Pairing the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments:  
Southern African Americans’ Voting Rights Struggles, 1870-1930  
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Historians have traditionally regarded the "Reconstruction Amendments" to the U.S. Constitution (the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments) and the "Progressive-era Amendments" (the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th Amendments) as distinct. This paper argues that, with respect to the issue of voting by African Americans in the South, that the 14th, 15th, and 19th Amendments should be treated as a set. As white supremacists worked at the turn of the century to disfranchise black men, leading African American suffragists such as Mary Church Terrell, Gertrude Bustill Mossell, and Adella Hunt Logan called for the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as well as the enfranchisement of black women. After the federal woman suffrage amendment was ratified in 1920, many southern African American women encountered the same barriers to voting—obstructionist tactics, threats, and violence—that black men had faced a generation earlier. In short, for aspiring African American voters in the South, the failure of the Nineteenth Amendment to secure voting rights for black women constituted a sad sequel to the failure of the Fifteenth Amendment to secure voting rights for black men.

This interpretation offers three significant interventions. It pairs the Reconstruction-era Amendments with the Nineteenth Amendment, recognizing their shared focus on voting rights. It connects the voting rights struggles of southern African Americans across genders and generations. Finally, it finds that, for some women, the canonical "century of struggle" for voting rights continued long after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified.

Professor Liette Gidlow is a specialist in twentieth century U.S. politics and women's and gender history. She has published two books: The Big Vote, which analyzes how large-scale, non-partisan voter turnout campaigns in the 1920s helped to contain the radical potential of woman suffrage; and Obama, Clinton, Palin, a collection of essays that puts the 2008 presidential election in historical perspective.

Her next book is a study of the disfranchisement of American women after the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 granted them suffrage. Her research has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, four presidential libraries, and the Bunting Institute at Harvard University.

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