

New Critical Viewpoints on Society



Women and Inequality in the 21st Century

Edited by
Brittany C. Slatton and Carla D. Brailey



Women and Inequality in the 21st Century draws from the best traditions of feminist scholar-activism, while reorienting focus toward topics and groups that to date have received less attention in the scholarship on gender inequality than is warranted, and indeed necessary. With chapters spanning a unique range of formats—from interviews with prominent gender scholars, to novel empirical studies and self-reflexive narratives—the text is at once accessible, theoretically nuanced, and highly engaging. Slatton and Brailey have generated an innovative volume from an incredible diversity of scholars addressing the many margins and complex positionalities that constitute contemporary womanhood today.

Jennifer Mueller, *Assistant Professor of Sociology and
Director of the Intergroup Relations Program, Skidmore College*



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WOMEN AND INEQUALITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Recent books have drawn attention to an unfinished gender revolution and the reversal of gender progress. However, this literature primarily focuses on gender inequality in the family and its effect on women's career and family choices. While an important topic, these works are critiqued for being particularly attentive to the concerns of middle-class, heterosexual, White women and ignoring or erasing the issues and experiences of the vast majority of women throughout the United States (and other countries).

Women and Inequality in the 21st Century is an edited collection that addresses this dearth in the current literature. This book examines the continued inequities navigated by women occupying marginalized social positions within a "nexus of power relations." It addresses the experiences of immigrant women of color, aging women, normative gender constraints faced by lesbian and gender non-conforming individuals assigned the female gender at birth, religious constraints on women's sexual expression, and religious and ethnic barriers impeding access to equality for women across the globe. Contributors to this collection reflect varying fields of inquiry—including sociology, psychology, theology, history, and anthropology. Their works employ empirical research methods, hermeneutic analysis, and narrative to capture the unique gender experiences and negotiations of diverse 21st-century women.

Brittany C. Slatton is Associate Professor of Sociology at Texas Southern University. Dr. Slatton's recent books include *Mythologizing Black Women* (2014) and *Hyper Sexual Hyper Masculine? Gender, Race, and Sexuality in the Identities of Contemporary Black Men* (2014). You can find her scholarly articles in journals such as *Sociology Compass*, *Socius*, and *Gender*. In 2017, she served as the prestigious Langston Hughes Visiting Professor at the University of Kansas.

Carla D. Brailey currently serves as Assistant Professor of Sociology at Texas Southern University. In addition to teaching and research, Dr. Brailey participates in New Leaders Council (NLC), Houston Chapter, serves as the Chair of KeyPac and on the Advisory Council for Sankofa Institute, and was recently selected for Leadership Houston's Class XXXIV. Dr. Brailey also served in the former Mayor Adrian Fenty's Cabinet as the Executive Director of Community Affairs and Senior Advisor for Religious Affairs for the District of Columbia.

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Carla D. Brailey*

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CONTRIBUTORS

Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi, is a lecturer with the University of Lagos, Faculty of Law, the National Coordinator of Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center (WARDC), is a former student leader and dedicated human rights defender, with specialization in gender and international human rights law. In recognition of her commitment and efforts on behalf of her fellow citizens, particularly women, the International League for Human Rights named her a recipient of the 1999 Defenders' Day Awards. Abiola, received the award at an impressive ceremony in New York City on December 9, 1999, the first anniversary of the United Nations Defenders Declaration. Abiola earned her Master's Degree in International Human Rights Law from the University of Notre Dame Law School, Center for Civil and Human Rights, Indiana, USA. Abiola has led several coalitions and has worked extensively on gender, human rights, law, democracy, and peace building, and has produced several research materials and publications on these areas. Abiola has also worked as a consultant to local and international organizations on several projects.

Rasha Aly is a graduate student with the University of Cincinnati's Sociology Department. Her dissertation focuses on how domestic violence shelter environments influence the identities of the women who live within them. She received her Master's Degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Cincinnati. She also has years of hands-on experience working as a domestic violence shelter advocate. In addition, she has also served as an instructor, teaching at the University of Cincinnati, Chatfield College, and Cincinnati State University.

Jacqueline F. Ballou graduated from Howard University's School of Divinity with a Master's Degree in Religious Studies with a concentration in Ethics. She also holds a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Duke University, the Fuqua School of Business where she was a Rollins Fellow, concentrating in Corporate Finance and Strategic Management. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University where

she graduated Salutatorian. She is also a Certified Public Accountant. Jacqueline has aspirations to one day obtain her Ph.D. in Christian/Social Ethics and become a professor and writer while continuing to give back to the community through focused efforts on the education and empowerment of young women of color.

Ellen Benoit is a sociologist and principal investigator at National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., in New York, NY. Her research is primarily qualitative and concerns HIV/STI risk and substance use in vulnerable populations, with a special interest in structural contexts of behavior. With Dr. Eloise Dunlap, she is a principal investigator on a study of substance use and HIV risk among heterosexual Black women with multiple partners, funded by the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Benoit's other work includes studies with behaviorally bisexual and high-risk heterosexual Black men and a critical-consciousness based intervention

Stephanie Campos has a Ph.D. in Anthropology from The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her dissertation, titled "‘Small Village/Large Hell’: Cocaine and Incarceration in Lima, Peru," explores the ways in which the Santa Monica women's prison in Lima both reflects and reconstructs intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender, and citizenship. She was awarded the Carolyn G. Heilbrun Dissertation Prize for the "outstanding feminist dissertation in the humanities" by the Women's Studies Certificate Program at The Graduate Center. Dr. Campos is an Investigator at National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., where she is receiving training support through the Supplements to Promote Diversity in Health-Related Research sponsored by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. She has also taught courses in Latin American studies, anthropology, sociology, and women's studies.

Rosalind S. Chou is a native of Florida, where her parents emigrated from Taiwan in the 1970s. She attended Florida State University earning a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology, and then spent six years working for Eckerd Youth Alternatives at Camp E-Nini-Hassee, a non-profit therapeutic wilderness camp for at-risk girls, before moving to Texas in 2005 for graduate school at Texas A&M University. She co-authored the book, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, in 2008 with Joe R. Feagin, and published the second edition in 2014. She completed her Ph.D. in Sociology with an emphasis on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in May 2010, and then was the 2010–11 Samuel Dubois Cook Postdoctoral Fellow at Duke University. She is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Georgia State University and her second book, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender,*

and *Sexuality*, was published in 2012 by Rowman and Littlefield. Her third book, *Asian Americans on Campus*, was published in August 2015.

Colleen Denney is Professor of Art History in the Gender and Women's Studies Program at the University of Wyoming, where she teaches courses on visual activism, gender and the humanities, Victorian Women, and the History of Women Artists, among others. Her research specializes in representations of women, including *Representing Diana, Princess of Wales* (Associated University Press, 2005) and *Women, Portraiture and the Crisis of Identity in Victorian England: My Lady Scandalous Reconsidered* (Ashgate, 2009). She has twice been named "Top Prof" at her university, is past Director of her program, has received her university's Seibold Fellowship, and also has held a Yale Center for British Art Fellowship.

Melissa K. Ochoa Garza is a Sociology doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Her main focus is race and gender; her advisors are Dr. Joe Feagin and Dr. Jane Sell. She has a Women's and Gender Studies certificate from Texas A&M University. She graduated from Purdue University, West Lafayette in 2009 for her undergraduate degrees, Psychology, and Public Relations and Rhetorical Advocacy. Melissa's research seeks to understand the contexts in which sexism is experienced among different racial groups and genders through daily interactions. Melissa's research connects the micro-level displays of power in gender to a larger, oppressive system. Systemic forms of sexism have continued for thousands of years ensuring women's lower status in society, although these forms have varied throughout time and culture. She is specifically looking to understand the normalization of sexism by studying not just the contexts, but also investigating which actors embrace, perpetuate, and contribute to these sexist frames and the ways in which they do it.

Daniella Graves has had seven years of experience in higher education administration and instruction. She is currently an Academic Dean at a business college in southern California, and teaches courses in Sociology, Leadership, and Management. Daniella earned her Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. She earned both a B.A. and M.A. in Sociology from UCLA and the California State University at Northridge, respectively. Her research interests include gender norms, social constructionism, and leadership, and her dissertation explored the social construction of women's leadership identity.

Elizabeth Gregory directs the Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies Program at the University of Houston, where she is a Professor of English. Her research interests include 20th-century poetry and the intersection of fertility and women's work in contemporary life. Both strands of her

work explore issues of aging. Her books include *Ready: Why Women Are Embracing the New Later Motherhood*; *Quotation and Modern American Poetry: "Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads"* and two edited collections. She is now completing projects on the later poetry of Marianne Moore, on the lack of "School/Work Synchrony" and its effect on gender dynamics, and on the interactions of fertility and work in the US economy. Her blog, *Domestic Product: Later Motherhood & the Politics & Economics of Women's Work*, is online at www.domesticproduct.net.

Chien-Juh Gu is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Western Michigan University. She specializes in gender, social psychology, and immigration. Gu has received numerous awards and grants. She is the first winner of the Gender Scholar Award at WMU. She has also received, among other recognitions, the Junior Scholar Grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and the Faculty Research and Creative Activities Award from WMU. On students' nomination, she received a 2015–16 College of Arts and Sciences' Faculty Achievement Award in Teaching, and a 2016–17 College of Arts and Sciences' Faculty Achievement Award in Research and Creative Activity.

Erin Heisler recently graduated from the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota with a Master of Arts in English. She currently works in online communications at the Children's Home Society of Minnesota. Erin's passion for feminist activism was ignited when she first performed in *The Vagina Monologues* in 2004. Since then, she has been constantly considering the ways in which activists can be empowered and newly engaged citizens can be called into action. In 2014, she was awarded the Luann Dummer Center for Women's Graduate Research Fellowship to support her research in online feminism.

Dresden N. Lackey is a first-generation doctoral student at Georgia State University. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and Sociology at Appalachian State University, and her Master of Science degree in Applied Psychology at the University of Baltimore. Prior to beginning her studies at Georgia State, Dresden worked for the National Institute of Health, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Baltimore. Her current research interests include racial and gender microaggressions, social stratification, and Asian American oppression. When she is not conducting academic research, Dresden volunteers with the House Rabbit Society.

Martin J. Leahy has 30 years' experience as an organizational and leadership consultant and is Professor, Ph.D. Organizational Leadership Program, at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. He serves on the school's Academic Affairs Leadership Council, The President's Council, and is Chair of the National Faculty Council, representing faculty at all

four campuses. He has taught leadership and qualitative research methods to doctoral students since 2003. Dialogue (Buber, Rogers) is his area of practice, research, and writing; he advocates a relational approach to leadership and research methods. He serves on the boards of the American Catholic Council and the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia.

Alexandra C. H. Nowakowski is an Assistant Professor of Geriatrics and Behavioral Sciences at the Florida State University College of Medicine. Dr. Nowakowski's work examines the experience and management of chronic health conditions across the life course. Using mixed methods and diverse literatures, Nowakowski explores how people age with, and adjust to, persistent health challenges.

Candace Nunag Tardío is Trotter Multicultural Center's Operations and Event Coordinator and joined the team in February 2018. Candace holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Affairs from the University of Colorado Boulder, as well as Master of Social Sciences degree in Women's and Gender Studies from the University of Colorado Denver. Prior to working at the University of Michigan, Candace worked as a Multicultural Program Coordinator at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Dean Ohmsford is a trans man and Allen S. Wilber Scholar from the University of Kansas, where he graduated with a B.G.S. in Sociology with a minor in Psychology. His focus as a doctoral student is on the construction of identity, with interests in gender, race and ethnicity, surveillance, and critical theory. Previous research includes a sociological examination of the use of achieved versus ascribed identity on social media, and its effects on at-risk populations, and a study of the ways in which transgender and cisgender women buy into, or reject, feminine norms. He is currently exploring TSA agents' thoughts and feelings on their use of biometric surveillance devices to screen air travelers, with a focus on their interpretations of the screening process. Outside of academia, Dean's interests include drawing, hiking, writing fiction, performing in a darkwave band, and taking entirely too many pictures of his cat.

Kimberly Brown Pellum maintains an ongoing mission to help people accurately understand their place in American history and the world. With a doctoral degree in United States history earned at Howard University, she has worked as a Multicultural Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History. The Montgomery Improvements Association (founders of the famed 1955 Bus Boycott) and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute are among a number of groups and organizations that have called upon her leadership and expertise to guide community-based preservation projects, commemorative programs, and educational initiatives. For two consecutive years, she served the United Negro College Fund as both moderator and panelist

CONTRIBUTORS

for its nationwide “Empower Me Tour.” She has made presentations for the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, the Baylor College of Medicine Office of Institutional Diversity, as well as the American Historical Association’s Texas Conference on Introductory History Courses. She is the author of two history books for children, founder of the non-profit Education Like Me and was recently promoted graduate faculty at Texas Southern University where she teaches courses in US, African American, and Women’s History.

Susan Rasmussen, Professor of Anthropology within the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Houston, has conducted field research in rural and urban Tuareg communities of northern Niger and Mali and among African immigrants in France. Her interests include religion, healing and healing specialists, possession, gender, aging and the life course, verbal art performance, and African humanities. She has written a number of articles and five books. Her published authored books include *Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg*, *The Poetics and Politics of Tuareg Aging*, *Healing in Community*, *Those Who Touch: Tuareg Medicine Women in Anthropological Perspective*, and *Neighbors, Strangers, Witches, and Culture-Heroes: Ritual Powers of Smith/Artisans in Tuareg Society and Beyond*. Current projects include a book manuscript on urban Tuareg play performances in northern Mali and manuscripts on conversion experiences among Kabyle in France.

Sarah V. Suiter, Ph.D., M.S., is an Assistant Professor of the Practice in Human and Organizational Development, and the Director of the Community Development and Action M.Ed. program at Vanderbilt University. Prior to coming to Vanderbilt, Dr. Suiter was a Senior Program Evaluator at Centerstone Research Institute. Dr. Suiter received her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Community Research & Action, and completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for Spirituality, Theology & Health at Duke University Medical Center. Dr. Suiter’s work engages community-based responses to promoting human health and well-being. She has conducted community-based research with health and human development organizations around the globe, including PRODEPINE in Ecuador; Casa de Galilea in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Magdalene House in Nashville, Tennessee; Southlight in Raleigh, North Carolina, and two federally funded System of Care sites in central Tennessee. Dr. Suiter’s first book, *Magdalene House: A Place About Mercy*, was published in 2012.

Kesslyn Brade Stennis, M.S.W., M.Div., Ph.D., serves as the current Chair of the Department of Social Work at Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland, Director of the Dorothy Height Center for the Advancement of Social Justice and is the first African American female

Board President for the North American Association of Christians in Social Work. She has published in several peer-reviewed journals and been a reviewer, editorial consultant and/or guest editor for journals including *Social Work*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Social Work and Christianity*, *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work*, and *Journal of Family Violence*. She has also worked on various violence-related and community-based grant projects associated with Oakwood University, Georgetown University, Howard University and Coppin State University.

J. E. Sumerau is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Tampa, Florida. Dr. Sumerau's teaching and research focuses on the intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health in the historical and interpersonal experiences of sexual, gender, and religious minorities. For publications to date and teaching materials, see www.jsumerau.com. To date, Sumerau's work has focused on, for example, the experiences of Christian sexual minorities, gender and sexualities in Mormonism, gender and sexual health disparities; and transgender religious experience. Zir work has been published in many books and journals, including but not limited to *Gender & Society*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Sexualities*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Men and Masculinities*, *Sociology of Religion*, *Sociological Spectrum* and *Journal of Sex Research*.

Omar Swartz (Ph.D., Purdue University, 1995; J.D., Duke University, 2001, magna cum laude) is Associate Professor and Director of the Master of Social Science program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado Denver, where he has also coordinated the Law Studies minor for the past twelve years. His primary areas of research and teaching are law and diversity, mass media law and policy, cultural criticism, and philosophical problems in the social sciences. Specifically, his work focuses on the intersections between the US legal system, the history of social injustice and intellectual intolerance in the United States. He is the author or editor of twelve books and nearly a hundred essays, book chapters, and reviews.

Arthur L. Whaley is an independent consultant in research design/program evaluation. He received a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Rutgers University in 1986 and a Dr.P.H. in Epidemiology from Columbia University in 2000. He has been a professor or research scientist at several institutions of higher education over the past 25 years. Dr. Whaley also was a community mental health practitioner working with children, adolescents, and their families in poor communities of New York City. He was a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation and the recipient of the National Alliance of Research on Schizophrenia and Depression (NARSAD) Young Investigator Award. His research involves the study of the role of cultural and cognitive factors in the

CONTRIBUTORS

etiology, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders in ethnic/racial populations, with a particular focus on African Americans.

Evelyn B. Winfield-Thomas is the Executive Director of Institutional Equity and Special Assistant to the President at Western Michigan University (WMU) where she has worked for the last 15 years. She also holds rank and tenure as an associate professor at WMU and is a licensed clinical psychologist in Michigan. Dr. Winfield-Thomas earned a B.A. degree in Psychology from Dillard University, a M.A. degree in Psychology from the University of Northern Iowa, and a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. For the past five years, she has focused her efforts on developing partnerships and organizational capacity to lead campus climate and strategic diversity change initiatives in higher education. Her primary research interest is the impact of sociocultural factors and experiences on identity development, behavior, and well-being, with a primary focus on African American/Black women.



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INTRODUCTION

Inequality and the Complex Positionalities of 21st-Century Women

Brittany C. Slatton and Carla D. Brailey

The gender revolution resulted in women having access to birth control, employment opportunities in male-dominated jobs, greater access to college education and political office, legal bans on gender discrimination in the workplace, and a host of other changes since the 1960s.¹ However, change in the “gender system has been uneven—affecting some groups more than others and some arenas of life more than others.”² Social inequities intersect to “create complex positionalities” for women within a society’s social power relations.³ Thus, women have varying experiences of oppression and dominance,⁴ barriers and access. In the fight for equality and democracy, cisgender, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class White women have been and continue to be the primary beneficiaries of privileges and rights gained by the women’s rights movement and via existing racist and heterosexist social structures. Marginalized groups of women have experienced much slower progress because they were excluded from the early fight for democratic change and because privileges for dominant groups—such as access to outsourced care work—often come at their expense.⁵ However, all women in the 21st century—to different degrees and within varying contexts—continue to encounter barriers to full democratic inclusion and equality.

A review of recent data illustrates a series of setbacks in pertinent areas integral to women’s full access to rights and opportunities in society. At least nine states have passed the “Abortion Insurance Opt-Out Act” which bans all public and most private insurance plans from covering abortion—even for women pregnant due to incest or rape.⁶ Federal policy changes under the Trump administration bolster states’ ability to defund Planned Parenthood, an act that disproportionately limits access to reproductive and preventative health care for women who are low income, living in rural areas, and/or women of color.⁷ Despite technological advancements, the United States has the highest rate of maternal death of all industrialized countries. Particularly atrocious is that African American women are a staggering 243 percent more likely to die due to pregnancy- and childbirth-related issues than White women, a disparity that holds

even when education and socioeconomic status are accounted for.⁸ The gender wage gap continues to threaten women's economic opportunities. A recent study finds women workers must have an additional academic degree to earn the same salary as men.⁹ Similarly, women lag behind men in the ownership of assets, a gender wealth gap that is particularly shaped by race. While single white women have a median wealth of \$41,500, single Black and Hispanic women have a median wealth of only \$100 and \$120 respectively.¹⁰

Perhaps the ascension of Mr. Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States best illustrates the systemic nature of gender inequality. He has a long history of judging women's physical appearance, criticizing women when they do or say something he disagrees with, and upholding the system of patriarchy. To give a few examples, Mr. Trump blamed sexual assault in the military on cohabitation, stated women who get abortions should be punished (although he later recanted this statement), and contended that Mrs. Hillary Clinton would be incapable of satisfying the country because she is incapable of satisfying her husband.¹¹ Most egregious are the accusations of sexual assault and harassment against Mr. Trump.¹² Speaking to former *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush in a 2005 audio, he admitted that because of his celebrity he can do anything to women: "I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss, I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything."¹³ Several women have come forward alleging Mr. Trump indeed kissed or grabbed them without consent. Mr. Trump's status as President sanctions his behavior at the highest office in the country, making his election a most important contemporary representation of the stall in women's access to equality.¹⁴

Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), Paula England's "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled" (2010), and Ann-Marie Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" (2012) and *Unfinished Business: Men, Work, Family* (2016) are recent influential works that have importantly drawn attention to an unfinished gender revolution and the reversal of gender progress. While these works are integral in bringing attention to continued gender inequality, there is still much to be learned about the inequities experienced by diverse women in society. The aforementioned literature primarily focuses on gender inequality in the family and its effect on women's career and family choices. While an important topic, these works¹⁵ are critiqued for being particularly attentive to the concerns of middle-class, heterosexual, white women and ignoring or erasing the issues and experiences of the vast majority of women throughout the United States (and other countries).¹⁶ A volume of work on the continued inequities navigated by women occupying marginalized social positions within a "nexus of power relations"¹⁷ reflects a dearth in the current literature.

INTRODUCTION

Women and Inequality in the 21st Century addresses this gap by featuring topics currently limited in the gender inequality literature. This book examines the experiences of immigrant women of color, aging women, normative gender constraints faced by lesbian and gender non-conforming individuals assigned the female gender at birth, religious constraints on women's sexual expression, and religious and ethnic barriers impeding access to equality for Nigerian and North African Kabyle women, amongst other topics. Contributors reflect varying fields of inquiry—including sociology, psychology, theology, history, and anthropology. Their works employ empirical research methods, hermeneutic analysis, and narrative to capture the unique gender experiences and negotiations of 21st-century women.

The organizational structure of *Women and Inequality* was developed to address several key concerns including the limited democracy in which diverse women live, key arguments/critiques in women's inequality, the inequitable terrain women negotiate, its psychosocial effects, and the resistance and activism strategies employed by women and their allies. The book is divided into five parts. Each part begins with a Gender Scholar Spotlight feature, where established and up-and-coming scholars in the field of women and gender studies completed interviews that address several key issues, theories, and approaches within their field.¹⁸ These interviews showcase the work of gender/women's studies scholars, underscore the importance of this type of research, and present pertinent topics for future research in the field.

Part I, "An Unrealized Democracy," introduces readers to the ways in which intersecting systemic inequalities historically and presently preclude women from full democratic realization. Brown-Pellum starts this collection off by examining how deeply racialized and sexualized American-made images of women uphold white supremacy and capitalism. She provides a historical context for how American labor, politics, and entertainment manipulate and exploit women's images in ways that obstruct them from securing full equality. In Chapter 2, Swartz and Nunag-Hicks connect historical legal doctrine grounded in difference to women's contemporary experiences of inequality. This chapter illustrates the breadth of gender discrimination and problematizes postfeminist arguments. In Chapter 3, Gregory illustrates how patriarchy and racism shape who has access to economic and civic power to define how paid and unpaid work is assigned and what work is valued and compensated in society.

Part II, "Negotiating Inequitable Terrain," gives specific examples of women's everyday experiences of inequality and the ways in which their complex positionalities shape the type of inequality they encounter. Chapter 4 begins with Garza's examination of systemic sexism. Collecting and analyzing journal entries of detailed accounts, stories, or daily events experienced by women of various racial/ethnic backgrounds,

Garza finds men's everyday interactions with women reproduce gender inequality and perpetuate discrimination against women. In Chapter 5, Gu relies on 45 life-history interviews with middle-class Taiwanese immigrant women to examine how they navigate everyday encounters of discrimination and negotiate their American identity. Chapter 6, by Lackey and Chou, examines the types of harassment experienced by queer and gender non-conforming women. Drawing on in-depth interviews, they present data on dimensions of familial approval and disapproval in respondents' identities as queer women and their experiences of gender-conforming expectations. Building on Lackey and Chou's work, Omshford provides a personal narrative in Chapter 7 that details unique forms of discrimination experienced by a gender non-conforming individual assigned the female gender at birth. Attention is given to the ways in which hegemonic gender norms are maintained through surveillance and gatekeepers. In Chapter 8, Graves and Leahy examine how women organizational leaders negotiate societal gender expectations in their presentation of self and impression-management strategies. This part ends with a chapter on diasporic North African Kabyle people's use of religion to negotiate gender constructs and relations between men and women.

Part III, "Psychosocial Effects of Inequality," examines the effects of inequality on women's mental and emotional well-being and social functioning in society. Chapter 10 addresses Whaley and Winfield-Thomas' investigation of "hair stress," which they define as the physical and mental health correlates of unnatural hair care and styling practices among African American women. Their findings suggest a health cost to African American women who reject their natural hair and emulate Eurocentric standards of beauty. In Chapter 11, Sumerau and Nowakowski explore the obligation to have sexual intercourse among older women. Drawing on nationally representative data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project, the authors capture feelings of sexual obligation as well as the ways such feelings vary in relation to social factors. They find that arthritis may be deeply related to gendered experiences of such pressures in later life and that significant variations arise in relation to respondent's racial, class, age, and ability statuses. This part ends with Brade-Stennis and Aly's chapter on the impact of identity and stigma on domestic violence survivors.

In Part IV, "Key Debates in Women's Inequality," authors problematize key arguments and practices restricting women's rights and freedoms, and propose possibilities for women's potential liberation. Ballou's chapter, "Is there Liberation for the Single, Saved, and Sexually Repressed?" opens this part. She employs a womanist biblical hermeneutic to analyze scriptures used by many Christian Churches to repress unmarried women's sexual desires and condemn their sexual behavior outside of marriage. Her examination offers an interesting debate on the interpretation of scriptural text by the

early Christian Church and is particularly concerned about what these texts mean for African American Christian women because of their increasing improbability of marriage. In Chapter 14, Suiter explores current debates around sex work through the lenses of three feminist political theories of freedom in an attempt to understand the ways in which inequalities related to gender, race, class, and sexuality express and perpetuate themselves for women who trade sex for money. And in Chapter 15, Akiyode-Afolabi examines how conflicting religious and ethnic positions in Nigeria pose a threat to the acceptance of women's human rights protocols.

The chapters in the final part, "Pushing Back: Resistance and Activism," illustrate women's active resistance strategies, assess current forms of activism, and propose techniques for improving the established ways in which women *push back*. In Chapter 16, Campos and Benoit examine sexual assertiveness among Black women as a form of resistance to limited means of social mobility and cultural images that emphasize control over their sexuality. They contend that while these women's experiences may not portend structural changes, their stories reject victimization and highlight their power and agency. Chapter 17, "Raise Your Banner High! Mounting a Take Back the Night Event," Denney provides an example of feminist service learning and civic engagement among college students. Denney uses this service learning project as a tool to teach students about women's historic activism. Lastly, in Chapter 18, Hiesler employs Nancy Fraser's theory of justice to argue that Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is unsuccessful in combatting women's oppression—which it successfully brings attention to—because it silences the voices of marginalized women. Hiesler contends an intersectional approach that explores the ways in which women are simultaneously oppressed by racism, capitalism, gender binarism, and nationalism can develop the play into a tool with the potential for ending gender violence for all women.

Notes

- 1 Paula England, "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled," *Gender & Society* 24 (2010): 149–166.
- 2 England, "The Gender Revolution," 149–166.
- 3 Laura Dean, Rachel Tolhurst, Renu Khanna, and Kate Jehan, "'You're Disabled, Why Did You have Sex in the First Place?' An Intersectional Analysis of Experiences of Disabled Women with Regard to their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Gujarat State, India," *Global Health Action* 10 (2017): 1.
- 4 Dean et al., "You're Disabled," 1.
- 5 Catherine Rottenberg, "Neoliberal Feminism and the Future of Human Capital," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 329–348.
- 6 Nicki Rossoll, "9 States Where You Might Need 'Abortion Insurance'" *ABC News*, December 13, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/states-abortion-insurance/storu?id=21197679>
- 7 Jessie Hellman, "Trump Administration Rescinds Obama Guidance on Defunding Planned Parenthood," *The Hill*, January 19, 2017, www.google.com/

- amp/thehill.com/policy/healthcare/369723-trump-administration-rescinds-guidance-protecting-planned-parenthood%3famp
- 8 Nina Martin, "Black Mothers Keep Dying After Giving Birth. Shalon Irving's Story Explain Why," *NPR*, December 7, 2017, www.npr.org/2017/12/07/568948782/black-mothers-keep-dying-after-giving-birth-shalon-irvings-story-explains-why
 - 9 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Artem Gulish, "Women Can't Win: Despite Making Educational Gains and Pursuing High-Wage Majors, Women Still Earn Less than Men," *Georgetown University*, accessed April 18, 2018, https://cew-7632.kxcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/Women_FR_Web.pdf
 - 10 Mariko Change and Meizhu Lui, "Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth, and America's Future," *Insight*, accessed, April 18, 2018, www.mariko-chang.com/LiftingAsWeClimb.pdf
 - 11 Claire Cohen, "Donald Trump Sexism Tracker: Every Offensive Comment in One Place," *Telegraph*, July 14, 2017, www.google.com/amp/s/www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/donald-trump-sexism-tracker-every-offensive-comment-in-one-place/amp/
 - 12 Jeremy Diamond and Daniella Diaz, "Trump on Sexual Assault Allegations: I am a Victim," *CNN*, October 15, 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/10/14/politics/donald-trump-sexual-assault-allegations/index.html
 - 13 David A. Fahrenthold, "Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9168a6d28e25
 - 14 It should be noted that White women were instrumental in Trump's election. Fifty-three percent of White women voted for Mr. Trump. Whereas 94 percent of Black women and 68 percent of Latina women voted for Mrs. Clinton. According to certain arguments, this disparity is due to some White women seeking to sustain privileges derived from the existing patriarchal system for themselves, their husbands, and their children and because they do not view the concerns of other racial/ethnic/religious groups of women as their own. See Phoebe Lett, "White Women Voted Trump. Now What," *New York Times*, November 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/opinion/white-women-voted-trump-now-what.html; also see Laura Morgan Roberts and Robin J. Ely, "Why Did So Many White Women Vote for Donald Trump?" *Fortune*, November 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/11/17/donald-trump-women-voters-election/>
 - 15 This critique is particularly so for the works of Sandberg and Slaughter.
 - 16 Catherine Rottenberg, "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 418–437; Rottenberg, "Neoliberal Feminism," 329–348.
 - 17 Dean et al., "You're Disabled," 1.
 - 18 The Gender Scholar Spotlight Feature and the interview questions derive from the excellent Spotlight on Research feature in Mindy Stomblor, Dawn M. Baunach, Wendy Simonds, Elroi J. Windsor, and Elisabeth O. Burgess (eds.), *Sex Matters: The Sexuality & Society Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

Part I

AN UNREALIZED DEMOCRACY

GENDER SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT: INTERVIEW WITH AMRITA CHAKRABARTI MYERS

Amrita Chakrabarti Myers is Ruth N. Halls Associate Professor of History and Gender Studies at Indiana University. She earned her doctorate in US History from Rutgers University and has been the recipient of several awards for scholarship, teaching, and activism, including a 2017 fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, the 2012 Julia Cherry Spruill Book Prize from the Southern Association of Women Historians, and the 2016 Martin Luther King, Jr. Building Bridges Award from Indiana University. Her first book, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston*, was published in 2011. Myers is currently writing her second book, *Remembering Julia: A Tale of Sex, Race, Power, and Place*.

What led you to begin studying women's inequality?

I began studying women's inequality because of the gender dynamics I witnessed growing up in my own household. While both my parents worked long hours outside the home, and my mother earned more money than my father did after a certain point, she was still expected to perform all the domestic labor inside the home . . . simply because she was a woman. Whereas my father came home from work and sat in his easy chair, watching TV while waiting for dinner to be served, my mother came home after work and began preparing our dinner. These types of scenarios frustrated me as a child, and shaped my early interest in gender inequities.

How have your lived experiences shaped your research interests?

Growing up as a woman of color with immigrant parents in a predominantly White nation deeply shaped my research interests. I always felt like

an outsider, both at home and at school and work. At home, I was daily chastised for being “too western” in my thoughts and behaviors, while out in the real world, my Canadian-ness was always in question because of the color of my skin and my “unusual” name. It is no surprise, then, that I gravitated towards studying Black women’s history. The field gave me a better understanding of my own history, provided me with the language to name the things that happened to me and around me, and explained my constant feelings of being an outsider, or what W.E.B. DuBois called “double consciousness.”

In your opinion, what scholarly works have been most impactful in your research on women and inequality?

The scholarly works that I found, and still find, most impactful in my own work on Black women include Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Darlene Clark Hine’s *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History*, Tera W. Hunter’s *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War*, and Stephanie Camp’s *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Resistance in the Plantation South*.

What has been most challenging about your field of work?

My field of work has presented me with several challenges. It meant leaving my home, family, friends, and country, for starters, and moving to the United States, first to attend graduate school and then, eventually, to pursue my career. It currently means extensive time away from home to do archival research in various facilities around the nation, an endeavor both costly and tiring. The kind of work I do takes a long time (I have been doing research on my new book on and off since 2010), real patience, and willingness to pursue every lead and not leave any stone unturned. It is definitely not for those looking for quick finishes and regular pats on the back.

Why is your work on women important?

I believe my work on women is important because it brings Black women to the center of US history. Not only does this reshape the narrative of our history and bring us closer to the “truth” of what happened, and what role people of color played in building this nation, it also gives young Black girls and boys a real sense of pride when they see their ancestors’ stories and voices in our history books. This makes them feel like they belong here, that they are a part of this nation, and that they, too, can help to move us forward and make this country a better place. I also believe that without

historical context, we simply cannot comprehend what is happening in the world around us. In order to understand our current political moment, we must understand the path that brought us here. Black women's history is this fundamental to understanding current, critical issues including the existence of rape culture, state-sanctioned violence against people of color, generational poverty, and more.

Which scholar(s) (and why) has been most influential in developing your perspective?

The scholar that I think has been most influential in developing my perspective on race and gender inequality is Kimberlé Crenshaw. Her pioneering work on, and coining the term, "intersectionality" is foundational to how I think and write about Black women, and how I understand the structural inequities I see around me in the very fabric of this nation. I also admire her for being both a scholar and an activist and am trying to follow in her footsteps as best I can.

What theoretical approach best guides your research?

My research is guided by a blend of theoretical approaches, particularly those of social history, Black feminist theory à la bell hooks, and critical race theory via Kimberlé Crenshaw and others.

What pedagogical approaches have you found most effective when teaching on women and inequality?

Over fifteen years of full-time teaching, I have found that small-group work is the most effective way to help students come to grips with issues of gender and race inequality and truly absorb, retain, and understand the material. I assign readings, provide contextual information via short lectures, and then have students work through each reading as a group, guided by pre-set discussion questions. We then come back together as a large class to address any confusions or questions that arose during small group time. While this method requires much more from the students, and from me, the result is papers that reflect a deeper and more nuanced understanding of women and issues of inequality than simple rote memorization.

In your opinion, what are the most pertinent issues facing the women in your area of research today?

The most important issues facing Black women in the US today are sexual assault, domestic violence, HIV-AIDS, drug addiction, state-sanctioned police violence, systemic poverty, and a lack of access to quality health care. All of

these problems are bolstered by a national, stereotyped image of Black women as loud, angry, ugly, lazy, unintelligent, gold-digging, amoral, hypersexual Jezebels who are bad mothers, an image crafted during slavery and continually reinforced through to the present by the media, educational structures, and popular culture.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST OF INEQUALITY

A Historical Synopsis of Women's Images as Barriers in American Labor, Politics, and Entertainment

Kimberly Brown Pellum

“The stronger women became politically, the heavier the ideals of beauty would bear down on them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress.” Naomi Wolf, feminist writer and former advisor to President Bill Clinton, published this poignant observation in her sociological critique *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (Wolf 1990). Wolf’s text assists in recognizing the beauty ideal, together with its unattainability, as a political apparatus designed to tighten around the necks of women as they advance in society. Consequently, as recent years have extended new privileges and higher platforms to women, the chokehold of the beauty ideal and its oppressive disadvantages have in many ways intensified for the contemporary woman. As evidence of the severity of the phenomenon, Wolf points to the long-lasting and rapidly expanding dieting industry, an increased number of women who undergo elective surgery for facial and body enhancements, and those with eating disorders that have led to death (Wolf 1990).

Ironically, feminist scholar bell hooks, once named Wolf a symbolic beneficiary of America’s racially driven and size-sensitive beauty caste. hooks remarked, “[As a White woman,] Naomi Wolf is allowed to be both intellectual and sexy. Whenever a Black woman is attractive and sexy, she must be a whore” (Trescott 1999). Today, even as a renowned African American author, hooks remains convinced that publishers and audiences perceive her very differently from Wolf, as a consequence of her image first and then perhaps the content of her writings. Negative perceptions lead to palpable challenges, professional and otherwise, not just for hooks, but for women from all walks of life. The phenomenon is not new, but rather carries origins in the nation’s founding. In fact, critics of Wolf’s work found her challenging of the beauty ideal “not only

unfeminine but almost un-American” (Wolf 1990). This chapter provides historical context essential to explicating how a general public could arrive at such a limiting conclusion and how femininity and American identity became so intricately linked. It will also integrate and expand hooks’s argument that American-made images are deeply racialized and sexualized for the purpose of upholding both White supremacy and capitalism. Finally, it will succinctly consult the spheres of American labor, politics, and entertainment in which women’s images, and the manipulation and exploitation thereof, have obstructed them from securing full equality since the formation of the United States until now.

hooks’s *Black Looks: Race and Representation* summarizes, “From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (hooks 1992: 7). Indeed, early America’s constitutional structure and economic livelihood rested on racial domination, and history proves the entire system was framed by patriarchy. Thomas Jefferson, and similarly minded White men, inserted these constructs into their crafting of the Declaration of Independence, which states, “All men are created equal,” but offers no consideration to women. According to historian Kenneth Hafertepe, Jefferson’s “aesthetic theory was informed by his understanding of the human mind” (Hafertepe 2000: 216–231). In Jefferson’s only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1781, he broadcast his thoughts on “the circumstance of superior beauty” (Jefferson 1787). He identified color as a primary factor in distinguishing value between the races. He designated Europeans’ “flowing hair and more elegant symmetry of form” as reasoning for what he believed was Africans’ “own judgment in favor of the whites, declared by their preference of them.” Jefferson stretched his beauty hypothesis further, stating that there existed a “preference of the orangutan for the Black women over those of his own species” (Jefferson 1787). Although it is a ludicrous assertion meant to equate African women with animals, acceptance of the image itself was critical in enforcing and standardizing breeding norms at the expense of Black women for the purpose of driving the nation’s principal moneymaker: slavery. Even those founding fathers such as John Adams, who avoided direct ownership of Africans, led efforts normalizing these ideas. In 1765, Adams had written that God had never intended the American colonies “for Negroes . . . and therefore never intended us for slaves” (Hine et al. 2007: 7). The textbook *African American Odyssey* contends, “Jefferson, Adams, and other Patriot leaders were so convinced that Black people could not claim the same rights as white people, they felt no need to qualify their words proclaiming universal liberty” (Hine et al. 2007: 73). Jefferson commented, “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Jefferson 1787). His inclusion of the “body” is of sobering importance as a marker

for establishing White superiority, since the “mind” in many circumstances might prove more difficult to substantiate as a European advantage. Here, the body operates as an easily readable visual aid to hierarchal ideology.

The most impolite deliberations on beauty and ugliness, such as those in Jefferson’s *Notes* that likened some women to monkey species, stress the female gender, which literally leaves *men free*. While assigning African women to the lowest end of ugliness and White women to the highest end of beauty, White men altogether escaped serious unwarranted societal ridicule and constant critique, and instead experienced the privilege of upward mobility without those handicaps. As for White women in both colonial and antebellum America, they found themselves confined by men’s manufacturing and regulation of their image too. Men regularly projected both their idealistic aesthetic, sexual, and behavioral expectations for women into public discourse. In 1789, a male essayist proclaimed modesty “adds charms to their beauty and gives a new softness to their sex” (Norton 1980: 112). Another postulated, “When a woman loses her native modesty . . . she loses all her charms, she loses all her virtue, and is undone forever” (Norton 1980: 112). Such severe cautions burdened women to chase perfection lest they be otherwise banished from societal acceptance, and media influencers of the period worked to engrain these messages. In 1790, an author writing in the *Massachusetts Magazine* warned that the “minutest speck” upon the surface of a woman “will obscure almost all its luster.” Such unfortunate specks, as laid out by scholar Mary Beth Norton in *Liberty’s Daughters* (1980), included an “ungraceful walk, a careless choice of clothing, a slovenly hairdo, an injudicious conversation, and even an elevated tone of the voice” (Norton 1980: 112). Women were made to literally quiet and cover and adorn themselves according to the requirements of men. Otherwise, in a society that forced their financial dependency, they might risk the protection and provision they received in exchange.

Within the context of slavery, White women suffered at the hands of sexism, but rather than align themselves with subjugated Black women, they, so constricted by images and ideals, functioned as agents of White male domination. Professor Thaviola Glymph skillfully details the contentious relationship between the two women groups in *Out of the House of Bondage* (2008). She removes “the elegance of manners” often ascribed to White women and posits them as wielders of “the power of slave ownership.” While husbands, brothers, and sons were often away from plantations conducting human sales and negotiations business and related endeavors, White women “owned slaves and managed households in which they held the power of life and death” (Glymph 2008: 4). Author Jacqueline Jones notes, “White women devised barbaric forms of punishment that resulted in the mutilation or permanent scarring of female slaves” (Jones 1985: 23). Glymph describes them as “so handicapped by patriarchy and paternalism that their lives more closely resembled those of enslaved women” (2008: 2)

than their White male counterparts. Yet, they too depended on the slave society and therefore perpetuated it. They enjoyed the monetary profits as well as the elevated image that the degradation of African women afforded. Thus, many participated in the whippings and general dehumanization process. Given the common reoccurrence of such violent episodes, how then could White women live out the daintiness of disposition patriarchy demanded of them? Fascinatingly, images require little to no attachment to reality; hence image-makers can simply imagine and invent them.

After slavery, White men ensured their highly crafted woman's image remained intact by hooking it into the larger American imagination through film. This way, whether or not White women actually stepped outside of boundaries of restrictive ideals was less of a concern. Even when they did, as was the case when they brutalized Black women and children, they were pressured to step back into and remain inside idealistic lines (or at least pretend to) because prevailing beliefs about who they were and who they should be were now re-inscribed, in many ways, heightened, and certainly, intertwined with notions of natural American identity. This was the power of movies. The 1915 transformative film *Birth of a Nation* exposed the South's resolve to resuscitate itself from the tremendous loss of the Civil War, interpreted by Southern men as an assault on their collective identity and the future of the country. It imagined their worst fears of reckless African Americans assuming political power and soiling pure White women, but also responded to these fears by portraying themselves as sophisticated protectors and saviors.

Both *Birth of a Nation* and *The Clansman*, the book which inspired the movie, were produced by men. Here again, they publically directed women's images in order to solidify their own. *Birth of a Nation*, a national sensation, pictured White women as well dressed and privileged, but soft and endangered. Once more, as a symbol of America itself, their safety and wholeness lay in the strength of men, especially those willing to suppress African Americans and other ethnic groups in the name of patriotism. Other women, such as Latinas and Native Americans, were either ignored or reduced to sexualized varieties of general stereotypes of their race. Writers in the *Oxford Journal*, in an article titled "Colonialism, Racism and Representation," conceded, "Mexicans were reduced to greasers in films like *Tony the Greaser*" (Stam 2017). The article continued, hundreds of Hollywood westerns made "Native Americans appear to be intruders on what was originally their land, and provided a paradigmatic perspective through which to view the whole of the non-white world" (Stam 2017).

Perhaps the weight of these kinds of images would be less relevant if they reached only a few people. However, these images became dangerously normal after permeating the population. In an issue of *American Quarterly*, historian Everett Carter called the imprint of *Birth of a Nation* "enormous." In addition to Woodrow Wilson hosting a screening, making it the first film

ever presented at the White House, “by January 1916 it had given 6,266 performances in the area of greater New York alone” (Carter 1960: 347). A conservative estimate of five hundred persons at each performance would support an “astounding total of over three million residents of and visitors to New York who saw the picture, and forever viewed themselves and their country’s history through its colorations” (Carter 1960: 347). Millions also consumed the very similar feminine trope in 1933’s *King Kong*. Although women earned the right to vote thirteen years earlier, they remained disenfranchised in American deed and thought. The Ann Darrow character of *King Kong* is penniless and vulnerable. She is also thin and blonde, which producers intended as a contrast to the dark and threatening giant gorilla who sought to capture her. A handsome White man, unsurprisingly, rescues her from the monstrous animal’s grasp at the Empire State Building, emblematic of American world dominance. Symbolically, the ability for White men to secure global victory, then, depended on weakened ideas and images of women and national acceptance thereof.

The 1939 blockbuster *Gone with the Wind* departed only slightly from its predecessors, presenting a faintly more complex version of White women. Perhaps its origins as a book written by a woman afforded the complexity. Although black-haired and exuding a spicier countenance, Scarlett O’Hara, *Gone with the Wind*’s main protagonist, boasts a small waist and draws the attention of men mesmerized by her beauty much like the other formulaic women in film. Predictably, she enjoys the plantation wealth of her Southern family and exudes all the charms and Victorian manners the men of colonial America called for a century earlier. In keeping with the pattern, Scarlett finds herself in a financial conundrum when her father (a White man) becomes ill and the Civil War (resulting in freed African Americans) disrupts their aristocratic lifestyle. Once she realizes dependency on her father is no longer an option, she turns for security to Rhett Butler, a younger, stylish, handsome White man with wealth. However, by the movie’s end, Rhett leaves and Scarlett is left alone and without stability. It shamelessly suggests that national unrest, expressed by Scarlett’s frantic behavior, is imminent without the leadership of fine White men. Movies seared these fragile and underdeveloped caricatures of women deeply into the American psyche by employing them repeatedly and disseminating them widely on screen. The pale, frail, and frightened beauty symbols appeared so frequently, audiences eventually named those acting in horror films “scream queens.” Furthermore, since several of the most influential movies were anchored in historical events, viewers often read the stories and the stereotypes within as factual.

Interestingly, stereotypes, although distinct from fact, require updating to meet the needs of history’s reality. World War II evidenced this, particularly in the area of labor. Considering World War II was a total war, compelling the entire American population to contribute to the effort, the United States government actively encouraged women to work in factories and

perform necessary production and assembly-line jobs while men engaged in combat overseas. The global war, which penetrated every aspect of society, thus necessitated a new image of women. The Office of War Information (OWI) and the magazine industry collaborated to launch massive propaganda campaigns to address labor shortages in multiple industries. Maureen Honey illuminated the frenzied state and America's prescription for it in *Creating Rosie the Riveter*. "Through psychological manipulation and emotional appeals, propaganda could perhaps accomplish what registration and enrollment drives were failing to do: make more orderly the relationship between labor supply and demand" (Honey 1984: 29). President Franklin Roosevelt implemented the OWI to specifically influence press and advertising. Posters and ads communicated that the women who had earlier been conscribed to domesticity should now demonstrate empathy for men at war by seeking industrial employment outside of the home. In 1942, the Westinghouse Company's War Production Coordinating Committee hired illustrator J. Howard Miller to produce a poster series, out of which came the iconic "We Can Do It" image. Later called "Rosie the Riveter," the poster posited the upper body of a straight-faced woman with her hair tied and apparently ready to work. Accented by bold hues of red, white, and blue, she is rolling her shirtsleeve back to expose a flexed and exaggerated muscle while her eyes pierce straight forward. Although the total war depended on the contributions of African American, Latino, Asian, and other women workers, the period's many "Rosie the Riveter" interpretations always featured fit White women.

Revealingly, World War II's pro-work messages nudged women to seek this shift only temporarily, as a sacrifice only to later return to the ideal American life and their role in it. A Monsanto ad proclaimed, "There'll come a day . . . when a lot of the good new things of peacetime will become important to Rosie the Housewife" (Honey 1984: 123). Likewise, the Thermos Bottle company showed a war worker with its product pouring coffee for herself at a factory in one picture and serving coffee to her husband and friends in another as she muses: "This is what I'm working for—the carefree home parties we used to have" (Honey 1984: 123). In both, the woman is in servitude, albeit voluntary and seemingly content, to her country and her husband, often one and the same in the American media. According to the *Encyclopedia of American Economic History* (2017), "Rosie the Riveter" stimulated an increase of working American women to 20 million by 1944, a 57 percent increase from just three years prior.

War industries represented one of several that manipulated and then monetized women's images. Unfortunately, the progression of time failed to stall this national trend and automatically generate job access and equality for women. In *Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon* (2013), scholar Victoria Vantoch argues, "Beauty, an aspect of femininity, was a critical qualification for stewardess work." In the 1950s and '60s,

not only did strict airline requirements concerning age, weight, hair, and charm hamper how women employees were viewed and treated, they also prevented women who fell outside of narrow beauty ideals from securing work in the air carrier business. This included both White women considered unattractive and non-White women in general. Vantoch states that while airline hiring practices appeared race-neutral when they called for “wholesome” and “virginal” applicants, the implied meanings were implicitly White since African Americans were read as “sexually promiscuous in mainstream American culture” (Vantoch 2013: 73). Hiring managers repeatedly interpreted Black physical features as supporting evidence of the sexualized stereotypes; for example, Northwest Airlines once rejected an African American applicant because “her bust measurements appeared to be abnormally large” (Vantoch 2013: 73).

These discriminatory practices led African American women to file suit against the companies. The court cases called into evidence all manner of bodily examinations, even including ankle measurements. When Black women and their lawyers successfully proved that they in fact met the airlines’ physical beauty standards, hiring supervisors would often call “femininity” into question instead. In one particular case, Northwest representatives claimed they rejected Marlene White, not because she was African American, but because she was “ill-groomed, had an arrogant attitude, and lacked the personality for stewardess work.” Officials also described her as, “aggressive, argumentative, and masculine.” In response to White’s discrimination claim, Northwest stated the complaint itself was “evidence of an antagonistic attitude” (Vantoch 2013: 73). Once more, women, as defined by American standards, were to be inaudible. In not conforming, one lost her claim to her born identity.

Effectively banned from the airline services industry, African American women also found themselves wanting for work in the same Hollywood that maintained narrow entryways and character possibilities even for White women. Certainly, neither group had yet accessed the ranks as any more than on-screen talent. Writers, producers, and studio authorities were men. As White women struggled to break free from one-dimensional “damsel” roles, African Americans had been traditionally barred completely from performance, except in silent buffoon or servitude roles. Studios passed over Black actresses even when the script called for someone of color. Producers for 1951’s *Show Boat* selected Ava Gardner over *café-au-lait*-hued Black starlet Lena Horne, who embodied “Black femininity,” according to women’s performance studies authority Kirsten Pullen (Pullen 2014: 74). In the relatively few instances in which African American women professionals in entertainment secured Hollywood contracts, they usually played domestic servants and regretfully accepted lower pay rates compared to other supporting cast members. Walter White, Chief Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Lena Horne collaborated to successfully secure an unusual MGM contract, which stipulated

her exemption from maid-type or demeaning roles. White hoped the breakthrough deal with Horne, specifically, would transform opportunities for Blacks in Hollywood (Janken 2003).

Surely, the challenges women faced in labor and entertainment reflected the nation's political landscape, and surely again, the nation's political landscape reflected its institution of inequality. Even a cursory comparison of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor evidences the imbalance of opportunity. President Roosevelt, despite functioning with a physical handicap, and often immobile due to polio, enjoyed public adoration throughout four terms in the White House. Rather than scorn him or rule him incapable, office staff, health care assistants, and lovers worked to help him conceal his illness and fervently supported and respected his position as leader of the free world. Meanwhile, researcher Eric Burns reveals Eleanor maintained a lifelong insecurity about her looks. As a result of vocal ridicule from adults, she grew up "convinced she was physically ugly . . . with a mouth full of teeth so prominent that they gave a look of weakness to her chin" (Burns 2017). Even as an adult and First Lady of the United States, she often cracked self-deprecating jokes and recalled, "I knew I was the first girl in my mother's family who was not a belle, and though I never acknowledged it [to any potential suitors] at the time, I was deeply ashamed" (Burns 2017). Undoubtedly, a woman could not be president, and a woman considered unattractive was undeserving of much.

It is likely that this situation contributed to her overlooking her husband's liaisons with other women, as much as possible. Instead, she deeply embedded herself in international reform and civil rights causes. She was central to the establishment of the National Youth Administration and became the first US delegate to the United Nations, as well as chairing the committee which drafted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Her contributions, including critical support for the Tuskegee Airmen program in World War II, are innumerable. She befriended African American women's activist, college founder, and political strategist Mary McLeod Bethune and enthusiastically supported her work. Bethune, like Roosevelt, was considered uncomely and experienced an unsuccessful marriage. Robustly built with ebony skin and kinky hair, Bethune fit neither the Hollywood standard for starlets, nor the airline prerequisite for stewardesses. According to Bethune scholar Ida Jones in *Mary McLeod Bethune in DC*, Bethune, like her comrade Eleanor Roosevelt, found liberation in social uplift, the education of others and serving as a voice for her own people (Jones 2013). In fact, Bethune advised four US presidents, including Franklin Roosevelt, and used her platform to advocate for African American causes. Given both women's breadth of accomplishments, in another time, and perhaps in another universe where beauty is irrelevant, they would have experienced widespread public adoration for their work and become presidents themselves, as opposed to wives and advisors to men.

Eight years after Bethune's death, President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act of 1963. Women, despite America's imagination of them, were a major workforce demographic, but *because* of America's imagination of them as subordinate, collected substantially less pay. As a consequence of decades of pressure from groups such as Bethune's National Council of Negro Women and others, the president legislated correction of the 60 percent women received as compared to the wages of men. In the same year, Betty Friedan published her seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which challenged the housewife image created by both the education system and advertising industry, Kennedy announced the following:

I am delighted today to approve the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which prohibits arbitrary discrimination against women in the payment of wages. This Act represents many years of effort by labor, management, and several private organizations unassociated with labor or management, to call attention to the unconscionable practice of paying female employees less wages than male employees for the same job. This measure adds to our laws another structure basic to democracy. It will add protection at the working place to the women, the same rights at the working place in a sense that they have enjoyed at the polling place.

(Kennedy 1963)

The foundational work of women like Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune precipitated the continued ascension of women's voices in the political sphere during the last quarter of the 20th century. African American voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer's voice shook the nation in 1964 when she told her story of terror upon attempting to register to vote in Mississippi. Her speech before the Democratic National Convention Credentials Committee led to her seat four years later as the first African American official delegate at a national-party convention since Reconstruction, and as the first woman delegate from Mississippi. New York African American Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm launched her presidential campaign in 1972 as the first Black person to run and the first woman to attempt to gain the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Houston-born Barbara Jordan altered the course of history as the first African American elected to the Texas Senate since Reconstruction. In her powerful 1974 opening statement during the House Judiciary hearings on the Richard Nixon impeachment process, she reviewed women's progress toward equality in the political arena:

"We, the people." It's a very eloquent beginning [to the Constitution]. But when that document was completed on the seventeenth of September in 1787, I was not included in that

“We, the people.” I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision, I have finally been included in “We, the people.”

(Jordan 1974)

Still, even in proving themselves advantageous to the American democratic process, women paid dearly both when they did not mirror beauty ideals *and* when they did. None of the names mentioned above fit within the tightly established silhouette of feminine attractiveness. As history unravels, necessary questions rise: To what extent did their distance from the beauty ideal help them secure a space in government? Did constituents and public audiences take them more seriously because they were not perceived as traditionally soft and dependent? Is unattractiveness a political strength for women? Is beauty a disadvantage? Sara Palin, a self-professed “hockey mom” who wears lipstick, drew widespread criticism during her 2008 bid for the vice-presidency of the United States. As a candidate, she embraced skirts, heels, both flowing hairstyles and polished updos, and adopted a “country first” patriotic persona. She typified modern femininity, often bringing her children and husband onto her campaign stages and posing in loving photos with them. While criticism and opposition to her policy positions were expected and acceptable, political pundits and media influencers concentrated heavily and unnecessarily on her appearance. Opponents unrelentingly questioned her ability to hold office and be a mother. Meanwhile male politicians, many of whom were parents, never grappled with such skepticism. Disturbingly, a few years after her run, one comedian remarked that Palin was “good masturbation material” (McGlynn 2011). Was this her compensation for adhering to the national image for women?

If so, Hillary Clinton departed from it and espoused a different, less “feminine” approach to public life. In her husband’s 1992 bid for the presidency, her vocal temperament and vigorous political career, separate from her husband’s, further aggravated traditionalists already unnerved because of the era’s culture wars. Moreover, she stirred existing controversy about her audacity when she quipped, “I suppose I could have stayed home, baked cookies and had teas” (Nicks 2015). According to *TIME* magazine, the assertion enraged conservative voters. One responded, “If I ever entertained the idea of voting for Bill Clinton, the smug bitchiness of his wife’s comment has nipped that notion in the bud” (Nicks 2015). Was this her compensation for years of public service and developing a proud identity apart from the presidential candidate? Nevertheless, Bill Clinton still won both of his presidential campaigns. Without a doubt, advisees counseled Hillary Clinton to soften her image. More than a decade later, during a stop on her own presidential campaign, she briefly, sincerely, and openly wept about caring deeply for the country and the future of its children. Media