

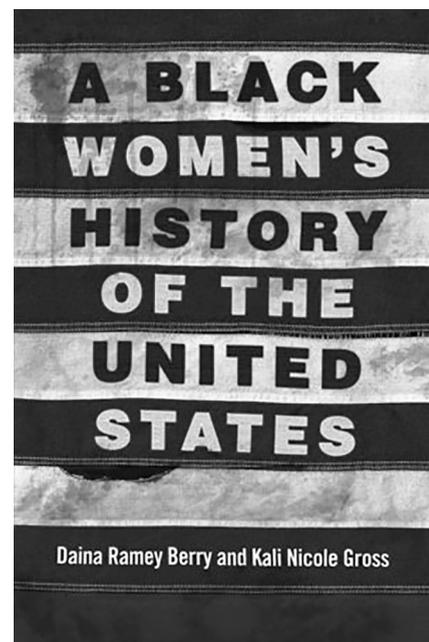
## Mining the Archives of the African Diaspora to Amplify Black Women's Voices

BY HOLLY A. SMITH

Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2020. 288 pp. illus. notes. index. \$27.95, ISBN 978-0807033555.

Historically, archives have not prioritized records created by women of the African diaspora. Yet reflections of Black women's voices still exist in travel logs, letters, photographs, diaries, and other items. Many historians, such as Deborah Gray White and Darlene Clark Hine, have been able to effectively utilize these resources, along with oral histories, objects, and other means of story/telling and remembering, to tell the stories of Black women. Now, scholars Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross<sup>1</sup> have written *A Black Women's History of the United States*, a thematic analysis of the history of women of the African diaspora in America from the 16th century to the present. The text covers key topics such as incarceration, the arts, politics, enslavement, civil rights, LGBTQ advocacy, Black material culture, Reconstruction, and feminism, to name a few. This work highlights the experiences of various Black women — “the enslaved, the free, educators, politicians, artists, queer folks, disabled people, and activists, as well as those who lived outside the law” (p. 4). The authors state unequivocally and unapologetically, “This is a history about Black women, for Black women and their allies, written by Black women — though it seeks to educate and inspire all who read it” (p. 5).

Professors Berry and Gross make a critical point in the introduction: “Black women occupy a complex, paradoxical relationship to America. We are at once marginalized and ostracized, yet our very being has been exploited to help create and maintain white supremacy” (p. 2). Black women have had to fight against systemic forms of oppression since their first arrival in this country. Many of these women's names and stories remain unknown and unrecorded in the written record. The authors discuss the challenges related to the use of archival resources but also mention the difficulties of archives not created from the voices and perspectives of Black women and even interrogate those sources where Black women's voices might be (p. 8). The authors provide a critically powerful historical overview, however, by demonstrating an amazing use of archival resources. Each chapter is anchored by the story of a different woman, someone likely unknown to most readers, although a few of the names, such as that of educator and activist Nannie Helen Burroughs, might be familiar. Other women, like Isabel, who in 1600 had to advocate for her right to travel as a free woman of color, are less well known, yet their lives are no less important. This storytelling personalizes the history and gives these women and their



communities a voice, as well as links to broader Black and American history and historical events.

Throughout the text, the lived experiences of Black women are linked to those of other historically marginalized and oppressed communities, with Black women serving as originators and in the forefront of critical social justice, civil rights, and human rights movements. Black women have focused on the most vulnerable and socially exploited populations and have historically formed necessary coalitions across race, class, and gender. Professors Gross and Berry

## BOOKS

---

note in their concluding chapter that “in just about every battle that Black women have undertaken in the United States, every barrier they have shattered, and every first accomplishment they have secured, their actions have paved the way not just for other Black women but for all marginalized peoples” (pp. 209–210). This point underscores the one made in the iconic 1977 Combahee River Collective statement: “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.”<sup>2</sup>

It can be difficult to cover hundreds of years in one text, but the authors note that they want this book to be a

“a new kind of survey on Black women’s history, one that is purposely not comprehensive or attempting to be the definitive history of Black women in the United States. Instead, we see the book as a vivid introduction to Black women’s history that aims to paint a richly textured portrait of Black womanhood in a manner that celebrates Black women’s diversity and inspires readers to seek out more” (p. xi). They go on to emphasize that they “also want this book to be read by students, book-club members, aunts, uncles, grandads, artists, policymakers, activists, and by people in recovery and by people in politics, and everybody in between, so we do our best to avoid jargon and language that tends to

exclude rather than educate.” In that sense, the text is very accessible and well written, scholarly but not unattainable as an introductory text to Black women’s history. Particularly in this crucial political moment, it remains imperative to amplify the work and experiences of diverse Black women and our communities. This volume will serve as a fantastic portal to introductory learners or those who have read or studied Black history, and it will be a catalyst for continued research and exploration of the archives and Black women’s history. This text also has continued implications for current political and social events and will stimulate critical thinking and conversations in a variety of spaces.

### Notes

1. Daina Ramey Berry is the Oliver H. Radkey Regents Professor of History and Chair of the History Department at the University of Texas at Austin; Kali Nicole Gross is the Martin Luther King, Jr., Professor of History at Rutgers University.

2. Keeanga-Yahmahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Haymarket Books, 2017), pp. 22–23.

[Holly A. Smith is the college archivist at Spelman College. She received her B.A. in history and Black studies from The College of William and Mary, an M.A. in history from Yale University, and an M.S. in library and information science from Simmons College. She co-authored the article “This [Black] Woman’s Work: Exploring Archival Projects that Embrace the Identity of the Memory Worker” (*KULA Journal*) and authored the piece “Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy” (*Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists*). She is passionate about community archives and archival advocacy related to collections for historically under-documented communities.]

# Resources for Gender and Women's Studies

A FEMINIST REVIEW

---

**Looking for this journal online?**

---

**Find it in full text in**

Gender Studies Database

Gender Watch

Women's Studies International

Academic Search

**Locate it in indexes in products from**

EBSCO

Gale

ProQuest

**Talk to your librarian!**