THE GENDER JUSTICE CAMPAIGNS: WOMEN SUFFRAGE AND BEYOND IN CANADA

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Canada's women suffrage movements have received an evolving press. Contemporary supporters hailed achievements as a significant advance for democracy; opponents prophesized the end of (patriarchal) civilization. Subsequently, in the context of the emergence of the Canadian mainstream liberal consensus, suffragists were largely ignored as little more than eccentric footnotes to democracy's supposedly inevitable triumph. The last quarter of the 20th century, however, renewed doubts about capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. In that context, many feminist, socialist, and anti-racist scholars and activists condemned suffragists as inadequate foremothers.[1]

1 On this evolution see Veronica Strong-Boag, "Taking Stock of Suffragists: Personal Reflections on Feminist Appraisals," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* NS, 21:2 (2011): 76-89.

Today, as the forthcoming UBC Press seven volume series, "Women Suffrage and the Struggle for Democracy in Canada," of which I am the General Editor, suggests, we stand in another time. The on-going crisis of liberal capitalism, the resurgence of sectarianism, and a diverse resistance politics encourage further reconsideration of the citizenship debates that infused the suffrage age. Today, political theorist Nancy Fraser's discussion of 'participatory parity,' with its requirement of both 'recognition' and 'redistribution,' as essential to a democratic politics offers a useful approach to the gender justice debates of which women suffrage was a significant part.[2]

For some hundred years, Canada's enfranchisement campaigns raised the best-known standard for 'gender justice.' In this, they were not, however, entirely alone. A few other critics of the dominant order, while rejecting the race prejudices of much mainstream suffragism, also called for respect and reallocation of resources in women's favour. This short paper highlights that common political terrain. It begins with the centrality of respect and economic redistribution to the mainstream suffrage cause. It then turns to two critics of North American colonialism who also championed gender justice — the English-Mohawk writer and performer E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake; 1861-1913) and the Eurasian writer Edith Maud Eaton (Sui Sin Far; 1865-1914). New Women of their age, they advocated for women while never naming themselves suffragists.[3] Like the suffragist mainstream, they too imbricated race into their discussion of gender. In their case, this meant racial justice for Indigenous and Asian peoples.

CANADA'S MAINSTREAM SUFFRAGISTS

Respect for and recognition of women's contributions to home and country, in other words a repudiation of what Fraser has termed pervasive "status subordination,"[4] infused Canadian franchise campaigns.[5] Activists typically scavenged history for examples of female industry, talent, and sacrifice to counter the pervasive "demeaning representations" that characterized much western culture.[6] Heroines, from the Virgin Mary to Boadicea, Mary Wollstonecraft, Laura Secord, Elizabeth Fry, and Queen Victoria, affirmed worthiness. Crusades for domestic science in schools and universities in turn asserted the value of women's domestic labour. So too did support for child study and maternal health programmes and demands for legislative change

2 See her "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3 (May-June 2000): 107-230 and "Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition: A Two-Dimensional Approach to Gender Justice," *Studies in Social Justice* 1:1 (Winter 2007): 23-35.

3 Johnson and Eaton never met but the latter wrote a short story suggesting sympathies with Indigenous women. See Mary Chapman, "Cultural Affinities between Native American and White Women in 'The Alaska Widow' by Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far)," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 38:1 (Spring 2013): 155-63. Johnson, however, may have shared some anti-Asian sentiments with white imperialists. The observations here draw on my work on Johnson with Carole Gerson and on Mary Chapman's assessments of Edith Maud Eaton.

4 Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," 119.

5 These campaigns are explored in Denyse Baillargeon, *A Brief History of Women in Quebec* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014); Penni Mitchell, *About Canada: Women's Rights* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2015), and Gail C. Brandt, et al, *Canadian Women. A History* 3rd ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2011).

6 Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," 110.

of the age of consent and marriage for girls and in favour of mothers' custody of their children. Decades-long efforts to win women entry to universities and to professions sent the same message of recognition. The emergence of Canada's University Women's Clubs and the Canadian Women's Press Clubs, like associations representing nurses, teachers, and business and professional women, as well as those centred on patriotism such as the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire and the Women's Canadian Club, constituted other assertions of worth. In the 1920s Alberta's suffragist 'Famous Five' turned naturally to recognition of legal personhood under the British North America Act. All such engagement repudiated longstanding gender codes that set men as the standard for citizenship.

As Nancy Fraser has argued, recognition of worth cannot be "neatly separated" from economic reward[7] Suffrage campaigns for respect never existed in isolation. Activists regularly tackled the "economic structures, property regimes or labour markets" that "deprive actors of the resources needed for full participation" in the community.[8] While pursued for the most part within the framework of liberal capitalism, feminist efforts were diverse. Crusades for homesteads for women and reform of the married women's property acts focused on equalizing access to community and family resources. Others addressed the labour market, arguing for minimum wages for women and against employment barriers. Still others demanded that the state help women when men and families failed. Mothers' allowances and old age pensions (since the female elderly were regularly poor) were popular suffragist causes. Even when activists rarely made the point explicit, such demands involved redistribution of individual and community resources from one sex to another. For all their very real radicalism, suffragist campaigns for recognition and recompense often invoked an exclusive sisterhood. Indigenous and Asian women were rarely offered participatory parity with European settler women, let alone with white men.

E. PAULINE JOHNSON

That dominant racist narrative helps explain why E. Pauline Johnson never publicly endorsed the vote. As she made sense of ascendant colonialism and racism and recognized the particular vulnerability of Indigenous women, she looked elsewhere for remedy. Like suffragists, she nevertheless demanded respect and redistribution, Fraser's key determinants of participatory parity. These themes pervaded her writing and performance.

Johnson's 1894 "The Cattle Thief," recited across North America, typically condemned imperial Canada's dispossession of Indigenous peoples and stressed the significance of women in Indigenous resistance. Like Boadicea facing the Romans, her heroine, the daughter of the Cree chief, a "lion" cut down by settler "demons", dispels aspersions of inferiority. She might be starving but, like all Johnson's Indigenous women characters, she merited respect: "you must cut your way through *me*." British invaders are forced to confront the humanity of those they

7 Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," 118.

8 Ibid., 117.

despoil. That demand is accompanied by an insistence on restitution "for the land you live in," for "our herds of game," and for "the furs and the forests that were ours before you came; Give back the peace and the plenty." The 'new nationality' celebrated in Johnson's 1886 poem "'Brant' A Memorial Ode" required respect and compensation.

Johnson's "Mothers of a Great Race" (1908) offered another typical assertion of merit. Embracing a maternalist perspective, which many Indigenous advocates shared with mainstream suffragists, it hailed Indigenous mothers as "ideal mothers of our day" not as New Women. In a pointed condemnation of settler practices and a foreshadowing of racism's later injuries, Johnson insisted that offspring of such mothers never went to "orphanages." Nor was superior parenting Indigenous women's only achievement. Among the Iroquois, matrons were "openly acknowledged by every man of her tribe, be he chief, brave or warrior." They represented "a living, breathing contradiction to the common idea that Indian men look down upon women and treat the mothers of their children as mere property." In governing councils, matrons' rule was law, a fair recompense for their many contributions. As in her 1906 article, "The Lodge of the Law-Makers," where Johnson asserted that "there is no need for an Iroquois woman to clamour for recognition in our councils," Indigenous women are celebrated as receiving respect and reward, unlike suffragists who had to "cry out for a voice in the Parliament."[9] Johnson judged European culture as ultimately deficient in respecting and rewarding either settler or Indigenous women.

EDITH MAUD EATON

Relocating from Montreal to the United States, Edith Maud Eaton did not match Johnson as a Canadian icon. Neither, however, was she constrained by a sentimental (and pragmatic) loyalty to the British Empire. Eaton developed a sophisticated response to the racism and related sexism of North America and the Caribbean's multiple 'contact zones'.[10] Both women nevertheless shared an interest in 'flexible citizenship' in which their key characters, like their mixed-race authors, existed in multiple worlds where their merits and their rewards required assertion against mainstream denial.[11]

Eaton's 1890 autobiographical essay "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" begins with the author's earliest encounter with racism. Her remembered response as a young child embraced the reviled status: "I'd rather be Chinese than anything else in the world." She retreated to the

9 All citations come from the works republished in Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds., *E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake: Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). See also Strong-Boag and Gerson, *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

10 See Mary Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016) and Eaton's texts now on the www. My thanks to Mary for her generosity in sending a pre-publication pdf of her manuscript. See also her *Making Noise Making News: Suffrage Print Culture and U.S. Modernism* (Oxford Scholarship Online: April 2014).

11 Chapman, "Introduction," *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, lix. Chapman draws on the concept of 'flexible citizenship' described by Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

library "to read every book I can find on China and the Chinese. I learn that China is the oldest civilized nation on the face of the earth." Eaton maintained that insistence on historic merit even as she documented "Chinese women's struggles against arranged marriages, sex slavery, and patriarchal Confucianism."[12] Her Asian female characters challenged demeaning portrayal. They merited respect.

In "The Chinese Woman in America" (1897) and elsewhere, Eaton invoked the past, much like mainstream feminists' recovery of white women worthies, to claim promising histories. Her project of redemption also engaged with a domestic feminism associated with contemporary Chinese critics of sex slavery, foot binding, and arranged marriage. This perspective, much like an older strain within western feminism, celebrated women's special nature, in other words their essential maternalism, rather than their similarity to men. Much like Johnson, Eaton insisted that her sex had no need to become New Women to deserve fair treatment and a fair share of resources. In emphasizing the intrinsic value of mothering, these anti-racist critics of the status quo challenged both the "antidomestic ideals and racist heartlessness" of some suffragists.[13] In celebrating China's reformers and domestic feminists, Eaton suggested that respect and reward for women would come through the efforts of the Chinese themselves. Rescue by Europeans, feminist or otherwise, was not necessary.[14]

CONCLUSION

Canadian suffragists campaigned for the recognition and redistribution that would advance participatory parity and gender justice. A pervasive prejudice that frequently excluded involvement of non-white women substantially undercut that ambitious goal. As anti-racist critics of contemporary North America and suffragists, E. Pauline Johnson and Edith M. Eaton were committed to a better deal for their sex. In a North American public world in which racism was wide-spread and often unquestioned by settler suffragists, Johnson and Eaton seized upon the potential of versions of maternalist feminism to offer women respect and equality, in effect a significant measure of what Fraser has called 'parity of participation.' In considering the evolution of democracy, their message needs to be absorbed along side that issued by Canada's women suffrage mainstream.

12 Chapman, *Making Noise*, 177.

13 Ibid., 195.

14 See ibid., Chapter 6.