

Dr. Jacqueline Jones
Ellen C. Temple Chair in Women's History Emerita, University of Texas at Austin
President of the American Historical Association (2021-22)

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For the purposes of the Task Force, we must consider the history of women of African descent in their roles as workers (waged and unwaged) and also as family and community members. Here I provide a brief overview of region-specific and national trends. I also cite specific examples drawn from California history, especially for the period after 1941. My emphasis is on the harmful discriminatory effects of governmental policies at all levels—local, state, and federal—combined with private employers' strategies related to profit-making and workplace configurations. Governmental entities played a significant part in promoting and sustaining racist practices, especially before 1964. As a result, those entities bear a direct responsibility for persistent patterns of poverty and low levels of asset-accumulation among Black families in California and throughout the nation. Even after the passage of major Civil Rights legislation in the mid-1960s, private companies such as banks and corporations have engaged in lending and hiring practices that help to solidify patterns of racial inequality. Residential segregation and the harmful effects of U. S. tax policies continue to have adverse effects on Black families. The history of Black women represents a key element in this larger story of public-private complicity in limiting the economic opportunities of all Black people.¹

¹ For an overview, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

Many Black Californians today trace their lineage back to the U. S. South, where their forebears were enslaved. The institution of slavery was a massive, government-sustained program of wage theft affecting millions of people of African and Indigenous descent who lived and labored (in territory that would become part of the United States) between the early seventeenth century and 1865. Carried out primarily (but not exclusively) in brutal labor camps called plantations, slavery depended on the strict oversight and enforcement provided by public officials at the local, state, and (beginning with the founding of the U. S.) federal levels. Enslavement was not a product of neutral “market” forces, but rather the result of direct intervention by intertwined mutually reinforcing legislative and private interests.

In the South, enslaved women worked in the fields growing staples such as tobacco, cotton, sugar, and rice, and in the kitchens and parlors of their white masters and mistresses. On the earliest plantations, in the Chesapeake region (the colonies of Virginia and Maryland), local officials taxed all field workers, called “tithables,” which included white, Black, and Indigenous men and Black and Indigenous women. This system of taxation resulted in the deployment of enslaved women in the fields, while white (English and other European) women remained confined to household work.² Black women thus performed what was traditionally considered “men’s work”—in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cultivating tobacco and then by the late eighteenth century planting, chopping (weeding), and harvesting cotton—as well as “women’s work”—cooking, cleaning, and performing childcare for white people.

Enslaved men and women were exploited under slavery, but in certain respects they experienced manifestations of that exploitation differently. A division of labor in the slave quarters mandated

² Kathleen Mary Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

that women and girls were responsible for food preparation, childcare, and laundry, adding to their burdens. Women labored under the constant threat of sexual assault from the men who oversaw their work in the fields and from white men generally—overseers and the sons and guests of plantation owners no less than the owners themselves. The rape of women was an instrument of terror wielded by white men, but it was also a means of increasing the enslaved workforce, thereby enriching the owner. Thus Black women were integral to this system of profit-making, which relied not only on their work in the fields but also on their reproductive labor.³

Between 1619 and 1808, approximately 9,566,000 men, women, and children were forcibly removed from Africa to the Americas; the vast majority went to the Caribbean and South America. Indeed, only about 300,000, or 4-6 percent of the total, were transported to what would become the United States.⁴ Yet by 1865 the nation's Black population amounted to over 4,400,000 people, revealing a dramatic pattern of natural growth over the generations. That number suggests the arduous labors of Black women as field hands, domestic servants, and bearers of children. Indeed, after the end of U. S. participation in the international slave trade, planters more than ever depended upon the reproductive labors of enslaved women, helping to account for large families as well as instances of sexual assault and forced mating.⁵

Town, county, and state officials as well as the federal government permitted slave owners a great deal of leeway in punishing and abusing their workers. Marked by shocking levels of

³ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); Rachel A. Feinstein, *When Rape was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual violence during Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁴ Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972).

⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

sadism and sexual license, the system of slavery amounted to a form of state-sponsored domestic terrorism. This system found favor with white people in the North, many of whom after 1790 or so benefited directly from the cotton economy—as sea captains, merchants, machine operatives in textile mills, and consumers of cheap cloth. Recently, scholars have argued that the cultivation of cotton fueled the Industrial Revolution and created not only great fortunes for a few, but a general prosperity among the white propertied classes in the antebellum North and South. Enslaved bodies—bought, sold, exploited for labor and sex, mortgaged, and insured—were extremely valuable commodities within the national and global economy.⁶

The United States Constitution does not mention the word slavery, but the 1787 document did protect private property, which included enslaved workers. In 1790 Congress stipulated that only free white men should be allowed to immigrate to the U. S. and eventually apply for citizenship.⁷ Although the Constitution mandated the banning of the international slave trade in 1808, that ban did not apply to the buying and selling of Black people within the United States. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Black families were routinely separated as part of a massive forced migration from the worn-out tobacco fields of the Upper South to the fresh cotton fields of the Southeast and Old Southwest.⁸ At the local level, towns and counties sponsored slave patrols, groups of white men charged with recovering fugitives and maintaining a racialized “order” on the southern countryside. In 1850, a robust Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress represented a

⁶ Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017); Edward Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁷ Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁸ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

renewed effort by the federal government to serve the interests of southern slaveholders; the act forced all Northerners to be responsible for apprehending alleged slave runaways, men and women who, at so-called rendition hearings, had no legal rights when it came to defending themselves or claiming their freedom on free soil.⁹

During the Civil War, many enslaved people liberated themselves by seeking refuge behind Union lines. Black women labored in refugee camps as servants for Union officers and as laundresses for Union troops. In many cases neither they nor their menfolk, hired as fatigue workers, received the financial compensation they had been promised.¹⁰ About 180,000 Black men from both the South and the North served in the Union military, though until the last year of the war Black soldiers were paid less than their white counterparts. This discriminatory pay scale had profound effects on the well-being of wives, children, and other dependent kin back home. For southern Black soldiers, serving in the Union army put their loved ones at home at risk for their lives.¹¹

In the wake of the abolition of slavery, the U. S. government made no concerted effort to compensate the millions of freedpeople who had literally slaved their whole lives to enrich their owners and the country generally. Most Black men and women emerged from bondage with only the clothes on their backs; they had no cash, land or credit, prerequisites for self-sufficiency in the rural South. In any case, many whites refused to extend to Blacks the credit necessary to buy

⁹ R. J. M. Blackett, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Joseph P. Reidy, *Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

¹¹ John David Smith, *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); James G. Mendez, *A Great Sacrifice: Northern Black soldiers, their Families, and the Experience of Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

land, and these whites also refused to sell land to the few Black people who possessed the means to buy it.¹²

After the Civil War, many freedwomen withdrew from field labor, an act of defiance that angered both southern planters and northern government officials. For the planters, the drop in the number of women field hands signaled a serious threat to the cotton economy, which had depended on their labor. Northern officials of the Freedmen's Bureau (a government agency established to effect the transition of enslaved people to freedom) considered Black women a subset of all poor women, who were supposed to work rather than remaining "idle" at home. This view revealed a dramatic double standard separating middle-class women who devoted fulltime to their families, from impoverished Black women, who incurred the wrath of employers and public officials if they did not work for wages. Some employers deprived Black women domestics of any kind of pay, instead giving them only cast-off clothing or food (the so-called "service pan") in return for their hours and days of toil. Black women had good reason to try to devote themselves to their families, an opportunity denied them under slavery: By withdrawing from the fields and the white woman's kitchen they took themselves out of harm's way and protected themselves from sexual assault by white overseers and landowners. They could care for their own children and, in some cases, raise chickens or tend gardens to help feed their families.¹³

Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, the vast majority of southern Black families remained landless, confined to the exploitative sharecropping system. Families contracted with a landlord at the beginning of every year and signed contracts that

¹² Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

¹³ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 43-76.

supposedly entitled them to a share of the crop at the end of the year. However, lacking tools, mules, and seed, many of these families found themselves living as peons, forced to remain on a plantation until they could discharge their debt as reckoned by the white landowner-employer.¹⁴

Sharecropping families tended to be large, revealing the economic value of children who could, at a young age, contribute to the household as cotton pickers. As late as the 1930s and 1940s, many southern Black families were tilling the soil much as their enslaved forebears had generations before. Beginning in 1890, all of the former Confederate states passed laws or amended their Constitutions to deprive Black men of the right to vote.¹⁵ Some states entered into contracts with private employers to supply Black convicts, men and women who had been arrested on flimsy pretexts and sentenced to labor on a chain gang or in a mine or rice field.¹⁶ Disfranchisement, local laws mandating racial segregation in public parks and private venues, and horrific acts of violence in the form of men and women hanged, dismembered, and burned to death, were the lot of southern Blacks during this period. (To label this period with the seemingly innocuous name of a comedic antebellum minstrel character—“Jim Crow”—is misleading in the extreme.)

Under these deplorable conditions, the majority of southern Black women continued to care for their large families, help with the harvest in the fall, and serve as the mainstay of local Black churches and benevolent societies. Some of them engaged in petty commodity production and

¹⁴ Jones, *Dispossessed*.

¹⁵ Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 2003); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restrictions and the Establishment of the One-Party South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

¹⁶ Talitha LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and their World: Alabama, 1865-1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996).

trade, as when they sold eggs, vegetables, or brooms. Though living within a region marked by stark inequalities in public education, many of them made sacrifices so that their children had the proper clothing to wear to school, leading to a phenomenon called—“chickens for shoes,” referring to mothers selling chickens and eggs to buy textbooks and shoes for their school-aged children. The cotton grown by sharecroppers enriched white landowners, who often cheated families out of their due at the end of the year’s reckoning. White landowners paid taxes that funded white public schools, diverting money from small rural Black schools, again revealing the complicity of public governments—in this case local white school boards—in perpetuating systems of discrimination.¹⁷

At this point it is helpful to step back and consider larger national trends in the gendered division of labor. The Civil War era opened up new employment opportunities for women in the fields of school-teaching and nursing. Black women who followed these professions were confined to paid work in under-resourced segregated schools and hospitals.¹⁸ In the late nineteenth century, the clerical, retail, and manufacturing offered employment opportunities for white women, especially those who were young and unmarried. Private employers hired these women as receptionists, department store clerks, telephone operators (positions that required interaction with customers), as well as machine operatives. Textile factories and sweatshop owners took advantage of the fact that many of these young women lived with their parents and did not have to support a family, and so could be paid less than a man to do the same job. Throughout the country, a higher percentage of Black married women worked than their white counterparts, and

¹⁷ Louis R. Harlan, *Separate and Unequal: Public Schools Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958); Jones, *Labor of Love*, 77-102.

¹⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Adam Fairclough, *A Class of their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

Black women stayed in the paid labor force longer than whites—indicators of the need among these women to be joint or sole breadwinners in families that could not subsist on the meagre pay of Black men, who themselves remained limited to ill-paid menial jobs.¹⁹

Overall these trends suggested that Black women would be excluded from “modern” forms of work--those that involved working with machines such as typewriters, textile looms, or sewing machines, and those defined by a set number of hours each day. Black women throughout the nation labored as domestic servants (some who lived in the home of their employer were on call virtually twenty-four hours a day), their jobs shaped by the whims of white family members and not by the hands of a clock. A noteworthy phenomenon appeared in the South, where enslaved Black women, men and children, had worked in water-powered textile mills before the Civil War. After the war, southern textile-mill owners reserved those jobs for white families, claiming that Black people lacked a “mechanical sense,” rendering them unfit for mill work. By excluding Black families from the Piedmont textile mill villages, southern elites (including politicians, bankers, and private employers) accomplished several ends. They fashioned even hazardous mill work as sharecropping families’ welcome escape from the cash-starved countryside, and they drove a wedge between the rural Black and white poor. Beginning in the 1880s, tenants and sharecroppers were beginning to join biracial political parties such as the People’s Party to challenge southern businessmen, landowners, and railroad operators.²⁰

Large-scale migration out of the South did not take place until World War I, when for the first time northern and Midwestern defense industries beckoned with well-paying jobs. Black women

¹⁹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Susan Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

²⁰ Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 222-232.

were an integral part of this migration, contributing to the war effort as workers in factories and on railroads. Yet after the war it was clear that the North broadly defined would fail to live up to its promise as a place of fair play and good wages. Still barred from work as secretaries and retail clerks, Black women were once again limited to service jobs as domestics and custodians.²¹

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s brought northern African Americans into the Democratic Party in great numbers; but the legislative initiatives by that name had a mixed impact on Black people in general. While northern Blacks (representing a small fraction of the total Black population) received something amounting to their fair share of governmental jobs and assistance, Black Southerners fared much worse. There, federal aid and public-works programs were controlled by local white Democrats. These officials saw no need to assist the large number of Black families devastated and displaced by the collapsing cotton economy, arguing that if there was laundry to be done or cotton to be picked for white folks, the state and federal government should not provide Blacks with relief of any kind.²²

During the 1930s, for the first time in the nation's history the federal government sought to mitigate the harsh effects of unfettered employer power when it came to wages, hours, and working conditions. Nevertheless, the signal achievements of this era-- Social Security and minimum hour, maximum wage, and anti-child labor legislation—explicitly denied these benefits to workers in the agricultural and domestic-service sectors, and to anyone who held a seasonal or part-time job. These restrictions affected approximately 85 percent of all Black workers in the United States. And too, federal initiatives often mandated racial segregation, in

²¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: vintage, 2011); Jones, *Labor of Love*, 131-62.

²² Jones, *Labor of Love*, 163-194.

the Civilian Conservation Corps, for example. A New Deal program, the Federal Housing Authority (1934) required that new housing be segregated if building contractors were to qualify for government loans.²³

Taken together, New Deal initiatives widened the gap between Black and white workers, and between Black and white women. The typical southern Black woman would continue to work in the white woman's kitchen and in the cotton field without the benefit of social-welfare legislation that primarily benefited the families of northern blue-collar workers in large factories. By excluding non-industrial wage earners from New Deal programs, the federal government enacted policies that, while "race neutral" on the surface, disadvantaged a disproportionate number of Black workers, with profound long-term consequences.

California had always beckoned to immigrants and migrants alike—the miners lured by what Chinese immigrants called "Gold Mountain" in the second half of the nineteenth century, the agri-business owners who aspired to feed the nation once the transcontinental railway was completed in 1869. The historical literature is replete with descriptions of southern white people who moved west in the 1920s and 1930s, fleeing depressed, and after 1929, Great-Depression conditions.²⁴ For a number of reasons Black people did not take part in this pre-1941 migration. Many lacked the means to buy a train ticket. Even those few who could afford a car knew that the cross-country journey was a perilous one, without predictable sources of fuel for the car or the body along the way. Most significantly, though, California employers already had an abundant supply of labor, including vulnerable Mexicans and Asian-Americans who would work

²³ Kevin Fox Gotham, "Racialization and the State: The Housing Act of 1934 and the Creation of the Federal Housing Administration," *Sociological Perspectives* 43 (Summer 2000):291-317.

²⁴ James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dustbowl Migration and Okie culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

in the vast crop fields and vineyards at starvation wages. Major manufacturers made it clear that they would not hire Black applicants, male or female. In 1940, aviation official W. Gerald Tuttle of the Vultee Aircraft Company in southern California announced, "I regret to say that it is not the policy of this company to employ people other than the Caucasian race."²⁵

It was not until the nation was well into World War II that the state's employers felt an acute labor shortage. Even then, it took the combined pressure of the state's NAACP, National Urban League, and Congress of Racial Equality to open the factory gates to African Americans. Blacks in California were also part of a national movement, the Double V for Victory campaign, to defeat fascism abroad and racism at home. The sudden availability of well-paying defense jobs, for Black men in 1942, for Black women not until 1943 or so, led to 5 million Black people migrating out of the South and into the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast. Seemingly overnight the newcomers transformed whole regions of the state, including the Bay Area, and especially the East Bay. The city of Richmond, California, saw a massive influx of war workers from 1940-45, when its population grew from 24,000 to 100,000, with the Black population increasing from 270 to 14,000 in those years.²⁶

The intense demand for labor was not sufficient to overcome generations-long practices that adversely affected Black women (and men). At the beginning of the war, in response to pressure from Black activists, the federal government created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), an agency that monitored federal defense-industry contracts to ensure job opportunities for Black workers. At the same time, a government job placement agency, the United States Employment Service and its Women's Advisory Commission, catered to the prejudices of white

²⁵ Tuttle quoted in Robert C. Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946), 109.

²⁶ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017) 5.

employers and their workers. In government publications, Black women were hailed as “support workers” and laborers in essential civilian industries (as domestics and laundresses) who would allow white women to work fulltime outside the home. The federal government continued its practice of segregating public housing.²⁷

Some Black women were hired as welders and riveters, factory jobs that paid well, allowing them to contribute directly to the war effort and bolstering their confidence as workers and citizens.²⁸ Yet it remained difficult for individual Black people to challenge generations-old all-white workplaces. In her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou describes the incredible persistence, determination, and time commitment that finally won her the position of the first Black streetcar conductor in San Francisco; passing the requisite entry examination was not necessarily sufficient to overcome the resistance of hiring officials.²⁹

At this point it is worth reviewing the dynamics of job discrimination and the entangled motives on the part of white employers, workers, and consumers. White workers deployed a number of strategies to discourage their employers from integrating workplaces. At one end of the spectrum were the World War II “hate strikes” that halted production in defense plants once people of color integrated a workplace. At the other end were the efforts of employees to push for new hires who were their extended kin or other migrants from the South; these efforts discouraged the introduction of so-called “outsiders,” keeping the workplace peace by enhancing familial, ethnic, and (white) fraternal bonds among workers. Some employers wanted to avoid the extra expense of accommodating the prejudices of their employees by providing separate

²⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 199-200.

²⁸ Maureen Honey, ed., *bitter Fruit: African American Women in World War II* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

²⁹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

lunchrooms and bathrooms for workers of color. Business owners in general promoted the idea that, given their choice of retail outlets, white customers would go elsewhere rather than be served by a Black clerk. And many employers simply abided by tradition and hired only white people. The effect of this “tradition” was to suggest that, because a Black person had never held a certain kind of job, he or she was incapable of doing it.

While Black women eagerly took advantage of new employment opportunities in defense plants, they had to contend with difficult living conditions. As thousands of migrants streamed into the Bay area, the housing shortage deepened, forcing many Black families into makeshift, ramshackle, cramped quarters. One war worker, Precious Mack, remembered that first her uncle and then her father left the South for California, and then the rest of the family followed. When they arrived in the Bay area, they could only find a one-room trailer to house their family of twelve. Like women in general, Black women had to scramble to find childcare, as local, state, and federal governments persisted in their historic refusal to provide support services for mothers of young children, even though many women were working fulltime, some on the night shift, on behalf of the war effort.³⁰

The war broke down some longstanding barriers so that women could perform what was previously designated as “men’s work”—welding, riveting, and carpentry for example. Yet after the war, women were displaced from their factory jobs by returning soldiers; white women resumed work as retail clerks and clerical staff, while Black women remained limited to employment as household domestics, cafeteria workers, and hospital aides. By 1950 the FEPC had been disbanded (it monitored only defense industries in any case), and once again employers

³⁰ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 207; Cheryl Mullenbach, *Double Victory: How African American Women Broke Race and Gender Barriers to Help Win World War II* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2017).

could freely advertise that “No Negroes Need Apply.” Black unemployment rates soared. As Maya Angelou put it in 1945, Black veterans were now “hanging on ghetto street corners like forgotten laundry left on back yard fence.” She added, “Thus we lived through a major war. The question in the ghettos was, Can we make it through a minor peace?”³¹

Because Black families continued to face stubborn challenges stemming from job discrimination and housing segregation, Black women’s labor continued to be essential to the well-being of their households, nuclear and extended. In the East Bay area, the largest shipyard union, the American Federation of Labor International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Shipbuilders, and Helpers of America segregated Black members into a separated group and rendered that group powerless in contract negotiations. While white men took advantage of the GI Bill to go to college, Black men found their chances for higher education foreclosed by the lack of accredited (ie., white) colleges that would admit them. Banks engaged in pernicious red-lining practices, which denied mortgage loans to even middle-class Black workers if they were living in an overwhelmingly Black area. In 1950 almost 30 percent of Black men between the ages of 20 and 24 were jobless. According to one historian, “Despite substantial progress during the war, Oakland’s employment patterns continued to reflect a Jim Crow occupational hierarchy” for both men and women.³²

Patterns of residential segregation in particular played a major role in thwarting the aspirations of Black women as wives, mothers, and workers. Confined to impoverished neighborhoods, they often faced long commutes to work. Their inability to purchase a home meant that they would remain at the mercy of landlords who realized they housed a captive group of people who could

³¹ Maya Angelou, *Gather Together in My Name* (New York: Random House, 1974), 5.

³² Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 54-7, 83.

not afford to move. In the suburbs, so-called neighborhood improvement associations put pressure on homeowners not to sell to people of color, a trend supported by real estate agents and city councils. All-white towns such as Eagle Rock enlisted local police in discouraging Black families from moving into their neighborhoods (in 1948).³³ The Federal Housing Authority and the Veterans Administration refused to grant loans to Black veterans who wanted to buy houses in white areas. City authorities segregated public housing, refusing to build enough units to accommodate the numbers of Black applicants. Federal policy favored suburban homeowners over urban renters by providing tax breaks for interest on mortgage payments, by creating an interstate highway system that frequently decimated Black communities, and by refusing to loan money to housing contractors who refused to segregate any new developments they built. The combined effects of these policies and practices among bankers, real estate agents, city officials, and builders meant that over the generations Black families would lack the assets of their white counterparts who owned their own homes. For the children of homeowners, a real-estate inheritance perpetuated patterns of wealth over the generations.³⁴

In the postwar period, government jobs became the bedrock of many Black families. Private employers fretted about the prejudices of their customers, and so kept Blacks in the “back of the house” jobs; however, government employers did not have to worry about customers in the realm of necessary public services related to education and transportation; after the war Black men and women would work as bus drivers, social workers, and teachers. Nevertheless, some public sectors such as law enforcement and firefighting resisted integrating their ranks, using

³³ Matthew Fleischer, “How white people used police to make L. A. one of the most Segregated cities in America,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 12, 2020.

³⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic*, June, 2014; Rothstein, *The Color of Law*.

formal examinations and other machinations as pretexts for discrimination; and some worksites, once integrated, showed hostility to people of color, making life miserable for them.³⁵

The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 marked the end of the federal government's active attempts to apply discriminatory policies to housing and employment, and the beginning of federal enforcement of voting laws. With the crumbling of legislative mandates upholding racial segregation, and with affirmative efforts by colleges and employers to admit Black people in meaningful numbers for the first time, a segment of the Black population began to thrive. The emergence of a well-educated Black professional class—with Black women becoming physicians, lawyers, college professors, and media personalities-- represented a dramatic development in American history, and in the history of work.

Yet the absence of legal barriers was not sufficient to open the way to a brighter future for many Black women. Indeed, a confluence of events in the 1960s and 1970s conspired to keep large numbers in poverty, relegated to low-paying, disagreeable jobs. The Immigration Act of 1965 opened the country to groups who competed with Black people for unskilled jobs. By this time, certain industries had taken advantage of local tax incentives and moved to the suburbs, making it difficult for people who did not own cars to get to work. Other industries took their production facilities offshore, or to Mexico, in an attempt to avoid American unions and minimum wage and maximum-hour laws. The global economy hit Black workers hard in the sectors that they were just beginning to enter—textile production for example. Some white-collar jobs such as bank teller were reduced or eliminated with the increased use of computers and robotics. In addition,

³⁵ "Chief Michael Moore: Policing Inequities Reflect Racism in Society," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2021; U. S. Department of Justice, "Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department: Summary" (1991) <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/report-independent-commission-los-angeles-police-department-0>

a tax revolt among suburban taxpayers began to register in municipal budgets, as towns and cities began to cut back on public employment in the transportation, education, and social-welfare sectors. In 2010, Black women and men were 33 percent more likely than the general workforce to have jobs with the federal government or with state and local governments.³⁶

By the 1990s old and new distressed communities proliferated around the country. The south Los Angeles neighborhoods of Watts and Compton shared certain characteristics with all these places, whether urban or rural and regardless of region. People in these communities lacked access to well-paying jobs that did not require a college education, and they lacked the resources to move into middle-class white suburbs. The available jobs were concentrated in the service industry—fast food workers, home health aides, child care. Without a substantial tax base, the public schools in these areas were unable to provide an adequate education to prepare students for the challenges of the twenty-first century global workforce. Underground economies thrived, and police targeted Black men and youth for nonviolent offenses such as drug use, leading to high rates of incarceration and leaving wives and mothers to try to piece together a living on their own. These communities were vulnerable to police abuse and violence, an historic pattern that persisted well into the modern era.

A number of recent studies illustrate the ways that federal housing and tax policies, as well as the practices of private banks and employers, harm people of color, all under the guise of “race neutral” policies and practices. Hidden forms of discrimination affect Black women in their roles as jobseekers, applicants for mortgages and other loans, and taxpayers. These studies suggest the limitations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, as a force for a level playing

³⁶ Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 289-301.

field when it comes to employment opportunities. Some employers persist in discriminatory practices, now using a person's zip code as a proxy for their "race." The rise of a service economy and the decline of manufacturing have limited the number of well-paying jobs for people with only a high school degree. In the early 2000s, banks switched from red-lining communities of color to pushing predatory loans on them, leading to high rates of foreclosure, especially after the financial crisis of 2008. Perhaps most significantly, the persistence of pockets of poverty, creations of federal policy and private interests, stand as a stark reminder of the way American taxpayers at the local, state, and federal level have funded the mechanisms of housing and school segregation over the years. For most middle-class Americans, equity in a home is a family's largest asset in terms of their total net worth. In 2016, the net worth of a typical white family was nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family (\$171,000 v. \$17, 150). Generations of Black women as workers, wives, and mothers have paid a high price for these forms of discrimination, their talents squandered and dreams dashed.³⁷

In 2019 the Public Policy Institute of California reported that about one third (34 percent) of the state's residents were poor or near poor, including more than one-fifth of all Latino/as, and 17.4 percent of African Americans (compared to 12.1 percent of whites). While 12 percent of white women were impoverished, the figure for Black women was 23 percent. In 2019, the median

³⁷ Rothstein, *The Color of Law*; Mehrsa Baraden, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2019); Dorothy Brown, *the Whiteness of Wealth: How the Tax System Impoverished Black American—and How We Can Fix It* (New York: Random House, 2021); Melvin Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Thomas M. Shapiro, *the Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, "Examining the Black-White Wealth Gap," *Brookings.edu*, Feb. 27, 2020 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/> ("This history matters for contemporary inequality because its legacy is passed down generation-to-generation through unequal monetary inheritances which make up a great deal of current wealth".

annual earnings of white women stood at \$55,266, and for Black women 44,438. The discrepancy was even greater for men-- \$71,875 for white men, and \$48,469 for Black men.³⁸

The COVID pandemic has had disastrous effects on Black communities. Concentrated in the service sector, Black women lost their jobs as waitresses, fast-food workers, and custodians when restaurants and educational institutions closed their doors to in-person gatherings. At the same time, Black women are overrepresented as front-line workers, serving as hospital orderlies and home health-care workers, making them more vulnerable to the virus. These developments suggest the ways that historic legacies of discrimination continue to shape the well-being of African American women and their families.³⁹

By way of conclusion I do not mean to argue that Black Californians are the only group in the state to have endured systematic prejudice over the generations. Certainly (for example) Mexicans and their descendants, U. S. citizens as well as undocumented immigrants, have faced prejudice in the form of job ceilings and residential segregation. However, the history of African Californians is unique because many of their forebears were enslaved in the American South. Governments at all levels have initiated and enforced policies that limited Blacks' employment opportunities in direct and long-lasting ways. Indeed, federal agencies, local city officials and school boards, and law enforcement officers, together with state legislative and Congressional inaction, have played a major role in limiting the ability of Black women to achieve material success and their highest potential.

³⁸ <https://www.ppic.org/publication/poverty-in-california/>; <https://statusofwomendata.org/wp-content/themes/witsfull/factsheets/economics/factsheet-california.pdf>

³⁹ Public Policy Institute of California, "Black Californians Struggle within Challenging Job Market," Feb. 24, 2021 <https://www.ppic.org/blog/black-californians-struggle-within-a-challenging-job-market/>