Addie Hunton, Undercover: Race and Resistance in the Post-Nineteenth Amendment South

The roots of Black women's political power today as well as today's voter suppression campaigns can be found in the history of the aftermath of the 19th Amendment, which was ratified a century ago this year. In late October 1920, investigator Addie Hunton “hurred along” her report to NAACP chair Mary White Ovington. With the November presidential election only a few days away, there was no time to spare. The Nineteenth Amendment was now on the books, but registrars in Norfolk, Virginia were refusing Black women who tried to register to vote. These women feared white reprisals if they challenged the officials, yet they freely told their stories of rejection and humiliation to Hunton, an NAACP representative who had traveled in from New York and who spent less than 48 hours in town. Why did they share such dangerous stories with a total stranger? Liette Gidlow unwinds this mystery by delving deep into the archives to explore the many ways African American women in the Jim Crow South fought for voting rights after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. Her research finds that while a great many southern Black women were indeed disfranchised, a surprising number in fact succeeded in voting, and their successes, together with ceaseless agitation by those who remained disfranchised, transformed American politics for the next hundred years and ultimately helped elect Barack Obama, the nation’s first African American president.

Liette Gidlow is an associate professor in Wayne State's Department of History, a recent alumna of Harvard's Radcliffe Institute, and the author of two books and many articles on gender, race, and modern U.S. politics.