
Though we have seen books discussing women’s lives affected by the institution of slavery, this particular encyclopedia makes a wider range of information accessible to those interested in learning more about the everyday lives of enslaved women in the United States “in the period beginning with the first slave ships in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until the end of slavery in 1865” (xiii). This encyclopedia provides an important perspective regarding the institution of enslavement by purposefully focusing on the varied experiences of enslaved women. The editor and contributors acknowledge there is no one single experience of an enslaved person and especially not for bondwomen. This viewpoint is a welcome addition to the current field of historical gender studies which has only in recent decades started to work on moving away from defining the experiences of many with the description of only one.

Topics within the encyclopedia range from broad and large-scale entries, such as “Abolition,” “Civil War,” and “Motherhood,” to entries on specific women. The women included are both the well-known figures like Harriet Tubman and also those that the reader may not be familiar with by name, but their voices are an important part of the stories of enslaved women’s varied experiences. The editor’s comments in the introduction expand on this idea of inclusion and necessary expansion as a critique of past historians, stating, “a gendered analysis is not the only aspect of enslaved life that historians overlooked, as the variations between locations and crops were equally blurred so that the ‘typical slave’ lived on a large plantation in the Deep South” (xxi). The encyclopedia successfully meets the expectations the editor sets in the introduction that “in order to understand the complexities and nuances of daily life for enslaved women, one must delve into the diversity of their experiences” (xix). Additionally, the editor has taken great care to ensure that the language used throughout the encyclopedia does not reify stereotypes and objectification of the enslaved women; for example, using “enslaved women” rather than “slave” to show that the women were enslaved, an action forced upon them, rather than slave, a noun “that describes a social position these individuals presumably accepted” (xxi).

Entries throughout the volume are enhanced with quotes and black-and-white photographs from primary sources ranging from Library of Congress and historical archive collections of photographs and engravings to excerpts from various narratives, journals, and biographies. The excerpts are well-chosen quotes, poetry, and records that truly give the readers a vivid picture of the related entry. For example, included within the entry for “Slave Quarters, Life in” is a quote from a former bondwoman describing how a family lived in a one-room house and also a photograph of actual slave quarters. In addition to the inclusion of primary source material, the encyclopedia also includes an appendix with tables showing the population of enslaved women from 1750 to 1860, a selected bibliography, a complete alphabetical index, and a timeline chronicling enslaved women in America from 1526 to 1865. The encyclopedia is largely accessible to audiences ranging from secondary education to the university. In fact, the encyclopedia would be an excellent addition to any reference collection. For education institutions with programs in American History, American Ethnic Studies, or Women’s Studies, this encyclopedia should be a mandatory addition.—Mela Fritsch, Multicultural Librarian, Kansas State University Libraries, Manhattan, Kansas