History weighs heavily on my mind as I write this introduction during a global pandemic. What the history books will say about this moment – in the wake of the coronavirus that had spread worldwide in 2020 – remains to be seen, but pandemics have often altered the course of history, and not just in the obvious examples of the bubonic plague in medieval Europe or the pandemics that wiped out indigenous America during the “age of discovery.” Looking specifically at the histories of Black women, there are examples of local African women (señoras or signares) healing the earliest European traders on the West African coast when the latter suffered from tropical diseases. These intimate liaisons provided traders with a sure footing and a foundation on which to build the centuries-long transatlantic slave trade (ca.1518–ca.1807), not just in restored health but in African women’s facilitation of local languages, customs, and economic trading.1

There is also the later example of the victory of the Haitian Revolution – begun in 1791 under the presumed leadership of a mambo (Vodou priestess), under the influence of an African-based goddess, Ezili Dantor,2 and culminating in Haiti’s independence in 1804 – enabled not just by the bravery and resistance of formerly enslaved revolutionaries but also by the raging yellow fever pandemic that wiped out Napoleon’s army. This eventually led to the sale of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which mapped out both a “manifest destiny” agenda for the United States and the eventual “scramble for Africa” that would unfold a century later among European nations. As our current history and earlier histories have taught us, it is often the response to the virus, not the virus itself, that steers the course.

Interestingly, during the lockdown of the United States, my social media feed circulated news stories that highlighted certain histories of pandemics. Such stories urged us to take advantage of the social isolation to create our best work. They used as examples white Englishmen from the past, like Shakespeare, who wrote King Lear, and Isaac Newton, who discovered gravity, during the London plagues of 1606 and 1665–6, respectively.3 Curiously, these articles failed to reference Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929), in which she speculated on the gendered nature of such men who could attend to their creative endeavors, given how they often relied on a woman (mother, wife, sister, housekeeper) to keep their homes clean, cook meals for the table, wash their clothes, and offer relative comfort while they devoted time to invent clever word play or calculus. Building on Woolf, Alice Walker specifically wonders about the “creative geniuses” among our ancestral Black mothers, especially those who were enslaved, who may have been
overburdened with work but who may have nonetheless expressed their artistry through song and through the growth of “our mothers’ gardens.”

This cultural history of Black women is often erased in general historical studies, but this edited collection seeks to remedy this issue by placing such women at the center, for such histories can relate across time and illuminate lessons of survival and resistance. Subsequently, when we ponder the history of “creative genius,” let us remember not the intellectual men but the healing women during times of pandemic. Black women like New Orleans Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau (1801–81), who healed many during a yellow fever epidemic in the nineteenth century with her knowledge of medicinal herbs (perhaps learned from her own mother’s garden), and Harriet Tubman (ca. 1822–1913), whose many roles—Underground Railroad conductor, spy, and scout during the Civil War—included that of a nurse, who also used her knowledge of medicinal herbs to cure Union soldiers of dysentery.

It was her role as nurse that placed Tubman in South Carolina, where she would eventually become the first woman in U.S. history to lead a military raid on June 2, 1863, at the Combahee River that freed 750 slaves. Tubman, later in life, would establish a home for the sick and elderly among the formerly enslaved, which reinforced her commitment to challenging the prevalent ableism, racism, sexism, and classism of her society. These oppressive systems affected her own life when in her old age, funds had to be raised so that she could pay the admittance fee to the same home she had helped to establish. Tubman’s heroic efforts, which were supposed to have been memorialized with her likeness on a new $20 U.S. paper currency that is now delayed, are often forgotten when compared with the heralded individualism of Shakespeare and Newton. Will the same fate befall our current nurses and other “essential workers” keeping so many of us alive and functioning during a time of crisis? What constitutes a history worth remembering, and how do race and gender shape such memories?

A history framed through the lens of Black feminist theory reveals the underpinnings of intersectional inequalities as well as the modes of resistance to them. It is within this framework that a Black women’s cultural history can be formulated, which is the focus of this unprecedented collection of 35 chapters in The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories. The authors in this volume represent a wide selection of scholars across genders, races, and ethnicities at different stages during their careers—from doctoral candidates to distinguished scholars to emerita professors. They also hail from such diverse countries as the United States, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Nigeria, Brazil, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Egypt. Importantly, these authors have integrated intersectional and transnational analyses in their scholarly inquiries into Black women’s histories. This includes “queering” certain histories, as Daniel F. Silva does with the history of the seventeenth-century Ndongo ruler Njinga Mbande. Similarly, Vanessa M. Holden examines the archival evidence of trans and same sex–desiring free Black women in nine-teenth-century North America, while Jenn M. Jackson inquires how certain Black feminists in the twentieth century are erased from history precisely because of their failures to adhere to respectability politics.

Other approaches to the archive reveal potential Muslim identities among enslaved women in the antebellum United States, as Denise A. Spellberg argues, or transnational praxis in activism, as explored in the chapters by Nneka D. Dennie, Claire Oberon Garcia, Carole Boyce-Davies, and Nicholas Grant. Still others interrogate the methods of claiming a history: from the use of genetics to confirm African identity, as Amade M’charek explores, to the tracing of African American women’s singing traditions back to the African continent, as Maya Cunningham suggests, to the challenge that such a constructed lineage is even possible—given the plurality and complexities of ethnic identities and “situated knowledge”—as Kyra D. Gaunt posits. Whether the history illuminates the lives of reigning monarchs, enslaved women, poets, singers, dancers, activists,
religious leaders in kitchenspaces, or community organizers shifting definitions of beauty, the chapters organized here cover a wide range of complex issues impacting Black women.

Meticulously assembled, this edited volume follows in the intellectual trajectory of other collections highlighting the philosophies and histories of Black women. If, as the late Carmen R. Gillespie (1965–2019) argues in her chapter in this volume, “Black women’s feminist literary renaissance of the late twentieth century,” that 1970 represents a milestone in the literary output of African American women, then writer Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, published that year, is worth mentioning as a precursor to these endeavors. Collecting a wide array of voices speaking from the interconnected oppressions of racism and sexism to create the in-between space for Black women’s experiences, Bambara assembled one of the earliest volumes to include language describing the nexus between these dual oppressions, as articulated in Frances Beale’s “Double Jeopardy,” which would later be expressed as “interlocking oppressions” (in the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement”), “the master’s tools” by poet and essayist Audre Lorde (1984), the “matrix of domination” by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990), more popularly “intersectionality,” as coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and more recently “misogynoir,” as coined by scholar-activist Moya Bailey (2010).

The anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982) built on Black feminist writings during the 1970s and spawned two other collections in the twenty-first century: *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies* (2009) and *Are All the Women Still White? Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms* (2016). A decade after *Some of Us Are Brave*, Margaret Busby’s *Daughters of Africa* (1992) assembled one of the first international anthologies on oral and written literature by women of African descent from ancient times to the late twentieth century. A few years later, Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995) became one of the first collections to provide an historical overview of African American women’s feminist writings. Other scholars, like Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia (1993) and Boyce-Davies (1995), edited volumes that covered the African Diaspora from a Black feminist perspective (including the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the African continent). To that end, the volume *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015) provides a diasporic and historic lens through which to explore the intellectual productions and writings of women of African descent, a different focus from Berry and Gross’s *A Black Women’s History of the United States* (2020), which foregrounds U.S. history from the perspectives of Black women even as it explores the earliest transatlantic histories that have framed this cultural context.

While this Routledge Companion has been shaped by these earlier projects, it has nonetheless expanded, widened, and deepened these subjects across the Diaspora, from ancient times to the present, thus making it the first of its kind in covering Black women’s histories in a comprehensive manner, both globally and historically. Given our focus on women of African descent and how cultural history can encompass a wide array of cultural practices, ideas, and beliefs – including literature, art, music, dance, food, religion, intellectual production, activist development, and other cultural expressions – this volume chooses a wide lens and a long reach to interrogate race and gender from an historical and interdisciplinary perspective. The politics of choosing a “start point” – do we begin with the transatlantic slave trade? Ancient Egypt or Kush? Mitochondrial Eve on the African continent? – is just as contentious as an “end point,” given how history continues to unfold in the present. And yet, this volume is forced to determine its beginning and end in an effort to be both inclusive and informative about what we might mean when we craft a subject called “Black women’s cultural histories.”

Consequently, the collection is loosely organized both thematically and chronologically. Part I, “A fragmented past, an inclusive future,” charts the earliest periods relating to Black
women’s cultural histories and includes the latest scholarship that has provided more inclusive approaches to mapping out and reconfiguring Black women’s fragmented past. The opening chapter, “Women are from Africa, and men are from Europe,” by Egyptologist Monica Hanna, offers critical interventions into the field of Egyptology, which has been shaped by both Western imperialism and male-centered scholarship. Given the importance of Ancient Egypt in Afrocentric ideologies, and the salience of the rhetoric and imagery of this celebrated culture, a chapter on the subject seemed pertinent, though not without problematizing the field’s Eurocentric gaze, which has severed Egypt from its African context, as well as the Afrocentric response in reclaiming its significance to the continent. Here, Hanna unpacks the loaded raced and gendered constructions of “Ancient Egypt” as a site for cultural identity while suggesting ways that local Egyptians – through women’s leadership – can reclaim this history for themselves and for a wider inter-African network.

Relating to this work is Solange Ashby’s subsequent chapter, “Priestess, queen, goddess: the divine feminine in the kingdom of Kush,” which seeks to recognize the power and prestige of the ancient queens of Kush, in what is now modern-day Sudan. These queens, however, are often ignored in comparison to Egyptian queens, since “Kush falls into obscurity, because it is not incorporated into studies of the ancient world, nor is it included in Africana Studies, which unfortunately still tends to begin the study of African history with European colonialism and slavery in Africa.” Ashby’s chapter proposes a different critical intervention by reframing and refocusing on Kushite female rulers, who were often more powerful than the more famous rulers of Egypt.

The next chapter, by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, examines representations of the ancient Queen of Sheba, who is referenced across the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and is associated with both present-day Ethiopia and Yemen, two countries separated by the Red Sea. The artistic representation of the Queen of Sheba is one of numerous examples of Black female subjects in early modern European art and culture, as examined in Paul H.D. Kaplan’s following chapter, which recognizes how these artistic subjects can be both stereotypical and complex in character. Similarly, Nicholas R. Jones’s chapter explores the status of Black women in early modern Iberia and their symbolic acts of resistance in Spanish literature, which complicates stereotypical renderings of Black womanhood.

The subsequent chapter, by Joyce Green MacDonald, interrogates the “legend of Lucy Negro” in Elizabethan England and the possibility that she may have been the inspiration behind William Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady” sonnets. Ten years after the publication of these sonnets, the arrival in 1619 of captive Africans to the English colony of Virginia would mark a milestone date in African Diasporic history; these captives originated from the Ndongo region (present-day Angola), which would be ruled by Njinga Mbande (1563–1663) from 1624 until her death. This fearless leader is the focus of the final chapter in this section, in which Silva utilizes the intersectional lens of race, gender, and sexuality to “reassemble,” as it were, representations of Queen Njinga that were distorted by European explorers and colonists before being rehabilitated in postcolonial projects.

Part II, “Contested histories, subversive memories,” explores cultural memory and revisionist histories from precolonial Africa to the era of the transatlantic slave trade on both sides of the Atlantic. In the opening chapter, Aje-Ori Agbese examines contemporary Nigerian cultural narratives – including film, animation, and theater – that memorialize precolonial heroic women who lived from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. Such popular narratives, Agbese argues, engage the past to make sense of present-day gender issues as they relate to Nigerian nation-building. In a different context, Beverly Mack presents in the next chapter the history of another Nigerian figure, Nana Asma’u (1793–1864), who serves as a “model for literate women
Muslims,” not just during her own era but also within the twenty-first-century context of a Pittsburgh-based Muslim community seeking to recreate Asma’u’s ‘Yan Taru program of women’s education. This example of African women’s literacy, however, seems to have disappeared during the transatlantic slave trade, as Spellberg explores in the chapter “Finding ‘Fatima’ among enslaved Muslim women in the antebellum United States.”

Tracing in slave databases the name “Fatima” – representative of one of the daughters of the Prophet Mohammad and, therefore, a popular name within Muslim communities – Spellberg proposes an alternative methodology that breaks the silence on what Marisa J. Fuentes terms the “violence of the archive” by recovering enslaved women’s Muslim identities, which might be revealed through this name. While there are no records to date suggesting any of these women wrote, much less in Arabic, Spellberg does point to scholars who posit that the early childhood writings of Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–84) might suggest her exposure to Islamic education, given her possible origins among the Fulani, a recognized Muslim group in the Senegambia region. However, Phillis Wheatley’s name recalls not an Islamic moniker but the actual slave ship that brought her to America, and in the next chapter, “Phillis Wheatley and New England slavery,” Jennifer Thorn interrogates how Wheatley’s history of “exceptionalism” – as the first African American and second woman to publish a book of poems – is circumscribed by misrepresentations of New England slavery.

A different “founding mother,” given her ties to American founding father and third U.S. president Thomas Jefferson, can be gleaned from the history of Sally Hemings (1773–1835), as examined in the following chapter, “Sally Hemings: writing the life of an enslaved woman” by Annette Gordon-Reed, author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family. Carefully assessing the different responses to Hemings’s narrative over time, Gordon-Reed interrogates how her story was first about race and later about gender, while Sally Hemings herself is oftentimes reduced or missing from these historical discussions, thereby arguing that she deserves her own pride of place in a history that often denies the agency of enslaved women.

The subsequent chapter, by Nathan H. Dize, narrates the bravery of 16-year-old Félicité Kina from Martinique, who traveled to France while pregnant to be near her husband and stepson, who were jailed alongside Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture. Dize explores how prison archives reveal the specific mode of what historian Stephanie M.H. Camp calls the “everyday resistance” of Black women that proved to be as effective as military resistance in achieving freedom, as Kina enabled this for herself and her family in the world of the Haitian Revolution. Part II closes with James Small’s chapter, “The then and now of subjugation and empowerment: Marie Benoist’s Portrait d’une négresse,” which analyzes how Benoist’s painting dating from 1800, which hangs in Paris’s Louvre Museum, depicts both exceptional ideas as well as standard tropes of Black womanhood.

Part III, “Gendered lives, racial frameworks,” covers much of the nineteenth century, which intensified concepts of race that correlated with more entrenched gender roles and definitions. Within this era of chattel slavery and expanding colonialism, Black women — enslaved or free — were constantly targeted for social, cultural, and political control, while they in turn enacted different forms of resistance in their quest for freedom, dignity, and full humanity. Robin Mitchell’s chapter, “A history of Black women in nineteenth-century France,” which opens this section, argues that France’s defeat in the war against its former colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) led to national trauma, subsequently resulting in further colonial subjugation of the African continent and Black women’s bodies by proxy. This is represented in the exhibition of South African Sara (or Sarah) Baartman (ca. 1770–1815), called the “Hottentot Venus,” as well as other African-descended women in France.
Black women would experience similar subjugation in North America, but certain women found ways to resist oppression not only as freedom-seekers but also as queer subjects, as provocatively argued in Holden’s chapter, “Living free: self-emancipated women and queer formations of freedom.” Comparing the lives of trans woman Mary Ann Waters, living as a free Black woman in Maryland in the 1850s, and Minty Caden, a same sex–desiring woman who fled slavery with her partner decades earlier to Nova Scotia, Canada during the war of 1812, Holden does the necessary work of “queering slavery, queering freedom” in order to “critique what consent could mean within the context of the American slave regime.” Such narratives have rescued Black women from the silence of the archive, just as Michele Reid-Vazquez proffers in her reframing of enslaved women as leaders of slave uprisings in her chapter “‘Blood, fire, and freedom’: enslaved women and rebellion in nineteenth-century Cuba.”

Likewise, Nneka D. Dennie highlights three modes of Black women’s transnational abolitionism – slave revolts, the Black press, and the lecture circuit – in her chapter “Black women and Africana abolitionism.” Alternatively, Barbara McCaskill explores how late nineteenth-century African American women writers articulated new iterations of “Africa” alongside their own depictions of a respectable, emancipated Black womanhood in the chapter “Ethiopia’s woke women: the nineteenth century re-imagines Africa.” Maya Cunningham’s chapter, “Singing power/sounding identity: the Black woman’s voice from hidden Hush Arbors to the popular,” explores the legacy of Black women’s singing as a site of liberation, developed from the “Hush Arbors” of enslaved African Americans’ worship services, which remained hidden until after emancipation, with public performances from Harriet Tubman before progressive audiences, to the Fisk Jubilee singers who popularized Negro spirituals on their world tour during the late nineteenth century. Finally, Allison O. Ramsay’s “Jamettes, mas, and bacchanal” explores alternative forms of embodied performance and resistance among working-class Black women on the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. Called Jamettes, these women were instrumental in formulating the earliest cultural expressions of Trinidad’s Carnival during the late nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries through dance, masquerade, songs (that eventually became calypsos), stick-fighting, and street riots.

Part IV, “Cultural shifts, social change,” focuses on how women of African descent resisted the forces of colonialism, legal segregation, apartheid, and heteropatriarchy that unfolded during the late twentieth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. In her opening chapter, Lynne Ellsworth Larsen provides an historical overview of the royal women of Dahomey, in what is now present-day Benin, some of whom served as warriors and were popularized in the French colonial press and world fairs as “Dahomey Amazons.” A different royal woman is investigated in Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch’s chapter “Reframing Yaa Asantewaa through the shifting paradigms of African historiography,” which examines the histories told about Yaa Asantewaa (1840–1921), who fought against the British colonial forces that eventually occupied Ghana. Such anti-colonial resistance also finds a parallel in the Aba Women’s War of 1929 in Eastern Nigeria, as explored in Egodi Uchendu and Uche Okonkwo’s chapter on Igbo women’s resistance strategies against the British empire.

Beyond the African continent, women of African descent brought their resistance directly to Europe, as Claire Oberon Garcia examines in her chapter “Black women writers in early twentieth-century Paris,” which juxtaposes the writings of Antillean Negritude women like the sisters Paulette Nardal (1896–1985) and Jeanne Nardal (1900–93) and Suzanne Roussy Césaire (1915–66) with African American writers like Jessie Redmond Fauset (1882–1961) and Gwendolyn Bennett (1902–81). These women lived as either colonial subjects or expatriates in the city of Paris during the interwar years while they formed Black Diasporic identities. Likewise, Boyce-Davies interrogates such identities through “The transnational Black feminist
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politics of Claudia Jones,” a radical Black communist (1915–64) born in Trinidad, whose activism in Harlem, New York eventually led to her deportation during the McCarthy era. She settled in her later years in London during the Windrush generation, where she continued her pro-Black, feminist, and class-based community organizing.

Similarly, Grant explores the Black internationalism that developed between African American and South African women activists who set the stage for the respective twentieth-century civil rights and anti-apartheid movements. Finally, Jackson’s chapter questions why Pauli Murray (1910–85), Shirley Chisholm (1925–2004), and Marsha P. Johnson (1945–92) – who were instrumental, respectively, in such landmark events as the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the run for the U.S. presidency (1972), and the Stonewall uprising (1969) – eventually faded from history. She further argues that a Black queer feminist praxis can guard against this.

Part V, “Black identities, feminist formations,” is the concluding segment of this collection, which covers much of the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century and addresses the subjects of Black identity and feminist movements. The chapter “Traces of race, roots of gender: a genetic history” by M’charek examines three episodes in the development of genetics and the racial and gender politics of DNA, which link genetic root-seeking among those of African descent to the groundbreaking science that discovered “mitochondrial Eve” DNA, tracing the origins of humanity back to the African continent, and emerging from a sequence from the HeLa cell line, based on the cancer cells extracted from the body of Henrietta Lacks (1920–51), an African American woman from Baltimore, Maryland. This “triptych,” as M’charek calls her chapter, positions presumably Black female bodies at the literal “origins” of human history, which has repercussions for the constructions of Black identities and Black bodies. Meanwhile, Gaunt’s chapter “Is twerking African?” draws from the same intellectual premise, which seeks to de-essentialize ideas of Africanness, especially when attempting comparisons between different contemporary dance forms associated with Black women and girls, including the popular “twerk.” Contesting “biological” or “genetic arguments,” Gaunt instead focuses on ethnic diversity within the African Diaspora, how “situated knowledge” informs diverse dance forms, and also how modern technologies perpetuate Black women’s sexualization, which prompted cultural arguments for African universality in attempts at respectability. Exploring a different performance of identity is Valquíria Pereira Tenório and Flávia Alessandra de Souza’s chapter, “Sites of resistance: Black women and beauty in Black Brazilian communities of São Paulo and Bahia,” which looks at events such as the “Baile do Carmo,” an elegant ball in São Paulo, and the “Ebony Goddess” beauty pageant, launched by the Ilê Aiyê block of Salvador de Bahia, that promote Black aesthetics among communities in Brazil to counter anti-Black racism. Similar to Ilê Aiyê’s embrace of Candomblé, Elizabeth Pérez identifies Afro-Diasporic religion as a significant site for resistance and feminism, as explored in her chapter, “Hail to the chefs: Black women’s pedagogy, sacred kitchenspaces, and Afro-Diasporic religions,” which looks specifically at cooking and the space of kitchens as “Black Atlantic traditions [that] hold out myriad paths to serving the spirits, gods, and ancestors.”

A different legacy is analyzed in Gillespie’s chapter on the Black feminist literary renaissance, which offers an historical overview of the vibrant record of Black women’s literary productions since the arrival of African women in North America. Specifically, this renaissance experienced a flowering of Black women’s poetry, novels, plays, and essays during the 1970s and 1980s. At the heart of this literary explosion is the work of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (1931–2019) as both writer and editor, who oversaw several cultural works that contributed to this literary renaissance.

Such writings inevitably broke the silence on Black women’s experiences with sexual violence, which is the subject of Janell Hobson and Donna E. Young’s chapter “Black women,
sexual violence, and resistance in the United States.” Highlighting the legal and political battles of Mechelle Vinson and Anita Hill against sexual harassment, this chapter examines how African American women have collectively emerged as feminist leaders in the anti-violence movement. Finally, Gretchen Bauer’s closing chapter, “African women’s political leadership: global lessons for feminism,” analyzes the triumphs and challenges that African women face when assuming leadership positions in government and the implications for feminism moving forward, both on the continent and in other parts of the world.

If humanity began its journey on the African continent, it makes sense to end by contemplating the state of Africa’s future and how it might be shaped by women’s visions for leadership, community, and solidarity. A world that started with Black women must now center their lives if we are to continue as a global community. In the words of Farah Jasmine Griffin: “The world as we know it will end if it does not heed the insights of black feminism. Because black feminism has never only been about black women … It’s been about a more just world.”8 The vibrant history of Black women, which crosses continents and time periods, offers invaluable lessons on their concerted efforts at resistance to interlocking oppressions, their agency, and restorations of their humanity at every turn.

Notes

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