
Rebecca Brueckmann*
Free University Berlin

From being labelled the East and West Coast’s “less-than-elegant-cousins” to representing America’s true “heartland,” the United States’ Midwest has been associated with various images. In the volume *Feminist Frontiers: Women Who Shaped the Midwest*, editor Yvonne J. Johnson and eleven contributors set out to add yet another piece to the mosaic: the idea of the Midwest as “a crucible for reform,” narrated through the lives of women who were invested in reformative ideas and activism (ix). Through eleven biographical essays, the book aims to explore “the unwritten histories of midwestern [sic] women” (ix) who lived variously between the 19th and 20th centuries. In doing so, *Feminist Frontiers* seeks “to demonstrate the economic, ethnic, and racial diversity of the Midwest, as well as the gender challenges faced by women” (ix).

The Midwest is defined as a region of twelve states, comprising Ohio and the Dakotas through Missouri and Kansas. Following the lives and careers of their protagonists, the essays focus on the specific ways these women negotiated their gender roles and pushed boundaries, whether by advocating diverse reformative ideas or participating in reformative activism in their states, such as Carry Nation’s crusade for temperance in Missouri and Kansas and Michigan’s Genora Dollinger’s efforts for unionisation in a sit-down strike against General Motors in 1937.

Referring to Lucy E. Murphy’s and Linda H. Venet’s volume *Midwestern Women: Work, Community and Leadership at the Crossroads*, published in 1997, *Feminist Frontiers* names the key areas of Midwestern women’s experiences and activism as religious affiliations, the establishment of educational institutions and women’s activism as one of the consequences of changing work patterns over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (xii-xiii).

---

*Rebecca Brueckmann is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of North American Studies (Freie Universitaet Berlin). She can be contacted at: brueckmann@gsnas.fu-berlin.de.*
Johnson contends that while not all of the women portrayed could be described as feminists defined by twenty-first century understanding, […] most of them were feminists in a broader sense, for they were committed to human rights as they understood them (ix-x).

Feminism is, therefore, equated with “the notion of a universally recognized belief in human equality” (x). However, the decidedly conservative belief system of some of the women featured in this volume puts a question mark behind *Feminist Frontiers*. The idea of “human equality” as a common denominator is seemingly contradicted by the slave-owning Missourian Mary Sibley (portrayed by Mary Ellen Rowe) who was also active in her church’s Colonization Society, or the nativist tendencies of Alice French and the Indiana War Mothers (presented by Elizabeth Cafer du Plessis) which formed during the First World War to support women’s fighting sons and which denied membership to stepmothers because of their lack of parental “ties of blood” (107). Furthermore, whereas agency is a vital part of feminism, it seems questionable as to whether every public action undertaken by women can be thought of as feminist, as the discrepancy between the book’s title and thesis of the Midwest as vital for Progressivism and the non-progressive actions of some of the women portrayed here seems to suggest.

Moreover, Maureen Wilt’s account of Esther Twente, who “pioneered the development of social work education at the University of Kansas” and represented the state at several White House conferences on the welfare of children (139), seems to equate Twente’s “nurturer” role, which led her to work seventeen-hour days for the Family Service Society, uncritically with feminism (140-143). Twente had many feminist accomplishments, including serving as chair of the Department of Social Work at the University of Kansas for fourteen years; thus, defining personal sacrifice as feminism and labelling activism as “nurturing” seem to perpetuate the notion of women’s community activism as extended family care and re-assigns Twente’s accomplishments to performing a mere maternal role. In light of this, the book would have profited from refraining to employ “feminism” as an umbrella term for every
biography, and some of the essays could have examined the ambivalences of gender roles, conservatism and feminism more profoundly.

Despite its intention to demonstrate the Midwest’s diversity, the volume falls short of uncovering unwritten stories by African Americans and Native Americans. Marcia Chatelaine’s biography of Chicago’s Amanda Berry Smith, who was born as a slave in 1837 and travelled the world as a missionary before becoming a pioneer for African American childcare in Illinois, is the only African American woman featured in this volume. Furthermore, Feminist Frontiers neglects the vital history of the Midwest’s Native American women. North Dakotan Linda Slaughter’s life, narrated by Barbara Handy-Marchello, gives a brief account of the protagonist’s developing attitudes towards Arikara and Lakota people through the eyes of a white middle-class wife joining her husband stationed at Fort Rice in the late nineteenth century. A more inclusive engagement with Midwestern women’s history would have done the region’s history more justice.

Feminist Frontiers is at its strongest when it uncovers unwritten details of Midwestern women’s history, offering interesting and detailed insights into the protagonists’ lives and points of view. The first essay of the volume, Jeffrey E. Smith’s portrayal of Frances Dana Gage, who is most prominently known for her account of Sojourner Truth’s speech “Aren’t I a Woman?” at the Akron Women’s Rights Convention in 1851, gives a broader picture of the abolitionist and women’s rights activist and creates a clearer image of a woman who dedicated her life to grassroots activism in rural communities, orating and writing columns on temperance and women’s rights, and truly challenging feminist frontiers.

Yvonne J. Johnson’s and Shari Bax’s final essay on Harriett Friedman Woods, who by 1976 was the second woman ever elected to the Missouri State Senate and a constant proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972, which has yet to be ratified by Missouri, reads like the implicit conclusion of the volume. Johnson and Bax state that

Wood’s political career was the twentieth-century culmination of the efforts made by most of the women in this book, whether they worked as Progressive activists, union organizers, or community leaders (175).
Ultimately, *Feminist Frontiers* achieves its goal in further contributing to the “unwritten history” of Midwestern women, unveiling untold stories and filling gaps in knowledge about women’s essential contributions to reform movements in the region. Notwithstanding, the book neglects the history of African Americans, Native Americans and race relations, and would have benefitted from a more nuanced definition and critical analysis of what it means to negotiate feminist frontiers.

---