

Fourth Graders' Inquiry on Nonwhite Suffrage Activism

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"Wait, Mabel Lee and Jovita Idár are missing!" "Zitkála-Šá and Ida B. Wells too!" Katy and Jenna noted four nonwhite suffragists who they studied were missing in the Georgia's 4th grade social studies standards. The standards stated: "Examine the main ideas of the abolitionist and suffrage movements. a. Discuss contributions of and challenges faced by Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman."¹ Across the classroom, Sam and Teri found a similar absence in a textbook excerpt on women's suffrage.² They felt the absence was "disappointing" and "not fair!" After analyzing standards and textbook excerpt, the fourth graders in Ms. Yoo's classroom convened as a whole group and discussed why the nonwhite suffragists were missing and what they could do about it. They agreed that textbooks and standards "can't include everybody," but they also concurred that the stories of Indigenous, Black, Mexican, and Chinese women suffragists were important to be told. So, they decided to write a letter to the state board of education and the textbook publisher for the inclusion.

This lesson concluded a unit in which students explored lives of Zitkála-Šá, Ida B. Wells, Jovita Idár, and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee and examined nonwhite suffrage activism through primary and secondary sources. Doing so, students learned that a full suffrage story is more complex and longer than a popular story, which usually runs from the Seneca Falls to the 19th Amendment with almost exclusive focus on white women. They also identified that Indigenous, Black, Chinese, and Mexican American women had different struggles because of their different racial or citizenship backgrounds, and their suffrage activism was not solely about gender equity but about broader civil and human rights.³ This understanding helped the students critically read and challenge who are included and who are not in the textbook and state standards.

The impetus of this unit was a student question. During the study of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who were included in the state standards, a few students asked if there were any Asian or Latina suffragists. In the previous unit, students had learned about the US-Mexico War and the Gold Rush so that they knew people of Chinese and Mexican origin were part of American society. Ms. Yoo felt the need to find missing voices and invited me to co-develop a unit on nonwhite suffragists. As Asian American teacher and teacher educator respectively, Ms. Yoo and I share commitment to antiracist education and believe that "research about people who are underrepresented in popular culture and history textbooks is an act of curricular resistance unto itself, to be practiced wisely and often."⁴ Thus, we have been collaborating to bringing missing stories into social studies lessons, and this unit was an example of such collaboration.

Specifically, the unit focused on four women--- Zitkála-Šá, Ida B. Wells, Jovita Idár, Mable Ping-Hua Lee---and used National Women's History Museum and a children's book, *Finish the Fight!: The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote* to find primary and secondary sources on these women.⁵ The unit goal was that students understand how the suffrage history changes when they move beyond the traditional narrative built around white women and put Indigenous, Black, Asian, and Latinx women in conversation. C3 Framework's inquiry skills were also addressed, which

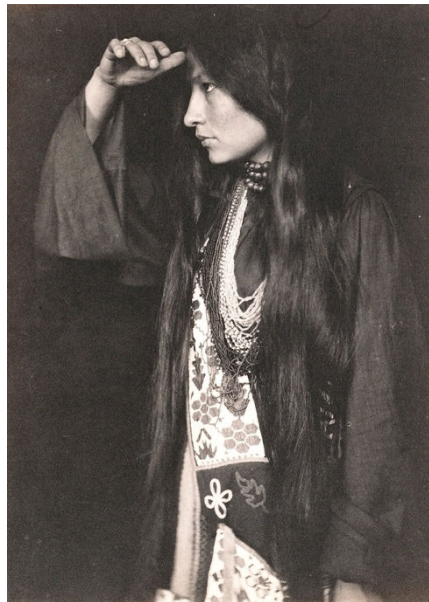
included: D2. His.4.3-5. Explain why individuals and groups during the same historical period differed in their perspectives; D2. His.5.3-5. Explain connections among historical contexts and people's perspectives at the time; D2. His.10.3-5. Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.⁶

In the following, I present brief biographies of the four suffragists and common threads across their stories. Instructional resources to bring these stories into teaching about women's suffrage are listed in the appendix.

Four Nonwhite Suffragists

Zitkála-Šá

Zitkála-Šá (1876–1938) was born on the Dakota Sioux Reservation.⁷ Like many Indigenous children at the time, she was separated from her family to attend an Indian boarding school. Later, she attended college and became a music teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. While teaching, she began writing autobiographical stories, and her criticism of the Indian boarding school caused the school to fire her. She then came home to take care of her mother and worked as a clerk at the Bureau



of Indian Affairs (BIA) office. After marriage, she and her husband went to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah. There, she joined the Society of American Indians and served as its secretary. Her criticism of the BIA's assimilationist policies led her husband to be fired from the BIA office. They then moved to Washington, DC.

While being critical of assimilation, Zitkála-Šá firmly believed that Indigenous People should be American citizens and the voting right was key to tribal sovereignty. She spoke at white women's suffrage meetings, which invited her to speak about matriarchal traditions of Indigenous peoples. Taking advantage of their interest, she called on white women to support citizenship and enfranchisement of Native Americans. When the 19th Amendment was ratified, she traveled across the country, urging newly enfranchised white women to support for citizenship and voting rights of Indigenous Peoples.

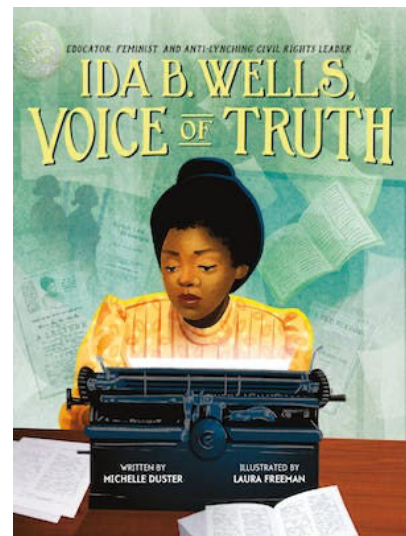
Thanks to her and other Indigenous suffragists' activism, the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 was passed, granting citizenship to all Native Americans. However, several states used a variety of strategies such as literacy tests and poll taxes to disenfranchise Native Americans. She and her husband founded the National Council of American Indians to fight such practices and advocate self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous nations. She continued to work for her community until she passed away in 1938.

Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi during the Civil War.⁸ She lost her parents and infant brother to yellow fever when she was 16 and became a teacher to take care of her siblings. After moving to Memphis, Tennessee, she continued to work as a teacher. One day in 1884, while riding a train from Memphis to Nashville, a train conductor ordered her to sit in the colored section with men despite she had purchased a first-class ticket in the ladies' car. When she refused, the train crew forcibly removed her from the train. She sued the train company and won the case but lost on appeal. She then turned to writing, becoming the editor of the newspapers. She wrote criticisms of the unequal education provided to Black students; in retaliation, her teaching contract was not renewed.

In 1892, her friend and two other Black men were violently attacked and killed by a white mob. Wells began the lynching investigation and found lynching was a form of economic retaliation against Black men who were successful. When she published her findings, angry white people destroyed her newspaper's office. She did not, however, stop lynching investigations and went on speaking tours abroad to create international pressure for the U.S. government to address lynching.

Wells believed enfranchisement was key to end lynching and win civil rights and found the Alpha Suffrage Club. She was also among women from Illinois who traveled to Washington, D.C. to march at the women's suffrage parade in 1913. The parade's white leadership told Black women to march at the back as a separate section so as not to upset white southern suffragists and voters. Wells refused and marched along with her state delegates. Wells spent the rest of her life fighting injustices and working for African American communities.



Jovita Idár

Jovita Idár (1885-1946) was born in Laredo, Texas.⁹ She started off as a teacher, but she became frustrated with segregated and unequal schools provided to Mexican American students as well as the school curriculum that demonized Mexican culture. So, she decided to become a journalist, reporting anti-Mexican racism. In Texas, signs refusing service to "Mexicans and dogs" were hung in storefronts, and voter intimidation, frequently through violent killing, was common.

In 1911, Idár and her family organized the First Mexican Congress to create a unified front to dismantle discrimination against Mexican American communities. As part of the Congress, she helped found the League of Mexican Women to empower Mexican women



and demand women's suffrage and equal education for Mexican American children. When she wrote a news editorial criticizing President Wilson for intervening militarily in the Mexican Revolution, Texas Rangers arrived to shut down the newspaper. She boldly stood in the doorway and made the Rangers to leave. However, the Rangers returned next day and destroyed the press. Undaunted, she started her own newspaper and continued to expose anti-Mexican discrimination.



When she moved to San Antonio, she and her husband founded the Democrat Club and became leaders in the community. She served as a precinct judge for several years and promoted equal rights for women. Until she passed away in 1946, she continued to work for her community by founding a free kindergarten and assisting undocumented workers in getting their naturalization papers.

Mabel Ping-Hua Lee

Mabel Ping-Hua Lee (1896-1966) was born in China.¹⁰ Her father was a Chinese missionary who moved his family to New York to lead a Baptist church for Chinese immigrants in 1905. During that time, Chinese immigrants were barred from naturalized citizenship, thus unable to vote. However, this did not stop Lee from fighting for suffrage. She was on horseback to help lead over 10,000 people in the 1912 New York suffrage parade.

To note, Lee was not the only Chinese immigrant woman who was invited to suffrage meetings and parades. Such inclusion was largely due to white suffragists' interest in enfranchisement of women in China. In 1911, Chinese revolutionaries overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China. Leaders of the revolution advocated women's rights, and the provisional republican government enfranchised women. White suffragists were curious about Chinese women's role in the revolution and enfranchisement. Lee and other Chinese American women used the invitation as an opportunity to dispel stereotypes about Chinese people and inform white suffragists about anti-Chinese discrimination in the United States.



Lee published many articles about women suffrage in college, and later she led another New York suffrage parade in 1917. When women got the right to vote in New York in 1917 and nationwide in 1920, Lee was still unable to vote because Chinese immigrants were not allowed to become a US citizen until 1943. Despite she had no hope of directly benefiting from women's suffrage movement, Lee joined the fight. Until her last days in 1966, she devoted her life to serve Chinese American community in New York.



Lessons from Nonwhite Suffragists' Stories

Stories of Zitkála-Šá, Ida B. Wells, Jovita Idár, and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee reveal that the full suffrage story is complex, and no single trajectory fits the experience of all women.¹¹ Here are some important ideas to consider in teaching about women's suffrage.

Beyond a Single Story Running from Seneca Falls to the 19th Amendment

A traditional narrative of women's suffrage tends to begin with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and other activists gathered to discuss women's rights. From there, the story goes, Susan B. Anthony and many white women waged a decades-long campaign, and finally the 19th Amendment gave all women the right to vote. This feel-good story is, however, an over-simplification at best.

First, what is often missing in telling the Seneca Falls Convention is the influence of Indigenous women.¹² Living near the Haudenosaunee-- a confederacy of six nations that reached near Seneca Falls--some white suffragists were inspired by the Haudenosaunee women who selected the chiefs, owned property, and had elevated roles in spirituality and children bearing. They referenced the equal and even superior positioning of women in the Haudenosaunee in their writings, including the Declaration of Sentiments.¹³

Second, 19th amendment was not the end of story for most nonwhite women. In fact, the 19th amendment did not affirmatively grant the vote to all women or even to any women.¹⁴ All the amendment said was *the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex*. This simply means that states were no longer able to keep people from the polls just because they were women. There were, however, plenty of other ways for states to block women from voting. For example, poll taxes, literacy tests, or other voter suppression tactics were used to keep Black and Mexican American women from voting as the stories of Ida B. Wells and Jovita Idár show.¹⁵ Further, many Asian and Indigenous women could not vote even after the 19th amendment because the amendment concerns only citizens. Until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act and the 1952 Walter-McCarran Act, many Indigenous and Asian women could not become U.S. citizens

respectively.¹⁶ As such, for nonwhite women, the fight for suffrage continued well past 1920 because of discriminatory citizenship laws and voter suppression practices, some of which continues today.

Suffrage Activism as Part of Larger Struggles

For nonwhite women suffragists, getting the vote wasn't an end point. Rather, it was an instrument to achieve broader civil and human rights, and each group's struggles differed partly because they had different relationship with U.S. citizenship.¹⁷ For example, Mexican citizens living in Southwest were granted U.S. citizenship by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. They were however not treated equally; instead they faced segregation, violence, and voter suppression.¹⁸ As Jovita Idár's story shows, Mexican American women's suffrage activism was part of larger struggles against anti-Mexican discrimination. Meanwhile, African American men achieved citizenship and voting rights through the 14th and 15th Amendments. However, voter suppression and violent intimidation kept them from the polls. As Ida B. Wells' story shows, Black women waged suffrage campaign to fight injustices and violence against Black communities.¹⁹

For Indigenous and Asian women, whose communities were not granted citizenship until 1924 and 1952 respectively, their suffrage activism was to inform white suffragists and voters about the issues faced by their own communities. For Indigenous women like Zitkála-Šá, suffrage activism grew out of their struggle for tribal sovereignty.²⁰ For Chinese immigrant women like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, their participation in suffrage movement was to fight anti-Asian immigration and citizenship laws and practices.²¹ In short, each nonwhite group had a particular historical relationship to citizenship and racism in the United States, and thus suffrage activism means different things to different groups of women.

Contention in Suffrage Movement

The full suffrage story is far from a feel-good story of unity and inclusion. The Seneca Falls Convention did not have a single Black woman in attendance.²² Three years later, at a women's rights conference in Ohio, white women in attendance urged organizers to silence Sojourner Truth for fear that her comments would divert attention from women's suffrage to emancipation.²³ During the debate on the 15th Amendment, Elizabeth Cady Stanton opposed the amendment because it would give Black men and other men of Color the vote before white women.²⁴ Susan B. Anthony also believed that if only one group were to be given the vote, it should be white women.²⁵ As such, by separating women and African Americans into two groups, white suffragists including Stanton and Anthony overlooked the presence of Black women and their struggles that were centered at the intersection of gender and race.²⁶ Against this backdrop, Black women organized among themselves to advance suffrage rights and broader civil rights for Black Americans as Ida B. Wells' story shows.²⁷

Meanwhile, white suffragists were more willing to include Indigenous and Chinese women in their events and parades. Such inclusion was not because they viewed these nonwhite women genuinely equal to them. Rather, they saw the Indigenous and Chinese women less threatening and more exotic and used them to build interest in their movement as the stories of Zitkála-Šá and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee show.²⁸

Also notable is divergent voices within groups. For example, not all Indigenous people agreed with Zitkála-Šá and other indigenous activists in their campaign for citizenship and suffrage. Many tribal

leaders believed that if they agreed to US citizenship and participated in elections, they were giving up their rights to tribal land. Some members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy rejected US citizenship and emphasized their belonging in their own nations that predated the United States.²⁹ Also, many Indigenous women chose to work within their communities, rather than engaging in conversation with white women.³⁰

Instructional Suggestions

The story of women's suffrage is more complex, richer, and longer than a traditional narrative that runs from the Seneca Falls Convention to the 19th Amendment with focus on a few famous white women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Of course, they were some of the first to call for votes for women and among the most important leaders of the movement. However, there are many nonwhite women beyond the famous white suffragists who helped make suffrage a reality for *all* women. Ms. Yoo's lesson centered these women's stories in teaching about the battle for women suffrage.

There is a wealth of resources to teach beyond the traditional narrative. Several articles from *Social Studies and the Young Learner* and *Social Education* provide various instructional strategies to teach a more nuanced and fuller story of women's suffrage, including biographic study, research, primary source analysis, making timeline, debate, and more. A good amount of children's literature and websites is also available to center nonwhite suffragists and their stories in teaching about women suffrage. I list some of these resources in the appendix with a hope that many students explore and celebrate rich and diverse stories of women's suffrage activism.

Note

1. Georgia Department of Education, *Fourth Grade Social Studies Georgia Standards of Excellence* (2017). <https://www.georgiastandards.org/Georgia-Standards/Pages/Social-Studies-Grade-4.aspx>
2. The school used *Social Studies Weekly* (www.studiesweekly.com) for social studies textbook.
3. Cathleen D. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
4. Anthony Brown, Joanna Batt, and Esther June Kim, "Beyond the 19th: A Brief History of the Voter Suppression of Black Americans," *Social Education* 84, no. 4 (2020): 204-208.
5. National Women's History Museum (<https://www.womenshistory.org/celebrating-centennial/suffragist-biographies>); Veronica Chambers and the Staff of the New York Times, *Finish the Fight!: The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote* (New York: Versify, 2020).
6. National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
7. This section on Zitkála-Šá's biography drew from Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*; Chambers, *Finish the Fight!*; *Suffragist Biographies* from National Women's History Museum (<https://www.womenshistory.org/celebrating-centennial/suffragist-biographies>); *20 Suffragists*

to Know from National Park Services (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/20-for-2020.htm>)

8. This section on Ida B. wells' biography drew from Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*; Chambers, *Finish the Fight!*; *Suffragist Biographies* from National Women's History Museum (<https://www.womenshistory.org/celebrating-centennial/suffragist-biographies>); *20 Suffragists to Know* from National Park Services (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/20-for-2020.htm>)
9. This section on Jovita Idár's biography drew from Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*; Chambers, *Finish the Fight!*; *Suffragist Biographies* from National Women's History Museum (<https://www.womenshistory.org/celebrating-centennial/suffragist-biographies>); *20 Suffragists to Know* from National Park Services (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/20-for-2020.htm>)
10. This section on Mabel Ping-Hua Lee's biography drew from Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*; Chambers, *Finish the Fight!*; *Suffragist Biographies* from National Women's History Museum (<https://www.womenshistory.org/celebrating-centennial/suffragist-biographies>); *20 Suffragists to Know* from National Park Services (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/20-for-2020.htm>)
11. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*; Nancy Hewitt, "From Seneca Falls to Suffrage? Reimagining a 'Master' Narrative in U.S. Women's History," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 15–38; Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
12. Sally Roesch Wagner, *Sisters in Spirit: Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Influence on Early American Feminists* (Summertown, TN: Native Voices, 2001).
13. Woman's Rights Convention, *Declaration of Sentiments*, Res. 9 (July 20, 1848) (available at <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbnawsa/n7548/n7548.pdf>)
14. Lisa Tetrault, "Lessons from the Constitution: Thinking Through the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments," *Social Education* 83, n. 6(2019): 361-368; Anna North, "The 19th Amendment Didn't Give Women the Right to Vote," Vox, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/8/18/21358913/19th-amendment-ratified-anniversary-women-suffrage-vote>
15. Martha S. Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Henry Flores, *Latinos and the Voting Rights Act: The Search for Racial Purpose* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015); Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009)
16. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*
17. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*; Daniel McCool, Susan M. Olson, and Jennifer L. Robinson, *Native Vote: American Indians, the Voting Rights Act, and the Right to Vote* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
18. Flores, *Latinos and the Voting Rights Act*

19. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
20. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*
21. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*
22. Jones, *Vanguard*
23. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167
24. Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*
25. Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*
26. Jones, *Vanguard*; Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex"
27. Jones, *Vanguard*
28. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*
29. Kevin Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
30. Cahill, *Recasting the Vote*

Appendix. Suggested Resources for Teaching About Nonwhite Suffragists

NCSS Journal Articles

- Women's Suffrage: Teaching Voting Rights Using Multiple Perspectives and Timelines by Jessica Ferreras-Stone (2020), *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 33(2), 25-32.
- Forging a Path to the 19th Amendment: Understanding Women's Suffrage, by Corinne Porter and Kathleen Munn (2019), *Social Education*, 83(5), 248-255.
- Suffrage, Activism, and Education in the Era of Chinese Exclusion: Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee by Sara Lyons Davis (2019), *Social Education*, 83(6), 356-360.
- Working the Democracy: The Long Fight for the Ballot from Ida to Stacey by Jennifer Sdunzik & Crystal Johnson (2020), *Social Education*, 84(4), 214-218.
- On the (Shirley) Chisholm Trail: The Legacy of Suffrage and Citizenship Engagement by Barbara Winslow (2020), *Social Education*, 84(4), 219-223.

Websites

- *Suffragist Biographies* from National Women's History Museum
<https://www.womenshistory.org/celebrating-centennial/suffragist-biographies>
- *20 Suffragists to Know* from National Park Services
(<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/20-for-2020.htm>)
- *Who Was Left Out of the Story?* From National Museum of American History
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/creating-icons/who-was-left-out-story>
- Black Women's Suffrage (<https://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/>)

- *Hispanic Women and the Fight for the 19th Amendment in New Mexico* from National Park Services <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/suffrage-in-spanish-hispanic-women-and-the-fight-for-the-19th-amendment-in-new-mexico.htm>

Children's Literature

- *Finish the Fight!: The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote* by Veronica Chambers and the Staff of the New York Times (2020). Versify.
- *Lifting as We Climb: Black Women's Battle for the Ballot Box* by Evette Dionne (2022). Viking Books for Young Readers.
- *Ida B. Wells: Let the Truth Be Told*. By Walter Dean Myers (2008). Amistad/Collins.
- *Voice of Freedom, Fannie Lou Hamer: Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement* by Carole Boston Weatherford. Dreamscape Media.
- *Lillian's Right to Vote: A Celebration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965* by Jonah Winter (2015). Anne Schwartz Books