Social Education 84(3), pp. 171–175
©2020 National Council for the Social Studies

The Fraught Relationship of Women's Suffrage and Race in Picture Books

(AP Photo/Joseph Frederick)

This November 4, 2019, still video image shows a portion of the first women's statue that will be installed in New York's Central Park, as it is being created by sculptor Meredith Bergmann in her studio in Ridgefield, Conn. The monument is scheduled to be dedicated on August 26, 2020, marking the 100th anniversary of American women winning the right to vote.

Andrea S. Libresco

It's not easy to get women's suffrage right. Its history is a lot messier—and more nuanced—than many of us might have learned in our own schooling.

From statues to picture books, the depictions of suffragists do not always do justice to the complexity of the issues and activists who fought for the 19th Amendment, which provided that "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."[1] The recent debate and subsequent revisions to a bronze and granite suffrage statue scheduled for dedication at Central Park's Literary Walk on August 26, 2020 (the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment's ratification) provide a window into these complexities.

The New York City Public Design Commission had sculptor Meredith Bergmann revise her proposal for the monument twice; initially, because it depicted only white suffragists (Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton), while African American and other

suffragists were listed in name only on a long scroll unfolding from Stanton's desk. A second design added Sojourner Truth at the table, working with Anthony and Stanton at Stanton's home; however, historians raised questions about its accuracy, given that the three women did not always see issues the same way. A third and final model was designed to reflect differences of opinion between Truth and Anthony and Stanton:

> Renderings of the new design show a different, more determined gesture of Truth's left hand (it rested on the table in the last design) to reflect a debate between her and Stanton. "I resculpted Sojourner Truth's left hand to bring it into the conversation," Bergmann writes in her latest proposal. "I also moved the table closer to Sojourner Truth and brought Stanton's hand out to the edge of the table to eliminate Stanton's apparent ownership of the table, since possession of the table might be regarded as a marker of power." Bergmann also changed Stanton's expression to "one of greater attention and serious listening."[2]

The deeper one looks into race and suffrage, the messier it gets. Stanton certainly used racist tropes in her efforts to get "sex" included alongside "race, color, or previous condition of servitude"[3] in the 15th Amendment, as characteristics by which the vote could not be denied. She warned that "Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung who do not know the difference between a monarchy and republic, never read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's Spelling Book" would be making decisions for white women, if women's suffrage were not included in the amendment.[4]

Anthony began with this assumption: "The question of precedence has no place on an equal rights platform."[5] Thus, when Frederick Douglass placed his oppressed group and its cause above all others, Anthony did the same with her own group, "I would sooner cut off my right hand than ask the ballot for the black man and not for woman."[6] Was she being racist? Choosing radicalism over gradualism? Both?

In *The Woman's Hour*, Elaine Weiss details the trade-offs that white women suffragist leaders were willing to make with respect to Black voting rights to achieve a women's suffrage amendment. Weiss points out that 50 years after Stanton and Anthony's strategies for including "sex" in the 15th Amendment, Alice Paul (head of the Woman's Party) made the same calculations with respect to the 19th Amendment, telling African American journalist Ida B. Wells (who was just awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously) to march at the back of the suffrage parade, instead of with her Illinois state delegation to avoid upsetting potential white allies (an order Wells defied). In addition, Paul and Carrie Chapman Catt (head of the National American Women's Suffrage Association) wooed white Southern women with the promise that "Negro men cannot vote in South Carolina and therefore negro women could not if women were to vote in the nation."[7]

The good news is that Weiss has adapted her book for young readers and it is scheduled for publication in June 2020,[8] just in time for the women's suffrage centennial. At 224 pages, it is geared for intermediate and middle school readers. What about elementary readers? How well do picture books on women's suffrage do when it comes to addressing the complex issues of race and suffrage? To what extent do picture books include the voices and activities of a variety of suffragists, their points of agreement and their points of conflict? Do they present such suffragists, flaws and all?

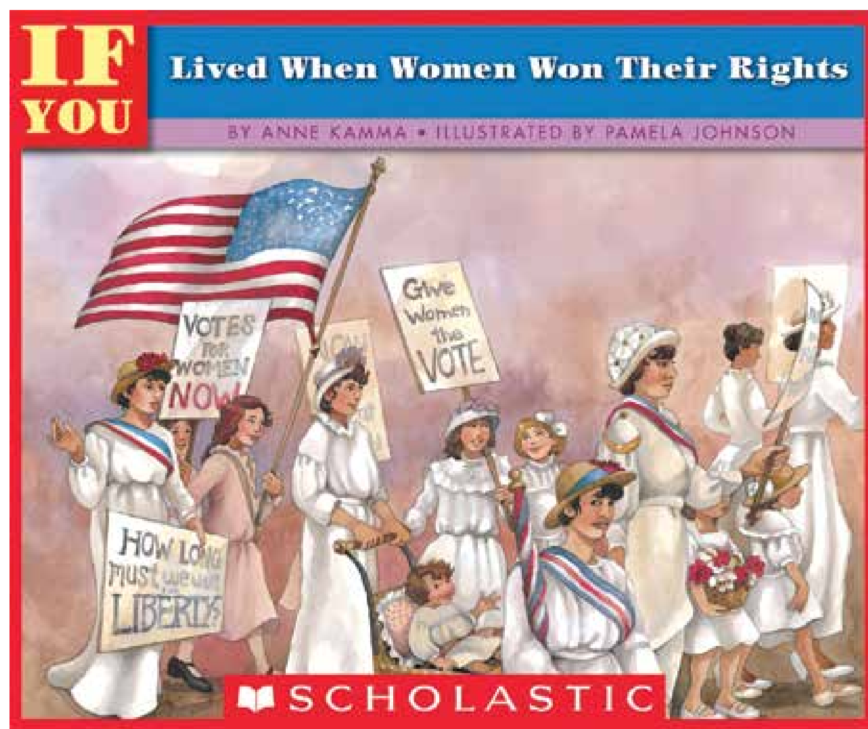
Biographies about Stanton and Anthony are a logical place to search for answers to these questions. Some picture book biographies of Anthony focus on a particular episode in her life—e.g., her illegal vote and trial (*Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President*[9]), or her suffrage work in California in 1896 (*Marching with Aunt Susan: Susan B. Anthony and the Fight for Women's Suffrage*[10]). In other words, these books don't cover the time periods (debates over passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, or early twentieth-century women's suffrage parades), where race might play a more prominent role. Neither do their source citations engage suffrage with issues of race. Biographies that span the trajectory of Anthony's life might have more opportunity to tell the nuanced story of Anthony's position on the 15th Amendment, but, thus far, they have not done so. For example, Alexander Wallner's *Susan B. Anthony* alludes to Anthony and Stanton's frustration about the exclusion of women from the 15th Amendment, but offers no Anthony quotes on the subject (though she is quoted multiple times throughout the book):

> Susan had been one voice among many that had spoken against slavery. After the Civil War, when slavery was officially abolished in the United States, Susan and Mrs. Stanton started a magazine called *The Revolution*, which pushed for the right of women and freed slaves to vote. Then the Fifteenth Amendment was passed, giving African American men the right to vote. Women still could not cast a ballot. Susan had worked hard on many reform causes for twenty-two years, but this action made her focus. Now she would fight only for "the cause": women's suffrage.[11]

This information is not incorrect; neither is it the whole story. It is a missed opportunity to explore, in depth, Anthony's motivations in declining to support the 15th Amendment.

In Mary Kay Carson's question and

answer book *Good Question: Why Couldn't Susan B. Anthony Vote and Other Questions About … Women's Suffrage,*[12] the issue of race appears twice; first, in response to the question, "Who were the Quakers?" The answer points out that Quakers "worked in many reform movements, including the abolition of slavery, better treatment of prisoners, and education for children of all races and sexes." The second mention of race is in response to "Why was the Fifteenth Amendment so disappointing to the suffragists?" The answer contrasts Anthony's desire for universal suffrage with the actual outcome and how she and other suffragists felt about it: furious and betrayed. "They'd fought to end slavery, but didn't get any support for women's rights in turn. 'Many abolitionists have yet to learn the ABC of woman's rights,' wrote Anthony."[13] The response to the final question, "Do all women around the world have the right to vote?" is notable for the absence of any discussion of race: "One hundred years after Susan B. Anthony's birth, all American women were finally able to vote."[14] That statement might come as news to African American women who put their lives on the line some 40 years later to make the 15th and 19th Amendments live up to their promises.



There are fewer picture book biographies of Stanton, and, despite her more overt comments about race, the books are almost silent on this issue, except with respect to Stanton and Anthony's early abolitionist activities. Tanya Lee Stone's *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote* only covers through to the Seneca Falls Declaration, so there is no opportunity to examine Stanton's use of race in the gender debate.[15] Nor does the brief Author's Note mention any post-Civil War suffrage dilemmas or conflicts; indeed, it does not even reference the 15th Amendment.

Doreen Rappaport's *Elizabeth Started All the Trouble* takes the reader beyond Stanton's death to the passage of the 19th Amendment, so there are opportunities to grapple with the issue of race in the fight for women's suffrage. A nod to the issue appears with a page devoted to Sojourner Truth, who "caused quite a stir when she reminded white women [at a meeting in Ohio] that black women were treated even worse than they were." This leads naturally to an excerpt from Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. The second, even briefer nod, comes in the post-Civil War section: "Then the lawmakers began debating giving the vote to black men. Now, Elizabeth thought now is *our* chance to get the vote, too. But they didn't."[16] The book then moves on to the western travels of suffragists, and the opportunity to deepen suffrage history is lost.

Biographies about African American suffragists often provide the information about racial issues missing from biographies about the movement's white leaders. Walter Dean Myers's biography of Ida B. Wells, *Let the Truth Be Told*, includes a two-page spread about Wells joining the 1913 march with the Illinois delegation, rather than march at the back. The accompanying text includes the fact that Wells "created the Alpha Suffrage Club … the first voting organization for black women in the state of Illinois," and notes, "When white suffragists asked Ida to march in the separate colored section, Ida sternly refused."[17] No names are listed for these "white suffragists," and no reason is given for their request. The only suffragist (besides Wells) named on the two-page spread is Anthony, cited as Wells's friend. Interestingly, the timeline at the end of the book does not focus on Wells's agency in the suffrage movement, as it jumps from 1910, citing her role in launching the NAACP, to 1920, "The Nineteenth Amendment is ratified, giving women the right to vote."[18]

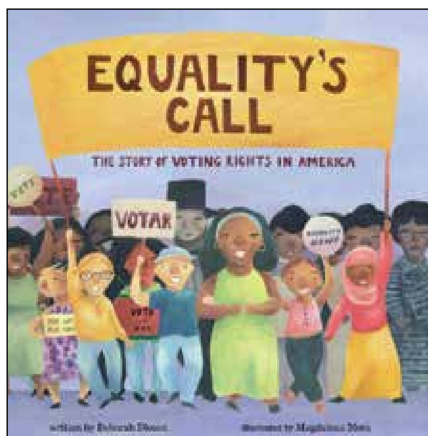
Because Wells is most known for her fearless journalism, in which she exposed the truths about lynching at great personal risk, biographies about Wells may not even delve into her suffrage activities. The only mention of suffrage in Philip Dray's book, *Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells*, is found in the afterword—a paragraph, highlighting the same points as Myers's book: the friendship with Anthony, the black women's suffrage club in Chicago, and "singlehandedly integrat[ing] the [1913] march."[19]

One of this year's NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books, Diane Bailey's *Ida B. Wells: Discovering History's Heroes*, a chapter book geared for third to fifth graders, does not mention suffrage at all.[20] While there is a logic to focusing on that for which Wells is most known, it is also the case that the decision to omit suffrage contributes to the idea that suffrage was predominantly a white women's game, while race issues were taken up predominantly by African Americans. Yet Wells, like Sojourner Truth, struggled against both race and gender discrimination.

Some books examine multiple suffragists, as does Kirsten Gillibrand's recent *Bold & Brave: Ten Heroes Who Won Women the Rights to Vote.* Books of this nature, which devote a page of text to each woman, can't provide the depth needed to explore the history of race and suffrage and, indeed, none of the pages on white women mentions race. However, all of the profiles of women of color touch on the intersections of race and gender. The page on Ida B. Wells addresses her 1913 parade activism, indicating that "she ignored racist objections and marched with the otherwise white Illinois delegation."[21] That is to say, Gillibrand does call out racism on pages devoted to women of color, without, however, naming any names.

Non-biographies might serve as useful sources for children to encounter more meaningful explorations of the intersections of race and gender. The question and answer format in Anne Kamma's *If You Lived When Women Won Their Rights* does provide the space to explore topics in more depth. While the answer to "Why were women's rights leaders upset after the war?" does not quote Stanton or Anthony in their frustration at the privileging of race over gender, Sojourner Truth's voice is heard:

> Finally there was a chance to
> change the Constitution so
> that both women and African
> Americans could vote. Instead,
> women were told to wait. Even
> most antislavery leaders agreed.
> Sojourner Truth didn't agree.
> "There is a great stir about
> colored men getting their rights,"
> she said, "but not a word about
> colored women." She warned, "If
> colored men get their rights, and
> not the colored women ... the
> colored men will be masters over
> the women."[22]



This quote is notable as it is rare that a picture book on suffrage provides additional voice to Truth, beyond the oft-quoted "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, which this book also highlights, on a full page devoted to "Who was Sojourner Truth?" Other books that provide more information and statements by Sojourner Truth and explore the interplay of gender and race are those whose reading levels range from intermediate to middle school and focus more on primary sources.[23] A recently published elementary level book, *Suffragette: The Battle for Equality*, examines suffrage movements in both the United Kingdom and the United States and directly describes the stakes around the 15th Amendment: "Whether the voting rights of women should have precedence over those of African American men,"[24] though it does not explore the language or tactics that movement leaders employed to address these stakes. Later in the movement timeline, *Suffragette* highlights Wells's defiance of white women suffragists in the 1913 parade, not only with a forceful description but with a full-page drawing of the incident.

In its discussion of the passage of the 19th Amendment, *Suffragette* makes an important and often overlooked point, namely, that not all American women could actually vote:

> It is important to note that,
> although all women were granted
> the right to vote in 1920, many
> African American women were
> kept from doing so by taxes,
> literacy tests, and threats, all
> designed to keep them from
> having political influence.... It
> would take more than forty years
> for African American women to
> have a chance to fully exercise
> their legal rights, with the passage
> of the Voting Rights Act that
> struck down unfair local laws.[25]

Lest we suppose that the complexity of suffrage and race is beyond the ken of very young children, Deborah Diesen's recently published book, *Equality's Call: The Story of Voting Rights in America*, geared for grades K-3, manages to use simple rhyming stanzas to convey that the passage of the 19th Amendment did not mean that all women were actually able to vote:[26]

> Suffragists didn't
> Give up on the fight,
> And the Nineteenth Amendment
> Gave women the right.
>
> But voters of color
> Still met with oppression.
> Their voting was hindered
> By brutal suppression.

The book chronicles efforts to extend voting rights to all citizens over the course of U.S. history with a repeating line of text, "A right isn't a right/ Till it's granted to all," illustrated by an ever-increasing line of people of all races, ethnicities, and genders toting suffrage signs. Yet the

book also notes that voter suppression has not been fully vanquished.

This anniversary year for women's suffrage will bring more books, celebrations, exhibits, lesson plans, and articles (indeed, *Social Education* will offer its own special issue in the fall), all of which provide us with opportunities to present students with the messiness of history and the complexities of the women's suffrage movement.

Given the varied emphases presented in the books discussed here, one recommended activity is to organize biography literature circles, wherein students in a group pick different biographies about the same suffragist and then compare what the different sources said—and omitted—about their activist and the movement, as well as which sources students would label as most reliable.[27] If examining a suffragist through the lens of racial issues, teachers can provide students with particular events on which to focus their comparisons (e.g., passage of the 15th Amendment and the 1913 parade); and students can supplement the biographical treatments of their suffragist with the record in primary source documents. To assess their learning, teachers can ask students to design their own (well-sourced) commemorative exhibit on women's suffrage. Which suffragists will they include? What events will they select? What quotes do they think are representative? Will they develop a hagiographical exhibit or a contested one?

James Baldwin was not speaking about women's suffrage when he said, "American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it,"[28] but his words still apply. Our students can handle a more beautiful and more terrible story about women's suffragists. Can we?

This anniversary year for women's suffrage will bring more books, celebrations, exhibits, lesson plans, and articles (indeed, *Social Education* will offer its own special issue in the fall)

Notes

1. 19th Amendment, Interactive Constitution, National Constitution Center, https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xix
2. Hakim Bishara, "Central Park Women's Suffrage Monument Approved," *Hyperallergic* (October 23, 2019), https://hyperallergic.com/524362/central-park-womens-suffrage-monument-approved/
3. 15th Amendment, Interactive Constitution, National Constitution Center, https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xv
4. Elaine Weiss, *The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 135.
5. Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 192.
6. Barry, 171.
7. Weiss, 139.
8. Elaine Weiss, *The Woman's Hour (Adapted for Young Readers): Our Fight for the Right to Vote* (New York: Random House Books for Young Readers, forthcoming, 2020).
9. Ann Malaspina, *Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President* (Chicago: Albert Whitman & Co., 2012).
10. Claire Rudolf Murphy, *Marching with Aunt Susan: Susan B. Anthony and the Fight for Women's Suffrage* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2011).
11. Alexander Wallner, *Susan B. Anthony* (New York: Holiday House, 2012), n.p.
12. Mary Kay Carson, *Good Question: Why Couldn't Susan B. Anthony Vote and Other Questions About … Women's Suffrage* (New York: Sterling Children's Books, 2015), 8.
13. Carson, 8.
14. Carson, 30.
15. Tanya Lee Stone, *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2008).
16. Doreen Rappaport, *Elizabeth Started All the Trouble* (New York: Disney/Hyperion, 2016), n.p.
17. Walter Dean Myers, *Ida B. Wells: Let the Truth Be Told* (New York: Amistad, Collins, 2008), 30.
18. Myers, 35.
19. Philip Dray, *Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells: The Daring Life of a Crusading Journalist* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2008), n.p..
20. Diane Bailey, *Ida B. Wells: Discovering History's Heroes* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Aladdin, 2019).
21. Kirsten Gillibrand *Bold & Brave: Ten Heroes Who Won Women the Rights to Vote* (New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2018), n.p.
22. Anne Kamma, *If You Lived When Women Won their Rights*, (New York: Scholastic, 2006), 52.
23. Colleen Adams, *Women's Suffrage: A Primary Source History* of the Women's Rights Movement in America (New York: Rosen Central, 2002); George Sullivan, *The Day the Women Got the Vote: A Photo History of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Scholastic, 1994).
24. David Roberts, *Suffragette: The Battle for Equality* (Somerville, Mass.: Walker Books, 2019), 30.
25. Roberts, 122.
26. Deborah Diesen, *Equality's Call: The Story of Voting Rights in America* (New York: Beach Lane Books, 2020), n.p.
27. This activity is adapted from Andrea S. Libresco, Jeannette Balantic, and Jonie C. Kipling, *Every Book is a Social Studies Book: How to Meet Standards with Picture Books, K-6* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 92–95.
28. James Baldwin, "Talks to Teachers" (Delivered October 16, 1963, as "The Negro Child—His Self-Image;" originally published in *The Saturday Review*, December 21, 1963), www.spps.org/cms/lib010/MN01910242/Centricity/Domain/125/baldwin_atalktoteachers_1_2.pdf

Andrea S. Libresco *is professor of Social Studies Education at Hofstra University; her most recent book is* Notable Books, Notable Lessons: Putting Social Studies Back in the K-8 Curriculum, *an edited volume of lessons that use NCSS Notable Books from the last 10 years.*

NATIONAL SOCIAL STUDIES HONOR SOCIETY
JUNIOR RHO KAPPA
JR. is here!
Junior Rho Kappa is the only national organization for middle or junior high school students that recognizes excellence in the field of Social Studies.
www.socialstudies.org/junior-rho-kappa