"SHE NAMED IT CANADA BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT IT WAS CALLED": LANGUAGE AND JUSTICE IN CANADA 2017+

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Well before the "Confederation" we officially celebrate, Canada had diverse histories and views of these histories. For many residents of the 2017 state, a 150th anniversary is insulting or meaningless, recognition of no more than a limited and highly compromised national/imperial project. Refusal and resistance are nothing new. While often ignored and repressed, they are woven into Canada's very fabric. The phrase, "She Named It Canada Because That's What It Was Called," the title of a 1971 feminist graphic herstory, invokes historic dissent. As continuing debates over official bilingualism and multilingualism, gender equal lyrics for "O Canada", the terms Indian, Métis, Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nation, and cultural appropriation similarly demonstrate, words signal power. While economic redistribution necessarily underlies any democratic project, linguistic respect, including acceptance of the right to say "no" always matters. As the cultural critic Raymond Williams explained in his 1976 work *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* updated in 2016 by *New Words for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*,[1] language constitutes a frontline in demands for justice and fair play.

1 Editors Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and A.K. Thompson.

Progress toward participatory parity and meaningful democracy[2] requires an enriched vocabulary.

As the *Oxford English Dictionary* declaration of "post-truth" as its 2016 word of the year and the prospect of "alternate-fact" for 2017 demonstrates, lies haunt the evolution of English (and for that matter other languages, too). Despite the denunciation of "newspeak" in George Orwell's dystopia *1984*, "oldspeak" has too often been little more than subterfuge, ultimately undermining communication and solidarity and upholding the tyranny of the powerful. Certainly policy and public commentary on Canada have abounded with evidence of linguistic dishonesty and dispossession. As Mohawk-English writer and performer E. Pauline Johnson made clear in her 1893 short story, "A Red Girl's Reasoning," contemptuous terms such as "squaw" have repeatedly squandered possibilities for fairer marital, multicultural and national unions.[3] Whether defended as academic freedom, as with recent apoplexy about non-gendered pronouns from a University of Toronto psychology professor, as common sense, as with an Alberta judge's dismissal of a sexual assault victim as inadequately defending herself, as the prerogative of creative genius in *The Walrus*, or as mere locker-room banter in one future U.S. president's talk of grabbing pussy,[4] linguistic disrespect underpins and legitimizes cultural and physical violence and attempts to erase memory of injustice and enforce consent.

Although today's heightened bigotry and boorishness give ample cause, despair when we look toward the future is unjustified. On the horizon, indeed in our very midst, stands a richer vocabulary and the promise of mutual respect, offering what Anne of Green Gables might have termed "scope for the imagination." Its construction began long ago, but feminism has led in generating contemporary Canada and the world's extraordinary reconsideration not only of material oppression but also of our associated linguistic impoverishment. Global feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and Judith Butler have routinely highlighted linguistic injuries.[5] In Canada, sociologist Margrit Eichler's

2 See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition" New Left Review 3 (May/June 2000): 107- 120 and the critique by Linda Martin Alcoff who argues that identity politics are essential to redistribution, "Fraser on Redistribution, Recognition, and Identity," European Journal of Political Theory 6:3 (2007): 255-265 and her Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also, inter alia, Nancy Fraser, Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis (London: Verso, 2013) and the critique by Leticia Sabsay that emphasizes Fraser's limited engagement with Black and anti-colonial feminist critics, Feminist Legal Studies 22:3 (Dec. 2014); 323-329 and the important reservations of Joan Sangster and Meg Luxton, "Feminism, Co-optation and the Problems of Amnesia: A Response to Nancy Fraser," Socialist Register v. 49 (2013): 288-309.

3 See Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag "Championing the Native: E. Pauline Johnson Rejects the Squaw," in Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past, ed. Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005): 47-66.

4 See inter alia "University of Toronto Professor Defends Right to Use Gender-Specific Pronouns," Globe and Mail (19 Nov. 2016) and Lauren Heuser, "The Legal Case for Gender-Neutral Pronouns," The Walrus (22 Dec. 2016); Jason Markusoff, Charlie Gillis and Michael Friscolanti, "The Robin Camp Case: Who Judges Judges," Macleans (14 Sept. 2016) and Elaine Craig, "Section 276 Misconstrued: The Failure to Properly Interpret and Apply Canada's Rape Shield Provisions," Canadian Bar Review 94:1 (2016); Stassa Edwards, "What Can We Learn from Canada's 'Appropriation Prize' Literary Fiasco?", Jezebel (16 May 2017), http://jezebel.com/what-can-we-learn-from-canadas-appropriation-prize-lite-1795175192 ; Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, "The Cultural Appropriation Debate is Over. It's Time for Action," Globe and Mail (19 May 2017); Julie A. Nelson, "Nature Abhors a Vacuum: Sex, Emotion, Loyalty and the Rise of Illiberal Economics," Real-world Economics Review 79 (2017): 35-42.

5 See, for example, Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (1984), and Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990).

dissection of "androcentricity", "overgeneralization," "gender insensitivity," and the "double standard," in her classic *Nonsexist Research Methods: a Practical Guide* (1988) mapped the terrain to a more just future. In 2017, such recognition gives cause for taking heart.

Today, the much contested entry of words such as queer, lesbian, two-spirited, transsexual, classism, racism, sexism and homophobia, to name only a handful, into common parlance promises liberation from some of the worst shackles of English's linguistic past. So too does unprecedented recognition that demeaning appellations — from squaw to fag, spaz, nigger, jewboy, cunt, and many more — with their enshrinement of oppression, threaten democracy and a shared life. These hard-won shifts have incalculably emboldened our individual and collective abilities to imagine and resist injustice.

Even as today's enhancement of English — alongside new-found appreciation of other tongues, including, very significantly for this settler space, Indigenous languages[6] — questions oppressive relations, equally important is the closely associated right of refusal by historically disadvantaged communities. This claim, without which equality is ultimately meaningless, is captured in feminist "no means no" drives against sexual abuse and demands by Indigenous communities and Quebecers that they can choose independence of the 1867 project. This is just what scholar Audra Simpson proposes in her important discussion of "nested sovereignty" in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*.[7] The possibility of constructing different outcomes than those set out by patriarchs in general and by the 1867 Founding Fathers of Confederation in particular can terrify, especially those of us who reap benefits from the status quo, but it offers Canadians extraordinary opportunities for overdue thinking, more "scope for the imagination", about how to share the planet.

Even as she inventories hard truths — "there is no we"[8] — the Ontario capital's former poet laureate and GG winner, Dionne Brand, has glimpsed that better world. Her description of Toronto in the 2005 novel *What We All Long For* might well stand in for Canada of a New Day, to borrow a phrase from suffragist Nellie L. McClung:

It's like this with this city — you can stand on a simple corner and get taken away in all directions. Depending on the weather, it can be easy or hard. If it's pleasant, and the pleasant is so relative, then the other languages making their way to your ears, plus the language of the air itself, which can be cold and humid or wet and hot, this all sums up into a kind of new vocabulary. No mat-

6 On the tortured history of the beginning of their recognition see Eve Hague and Donna Patrick, "Indigenous Languages and the Racial Hierarchisation of Language Policy in Canada," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 36:1 (2015): 27-41.

7 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 193. See also Janet Rogers' "Bring Your Drum: 50 Years of Indigenous Protest Music" and "Has Anything Changed? Revisiting Chief Dan George's Iconic 'Lament for Confederation'," CBC Opinion, 5 May 2017, http://www.cbc.ca/2017/has-anything-changed-revisiting-chief-dan-george-s-iconic-lament-for-confederation-1.4079657?cmp=abfb

8 This is in stark contrast to the illusion celebrated in Canada's official broadcaster's commemoration of 150 in "The Story of Us" (2017), which unleashed a furor of criticism. For an introduction to the resulting controversy see Cassandra Szklarski, "Historians and Filmmakers Dissect CBC's Maligned 'The Story of Us'", Times Colonist, Canadian Press (12 April 2017), http://www.timescolonist.com/historians-and- filmmakers-dissect-cbc-s-maligned-doc-series-the-story-of-us-1.15132511

ter who you are, no matter how certain you are of it, you can't help but feel the thrill of being someone else.

In 2017, the same politics of possibility informs important creative initiatives, such as the "Remember/Resist/Redraw: A Radical History Project" by the Graphic History Collective, the #LOVEISLOVE ISLOVE photography campaign against homophobia and transphobia by Adam Zivo and the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity, the May 2017 discussion on "Restorying Islam and Judaism in Canada" at the University of Ottawa, and the "Shame and Prejudice" exhibit that started out at the University of Toronto in January 2017 by Cree artist Ken Monkman. All send Canadians back to the national drafting board.

In short, when I survey Canada, my vision takes hope, admittedly sometimes fragile, from our collective capacity to embrace language that extends the idea and the practice of equality and fair dealing. Although that heightened prospect does not justify a passing grade for Canada 150+, it does permit an assessment familiar from our student days: potential in plenty but much more effort required. In the dark days of Trump and Brexit, not to mention a host of global conflicts and catastrophes, that vision should inspire all who live in the land she called Canada. We can do so much better — and we will need to if humanity and the planet are to survive.