

Teaching With *Vanguard*: *How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*

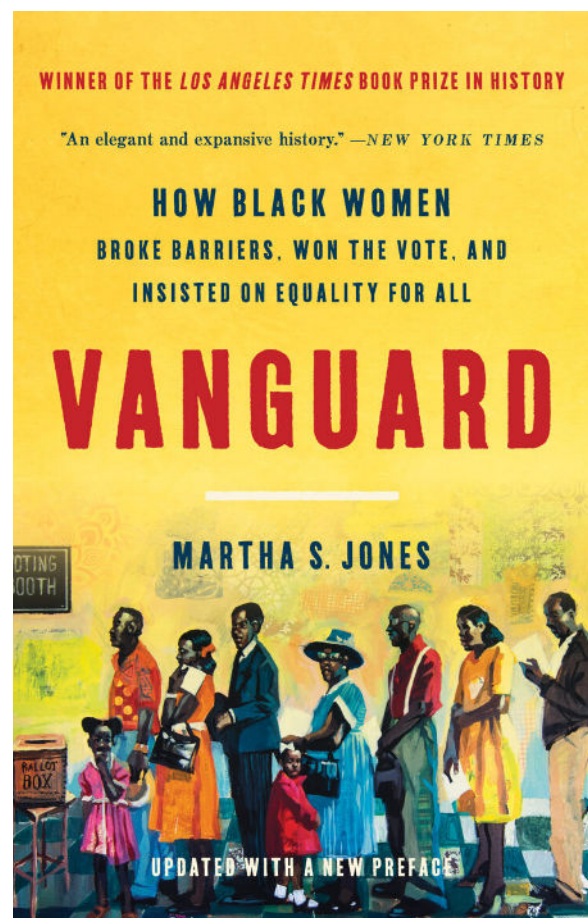
BY URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA

MARTHA S. JONES' *VANGUARD: HOW BLACK Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* is a love letter to Black women's organizing for justice. It includes profiles of more than two dozen women.

Some of these women may already be in our curriculum — Ida B. Wells and Fannie Lou Hamer, for example — but many more are likely not.

There is Jarena Lee, who transformed expectations around women's role in the church by becoming a traveling AME preacher in the early 19th century; Hester Lane a formerly enslaved woman who started a successful home decorating business in New York City, rising to prominence in the American Anti-Slavery Society; Mary Ann Shadd, publisher of the *Provincial Weekly*, a newspaper that advocated against slavery and for the right of women to speak and write in public, own and control property, and work.

In this lesson, students read short excerpts from Jones' book to learn about these and other women, share what they learned with each other, and use what they've gathered to analyze Jones' provocative title — *in what sense did these women constitute a "vanguard" and why?*





From top left: Diane Nash, Joe Ella Moore, Nannie Helen Burroughs,
Mary Church Terrell, Amanda Berry Smith, Pauli Murray

Suggested Procedure

1. Tell students that they are going to read a 341-page book in one class period. After the heckling dies down, explain that no, no one will be speed-reading the whole thing. Instead, each student will read a key part of *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*, and share what they learned with others in a mixer. At the end of the mixer, students will have a good sense of the book’s overall content — as if, collectively, they read the whole thing!
2. Hand out one profile to each student. There are 22 different women in this activity, but Jones profiles many more women in the full book. I selected this array of women with an eye toward balancing a variety of different kinds of stories and time periods, and with a preference for women less likely to already be in our curricula. It is also important to emphasize that although the descriptions of the women are written by Martha S. Jones, I took liberties with excerpting and adapting each profile to fit to one-page. In some cases, this means students encounter only a small fraction of the fuller story Jones tells.
3. Ask students to read the profile at least twice and to underline key information about the woman. You might have students jot down answers to a few questions:
 - A. What were some formative experiences — events or relationships in early life — that shaped this woman’s path?
 - B. Describe encounters with racism. Sexism. Other forms of oppression.
 - C. What kind of activism or work did she do?
 - D. What’s something surprising, cool, or interesting about this woman?
4. Now ask students to move around the room and talk, to share key facts with each other, and take a few notes on each woman they

learn about. (You might ask students to create a simple grid in their notebook, with names on the left, and key facts — using the questions from step 3 as a guide — about the woman on the right.) Tell students, “We want to learn about these women, who are worth knowing in their own right, but we also want to begin thinking about what Martha Jones is arguing by titling her book, *Vanguard*. A vanguard is a group that leads the way, is at the forefront of a movement. In what sense were these women a vanguard? And the vanguard of what?” Ask students to stick to one-on-one conversations. Encourage them to pay attention to when these women lived (since the book covers about 200 years of history), what issues they were active in addressing, and similarities and differences between their experiences.

5. Allow students enough time to mix and mingle so that they learn about 7-8 different women. When they return to their seats, ask them to reflect in writing on what they discovered. Some possible questions to guide their reflections:

- Who is someone you encountered that you were excited to learn about?
- What fights and struggles were these women engaged in? What were some of their accomplishments or successes?
- What connections can you draw between the struggles these women undertook and today’s struggles for justice?

6. Ask students to share and discuss some of what they wrote. Encourage students to surface specific women and their stories in the discussion, so that all students learn about additional women beyond the 7-8 they encountered directly in the mixer. Some additional questions and themes you might tackle:

- How did these women confront sexism and racism? In what ways did sexism and racism impact their alliances — or

conflicts — with Black men and white women?

- What did you notice about the class position and of these women? Rich? Poor? Other observations about work? Education? Religion? Geographic location? Did you notice any kinds of experiences that were not reflected in the stories you heard?

7. Finally, either in small groups or as a whole class, ask students to return to Jones’ book title: *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*. Tell students, “This title is actually a claim or thesis. Jones asserts something to be true. And the evidence for her claim should be in the pages of her book. What evidence did you encounter that this claim is true?” There are lots of ways to guide this conversation. You might take each piece of the title, one-by-one, or talk globally.

However you structure the conversation, it is important to give students a chance to talk about the boldest assertions of Jones’ title, that these women “insisted on equality for all,” and that they constituted a vanguard. Some of our students are also familiar with today’s movements for justice — which include critiques of capitalism, heteronormativity, and environmental destruction, critiques that are not at the forefront of most of *Vanguard’s* stories. But just because they are not at the forefront does not mean they are not there, and it is worth asking students to reflect on where they do — and do not — see seeds of modern movements in these stories. (Also, remind students that Jones’ title is, of course, supported by the entirety of her book, of which they only read a bit.)

Where from Here

There are a lot of directions you might take this activity. In a recent workshop with teachers, the mixer was followed by each participant writing a [“Write That I” poem](#) (an idea borrowed from Linda Christensen) from the perspective of the woman they learned about. With students, you might give them the option to choose any one of

the women to focus their poem on — and to learn more about them in the process. In that same workshop, we also placed *Vanguard* into conversation with the [Combahee River Collective statement of 1977](#), in which a group of Black lesbian socialist feminists wrote, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” The Combahee statement itself included echoes of the Black communist Claudia Jones’ 1949 essay, “[An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman](#),” which asserted that Black women were potential source sources of “heightened political consciousness,” because “Negro women — as

workers, as Negroes, and as women — are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population.” The point here is that there is a long history of scholars and activists thinking about how the experiences and social position of Black women shape — or should shape — struggles for justice, and students will make more of Jones’ text when they can see it as part of this ongoing conversation.

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Mixer Roles

Mary McLeod Bethune

The arc of Mary McLeod Bethune's life linked two moments of optimism for Black Americans. She was born in 1875, making her a child of Reconstruction, the nation's first experiment in interracial democracy. Born Mary McLeod, she lived until 1955, long enough to see the dawn of the modern civil rights era.

Bethune understood that she was an individual working at a political crossroads. She learned this approach from her mother and grandmother, women who were born enslaved and who had endured the exploitation of their production and their reproduction and had then survived to ensure their children thrived.

With the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, Bethune leapt to register Black women on her campus and in the surrounding community. In 1922, Bethune faced off against the Ku Klux Klan in defense of Black voting rights in Daytona, Florida. There are two versions of this story. Both begin with Daytona's 1922 mayoral election. The candidates were at odds over whether to establish a local high school for Black students. Bethune openly organized Black voter turnout, urging support for the new school. Klan members aimed to stop her, threatening to destroy her school. One version of the story goes that on election eve, hooded Klansmen marched onto campus while Bethune stood out in the open alone, arms folded in defiance. She had sequestered students in their dormitories, while faculty stood like sentries across the grounds. The mob briefly trespassed but then departed without leaving a mark on the campus or its leadership. The following morning, Bethune rose to get hundreds of Black Daytonians out to vote, and she remained a watchful presence there throughout the day.

Bethune herself told a slightly different version of the story, one in which she confronted the Klan flanked by students. The young people faced the trespassing terrorists and filled the air with the sound of their voices. They sang a hymn. In the aftermath, Bethune described "a band of women as far back as you could look" that accompanied her to the polls and "stood for hours and hours until we got our chance to cast our votes." Both versions of this story reach the same conclusion. Black voters cast their ballots and ensured that Daytona's first Black high school finally came into being.

Bethune dominated Black politics in Washington, but the wrangling there did not consume her. By 1943, her burgeoning internationalist vision built upon struggles against racism and sexism at home to embrace similar fights across the globe. Bethune linked the fight against anti-Black racism in the United States with anticolonial movements around the globe. She marched the National Council of Negro Women deep into wartime organizing and sat at the table when questions about the contours of postwar politics were debated. Bethune's NCNW was among the groups that pressured the Allied powers to open the deliberations that led to the 1945 United Nations Conference on International Organization. Her message to U.S., British, and Soviet diplomats, as well as to her fellow activists, was singular: women of color must be at the center of any analysis of international human rights.

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Charlotte Hawkins Brown

In North Carolina, Charlotte Hawkins Brown got caught in the crosshairs of voting rights strife in fall 1920. It was no accident that she landed there. Brown had long been a public figure in her native state, a woman who made herself visible in the years of Jim Crow. The granddaughter of enslaved people, she had studied in New England. Brown was not yet twenty years old when she returned to North Carolina to found a combined day and boarding school for Black students, naming it the Palmer Memorial Institute in honor of her benefactor.

As she worked to educate fellow Black Americans, Brown also set her sights on politics. She organized women to do their part and support Black soldiers during the First World War. Audiences eagerly attended her public talks, which included speeches such as “The Negro Woman in the Program of Reconstruction.” Brown was a clubwoman, leading North Carolina’s State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, where she promoted vocational education. Local newspapers touted her as a woman who “has the confidence of both races,” giving her work on behalf of Palmer Memorial Institute and Black women’s clubs a veneer of interracial cooperation that permitted Brown to work across the color line. In 1919, she addressed the white-led North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs, the first Black woman to do so.

None of this spared her from the indignities of the polling place. In fall 1920, Brown was a lightning rod for Democratic Party anxiety about how Black women might gain political power in North Carolina. In early October, reports surfaced about a letter that was appearing in mailboxes across the South. The letter was addressed to Black women and explained the terms of the 19th Amendment, which gave “all women the right of the ballot regardless of color.” It went on to “beg all the colored women of North Carolina to register and vote on November 2nd, 1920.”

It was a call to action: “The time for negroes has come. Now is our chance to redeem our liberty.” The tone was militant and it emphasized that Black voters might overtake the system: “white women of North Carolina will not vote and while they sleep let the negro be up and doing. When we get our party in power we can demand what we wish and get it.” It was postmarked Greensboro, North Carolina, and signed “Yours for negro liberty. COLORED WOMEN’S RIGHTS ASSOCIATION, FOR COLORED WOMEN.”

Who, newspaper editors and Democratic Party leaders asked, was responsible for this incendiary manifesto, one that was branded a conspiracy influenced by Republican Party promoters “from the North”? Charlotte Hawkins Brown’s name very quickly surfaced; Democrats charged her with conspiring to oppose them and of using the new political power of Black women to do so.

The storm was rough enough that Brown publicly issued a rebuttal, one in which she invoked the name of every white philanthropist who had supported her school and emphasized her commitment to education, not politics. Brown denied the circular and its views: “I do not hold, or endorse, the views which [the circular] expresses.” Between the lines, Brown expressed her indignation but also her fear of retribution. An association with voting rights could have cost her school its supporters, land, buildings, and students — her reputation and her power.

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Hallie Quinn Brown

For Brown, education was the foundation of women’s political power. Though she was born free in 1849 in Pittsburgh, Brown’s parents had been enslaved. To better educate their children, the household migrated to Chatham in Canada when Brown was a teenager. There, the family lived alongside fugitive slaves and dissident Black emigrants who had abandoned the United States. By 1870, in the wake of the Civil War and early Reconstruction, Brown returned to the United States, where she enrolled at the AME Church’s Wilberforce University, in Ohio.

In the decades leading to ratification of the 19th Amendment, Brown avoided any sustained association with National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) or the National Women’s Party (NWP). The anti-Black racism that ran through such organizations likely kept her at a distance. Black women’s clubs became the heart of Brown’s public work. There, by 1899, leaders heralded the movement for women’s suffrage as “the pioneer force for woman’s emancipation and progress.”

In 1922, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) proposed to dedicate a monument to the mythical “Black Mammy of the South” — a figure in servant’s garb cradling a white infant. As president of the National Association of Colored Women, Brown voiced the views of many thousands of enslaved women’s descendants, who derided the hypocrisy of white Southerners who in “one generation held the Black mammy in abject slavery [and in] the next would erect a monument to her fidelity.” Her words cut: rather than loyal supplicants, “slave women were brutalized, the victims of white man’s caprice and lust. Often the babe torn from her arms was the child of her oppressor.” She doubted that the monument emanated from a “deep reverence and gratitude” as the UDC professed. White Southern women would better “make restitution,” Brown advised, by interceding with their husbands and fathers to “with one hand upraised . . . stop mob rule and lynching.”

But by 1922, the notion of a “Monument to the Faithful Colored Mammies of the South” had attracted the interest of Congress. A bill followed, authorizing the Washington, D.C., chapter of the UDC to install such a figure on public grounds “as a gift to the people of the United States.” Black Americans saw through to the irony of such a framing and cried foul. The monument was mere propaganda aimed to distract the nation from real, 20th-century needs: adequate homes, schools, and health care. Brown joined others — from grassroots activists to luminaries like W. E. B. Du Bois — in opposition. The bill died of inaction.

When Brown railed against the prospect of a “mammy” monument in the nation’s capital, she did so knowing that the promotion of such a false and degrading image undercut Black women’s political aspirations. She was part of a “great vanguard” prepared to fight back and further empower a “great nation of women.”

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Nannie Helen Burroughs

Burroughs was just a girl when she migrated with her mother from Orange, Virginia, to the nation's capital in 1883. Burroughs studied at the city's famed M Street High School, where she was a standout student. Her teachers imparted more than book lessons. Burroughs's teacher Anna Julia Cooper published her treatise on Black women's political theory, *A Voice from the South*. The year that Burroughs graduated with honors, 1896, her teacher Mary Church Terrell took the helm of the newly founded National Association of Colored Women. The M Street School was a training ground for a next, rising generation of Black women leaders, and Burroughs was among its brightest stars.

In the summer of 1915, Burroughs joined the ranks of the nation's leading thinkers when W. E. B. Du Bois included her essay in a special "Votes for Women" issue of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*. Burroughs advised that Black women's capacities had been underestimated. Their votes would affirm the "correct estimate" of the Black woman as a "tower of strength." They would remedy how men had misused the ballot. Their leadership would prove to be "aggressive, progressive and dependable." Most importantly, the nation's moral destiny rested with Black women. They had been "prey for the men of every race" but had "held the enemies of Negro female chastity at bay." Why support women's votes? Burroughs explained that the ballot would bring Black women "respect and protection" and serve as "her weapon of moral defense." With the vote, Black women would further shape their destinies, including the enactment of law and policy "in favor of her own protection."

With ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, Burroughs moved immediately into Republican Party politics. By 1925, she was president of the National League of Republican Colored Women.

When it came to women's votes, the ground had shifted. White women thought themselves now entitled to cast ballots. Too many Black women did not. When Burroughs commented on the future of women's voting rights, she spoke in an ominous tone. She warned white women against being naive as they played the game of politics. If they thought their futures lay with political parties, organizations that would buy and sell them, they were mistaken. If they passed on the chance to partner with African American women, they invited "political menace." Black women were the "safest and most valuable ally." Black women were not above reproach in Burroughs's view, however. She warned against those who were handpicked by men — "Tom, Dick or Harry" — and "clamoring for leadership" and "without followers in their own race." Burroughs instead celebrated those Black leaders selected by the people they represented. Black Americans were capable of selecting their own leaders: "Leave them to it!"

Burroughs did not intend to repel or crush white women. To the contrary, she sought to work in cooperation with them. She moved past the marginalization and denigration that had run through the suffrage movement. Burroughs never occupied an ancillary or subordinate position. She entered into interracial cooperation secure in her strength, including the thousands of Black Baptist and Republican Party women who were her base.

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Anna Julia Cooper

Anna Julia Cooper had women like Selina Gray [who had been blocked from sitting in the ladies' car on a train due to her color] in mind when she penned her 1892 manifesto, *A Voice from the South*. Cooper had been born enslaved in North Carolina on the eve of the Civil War. She was trained first in the nearby Saint Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute and later at Oberlin College. She would go on to earn her PhD from the Paris-Sorbonne University in 1925, when she was in her sixties. But in 1892, she was a founder of the Washington, D.C., Colored Women's League. By day, Cooper taught Latin at Washington's M Street High School. During the evenings, she was at work on her book, which argued that it was time for Black women to claim political power.

Cooper added her story to the many that women told about traveling while Black. Drawing upon a true experience, Cooper speculated that she might comply with a request to change her seat if a gentlemanly conductor asked that she move to a well-appointed car set aside for Black ladies. But anything less would win only her rebuke. She told how she resisted when “a great burly six feet of masculinity with sloping shoulders and unkempt beard swaggers in, and, throwing a roll of tobacco into one corner of his jaw, growls out at me over the papers I am reading, ‘Here gurl,’ (I am past thirty) ‘you better git out ’n dis kyar ’f er don’t, I’ll put yer out.’” Cooper revealed her contempt for the man, an “American citizen who has been badly trained.” And she did not give up her seat.

Above all else, securing dignity most concerned Cooper: “There can be no true test of national courtesy without travel.” It was the demands of her body and of her spirit that set the country's high bar. Travel invited vulnerability: “The Black Woman of the South has to do considerable traveling in this country, often unattended.” She affirmed a collective tale of rough indignities, “personal violence to colored women traveling in less civilized sections of our country, where women have been forcibly ejected from cars, thrown out of seats, their garments rudely torn, their person wantonly and cruelly injured.”

Black women aspired to freedom from the tyranny of conductors and brakemen, one dimension of their full liberation. Which car one rode in was a matter of equality: “When I . . . apply for first-class accommodations on a railway train, I do so because my physical necessities are identical with those of other human beings.” The “unique position” of Black women upset the same routine transactions. They were confronted “by both a woman question and a race problem,” in Cooper's analysis, a dilemma that remained generally “unknown or . . . unacknowledged.”

It was not enough for Black women to fight their battles for the ladies' car, be it with wit, wits, or fisticuffs. They would also need to speak for themselves. No one else could: “Our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot quite put themselves in the dark man's place, neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman.”

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Josephine DeCuir

Too soon, Black women learned that the urgent interest of all of humanity included those very close to home: that of their husbands, sons, and fathers. The hard-won voting rights of Black men were under attack.

Starting in 1877, federal authorities — Congress and the courts — made a devastating pullback from enforcement of Reconstruction’s democratic promise. State by state, Southern lawmakers began to roll back the gains that new constitutions and civil rights acts had promised.

There was no reason to think that any constitution would protect Black women. Their rights were tested early on right where Frances Ellen Watkins Harper had told the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) that they mattered most, in transportation. In 1872, Josephine DeCuir tested who she was before the law after a steamboat company refused her entry into a ladies’ stateroom as she headed north, up the Mississippi from New Orleans.

In protest, DeCuir spent the night in an anteroom intended for nursemaids and their charges rather than lay her head in the “bureau,” short for the Freedmen’s Bureau, the colloquial moniker that Southern ship operators gave to their quarters for Black passengers. DeCuir was not a newcomer to this dilemma. Captains and clerks later recounted the many instances in which she had groused, held fast to a white-only ladies’ seat, and insisted on equal access. She spoke only through her lawyer during the lawsuit — in a complaint, during cross examination, through briefs — never submitting to questioning. That would only repeat the original offense.

DeCuir relied upon Louisiana’s 1868 Constitution, a text drafted by radical men, Black and white. Article XIII guaranteed: “All persons shall enjoy equal rights and privileges upon any conveyance of a public character . . . without distinction or discrimination on account of race or color.” In the proceedings, DeCuir heard the steamboat’s indignities now recrafted into words. She was curiously said to be like a white man — someone absolutely barred from the ladies’ cabin. She was also compared to “repulsive and disagreeable” persons whom everyone agreed steamboat operators could exclude, segregate, and expel at will.

At the U.S. Supreme Court, the state laws that guaranteed DeCuir’s right to travel as she chose were said to violate the U.S. Constitution’s commerce clause, an impermissible regulation of trade between the states. It was a clinical conclusion that could not cool the hot indignity that DeCuir felt.

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Sarah Mapps Douglass

Sarah Mapps Douglass and Philadelphia's Female Literary Association used their pens as weapons when they gently rivaled the city's men. In 1834, the women planned to celebrate the First of August, the marking of what would become known as West Indian Emancipation Day. That day, Britain's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 went into force. When the day arrived, Philadelphia's leading men turned out for a dinner that included a long series of toasts. When the women presented a satin banner that hailed the "birth day of British emancipation," they never spoke a word, reduced to little more than symbols. Douglass rightly anticipated that, despite extensive speechifying, women would be muzzled. But she had a plan.

For Douglass, how to mark the occasion was also a delicate matter, requiring the women to plan carefully or be overshadowed by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. They chose the following night, August 2, to gather for their own commemoration, and then staged a different type of affair. Women chaired the event, setting the agenda and directing the proceedings, with precision. Members read aloud essays selected especially for the occasion and presided over men who attended by invitation only.

Douglass was born into public life. Her parents, Cyrus and Grace, esteemed members of Philadelphia's Black activist circles, raised their daughter to take on the burdens of her community and her conscience. But her road would not be smooth. Born at the dawn of the 19th century, Douglass confronted an unprecedented set of questions about her place as a woman.

Douglass spent her entire life as a teacher. She was formally educated in Philadelphia, preparing to assume responsibility for her own classroom. She might have continued in that vein had not the abolitionist cause called to her, as it did to so many free African Americans.

The newspaper's pages gave Douglass an opportunity to engage in open debate before an audience. She weighed in, for example, on the troubled prospect of Black Americans emigrating away from the United States. She knew that pressures, such as colonization and Black laws, tempted some to consider self-deportation. Douglass also saw how emissaries from Haiti — the only independent Black Republic in the Americas — toured major cities and enticed Black migrants to the Caribbean nation. Douglass did not mince words when she sparred in the pages of *The Liberator*. Dispensing with pleasantries and ritual politeness, she countered a correspondent who went by the name of "Woodby" as having been "entirely mistaken" in their understanding of Douglass's position on emigration. And then, Douglass mocked Woodby as unprepared for a serious debate: "I wish you would read what is said on emigration."

Douglass never spoke expressly about how it felt to depart from the role of helpmate. What she did, however, revealed what she thought. Her work with the Female Literary Association demonstrated shrewd leadership that used a women's platform to enter political debates.

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Eliza Ann Gardner

She had come of age in Boston in the decades before the Civil War. During the day, her home life ran on the rhythms of work and school. Her father, James, labored as a stevedore and eventually became a modest entrepreneur in a busy port. Eliza spent days at school, where she excelled through a “keenness of her mind” and “retentiveness of her memory,” though none of this excused her from lending a hand to everyday chores.

Evenings and weekends were different. Whether she was eavesdropping while perched on the edge of a settee, pouring cups of tea, lost with her nose in the pages of *The Liberator*, or at attention during church or in a meeting hall, Eliza came to know many of the era’s radical luminaries. Thinkers from William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and Frederick Douglass to Sojourner Truth and Charles Sumner stretched her horizons across the endless miles of the lecture circuits. These were lessons in politics that no primer taught.

Gardner’s home, 20 North Anderson Street, was set in Boston’s West End. There, and in nearby Beacon Hill, Black Bostonians clustered around institutions such as the Baptist African Meeting House and the Abiel Smith School, where, as a girl, Gardner attended the city’s only public school for Black students. Her family’s home was, however, no ordinary place. In the years before slavery’s abolition, the Gardner home was known as a “Bethel” for fugitive slaves, a safe haven for those fleeing bondage and the grasp of fugitive hunters. After her parents’ deaths, Gardner transformed it into a place of needles, thread, and fabrics, the tools of her trade as a dressmaker. Yet it remained a haven, as Gardner extended a caring hand to young women in need of work. She also took in boarders, men and women who traded coins for a warm and dry bed, which ensured that Gardner remained financially independent late into her ninth decade.

Gardner centered her activism in a spiritual home, the AME Zion Church. At the podium, Gardner never failed to put women’s concerns first. “Our fathers and mothers, too, fought to secure that glorious boon of liberty,” Gardner admonished those who assembled in Boston at the 1876 centennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. The emphasis is hers.

The women formulated a next set of demands that included a call for their right to hold office [in the church]. And again they won. The church created the Office of the Deaconess, a team of women lay leaders to be appointed within each congregation. Soon women began appearing in church conferences as delegates representing the men and women of their state or region. They took seats as decision makers — hundreds gathered to debate the church’s future — engaged in lawmaking, and otherwise directed AME Zion’s governance. It was a sea-change. Soon women preachers received licenses as part of ordinary business, and few objected when a woman stepped into the pulpit to interpret the scripture. Women petitioned for control of their missionary work and won a new Ladies’ Home and Foreign Missionary Society, where they controlled the direction of benevolent work, including how the dollars and cents they raised were spent.

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Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

When Frances Ellen Watkins Harper stood up before the American Equal Rights Association in 1866, she did not mince words. She came to face down figures no less formidable than Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, so she needed to be at her best. She was the only Black woman to speak in a gathering brimming with skilled orators.

Most often quoted is her admonition that “we are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity.” It was a fierce reframing of American politics that rejected differences of race and of sex. What she did not say also mattered, and Harper did not speak about property rights or the ballot. Instead, her grievances emanated from the everyday indignities Black women endured on the nation’s streetcars, where Harper had been roughed up, ridiculed, and refused service. All this, while white women watched. “You white women speak of rights. I speak of wrongs,” she railed. No one dared talk back.

Harper spent many months on the road, where threatening confrontations with drivers, conductors, and engineers loomed constantly. In 1858, Harper marked her fourth year on the lecture circuit and had seen a lot: “I have been insulted in several railroad cars.” In these moments, her ladies’ gloves came off: “The other day . . . the conductor came to me, and wanted me to go out on the platform. Now, was not that brave and noble? As a matter of course, I did not. Some one interfered, and asked or requested that I might be permitted to sit in a corner. I did not move, but kept the same seat. When I was about to leave, he refused my money, and I threw it down on the car floor, and got out, after I had ridden as far as I wish. Such impudence!”

Assaults on her dignity accompanied the physical dangers. Harper left readers to imagine her fears when she remarked, “On the Carlisle road, I was interrupted and insulted several times. Two men came after me in one day.” Recalling this confrontation for a friend, Harper was a bit more frank: “I hardly think that I shall be at your meeting after all. The distance is far, and the road most accessible that I know of, is proscriptive to colored persons. I was interrupted and insulted on it Monday this week — the Cincinnati and Carlisle road.” No number of lace cuffs or carefully tailored dresses could protect Harper from violence. At a meeting in Cool Springs, Ohio, “an attempt was made to break up by rowdy violence, one of Miss Watkins’ meetings.” Her hosts had the offenders arrested.

The root cause of the mob’s objections came through during the court proceedings that followed. Yes, Harper sued. The attorney for the defendants asked one witness, a white man, “Are you a n****r worshiper?” Rather than sanctuaries, courtrooms permitted the insults to her dignity to continue. She stayed in town to testify against the men who had disrupted her remarks and threatened her harm. The court required Harper to repeat her lecture for the jury so that it might determine the “character of the meeting.” The trial ended in favor of Harper and her right to lecture. But that victory did not mean she was safe. Harper continued to speak about politics willingly, and she influenced hearts and minds. And still, she had to endure a distinct

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Hester Lane

She had been born enslaved in Maryland, the records suggest. Whatever her origins, by the 1820s, Lane was a free woman, settled in New York City, and thriving. Some termed her a whitewasher. She might have preferred calling herself a decorator. In any case, New Yorkers recognized Lane for having devised a novel technique for coloring the walls of homes. As an entrepreneur who operated her own business and owned her own home, Lane stood out in a city in which most Black women labored as domestics and laundresses.

Though she settled in New York, and mixed with civic leaders, visiting notables, and a growing community of Black women activists, Lane never forgot Maryland or the enslaved people she had left behind. By the 1820s, she was earning enough to buy the freedom of others. It was costly, daring work. But Lane had a gift for subterfuge, entering and then exiting the South

undetected after bargaining for the purchase of people whose lives demanded a price. She bid at auctions and negotiated with reluctant and greedy slaveholders. One report credited her with freeing eleven people, from Maryland to South Carolina, a story Lane did not deny.

Lane's ambition grew, and she aimed to join the highest ranks of the antislavery movement. Her money and fundraising for the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) laid a foundation. Her earnings enabled Lane to join a small class of Black abolitionist-philanthropists. Money was an avenue to power, and Lane wanted to stand as a peer to the men who underwrote the anti-slavery movement.

As Lane exited the meeting [of the AASS], she was left alone to think through the awkward note upon which the meeting had concluded. A faction of 123 men, her allies in the political wing of the society, had lodged a formal protest that opposed the intrusion of women's rights into the work of an antislavery society. Women might form "distinct societies of the female sex," but their incorporation into the leadership, it was argued, risked inviting "unnecessary reproach and embarrassment to the cause of the enslaved." It was a shot across the bow at antislavery women, and not one of them signed onto this dissenting report. Lane had risen in the ranks of the society, but there remained an open question about how far she, and women like her, might go.

One year later, Lane was back. The following May, in 1840, she readied herself for the American Anti-Slavery Society's annual meeting. The intervening twelve months had not been a cooling-off period. Instead, delegates arrived prepared to lock horns over women's leadership, and nobody wasted time with niceties. In the meeting's earliest moments, the chair appointed a business committee that included a woman — Abby Kelley, a leader of the Lynn (Massachusetts) Female Anti-Slavery Society. Like Lane, Kelley had risen to leadership through fundraising for the national organization. The vote upon her appointment revealed a deep split among the more than one thousand delegates: 557 for and 451 against. Kelley's opponents — those who rejected women in leadership roles — resigned and then walked out, dividing the organization irreconcilably.

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Jarena Lee

Jarena Lee, as she later came to be known, did not initially intend to upend power in her church. As a young woman, she first asked questions about her spiritual mission: the genuineness of her calling, the correctness of her biblical interpretation, and her capacity to convert souls. She underwent a conversion and arrived at a life-defining insight: she would give in to a calling from God and preach. Trouble arose, of course, when that divine purpose led Jarena to speak with authority on spiritual matters and do so in public. Since the 1760s, Black women who preached had provoked alarm about religious and sexual “disorder,” but generally these women did not challenge their formal subordination. When Jarena rejected all limits placed upon her work, she introduced something altogether new.

Jarena lived a humble early life. She was born in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1783, just at the end of the American Revolution. As best we can know, she was born free, even as slavery remained legal and not uncommon in the southern part of the state.

In 1811, four or five years after joining the AME Church, Jarena “distinctly heard, and most certainly understood” a voice that insisted that she “go preach the Gospel.” She was being called, though she was not certain by whom. Perhaps it was Satan. She asked God for a sign, and witnessing a vision convinced Jarena that she was on a righteous path. Even while sleeping, she practiced, waking herself and her household with late-night preaching. Jarena wrestled with an urge to tell her local minister, Richard Allen, of her calling but then hesitated, a sign of just how inflammatory her ambition was.

All that changed, though not exactly by design, when Lee attended the sermon of a guest minister, a Rev. Richard Williams. She followed along as Williams preached “Salvation is of the Lord.” At one moment, the minister “seemed to have lost the spirit.” He faltered. Lee in turn “sprang” to action, moved by a “supernatural impulse, to her feet.” She then, standing in her pew, delivered an impromptu sermon that explained how she, like the Bible’s Jonah, had been kept away from her true calling. It was nothing short of an audition. As Lee sat down, Allen rose and declared that her call to preach was as genuine as that of any minister present.

That day launched Lee’s preaching career. Over the next thirty years, she measured her efforts by miles traveled and sermons delivered. In 1827, she covered 2,325 miles and delivered 178 sermons. Ten years later, in 1837, she preached 146 times and rode just shy of 1,000 miles. She was nothing short of tireless, but she also had to be fearless, especially when journeying alone or in the company of other women. She attracted converts, old and new, from Maine to Virginia and from Long Island to Ohio. She spoke to Black Americans, enslaved and free, and to white audiences that included doubters, the curious, nonbelievers, and even slaveholders. Lee stood up in camp meetings, in small Black houses of worship, and many times in a town’s largest hall. She regularly accompanied Bishop Allen and the AME Church leadership to conferences, where she preached to those who might have doubted her right to do so but who nevertheless could not deny her power.

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Joe Ella Moore

In 1965, Joe Ella Moore was nearly seventy years old when a federal official finally administered an oath that made her a registered voter in Prentiss, Mississippi. Federal officials took over twenty-four rooms in a local motel and, according to one report, they “cut connecting doors in the walls, moved out furniture and moved in registration desks.” When things there got too cramped, they took over the town post office. Black registration in Prentiss jumped from 5 to 19 percent in just one week.

A local news photographer captured the sight of Joe Ella Moore just as she was being sworn in as a first-time voter. The image went viral, at least in 1965 terms, when the Associated Press distributed the photo to its network of regional newspapers. Bespectacled, with pen in one hand and the text of the oath in another, registrar Crawford A. Phillips of the federal Civil Service Commission welcomes Moore to the state’s roster of voters.

Moore had witnessed struggles for dignity and voting rights in Prentiss over many decades. Lynching persisted there until at least 1947, when Versie Johnson was killed by three white police officers who were charged and then found not guilty of manslaughter.

In 1956, local officials purged minister Henderson Darby from the voters’ rolls in a sweep that cut the number of Black voters in Prentiss from 1,221 to just 60. He filed suit on behalf of himself and all those in Prentiss who were being kept from the polls, aided by the state NAACP head, Medgar Evers. Defending the state against Darby, Governor James Plemon “J. P.” Coleman remarked that he did not “believe Mississippi Negroes are ready to vote.” A three-judge federal court agreed, and Black voters in Prentiss would vote only after passage of the Voting Rights Act. In the interim, Evers was assassinated in front of his home in the early hours of June 12, 1963. He survived if only in memory as a martyr to the cause of voting rights in Mississippi. Joe Ella Moore kept the struggle alive.

That 1965 day in the Magnolia Motel was the first time Moore had successfully registered to vote. But she had spent years fighting for this. Like Darby, she had already tried on seven occasions to get her name onto Mississippi’s voter rolls, only to be rejected at each turn. It was a dangerous and discouraging undertaking.

Still, Moore took a final shot at registering, this time at the beckoning of federal officials: “She had heard the president say on the radio this morning that she could register.” And so, she appeared at a makeshift office before the federal registrars, one team among the many who arrived in Mississippi to enforce the Voting Rights Act.

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Pauli Murray

As a young woman, Murray doubted the value politics of parties and candidates, and her first appearances at the polls were uneasy. She voted in her first presidential contest in 1932, an election that ended with Democrat Franklin Roosevelt resoundingly defeating the Republican Herbert Hoover. Murray cast her ballot in New York City, where she had recently graduated from Hunter College for Women.

Murray's real entrée into politics came in March 1940, when she joined the annals of women traveling while Black. It was the eve of an Easter Sunday visit with her Durham, North Carolina, family. Riding by bus from New York City, Murray and her friend, Adeline McBean, were required to change buses in a Virginia depot. The company relegated the two women to a vastly inferior bus, one brought out to accommodate heavier-than-usual holiday traffic demand; they found the seats for Black riders uncomfortable and in disrepair. The women asked the driver to rearrange a few white passengers to make room for them closer to the front. He refused "curtly," and with his arm pushed Murray backward into the bus. After a heated back-and-forth with the driver, Murray and McBean were arrested pursuant to charges that shifted in the coming hours and days. This was not part of any plan or test case. With the support of civil rights attorneys, the women were found guilty of only a minor, disturbing-the-peace charge.

The confrontation on that Virginia bus activated Murray, ushering her into civil rights politics and law. Murray began her studies at Howard Law School.

At Howard, Murray's most influential idea was born: Jane Crow. Jim Crow had long before entered everyday parlance as a phrase that captured the elements of American disenfranchisement, segregation, and violence. Murray was searching for a similar kind of phrase, one that would offer a framework that recognized the burdens borne by women. How could the civil rights movement better speak to contests over the ladies' car or the ubiquity of sexual assault? How could activists better account for the subordination of women in their own circles and for the disabilities women faced in courthouses? It would be two decades more before Murray would publish her defining article: "Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII." But it was at Howard, in Sojourner Truth Hall, that Murray came to understand how her analysis needed to meet the challenges that she and other Black women were living.

Murray's life was nothing short of extraordinary in the decades that followed her years at Howard Law. Her work singularly shaped the rights of American women. Still, none of her many accomplishments resonated more with the long history of Black women's politics than her ordination to the priesthood in 1977.

In September 1976, the church-wide General Convention finally concluded that "no one shall be denied access" to ordination on the basis of sex, effective January 1, 1977. Murray became the first Black woman elevated to full privileges in the Episcopal Church.

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Diane Nash

Nash had been raised in the hometown of Ida B. Wells’s Alpha Suffrage Club, where Black women voters had helped elect an African American, Oscar DePriest, to Congress as far back as 1928. Nash knew that she had been sent to college for good reasons, perhaps to find a vocation. She had not been sent South to get involved with the “wrong bunch” and foment unrest, but with them she found her purpose. During an afternoon at the Tennessee State Fair, Nash was required to use a restroom marked for “colored women.” She realized how much work was yet to be done to undo segregation, and she never looked back.

Nash was a true student of her vocation. She trained in nonviolent civil disobedience under Methodist minister and teacher of Gandhian nonviolence James Lawson, gaining the discipline needed to confront those who would taunt, and then assault, demonstrators who broke with law and custom in the effort to end segregation.

Segregation preoccupied Nash’s attention. In 1961, when Freedom Riders began to challenge segregation in public transportation, she refocused. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) arranged for groups of travelers — Black and white, men and women — to ride interstate buses south from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans. Encouraged by local officials, mobs brutally attacked the riders, fire-bombing buses and savagely beating the CORE riders. Despite the intervention of federal officials, the assaults continued. When the riders were forced to abandon their route in Birmingham, Alabama, Nash leapt to action. She could not, Nash explained, permit civil rights to be stopped by violence, and she sent off young people from Tennessee to Alabama to continue the rides.

When she is asked to explain how she came to the fight for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, Nash has always said it started with the girls. The news from Birmingham came from a familiar place, the city’s 16th Street Baptist Church, the headquarters for the city’s 1963 Children’s Crusade. In that moment, hundreds of young people had boycotted schools, marched on downtown streets, and demanded the integration of public buildings, businesses, and classrooms. Scores of arrestees filled the city’s jails, successfully pressuring local officials to negotiate with Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

A site of triumph soon became one of tragedy: Not so many months later, in September, four members of the United Klans of America planted dynamite at the church. When it exploded on a Sunday morning at nine a.m., four girls lay dead and twenty other worshipers were injured. News about the murders of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair reached Nash and her husband, activist James Bevel, in Edenton, North Carolina, where they were taking part in a SCLC voter registration project.

Nash and Bevel grieved, but their organizer’s instincts quickly kicked in. That same afternoon, the two drafted what became the Selma plan. Within just a few months of the Selma demonstrations, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. But it was Nash who brought about voting rights in Alabama on the ground.

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Susan Paul

At home in Boston, Susan Paul readied her valise for a trip to Philadelphia and a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in 1838. Among the things she had to pack was her courage. Paul knew that the days at the convention would spark with urgency, as Black and white women mingled in meeting halls and at podiums. For only the second time, radical women had dared to announce their cause and meet openly in front of a doubtful public.

Paul came equipped with courage that she inherited from the first generation of Boston's brave Black abolitionists. Her father, the Reverend Thomas Paul, raised his daughter in a Baptist community that included the incendiary antislavery pamphleteer David Walker. Rev. Paul's congregants included Maria Stewart, the writer and speaker whose public career had been cut short when she championed the political ambitions of Black women.

Paul entered public life as a teacher at Boston's Primary School Number 6. She followed in the footsteps of her mother, Catherine Waterhouse Paul, also an educator. But Paul did more, and soon transformed her schoolroom into a platform for antislavery work. This began when Paul authored a book that featured the life story of a remarkable student. Her *Memoir of James Jackson* broke new ground, the first Black biography published in the United States and the first evangelical children's text about an African American child that was not fiction.

Not content to stay cloistered in classrooms or at her writing desk, Paul organized her pupils into the Juvenile Choir of Boston and traveled with them on the road throughout New England. It was a test of New England's commitment to racial equality and Paul exposed its fault lines. Though Massachusetts had abolished slavery decades earlier and led the abolitionist movement, racism plagued the work of Paul and her young charges. After a performance in Salem, coach drivers refused to shuttle the choir back to Boston.

The urgent efforts of radical antislavery societies drew Paul to politics. She saw Black women playing pathbreaking roles in that movement. The Black women of Salem, Massachusetts, took the trouble to advise William Lloyd Garrison that he had wrongly accused Black Americans of failing to establish antislavery societies. The women published their constitution in *The Liberator*, evidence that the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, led by Black women, had been founded in February 1832. They lit a spark. Paul joined antislavery societies — first the New England Anti-Slavery Society and then its women's auxiliary, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society — and was immediately out in front of a movement.

Paul soon witnessed firsthand how opponents did not hesitate to place women in the crosshairs of the contest over slavery during the October 1835 meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. A mob disrupted the proceedings, descending upon the delegates and attempting to capture the women's guest speaker, British abolitionist George Thompson. Eventually, the crowd let the women escape. But they took William Lloyd Garrison into their hands and nearly lynched him on the streets of Boston. Paul weathered the melee and remained steadfast in her antislavery commitments.

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Mary Ann Shadd Cary

Mary Ann Shadd's career as a journalist is a testament to her sense of herself as a person with rights. Born free, to parents Abraham and Harriet Shadd, she started out life in the slaveholding state of Delaware but was educated in Pennsylvania, where her family moved to avoid the Southern bans against educating children of color. She worked as a teacher and then, in 1853, migrated to the city of Windsor in Canada West, today's Ontario. There, Shadd joined a growing community of Black Americans who had fled — or, in the language of the day, emigrated from — the United States in search of free soil.

She had, from the beginning, been an upstart. In 1849, at twenty-six, Shadd wrote a long letter to Frederick Douglass, responding to his request for suggestions on how to improve the “wretched conditions” of free Black Americans in the North. Shadd did not couch her comments in a timid or deferential tone and, instead, she claimed authority based on her “ten years of teaching Black children in all Black schools.” But she was unwilling to let an editor impose his whims and put out her own twelve-page pamphlet, *Hints to the Colored People of the North*. It was an openly political tract published to “arouse her readers with a direct analysis of the condition of northern Blacks, regardless of whether it might offend.”

How Shadd decided to publish a newspaper, it is difficult to say with certainty, but the idea must have been brewing for some time. Canada provided her just enough of an opening to realize her dream. Shadd built a team, one that included her future husband, barber Thomas Cary. Some men helped with the writing and editing, while others set type, rolled ink, and operated the printing press. She was a new publisher who, while the pages dried, traveled to promote the paper to subscribers across Canada and the United States. She was soon at the helm of a brand new weekly, the *Provincial Freeman*. By publishing her own paper, Shadd joined the ranks of “first” women on the day the inaugural issue left the office. With the next issue due in just seven days, she did not have much time to boast.

Cary never spoke openly about the dilemmas she faced as an editor who was also a woman. Instead, she used her editor's prerogative to tell readers about the difficulties that women like her confronted. The paper chronicled the history and labors of women's rights leaders and explored married women's legal rights, the content of women's education, and avenues for women's work. She celebrated women's accomplishments, especially their firsts, and featured noted thinkers, such as Jane Swisshelm, who held forth on issues ranging from women's mission to men's sphere.

Among the women that Cary featured in the *Provincial Freeman* was Sojourner Truth. Cary reprinted a piece that quoted Truth as having gently mocked white Americans who mixed abolitionism with racism. Cary used Truth's words to level a critique that was at the root of Black women's political thought: in American politics, they set the bar high, such that commitment to a good cause did not excuse complicity with evil. The newspaper was likely the only place that Cary and Truth — two towering intellectuals and activists — ever met. And still, for Cary, the encounter was unforgettable.

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Amanda Berry Smith

Amanda Berry Smith had success in the pulpit but never managed to breach the color line that divided her from white women preachers. She had been born enslaved just outside of Baltimore. Her father worked to liberate their family and relocated Smith and her siblings to the Free State of Pennsylvania. Her parents saw to it that Smith went to school, but too soon she was sent out to work, earning her living as a domestic worker, a cook, and a washerwoman.

Her hardships only increased when Smith lost first one and then a second husband, along with four of her five children. She had long sensed that she was called to preach, but widowhood gave Smith the freedom to learn precisely what that meant. Smith got her start at her local sanctuary, Philadelphia's Green Street AME Church. By 1869, she was traveling regularly between churches and camp meetings, where she became known as a powerful evangelist, a reputation that eventually carried Smith and her ministry to England, India, and Africa.

Many Christian leaders drew sharp lines between denominations. Smith did not. She paid little mind to whether her hosts were Methodists, Baptists, or Presbyterians. She preached to anyone who would listen. Smith also did not defer to any color line. Her greatest supporters were laywomen — Black and white. Smith knew how some church leaders used women's sex to limit their power. She pushed back, speaking out openly in support of women's right to preach and be ordained to the ministry.

The racism Smith encountered marred her work. Often, white women preachers kept her at the margins. She was disappointed in more than one encounter with Sarah Smiley, a popular preacher who started life as a Quaker but spent her career preaching to a wide range of Christian sects. In 1870, Smith was invited to hear Smiley speak during a Bible reading at the Twenty-Fourth Street Methodist Church in Brooklyn, New York. Upon arrival, Smith was encouraged to sing a hymn prior to Smiley's taking the pulpit, and she obliged. Smith then stayed on to hear Smiley's Bible reading but was taken by surprise when she was inexplicably escorted out of the sanctuary. One of Smiley's confidantes explained that Smith was not welcome to share the venue with her white counterpart. Smith left, tearful and despondent.

Smith was also slighted in print. She never met Phebe Hanaford, author of the 1877 book [*Women of the Century*](#), published for the centennial of the United States to document the national debt owed to women. Hanaford was an ordained pastor in the Universalist Church, a suffragist allied with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan Anthony and the American Equal Rights Association, and a prolific writer. Her 640-page tribute to American women included hundreds of biographical essays that highlighted women's "patriotism, intelligence, usefulness, and moral worth." Across twenty-seven chapters, Hanaford charted women's contributions to U.S. history and culture. Somehow, she overlooked Amanda Berry Smith.

Not to be overlooked or forgotten, Smith wrote herself into the record in 1893 when she published her life story, [*An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist*](#).

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Maria Miller Stewart

Nothing about her early life destined Stewart to make her mark as a lecturer. Hardship had defined her younger years. At five, in Hartford, Connecticut, Maria Miller lost her parents, which left her vulnerable to exploitation, kidnapping, and sale into a domestic slave trade that trafficked people between the free North and the slaveholding South.

She began to teach, a vocation that would sustain her for years to come. She also turned to the church, where she found consolation through a newly discovered faith: “I found that religion was full of benevolence; I found there was joy and peace in believing.” Then Stewart did the unexpected: She commanded a quill and inscribed hot words onto paper, awakening the consciousness of men and women, Black and white, to the evils of racism. Stewart wrote expressly to Black Americans, the formerly enslaved who faced the challenges that racism imposed in Boston and beyond.

Stewart did not spare Black women from criticism, even though she knew that sexism multiplied their burdens: “Oh, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves.” Women had to do their share of the work if Black Americans would ever see true equality. Women had long played a special role, Stewart believed. Black mothers held one key to real freedom: their children, who in next generations would steer Black Americans forward. Stewart insisted that women take pride in their contributions to the political future. They should not shy away from the challenge, and she chided: “Shall it any longer be said of the daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force? By no means.”

Stewart dared to go further, calling for women to play a part in politics, well beyond the domestic sphere. Anything less was to waste women’s skills and experience in a community that needed all the resources it could muster: “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” Black women needed to lead despite the distinct degradations that marred their lives. She pointed the finger at white Bostonians, and by implication, all white Americans, for the sexual debasement of Black women. They had “caused the daughters of Africa to commit whoredoms and fornications.” This would end, Stewart insisted, only when Black women seized their own power and resisted assault, coercion, and compromise.

On a September day in 1833, Stewart got ready for her very last appearance at a public podium. Her critics had driven Stewart to speak yet again, but only to say goodbye. She had long known contempt: “It was contempt for my moral and religious opinions in private that drove me thus before a public.” Though opposition to Stewart had surfaced, she did not simply fold. Instead, Stewart used her last speech to make a record of what it meant to be a woman who broke barriers. “What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah . . . queen Esther . . . Mary Magdalene . . . the women of Samaria . . . holy women [who] ministered unto Christ and the apostles?” She warned those who had been against her to be wary of deriding other women. “No longer ridicule their efforts,” she said, “it will be counted for sin.”

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Mary Church Terrell

Terrell never hid her support for women’s voting rights. She made clear her commitment to winning the ballot even when it put her at odds with other leaders. Terrell organized a distinct constituency, a national network [the National Association of Colored Women] of Black women to combat lynching, secure civil rights, and even work toward the vote. She and her husband shared a partnership of mutual cooperation and equality, an industrious partnership in which they were matched in ambition and savvy. Terrell never shied away from alliances with white women, especially when it suited her aims, and she traveled nationally and internationally in circles where she was often the only woman of color. She held public office, used her status to develop working relationships with members of Congress, and knew how to exploit them to her advantage.

The belief that she was the equal of any — including white women, and men of all colors — ran deep in Terrell, and it had been instilled in her at an early age. She was a child of privilege, born in Tennessee to parents once enslaved who gave their daughter a cosmopolitan upbringing filled with travel, clothing, and ideas. At Oberlin College, where Anna Julia Cooper was her classmate, Terrell had taken the more demanding “gentleman’s” course and thrived among students — Black and white, men and women — who, when they mingled, challenged conventions.

Terrell saw the problems of “race” and “sex” as intertwined, part of one great concern for humanity. She did not privilege the so-called rights of women over the rights of Black Americans. Her women’s cause included the battle against lynching, for example. In 1893 at a Washington, D.C. antilynching meeting, with Frederick Douglass presiding, Terrell introduced Ida B. Wells. The two women had known one another as friends from when they had shared time in Memphis, Tennessee. Terrell condemned what she termed “Southern Mob Rule” and lauded Wells “for her undaunted courage [and] zeal.” Going forward, Terrell would follow Wells’s lead and join a circle of activists who pressed Congress to act against lynching when state officials refused to do so.

Terrell stood out and oftentimes stood alone when it came to women’s suffrage. It was a risky subject for a middle-class woman who practiced the politics of respectability. Stumping for women’s votes might have undercut Terrell’s reputation as a paragon of Victorian comportment and sensibilities. At least this was the case in the eyes of editors at the *Colored American*. When Terrell spoke at Washington’s Second Baptist Church Lyceum on suffrage, the paper felt the need to reassure readers: “Mrs. Terrell sacrifices not one iota of her womanly graciousness and her charming and stately attractiveness is not diminished one degree by the position she takes on this vital question.”

Her most important work in this period was with the National Association of Colored Women. Through their local clubs, Black women responded as Jim Crow drew their families, communities, and reputations as women into racism’s fray.

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Sojourner Truth

Few who met Sojourner Truth forgot the experience. She was an imposing presence, standing six feet tall and speaking with a Dutch accent she had acquired during her early life in Upstate New York. Truth attracted audiences as a former slave and advocate for abolition and women's equality, and she eventually commanded the podium with unrivaled frankness, humor, and personal testimony. She once told a story, for example, that included a struggle between her desire for freedom and the need to care for her children. She adorned herself in bonnets, shawls, and, later in life, dresses crafted from fine fabrics. Truth knew that audiences had questions about what kind of woman she was, and she became as deliberate as any woman of the 1850s about crafting her own image. Wasn't she a woman?

Truth's early life had been unorthodox. Born enslaved, Truth had claimed her own freedom, endured separation from her children, spent years living in a utopian, free love community, and by the 1840s had finally settled in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she embraced antislavery activism. As she embarked on a political career, Truth hoped audiences would understand her point of view — and so she sat for a series of interviews with a white abolitionist, Olive Gilbert, to whom Truth dictated key episodes of her life story. The resulting *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, published in 1850, became a peer to the era's best-known slave narrative, [*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, a Slave*](#). It also became Truth's calling card, and she sold the pamphlet on the lecture circuit. But self-definition for a woman unable to read and write was not a straightforward task. Gilbert's desire to show white Americans the wrongs of slavery did not mesh with Truth's story about a Black woman's hardships, losses, and the irreconcilable choices she faced when enslaved. The problem of being spoken for and about by others would haunt Truth's entire public life.

There was no precedent for the moments when Truth stepped to the podium at the women's conventions of the 1850s. Truth was indeed a first when she arrived in Worcester, Massachusetts, in October 1850 — Black women had not attended the women's meetings of 1848 in Seneca Falls and Rochester, New York. She arrived, the sole delegate representing Northampton, Massachusetts, to face as large an audience as she had ever encountered. Over one thousand people filled Brinkley Hall to capacity, with others milling about outside after being turned away.

Ill-fitting for Truth was how speakers juxtaposed the condition of “women” against that of “the slave.” President Paulina Davis drew a parallel between “Woman” and “the contented slave” as two figures who had not yet claimed their rights. Abby Price lamented how, in “many countries,” women “were reduced to the condition of a slave” and decried how “the very being of a woman, like that of a slave, is absorbed in her master!” Price especially implored men: “Will you . . . dim the crown of [your sisters' and wives'] womanhood, and make them slaves?” These deliberations left Truth alone to carve out her own space, as a woman who began life enslaved but who was now free, who stood alongside women in the North rather than enduring as a captive in the South. Truth was not a metaphor. She was alive, with presence, voice, and her own views about women's equality.

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Maggie Lena Walker

Black women's rush to register [to vote] alarmed some. They put their names on the books and then went to the polls with power on their minds. Those who aimed to suppress Black political power had good reason to fear the women's enthusiasm. In Richmond, Virginia, a fracas followed when Black women outnumbered white, three to one, at a registrar's office. The official in charge underscored the sense that Black women were unwelcome when, in response to the demand, he called upon police to "keep the applicants in line" according to Jim Crow rules: white and Black women were separated.

In the days leading up to this confrontation, Maggie Lena Walker recorded how she and other Black women in Richmond prepared to meet the voting registrar. One week before, a Saturday, she paid her "first poll tax, \$1.50." On Sunday she was part of a meeting at the Elks Home Conference of Women and then met with a local attorney to strategize about the women's plans. And then on Monday there was a "grand meeting" at St. Luke's Hall for women. "Good results," she remarked, noting the women were prepared to register.

It is difficult to imagine Walker doing anything but organizing to win Black women's voting rights in 1920. She was a towering figure in her hometown, whose career had included time as a teacher, insurance agent, and finally head of the Independent Order of St. Luke, a fraternal business organization where she also edited the *St. Luke Herald*. Walker later founded the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, making her the first Black woman to head a bank — another "first" foremother. She had always blazed the path toward women's power. And tensions between white and Black Republicans in Richmond made it a likely space for such a confrontation. Walker was part of a faction dubbed the "Lily-Blacks" that opposed the "Lily-White" party leaders who planned to jettison the votes of African American Virginians.

At the registrar's office, Walker and the other Black women present were segregated and then directed to the building's basement. Walker charged that "partiality" was being shown to white women, going from the registrar to a judge, then to the secretary of the electoral board to complain, without satisfaction. The women waited. When the registrar moved to close up for the day, with Black women still waiting to sign up, Walker again raised her voice, pointing out that a hundred women remained in line. The registrar directed them to return in two weeks, the "general" registration day. Walker countered, urging the women to "come again tomorrow," and offered that she would serve as a deputy registrar. Black women, like white ones, should be permitted to fulfill such duties, she asserted.

Power was in hand, and Black women were determined to do something with it. In 1921, they found a cause. The state's Republican Party flatly excluded Black delegates, as did the Democrats. Black leaders convened their own convention and nominated an independent ticket. John Mitchell Jr. was put up as head of the Lily-Black Republican slate as candidate for governor. "Women were recognized with the nomination of Maggie Lena Walker for Superintendent of Public Instruction." As one editor put it: "The war is on and we are compelled to fight with fire." Walker, who aimed to hold office as well as to vote, and the hundreds of women whom she represented, were now part of that battle.

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Teach this lesson remotely by copying Zinn Education Project Google Docs with mixer lesson role assignments, and then distributing your copied materials to students.



Role Assignments for Remote Instruction Template

Teaching With *Vanguard*: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All

By Ursula Wolfe-Rocca

Lesson: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/teaching-with-vanguard/>

Teacher Instructions: Assign your students roles and groups by entering each of their names into the left-hand column. The template here comes with spaces for 22 roles, but it’s entirely up to you how you want to distribute roles to your students. Delete these instructions, delete “for Remote Instruction Template,” and share this sheet with your students.

22 Women from *Vanguard* by Martha Jones (and only a fraction of the women included in the book!)

Name of Participant	Historical Figure
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mary McLeod Bethune
	<input type="checkbox"/> Charlotte Hawkins Brown
	<input type="checkbox"/> Hallie Quinn Brown
	<input type="checkbox"/> Nannie Helen Burroughs
	<input type="checkbox"/> Anna Julia Cooper
	<input type="checkbox"/> Josephine DeCuir
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sarah Mapps Douglass
	<input type="checkbox"/> Eliza Ann Gardner
	<input type="checkbox"/> Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
	<input type="checkbox"/> Hester Lane
	<input type="checkbox"/> Jarena Lee
	<input type="checkbox"/> Joe Ella Moore
	<input type="checkbox"/> Pauli Murray
	<input type="checkbox"/> Diane Nash
	<input type="checkbox"/> Susan Paul
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mary Ann Shadd Cary
	<input type="checkbox"/> Amanda Berry Smith
	<input type="checkbox"/> Maria Miller Stewart
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mary Church Terrell
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sojourner Truth
	<input type="checkbox"/> Maggie Lena Walker
	<input type="checkbox"/> Frances Williams

[Click here](#) to make a copy of the Google Doc, pictured above, with links to the online materials. Then, share the specific materials you want to use with your students for synchronous or asynchronous learning.