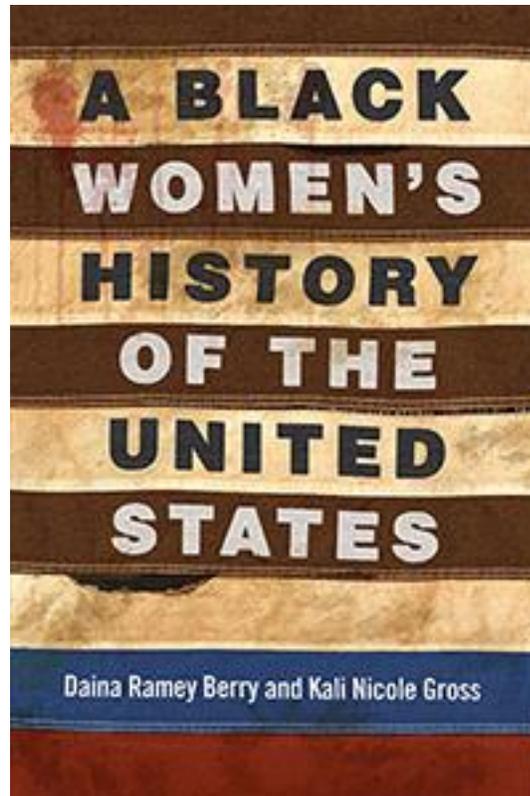


*A Black Women's History of the United States*  
by Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross

Reader's Guide Discussion Questions



1. In the authors' note for *A Black Women's History of the United States*, Dr. Berry and Dr. Gross recount their own histories and speak to the lived experiences and archival vacancies that led them to pursue this project. How does the framework of the authors' personal lives shift the ways in which you understand the book? Does the book itself serve as a radical document within the tradition of Black feminist activism?
2. What do you make of the statement in the authors' note that this history is "purposely not comprehensive" as it resists asserting itself as the "definitive history of Black women in the United States"?
3. The American flag on the cover of this book is referenced in the introduction as, in part, the covert product of the work of a thirteen-year-old Black indentured servant, Grace Wisher. As demonstrated with Wisher, Dr. Berry and Dr. Gross pull back the curtains on countless Black women's stories that have slipped through the cracks of national memory. In addition to the flag, what other cultural productions do the authors reveal to be made possible by the efforts of Black women? Which of these histories did you have to re-learn, and how did you originally learn them?

4. The first history in the book is that of Isabel de Olvera, a woman of African descent who arrived of her own volition in the United States in the early sixteenth century. What shifts in your comprehension of the history of Black women in America are introduced by Isabel's narrative, which predates chattel slavery? What stays the same? Why do you think the authors begin this book with Isabel's story?
5. Throughout the text, Dr. Berry and Dr. Gross pose questions about the realities and interiorities of the lives of Black women despite a recognition of the fact that their definitive answers are unknowable. Why is it valuable for the historians to pose impossible questions, and how do these questions alter your relationship to the women in the book?
6. What is the importance of recounting histories like that of Fenda Lawrence, a free African trader and enslaver who profited from slavery in the New World? Why is Fenda's story included in a book that otherwise focuses on those who rebel against the station of Black women in America?
7. Discuss the story of Monemia (mother of conjoined twins, Christine and Millie) in conversation with the efforts of Mamie Till-Mobley (mother of Emmett Till) and the numerous other Black mothers recognized within this book. According to the provided narratives, what can be concluded about the role of the Black mother throughout American history?
8. Many of the central histories in this text are those already familiar to the American public. How is your relationship with and understanding of these histories altered by accounts that refuse to center widely celebrated Black male historical figures?
9. How does the story of Frances Thompson, who faced sexual violence, public ridicule, and state incarceration for her gender identity, complicate conventional histories of Black womanhood in America?
10. Think of examples of Black female solidarity in this book that extend across time, geography, ability, sexuality, age, and class. What is the role of solidarity in Black women's history in the United States, and what particular conditions exist at the intersection of Blackness and womanhood that foster said solidarity?
11. In reference to Anna Julia Cooper and the Black clubwomen of the early twentieth century, the authors write, "Black women are the barometer by which the soundness of the race could best be measured." What is meant by this statement, and how is it supported by the histories held within the book? How does it counter or confirm the American and Black radical histories you've encountered prior to reading this book?
12. In the discussion of the rise of domestic servitude and Black women's longstanding history of being systematically barred from fair labor opportunities, one Black woman

declares, “I live a treadmill life [...] Tho today we are enjoying nominal freedom, we are literally slaves.” How does Black women’s history (within and outside labor history) complicate your understanding of the progression of Black rights in the United States? What is the connection to slavery, and how does labor feel or seem different for Black women?

13. Discuss the history of incarceration as it relates to Black women in the United States. Which of these histories surprised you given your current cultural context, and why? What is the importance of including so many histories that touch on the conditions of prisons and penitentiaries?
14. One of the most overlooked components of the history of Black women is that of the leaps and bounds they have made and continue to make in advancing civil rights for Black people as community organizers, union strikers, and elected state officials. What figures in this book did you find compelling in their political work, either operating from within or from wholly outside and against the US government? Make a case for their approach to national change.
15. Sexual violence and laws related to solicitation and workplace harassment play a central role in Dr. Berry and Dr. Gross’s book. How does the history of the African American woman uniquely illustrate a national legacy of racialized legislation against sex, sexuality, and the female body? What do these histories reveal about national attitudes toward the Black female body? Where do you see these histories echoed in today’s governance?
16. What is revealed about the forces that drive historical production in the relative prevalence of the Rosa Parks story when compared to the stories of the many other women who committed identical radical acts? What is achieved in the authors’ attention to these other women?
17. From the “Mammy” figure to the “welfare queen,” Black women have long been categorized under whichever denigrating “name” best serves the dominant American vision. In what ways do books like *A Black Women’s History of the United States*, which name and recite the stories of countless forgotten and sometimes unnamed Black women, counter the cultural harm done by narrow historical archives and prevalent stereotypes?
18. In the final pages of the book, the authors conclude that “Black women’s history in its truest sense serves as a historical road map of the failures of mainstream approaches to democracy and an incisive tutorial on how to correct it.” According to this history-as-tutorial, how then might we imagine correcting democracy in continuance with the Black feminist tradition enacted by the women in this book? How might we read more recent entries in this history, such as that of Patricia Okoumou, Angela Whitehead, or Bree Newsome as part of this historical trajectory? What are the next steps in honoring and recognizing the paths they’ve forged?