

Introduction

MANICURING WORK

For all the migrations in this gender-revolutionary century, care still remains largely in women's hands.

Arlie Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*

Our bodies are invested with social meaning. . . . Whether a body is handled with reverence or contempt, whether it is nourished or starved, whether its owner has control over it or must succumb to others' control—these are all determined by the intertwining of communities, families and individuals.

Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore, *Gendered Bodies*

Forging a political agenda that addresses the universal needs of women is highly problematic not just because women's priorities differ but because gains for some groups might result in a corresponding loss of advantage and privilege for others. . . . This does not mean that we give up on the goal of concerted struggle. It means that we give up trying falsely to harmonize women's interests.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work"

Two women, virtual strangers, sit hand in hand across a narrow table, both intent on the same thing—the achievement of a perfect manicure. From the touches to the smells, a manicure is a visceral experience. When the experience includes creamy hand massages, acupuncture, and aromatherapy, the embodied dimensions of the manicure greatly enhance its appeal. The exchange shifts dramatically, however, when the touches

result in misfiled nails, bleeding cuticles, and fungal infections, and the smells involve toxic chemicals, sweaty feet, and the exhalations of recently digested lunches across an eighteen-inch-wide table. The carnality of the manicure sets it up as an unpredictable exchange that can lurch suddenly from relaxing to uncomfortable, if not alarming. These embodied interactions are yet more complex because they occur between women who usually would not find themselves in the same social circles, let alone touching each other.

The clipping, filing, sculpting, and polishing of nails entails not only the manicuring of the physical body but also the manicuring of the women who perform this work and receive these services. This work requires both technical expertise and adroit emotional skills to finesse strong reactions of customers to the servicing of their bodies. Like much work in the service economy, this work is mostly invisible. It largely goes unnoticed and unappreciated and shows up only when it is performed unsatisfactorily. Nail salon interactions demonstrate how women inhabit bodies differently as well as how women's bodies are differentially valued and employed. In particular, while some women's bodies are manicured into objects of beauty, other women's bodies serve as tools for enacting these beauty regimens.

The Latin roots of the word *manicure* mean simply care of the hands. However, contemporary manicures and the establishments in which they occur involve much more than this bare definition suggests. While I use the term *manicure* to refer to a specific set of beauty service practices, I also use manicuring as a powerful metaphor for the individual and social processes that shape women's bodies, emotions, relationships, and lives. At the same time the metaphor of being *nailed* is also apt, as women are not completely free agents who construct their bodies and their bodily care according to their own will and whims. Instead, they are nailed to social positions and structures that shape not only their own bodies and the bodies of others but also the terms of commercialized embodied services.

Recent sociological and feminist scholarship has experienced a marked turn toward "bringing bodies back in" to theory and research.¹ As Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook argue, "Contemporary feminist theory

has added new ways to think about the body, and feminists now speak of writing the body, reading the body, sexing the body, racing the body, enabling the body, policing the body, disciplining the body, erasing the body, and politicizing the body."² I add to this list manicuring and nailing the body as new ways to think about the multiple forces shaping gendered bodies.

Because the intimacy of manicuring work engenders complex feelings, this work requires both physical labor and the extensive management of emotions, or what the sociologist Arlie Hochschild refers to as "emotional labor," in which "the emotional style of offering service is part of the service itself." The title of Hochschild's 1983 groundbreaking study, *The Managed Heart*, provides a rich metaphor for the control and commercialization of human feeling in service interactions. I play on Hochschild's title to coin the term *the managed hand*, which addresses the commercialization of both human feelings and *bodies* in manicuring work.³

Building on Hochschild's concept, I introduce the concept of body labor to designate the provision of body-related services and the management of both feelings and bodies that accompanies it. While service work increasingly involves managing the emotional work of the heart, it also involves managing the physical work of hands and the bodies they touch. Despite the many dimensions of emotional labor that scholars of gender and work have addressed, the body-related contours of low-wage service work dominated by immigrant women of color, particularly in the beauty industry, demand further research. Thus Asian-owned nail salons serve as a rich empirical site to develop the concept of body labor as a new theoretical lens through which to study gender, migration, race relations, and the emotional and embodied dimensions of service work.

While domination by Koreans of the nail salon niche in New York City is unusual in some ways, in other ways it reveals similar experiences among Asian immigrant women throughout the United States. My project emphasizes the specificities of Korean-owned nail salons in New York City while also exploring commonalities and differences among Korean, Vietnamese, and other Asian women based on their work in this industry.⁴ Thus it both recognizes and problematizes the strong tendency to lump all Asians together, despite multiple differences.

This book is not meant as a comprehensive overview of the nail salon industry in the United States. Instead, it focuses on the work of Asian women in this niche, specifically, Korean women in New York City, in order to illuminate the nature of the services provided and the social relations that shape them. Specifically, it theorizes new forms of body labor that unfold in the delivery of nail salon services to a broad range of customers, and it contextualizes these within shifting racial and gendered constructions of Asian immigrant women.

MANICURING IMAGES VERSUS INTERACTIONS

Popular culture would have us believe that beauty service establishments are homes to a universal and uncomplicated sisterhood. Dolly Parton's beauty salon in the film *Steel Magnolias* serves as a refuge in which privileged southern white women bare their souls. *Beauty Shop*, starring Queen Latifah, offers a multicultural version of a similar story.⁵ Manicurists also appear as women's best friends and therapists, most famously, when Reese Witherspoon as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* retreats to her manicurist after battling it out in the trenches of Harvard Law School. These media representations ignore the reality that beauty salons, and nail salons specifically, are not simply women's community centers, although they may in limited circumstances foster that impression. Instead, they are, first and foremost, places of employment, and the relationships forged within them are not simply between friends but are labor relations dictated by the protocols of the service industry.

Contrary to the popular representations of women as naturally and universally invested in the pursuit of beauty, many complex factors shape nail salons as feminized, globalized, postindustrial work sites and Asian immigrant women as the labor force most represented in this niche. Describing a process which she calls the "racialized feminization of labor," Lisa Lowe writes, "Asian immigrant and Asian American women are not simply the most recent formation within the genealogy of Asian American racialization; they, along with women working in the 'third world,' are the 'new' workforce within the global reorganization

of capitalism."⁶ Like Lowe and other scholars, I argue that gender is central to racial constructions of Asian Americans and shapes their incorporation into U.S. labor markets.⁷ Racial ideologies feminize Asian American women and men into particular jobs and reinforce notions of Asia itself as feminine. For Asian men this means that they gain acceptability by forfeiting their claims to conventional ideals of masculinity. In contrast, the terms of Asian women's racial acceptance require their enactment of forms of femininity grounded in subservient work. These complex social processes propel thousands of Asian immigrant women into nail salon work, and thousands more customers literally into their hands, but stereotypes that "Asian women are just good at nails" normalize their clustering in this niche. Thus everyday manicuring interactions both conceal and reproduce racial inequalities, labor migration flows, and the expansion of the global service economy under the veneer of women's supposedly common investment in beauty and beauty practices.

Racialized representations are simultaneously linked to gender and embedded in the racial imaginary through what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as "controlling images."⁸ As such they become taken-for-granted frameworks that serve to justify social arrangements. In the case of nail salon relations, controlling images pose certain women as the "natural" providers of manicures and other women as the entitled recipients of these services. These controlling images, however, are played out in face-to-face interactions in unpredictable ways, as women uncritically reproduce them in some situations and actively resist them in others.

In her 2003 "Revolution" tour, stand-up comedian Margaret Cho satirized the controlling image of the subservient Asian (Korean American) manicurist through her depiction of the Hollywood roles that she has been offered but refuses to play.⁹ Rather than begin with the well-known stereotypes of Asian women as dragon lady seductress, submissive China doll, or model minority television newscaster (although some of these appeared later in her show), her first act portrayed a manicurist. She would cock her head obsequiously to one side, pretend to hold a hand gingerly in front of her, and croon, "You have pretty nail." In the brazen comedic style that catapulted her to international fame, Cho

captures the fawning behavior associated with Asian women in service jobs while critiquing this depiction as a caricature.

Seated in the audience of her standing-room-only show, I was not sure whether to cheer or wince at Cho's performance. I applauded how she deftly played on the image of the Asian manicurist as a widely recognizable cultural stereotype while smashing it. At the same time her representations of the women who work in and patronize Asian-owned nail salons are oversimplified. During years of researching these sites I have lost the ability to accept such facile depictions of manicurists and their customers, even for the sake of a good laugh. The complexity of these women's lives and their relations with each other have challenged me to rethink my feminist, sociological, and Asian American consciousness. Can Margaret Cho's stand-up act even begin to hint at the contradictory relationships of manicurist and client, friend and confidante, caregiver and cultural translator negotiated across the manicuring table?

I hope it is obvious that I am setting this iconic comedian up as a straw, holding her to standards that no stand-up performer, however brilliant, could be expected to meet. While Cho's performance powerfully exposes demeaning stereotypes of Asian manicurists, it also short-changes the women who participate in these exchanges. Thus I invoke her performance as a jumping-off point to delve into women's manicuring practices and the ways that they manicure themselves and each other. As I watched Cho's performance, I wondered—what would the women in my study have to say about her representation of manicuring work? I think of Nancy Lee, the pseudonym I have given a manicurist at a Manhattan salon I call Uptown Nails; she provides intensive caregiving for her many elderly, middle-, and upper-class white customers.¹⁰ This includes massaging their arthritic hands and feet, helping them to the bathroom, and propping them up against the wall when they fall asleep while their nails are drying. On several occasions I heard Nancy make blunt comments to her coworkers about her clients, all veiled by a placid expression and uttered in her native Korean—"This one gives three dollars and thinks she's a BIG tipper." My guess is that Nancy would respond to Margaret Cho's depiction of manicurists with the same candor with which Nancy responded to my incessant questions about her

experiences in nail salon work: "I probably wouldn't have come to the U.S. if I knew this is what I would be doing. But after a few weeks, you get used to it. . . . I want to send my children to college."

Next I thought of Goldie Chun, the feisty owner of Artistic Nails, a bustling nail salon in a predominantly black neighborhood in Queens. She sports ornate nails and low-rise jeans while directing customers to stations for acrylic tips, airbrushing, and hand-painted nail art. In the course of a day I have seen her chase rats with a broom, grab a cell phone from a customer arranging a drug drop-off, joke with customers about their boyfriends, and give candy to children. "When I first got here," she told me, "I was so surprised. I thought 'Oh—my—God, how I am going to work here? How can I get the business here?' . . . Because [of] all the blacks. I could not even open the door of my car. . . . I had such a hard time, all the time fighting. I had to call the police. . . . Now, I know how to handle that. When they say something, I say, 'Oh, these people want these things.' Then I talk to them, this and that. I know how to do that now." Goldie's work in the nail salons wrought major changes in her identity, from a college student in Seoul to a struggling immigrant mother to the owner of a profitable business in a neighborhood where she once was afraid to get out of her car. She summarized the impact of nail salon work on her life: "I got more hot tempered, and not listen to people, and I was like that even in my home. When my sister and mother visited me, they were surprised about my change. If the members of my church could see me at work, they would say, 'What happened to you!' They wouldn't believe how tough I can be."

What about the customers, who are invisible in Cho's comic performance? The first who came to mind was Alia, an African American grocery store cashier who prides herself on her long nails adorned with rhinestones and hand-painted flames. She explained, "My hands are real big and rough. With my nails done, they don't look so chopped up. You know women, you know the way we are—we want to look ladylike. I used to be embarrassed about my hands but now I hold them up." Alia sees her nails as the ticket to claiming membership in a club from which she has been excluded for most of her life—the club of women who take pride in their appearance. Her nails also connect her to women with whom she

otherwise would have little contact. “Everyone who gets on my line has to look at my nails, and some of them will spend two, three, four minutes asking me, ‘Oh, where you get them done?’ . . . I would have on sweat pants, but if my nails are done, it makes me feel like I have on a whole new outfit. I can’t dress up everyday, but I can have my nails done all the time.” And the proliferation of Asian-owned nail salons is one of the main reasons that she can—in styles she prefers and at prices she can afford.

Similarly, Patti, who identifies herself as a Jewish American native of Brooklyn and a chronic nail biter, applauds the growth of Asian-owned nail salons for enabling her to have her nails done weekly in order to repair the damage of her constant gnawing. “The best is when I come here with my fingers hurting from my biting them. I cannot stand it. I cannot stand looking at them, and I cannot stand biting them because it even keeps me up at night—biting, biting, and biting. So . . . leaving after I get done with all my nails on—that is the best.” Patti works as a hospital social worker and credits her weekly nail salon visits with helping her to survive the daily physical and emotional stressors of her job. In return she has provided regular and tangible support to the salon owner, Charlie Choi, by mediating with upset customers and helping to translate English-language conversations and documents. Charlie values Patti’s patronage, but she also acknowledges that Patti’s emotional neediness and physically demanding nails can be stressful. “I’m very happy to see her because she is kind and I know she really needs my help, but when we are very busy and I don’t have time to spend with her, I feel bad,” Charlie told me.

Controlling images of Asian manicurists, as well as the disruption of these images in performances such as Margaret Cho’s, illuminate one-dimensional representations of Asian immigrant women. This book complicates these images by asking questions about the social relations from which they emerge and that they in turn influence. In exploring the variation in manicuring services, this book examines three different forms of body labor at Asian-owned nail salons: “pampering body labor” in nail spas serving mostly white upper- and middle-class women; “expressive body labor” in nail art salons serving mostly black working- and lower-middle-class women; and “routinized body labor” at discount nail salons serving racially and socioeconomically mixed customers. Like the emotional labor

that Hochschild documents, pampering body labor involves catering to the needs of customers, but it is complicated by differences of language, culture, class, and race. This form of body labor enforces the treatment of white women's bodies as both special and normative, thereby upholding these women's racial and class privilege. Simultaneously, it disciplines Asian women's bodies to display deference and attentiveness in line with the controlling image of the Asian "model minority." In contrast, expressive body labor in nail art salons serving a mostly black working-class clientele disrupts dominant racialized discourses regarding "Korean-black conflict," which emphasize tensions and hostility between these groups. Instead, Korean and black women can create respectful, reciprocal, and even affectionate relations through service interactions, although these ties remain fragile and tenuous in the face of pervasive racial and class divisions. Finally, discount nail salons reframe manicures from a luxury product to a one-size-fits-all consumer good. However, the scaled-down aspects of routinized manicures kindle fears of disease and contamination that resuscitate negative views of Asians as the "yellow peril." Interactions in these different sites are shaped but not determined by racial relations and economic positions. Instead, they are negotiated through particular practices of gendered work, specifically, the exchanges of body labor between diverse women in various types of nail salons. Furthermore, these different kinds of salons do not exist in isolation from each other but are part of a constellation of social relations in which Asian immigrant women are incorporated into existing divisions within U.S. society and culture in complex and contradictory ways. The different kinds of services and service relations in the range of salons that Asian immigrant women operate illustrate how they simultaneously play the roles of idealized minority citizen, racialized outsiders, and economic and cultural threat.

ACROSS THE MANICURING TABLE: STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

No individual woman suddenly wakes up with the idea that manicured nails are central to her identity. Years of socialization, along with the

messages of her immediate social worlds, coalesce in her determination that her nails say something important about who she is and that it is worth paying someone to make the statement that she desires. At the same time women are not simply puppets acting out social dictates through their beauty practices and their relations with their beauty service providers. Women make choices, not only about how, how often, and from whom to purchase beauty services but also about the ways that they define themselves and others in relation to these practices. While most customers insist on seeing their manicures as purely private rituals, their manicuring practices emerge at the nexus of historical and contemporary forces that have fostered a booming global niche in nail products and services.

Similarly, no individual woman simply wakes up to find herself seated in the manicurist's chair.¹¹ Forces beyond her control, such as global patterns of feminized labor migration flows, the growth of service-related industries, racialized job structures, and the resources of her family and ethnic community shape the conditions of her employment. Yet within these large-scale structural conditions, women make choices about the work they do and the terms under which they do it, although these terms reflect numerous constraints. Manicurists construct new identities in the salon (the women often christen themselves with a new "American name"—Eunju becomes Eunice, Haeran becomes Helen) that ultimately demand conformity to their status as service workers, even as the women themselves are incorporating competing identities as mother, wife, student, professional, immigrant, Korean, Asian, and American.

Social interactions in particular sites, such as nail salons, are simultaneously patterned by external forces and negotiated by individual actors. As a feminist sociologist I seek to understand dominant patterns of social relations, particularly those that relate to women and the persistence of gender inequality, but I am equally interested in departures from and resistance to these patterns. I am also concerned with identifying the mechanisms through which these various patterns are reproduced and disrupted, often in surprising and unpredictable ways.

What kind of relations do women forge in this exchange of manicuring services? How have Korean women in New York, and Asian women

throughout the United States, become the *de rigueur* providers of nail services, and why have customers from across the racial and class spectrum flocked to their doors? What factors shape the lives of Asian immigrant manicurists and their customers and the complex interactions that unfold between them? In what contexts do entrenched hierarchies of power and privilege prevail, and in what contexts are individuals able to contest and rework them? What happens during the manicure, and what explains the variation in manicuring practices and relations? How does this fleeting encounter shape these women after they leave the manicuring table? And what is the significance of these encounters for relations between the different groups to which these women belong, specifically, Asians, blacks, and whites, immigrants and natives, consumers and service providers? In exploring these questions my study is grounded in an ethnographic tradition that seeks to see the global through the local, to capture the larger workings of society by understanding how they play out in the mundane happenings at a specific site.¹² I believe that the answers to these questions lie not so much in individual women's psyches, nor in the media onslaught of beauty advertising or the rising cultural standards for women's appearance. These factors play an important part, but the larger story of why so many women seek manicures and why their manicuring practices vary so widely must address broader social shifts, especially the expansion of the global service economy, increase in women's paid participation in the labor force, flows of feminized migrant labor, and persistent racial and class inequalities. Centrally implicated in all these processes are women's bodies, both as the tools and the targets of new forms of work, which I characterize as body labor.

In what ways is nail salon work gendered? In what ways are these gendered work processes remolded by race and class? Nail salon work is gendered in that it involves mostly women as both service providers and customers; it focuses on the construction of feminine beauty; it is situated in feminized semiprivate spaces; and it involves gendered work practices, specifically, the performance of emotional and body labor between women.¹³ But it is not solely gendered work. Patterns of body labor conform to the racial and class positions of the customers and the associated feeling rules that define their service expectations. Building upon Paul

Gilroy's assertion that "gender is the modality in which race is lived," I argue that race, as well as class, are lived in nail salons, and other body-service sites, through differences in the gendered performances of body labor.¹⁴ These performances reveal that the simplistic framework of "sisterhood is global" does not hold in women's relations across the manicuring table and in beauty service work more generally. Instead, these relations demonstrate intractable divisions between women.

FEMINISM, BEAUTY, AND INEQUALITIES BETWEEN WOMEN

While surfing the Internet for nail-related articles, I stumbled upon a piece and was immediately disturbed by its jarring depiction of Asian manicurists as simultaneously exoticized sexual objects and maternal caregivers. One moment the author is sexually aroused by her manicurist, the next she regresses to an infantilized state of passivity. Even more unsettling is her insistence that this exchange somehow qualifies as an empowering experience simply because it occurs between women. I was about to dismiss this as the unfortunate ranting of some adolescent blogger, when I noticed the name of the author. Jennifer Baumgardner, who penned this reflection on her nail salon experiences, is widely recognized as a feminist author and leader in the Third Wave feminist movement.¹⁵ I found myself depressed and infuriated by her piece—and in a quandary as to how to respond. These feelings were compounded by my overall respect and admiration of her work. I asked myself, if a leading feminist writer and activist could engage in a manicure with such uncritical self-aggrandizement, what chance is there that the average customer will recognize the problematic aspects of this exchange, let alone strive to change them? Baumgardner writes:

But finances and love aside, long, well-tended nails are sexy. And, the process that gets them that way has a nice sensual intimacy that is rare in a \$6 service. . . . The manicurist kneads your palm and slides her fingers up and down on the fleshy nook in between your pointer finger and thumb. As she pulls on your hand and wrist, your fingers splayed open,

arm vertical, palm toward her, you rock slightly in your chair from the force of her rubbing. . . . When it's over, if it's cold out, your manicurist has to help you into your coat. Standing in front of you, she zips or buttons you in, and wraps your scarf around your neck like she's your mom and you're suddenly six again. . . . A big reason that the manicure transaction works the way it does—as safe, inexpensive carnality—is because it is a relationship among women. . . . I'd be lying if I didn't note that there is a class and race overtone to the New York manicure experience: the manicurists are small ladies who speak loudly in Korean to one another; the clients are yuppyish, mainly white, and talk too loudly into cell phones to other yuppyish, mainly white people.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Baumgardner's stature as a prominent feminist thinker stands in stark contrast to her objectification of the Korean immigrant woman who performs her manicure. While Baumgardner concedes that this service is shaped by race and class inequalities, this concession does not lead her to consider the manicurist's perspective and what this exchange means for her. Instead, Baumgardner goes on to commend herself for turning the supposedly unfeminist obsession with her nails into what she sees as a pleasurable and empowering act.

By criticizing Baumgardner—and other educated white middle-class U.S. feminists who may share her limitations in understanding women's lives very different from her own—I find myself, like many women of color, transnational and postcolonial feminists, caught in a difficult position. I do not want to deepen divisions within the feminist movement and provide further ammunition to those who are already too eager to invalidate its intellectual and activist goals. At the same time I find her self-congratulatory comments not only offensive but also indicative of attitudes that stand in the way of any kind of meaningful gender solidarity. Thus I hope that critics do not dismiss this book as a long rant that diverts attention from the work of feminist social change; rather, my hope is that this book exposes a persistent blind spot in many women's lives. That is, certain women benefit from the intimate body and emotional labor of other women at great cost to both those who serve them and the goal of more egalitarian relations—not just between women and men but between women across multiple boundaries of race, class, immigration, and citizenship.



Figure 1. Asian women's work in nail salons reveals complex relations between women as well as their own agency in creating and performing these services.

With these concerns in mind, I hope this book serves as an invitation to explore difficult and uncomfortable issues of power and privilege between women—issues that are central to forging an inclusive feminist scholarship and movement. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes in this chapter's epigraph, confronting privilege and inequality between women is a painful but necessary process to end oppressive working conditions in jobs such as housecleaning and other services. Likewise, a better understanding of the dynamics of nail salon work can illuminate the lives of women who provide manicures and their customers, as all women stand to gain from greater equality in the social relations that shape these sites.

BEAUTY MYTH VERSUS BEAUTY WORK:
WHO DOES THE THIRD SHIFT?

Instead of addressing the inequalities between the providers and purchasers of beauty services, a major focus in the popular and scholarly

literature on beauty has been on the ways that the “beauty myth” undercuts privileged women’s professional and political advancement by shackling them with unattainable expectations regarding their physical appearance. The author Naomi Wolf is perhaps the best-known articulator of this argument. She asserts that beauty ideology and the beauty industry are important tools in orchestrating the backlash against women’s rising social, political, and economic power: Wolf regards the heightened standards for women’s physical appearance as the “replacement shackle” to domestic work. Invoking the sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s concept of the “second shift,” which refers to women’s double duty as wage earners and homemakers, Wolf asserts that beauty work has become women’s “third shift” and functions as an additional tool to subvert women’s increasing power. “The backlash was provoked,” Wolf writes, “because even when they were weighted with the ‘second shift’ of domestic work, women still battered inroads into the power structure. . . . *Someone had to come up with a third shift fast.*”¹⁷ Thus she argues that contemporary beauty culture imposes unattainable standards and regimens that divert time, energy, and money from career advancement while lowering women’s confidence in pursuing various goals. Wolf’s book has served as a call to arms for individual women and the feminist movement to take seriously the cultural dictates of beauty as a major force in the ongoing subordination of women.

Unfortunately, Wolf and her supporters have ignored the many women who do not do their own beauty work. Instead, they pass off sizable portions of this third shift onto the shoulders of less-privileged women. Whereas Hochschild followed up her analysis of the second shift with *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (with Barbara Ehrenreich, 2004), which explores the transnational inequalities that allow professional women in industrialized nations to rely upon women from poorer countries for their domestic duties, few scholars have focused on these global inequalities in beauty work. This book addresses this gap, arguing that, like the domestic work of the second shift, the beauty work of the third shift is not laid solely on the shoulders of educated powerful women. Just as immigrant women, predominantly from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Philippines, pick up the second shift of raising children, cooking food, and cleaning

homes, the third shift of beauty work also increasingly relies upon the labor of immigrant women of color.¹⁸ Parallel social and historical conditions that push certain immigrant women into the work of housework and child care channel other women into the work of beauty services. Like domestic service, beauty services are regarded and remunerated as unskilled labor, when in fact beauty work entails highly skilled procedures as well as the exercise of extensive emotional labor. Furthermore, just as domestic workers trade care work for a paycheck at the expense of nurturing their own families, the women who perform beauty work often sacrifice caring for their own families and their own physical and emotional health in the service of other women's beauty.

While contributing incisive critiques of the contradictions involved in women's search for beauty, the literature on beauty has focused mainly on the experiences of middle-class white women consumers and their physical and psychological exploitation by the male-dominated beauty industry.¹⁹ More attention needs to be given to the substandard working conditions, unequal power relations, and complex emotional lives of the women who provide these services.

WOMEN, BEAUTY, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF GENDER

When do commonalities based upon gender take precedence, and when are they subordinated to, or fragmented by, other categories of difference? Intersectional, transnational, and postcolonial feminist scholars have identified the problematic assumptions of gender essentialism in academic and popular discourse that treat gender monolithically and fail to account for its fluidity and variation in local and global contexts.²⁰ Instead, the presumed commonalities between women, particularly around their investment in feminine beauty practices, unmistakably break down when examined in specific sites in which women interact.

Whereas feminist scholars have often focused on gender to the neglect of race, class, and immigration, scholars of race, class, and immigration have often neglected gender. This study bridges these literatures by

showing how gender, as enacted through body labor in the feminized niche of nail salons, can both disrupt ideologies of race and immigration as well as reinforce discrimination and exclusion. In particular, gender is an understudied factor in explaining the presence or absence of racial conflict in immigrant-owned small business establishments.

Race, class, and immigrant status also do not operate monolithically in their intersections with gender, as women of the same racial and immigrant groups do not necessarily cluster predictably into simplistic groupings or experiences. For example, middle-class white women are not all equally privileged nor are they identically demanding of pampering treatment. Likewise, working-class black women do not all uniformly desire long acrylic nails nor do they all experience tensions with their Asian nail care providers. Asian immigrant women en masse do not find the same motivations and meaning for pursuing this work, nor do they uniformly relate to their customers based solely on racial markers. Instead, distinct patterns emerge and are renegotiated by individual actors within the constraints of their social contexts.

While scholars of intersectionality have convincingly argued that gender operates in conjunction with multiple categories of difference, this theoretical understanding often flies in the face of the commonsense ways that people live these categories as separate and unbridgeable—you are either a woman or you are black; it's either about gender or about race.²¹ This “one-or-the-other” framing is ubiquitous in mundane interactions as well as in contemporary politics.²² Therefore, while I firmly assert an intersectional framing of gender and race as simultaneous and interconnected categories, I also explore why most people stubbornly adhere to seeing these as either/or constructs. In order to disrupt these commonsense dichotomies of gender and race, I seek to theorize ways that race, gender, and other forms of difference intersect and to examine specific ways that these intersections are forged and contested in concrete social settings.

Which intersections are most salient in any given context? While I recognize the importance of multiple forms of difference, including age, sexuality, and disability, I focus mainly on the intersections of gender, class, race, and immigration for several reasons. First, this framework captures the understandings that respondents in this study most often

articulated. Second, both public discourse and academic explanations of relations between Asian immigrants and other groups have prioritized heavily racialized understandings of relations between immigrants and native-born Americans. While class and economic relations are clearly central to all the questions that I address here, they are often rendered invisible and rewritten in terms of race, foreign status, or general notions of “otherness.” Thus I attempt to show not only how race, class, immigration, and gender intersect but also why and how these particular intersections are visible or hidden in performances of body labor.

FROM THE MANAGED HEART
TO THE MANAGED HAND

The concept of body labor that I develop in this book is indebted to Hochschild’s foundational work on emotional labor, which mapped the terrain of commercialized feelings but still left much ground to be explored. One of the many reasons that the concept of emotional labor hit such a resounding chord is that it provides language for a phenomenon that many people, particularly women, recognize as an integral but invisible part of their everyday work life. *Emotional labor* serves as a shorthand for the ineffable but constant attention put into smiling, complimenting, exchanging pleasantries, and smoothing over conflicts that comprise an inordinate chunk of the workday for those in subordinate positions—particularly, women serving men. Building upon Hochschild’s work, studies of emotional labor have illuminated the increasing prevalence of emotional management in specific occupations and industries, the gendered composition of the emotional labor force, wage discrimination, job burnout, and other occupational health issues. While scholars of emotional labor have examined certain embodied aspects of emotional labor concerned with gendered bodily *display*, ranging from control of weight to smiles, the study of bodily *contact* in service interactions deserves greater attention. In addition to neglecting embodied aspects, the concept of emotional labor has been less plastic in capturing the experiences of those subordinated on the basis of race, class, and immigrant status, in addition to gender.²³



Figure 2. Body labor brings diverse women into intimate embodied and emotional exchanges.

Similarly, the scholarship on gender and the body, while offering many important critical interventions, has largely focused on deconstructing the body itself, rather than examining work sites where actual bodies and their gendered meanings are constructed. Although feminist scholars have long been engaged in the project of “putting the body on the intellectual map,” Kathy Davis argues that they have neglected the day-to-day interactions involving actual bodies.²⁴ By bringing an embodied perspective into the study of gendered work, this book highlights the intricate everyday practices of enhancing the appearance of women’s bodies in body-related service-sector work. Exploration of the multiple dimensions of body labor in nail salons can illuminate other body-related service jobs, including nurse, nanny, plastic surgeon, massage therapist, sex worker, and cosmetics seller.²⁵

In addition to illuminating studies of gender and work, the lens of body labor can also bring new perspectives to the study of race and immigration. In *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes and the “Immigrant Menace,”*

Alan Kraut writes, "While scholars have paid considerable attention to negotiations between newcomers and native-born in matters of politics, religion, music, food, and social behaviors of various kinds, insufficient attention has been paid to the ongoing conversation between aliens and Americans over matters of the body."²⁶ Kraut has coined the term *medicalized nativism* to describe the justification of anti-immigrant sentiments based on fears of bodily contagion. While this embodied pathologizing of immigrants has been explored from a public health perspective, few have analyzed the embodied dimensions of everyday contact between immigrants and natives by looking at gendered work in the global service economy. Thus, by "bringing the body back in" to the study of race, immigration, gender, and work, the concept of body labor as applied to manicuring work reveals new dimensions of everyday social relations.

How, then, do I define *body labor*, and how does this concept relate to emotional labor? The term *body labor* designates commercialized exchanges in which service workers attend to the physical comfort and appearance of the customers, through direct contact with the body (such as touching, massaging, and manicuring) and by attending to the feelings involved with these practices. Furthermore, body labor requires that service workers manage their own feelings regarding the corporeality of their work while instilling their work with a sense of caring for their customers. Thus I use the term *body labor* to incorporate both emotional and embodied dimensions of body-service work, whereas the term *emotional labor* specifically references Hochschild's concept and related scholarship. While Hochschild distinguishes between emotion work and emotional labor, I adapt her concepts to draw distinctions among body work, body labor, and physical labor but also acknowledge overlap in these concepts.²⁷ I use *body work* as a general term for referring to commercial and noncommercial efforts directed at maintaining or improving the health and/or appearance of the body. This can include caring for one's own or another's body, whether paid or unpaid. *Physical labor* refers to work enacted *by* the body as the tool or form of labor. In contrast, the term *body labor* focuses specifically on the exchange value of services performed *on* the body for a wage or other form of compensation. Body labor entails extensive physical labor in which the body serves as the

vehicle for performing service work, but it also incorporates the body as the *site* or *object* upon which services are performed. It also involves the management of commercialized *feelings*, which is the defining characteristic of emotional labor, but *body labor* emphasizes the management of commercialized *embodied* exchanges and thus examines feelings as they are related to the servicing of bodies.

These two arenas—feelings and bodies—are often referenced as primary components of women’s shared experiences and are framed in opposition to men’s presumed commonalities in the domains of intellect and action. These outmoded binaries stubbornly persist, further mistakenly enforcing beliefs that women’s feelings and bodies are not only distinct from men’s but similar to each other’s. An intersectional analysis is again important here, as it highlights differences between women, as well as parallels and distinctions in emotions, bodies, and the work they entail.

Hochschild’s definition of emotional labor focuses on a particular form that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place.”²⁸ However, rather than being regarded as one form of emotional labor, this kind of caring attentive service has often been applied as a general definition. Asian-owned nail salons thus serve as a rich site to explore the range of emotional labor in work sites that are differently gendered, raced, and classed and are not necessarily governed by the feeling rules of white middle-class America. Furthermore, these salons can illuminate other sites in which emotional labor incorporates bodies as well as feelings and involves women serving women (as opposed to mainly women serving men).

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

I began this project as my dissertation research in 1997–98, with fourteen months of intensive fieldwork in New York City nail salons. While drawing from this early research, the data in the book include much more recent research during the summers of 2003, 2006, 2007, and 2009.

Data collection for this project has thus spanned more than a decade, thereby documenting patterns of both change and continuity in these sites. I have served as a receptionist, shared meals, and socialized with the owners, workers, and patrons, including visits to employees' homes and churches and several impromptu visits to *noreh-bang* (Korean-style karaoke clubs). I sought employment as a manicurist, and although I found one owner who was generous (or naive) enough to let me work in her salon, I abandoned this strategy, in part because I lacked proper licensing but mostly because of my thorough technical ineptitude. (Even for the sake of better research, it is hard to justify having someone pay you to do their nails when you cannot even make your own look presentable.) I thus pursued another strategy to gain access to the salons—cooperation with a community-based Asian American organization, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, to offer English-language workplace literacy classes to manicurists.²⁹ Initially, these classes gained me access and offered some reciprocity for respondents' support and cooperation, but I increasingly incorporated many of the insights and interactions from these classes into the data collection. While my presence as a researcher invariably altered the naturalistic setting, our shared ethnicity (I am a second-generation Korean American woman) allowed me to blend into the site, despite our class, immigration, and generational differences; that I was able to blend in is evidenced by some customers' mistaking me for the daughter of the owner of one salon.

The research design for the study included ethnography at six sites: "Uptown Nails" and "Exclusive Nails," located in predominantly white middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods; "Downtown Nails" and "Artistic Nails" in predominantly black (African American and Caribbean) working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods; and "Crosstown Nails" and "Convenient Nails" in racially and socioeconomically mixed neighborhoods. In addition, the research included in-depth, semistructured interviews ($N = 77$) with thirteen Korean nail salon owners, fifteen Korean nail salon workers, twenty-three black customers, and twenty-six white customers. I also conducted more than two dozen key respondent interviews with representatives of Korean business associations, reporters for the Korean ethnic press, New York State licensing officials, administrators

at the New York City mayor's office, instructors at Korean-operated nail schools, employees of Korean nail supply stores and distributors, and staff at several local community organizations and national advocacy groups. To provide comparisons based on gender and ethnicity, I interviewed two Korean men who are nail salon owners, two Korean male manicurists, three white male customers, two black male customers, two Vietnamese nail salon owners (one man, one woman), and one Chinese, one Russian, and two Ecuadoran women manicurists. To provide comparisons to other Korean-owned small businesses, I engaged in limited participant observation in a Korean-owned grocery store and interviewed the owner and manager. As part of extended participant observation, I engaged women in dozens of informal unstructured interviews about nails on subways, at parties, waiting in lines, and in the myriad locations in which New Yorkers find an excuse to strike up a conversation. Research followed the institutional review board protocols of the sponsoring institutions.

In-depth interviews averaged ninety minutes to two hours for owners and workers and thirty to forty-five minutes for customers. I interviewed owners and workers in Korean or English, depending on their preference and level of fluency. Several bilingual research assistants helped with locating respondents, translation, transcription, and follow-up interviews. Rather than editing participants' and translators' grammatical errors, I have preserved their use of English as it shows the natural speech patterns of Korean immigrants. I interviewed customers in English at the salon while they were having their manicures, and in some cases I arranged a follow-up meeting or telephone interview. I tape-recorded interviews when interviewees consented to the procedure (approximately two-thirds of the interviewees). In cases where respondents refused or where tape-recording was difficult, I made extensive handwritten notes and typed them immediately afterward. I use pseudonyms for customers and service providers that approximate the names they use in the salons. As many Korean women have adopted American-style names in the workplace, I follow this convention. I have also changed the names of nail salons. I refer to key respondents according to a description of their positions and, if they gave permission, by their names and organizational affiliations.

RESEARCHING ONE'S OWN: REFLEXIVITY
AND FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

Where does the urge come from to barge into strangers' lives and pick apart the meanings of their words, gestures, random thoughts, and most hidden feelings? It has become standard practice in ethnographic and feminist research for the author to provide a biographical account of the experiences that drive her interest in the project. These practices are sometimes misunderstood or dismissed as self-indulgent and superfluous to the study, perhaps satisfying readers' curiosity but a distraction from the real data and analysis. In the eyes of its harshest critics, reflexivity is regarded as an excuse for relativism or sloppiness. I do not agree. On the contrary, recent theorizing in various disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields, especially feminist methodology, emphasizes the importance of situating the researcher vis-à-vis the research sites and participants in order to acknowledge biases and account for them in data collection and interpretation.³⁰ Practices of reflexivity have evolved to include not only reflections on the researcher's social location and its impact on the research but also evaluation of the multiple perspectives of participants and audiences and how the context of academic institutions and political discourse impact this process. While I do not address all these dimensions of reflexivity, I have written myself into the text at various points in order to make my perspectives and role in shaping the research transparent and to allow readers to assess the validity of the findings and consider alternative interpretations.³¹

Several biographical experiences shaped the ethnographic impulses behind this project, not the least of which is shared ethnicity with many of the research subjects. I am the daughter of Korean immigrants. Like many of the women in this study, my mother entered into immigrant entrepreneurship, pouring the family savings into a small business, an Asian gift shop rather than a nail salon. Working in the shop as a child, I witnessed her struggles to negotiate not only everyday relations with customers but also her own multiple roles as self-employed businesswoman, wife and then ex-wife of a minister, mother of four young children, supporter of extended family in Korea, and new U.S. citizen.

I tell this story to acknowledge that my immediate sympathies tend to lie with the Korean women who work in and own the salons. Their struggles to earn a living, negotiate a new culture, and find meaning in their lives as immigrants resonate with my parents' story of displacement and uneven assimilation into U.S. society. At the same time I have often inwardly criticized these women for their discriminatory behavior, ethnocentric views, traditional gender norms, and unrealistic expectations for their children's achievement. While I feel strong ties to my Korean heritage, my upbringing has been largely outside the Korean community, and I identify most strongly as Asian American. My experiences illustrate that the terms *Korean* and *Asian American* do not refer to homogeneous groups but are undercut by multiple divisions, including citizenship, religion, class, political ideologies, and gender and sexual politics. I have also worked as an activist with several community and labor rights organizations, experiences that shape my concerns about the working conditions in the salons. Chinese and Latina workers of various ethnicities are increasingly employed to perform the dirtiest, most undesirable, work for the lowest pay and in the most undesirable working conditions. Lacking Spanish- and Chinese-language ability and research support, I regret the limitations of this study in addressing their experiences. I was able to conduct only a few interviews and engage in limited participant observation with these workers.

My indebtedness to the Korean owners for allowing me to conduct research in their salons necessitated that I maintain cordial relations with them and respect their viewpoints. This was most challenging when they expressed openly racist or antifeminist views. I was often torn between not saying anything and appearing to validate their perspectives or confronting them, at the risk of altering the naturalistic setting and losing access to the research sites. Early in my research I mostly kept my mouth shut, but as the level of trust with participants increased, I became more open about expressing my views. Several interesting and revealing interactions resulted, and I have included these as part of the data presentation throughout the book. One story in particular is worth highlighting here for its theoretical and methodological significance for this study.

To get to know the manicurists and reciprocate for their participation in my research, I offered to give English lessons during breaks at one salon, Uptown Nails. Although initially this was a gesture of appreciation to the women for agreeing to participate in my study, I found that the classes I held transformed my research questions and the dynamics of knowledge and power in the research process. For the first class I presented a lesson on how to ask for directions, copied from a beginner text for teaching English as a second language. The women participated dutifully, reading handouts, repeating phrases, and even good-humoredly acting out role-plays. However, the following week, when I arrived with another lesson, the women balked. Nancy tactfully told me that they appreciated my willingness to teach them, but they preferred that I just do my research. As I tried to hide my hurt feelings for their rebuke of my attempt at feminist reciprocity, I inquired, "Are you too busy, or do you not think it is important to learn English?" Stacey, the manager, instantly blurted, "Oh, no, we think it's very important to learn English, just not the English that you are teaching us." My curiosity sparked, I ventured, "So, what English do you think is important?" Stacey looked me in the eye and said, "I want to know how you say, 'You look like you lost weight.'" Nancy then chimed in, "How do you say, 'This color looks good with your dress?'" Another manicurist interjected, "*This* is the most important thing to know how to say—'Your boyfriend will think you look pretty!'" We all burst out laughing, and for the next half hour they bombarded me with questions about ways to compliment customers, including comparing them with various movie stars. I felt as if scales had fallen from my eyes. Rather than obsequiously catering to their customers, the manicurists are strategic in their delivery of emotional pampering and revealed that they understand the skills that they need to fulfill this aspect of their work.

At the time this interaction took me by surprise, but looking back several insights are now obvious to me. First, manicurists at this upscale salon clearly understood the expectation that they attend to their customers' feelings, and they did so consciously and at times humorously, rather than as victims or blind followers of the dictates of beauty service. Second, their conformity to their customers' expectations does not signal a blind desire to assimilate but instead derives from the conditions of

gendered service work, specifically, pampering body labor at nail spas. In other words, their emotional and embodied performances, rather than cultural traits, are adaptations to the kind of labor they engage in as immigrant women workers. At the same time their accommodations to body labor end up reinforcing the controlling image of hardworking, eager-to-please Asian immigrants. Finally, these strategic negotiations are often invisible to customers who benefit from them and even to somewhat detached observers like me. They became apparent only when the women took it upon themselves to confront me, in this case with the total inefficacy of the formal English that I was attempting to teach them, and instead asserted their need to learn colloquial forms of flattery and banter. Thus, instead of the researcher's bestowing her superior knowledge upon the researched, these women demonstrated their more nuanced understanding of the work that they perform on a daily basis.

Likewise, I have also had to challenge my hidden biases toward nail salon customers as dupes of oppressive ideologies of beauty and femininity and instead recognize their active participation in shaping the meaning of their manicuring practices. I must admit that in the beginning I saw the customers as mostly vain and frivolous. I had never had my nails professionally manicured and could not fathom the investment these women had in maintaining their fingertips. Also, my first paid nonfamily employment as a teenager had been in a suburban beauty salon that catered mostly to well-heeled elderly white women. While I have some fond recollections of customers, my strongest memories are of unremitting requests to adjust hair dryer settings, bring cups of coffee, and assist with handbags and coats, accompanied by frequent comments about my diligent work ethic and unaccented English. Thus my initial orientation toward customers could best be characterized as distant and somewhat dismissive.

Over months of conducting research, however, I came to know the nail salon customers and to understand the multilayered significance to them of manicured nails. Early in my research I engaged in forays around the city, receiving manicures and pedicures. While the purpose of these visits was to scope out sites and develop relationships with potential participants, I confess that, like many customers, I quickly took to these services. In one salon the women insisted on giving me free manicures, and I recall

the warmth I felt toward them as they massaged the tensions of graduate school and city living out of my hands. When people complimented my newly polished nails, I felt surprisingly flattered. Once I splurged on acrylic extensions and designs and basked in the feeling of power I felt drumming my long airbrushed nails on tabletops and subway railings. While my own manicuring phase was short lived, it was enough to engender an appreciation for the allure of nice-looking nails and the services that accompany them, especially for women whose bimonthly manicures may be the only thing they consistently do for themselves.

Are such beauty practices parasitic to women's self-esteem and a diversion from other more worthy pursuits or do they offer women a potential source of pleasure and power? In the women's studies, sociology, and Asian American studies courses that I have taught, I often find students intensely divided in these debates regarding beauty culture. While I agree that contemporary standards of feminine beauty have reached ridiculous extremes and fuel the exploitation of women, I also recognize that beauty and its regimens can provide meaning and opportunities for certain women. While I am critical of the distorted images of women's bodies used by corporate advertising to boost profit, I doubt that the multibillion-dollar beauty industry will disappear anytime soon. In addition, employment and self-employment in nail salons will remain one of the more attractive job prospects for Asian immigrant women as long as they are deterred from other jobs. I also think that it is important to understand the various needs that manicured nails fulfill for customers while not giving up on possibilities for women to fulfill these needs other than cosmetically. Thus, rather than condemning or dismissing the enterprise of manicuring nails, I regard these exchanges as a rare window through which to view women and the complex forces that shape their bodies, feelings, and relations with each other.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book uses nail salons as a site to examine the patterns of commercialized emotional and embodied exchange and the contexts of these

interactions, both inside and outside salons. The lens of body labor illuminates how and why the actions, beliefs, and feelings that seem so natural and justified for one party in this exchange can strike the other as rude, demeaning, or simply incomprehensible. As a sociologist, I focus not so much on individuals' internal processing of these exchanges, which is more the work of psychologists, but on the social structures that shape them and give them meaning. My purpose in describing and analyzing nail services is not to valorize or condemn women on either side of the manicuring table. Nonetheless, I believe that inequalities in power and status allow some women greater choice, and hence responsibility, in shaping these exchanges.

The chapters in this book address multiple dimensions of manicuring exchanges. Chapter 1 examines the growth of the nail salon industry, focusing on New York City and the clustering of Asian women, particularly Koreans, in this employment sector. How have nail salons and the services they offer become so prevalent? Who are the women who engage in these service interactions, and what factors have led them to either side of the manicuring table? In short, what can a manicure tell us about the larger society in which it is performed? This chapter situates the burgeoning nail salon industry within the expansion and globalization of service work. The conditions that have fueled Asian women's domination of the nail niche in New York City include gendered employment patterns, labor migration flows, ethnic community resources, racialized representations, and political and economic relations between South Korea and the United States.

Chapter 2 documents the stories of particular Korean women working in the salons. Who are these women, and how did they find this work? Why do they stay? How does this work affect their lives? This chapter examines in-depth narratives of Korean owners and workers, situating them within debates in the study of gender and immigration, particularly regarding the mixed gains and losses that migration, paid work, and reconfigured family relations bring to women.

Chapter 3 focuses on the customers. Who are the women who patronize these salons, and what are the factors that influence them to get their nails done? Why do they choose particular nail styles, and how do they

understand their own manicuring practices? Customers' narratives illustrate that beauty is not monolithic but that women in different racial and class locations construct and reconstruct the meaning of the manicure according to contrasting norms of femininity and beauty.

The next three chapters shift attention to relations across the manicuring table among customers, workers, and owners in different kinds of nail salons in diverse racial and socioeconomic settings. How do virtual strangers negotiate relations that involve semi-intimate physical and emotional contact that traverses lines of race, class, immigration, and gender? Varying forms of body labor emerge in distinct settings, and the contours of this work shape racial constructions of Asians and their relations with other groups.

Chapter 4 examines "nail spas" serving predominantly white middle-class and upper-class customers through "pampering body labor." Interactions at these sites demonstrate the gap between one-dimensional representations and the actual complexities of relations between Asians and whites. Gendered service practices intersect with dominant representations of the Asian "model minority" in ways that uphold the racial and class privilege of white middle-class and upper-class customers while reinforcing notions of Asians as a laudable but still marginalized group.

Chapter 5 explores "nail art salons" serving mostly black working-class customers through "expressive body labor." This type of service offers original creative nail designs while expressing respect and reciprocity toward individual customers and the communities in which these salons are situated. Expressive body labor contradicts representations of "Korean-black conflict" that naturalize racial tensions between these two groups. Instead, interactions in these salons demonstrate how Asian immigrant service providers and black customers negotiate shifting gender, race, and class alliances in these salons. The gendered performance of expressive body labor can subvert racial hierarchies, in ways that mitigate but do not transcend dominant racial discourses.

Finally, the focus of chapter 6 is "discount nail salons" serving racially and socioeconomically mixed clientele through "routinized body labor." The conditions of gendered work reflected in these sites fuel negative racial stereotypes of Asians as the "yellow peril," who spread disease

and bring down wage and living standards. The forms of body labor that Asian women enact in discount salons aim to disrupt this discourse of contamination by delivering services that are neither special nor objectionable. However, the provision of even these scaled-down manicures is hampered by toxic products, labor rights violations, and customers' demands for fast inexpensive service.

The conclusion addresses the question "What is a manicure worth?" and situates nail salon interactions within current debates about the desirability of new immigrants and their impact on U.S. society and culture. While the chapter underscores the persistent divisions between women even in interactions involving intimacy and interdependence, it also explores prospects for understanding and improving women's lives on both sides of the manicuring table through efforts to upgrade nail salon work as well as to address the various needs that manicured nails fulfill in customers' lives.

Writing a book such as this is both immensely rewarding and frustrating, as it requires excluding many worthy and important avenues of inquiry in striving for a theoretically and empirically coherent analysis. I take responsibility for the limitations of this study and look forward to engaging with scholars whom I hope will delve into other dimensions of this intriguing niche.³² By fleshing out the implications of embodied service work for social relations among diverse women, I hope to provide those who regularly purchase and perform manicures with new insights into this complex social exchange. In addition, I would be pleased if those who have never set foot (or hand) in one of these establishments decide to venture into the fascinating worlds that unfold in their corner nail salon.