churlishness would refuse. In general, neighbors said they could count on one another, particularly the people next door, in an emergency.

Organized socializing still existed on the block, though on a more modest scale than before. A few of the men had played golf together, and neighboring families sometimes went downtown to the Metrodome for a Minnesota Twins baseball game. Some of the older neighbors invited each other over during the winter holiday season. However, most social contacts (other than with relatives) came through one’s church or occupation—school, employment, or volunteer work.



As a result, neighboring families on the same block might actually meet through their jobs. For example, one physician was told by a realtor that another physician from the same clinic had bought a house across the street. They arrived in the neighborhood within weeks of one another and socialized thereafter.

“[This block] is almost the same now as when we moved in,” said a senior citizen, who had seen several demographic waves roll past since he first arrived in 1940.

When the people lose their kids and get to be just a family of husband and wife, they usually sell or move into an apartment. That’s just about the stage that I’m in now. I’m living by myself in this two-story house. (MP-87-1-1)

The current socioeconomic status of the area, in the view of one 23-year old, was middle-class, upper middle-class. I don’t know. It’s such a mix, because you have apartment buildings down here. On Nicollet you have apartment buildings, and then when you get down . . . on the other side of Forty-sixth Street, the houses are smaller. You kind of get a sense that that’s more blue-collar, but you don’t know. You really don’t know. It could be a young professional trying to redo the house. (MP-88-1-5)

Young professionals with children are likely to continue moving to Country Home in the coming decades, attracted, like past generations, to convenient schools, recreation, and commuter routes. To be sure, occupation, as an organizing principle, will compete with proximity, shared beliefs, and a sense of common history to structure interlocking sets of relationships not necessarily based in the neighborhood. The new norm of employed couples has already changed—some would say eroded—local social networks, yet some continuities are worth pointing out. Housewifery, after all, is an occupation too; conversely, a more stable, as well as flexible, middle-class lifestyle is possible to families with more than one income.

Not all of these families need be white or even heterosexual. Racially and culturally, the demographics of Country Home will probably change over time as Minneapolis as a whole becomes more diverse. The city’s relative acceptance of same-sex couples (who may register officially as “domestic partners” and are protected under

city and state housing laws) suggests that lesbian or gay neighbors, some with children, will find their way to Country Home, if they have not done so already.<sup>143</sup>

Tangletown's old-time elegance may well remain beyond the means, or even the needs, of most residents of Minneapolis. But as long as the regional and municipal economy remain stable, the upper block of West Country Home Lane, while diversifying in other ways, is likely to remain true to its origins as a stronghold of the urban middle class.

## A COMMUNITY OF BARS AND CHURCHES

“Northeast Minneapolis is a community of bars and churches, of ethnic groups and blue collars, of family values and tradition” (Hage 1984: 3). Cut off from the rest of Minneapolis by East Hennepin Avenue, a major thoroughfare, and the Mississippi River, the Northeast is home to most of the city's industry and to the descendants of European immigrants who found work in its mills, railroad yards, and breweries early in this century. In 1980 the “Northeast” remained overwhelmingly white (98%), even by Minneapolis standards, but a notable influx of refugees since the 1950s had quadrupled the Asian population of the city as a whole, while the black and Native American communities had increased by about half.<sup>144</sup> During the same period, Minneapolis'

---

<sup>143</sup>In the early 1990s, a pink triangle decal (a symbol of gay identity) was displayed on one resident's vehicle.

<sup>144</sup>Over the last generation, the city of Minneapolis has steadily grown more racially diverse. In 1950, 98% of its 522,000 residents were white; by 1980, the proportion of whites had dropped to 87% of 371,000. In a ten-year period (1970–1980), the number of whites declined by 20%, while minorities increased by two-thirds; nevertheless, Minneapolis remains a predominantly white city. In 1980, eight of its eleven administrative districts were 85 to 98% white, and in no district did the minority population exceed 40% of the total (Minneapolis, Office of the Mayor 1981).

industrial base declined, forcing newer generations to seek jobs outside the Northeast, while students and young couples from other parts of the city moved into the old ethnic neighborhoods.

Beltrami, located at the southern edge of the district, was in many ways a microcosm of the Northeast as a whole. Somewhat poorer and slightly less white, the neighborhood, formerly known as “Maple Hill,” was also more physically isolated.<sup>145</sup> Crisscrossed by railroad tracks, Beltrami was bounded by three major city streets: East Hennepin Avenue to the south, Central Avenue to the west, and Broadway Street to the north. On the east was Interstate 35W, built in the late 1950s amid great controversy. While some residents still placed the eastern boundary at Johnson, that street became an industrial corridor, physically isolated between the highway and a major railroad interchange. Although a footbridge provided a vestigial connection to the old neighborhood, most sources regarded I-35W as the eastern edge of Beltrami.

### *The Maple Hill Community*

Soon after the turn of the century, a wave of Italian immigrants began to settle on the east side of Maple Hill Park, north of Summer Street and between Polk and Fillmore. Originally recruited by labor bosses (*padrones*) as seasonal railroad workers, the Italian population grew from 18 individuals in 1905 to 488 by 1920, comprising 38% of the residents between Fillmore and Johnson Streets (Knazan 1973: 20). Their four-by-five-block settlement in Maple Hill represented about 40% of their numbers in Minneapolis.

---

<sup>145</sup>The 996 residents of Beltrami fall within Census tract 26 in the Northeast district. In 1980, for the tract as a whole, whites accounted for 93.6% of the population, followed by 41 American Indians (4.1%), 20 Asians (2.0%), 16 Hispanics (1.6%), and 3 blacks (0.3%). Between 1970 and 1980 the proportion of whites decreased about 12%, while the minority population, particularly blacks and Asians, increased by about half (Minneapolis, Office of the Mayor, 1981). An instance of anti-black graffiti in the neighborhood suggests that Beltrami has not entirely escaped the racial politics of the Northeast in general.

Inside the neighborhood the Italian community thrived. “[M]ost Minneapolis Italians could speak English, although they still had a higher percentage of non-English speakers (nine percent) than any other foreign-born group in the city,” according to one historian (Hughlett 1986: 16–17). The remembered details of Italian life included “good, substantial food, delicious food” such as *minestra*, “a heavy-bodied soup.” Much of the produce was homegrown, “and most mothers, they’d make their own bread, at least twice a week,” with gas or wood stoves (MP-89-2-16).

With the other children of Maple Hill, Italian girls and boys attended a neighborhood public school (Franklin Pierce, north of the park on Broadway), which was easier to afford than parochial school. The neighborhood also supported many small independent businesses as well as other institutions.<sup>146</sup> Of the corner stores and taverns that dotted the area, Delmonico’s Foods, facing the park on Summer Street, was a notable survivor, as was Schullo’s Grocery, one block south at Spring and Fillmore, and Ferraro’s Bar and Cafe, at Broadway and Pierce. Also on Pierce, just across the street from the bar, stood the former Margaret Barry Settlement House, founded in 1912, which had served for sixty-one years as a community social and health services center. The Barry House also offered Italian Catholic mass from 1918 to 1938.

With all these organizations supporting the neighborhood and its extended families, no wonder that a second generation of American-born Italians was attracted to the area. Non-Italian families also appreciated having these conveniences in an affordable neighborhood. For some, living in a white neighborhood was an added attraction, and railroad laborers, as always, could walk to work. Especially during the labor shortage of

---

<sup>146</sup>Extralegal economic activity associated with Maple Hill included bootlegging and gambling, according to oral history sources (Knazan 1973). A 1925 report from the Women’s Cooperative Alliance, a charitable organization, cast aspersions on the corner grocery stores as social centers for gangs and gambling (cited in Knazan, 85, 95–97).

World War Two, high-school boys were often hired for the summer as track workers (“gandy dancers”), factory hands, foundry workers, or cooks, all at walking distance from home. For children too young to get such jobs, delivering newspapers was an alternative way to make money. Another was to sweep up grain spilled in the boxcars and sell it to the neighbors as chicken feed.

Women who worked outside the home mentioned jobs in local restaurants as a cook or waitress, in a factory packaging baby blankets, and in a nearby paint shop. Selling homemade wine was also mentioned by a woman who, with her husband, owned and operated a neighborhood bar (MP-87-2-1). Employment in the immediate area not only provided women with income but also expanded their social contacts in the neighborhood (MP-88-2-10, MP-88-2-14).

Women also supported one another economically by providing childcare. Shared responsibility for children drew newcomers into the women’s social networks (MP-88-2-10) and maintained connections between employed women and housewives—categories which were none too distinct to begin with. In a community where relatives tended to live nearby, friendships between neighbors sometimes took on a sisterly cast.

In 1938, at the community’s initiative, the former United Brethren Church, at the corner of Fillmore and Summer Streets, was rededicated as Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. The parish priest, who was Irish, had learned Italian and heard confession in that language. The church was another place for newcomers, especially Italians, to make friends outside the family circle. The feast day of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, held on the Sunday closest to July 16, began with a spaghetti dinner and continued with a procession that effectively mapped out the Italian streets of the neighborhood.

The importance of the settlement house was by no means diminished once church services were no longer held there. Services offered at the Barry House began with pre-

natal, maternity, dental and health care (Knazan 1973: 78–82) and continued with a variety of clubs, programs, and entertainment for all ages, from nursery school to adult. Neighborhood women from various cultures were also brought together.

Children, especially, flocked to the Barry House, where University of Minnesota students, both male and female, served as live-in counselors. Daytime or nighttime, children on their way home from the Barry House passed before many observant eyes. “You knew everybody in the neighborhood, and they all seemed to kinda watch” (MP-89-2-18). Porch-sitting, almost an institution in itself, provided opportunities for conversation while contributing greatly to a feeling of community safety.

The park was another center of social activity shared by various local groups. In the 1930s, counselors from the Barry House organized ball games for children after school and in the evenings.<sup>147</sup> The Independence Day festival, held at the park, provided an excellent opportunity for newcomers, especially non-Italians, to get acquainted. This annual event was organized by a succession of neighborhood boosters’ clubs.

A particularly momentous Fourth of July was observed in 1948, when the park was rededicated in memory of Giacomo Constantino Beltrami (1779–1855), an Italian jurist, scholar, and explorer of the upper Mississippi River. Ironically, Maple Hill acquired an Italian name just as the community it symbolized was about to decline.

### *The Freeway*

The dispersion of most of the Italian community after the Second World War had several causes. Local historians (Knazan 1973, Vecoli 1981) point out that in Minnesota the social disruptions of the war were not offset by a new wave of immigration from

---

<sup>147</sup>An Italian man described a childhood game called “canny-can,” which seems to have been the local name for cricket (MP-89-2-16). Perhaps it was introduced to the neighborhood by Barry House counselors from the University.

Italy. A growing housing shortage in the neighborhood, together with widening work opportunities elsewhere, sent the younger generation farther and farther afield, where intermarriage and assimilation tended to dilute their ethnic identity.

A major threat to Beltrami's physical existence was announced at public hearings in 1959. The eastern quarter of the neighborhood—the heart of the Italian community—lay in the path of Interstate 35W, while a secondary highway known as the “North Ring” was scheduled for construction through Beltrami's southern half. Efforts to divert the freeways out of the neighborhood were organized by the Beltrami Park Citizens League and continued throughout the 1960s. Residents living in the proposed construction zone deeply resented the freeway as an intruder built for the convenience of outsiders from the suburbs.

In parallel fashion, racial “outsiders” were regarded in many white Minneapolis neighborhoods as an additional threat during the 1960s. Children in the Northeast were taught to regard the Mississippi River as a sort of moat, physically separating the various white ethnic neighborhoods from the rest of the city (MP-88-2-12). Both blacks and also white “outsiders” were subjected to verbal and physical attacks by Beltrami youths in the 1960s. As a child who had moved in from a rural area, “I was terrorized in this neighborhood,” said a white woman (MP-88-2-4).

Another influx of “outsiders” were the tenants of absentee landlords who, in many cases, failed to keep up their property. Other problems, such as residential burglary by local youths, coincided with traffic in illegal drugs, according to a lifelong Italian resident, who felt that the fabric of community values he had known had unraveled from within. What had once been a stable, cohesive, working-class neighborhood was characterized by city authorities as a “poverty area,” to the chagrin of those who had grown up there (MP-89-2-16).

By the early 1970s, when the final section of 35W was built through the lower Northeast, one fourth of the neighborhood area, which formerly extended to Johnson Street, was cut off by construction, and one third of the housing was eliminated (Knazan 1973:101). Lincoln Street, in the heart of Minneapolis' Italian community, was entirely destroyed between Broadway and East Hennepin. Most people, after being reimbursed for their property, bought houses elsewhere in Northeast Minneapolis and the suburbs, but it would be decades before the vacated lots in Beltrami's southern half were rebuilt.

*Beltrami Today*

SETTLING IN Although local activists in the late 1980s welcomed the physical revitalization of the neighborhood, its social stability remained a concern for some. For those who intended to settle permanently, much of the residential architecture being introduced south of Winter Street hardly facilitated casual social contact with passers-by. Instead of the porches of old Maple Hill, dwellings set well back from the street and dominated by a protruding garage, front lawn, and driveway seemed more suited for suburban-style commuters than the residents of a close-knit urban community. Although Beltrami was conveniently located near a freeway exit and quite close to downtown, only two of the adults mentioned ease of commuting as a reason they moved in. Rather, the neighborhood's main attractions (other than family) were its affordability, recreational facilities, and reputation as a socially cohesive community.

When family connections did not extend to a particular block, the ordinary way for a newcomer to meet the neighbors was when they introduced themselves on the street. In some cases, however, a trial period seems to have been observed:

They look at you for a while, maybe two or three months. You got all these people watching. You don't even realize they're watching you. And when they see you're not



noisy, and that you're spending some time in your yard, big thing, but you're not having a squad car stop in front of your house—I guess that's about all. Then people start coming over. "I'm so and so. I live across the street." Or, "Somebody walked up to your house when you weren't home today," said what the person looked like. (MP-89-2-17)

An unmarried couple with two children also came in for some close scrutiny, as the following narrative shows:

This guy came up to me when I was outside playin' with the kids, and he says, "You came outta the house." He knows too goddamn much! (laughs). He's like, "You came outta the house!" Well, I do come out every now and then and *breathe*.

He started laughing, and he goes, he says, "I worry about you," he says. "Well, I come from the old country." . . . All that meant was the old social rules, like women don't stay home alone. . . . "I really worry about you with them two children," he says, an' "You're alone a lot," he says, "and I really worry about it." So he says, "All you have to do is stand out that door and scream, and I'll be over in a second."

And I went, "Well, I really appreciate that. I thank you. Well, that's really nice a you." And he's like—well, he says, "You look well-mannered." (MP-88-2-12)

INSTITUTIONS Neighborhood institutions also facilitated newcomers' entry into the community. One couple recalled that Welcome Wagon had provided information on local businesses and professional services when they first moved in. Others recommended the bar, corner grocery stores, the church, and local parks (Beltrami and nearby Northeast Park) as places to get acquainted.

"This bar isn't a drinking bar *per se*," said one of the owners, with a laugh. "It's more like a social club" (MP-87-2-1). A few blocks away, a relative newcomer referred to this woman admiringly as "the matriarch of the neighborhood." Besides being a local news source, the bar also maintains a certain ethnic flavor. On Sundays, extended family members gather for a home-cooked Italian dinner, and *bocce* teams from Beltrami Park like to adjourn there as well.

What kept the bar in the neighborhood, when so many people had moved? Part of the answer, according to the owner, was its status as an enduring neighborhood institution. Along with the corner grocery stores, the bar also played a contemporary role in Beltrami's economic stability.

Another institution, still at the corner of Summer and Taylor Streets, was Delmonico's ("The Minneapolis Italian Food Specialty Store"), which brought a flavor of the old neighborhood to what had become a regional clientele. Both here and at Schullo's, local shoppers appreciated the friendly atmosphere of a longtime family business. Said one, "The neighborhood itself is like a family, with the stores and—you go into Delmonico's and it's, 'Hi, honey'" (MP-88-2-2).

A third institution, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church, had also responded creatively, and apparently successfully, to the challenges of the post-freeway era.

"There's no Italian—hardly any Italian people left there," a longtime member said. "Some of the oldtimers still come" (MP-88-2-14). When, in response to this demographic decline, the church began offering mass for the city's Deaf community, Beltrami's defensive mistrust of "outsiders" was somewhat eased. "Our church was really goin' downhill," said this Italian woman. "Now [the priest] has this big group that comes in for ten o'clock that's put us back on our feet." Not only do hearing and Deaf lay people now serve Mass, both women and men participate as well.

Although a spaghetti dinner was still served on the feast day of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, the traditional procession through the neighborhood had been discontinued. In 1988, however, the congregation's fiftieth anniversary was commemorated with a smaller-scale parade on an abbreviated route.

One former neighborhood institution had been replaced. After more than sixty years of service, the Margaret Barry Settlement House closed its doors in June 1973, and a new building, shared by the Park Board and East Side Neighborhood Services, was dedicated the next month. The programs offered there include surplus food distribution, a battered-women's support group, reading and play groups for children, and adult games of *bocce*. Socially, said one mother, "the focus of everything is the park" (MP-88-2-11).

To some residents' dismay, however, the park at night was also a focus for the less-than-wholesome activities of alienated teenagers, which then reflected on the neighborhood as a whole. By day, however, Beltrami Park seemed fairly safe, and most people recommended it as a good place for children to play. The Italian community, by this time largely dispersed outside the neighborhood, still gathered there every July 4 (or thereabouts) for a picnic sponsored by the Italian-American Heritage Club, headquartered a few blocks north of the neighborhood on Central Avenue.

Finally, the Beltrami Neighborhood Council constituted a social force to be reckoned with. "Because the area is physically isolated from the city," said a 1983 newspaper report, "it has developed a small-town feeling" which was reflected in local politics.<sup>148</sup> Although money had been scarce through the 1980s, the Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA) cooperated with the neighborhood council to fund various improvement projects.

Internequine rivalry had certainly been known in Beltrami, as two newspaper articles from the mid-1980s made clear.<sup>149</sup> Two organizations were discussed, each vying for MCDA funds, which could be granted to only one representative group in each neighborhood. Noteworthy in both reports was the predominance of Italian surnames among neighborhood leaders. Whether in cooperation or in conflict, it seemed clear that in local politics, old connections remained strong.

Although Beltrami's history, name, institutions, and the annual picnic all reflected an Italian presence, the newer, non-Italian residents saw their neighborhood as more ethnically mixed than before. Nevertheless, said residents, ethnic identity, at least in some quarters, does persist. Although their numbers had diminished in proportion to other

---

<sup>148</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 21 April 1983, 3.

<sup>149</sup>*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 21 April 1983, 1; *The Northeaster*, 8 May 1985, 1.

groups, Italians were still regarded as Beltrami's organizational backbone. One homeowner offered this conclusion:

It seems like it's changing, I don't know. I can't tell you. Italian people are pretty settled in their ways. If it is changing, I'm really not sure why. 'Cause I think they still do rule the neighborhood. It seems like they do, and they want to. And that hasn't been all bad. (MP-88-2-11)

**SOCIAL NETWORKS** Although neighbors living in close proximity tended to name each other as acquaintances, spontaneous socializing seemed to be rare among neighboring adults. Although children continued to gather for street games, adults rarely, if ever, followed up those contacts by organizing block parties or garage sales. While some adults indicated that a friendly telephone call or visit from a neighbor would be welcome, employment outside Beltrami seemed to have lessened this kind of interaction.

A generational difference was very apparent when residents were asked about socializing outside their immediate families. The oldest generation kept in touch with former neighbors from Maple Hill, including extended family, as well as suburban grandchildren. Conversely, younger parents who had moved into the neighborhood maintained their closest relationships with outside friends who had never lived in Beltrami.

This suggested that Beltrami's reputation as an urban "small town" could not depend on close friendships and spontaneous socializing among neighbors. Aside from its institutions, what social networks held this community together? "I think the Italian people [are] the root of this neighborhood, they do a lot of stuff," said one woman (MP-88-2-11). A young mother commented that her older neighbors "are really like parents or grandparents. They [are] just always interested in what you're doing, in seeing you" (MP-88-2-9).

Although the scope of "neighborly" behavior had certainly diminished in the post-freeway era, it still included exchanging favors, lending household objects, and giving aid

to those in need. Snow removal was very commonly mentioned as an example of help in the neighborhood. Caretaking favors included looking in on a neighbor's aged parent, babysitting a neighbor's children, or recommending a suitable teenaged girl as a sitter. Some people made life more convenient for neighbors by occasionally offering rides or hand-delivering misdirected mail. Others shared skills such as taking blood pressure, planting flowers, or even renovating property. All these actions made Beltrami feel "more like a community" (MP-89-2-17).

Sudden emergencies brought quick help from neighbors, several people said. Neighbors were not, however, expected to risk life and limb. Answering a hypothetical question, most residents said that a babysitter who heard a suspicious noise outside should call 911. An older Italian resident commented, however:

Years ago, we would respond differently. Like when I was babysitting, on occasion, when my sister had another job, and I'd take one of her duties, . . . why, I would always come run back home, I imagine, if I needed assistance. But today, you couldn't come—I imagine the babysitters, what I'd want 'em to do is call nine-one-one. (MP-89-2-16)

The feeling that older people watch over the neighborhood may not have been as strong as it once was, but many residents believed that their neighbors' vigilance continued to make Beltrami a safer place. The confidence of the oldest women, the neighborhood matriarchs, was especially striking. "I'm not a bit afraid," said an elderly Italian. "This is my corner, and nobody's gonna bother [me]" (MP-88-2-10). Most people—especially senior citizens—expressed an almost proprietary feeling of familiarity, and therefore safety, in the neighborhood as a whole. Even those residents who said they had been the victims of crime (vandalism, burglary, even armed robbery) explained these events as the acts of troubled or desperate individuals, most likely people they knew in Beltrami. This strategy allowed them to condemn the behavior while continuing to participate in the social life of the neighborhood.

STABILITY Although some residents complained that Beltrami is still a “transit[ory] area,” the social disruption caused by high turnover seemed to have lessened. Now that a generation had passed since the freeway forced many residents out of the neighborhood, absentee landowning continued to be a problem on some blocks, but others seemed to have recovered. A block captain nevertheless admitted that Beltrami residents may have had unusually high expectations for owner occupancy:

You’ve got—what did they tell us? Eighty-two percent owner-occupied? What else. We probably have forty percent of the homes have been the same owner or the same family since the Depression. And they’re worried because it’s less than fifty percent. They don’t like that. (MP-89-2-17)

Yet renters were not the only residents who chose to leave Beltrami. Upwardly mobile homeowners spoke of moving out towards the perimeter of the city, either to the upper Northeast or beyond into the suburbs.

In contrast, those who wanted to stay in Beltrami already had, or were creating, family connections in the area. Older people had familiar surroundings where they felt physically safe, socially useful, and (in all likelihood) were no longer paying off a mortgage. Finally, those who expressed commitment to Beltrami seemed content to be part of the mainstream; unlike the upwardly mobile, they did not set themselves apart from their neighbors in terms of socioeconomic status, attitudes, or aspirations. As a block captain admitted, “It kind of feels good to be part of the numbers” (MP-89-2-17).

### *Conclusion*

Neighbors who watched out for one another and report suspicious activity, who exchanged greetings and assistance, who interacted with one another in institutional settings such as the church, the bar, the park, and local grocery stores—all these contributed to a fairly extensive word-of-mouth communications network, supplemented by written sources such as homemade flyers and the *Northeaster* community newspaper.

Several of those interviewed either identified themselves, or were identified by others, as sources of information within the neighborhood. In general, these people were active in local institutions or had lived in Beltrami for decades. Former residents of Maple Hill, as well as the descendants of older current residents, also kept in touch by visiting friends and family, attending church, shopping at Delmonico's, and participating in the Fourth of July picnic at Beltrami Park.

Compared to old Maple Hill, post-freeway Beltrami was evidently a much less insular, and thus less tightly-knit, community. Since the demise of the neighborhood school and settlement house, residents had to go farther afield for education, recreation, and most social services including health care. For both men and women, employment outside the neighborhood boundaries was common. Although neighbors still felt they could rely on each other for emergency help, they were now more likely to involve external agencies by dialing 911. While Beltrami remained somewhat multigenerational, the use of the Italian language had declined dramatically, and both older and younger adults had friends and family elsewhere.

All these changes did not necessarily signal a community in decline, however. Led by its neighborhood council, Beltrami had made physical revitalization a priority. As its social ties loosened, the community had become more open to outsiders—rural, Asian, or Deaf—from the metro area and beyond. Adapting to this demographic shift, both the church and Delmonico's grocery had ensured their survival by redefining themselves in regional as well as local terms: that is, by serving a well-defined but geographically diverse audience while maintaining a distinctive identity as neighborhood institutions. In much the same way, Beltrami, no longer an ethnic ghetto, continued to draw on its Italian heritage while taking part in the larger life of the city.

