

Uncovering the Little-Known History of Suffragists of Color

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Cathleen D. Cahill, [Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement](#) (2020).

Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement is an essential read for anyone interested in women's history, the history of voting rights in the United States, Indigenous history, or the history of other under-represented groups. Cathleen D. Cahill brings to light the little-known contributions of Native, African-American, Asian, and Latina women to the struggle for voting rights in America. Cahill combed multitudinous sources to paint robust portraits of these women, including Native activists Laura Cornelius Kellogg, Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin, and Zitkala-Ša, African-American voting rights advocate Carrie Williams Clifford, Chinese-born activist Mabel Lee, and Latina activist Nina Otero-Warren, among others.

The book rightfully complicates the notion of women's suffrage, revealing that a singular focus on *women's* suffrage both obscures the larger struggles that these women were engaged in to secure the voting rights of all members of their communities and elides the contributions of these women to the suffrage movement. As Cahill explains, "[t]he suffrage histories of women of color bridge 1920, so to see that year as an end point leads us to tell a story that inevitably ignores them and truncates our understanding." (P. 205.) Another invaluable aspect of this book is that Cahill refuses to shy away from the complexities of the important history she is unveiling. Thus, as readers, we are forced to reckon with the fact Native and Latina activists, for instance, sometimes drew distinctions between themselves and African-Americans to demonstrate the worthiness of their own communities for voting rights. More broadly, we are faced with the shameful history of exclusion within the women's suffrage movement. White suffrage parade organizers, for instance, tried to relegate Ida B. Wells (then going by Mrs. Wells-Barnett) to the portion of the 1913 Washington D.C. suffrage parade reserved for African-Americans, rather than allowing her to march with the Illinois delegation as planned. As a consequence, she had to jump into the parade after it had already started in order to march with her fellow Illinois citizens. (P. 104.)

It is tempting to think of the history of voting rights, like other histories, in linear terms, with African-American males getting the vote in 1870 upon the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment; white, African-American, and Latina women receiving the right to vote in 1919 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment; and Native American men and women securing the right to vote via statute in 1924 (although many Native persons had obtained the right to vote prior to that).

Recasting the Vote shows that this progression was nowhere near so simple. Cahill, for example, reminds us that, post-1920, widespread lynching of African-Americans continued to be utilized to dissuade African-Americans from voting and that, as a consequence, activists like Carrie Williams Clifford organized campaigns for anti-lynching legislation. (P. 226.) Racist whites also prevented Native Americans from voting even after the Indian Citizenship Act was passed, with "States with large Native populations borrow[ing] heavily from . . . southern examples while also using Native people's unique relationship to the federal government to keep them from voting." (P. 261.) And although activists like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee fought for women's suffrage in the United States, under the Chinese Exclusion Act,

“the Chinese were the only people in the world whom the United States restricted due to their nationality and made ineligible for naturalized citizenship.” (P. 149.) Thus, until the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, Chinese-born women could not become naturalized citizens and could not vote irrespective of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Cahill thus renders her history of suffragists of color in all of its undeniable complexity. As such, *Recasting the Vote* is bound to be an indispensable resource on the subject for decades to come.

As a tribal law and federal Indian law scholar, I found I was most drawn to Cahill’s portraits of Native activists who participated in the suffrage movement. Cahill’s work introduced me to Marie Louise Bottineau Baldwin and Laura Cornelius Kellogg and greatly enriched my understanding of the life of writer Zitkala-Ša, all of whom were significantly involved in the suffrage movement.

A member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe who initially supported her attorney father in his protracted attempt to recover fair compensation for the federal government’s taking of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa’s lands, Bottineau Baldwin went on to become the first Native female attorney in the United States, after graduating from Washington College of Law (now part of American University).¹ Before, during, and after law school, she served in the United States Office of Indian Affairs, and she also served as one of the founders and executive committee members of the Society of American Indians. In her work for Native suffrage, Bottineau Baldwin, like Kellogg and Zitkala-Ša, fought against the idea, so prevalent in mainstream society at the time, that United States citizenship for Native Americans was diametrically opposed to tribal sovereignty, so that an individual Indigenous person would have to choose between the two types of citizenship and rights. Instead, Bottineau Baldwin argued for a layered understanding of citizenship in which participation in tribal affairs and tribal rights recognized under treaties with the federal government, including communal land rights, remained important.

Oneida author Laura Cornelius Kellogg similarly advocated for a layered notion of citizenship in which American Indians’ tribal identity would remain important. She was also employed for a time in the Indian Service and similarly served on the Executive Board of the Society of American Indians. (Pp. 90-91.) She linked United States constitutional ideals to a Haudenosaunee origin, publishing her first book, *Our Democracy and the American Indian: A Comprehensive Presentation of the Indian Situation as It is Today*, in 1920. (Pp. 243-245.) The book set forth Kellogg’s groundbreaking economic and political plan, which she called Lolomi. In order to continue to resist assimilation, she argued for Native persons to become organized in a corporate structure through which they could negotiate with the federal government on a more equal basis. (P. 244.)

Finally, I was grateful to learn more from Cahill’s book about Yankton author Zitkala-Ša, whose American name was Gertrude Simmons Bonnin. Active on the Board of the Society of American Indians and a staunch suffrage advocate, Zitkala-Ša, like Bottineau Baldwin and Kellogg, rejected the idea that Native Americans had to choose between tribal rights and rights as United States citizens. (Pp. 189; 247.) Zitkala-Ša fought for the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act and was bitterly disappointed that Native persons in many states continued to be denied the vote after its passage. (Pp. 256; 260.) As one of the investigators of efforts to defraud members of the Five Civilized Tribes of their mineral wealth, Zitkala-Ša also importantly “linked the plundering of Native resources to the violence perpetrated against Native women.” (P. 250.)

As Cahill demonstrates, the canonical women’s suffrage story is a white women’s history, curated very deliberately by Susan B. Anthony, who, along with Matilda Joslyn Gage, wrote the six-volume *History of Woman Suffrage*, after which Anthony burned the sources and mementos she had solicited from her compatriots in order to write the work. (P. 263.) Readers are extremely lucky that Cahill has assembled

these compelling stories of the suffragists of color who do not fit into the tidy white women's suffrage story and whose voices have been ignored for far too long.

1. The Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe is comprised of Anishinaabe and Métis peoples and is located within the boundaries of North Dakota. See "Tawnshi! Welcome," Chippewa Heritage, available at <http://www.chippewaheritage.com/>.

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