Re-Franchising Women of Hawai‘i, 1912–1920
The Politics of Gender, Sovereignty, Race, and Rank at the Crossroads of the Pacific

Rumi Yasutake

Abstract

This chapter examines the struggle of Hawai‘i’s women’s suffrage movement under the leadership of prominent Native Hawaiian women. It provides a view of their relationship with white and non-white women in Hawai‘i, the U.S. mainland, and the home-lands of Asian and white immigrants. Focusing on how the suffrage leaders transformed their strategy and identity, this chapter analyzes the complex workings of gender, sovereignty, race, and rank in the emergence of a women’s mass suffrage movement in post-annexation Hawai‘i between 1912 and 1920.

Keywords


On October 28, 1912, Carrie Chapman Catt gave a lecture on the women’s suffrage cause at the Hawaiian Opera House in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. Following forced annexation in 1898, the United States had installed a territorial government in Hawai‘i in 1900. Island society in the early 20th century was both a culturally hybrid and a neocolonial plantation society. It was racially

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diverse and racially stratified, with whites, Native Hawaiians, and Asians—who were mostly recently arrived immigrant laborers. There were other groups of laborers, such as those imported from Portugal and the Caribbean. Native Hawaiian women, including racially hybrid “Part-Hawaiian” women, sometimes straddled the divide between indigenous and white. Their political citizenship also spanned different systems. Native Hawaiian women, who had opposed annexation, viewed U.S. territorial suffrage as a means both to regain female political power and to restore indigenous sovereignty. In contrast, white women, who were a tiny minority of the islands’ population, had disdainful racial views about non-white societies and were anxious about challenges to white settler colonialism. Consequently, local white women in Hawai’i were reluctant to engage in the suffrage movement in the post-annexation era.

In fact, Catt’s lecture was due to an invitation by a group of Native Hawaiian Women. Catt was a former president and influential member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and was then serving as the president of the International Woman Suffrage Association (IWSA). She was on her return from a world tour that had lasted one year and seven months. Insisting that the coming of women’s suffrage was “as certain as the rising of the sun,” Catt urged the women on the islands to get their vote while Hawai’i was still a territory. She also encouraged the Native Hawaiian women’s group to take the form of a modern women’s organization and to establish an affiliation with the NAWSA. Although the NAWSA records, after Catt’s visit, proclaimed

3 The term ‘Native Hawaiian’ is used to indicate people who previously were categorized as ‘Part-Hawaiian’ or ‘Hawaiian,’ even though these categories were based on blood- (and race-) quantums. According to Judy Schachter, “‘native Hawaiian’ with a small ‘n’ refers to individuals with 50 percent or more Hawaiian blood, while ‘Native’ with a capital ‘N’ refers to those with some Hawaiian ancestry” in official state agencies. See Judith Schachter, The Legacies of a Hawaiian Generation: From Territorial Subject to American Citizen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), x.
4 Harper, The History of Woman Suffrage VI, 717; The Papers of Carrie Chapman Catt, Reel 1, 40, 42; “Noted Suffragist to Speak Here Tonight.”