

**“Radical Women: Fighting for Power and the Vote in New Jersey!”****Newark Public Library****Curator and Researcher: Noelle Lorraine Williams****Consultants: Beth Zak-Cohen and George Robb****Exhibition Panels: <https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/radical%3Awomen>****Web Page: <https://npl.org/radical-women-exhibition/>****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.238>**

Virtual Tour: “Black, Native American, and Immigrant Women’s Voices Taking the Vote! 100 Years of Women’s Suffrage.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENrHbZ6kb4A&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENrHbZ6kb4A&feature=emb_logo) 32:30.

Funding provided by NJ Women Vote: The 19th Amendment at 100, a partnership led by the New Jersey Historical Commission and the Alice Paul Institute, with assistance from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

In-person: Newark Public Library. 49 Washington Street. Newark, New Jersey 07102.

Third Floor Gallery. Until June 2021. Open 10-5 weekdays, and 10-2 Saturday.

COVID Protocols: Masks are required and temperatures taken. The Main Library will be open to the public, Monday through Friday, 10 AM to 5 PM, for one-hour intervals followed by ½-hour closures; and Saturdays, from 10 AM to 2 PM

2020 is the centennial of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, recognizing, by federal law, the right of many, though not of all, United States women to vote. We know the main figures of the New Jersey fight for suffrage: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, Alice Paul. But as it is in 2020, the fight for freedom was ultimately won by the force of the unsung and little known, those whose fight was fueled by personal suffering, oppression, injustice: African American, Native American, Immigrant, Working, and other radical women.

Noelle Lorraine Williams curated a Newark Public Library exhibit, funded by research and fabrication project grants from the New Jersey Historical Commission, to bear witness to these “fearless and courageous” champions of freedom: “Radical Women: Fighting for Power and the Vote in New Jersey.” To provide virtual access in this year when thousands of in-person celebrations were cancelled, Ms. Williams designed, directed, and narrated a virtual tour of the live exhibit in conjunction with New Jersey based filmmaker Kay the Kreator. This film,

entitled “Black, Native American, and Immigrant Women’s Voices Taking the Vote! 100 Years of Women’s Suffrage,” is the subject of this review.

In this engaging virtual tour—textured with contemporary art and music by women and non-binary artists from New Jersey, and juxtaposed with rare photographs and archival footage, memorabilia, music, and performance—Ms. Williams deftly shows us how radically essential the anti-slavery movement was as a training ground for the fight for women’s rights. Ms. Williams introduces us to a panoply of African American luminaries in the battle for the vote: Ida B. Wells marching among white women in Alice Paul’s Woman’s Suffrage Procession, although she had been assigned to the black sisterhood at the tail end of the parade; Violet B. Johnson, founder of the Fountain Baptist Church in Summit; Grave Baxter Fenderson, cofounder of the Newark Chapter of the NAACP; Jarena Lee, first African American woman to have an autobiography published in the United States; and too many more to name here. Ms. Williams praises Native American women’s contributions to The Cause. These include: Susan La Flesche Picotte, generally acknowledged as the first female Native American doctor, and Susette La Flesche Tibbles, both students at a school for girls in Elizabeth; and our contemporary Autumn Wind Doreen Scott.

Standing where the 1910 Wolf Muslin Factory fire took the lives of 27 women, many of them the sole providers for their families, librarian Beth Zak-Cohen acclaims the contributions of working women to The Cause. They knew that only the vote would push forward labor laws to address economic exploitation, and protect their safety, provide fair wages, eradicate child labor, and grant maternal support. We hear the words of activist Melinda Scott, “If you want to help us, help us to get the ballot.”

Reading Mina Van Winkle's claim for immigrant and working women, Ms. Williams relays the tour to Professor George Robb of William Paterson University. Standing in front of the historic Women's Political Union—its white, wrought iron gates, ironically forged as a series of hearts—Dr. Robb tells us that African American women were discouraged from this labor organization. So community leader and activist Mrs. Blanche Harris created an auxiliary for African American women. Our focus then shines on The New Women, who chose to eschew traditional marriage, to focus on career, and to assert their right to same-sex unions called "Boston Marriages."

In one of her compelling performances during the tour, actress, poet, and artist Nelly Bess embodies Florence Spearing Randolph—the first African American woman to be ordained a deacon, and the pastor of the Wallace AME Zion Church for 26 years. Ms. Bess recites a portion of Randolph's sermon "If I Were White" against a backdrop of Gladys Barker Grauer's art installation "Unequal Justice" depicting women of all colors ascending totemically on a banner, their foundation several depictions of 17-year-old African American high school student Trayvon Martin.

Throughout the exhibit, Ms. Williams links past and present through these pairings, and her refrain of "We Remember," "We Remember." She celebrates contemporary women who have broken through the barriers of race, gender, and sexual orientation to become today's civic leaders. Those, who like Nelly Bess emerging from Asha Ganpat's "Hiding Under a Mother's Skirts," have come into their own power; such as New Jersey's Secretary of State Tahesha Way, co-founder of the initiative NJ Women Vote, and Newark Councilwoman LaMonica R McIver.

Noelle Lorraine Williams's message is compelling and clear: the courageous groundbreakers in this exhibit live through us, today, in our fight for democracy. They are

present as we march for human rights; phone, text, stump for our candidates; drive our neighbors to the polls; stand in line for eleven hours to cast our ballots. At the closing of the film, Ms. Williams casts her vote and picks up a mask designed with Breonna Taylor's face, joining us to our foremothers in the beautiful halls of the third-floor gallery of the Newark Public Library. Her voice, as theirs, echoing from the high ceiling, marble columns and stairs, oak panels, urging us to Vote! Vote! Vote!

**Susanna Rich**

**Poet: *SHOUT! Poetry for Suffrage* and Producer: Wild Nights Productions, LLC**