INTRODUCTION: Revisiting the Question of Race in the Suffrage Movement

The centennial of the 19th amendment invites a reassessment of the role of African American suffragists in the women's suffrage movement. In the 1840s and 1850s, the women's rights movement coalesced from a wide array of antebellum reform drives and eventually produced a sustained struggle for woman suffrage. Despite the broad participation of black activists beginning in the 1830s, their leadership and organizations have largely disappeared from traditional narratives of the struggle for the female vote. The suffrage movement, however, was shaped by both black suffrage activism and by white racism. Moreover, nearly two generations of black women, faced with voting restrictions in the Jim Crow south, continued to fight for their right to the ballot after the suffrage victory in 1920. This lesson attempts both to write generations of African American women back into the suffrage story and to connect their broad reform agenda to the twentieth-century civil rights movement.

I. Warm-up: Was there ever a time where you felt overlooked or invisible? Study the suffrage cartoons below. What do you see? What do you think? What do you wonder? Record your answers.

Photo credit: New York Tribune, March 1, 1913

Photo credit: Crisis magazine, 1915
II. The Problem with Historical Timelines

**EXPLORE:** Most timelines of the suffrage movement begin in the 1840s and end in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th amendment. Explore this timeline from The National Women's History Museum to get a sense of how the story of women’s suffrage is usually told. As you explore, notice the women, organizations and events that are featured.

- Who is identified as a suffrage leader and what do they have in common?
- Are there individuals who are left out or overlooked?
- What organizations are included and which are excluded?

**READ:** In How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women, Brent Staples reminds readers that “suffragist heroes Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony seized control of the feminist narrative of the 19th century.” Why was this problematic, according to Staples? As you read the article, note three things you learned, two “aha” moments or insights you gained and one question the reading raised, using this 3-2-1 worksheet.

**WATCH:** the trailer for the forthcoming documentary, The Black Suffragist, which calls attention to the contributions of African American women to the suffrage movement. As you watch, notice who is featured and the date that universal suffrage was achieved.

III. Creating a Black Suffrage Timeline

A. **Research:** Complete the archival research missions below to identify overlooked African American suffragists and suffrage organizations as well as civil rights activists who fought for universal female suffrage. Use this document to record your notes.
| MISSION 1 | This formerly enslaved woman spoke at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention. Identify her and describe why her presence was so significant. Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 2 | The American Equal Rights Association (AERA) was formed in 1866 “to secure Equal Rights to all American citizens, especially the right of suffrage, irrespective of race, color or sex.” Who delivered a speech at the 1866 American Equal Rights Association Convention where she said, “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs”? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 3 | Who was the black suffragist who joined other women in an unsuccessful attempt to vote in 1874 and helped create the Colored Women’s Progressive Franchise Association in 1880? She also looked to the courts for assistance in securing equal rights-- the 1880s she studied law at Howard University, becoming the second African American female lawyer in the U.S. Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 4 | The ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870, which gave African-American men the right to vote, split the women’s suffrage movement and led to the collapse of the AERA. What leading 19th century suffrage organization recruited African-American women and even established a *Department of Colored Work* in 1883? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 5 | By the late 1880s, African-American women recognized that their reform agenda went beyond female suffrage and they began to create their own organizations. What was the name of the organization founded in 1896 by Mary Church Terrell and what was the significance of its motto - *Lifting as we Climb*? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 6 | The first black suffrage club in Chicago was founded in 1913. Who founded it and why did this individual see the need for a separate black suffrage organization? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 7 | The ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920 did not give African-American women in southern states the right to vote - prolonging the road to universal suffrage. In response, what organization did Mary McLeod Bethune found in 1935? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 8 | Find an example of barriers to voting in the south, which affected African-American women after 1920. Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 9 | What student-led organization, founded by Ella Baker in 1960, was central to voter registration campaigns in the Jim Crow south? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |
| MISSION 10 | What 1965 federal law finally gave African-American women the right to vote and led to universal suffrage? Go to [this website](#) to complete the mission. |

B. **Making the Timeline:** Use your research from your completed missions to create an alternative suffrage timeline. There are several options for the timeline.

- Create your own using this [free online timeline tool](#).
- Revise an existing [suffrage timeline](#) by inserting your research on African American suffragists and civil rights activists.
- Print the template on the next page. Using what you’ve learned, cut out the yellow boxes and paste them into the proper order in the blue boxes.
IV. Writing Black Suffragists Back into History: Who Is Remembered?

Since 1851, the deaths of prominent individuals have been recorded in the Obituary section of the *New York Times*. In 2018, that newspaper launched *Overlooked*, which was an effort to recognize the contributions of men and women whose lives and accomplishments were not acknowledged at the time of their deaths. Ida B. Wells, who died in 1931, was honored in this 2018 obituary—nearly 87 years after her death.

WATCH [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ), which explains the series more fully.
WRITE AN OBITUARY

- From your research or this article on black suffragists, identify an African American woman whose contributions were overlooked in her lifetime.
- Recognizing that obituaries are more about someone’s life than their death, use Overlooked as a guide to write an obituary for the black female activist you selected.
- Make sure your obituary begins with a hook (short phrase or quote), includes photos and captures the significance of her life, particularly her contributions to universal suffrage.
- Fill out this form to have the editors consider publishing an official obituary.