

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

Lifting
as we
climb

BLACK WOMEN'S
BATTLE FOR THE
BALLOT BOX

evette dionne



About
Lifting as we Climb
as we Climb

FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, THE FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE WAS ONLY *ONE* BATTLE.



An eye-opening book that tells the important, overlooked story of Black women as a force in the suffrage movement—when fellow suffragists did not accept them as equal partners in the struggle.

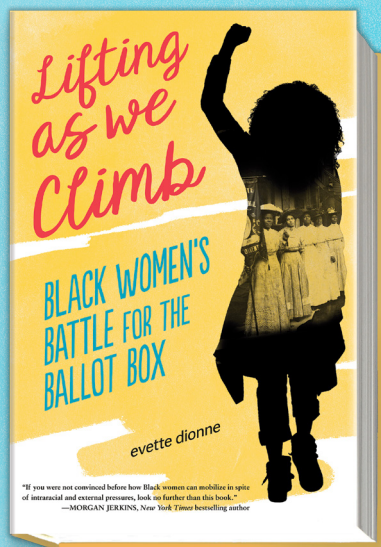
Susan B. Anthony. Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Alice Paul. The Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls. The 1913 Women's March in DC. When the epic story of the suffrage movement in the United States is told, the most familiar leaders, speakers at meetings, and participants in marches written about or pictured are generally white.

That's not the real story.

Women of color, especially African American women, were fighting for their right to vote and to be treated as full, equal citizens of the United States. Their battlefield wasn't just about gender. African American women had to deal with white abolitionist-suffragists who drew the line at sharing power with their black sisters. They had to overcome deep, exclusionary racial prejudices that were rife in the American suffrage movement. And they had to maintain their dignity—and safety—in a society that tried to keep them in its bottom ranks.

Lifting as We Climb is the empowering story of African American women who refused to accept all this. Women in black church groups, black female sororities, black women's improvement societies and social clubs. Women who formed their own black suffrage associations when white-dominated national suffrage groups rejected them. Women like Mary Church Terrell, a founder of the National Association of Colored Women and of the NAACP; or educator-activist Anna Julia Cooper who championed women getting the vote and a college education; or the crusading journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a leader in both the suffrage and anti-lynching movements.

Author **EVETTE DIONNE**, a feminist culture writer and the editor in chief of Bitch Media, has uncovered an extraordinary and underrepresented history of black women. In her powerful book, she draws an important historical line from abolition to suffrage to civil rights to contemporary young activists—filling in the blanks of the American suffrage story.



"If you were not convinced before how Black women can mobilize in spite of interracial and internal pressures, look no further than this book."
—MORGAN JERKINS, *New York Times* bestselling author

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Preface

- “We read about slavery, abolition, and the Civil War . . . Black American history, however, was rarely, if ever, taught—except of course, in February.” (4)
 - What do you already know about Black American history and the women suffragettes?
 - Consider the time periods and figures you have learned about. What time periods celebrated as great moments in US history, have had narratives of Black people and lives erased? Why do you suppose that is?
- Based on the information given in the preface, what stories do you anticipate reading and learning about? Have you heard of any of the people in the synopsis? What do you already know about them?

Chapters 1-2

- What was the Fugitive Slave Act and who were Abolitionists? What did they want, and why?
- On Page 9, we learn that, “Men, including Douglass, were perceived as principal leaders in the anti-slavery movement. In the nineteenth century, women were considered the inferior or lesser sex.” How did this impact their ability to enter into life as free people of color or as emancipated slaves fighting for the abolition of slavery in slaveholding states?
- What barriers existed for Black women (wanting to engage in anti-slavery acts of resistance) that did not exist for white women?
- What was the World Anti-slavery Convention? Who organized it? What was its mission? (30)
- “In the mid-1800s, the movement for women’s political rights and recognition of full personhood was well underway,” but white and Black women did not have access to the same platforms or organizing conventions. Who were the principal leaders at the Seneca Falls and National Women’s Rights Conventions? How were their arguments similar? How were they different?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapters 3-4

- For many historians, the end of the Civil War also marks the end of slavery, as the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in addition to the amendment to the United States Constitution that ended slavery. Even so, according to the general cultural climate of the time and suffragist Susan B. Anthony, “African Americans were not as intelligent, just, or moral as women,” and therefore, white women should get the vote before (newly recognized as citizens) African American males. (45) How do her words differ from those of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper? (43)
- What was the Fifteenth Amendment; and how did the American populace respond to it? Consider each group separately, Black women, Black men, white women, white men.
- On Page 54, we learn that, “As part of their agreement, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) decided to focus only on suffrage, so that there was no commitment to ending discrimination, poverty, lynching, or any of the other urgent issues that mattered to Black women.” How is the fight for the right to vote connected to each of these issues? Begin a tracker and take notes under each column to gather evidence about the ways these factors disenfranchise voters as you read the remainder of the book.
- Who were Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell? What American act of racialized violence—perpetrated primarily against Black men—was their primary concern? How did this connect to voter suppression?
- “Women’s clubs have been a part of Black communities since slavery ended.” Black women “organizing themselves for self-help” included what types of activities? (67)
- Where did the motto “lifting as we climb” originate? What did it represent? (74)
- What was the NACWC and how did Black women use suffrage to convene and combat other issues such as, “ending abuse in the judicial system, being lynched, and not being able to get ahead financially”? (75) What do you already know about them?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapters 5-6

- What were the larger implications of the statement “Voting is only for educated women”? How and why did this disenfranchise and exclude many women of color?
- From Mary Church Terrell’s speech entitled, “The Progress of Colored Women,” what steps does she say Black women suffragists had taken—without assistance from white women—to advance their communities? (83)
- Who was Mary McLeod Bethune and what did she do to try to uplift Black people in her community? (85) How did her actions connect to the idea of “racial uplift”? (66)
- Explain the tension that existed between the NAACP and the NAWSA. In what ways were Black women left out of the conversation? (91–92)
- How did Wells-Barnett and the Alpha Suffrage Club achieve the goal of attaining some political power and representation in Chicago? (97–99)

Chapters 7-8

- Which state governments, by 1911, had granted women the right to vote? What do you suppose was their percentage population of Black citizens (men and women)? How might this have differed from Northeastern and Southern states?
- After raising money and committing to attend, what place did Black women suffragists have in the Women’s Suffrage March? (103-104) How did they resist? (108)
- What was the fate of many of the Nation’s first Black women suffragists? (114–115)
- “In 1920, there were more Black women than white women registered to vote in Florida.” “Even with this new right, though, only 36 percent of eligible women voters [of any race] cast a ballot.” (116) Generally speaking, what do you suppose would have happened if all of the women eligible to vote, had registered and done so?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapters 7-8 (continued)

- “The fight for the right to vote was really a part of a bigger struggle for dignity, for being seen as and treated as an equal citizen. For this reason, the act of voting was also tied closely to other elements of citizenship.” (118) What were these “other elements of citizenship”? If Black citizens could not vote, how were they impacted?
- How did the Great Depression impact Black Americans? How did Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune try to repair the impact? (125)
- What types of voter suppression did Fannie Lou Hammer face? (130–131) How did she fight back?
- What did Ella Baker and the SCLC’s Crusade for Citizenship accomplish? (133)
- Who was the first Black Woman to run for president of the United States? (142) What was her slogan?

Epilogue

- What was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and what was it created to protect?
- What moves did state governments make to restrict voter access after gutting the Voting Rights Act in 2013?
- “Voter suppression isn’t only about blocking the vote. It is also about creating an atmosphere of fear, making sure [people’s] votes don’t count.” (147) In what ways does voter suppression continue today? How is voting connected to denying full participatory citizenship?



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Pre-Reading

1) There is a lot of language you'll need to know as you progress throughout this book. Create a word square for each of these terms and vocabulary words: **suffrage, abolition, emancipation, disenfranchise, lynch, "Jim Crow Law," voter suppression.**

Example: *Climb*

Denotation <i>"To rise slowly by or as if by continued effort."</i>	Connotation <i>"To rise up."</i>
Sentence including the word <i>Mountain climbers go to the top of Mount Everest.</i>	My definition <i>"When anything or anyone elevates themselves in position or status"</i>

2) **JOURNAL ACTIVITY:** What is the story you've been told about the women's right to vote in the United States? What do you know? What do you want to know? Does the narrative you already know include Black women? If it does, who do you remember teaching you their story? If not, why do you think it doesn't?

DURING READING*

3) Throughout the book, there are many Black women mentioned who fought for the right to vote and advanced the cause of liberation for Black people—and, more specifically, Black women—in America. As you read, write down the name, date of birth, associated organization or movement, *a quote from each woman, and make a personal connection.* You will need to read carefully to gather all of the information. You may do this activity as a group or individually to deepen your knowledge of Black women in the "Battle for the Ballot Box."

Name	Date of Birth	Associated Organization or Movement	Quote	Personal Connection

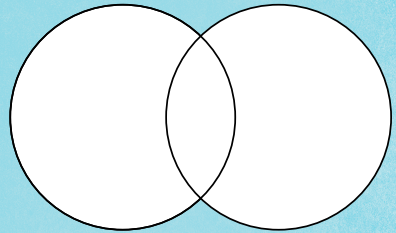
*You may also go through each chapter before reading, search for names and record them in the tracker.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Pre-Reading (continued)

4) Among the many organizations listed in the book, one that still exists is the NAACP. What is its ongoing mission? Research the history of your local chapter, especially Black women in its leadership. What work are they currently doing? How can you support it? What other political organizations run by Black women exist in your city?

5) **CREATE A VENN DIAGRAM** with two circles that capture places where Black and white women differed and may have aligned in their goals, beliefs and expected outcomes pertaining to the right to vote.



6) **READ THE LYRICS WHILE LISTENING TO BILLIE HOLIDAY'S SONG "STRANGE FRUIT."** Discuss modern forms of lynching that still disproportionately affect Black Americans. *E.g., police brutality, health-care disparities, etc.*

7) **JOURNAL ACTIVITY:** When you've reached Chapter 8, consider what you thought you knew before you read the book, what you know now, and what you still want to know. What questions remain for you about Black women and the right to vote, past or present?

Post-Reading

8) Voter suppression is real, and ongoing. Research how one of the following elements impacts voter registration and participation: **education (literacy), incarceration rates (specifically among Black Americans), discrimination, poverty, voter identification laws.** What laws has your state made to impact voter access and participation? Investigate the number of elected officials in your state who identify as Black American. What cities or areas do they represent? What is the population of Black registered voters in those areas? How does the representation or lack thereof affect the lives of those you care about? Is your city or town racially segregated? If so, what could you do to impact that?

Create a map, podcast, short video reaction, or other presentation with your findings that you could present to your community, and a plan for change if you notice decades-old patterns.

Standards*:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Additional Resources:

Southern Poverty Law Center: "Voting Rights"

*Alive and Well: Voter Suppression and Election
Mismanagement in Alabama*

Dream Defenders

The New Jim Crow

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You

Educator Biography

This guide was written by **JULIA E. TORRES**. Julia is a veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia serves teachers around the country by facilitating teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of social justice, anti-racist education, equity and access in librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia also works with students locally and around the country with the goal of empowering them to use literacy to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia serves on several local and national boards and committees promoting educational equity and progressivism. She is the current NCTE Secondary Representative-at-Large, and she is also a Heinemann Publishing Heinemann Fellow and Book Ambassador for The Educator Collaborative.

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About Evette Dionne

EVETTE DIONNE is a black feminist writer and the editor in chief of Bitch Media. Her writings about race, gender, and culture have appeared in *Teen Vogue*, *Refinery29*, *Bustle*, *Self*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*, among other publications. Before becoming a writer and editor, Dionne taught eighth graders about social justice and tenth graders about world literature.

Visit her at

www.evettedionne.com



Photo credit: Erica Buddington

Praise for *Lifting as we Climb*

★ “A lively and critical addition as the United States commemorates the centennial of women’s suffrage.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Dionne pulls back the veil on these stories, offering up an essential work for middle graders that helps to fill a gaping void.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “A must-purchase for all secondary school libraries.” —*School Library Journal*, starred review



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